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SILENT HER

The light was lavender, the light was white, the light was red. When the light was white, they would come, their heads hidden in black mists.

The one with the hard mouth would be there. Sometimes alone, sometimes with another, but always the one with the hard mouth would come.

Hard Mouth brought the pain and the anger. Silent Her hated Hard Mouth. The light brought Hard Mouth. Silent hated the light.

The white light would creep in through the window, climb the wall with the spots of yellow and blue, and Silent would be afraid as Silent's eyes filled with tears, smearing the light.

Silent loved the dark and clung to it. The dark was safe. It was solitude, aloneness, quiet, an absence of pain. But only the dark that came when the light went away was safe. The darks that came when Silent hid in the cover, or closed the eyes, or held the hands over the eyes, these were not safe.

Silent believed that if the light could be stopped from moving, Hard Mouth would stay away. The edge of the light touched the window and Silent tensed with wishes to the light to go back. Silent shook fists, shed tears, and the light did not stop. The light advanced until it filled that corner of the place. Then Hard Mouth came.

One time the light did not begin as lavender and change to white. It began dim and gray. It was so dim and so gray that Silent could hardly see the colored spots on the wall. Surely it was too dim for Hard Mouth to come.

Silent laughed a silent laugh, pulled at the toes, for Silent had won. The light had stopped and Hard Mouth would stay away.

There was a sound. It was followed by Hard Mouth's head hidden in its black mist. Silent's universe shattered. Silent had failed; the wishes had failed. Only the light and its monster Hard Mouth had succeeded. Then followed pain. Then followed anger.

There was another black mist that would come. The other had kind lips. Kind Lips would always stand on that side and look down at Silent with soft, dark eyes. Kind Lips had dark hair, eyes of love, and a mouth that never looked angry.

Hard Mouth would stand at the other side when Kind Lips was there. Hard Mouth's hair was like the yellow light. The eyes were as blue as the tiny spots on the wall, narrow and angry. The lips were hard and pressed tightly together.

Kind Lips reached in a hand and stroked Silent's hair.

Hard Mouth reached in a hand and pinched Silent's arm.

Kind Lips pushed Hard Mouth away, and as the sounds of them struggling filled Silent's ears, the pain wouldn't go away.

Again the white light crawled up the wall. As it moved, Silent determined that Hard Mouth would never pinch Silent again. To do that Silent would have to stop Hard Mouth. To stop Hard Mouth Silent would have to hurt Hard Mouth. If Hard Mouth put a hand near Silent, instead of Hard Mouth pinching Silent, Silent would pinch Hard Mouth.

Silent held a hand up. The fingers were much smaller than Hard Mouth's fingers. Silent tried to pinch the arm that was always in pain, but the pinching didn't hurt.

Silent stuck a finger in the mouth, bit it hard, and Silent's eyes filled with tears. That hurt. Silent determined to bite Hard Mouth's fingers. That would stop Hard Mouth.

There was the sound. Silent listened carefully. It was Kind Lips and Hard Mouth, yet something different. There were other sounds.

A third figure appeared. It was horribly pink and naked. It had no black mist shading its features, and it had no hair on its head. Hard Mouth and Kind Lips both wore coverings of black. Shiny Head's coverings were pale yellow. Shiny Head stood at one foot next to Kind Lips.

Silent looked and there was another one standing there. The new one had no black mist, but the new one did have light brown hair. Instead of black or yellow, Hairy Head's coverings were pale green.

Kind Lips raised a hand and moved fingers at Shiny Head. Shiny Head frowned at the moving fingers and said to Hairy Head, "Minister Amin, I do not read Mogam." Amazing sounds.

"I thought everyone read it, save a few fanatics," replied Hairy Head. "Not that I'm implying you're a fanatic, of course."

"Of course," answered Shiny Head.

Hairy Head leaned over and lifted the cover from Silent. "My first wife signed that you should look at my second wife's daughter's right arm, Father Yadin. Look here."

Shiny Head moved in front of Hard Mouth, bent over, and reached toward Silent. His fingers were cold and moist as they picked up the arm and turned it. The arm hurt.

"This bruising is terrible!" Shiny Head stood up and turned toward Hard Mouth. "Woman, don't you understand? You are causing your daughter terrible pain. This could cause permanent damage. Do you understand?" Shiny Head turned toward Kind Lips. "Does she understand anything?"

Kind Lips nodded and looked up at Hairy Head. Kind Lips moved fingers at Hairy Head for a long time.

Hairy Head said, "She understands."

"Forgive me, Minister Amin, but I'm certain that she signed more."

"Yes. She did." Hairy Head seemed to struggle his words out from a great pain. "My second wife believes the child can speak. The reason she pinches her is to make her give voice. She's trying to force the child to cry out."

Shiny Head frowned as he looked first at Hard Mouth, then down at the child. After a moment he looked up at Hairy Head. "How long has this been going on? Some of these bruises are weeks old."

Hairy Head disappeared from view. His voice came from a distance. "Since the child was born." Hairy Head's face came back into view. He looked at Hard Mouth with angry eyes.

"In the birthing hostel, woman, the priests told you that your daughter cannot speak. Do you expect this scrap to change the world? I told you your daughter cannot speak. I was even there when the girl brought you your baby. I saw what she told you."

Hairy Head touched fingers to lips and then held the hand down as a fist. " 'Silent her,' the girl signed to you. Do you remember?"

Hard Mouth looked afraid, but Hard Mouth also looked angry. Hard Mouth began moving fingers at Hairy Head, but Hairy Head slapped down Hard Mouth's hand.

"No!" shouted Hairy Head. "You did not hear her cry! You could not have heard her cry! What you heard was her twin brother, your son, Rahman. That's all you heard."

Again Hard Mouth lifted a hand and again Hairy Head slapped it down. "No! If you thought you heard two babies cry, the priests explained it was a trick the drugs played on your ears." Hairy Head let out a sigh. "You must stop this. Please stop this."

"Allow me, minister," said Shiny Head.

Hard Mouth's eyes filled with tears. Hard Mouth pulled away and went out of view. Shiny Head nodded at Hairy Head. "It is a severe problem, but it's more common than one might think."

"What is it?"

"The women pray for an end to the Curse—I suppose all of them do. However, some of them believe so strongly in the end of the Curse, they enter a world of fantasy and imagine all sorts of things. I once had a patient whose eldest daughter imagined that she could speak. She was over twenty years old and would stand there moving her lips—"

"Father Yadin," interrupted Hairy Head, "Please, get to the point."

Shiny Head rubbed its chin and frowned. "Usually this sort of thing only goes on for a few minutes or hours. A few days at most, although I do know of a case that went on for over nine years."

Hairy Head glanced down at Silent. "My daughter is nine weeks old."

"Your second wife needs help, minister. It's a kind of help I'm really not qualified to give. With your permission, I will make arrangements at a suitable facility."

"Suitable facility?"

"Yes."

"A madhouse?"

Shiny Head frowned. "The madhouse is an ancient figment from the father planet. I was speaking of a specialized hospital where—"

"Impossible." Hairy Head rubbed its eyes, glanced at Kind Lips, and said to Shiny Head, "That is quite impossible, father."

"I assure you the facility is very discreet and—"

"Discreet? My family and I are in the public eye, father. Outside my estate there is no such thing as discretion, and damned little within it." Hairy Head took a deep breath and let it out in a sigh. "I apologize for

my language, father."

"There's no need."

"I cannot accept the risk. I have a responsibility to the Reformists and to my good friend Mikael Yucel. Aside from that, there is my position to consider. My son Rahman will inherit my estates, my position, my investments, and influence on this and other worlds, and the responsibilities for all of them. I cannot risk it being known that his mother is troubled."

Hairy Head fell silent for a moment. Hairy Head resumed speaking with a low voice. "You know what can be made of such things by the news, by the off-world traders, by the orthodoxy—especially by the orthodoxy."

"Perhaps a visiting therapist, then?" implored Shiny Head.

Hairy Head stared at Silent for a long time before looking at Hard Mouth. "Very well. I will leave it to you to find someone who can keep our confidence." Hairy Head looked at Shiny Head. "There are only a few persons who know about this, and I know who they all are. If any of this gets out, I'll know to whom to send my operatives."

"I understand," answered Shiny Head.

"Make certain your therapist understands as well."

"Yes, minister."

"Make any arrangements with my secretary, Razi." Hairy Head nodded toward the door and there was a figure standing there with a glittering thing hanging from its neck.

"As you wish, minister."

Hairy Head went out of view and Glitterneck followed. There was a noise. Kind Lips bent over and tucked in Silent's cover as Shiny Head returned.

"Here," said Shiny Head as Shiny Head handed a small vial filled with blue liquid to Kind Lips. "Rub it on the bruised area. It will reduce the swelling, relieve the pain, and remove the discoloration. Do you understand?"

Kind Lips nodded.

Shiny Head nodded toward Hard Mouth. "Keep that one away from the baby. I'm going to tell the minister's secretary to have her locked up where she will no longer be a danger to the child, or to herself. After the therapist sees her..." Shiny Head seemed to get angry. "Look who I'm talking to." He pointed to where Hard Mouth was. "Just keep her out of this room. Can you do that?"

Kind Lips placed hands over her face and bowed toward Shiny Head. Shiny Head reached down and moved his hand as he said, "In the name of Alilah and his Messengers, in the name of the Enlightener, bless and protect this female. Amen."

Shiny Head went away. Kind Lips poured some of the blue liquid onto a hand and reached toward Silent. Silent was afraid for the arm, but as the delicious coolness touched it, the pain went away.

Silent lifted up a hand to touch Kind Lips's face—

Suddenly the world turned over and Silent fell, a cold hard surface striking Silent's cheek. It was dark and Silent could hear crashes and thumps. Silent hid in the darkness and cried for the pain.

The light invaded Silent's hiding place and Silent could see Hard Mouth and Kind Lips struggling. Hard Mouth picked up something and struck Kind Lips in the head. Kind Lips fell to the floor.

Hard Mouth knelt and began coming closer and closer. Hard Mouth pulled the black mist off its yellow hair and came to a stop. Hard Mouth looked down, moved fingers, and pointed at Silent. Then Hard Mouth reached down and slapped Silent's face right where the cold hard surface had hit it.

Silent cried and screamed, but she made only the same quiet hiss that Hard Mouth made as Hard Mouth continued to slap and slap at Silent's face. An edge of dark softness came as Glitterneck rushed into the room. Glitterneck's arm went around Hard Mouth's throat and pulled Hard Mouth away. Glitterneck bellowed angrily at Hard Mouth as the world became very dark.

In the wonderful-smelling room with the great hot iron cookers, she waved her arms and cried without voice as Kind Lips put the filmy black veil over her head.

Twice she had pulled it off, and twice Kind Lips had replaced it, each time making signs with her fingers. There were signs she could read and signs she couldn't. The signs that stood for her, the single finger to the lips followed by the downward-held fist, she could read. The man in white who made the cooking smells and banged the huge silver pots said the signs said "Silent Her." She did not believe him because no one had such a silly name.

Kind Lips wasn't making those signs. Kind Lips was holding up fingers, holding down fingers, making fists, and looking very worried. She thought Kind Lips was playing, so she reached out and pulled the veil from her head once again. She laughed without voice as Kind Lips sat back upon her heels.

She felt a hard slap upon her buttocks. It stung and she cried. The veil was placed upon her head by an unseen hand, and she cried as she saw the tall one in white dusting off his hands as he went back to the

sink. The one in white had a word-name, and it was Onan. The other man, Nabil, had called him that.

Onan turned and looked down at Kind Lips. "It's the only way Silent'll ever learn." Onan dried his hands and returned to the huge silver pots he was supervising as he gave orders to three helpers with names and four helpers without names.

Kind Lips reached within the folds of her black dress and withdrew something. She held it out, but the one whose name was a finger held to the lips followed by a downward-held fist could only look through her tears and hold her hands upon her bottom.

After a moment she sniffed and looked at the object in Kind Lips's hand. It was a beautiful golden thing with a six-pointed star enclosing a cross with a curved point on the bottom. There was a thin golden chain with it. She wanted to look at it more closely and she drew it beneath her veil. It was so shiny. Kind Lips reached beneath the child's veil and put the chain around the child's neck.

"If you keep giving that brat presents every time it gets paddled, she'll never learn anything."

Kind Lips stood up and walked away. Onan stirred at a pot and soured up his face as he said, "Fuzzywriggles! May the Messengers carry word of my suffering."

He took a wooden spoon and dipped it into one of the silver pots. Bringing the spoon out, he sniffed at it, wrinkled up his nose, and blew upon it.

"Here, girl." Onan lifted the front of her veil and touched the spoon to her lips. She tasted the hot liquid and it was sharp-flavored, but sweet. It filled her nose with heady aromas.

"I guess you like it. I suppose it's all right then for the Fuzzywriggles." He placed the spoon in a drip boat and went to a counter where he began chopping things with his huge, wicked-looking knife. In the middle of his chopping, he stopped and glared at her.

"Girl, have you ever laid eyes on one of those fuzzywriggles?"

She shook her head.

Onan nodded. "You pray from Abraham to Kamil that you never meet one. They eat little girls."

She shook her head. That was too horrible to be true. No one ate little girls.

The cook raised his eyebrows. "We can't keep a veil on her head, and now she questions a man's word. You have Magda's salt in you, and that's the truth."

Onan dried his hands on a cloth and said, "Come with me, girl. I'll show you what the fuzzywriggles eat."

He went to another counter. "You see, tonight your father is entertaining many important men, including his friend the new first minister, Mikael Yucel." His hands swept together some things on the counter. He glanced over his shoulder at the girl. "There'll be five fuzzywriggles there, too, and I've been given my orders to feed 'em proper."

He swung around and held out a handful of silky brown threads. He thrust the bundle into her face and shouted, "Hair! This is hair, girl! Dozens of pigtails I had to lop off the heads of little girls before I boil 'em up!" The cook leered as he said, "The fuzzywriggles can't abide the hair, see? It makes the eyeballs hard to digest."

He bellowed out his laughter as she crawled between the hot iron ranges to a place dark and safe next to the wall. With Onan still laughing at his fine joke, she noticed a number of the fine brown strands on the polished stone floor. She crept between the hot ranges until she could reach out a hand and pinch up a bit of the hair.

She sat back in her dark place and felt the strands. It felt like hair. She smelled it. With all of the other smells in the kitchen it was hard to tell what the strands smelled like. She tasted it and jerked the strands from her mouth. It was just like hair.

She looked from between the ranges and saw more of the hair. It was protruding from the top of the garbage pail. When Onan wasn't looking, she slipped from between the ranges and went to the garbage pail. The hair came out of a strange-looking thing that might have been a flower with large, ear-shaped petals. The flower grew out of a purple-black shell.

She didn't know what it was, but she knew it wasn't the head of a dead girl. She took the thing out of the pail by its brown hair and walked around the ranges until she found Onan coming from the pantry with his arms loaded. She stood in the way and held up the thing.

The cook laughed when he saw her. He placed his burden down upon a counter and said, "Aren't you the clever little one? Do you know what that is, girl?"

She shook her head.

Onan went to the cool room and returned with a large purple-black lumpy ball. On its top was one of those flowers with a topknot of brown hair coming out of it.

"This is called a soldier melon, girl. The fuzzywriggles can't get enough of the things."

He went to his cutting counter and picked up his wicked-looking blade. He lopped the lid off the melon and placed it aside. Holding the ball of the melon down to her so she could see inside, Onan said, "Did you ever see anything like it?"

The flesh of the melon was pale blue. In the center were bright red seeds suspended in a lavender gel. "Go

ahead," said the cook. "Stick your finger in it and give it a taste."

She touched her finger into the lavender gel and touched the finger to her tongue. Instantly her mouth filled with the most incredible bitterness. Her throat closed at the taste and she could feel her stomach begin to retch.

Onan laughed again. "That's the part you don't eat!"

She didn't run from the kitchen. Onan would play tricks on her, but she knew that he would soon feel bad about it and give her a biscuit, a sweet, or a taste of one of his puddings. She returned to her dark place behind the ranges to wait.

While she waited she fingered the veil over her head. She rolled the fine fabric between her fingers and was angry that she was supposed to wear it. She was angry and hurt that she was slapped for not wearing it.

She looked around and decided that she could trust her dark place. No one was small enough to get to her there. She pulled off her veil, wrinkled her nose at the taste in her mouth, and waited for Onan to call her for a treat.

The color of female was black. Her dress was black, as were her shoes and veil. The women would sign-call her Silent Her. Instead of spelling out her name fully in Mogam, the women would abbreviate it by representing the name Silent with the single finger held to their closed lips. That would be followed by the downward-held fist that was for the female of anything.

Once when her father was in the kitchen giving instructions to Razi, his secretary, about some building repairs, she heard her father say that he was the one who had given her the pet name. The name was a reminder to Duman Amin's second wife that her daughter could not speak.

Women were not allowed to have names, but as the guard Majnun said at the female wing's guard station one day, "You have to call women something, don't you? It's too chilly to call them 'second wife,' or 'wife of Majnun.' Too much of that and I'd soon find myself in a pair of hairy arms."

The other guard, Isak, had been listening and had shaken his head. "There is too much of that these days: men and men. In another few years they'll even be marrying."

Majnun had nodded at Silent Her and had said, "Be off with you, Si. None of this is for your ears."

The men called her Si, or Hush, or Silent.

God had forbidden women to have names, but they had names that were pet names. But pet names were not real names, so God didn't care about them. "All of that is nothing but Haramite nonsense," said Toi the gardener. Toi seemed very proud of not being a Haramite. Isak said to Toi, "You had best watch your mouth before you find yourself in front of a priest's court."

Later, in the kitchen, when Isak had finished complaining about the gardener, Majnun had shrugged and observed, "Without Duman Amin and the Reformists all of us would be looking at the world through choke loops."

Kind Lips had a name that was five fingers down and doubled, one finger up, and five fingers down: N-H-R. That was how Duman's first wife spelled her quiet name, Rihana. If a woman simply made the R sign, however, all of the females knew that it stood for Rihana, just as everyone knew that the H sign stood for IaD-H, Duman's second wife whose quiet name was Hedia. Hedia was Silent Her's mother. Silent Her never saw Hedia because her mother was kept locked up in a room on the third floor of the female wing.

Rahman was a name of mystery. Onan the cook would often say the name as though everyone knew who Rahman was. There were special meals for Rahman. A special party for Rahman. A holiday celebration for Rahman. A feast for when Rahman was baptized, another when he was confirmed, another for his birthday, and yet another on Rahman's first day of school.

On the second floor of the female wing, Rihana was marking on a piece of paper the letters of Mogam as Silent Her watched. First, from a center line a single vertical line above. Next to the first, a group of two vertical lines above from the center. Then three, four, and five. Following that, from the center, a single vertical line down. Then groups of two, three, four, and five all down. Drawing a new center line, Rihana then repeated the same five groups, but this time going through the line so that each group was above and below the center. Two more: First, two lines crossed through the center line and, second, a circle cut through its middle by the center line.

Using words Silent knew the sound of, Rihana marked the beginning sounds: four down for ship, the sound *ess.* Two down for light, the sound *el.* Five down for notch, the sound *en.* Three up for train, the sound *tee.* Then one up for harem, the sound *aych.* And a group of five all the way through the center for river, the sound *ar.*

Rihana then wrote them down in order from right to left, spelling out the child's pet name. Without a mistake, the girl wrote down the Mogam for *Silent Her.*

Rihana went through the rest of the letters, marking them with sound-words, and suddenly the girl knew

the meaning of the marks in dust, the little scratches on walls, or on the bark of trees she had seen all her life.

Rihana signed, "*Do you know my pet name?"* The girl shook her head and Rihana wrote the single line straight through for *em,* the single line down for *bee,* and the five straight through for *ar.*

The girl signed, "*I can't see how it sounds."*

"*Someday you will hear your father call me his pet name. Listen for how it sounds. Your mother has a pet name, too."* Rihana marked down the single straight through for *em* followed by the five down for *en.* "*When your father mentions her pet name, listen for how it sounds."*

The girl frowned as she signed, "*There are the quiet names men never speak, and there are the names that are pet names. They are names for pets like Zizi, Toi's rat-dog. What are our real names?"*

Rihana smiled as she signed, "*Zizi is the rat-dog's real name. The only names women are allowed are as parts of men's names. I am Duman's first wife. You are Duman's daughter. Those are the only names we are allowed."*

Silent Her thought of a group of letters she had seen many times. She wrote on the paper the *ar,* the *aych,* the *em,* and the *en.* "*What is this?"* Silent signed.

"*That is the name of Rahman. Rahman is your brother. You are twins."*

"*Is he dead?"*

"*No, he is not dead. What would make you think that?"*

"*I never see him. Onan said he hoped the fuzzywriggles got him."*

Rihana shook her head and smiled as she signed, "*Rahman lives in the other part of the house. That is why you do not see him. Don't listen to Onan. The Imahnti don't eat children. The traders are a fine people."*

Silent Her pouted as she signed, "*My brother must be very important."*

"*Why do you think so?"*

"*Onan and Nabil are always planning another feast or party for Rahman's this and Rahman's that. They never plan anything for me."*

Rihana's face grew very serious as she signed, "*Rahman is Duman's son. He is male."* Rihana marked the sign on the paper. It was the single line up from the center; the *aych.* "*You are Duman's daughter. You are female."* Rihana marked on the paper the circle cut through its center, the double-u sign, the sign of the downward-held fist.

"*The son is very important. Rahman will carry Duman Amin's name and fortune. Rahman is the future of the house of Amin. Someday you will be married to another house and will go away. Rahman will stay at home and keep his wives here. That is why Rahman is more important."*

"*Why don't I have a birthday?"*

Rihana's expression became very stern. "*Put such questions from your mind. Be grateful that you are alive. Some families still kill their daughters. Your father would not tolerate such things, even in his friends. Be grateful for the life you have, and put the life you cannot have out of your mind."*

Silent Her did not answer, but for a long time after Rihana had gone, the girl stared at the sign of the downward-held fist.

She listened as the men spoke in the kitchen and in the garden. On those rare moments when her father would come to the female wing to talk to the staff or to his first wife, Silent Her listened. Although God had forbidden names for women, all of the females, even the scrub women, had pet names. The girl now knew that the *em-en* of her mother's pet name was Amina, which sounded like *ah-mee-nah,* which meant peace and was the name of Muhammad's mother.

Her father's pet name for his first wife, Rihana, was Amber, and it meant jewel. It was a very beautiful pet name. Silent Her had listened one night when her father had come to the female wing to bring his Amber back to his bedchamber. Her father's voice had sounded thick and warm.

In signing to each other, women never used pet names. Instead they used their quiet names, their secret names among women, the names that were given to them by their mothers. When women signed for Duman's first wife, they never signed for Amber. Instead they signed for Rihana. Even the scrub women were signed by their quiet names. The one exception in the female wing was Silent Her. She had no quiet name because her mother hadn't yet given her one and that was because she was forbidden to see her mother. Her mother was mad.

No one would sign of Duman's second wife if they knew Silent Her was within sight. The men would not speak of her mother if they knew she was within hearing. Sometimes when Onan didn't know she was hiding in the dark behind the ranges, Silent Her would hear things. Onan or Nabil or the chauffeur Abi would say things to each other about her mother.

She listened to the talk because she wanted her name. It was by listening and watching that she found out where her mother was imprisoned.

"It is sad, it is sad," Onan would say every time after he had sent a girl up to the third floor with a food

tray.

Once Rihana was in her room kneeling on the floor, crying. "*Why do you cry?"* asked Silent.

Rihana signed, "*I cry for my wife-sister, Hedia. I cry for your mother. I cry for you. I cry for myself because I miss her so."*

"*We can go and see her,"* signed the girl. "*I know where they keep her."*

Rihana studied the girl's eyes. "*Child, no one loves your mother more than I do. But every time your mother comes near you she hurts you. Don't you remember?"*

"*Still, I would see her."*

"*Do you miss her?"*

The girl shook her head. "*I have no name among women. My mother must give me one. That is why I want to see her. I must have a name."*

"*I could give you a name."*

"*No. Your name came from your mother. My mother's name came from her mother. My name must come from my mother."*

Rihana held her by her shoulders and looked into her eyes. Withdrawing her hands she signed, " *Someday."*

Silent loved the gardens, even though she was almost never allowed to enter them. On one of the rare days when Rihana was allowed to take the girl into the gardens, the sun was bright, the sky a hazy blue. The girl ran from exotic flower to glittering tree. One of the flowers gave off an aroma that made her dizzy, and another flower had tiny red tendrils that writhed in the warm air. She watched as Toi dropped tiny blue worms into the tendrils and she held her hands to her face as she saw the flower eat the worms.

They reached a stone bench and Rihana took some fruit from her carrying bag and sat down. "*Let's eat here,"* she signed.

The girl smiled and bit into the bright orange and lavender skin of a paradise plum. As she ate, she signed, "*Where do paradise plums come from?"*

"*From the father planet, Earth, and from this world. Two plants got together and made paradise plums."*

"*They were married?"*

Rihana grinned as she nodded.

There were footsteps on the path and Rihana turned her head to look. In an instant she grabbed the girl and forced her to her knees as she knelt next to her and placed a hand on her shoulder and signed by pressing her fingers into Silent Her's flesh. "*Do as I do. Nothing more."*

The girl watched and when she saw Rihana cover her face with her hands and bow her head, she did the same. The sounds of footsteps grew louder. Silent Her saw a man's legs. On his feet he wore golden slippers beautifully brocaded with metallic silvers and reds. There were more sounds and the girl started at the sight of a wriggling mass of snakes and worms covered with black hair.

Quickly she signed to Rihana, "*Is that a fuzzywriggle?"*

A hand came down and slapped her fingers, making them sting and turn red. Holding her hands together and sitting back upon her heels, she looked up through her tears and saw that the man in the beautiful slippers wore a beautiful robe of white and gold. From his neck hung a large golden starcross. He reached down, grabbed the girl's hands and slapped them again.

"Never do that," commanded the man in the beautiful robe. He looked at Rihana. "Woman, do not let this child learn the blasphemous finger-talking unless you wish to see her neck in a choke loop. I know there are families that tolerate such things, but I would remind you that even if the family tolerates it, Alilah does not. Alilah sees, will not forget, and will not forgive. Neither will I."

"Father," began a strange voice, "perhaps we can continue looking at the gardens?"

The man glared at the girl for a moment longer, then he nodded and turned his back. "I apologize, Trader Ib, but you see how Reformist households simply flaunt the law."

"Not an easy law to enforce, father."

"And this is why, Trader Ib. This is why."

As the creature led the man away, it moved very smoothly down the path although it seemed to have nothing for legs. The creature's fur rippled with movement, and here and there a hairy worm or snake would peek out.

When they were out of sight, Rihana stood, brushed off her dress, and pulled Silent Her next to her on the bench. "*Before you use the finger-talk before a man, you must first know how the man feels about it."*

"*Who was the man, and why did he hurt me?"*

"*He is a very important priest and your father's guest. He slapped you because he believes that women using the finger talk is evil."*

"*If he is an important priest, shouldn't he know?"*

"*There are other priests who disagree."*

Silent Her rubbed her fingers and sniffed. She turned to Rihana and signed, "*Was that a fuzzywriggle?"*

"*Do not call them fuzzywriggles. It is very unkind. They are called Imahnti."*

"*Are they like Onan said?"*

"*What did Onan say?"*

"*He said they were made out of fur, worms, and snakes."*

Rihana sighed as she shook her head and signed, "*Those things Onan calls worms and snakes are appendages like your hands, feet, fingers, and toes."*

The girl stood on the stone bench to try and catch another look at the creature. All she could see, however, was a black thatch moving along a hedge next to the priest's shoulder. One of the snakes seemed to wriggle from beneath the thatch and wave at her.

"*It waved at me,"* signed the girl. "*How could the thing wave at me when it wasn't looking at me?"*

Rihana lifted the girl off the bench and placed her on the path. "*It is not a thing, child. It is an Imahnti. We also call them traders. Why it could see you is because they have more than one set of eyes. They have many eyes."*

Silent Her wrinkled up her face. "*That's awful."*

"*Did you ever think how you must look to an Imahnti with your naked skin, those awkward stubs of arms and legs, and only two eyes?"*

The girl laughed in silence as Rihana looked around and signed to her, "*It's time for us to be getting back. I'm certain your father wouldn't have let his guests into the garden if he knew women would be in the way."*

They returned to the female wing, and that night Silent Her had two nightmares about snakes and worms with multiple eyes and long, yellow teeth.

It almost seemed as though Onan never remembered anything he had ever said before. The stories he would tell, the observations he would make, were all things he had said to Silent Her many times before.

Over the years he had grown so thin he looked gaunt and starved. His nose was thin and large, and he had big gray eyes that peered from beneath bushy black eyebrows like the stare of some predatory bird. Still he ruled the kitchen with a sharp cleaver, and no one challenged his authority there.

Before his bank of ranges, Onan issued his pronouncements, moved pots, tasted this, flicked a pinch of magic spice into that, all of the time creating a cloud of delicious smells. At the oddest moments he would curse the Imahnti and damn them for being infidels, pagans, aliens, and things without taste buds.

Once as he stirred a soup, Silent Her watched him from a corner. They were alone together.

"By the Jesus and Bab, smell this awful mess, girl. Do you smell it?"

She nodded gravely. Onan was displeased with the soup. There were modern kitchen ranges that completely eliminated smells of any kind, but when approached by a seller, Onan passed it off with a disgusted wave of his hand. "I am a chef, not a space pilot." With another stir, he smacked the wooden spoon on the lip of the silver pot, and placed it in a drip boat. He leaned back against one of his cold ranges and folded his arms.

"I suppose you like the smell."

She nodded, and it was the truth. She loved Onan's soldier melon and brush pod soup.

The cook shook his head, held his hands up toward God, and said in explanation, "She has never tasted anything other than these hideous things and spices brought to us by the fuzzywriggles." The cook turned and went to where Silent Her was standing against the wall. He grabbed her shoulder.

"Come with me, girl."

He turned her and steered her down the servant's corridor beneath the female wing until they came to his room. He opened the door and pushed her inside. He closed the door and locked it. Picking her up, he placed her on his bed.

"Now, little Si, do you know what I'm going to show you?"

She shook her head as a sour taste came into the back of her throat.

She knew that it was wrong for her to be there. Shahar, one of the kitchen scrub woman, had warned her never to be alone with a man. When Silent Her had asked why, Shahar had signed that when she was little a man had gotten her alone and had done terrible things to her. Silent Her had thought that the scrub woman was only trying to frighten her, but as she sat upon the cook's bed, the fear made her heart beat rapidly.

"First I'm going to show you a very special book. Close your eyes."

She reached beneath her veil and placed her hands over her eyes. When she heard the cook open a closet, she peeked through her fingers. Onan returned carrying a book in his hands. It was a very old book. The cook sat on the bed next to her.

"You can look now."

As she lowered her hands to her lap, Onan pointed at the book. "You can't read, but there are many beautiful pictures in here. Look." He opened the book and leafed through the pages until he found a colored picture of a spindly plant with sparse leaves and clumps of pink blossoms.

"You can make a spice from this plant called marjoram." He flipped past a hundred or more pages. "Look at all of the dishes I cannot prepare because the world has no marjoram."

He turned back to the inside front cover and pointed at an inked scribble. "There is the fool woman's name: Bethany Yiskah. She brought this cookbook to Haram. That was what they called Angerona when the Enlightener's followers settled here over four hundred years ago. She brought this cookbook and every recipe in here calls for certain specific spices."

He again held his outstretched hands up to the face of God that He might witness the absurdity of the female. "Did she think to bring seeds to grow these spices?" He lowered his hands and shook his head. "No, she did not."

He flipped through the pages, his eyes aching after the multitude of recipes he could not execute.

"I do not even have an idea how these things are supposed to taste." His eyes became sly as he remembered something. "I do have a bit of an idea about one spice." Onan faced her suddenly. "How old are you?"

She held up six fingers.

"Do you want to smell some magic?"

She nodded eagerly. Onan reached across her to a tiny shelf built into the wall next to his bed. He picked up a clear bottle that was stoppered with blue glass. He held it in his hand and pointed at the brownish fragments inside the bottle.

"Girl, this is a bay leaf. If I had but one or two to throw into that soup in the kitchen, it would fill the estate with glory. Listen to me now. When I open the bottle, sniff quickly and you will smell a glorious taste from Father Earth that the soup could have had if Bethany Yiskah had been smart enough to bring seeds for her spices."

He held the bottle before her and she stuck out her nose. He pulled out the stopper, and as soon as she sniffed, he replaced the stopper. "Well?"

Her nose wrinkled up as the acrid odor reminded her of something. The leaf in the bottle had smelled like Toi after the gardener had spent the morning working under a hot sun. It smelled like man sweat. It smelled like dirty laundry and Toi's armpits. Her face had a sour look as she looked up at the cook and frowned.

Onan pushed her off the bed, unlocked his door and opened it. "Stupid girl! Get out of here, stupid girl!"

On the top floor of the female wing, at the end of the narrow hallway, there was a locked door. Each time Silent Her went there she tried the latch. Each time she found it locked. After trying the latch she would put her ear to the door and listen for sounds of her mother.

Behind the door there was mostly silence. Once she heard footsteps and once she heard an eating utensil as it fell to the floor. The sound she heard the most often was a constant scratching that sounded like an insect or pest in the wall.

One morning she tried the latch and the door was not locked. Suddenly she was very confused. Up until that moment she had known what her goal was. Her goal had been to find the door unlocked. On the other side of the door had been something that belonged to her: her name.

With the achievement of her goal, old fears stole into her heart. The person who held her name was mad. Everyone said so. She was violent, and the only person Duman's second wife had ever been violent with was her daughter.

Very slowly she pushed open the door, no more than a thickness of a dust hair at a time. There was a table before a window, and there was a black-shrouded figure hunched over the table. The dark figure was her mother, and her mother was writing.

Silent Her had done no more writing since the important priest had slapped her hands and had spoken sharply to Rihana in the garden. Her father had been very angry and he had instructed the family priest doctor, Father Yadin, to instruct all of the females in "The Shaytan."

The knuckles of Silent Her's left hand accidentally rapped against the door. Without looking toward her, the woman at the table suddenly fell to the floor behind the table.

It seemed like such an insane thing to do, the girl became frightened and pulled shut the door with a bang. The door was still not locked and she held her breath as she heard footsteps running across the floor. The latch moved and she grabbed it and held onto it as she tried to keep the madwoman inside.

The door handle was pulled from her grasp as the door swung open throwing her to her knees inside the room. She looked up at the figure and her eyes filled with the image of Hard Mouth from her nightmares.

Hard Mouth reached down, but the girl scurried to her feet and ran from the room, through the corridor to the back staircase, down the stairs to the kitchen, and into her safe place behind the ranges.

As she huddled in her safe place, she heard Nabil and Onan screaming at each other from the floor above. The madwoman was loose in the female wing, and each one was blaming the other. The voice of the guard sergeant, Jamil, drowned out the others and soon it was quiet once more. As she hid in the dark she felt her eyes burn with tears. She knew she would never have a quiet name. She would never have anything but her

pet name, and she hated nothing more than being called Silent Her.

Men never wore black. The gardener, Toi, once said to Abi the chauffeur a joke about men who wore black. From the joke, and from Abi's response, Silent Her understood that there was something wrong with men who wore black. Somehow they were not really men, but were something different; something less. God hated them, too, although not as much as women. She also understood that there were many such men, and that some other men used them as both friends and wives.

Her father, of course, never wore black. Often he would wear pale gray with a maroon sash, or pale green with golden sash. On special occasions he would wear a white satin suit with a maroon sash set with blue gems.

Rahman, her brother, seemed to wear whatever he wanted. Each of the rare times she had seen him he had been wearing something different. His clothes were of bright reds, oranges, and yellows. She wanted so much to wear a jacket the same color of yellow as Rahman's.

One evening in the garden she signed to Rihana, "*I want a yellow coat."*

Rihana frowned as her fingers answered, "*I do not understand you."*

"*I want a yellow coat like Rahman's."*

"*You know females wear only black. You know females own nothing."*

"*I know I hate black. I know I want a yellow coat."*

"*Don't be foolish, child. Own your yellow coat in the back of your mind, but never let your fingers speak of such a thing again."*

There was no way to argue, no one with whom to plead. It was written in "The Shaytan." Females may own nothing. Silent Her did not even own the starcross Rihana had given her, for it had not been Rihana's to give. It had belonged to Duman Amin, and it had come into Rihana's possession by the grace of her husband's favor. Possessions were forbidden to her.

She looked from the windows of the female wing at all of the places that were forbidden to her. She was forbidden to enter the rest of the house. Only Rihana could go there, and only when Duman invited her.

The mansion was surrounded by a wall, and beyond the wall were many beautiful gardens. Beyond the gardens were more walls and the vastness of Duman Amin's estates. Beyond the limits of the estates was a land about which she could only imagine. Above it all was a sky crossed with wealth-laden ships headed for the same stars Si could see at night.

Once when she had disobeyed the guards and had slipped out of the female wing, she had climbed to the top of the north wing and had seen her brother in a large room at the end of the corridor. Her eyes were dazzled. The room was filled with toys, stuffed animals, and games. Built into the wall was a screen with moving pictures of small fuzzy animals with long ears and tiny pink noses. Songs came from the screen. Rahman was sitting with his back toward her, his attention absorbed by the television. She stared at him and at his wonderful room, ignoring the sound of footsteps behind her.

"Now I've got you!"

Strong hands grabbed her, trapped her arms, and picked her up. "This time, girl, I will certainly teach you to remain where you are supposed to remain," growled Sergeant Jamil.

Rahman turned to see the cause of all of the noise. "What are you doing?" demanded her brother.

"My apologies, little master," said the guard sergeant, "I must bring this one back to the female wing."

"You wouldn't have this trouble if you guarded her properly. See that you don't disturb me again."

Jamil tucked Silent Her beneath his left arm and bowed very deeply. "As you wish, little master."

"Who is she? One of the scrub girls?"

Sergeant Jamil stood and said, "By the Jesus, you do not know?"

Rahman put his fists upon his hips. "You do not use profanity in my father's presence. Do not use it in mine."

"My apologies, little master. I was only surprised that you did not know your own sister. She is the one your father pet-named Silent Her."

"Oh?" Rahman walked closer. His eyes narrowed as he approached her. "Are you certain?"

"Quite certain, little master."

He placed his fists upon his hips and studied her down the length of his nose. "She's not very pretty."

"Well, she is a twin."

The boy glowered at the guard. "That wasn't very funny, Jamil."

"A thousand pardons, little master."

Rahman turned his back and picked up his book. "Do not disturb me again, Jamil, or else I will tell my father."

"Yes, little master. I am most grateful."

Silent Her saw her brother glance at her as Sergeant Jamil took her away. Once they were going down the stairs and were thus out of Rahman's hearing, Jamil hissed, "By the Jesus, Muhammad, Abraham, Buddha,

and the Bab! Don't use profanity in *his* presence! How was *that* fathered by Duman Amin? It's having that madwoman for a mother, is what's done it. That's what made such a piss-dripping out of Duman's son and made such a disobedient salt out of you, girl. But, by the Buddha's benevolent balls and the Bab's crabs, this time I'll beat Magda's salt out of your tail feathers!"

Once in the female wing, Jamil took her to the room next to the guard's station. As she struggled in his arms, he sat down, put her across his knee, lifted the hem of her dress, and began spanking her. As she struggled, her veil fell to the floor.

"Sergeant Jamil!" shouted her brother's voice.

The guard sergeant froze as his name was spoken. Silent Her lifted her head and saw Rahman standing in the doorway. "You should not be here, little master."

"I'll say where I am supposed to be in my own house, sergeant!"

"Forgive me, little master, but this is your father's house. What's more, I am your father's guard placed here to keep the females in the female wing."

Rahman stepped into the room and pointed at Silent Her. "My father would never approve of you beating my sister."

"You must forgive me once more, little master, but I am not beating her, I am spanking her."

"It's all the same whatever you choose to call it, sergeant. My father could never approve of such brutality."

"Little master, not only do I have permission to spank this female when she is disobedient, I have Duman Amin's permission to punish his wives if they misbehave."

She watched as Rahman reached out a hand and pulled down the hem of her dress, covering her. He said, "Never strike my sister again. If you ever do I will make up a terrible lie about you and tell it to my father."

The guard sergeant laughed. "I am more than your father's servant, boy. I am his friend. I was his sergeant during the War of the Prophets, and I saved his life. He attended my wedding and my eldest son is named for him. Now, what kind of lie could cast that in a shadow?"

The boy frowned at Jamil. "I mean it. I'll do it."

"Go back to your toys, little boy."

Her brother reached to his sash and withdrew a small folding knife. Opening the blade, he held it at his own throat with his right hand and said, "Father, I know this is hard to believe, but Jamil did something to me." He placed his left hand upon his crotch as a tremble crept into his voice. "He touched me here."

"What filth!" exclaimed Jamil, his eyebrows climbing. "Duman would never believe such a—"

"I cried out but he held a knife at my throat! See the scratch where the edge cut the skin! Jamil swore he would kill me if I told anyone!" Rahman increased the pressure of the blade upon his neck.

"You haven't the courage," taunted the guard.

A drop of blood dribbled down Rahman's neck and Jamil stood the girl on her feet and jerked Rahman's blade and hand away from his neck in one swift movement. He got to his feet, his hands trembling.

"By the ice, boy, you're as mad as your bloody damned mother!" He shoved Silent Her toward Rahman. "There! Take her! And when Duman Amin wants to know why there's no discipline in the female wing, I'll send him to you!"

The guard sergeant marched toward the door, but before reaching it he paused and looked back at the girl. He pointed a finger at her, his face now quite red. "Don't think you've found a rescue at the hands of some knight, girl. He'll tire of you the way he tires of all of his toys. I'm like the Enlightener in his ice: I'll always be there." Jamil left the room, closing the door behind him.

Rahman picked up Silent Her's veil and draped it over her head. Reaching beneath her veil he wiped away her tears with his thumbs. "We can play together. It'll be fun."

She looked toward the door and back at Rahman.

"Jamil is an old fool," the boy declared. "You are my sister and I am going to be your patron from now on. You are the twin sister of Rahman, and I shall protect you."

She saw the tiny dribble of blood on her brother's neck and knew she had at last found her protector.

That night Rahman's face was in her mind. He was handsome, strong, and very brave. How he had stood up to Sergeant Jamil! How he had spoken to the guard! Could the heroes of the testaments have been any braver?

With her fingers she signed to the darkness, "*Rahman"* and "*My brother. Rahman, brother of Silent Her."* While she was in her bed allowing the memories of the afternoon with her hero play in her mind, she smelled smoke. Rising from her bed she went to the window and saw the dots of many small fires burning in the distant hills. Far below her in the courtyard stood all of the servants and hired hands. They were preparing to fight the hot breath of a fire storm. Droplets of water fell from the roof's edge while a fine spray obscured the view through the window.

There were anxious voices in the corridor and she heard Nabil shout, "It's a Magda! The worst one in fifty

years! If we're not sharp we'll lose the house!"

Fear brought Silent Her to the door. She opened it in time to see Nabil's back as he ran down the corridor toward the stairs. Forgetting her veil, the girl slipped into the corridor, ran to Rihana's room, and opened the door. The room was dark, but Rihana was at her window looking at the fires. She turned and saw the girl sign, "*May I stay with you tonight? I'm frightened."*

Rihana nodded and climbed into her bed. The girl climbed in next to her and, as Silent Her hugged Duman's first wife in the dark, she signed by pressing her fingers against Rihana's arm. "*What's happening? What's a Magda?"*

Rihana placed her arm around the child and signed with her fingers upon the girl's arm, "*It is a kind of storm. It has very hot winds and can start many fires."*

"*Why is it called a Magda? And why does Jamil say I have Magda's salt in me? Who is Magda?"*

"*Magda was a woman who did an evil thing three hundred years ago."*

"*What was the evil thing?"*

It was a long time before Rihana answered. When she did she signed, "*Magda set fire to the world and brought the silence and the Female Law down upon women."*

Isak was one of the guards on the door of the female wing. Silent Her knew that Isak hated her because Sergeant Jamil had scolded Isak and had called him horrible names because of her. It had been on Isak's watch when she had first escaped from the female wing into the other part of the house. Whenever Isak would be where she could see him he would frown, grimace, and draw his thumb across his throat.

Along with Sergeant Jamil and Isak, there was a third guard, and his name was Majnun. Majnun was very lazy. He would eat the fruit and candies he had hidden near his post, and then he would sleep in the room near the guard's station at the entrance to the female wing. She knew that she could leave the wing once she heard the soft snoring come from the room. She could then explore or play with Rahman for an hour or two and return before Majnun awakened.

She liked Majnun. He would laugh and tell her funny stories. Sometimes he would tell Silent Her about his own daughter. Her pet name was Azize and whenever Majnun would mention her his face would almost glow. Silent Her thought that being Majnun's daughter must be the most wonderful thing in the world. Sometimes, making a great display of secretly doing something very wicked, Majnun would give the girl one of his candies.

On this day she had stolen one of Majnun's candies and had placed it in a deep pocket of her dress before she once more crept past the sound of the guard's snoring. Moving with the silence of a shadow, she darted behind and beneath furniture, trying to remain invisible as she explored the mansion with its many rooms.

As she passed the great dining hall, she saw that the servants were preparing the table for a grand banquet. Nabil, the head servant, was arguing with Onan, the cook, while black-veiled serving girls silently polished and placed the silver.

The cook and the head servant were arguing over the place setting for a very important Imahnti. Onan had said that one of the fuzzywriggles would visit her father. The creature's name would be Huroot Ib, the most important trader on Angerona. Trader Ib represented all of the Imahnti traders in the world. Although the cook had been adamant about the fuzzywriggles eating little girls basted with gutter sludge, she could tell that Onan had been very impressed with the honor being done his master. She backed away from the door and let her fingers caress the polished wooden paneling as she moved through corridors and passageways.

As she passed the vestibule of the main entrance to the mansion, something touched her shoulder. Instantly she froze. There was no one there, she knew. She had studied every corner of the vestibule for a full minute before she had entered. There could be no one there. Slowly she turned her head, her eyes widening once they saw the thing that had touched her. It was like a long snake covered with black hair. Beyond it was a column of writhing, fur-covered snakes. It was an Imahnti. Si covered her face with her palms and bowed toward the creature.

"Are you Duman Amin's daughter? The one called Silent Her?" asked the Imahnti. The voice was strangely soothing as the creature seemed to glide as it moved around her. Deep within Huroot Ib's fur were tiny black buttons that reflected light. The girl thought they must be the creature's eyes. Something touched her hair and she stifled a shudder as she imagined one of those hairy snakes in her hair.

"You do not remember me, child, do you."

She shook her head.

"Many months ago I waved at you in the garden. I was with a very important priest. Do you remember now?"

She nodded and looked down, ashamed, at her hands. The very important priest had slapped them.

"Did you know I was at the birthing hostel the day you were born?"

She stared at Huroot Ib. Slowly she shook her head.

"I was one of the few so honored by Minister Amin. That was almost seven years ago. Your twin brother's birthday is to be celebrated soon, is that not true?"

She nodded. The creature glided around her once more, coming to a stop in front of her.

"My people celebrate the birthdays of both males and females. I would like to give you a present, but you are not allowed to own anything."

She smiled sadly and shook her head. The Imahnti wasn't so frightening.

"Can you do the Mogam finger-talking?"

Her face became as stone as she caught her breath. She looked around for a clear route of escape.

"Do not be alarmed, child. Banning females from reading and writing is not a law of the Imahnti. I asked, because I wondered if you could read this."

The front of the creature erupted in tiny pink worms. They quickly arranged themselves into a center line filled with Mogam letters. She saw the letters for *gee* and *en* followed by *aych, cee,* and *ar.*

"This is one present I can give you that no one can take from you. It is your life name in the language of the Imahnti. It is pronounced *jen ha-kaar."* The worms slithered beneath the creature's fur and the line of Mogam vanished.

"*Does it mean Silent Her?"* she signed.

"No. It means Light of the Star. Star Light."

She lifted her hands and signed, "*Thank you."*

One of the snakes touched her right hand. It was warm and soft. The snake wrapped around her wrist and the tip of it touched the back of her hand. There was a slight stinging sensation which quickly faded. The snake released her hand and she looked at it. There was a slight redness that went away as she watched. When the redness had gone, she frowned and looked up at the creature. "*Why did you do that?"* she signed.

"It is another present to you, Gen Hakarh. All you need do if you ever want to see me is show your hand to an Imahnti. If you should do that, either you will be brought to me or I will be brought to you."

She studied her hand for a moment, then signed, "*Why do you do this for me?"*

"I shall ask you a question, first. Do you know who Abraham, Moses, Solomon, Jesus, Muhammad, the Bab, and the Enlightener were?"

"*They were the Messengers. They carried the words of Alilah to the people."*

"The Imahnti have had messengers, too. In all of my travels I have been to many worlds and have known many races. Under many names, all of them know Alilah, and all of them have had their messengers. Does that surprise you?"

Silent Her nodded.

"Do you think that you might be such a messenger?"

Silent Her's face flushed red as she shook her head. She signed, "*All of those men were good. They were blessed by God. They were men. I am female. I am evil. 'The Shaytan' tells me so."*

"The Shaytan," from *The Book of Peace,* was the first thing that had been whispered into her ear after her birth, and it would be the last thing whispered into her ear as she died. Rihana had told her so. Father Yadin would sing the story in low tones over her emaciated body the way he had sung over the thin remains of Duman's mother. It had happened so long ago, but she still remembered an ancient woman at the burying who cried so much she had to have her red nose wiped again and again. She was the sister of the dead woman.

Very curiously, the Imahnti began reciting from "The Shaytan."

"On the Night of Death and Vision," sang Huroot Ib, "the Founders each had the same dream, and the dream was of the Enlightener. Each of the Founders whispered the name Kamil Marnin, and then died. The faithful Haramites searched the ancient father planet for seven years, and on the last day of the seventh year, on Kamil Marnin's birthday, they found him—"

The Imahnti knew the words better than she knew them, and she wondered why someone who was not female and who was not even from Angerona would have such an interest.

"—Kamil pointed toward the stars and spoke the revealed words of God. 'Build twelve great ships and gather the Haramite faithful into them. Set course for the center of the galaxy, and where the clustered stars of the nucleus form the pupil of night's eye, there you will find Haram, the planet forbidden to war.…' "

Father Yadin had said that the story must be the last thing a female hears when she dies if she would avoid the fires of Hell, but the last thing Duman Amin's mother had heard was the sound of her own ragged gasping as the cancer ate at her.

Yet the priest had said that not so much as a petal from a tree flower falls without the movement of God's hand, and would Alilah deny Heaven to Duman's mother just because she had not listened to a story that God himself had made impossible to hear?

"The aged Kamil Marnin," continued the Imahnti, "his remains preserved in the suspension ice from which he never awakened, let his spirit search the stars until Alilah pointed toward the world where He would recreate Eden and set mankind once again in Paradise—"

The creature paused and tilted toward her. "Am I doing well, child?"

She nodded and signed, "*You did very well."*

"Then listen." Huroot Ib's voice continued. "The new paradise of Haram was consumed by the flames of the Female War. Filled with the spirit of 'The Shaytan,' Magda Haram Marnin, great-granddaughter of the Enlightener, led the women of Haram against God and man and into war—"

"Huroot Ib?"

The quiet voice filled her heart with fear. She reached beneath her veil and covered her face with her hands as she sank to her knees and bowed before her father.

"*Meiakab a'ti,* Trade Minister Amin," greeted the Imahnti. "With your daughter's kind assistance I've been using my wait to practice 'The Shaytan'."

Silent Her peeked through her fingers. Her father, his hands clasped in front of him, was looking down at her. "She knows she does not belong here." He opened his hands and touched his maroon sash. That meant that her father was calling Jamil. The sergeant would be livid. There would be no escaping a beating this time. There was an uncomfortable silence that was broken only by the rapid sounds of Jamil's footsteps as he approached. The guard entered the vestibule, stopped, bowed, and before he could speak, he spied Silent Her kneeling on the floor. His face became very red.

Before the sergeant could speak, the Imahnti interrupted. "Minister, I apologize for my ignorance concerning your customs, and the thought of interfering with your household would never enter my mind. However, I alone am at fault. I was the one who asked the child to stand and listen to my words. I would be most distressed to learn that she had been punished for my ignorance."

A thin smile came to Duman Amin's lips. "Listening to you was not her crime, trader. Her crime was being where you could ask her to listen."

Silent Her looked up at her father. She thought his face was very handsome, which made it much more frightening when he was angry, because when he was angry his face was not so handsome.

Her father raised an eyebrow and nodded at Jamil. "Have no fear, Huroot Ib. She is only where she is not supposed to be. The sergeant will see that she finds her way back to the female wing." He looked at the girl. "Daughter, take your leave of the trader."

Without thinking she bowed, placed her palms together and extended her arms in front of her. She felt the Imahnti's snake-sized appendages wrap around her fingers. They were fuzzy and warm. The Imahnti spoke with strange words. The words she heard, except for the last two, her new name, made no sense. But something strange had happened to the girl. It was almost as though one ear had heard the incomprehensible words of an Imahnti leave-taking, while the other ear heard, "*I wait to witness the achievement of your destiny, Star Light."*

The fuzzy appendages released her fingers and her father nodded at Jamil. The guard led her to the doors to the main hall, and from there to the corridor leading to the female wing. Once out of sight of Duman and his guest, the guard picked her up with strong hands and hissed, "Jesus wept, child! By the beard of the Prophet, what am I to do with you? Once the trader leaves your father's house, you may be certain that Duman'll have my guts for a jump rope. If he discharges me without references, what is my poor family to do? Why can't you obey me, child? Why can't you obey your father? You have Magda's salt in you, little Shaytan, and that is no lie. I see the evil in your eye. You think you can hide it, and perhaps you can from some people, but you can't hide it from me. I can see your heart and it is blacker than the firestorm."

He stopped at the door to the female wing. He waited for a moment. When no one answered he looked up at the sensor and began tapping his foot. "I see how you managed your clever escape." He snorted out a laugh and kicked the door. "What brilliance it must have taken. What daring."

The door opened a crack, then opened wider. Majnun's sleepy face looked out. "Sergeant?"

"Of course it's me, you fool!"

Majnun looked down at the girl and frowned. "Si, what are you doing out there?"

Dragging her behind him, Jamil pushed past Majnun and closed the door. "She walked right past you when you were sleeping, you lazy fool." Majnun looked at her with hurt in his eyes. "If this was the Mujtahidun you could have been shot—"

She broke free of the sergeant's grasp and ran into the women's living quarters as Jamil screamed his curses at Majnun. She was sorry for Majnun and she knew that from now on Majnun would hate her, too.

She reached into her dress pocket for the piece of candy she had stolen, thinking that returning it to Majnun might ease the guard's anger toward her. Next to the candy her fingers touched the sharp edges of something unfamiliar. She withdrew it part way, glanced at it, and thrust it back inside her pocket. It was yet a third present from the trader: a tiny blue book.

"I learned a new thing in school yesterday," Rahman declared the next day as Silent Her entered her brother's toy room. The television screen showed a fanged cartoon Imahnti chasing a little boy. "It's very rude. It was my good friend Akil Numair who taught me."

Silent Her squatted on the floor beside Rahman and looked up at his face with adoring eyes. What care had she for the risks of leaving the female wing if she could only be in the presence of her brother? "*What is a school?"* she signed.

The boy sneered and cocked his head in a show of extreme indifference as he pressed a button lowering the sound from the television screen. The cartoon boy was hiding behind a tree and the cartoon Imahnti was leafing through a little blue book to try and find the boy. All of the woodland creatures thought the Imahnti was very stupid for looking in a book instead of behind the tree.

"What is a school?" repeated Rahman. "It's a place where I am forced to go six days a week to learn mountains of stuff I will likely never use again. I envy you not having to go to school."

"*I would love to go to school if I could learn."*

"It is forbidden. Besides, you wouldn't want to go if you had to go. Believe me. School is deadly dull and the masters are very mean. But watch what my friend Akil taught me."

Rahman's brow furrowed in a frown as he seemed to gulp at the air after the manner of a fish out of water. He gulped and gulped again, then he was still for a moment. At the end of his silence he let forth with a belch whose magnitude rivaled that of Majnun's gas attacks. Rahman did it again and laughed out loud when he saw how hard Silent Her was laughing.

"Here," he said at last. "I must stop laughing if I am to show you what else Akil taught me." He took a deep breath, laughed again, and took another deep breath. When he had calmed himself down, he swallowed more air, then belched, but this time he formed a word with his mouth. "Jamil!" he growled.

They both laughed at the sound, and when they had calmed down, Silent Her signed to her brother, "*Show me how to make a burp. It's such fun. Show me how. Please."*

"I don't know if you can learn it. It took me a great deal of time."

"*Please."*

Rahman shrugged again. "First you swallow a lot of air, and be sure to hold it down. Do it like this." Rahman swallowed some air and let forth a tiny burp.

Silent Her tried several times, but she couldn't seem to develop the knack. "*Perhaps females cannot do this."*

"Oh, they can too," Rahman corrected. "Akil Numair taught one of his sisters to burp and she was better at it even than he." Rahman frowned and thought for a long time.

"*Brother, will you show me again?"*

"No." He shook his head slowly and looked with care at his sister. "Akil taught his sister to do it. She even made a word with her burp. Someone caught them. She was beaten for learning and Akil was beaten for teaching her. I don't think it is something God wants." He shook his head and glowered at his immature manhood having to knuckle under to overwhelming authority. "This is something it might be best to forget."

Silent Her looked at the television screen in time to see the fanged Imahnti have a bright light appear over its head. It put away its little blue book and reached beneath a rock where everyone, including the little boy, knew the little boy wasn't hiding. The Imahnti withdrew its appendage, dragging the little boy from beneath the rock by his collar. The boy screamed, broke loose, and the fanged alien streaked after him. The boy's name was Koko. The Imahnti's name was Fuzzy.

"Onan, there are sorry changes in the wind," warned Nabil with a grave voice. He was sitting at the kitchen table sipping at a cup of abanush. "Keep my words in the front of your mind. In a matter of days we could all find ourselves begging scraps from the workhouse women."

"Bah!" answered the cook from the depths of the kettle he was inspecting. The scrub girl, Joina, stood off to one side, her gaze cast down, respectfully awaiting Onan's judgment. Si smiled at the boom of the cook's voice. With his head inside the pot his voice had become deep and powerful. It sounded the way she imagined the voice of Alilah had sounded those many thousands of years ago when He told Noah He would destroy the father planet.

Onan withdrew his head from the pot, nodded his satisfaction to the scrub girl, and handed the heavy kettle to her to hang with the others as Silent Her crept between the ranges to her safe place.

"Nabil," began the cook, "the way you worry, it's a wonder the priests haven't put you in a taffy house and wired you up to a few volts. By the Founders, after that you'd see the light."

She leaned against the wall, pulled off her veil, and placed her hand inside her pocket. Withdrawing the tiny blue book, she opened it and looked at the curious marks on the first page.

Huroot Ib had been reciting "The Shaytan." Perhaps the booklet was his copy of *The Book of Peace.* But then why did Fuzzy, the cartoon Imahnti, look in his little blue book to find Koko? And when he found Koko, why was the boy in a place where no one expected him to be, including Koko?

At the head of the first page were two groups of marks set off from the rest. Perhaps they were the marks that represented "The Shaytan" in man-writing.

A cup was placed upon the kitchen table with a heavy hand. "Scoff at me if you wish, Onan, but I watch

the news. I hear what's between the words."

"What do you hear?" The cook laughed as he poured himself a cup of the buttered tea and sat down at the table. "Or should I ask, what do you *think* you hear?"

While the cook and the head servant talked, Silent Her studied the two groups of marks in the center of the page. The first group had thirteen of the forbidden writing letters. The second group had four letters. If it was "The Shaytan," the first group was too many for "the" and the second much too few for "Shaytan."

Nabil's voice became loud. "Laugh if you want, Onan, but perch this between your eyes. The 'doxies are gathering enough support to make a coalition possible—"

"It will never happen," interrupted the cook.

"If they do gain control of the government, Joram won't join the world congress. If we don't join, no one joins, and if no one joins, no one disarms. In such a case it's only a matter of time before we are once more looking for prophets to follow and wading through blood."

"Exactly my point, Nabil. No one wants war, so no one wants the return of the orthodoxy. So where's the threat?"

"The threat is right here in Joram, Onan. The Reformists are hanging on to power right now only because Mikael Yucel keeps promising moons to the splinter parties he cannot deliver. If the splinter parties grow cold on Yucel, Tahir Ranon and the 'doxies will have all of us in a bloody choke loop."

"Look at what you are saying. The Reformists haven't lost an election for over twelve years."

"That was before Joram's army tangled with Bahai," Nabil reminded.

"What does that change?"

"Here's what it changes, my smug friend, safe and secure in your little kitchen. What if the people of Joram become convinced there will be a war? They're going to think twice before keeping the Reformists in. When it comes to a fight, people feel safer with the 'doxies running things. It's the Orthodox Party that knows how to call a jihad."

"By the Christ, Nabil, break that wind before your eyeballs explode."

"We'll see. We'll see."

The pair fell into silence as the girl continued to study the marks. Frontwards, backwards, one at a time, the words made no sense without the key. Man-writing had far too many letters in it. A thought teased at her frustration. What if the booklet wasn't in man-writing at all? What if it was in Imahnti?

"Jihad," spat Onan. "Don't the 'doxies just love that ancient curse?"

"They do that."

"I cannot imagine the people going for it again. That last holy war of the 'doxies was one hell of a bloody mess. Don't you remember? Every family had out the black weeds."

"Of course."

"Many others do as well, my friend. The 'doxies are finished. Consider it written."

"Consider it written," scoffed Nabil. "Read to me from your fortune-telling book, fuzzywriggle."

"Nabil, I saw the horror of the Jihad on the screens. My father was in the war and he told me of things much worse than those that made it into the news. The "doxies had their damned Mujtahidun performing atrocity after atrocity until the army itself rebelled, attacked the fanatics, and put an end to the fighting. Duman Amin was there. He can tell you. Ask Jamil. He was Duman's sergeant."

"Many don't remember the war, Onan. That's all I'm saying. A whole new generation has grown."

"What about history, Nabil? What about memory?"

"History is dead to those who haven't lived it, and in politics an accurate memory is not a tool of profit. Instead, it is a tool of convenience, opportunity, and blackmail. A lot of people don't remember and a lot of people won't remember. They are the ones who put this smell into the wind. They are the ones who will put Tahir Ranon in power one of these days."

"Nabil, you worry more than an old woman on workhouse rations."

"What about that dribble-nosed young priest who was at the pulpit last Adonai?"

"What about him?"

Nabil laughed. "Skipping services again? You be careful that they don't have you in front of a priest's court one of these days."

"The priests are too busy buggering each other and stealing from the poor to worry about me. What did the priest do?"

"He as much as told Duman Amin and the members of every other old family in the temple that the Reformists are dragging the world down to Magda's fire in Hell—"

"That's a Reformist temple! He had no right to say such a thing." There was genuine shock in Onan's voice. "Why would even a fanatic take such a risk? And before that congregation? In that temple, of all places?"

"As I said, my friend, there is something 'doxy in the wind."

"Bah! Nabil, you ought to grow hair and sausages, become a fuzzywriggle, and augur up the future

yourself with a little blue book."

In the dark behind the ranges, Silent Her frowned at Onan's comment about a little blue book as she removed a loose stone from the wall and placed the tiny booklet into the opening. Before she replaced the rock, she looked at the book's blue cover and thought. Females were not allowed to own property, and the Imahnti must have known about the law. Why had the fuzzywriggle given her the book? And how could one "augur up the future" with such a book? And if she could, what kind of future would she try to bring into being?

She quietly replaced the stone. The questions were pointless without the key to the words in the book. She peeked from between the ranges. Onan was slouching in his chair, his arms folded, his legs outstretched and crossed at the ankles, his chin resting upon his chest. He lifted his head and said to Nabil, "If what's in the wind is what you think it is, my friend, we'd better pray to Alilah that Joram and Bahai have both outgrown the "doxies."

"*You* say to pray?"

"Pray like you have no paddle, and paddle like there is no God."

The girl faded into the shadows and slipped into the corridor. Jamil was on duty, and this time the sergeant was catching a quick nap in the guard room. She crept past the guard room, opened the door, and made her way to her brother's room of toys. She had made up her mind to tell Rahman about the book. Perhaps he would teach her how to read it.

When she arrived Rahman was sitting on the floor playing with a model sailing ship. After noticing her the boy frowned and returned his attention to the model.

"You shouldn't be here, girl. I'll get in more trouble."

Something cold touched her heart. She signed, "*What is wrong?"*

"Jamil talked to my father."

She smiled. "*Did you tell your great lie? Did you tell him that Jamil—"*

"No." Rahman's face was very red. "Jamil told my father about the lie and about my threat. My father was very angry with me." Tears of shame were hot in his eyes. "He beat me, and it was all your fault!"

Her eyes narrowed as she signed, "*I didn't make you tell lies against Jamil."*

The boy pushed his model aside, got to his feet, and slapped the girl's face. "That's for you, Silent Her!"

She stood there, stunned, as her world shrank to the limits of the female wing. She damned the tears on her cheeks as she signed, "*You are nothing, Rahman. You are just like them all. Nothing."*

He lifted his hand to slap her again, but she pushed his chest with her hands, knocking him backwards over his model ship. He struggled halfway to his feet and she leaped on him, knocking him flat on the floor, crushing his model. She wrestled with him until she straddled his chest and was holding down his arms by his wrists.

"I'll kill you, girl! I swear I'll kill you for this!"

From beneath her veil Silent Her looked down at her brother's bright red face. His face was directly beneath hers, and there was nothing but empty space between her lips and Rahman's eyes. She gathered the spittle in her mouth, opened her lips, and let it fall on his face. As her brother screamed his anger, she swallowed as much air as she could hold and burped the most filthy word she had ever heard. "Toilet!"

Releasing him, she stood and looked one last time at the room full of toys. The prince was a monster, but the kingdom had been wondrous.

"You are ugly!" screamed Rahman from his place on the floor. "You're mean, ugly, and you smell bad! You're stupid, a girl, and nothing but a dummy! I hate you! I hate you and wish you were dead!"

Silent Her turned away and faded into the shadows as she returned to the female wing. That night, as she cried, she felt her heart shatter.

Weeks later the household stood in the courtyard before the entrance to the main house, autumn's chilly morning breath upon their necks. The men stood in a loose half-circle around Duman Amin. The women and girls of the household stood in a black cluster at the foot of the stone staircase.

Rihana was standing with the wives of Onan, Nabil, Jamil, Majnun, and Isak. Even the wife of the heathen gardener, Toi, was there. The five kitchen scrub girls huddled by themselves, and no matter how Rihana urged them to relax, they stayed to themselves and kept the fear in their eyes.

Majnun and Isak stood with the women, but not with their wives. Between them they guarded Duman's second wife, known to the women as Hedia. All of the servant men were there, but none of them would be going to the ceremony.

Silent Her looked up at her mother. Isak was holding Hedia's left arm while Majnun held the right.

"By Kamil's ice," cursed Duman Amin. "This is barbarous." He glanced at Razi Itef, his secretary. "The orthodoxy raises its toothless old head to let out one last senile wheeze for the purpose of seeing if it can make the rest of us jump. It is nothing more than that."

"I see we are jumping nonetheless, minister."

Silent Her's father glared at Razi for a split second, then he snorted out an angry laugh. "That is not a lie on your lips." Duman paused to look through the main gateway. "If the first minister wants to make a parade out of this farce, where is he?"

"It shouldn't be much longer, minister. The prime's secretary said they were just passing Yo'el when he called." Razi looked at his watch. "Perhaps I should get your wrap, sir. You already look chilled and the ceremony will be held outdoors. If they plan readings in addition to all of the speeches, it promises to be quite an ordeal."

Duman grimaced and faced Razi. "Tahir Ranon will get in there with at least an hour of regressive wind, you may be certain." He nodded and sighed. "A wrap would be very sensible. Thank you for the suggestion."

Razi cocked his head at Nabil, and Duman's head servant bowed and hurried up the stairs. While Duman waited, he frowned and walked over to the women. Silent Her and the others bowed deeply at his approach.

He held up his hands. "Listen to me."

They stood erect and Duman looked at them one at a time. When his gaze reached Silent Her, he paused. His eyes blinked, then he addressed them all. "I want you to understand that the ceremony through which you are about to be put is something I and the Reformists have opposed for decades. It is a ceremony that humiliates everyone; men as well as women. It would not serve the will of Alilah any less to have a witch doctor dance about to summon dust demons."

The faces of some of the women carried worried looks. "The worst that might happen to you at this thing is a chill, sore knees, or a troublesome case of boredom. Is everyone dressed warmly?"

Some of the women nodded in response. Duman's glance fell upon his second wife for an instant. "I'd hoped I could spare you this." He shrugged and faced all of the women. "I wanted to spare all of you. However, because of the border incident with Bahai, the orthodoxy has the nation on a fundamentalist jag. It will pass, and until it does pass, all we have to do is to make certain that foolish courage doesn't have us getting caught up in the hysteria of the moment. Meanwhile we have some sand to eat. Our first minister, Mikael Yucel, will eat his share, so we must eat ours. The women of both of our households will stand the ceremony along with the household women of the rest of the cabinet members."

Nabil arrived with Duman's gray coat with the black fur collar. As he was helped on with his coat he said to the women, "I just want you to know that I oppose this."

A shout from the wall signaled the arrival of the first minister's party. After a moment the glossy maroon nose of the first limousine entered the gate followed by a trail of fourteen limousines, each one the same maroon color. The vehicles all had tiny flags mounted on their fenders. The flags were white with a golden starcross in the center of each one.

Silent Her turned around and saw two of the scrub women signing at each other.

"*Did you hear what he said?"* signed Zel to Joina. "*It makes my blood boil."*

Joina nodded and signed, "*Tahir will scour these stains from Alilah's hem one day."*

"*May God touch his eyes—"*

Rihana turned Silent Her around and signed, "*It is impolite to present your back to the first minister."*

The girl reached into Rihana's sleeve so that she could sign against her skin unobserved. "*Zel and Joina are angry at my father."*

"*They are orthodox,"* answered Rihana.

"*Should we tell my father?"*

"*Your father knows."*

Silent Her frowned as she thought of something. Again her fingers moved on Rihana's arm. "*If they are orthodox, should they be finger-talking? I thought the 'doxies didn't allow finger-talking."*

Rihana's lips parted in a wry smile as she answered, "*In their case it's all right because they're doing it themselves. Pay attention now to the first minister."*

Duman waited beside the first car as Nabil opened the door. The first minister stepped down from his limousine and Silent Her was disappointed at how short he was. Since he was first minister, that made him more important than her father. She had expected him to be taller than Duman. The first minister's face carried a troubled look.

Her father stepped forward, took Mikael Yucel's hand, kissed it, and held it to his forehead. Upon releasing his hand, Duman kissed the first minister on both cheeks. Silent Her looked up at the house. Rahman was looking down at her, his face filled with hate. She looked away and the chauffeurs of the last five limousines opened their passenger doors and took their posts.

Nabil began assigning the women to the last five cars and Silent Her became light-headed at the prospect of being off the estate. Where might they go? What might they see? She followed Rihana into the limousine and instantly her nostrils were caressed by the smells of leather and aromatic woods.

She was seated between Rihana and the ancient woman she remembered from the burying of Duman's mother. She placed her hand upon Rihana's arm and pressed, "*Who is she?"*

Rihana signed that the old woman was Duman's aunt Leeba, and to remember that Leeba was

feebleminded and not to ask her anything or she'll begin crying. Isak entered the compartment followed by Hedia and Majnun. Duman's second wife sat down facing her daughter, the guards sitting on either side.

Silent Her saw that her mother was staring at her. She lowered her gaze to her mother's hands. Hedia signed, "*You are my child. I heard you cry out when you were born. I know you can give voice."*

Hesitantly the girl signed back, "*They say you are mad. They say I should not go near you because you will hurt me. They say I should read nothing you sign to me."*

"*You can give voice."*

"*I cannot. I have tried. I cannot give voice."*

Hedia's fingers repeated, "*You can give voice."*

Silent Her sat still for a long time, looking at her mother's long, delicate fingers. When the cars began moving, she signed to her mother, "*You never gave me my quiet name."*

"*After you were taken from me, the one time I saw you, you ran from me."*

The girl's eyes widened. "*Do I have a quiet name?"*

"*Yes."*

"*What is my name among women?"*

Hedia's hard mouth softened slightly as she signed, "*Your quiet name is Lilith. Lilith was Adam's first wife. She demanded equality with Adam, and when Adam would not consent to this, she left him. Adam then received Eve from God and together they founded the race of men and pliant female creatures. Lilith went on to found the race of women."*

"Are they allowed to do that finger-talking among themselves?" asked Majnun.

Isak shook his head and answered, "Not in my limousine." He shrugged and smiled. "But, then, this is not my limousine." Majnun's voice grew more serious. "This is Duman's limousine, and without disrespect I say that with him women may do anything they please."

Lilith looked into her mother's eyes and signed, "*Thank you for my name, Mother."*

Hedia's fingers signed, "*Never forget: I heard you cry. You can speak. Lilith, you can give voice back to the race of women."*

Lilith looked to her left to see Rihana looking back at her. Duman's first wife studied her for a moment, glanced at Hedia, and turned her gaze toward the passing hills and fields.

As the caravan entered the limits of Joram City, it was joined by black-and-tan-clad cycle riders who escorted the first minister's party to the ceremony. The streets were wide and lined with majestic cotton flower trees and curiously silent crowds. The limousine stopped and Lilith felt a flutter in her stomach as Rihana led her out of the car.

The crowds were made up of nothing but men. Their faces carried neither humor nor pity. She looked up from the rows of masks to the tall gleaming buildings.

There was the sound of drums, and the beat seemed to reach inside her soul, calling up things ancient and strange. The sounds echoed from the steel and glass faces of the surrounding office towers as the ghostly sounds of blue wood flutes came from the crumbled remains of the old ruin before them. Lilith held Rihana's hand as the women from many important households formed a black column as they entered the old temple walls.

It seemed strange to be inside a building yet be able to look up where there should have been a ceiling and see the sky and the tops of other structures. The temple ruin itself was little more than the partial remains of a few honey-colored stone pillars and walls. The blackened arch through which they had entered was the only complete opening in the structure.

Inside and to the left of the arch was a bronze statue of a woman holding a finger before her bound mouth. She knew that the woman was Angerona.

There were white-colored areas on the walls, and she pressed her fingers into Rihana's arm as she signed, "*What is the white?"*

"*The heat of the fire bleached the stone,"* answered Rihana upon Lilith's arm.

"*When was the fire?"*

"*The temple was destroyed over three centuries ago by Magda and the Sword of Justice during the Female War."*

"*Women did this?"*

"*Magda and the women set the entire world aflame."*

Inside the ruins there were strange men standing in solemn little groups. Every few moments a man would look at the women. The expression would always be hard, with narrowed eyes, a smirk, or a sneer. Lilith did not avert her eyes, but returned glance for glance. It was almost as though the looks from the men were insults, challenges, signs of some enigmatic victory. Lilith's fingers reached beneath Rihana's sleeve and moved on her forearm asking, "*Why are we here?"*

"*The reason for this,"* signed Rihana, "*is to paint us once more with Magda's guilt."*

"No more of that, woman!" hissed an angry voice. Rihana started and looked with astonishment at an elderly novice.

Rihana began signing back, "*I only answered the child's—"*

"No more! Keep your fingers still! I do not understand your wicked finger signs and no true son of the Enlightener would. Stop it now if you fear the fires of Hell."

The novice took a significant look at the first minister's party and returned his attention to Rihana. With three steps he came to a halt in front of her. Lilith saw that her father was looking at his first wife.

"Wife of Duman Amin, you know the Female Law. No female is allowed to read, no female is allowed to write. All of that business with the fingers is reading and writing. There will be no more of it, woman. Especially there will be no more of it here and today."

When the novice returned to his post, Lilith looked for her father to see what he would do. Duman had an angry look on his face, but his anger was not directed against the novice. It was directed, instead, at his first wife. The look of anger transformed into one of confusion as Duman's gaze moved to his patron, Mikael Yucel. The first minister did not return the look. Lilith faced forward and the procession resumed its solemn pace.

There was an inscribed plate, green with age, that had been affixed to the remains of a stone column inside the temple ruins. To hide her fingers, Lilith again reached inside Rihana's sleeve and pressed her fingers against Rihana's arm.

"*What do the words say?"*

Rihana waited a long time before she placed her hand beneath Lilith's veil and rested it upon the child's shoulder. Hidden there her fingers answered, "*It is man-writing. It is forbidden for me to read it."*

"*I know you can read it, Rihana. I've seen you in my father's library. I have seen you read the books there."*

Duman's first wife looked down at Lilith, her face a mask. Rihana turned her face toward the bronze inscription and signed upon Lilith's shoulder:

"Look upon Magda's monument
And remember, oh men,
Lest ye forget and again
Fall victim to woman's tongue."

Women and their daughters crowded the cleared places on the floor as they knelt on the temple's hard, cold paving stones. Lilith could see that there were security guards everywhere. Far to the right her father and the first minister were standing with several more men. As more men arrived, they bowed, and the first minister nodded curtly at them.

Suddenly blinding white lights filled Lilith's vision. The child clung to Rihana's arm and buried her face in the folds of Rihana's dress. She felt Rihana's fingers on her shoulder. "*They are lights for television cameras. Don't let them see you are afraid."*

Slowly Lilith withdrew her face from the security of Rihana's dress. Squinting against the lights, she sat back upon her heels and turned to look for her mother. Directly behind the household women, Hedia knelt between the two guards, Isak and Majnun. As did all of the men, the guards remained standing. Hedia had her hands folded in her lap and her eyes closed.

The drumming changed rhythm and the flutes stopped as Lilith saw a strangely imposing figure bow before the first minister and kiss his hand. Somehow the tall one made the simple token of respect an insult as he did it.

The person was a full head taller than the first minister, with long black hair streaked with silver. His high cheekbones and thin nose made his cheeks look sunken. His brows were black and heavy, and beneath them were dark eyes set too close together.

"*Who is he?"* Lilith asked.

"*Tahir Ranon, leader of the Orthodox Party. He is your father's bitter enemy."*

"*Why would my father have enemies?"*

"*Your father wishes to change things. Tahir Ranon is opposed to change. That's why he is your father's enemy."*

Lilith looked up into Rihana's eyes. A strange pride seemed to burn there.

"*I do not understand."*

Rihana moved her hand beneath Lilith's veil. "*Duman Amin is opposed to allowing unwanted girl babies to be killed. He believes that the laws should be changed to allow women to read and write, and even to go to school to learn skills so that they may be employed as something other than servants and scrub women. He believes that women should be allowed to keep for themselves part of the money they earn. All this frightens the Orthodox Party."*

The wind increased slightly, causing a haze of yellow dust to rise from the paving stones. Tahir Ranon moved to the raised center of the floor where the altar had once stood. He took his place there with several

other men, all of whom wore simple white caftans with dark blue outer robes that reached to their ankles. They all wore the plain black fezzes that marked the priests of the Haramite orthodoxy.

Lilith watched a young novice walk through the kneeling ranks of women. He had a long thin stick in his hands. As he reached the end of one row and was turning into the next, his gaze made contact with Lilith's. He pointed his stick at her.

"Don't look at me in that manner, girl. Keep your eyes down."

As her face grew hot, Lilith quickly looked down at her lap. She felt Rihana's hand on her shoulder. "*It will be over soon."*

The drumming stopped. After a moment a deep, resonant voice filled the ruined temple.

"In the name of Alilah."

"In the name of Alilah," responded the men.

With her head still bowed, Lilith looked up. She saw all of the men bowing toward the speaker. The speaker was a powerful-looking Haramite priest with a white beard. Tahir Ranon stood at his right hand. The priest's fierce eyes seemed to search out Lilith's, and in terror she covered her face.

"Behold the Messengers of God: Abraham, Moses, Solomon, Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, and the Bab, who foretold the coming of Him-who-God-shall-manifest."

"Behold the Messengers," repeated the men as they knelt and bowed.

The white bearded priest looked over the assembly, waiting until every last sound had died. He placed his hands to the sides of his face, then held his hands up to the sky.

"Behold the Founders who named the Enlightener—"

"—who foretold the Voyage and the world of Haram," completed the men.

The priest turned and held out his hands toward the hundreds of women who knelt on the floor, their heads bowed. "Behold the daughters of Shaytan: defilers of men, poisoners of hearts, minds, and bodies." He held his hands out toward the bronze inscription. "And behold the legacy of Magda, the wife of Shaytan, the edge of the Sword of Justice, who turned the Sword against God and his people on Haram."

The men bowed again and pressed their hands over their hearts. The white-bearded priest bowed, kissed his starcross, and made the triangular sign of the starcross before the men. When the priest had finished, he joined the rank of priests at the rear of the raised area leaving Tahir Ranon standing alone.

The breeze caused a dry leaf to skitter across the paving stones. The sound it made seemed raucous and disrespectful in the silence. As the leaf passed a rank of kneeling women, a quick hand darted from beneath a black veil, captured the offensive leaf, and snapped back out of sight.

"Men of Joram, men of Planet Angerona," began Tahir Ranon. "All over this world there are ruins such as this. The ruins are of temples, schools, universities, factories, government buildings, and great houses of finance. These ruins have been preserved to make certain that memory never again grows vague. Every town and city maintains one or more such reminders. They remind us of who we are, from whence we came, and what we must do to continue to serve the will of Alilah."

"In the name of Alilah," repeated about half the men in the assembly. Lilith noticed that her father was not one of them. Her father stood alone, apart from the others, his face in a frown.

Tahir Ranon continued, "From the death of Magda and the destruction of the Sword of Justice until over a century ago, each year the men of old Haram would bring their women to the local ruin to remind them of the sin their silence carries. They were shown the image of Angerona, ancient goddess of silence, and told why Haram, the place forbidden to war, had become Angerona. They were brought to the ruin to have the Female Law read to them. Over the bones of Magda, in the year Eighty-Nine, God gave us this simple ordinance: 'Look upon Magda's monument and remember, oh men, lest ye forget and again fall victim to woman's tongue.'

"This is the Female Law: Women's sins against God, nature, and man have brought down upon her and her female offspring the curse of silence to mark them as evil. Until woman is again born with speech, this shall be her penance:

"Upon pain of death, no female shall bear a name save in reference to her patron;

"No female shall learn to read;

"No female shall learn to write;

"No female shall enjoy the protection of any rights save for those extended to her by her patron;

"The female who bears a name, or reads, or writes, or teaches, or claims property as her own will be put to death by slow strangulation.

"This is the will of Alilah."

"In the name of Alilah, by the spirits of the Messengers," said the men.

After a long silence Tahir Ranon held out his hands. "How simple it would have been," he began, "to have honored the ceremony and thus pay respect to the word of God." He lowered his hands and continued with a grave voice.

"Decades ago, however, our leaders confused compassion and mercy with laziness and lack of discipline.

Our leaders sought new interpretations of the Female Law, allowing the women's finger-talking and the Mogam writing to be tolerated, and then simply excused, as though this talking was not really talking and this writing was not really writing."

His fierce eyes looked over the assembly. "As of this moment, all of these blasphemous practices cease." He pointed at the women with a shaking finger. "There can be no compromises with God's ordinances, and we violate them only at the risks of ending human existence on Angerona and condemning our immortal souls to eternal fire. God has stricken down an entire world of sinners before, and the Female War was God's warning that the next time he will spare none of us."

He held out his hands to indicate the temple ruins. "Witness the effects of violating the laws of God. Men, your eyes will speak to you the truth. Because of Magda and her followers, half the population of this world was killed. All of our cities, homes, schools, industries, and houses of worship were destroyed. Read your histories and remember, you men. It was not so long ago that our forefathers battled in the gutters for vermin to eat."

He clasped his hands behind his back. To Lilith it looked as though Tahir Ranon was looking directly at her. She reached out her hand and found Rihana's. Rihana's hand was cold.

"The first minister and I have come together with our families this morning to tell our great nation and this world that never again shall we see misguided compassion bring on the destruction of civilization. As of this moment we return to the values that were born in the fires and ashes of this temple. Without exception, both the Reform and Orthodox parties support this return to God."

He nodded at the priest, and the priest's deep voice called, "Priests and novices of Alilah, unopposed knowledge of a sin is as great a violation of God's will as the sin itself. You do not serve God and you do no service to either men or women by keeping such sins secret."

"Great father," called a voice from behind Lilith, "I have seen this one use the finger-talking."

Lilith's stomach went cold as she gripped Rihana's hand. Rihana squeezed back. A tall priest with a closely-cropped black beard came down from behind the great father and walked toward Lilith. Every muscle tensed as she searched for an explanation, some kind of defense. She had used the finger-talking. Lots of times, even with Rahman, and Rahman hated her. Everyone, even Jamil, Isak, and Majnun, knew about her finger-talking. She had even used it with her father.

Duman Amin had said that no one would come to any harm. He had joked that someone might be bored to death or catch a chill. Jamil had beaten her for leaving the female wing, and that was only Duman's rule. Finger-talking was breaking God's rule. But her father was the minister of trade and best friends with Mikael Yucel, the first minister. Who would dare to touch the daughter of Duman Amin—

The sounds of footsteps came from behind her. She could hear the sand grinding between shoes and the paving stones. There seemed to be a sickeningly sweet scent of rotting flowers on the air.

She held onto Rihana's hand more tightly and prayed to herself—

"No!"

It was her father's voice. Lilith opened her eyes and turned to see four men holding Duman Amin. He began screaming and flailing his arms. The child turned to ask Rihana what she should do when Rihana's hand was torn from her grasp. Lilith looked up and saw that a priest had a length of rope looped around Rihana's throat from behind and was twisting it tighter and tighter through a wooden sleeve by a wooden handle.

It was as though the blood exploded in Lilith's head. She sprang to her feet, wrapped her hands around the executioner's arm and sank her teeth into the priest's flesh. The taste of blood filled her mouth as the man screamed in terror and pain. A hand she didn't see slapped her down. The back of her head struck a paving stone, and for a moment the world became soft and gray.

There were soft lights, gray ones, yellow ones, sunbursts of blinding white, a pain as though a steel needle had been thrust through her spine.

There was an image of Rihana, her swollen tongue pushing against her veil, her feet kicking as her hands clawed at the choke loop. Then she hung limply from the rope, her legs only twitching. The priest who smelled like rotting flowers continued to twist the rope's wooden handle.

Ghostly screams ate at the edges of Lilith's awareness, and she felt her hands and elbows push against the paving stones as Rihana's limp body fell upon the temple floor.

On the platform the priests seemed to be saying something, but Lilith couldn't make out the words. On her knees she crawled over to Rihana's body and picked up the woman's hand. It was very cold, the nails torn and bloody. The child dropped it.

A dark figure passed close by her right, and as it passed it pressed something into Lilith's hand. It was a tiny chip of the temple's yellow stone, and the girl stared stupidly at it as she heard Isak and Majnun calling.

"Back here! Woman, come back here!

The priest with the white beard held out his hands and said in a voice that was slow and distorted, "You guards, stay where you are. She will condemn herself."

Her father screamed again, his voice almost a whimper, "God, no! She is not well! She is not well! In the name of Kamil, have mercy."

The pain in Lilith's head seemed to drown every other sensation. She rubbed her eyes to clear them. Exploding lights and pain made her weave upon her knees as she saw her mother walk toward the stone pillar with the inscription. Hedia pulled off her veil and let it fall to the floor. She lifted a dark stone and, with one swift stroke, marked a Mogam center line beneath the bronze plaque. She quickly filled it in.

By the time Hedia was finished, the priest with the choke loop was behind her. He placed it over her head. Hedia turned so that she faced her executioner. As he began to tighten the loop, she spat in his face.

Lilith took a step toward them, but hands reached out and held her arms and legs, and covered her eyes and mouth. She bit one of the hands, and as she again saw light, she read the inscription her mother had made on the pillar.

"*Lilith will not be silent."*

She felt a blow on the back of her head. The gray returned, and then came the black.

Hovering above her dreams, but not yet awake, she hid from the images that reached at her from her sleep. She concentrated on the pain in her neck and head. She let the pain fill her and drive those images of the temple out of existence.

There was a noise, something hard hitting stone, and from the echo of it she knew the noise came from the courtyard. She tried to leap up, but the Shaytan himself was digging at her head with a trowel. She eased her head back upon her pillow, her eyes still shut.

"Did I hear her stir in there?"

A strangely distant voice came to her. Her lips felt dry as she wondered if they were coming for her; coming to place her head in a choke loop. She listened but the voice was gone.

She lifted her hands and touched her fingers to the skin of her throat. It seemed so soft. There had been a cased wheel of cheese in the kitchen that had rope handles. She had tried to lift the case, but it had been too heavy. She remembered the feel of the rope, how coarse it had been, the bite of its sharp fibers into her skin. She held her breath for a moment, then let it escape as the horror of her experiment touched her.

There was another sound. It was a sound that she had made. The rustle of the bedclothes sounded strange. The bed beneath her felt strange. She reached out with her hands and found that the bed was much wider than her bed. The reaching made her head hurt even worse and she brought her hands in to her sides.

"There," said a strange voice. "She's coming to."

There was a muttered response that the girl couldn't hear. She opened her eyes and squinted against the pain. The shades on the windows were drawn against the late afternoon sun. There was a bearded man standing near the windows. He was a priest doctor.

The priest came over, lifted her arm, and looked at his timepiece. Lowering her arm, he leaned over her and held up his left hand. "Look at my fingers, girl."

She looked at the man's stubby fingers as a light flashed past her left eye then her right. He smiled and placed the light into his coat pocket.

"Do you have a headache? I'd wager that you do."

She lifted a hand to answer and the priest placed his hand upon hers as he shook his head. "Not with your fingers, child. Either nod or shake your head."

Lilith closed her eyes and gave a tiny nod. It hurt to nod.

"Do you feel tired? Sleepy?"

She shook her head.

The priest patted her hand as he turned. "It's probably nothing more than a mild concussion. A little rest and she'll be fine."

Lilith lifted her head slightly to see who the priest was addressing, hoping that it was her father. Beyond the priest was Sergeant Jamil's gloomy visage. The guard was slouched against the door, his legs crossed, his arms folded. Lilith had never seen Jamil slouch.

"It can't be true."

The priest cocked his head toward the child. "Outside, Sergeant Aswad."

"Creeping Jesus, has the world gone mad?"

"Not here," insisted the priest. He patted Lilith's hand again and said to her, "Try and rest quietly, child. Just close your eyes and rest and you'll be up playing in no time."

He turned and followed Jamil out of the room. The priest pulled the door almost shut and said in a low voice, "Guard what you say, sergeant. If some church father dangles a choke loop in front of my face, you may be certain that I will tell them anything they want to know, including your occasional blasphemies."

"Please accept my apologies."

There was a silence and the doctor spoke again in a quieter voice. "The girl didn't need to be reminded of her mothers."

"I cannot believe it," hissed Jamil. "Next to the first minister there is no more powerful man in Joram than Duman Amin. How can this be?"

"The first minister needed to quiet the opposition. Duman Amin was Tahir Ranon's price."

"The first minister is Duman's closest friend!"

"Mikael Yucel is Mikael Yucel's closest friend."

"Father, such things cannot stand before honor, loyalty, and friendship."

"Sergeant, you are greener than that girl in there. The party in power will define the nation's slice of the new world government once it is formed. Of course, that world government will be the instrument that will control trade with Imahn and other alien worlds. You cannot even imagine the incredible fortunes and the degrees of power involved—"

The door opened and the priest leaned into the room. He glanced at Lilith and pulled his head back out of the door, closing it behind him. The sounds behind the door died to nothing.

She closed her eyes and concentrated on thinking about anything other than her nightmares. She thought the room she was in was strangely familiar. Opening her eyes, she gingerly turned on her left side and saw a table and chair. It was the table her mother had been sitting at that one day so long ago. This was her mother's room.

She pushed herself up with her elbow and arm until she was sitting up. For a moment the room seemed to spin, but she focused on the window until the feeling passed. There was a numbness inside of her; a confusion. How was she supposed to feel about her mother's death? How was she to know what to make of her mother's death when she still did not know what to make of Hedia's life? And there was the death of Rihana. She chose not to acknowledge at all the existence of that event.

She looked down to see that she was wearing a black bed-dress. There was a veil for her at the foot of the bed. Looking away from the veil, she moved to the edge of the bed and slipped to the floor. Her naked feet touched the cold planks and her headache and the dizziness left her.

With one hand on the bed to steady her, she reached to the chair. Once she was next to the chair, she climbed up into it. Letting her fingertips glide across the table's surface of soft wood, she sought out the shallow grooves made by her mother's pen writing with the strokes of Mogam. That was where Hedia had done her writing. Perhaps she had even written on the day she was murdered by the priests.

Lilith frowned as she remembered that her mother hadn't just written on that one day. The girl had crouched outside the door a hundred times, and almost every time she had listened she could hear the scratching. Hedia must have written a lot.

No sense could be made out of the grooves in the table top. Many sets of grooves had been made one on top of another. She asked herself, what had been done with it?

She looked around at the room and it was still tiny, dark, and small. Except for the bed, the table, a built-in closet and clothespress, and the chair, there was no furniture. The walls were painted a pale blue. Dark brown and gold waspwood beams and planks formed the ceiling from which a single electric globe light was suspended.

Where could Hedia have hidden her writing? A sudden flush of shame warmed Lilith's face. God hates the female who writes. What must God think of the female who seeks out the words of another female? The future seemed to be a barren, colorless road guarded by men wearing black fezzes and carrying choke loops.

The girl returned to the bed and sat upon it, her feet dangling above the floor. There was a tightness in her chest and throat. She knew there were tears waiting for her, but she did not want to cry. Tears were too hard. There were too many things to sort out, a whole new world to learn. It was a world without a mad mother, a world where Duman Amin was no longer powerful.

The specter of the workhouse loomed in her imagination. If her father was no longer powerful, did that mean that he was poor? Did she still have a patron? Onan always talked of the workhouse as though no human could sink any lower. Would it be the workhouse for her? She had been so evil.

The image of Rihana came into her mind as her eyes filled with tears. Rihana had always been there to chase away the nightmares with a kiss, a touch of her fingers, an embrace. There would be no more kisses; no more embraces. Rihana's death was before her and refused to be denied. The nightmares were here to stay.

The memory of the temple murders flashed through her mind. The choke loop was on Rihana and the girl had tried to stop them. The taste of the priest's blood was still in her mouth. They had swatted her aside as if she were nothing but a snowfly. Lilith knew she would cry for Rihana for many days. She did not know if she would cry for Hedia.

Another piece of memory presented itself. Hedia had been writing, and as soon as Hedia knew she was being watched, she had thrown herself to the floor. What an insane thing it had been to do.

The floor. She studied the floor, the chair, the table, the edge of the bed.

Lilith climbed down from the bed and lay down on the chilly planks where her mother had fallen that day.

Looking up, she could see the underside of the desk and the chair. There was nothing there. Looking at the bed, she turned around, reached out her hands, and grabbed the edge of the frame. Pulling herself beneath the bed, she felt with her hands at the underside of the frame, but she could find no opening, no papers.

Lilith came out from beneath the bed and sat up, although her headache almost made her faint. She knew her mother must have hidden her writing somewhere. The need to find the writing drove her. She got on her hands and knees and crawled over the floorboards, testing the edges of each plank with her fingernails. She tested dozens of cracks, finding each one tight and sealed with varnish. Then, near the wall, one of the short boards moved.

Holding her breath, she dug in her fingernails, and lifted the board. Its edges had been shaped and smoothed by a careful, patient hand. Lilith looked into the opening. Inside there were four writing pens and a wad of papers. She reached in, took the papers, and looked at them. All of the pages were blank. She looked through the opening into the floor and saw more papers tied into a roll with a black ribbon. The roll was as thick as her fist and two hand-lengths long.

She reached in and removed the roll from its hiding place. She sat back on her heels and read the line of Mogam written on the outside of the roll. It read: "To my daughter, Lilith."

The girl felt a teardrop on her forearm. More tears rolled down her cheeks. She put the papers back in their hiding place and replaced the board. When she was once again in bed, she buried her face in the pillow and cried for her mother, the hard mouth, the bringer of pain, the author of her name among women.

"The world is standing on its head," declared Sergeant Jamil many weeks later. He was sitting in the kitchen sipping at a hot cup of abanush. Lilith was in her invisible place behind the ranges. The extra stoves were always cold now. Onan only used the small range near the sink since the other servants had been dismissed and her father no longer did any entertaining. It seemed as though only dustflowers and ghosts roamed the empty halls.

Onan was shaking his head as he gloomily rested his elbows on the edge of the scrub sink. "I can't cry for Majnun and Isak. It was only a matter of time before Duman Amin sent them down the road. How many men does it take to control one sick woman?"

Jamil snorted in disgust. "What were they supposed to do? Wrestle their master's wife to the paving stones in front of the entire government? Are they jinn that they should do battle with Alilah's priests? Was it their fault that bloody Ranon had his sights set on Duman Amin?"

"What of me?" demanded the cook. "I'm left with one sorry scrub woman, and no helpers."

"You make it sound like some great burden to cook for a man who eats less than a devilmoth." Jamil shook his head. "I can't see how he stays alive on what he eats."

"I tell you, Jamil, the master isn't thinking things through. Who is to clean this bloody great mansion? Old Nabil? It broke Duman Amin, that business at the temple. It broke him."

"We must do what we can."

"You're a military man, Jamil. I must look at things differently. A few months ago this was a great household. To cook here was an honor. Now, with but a handful of servants, I don't see—"

"Have you no loyalty, man?" interrupted the sergeant. The conversation dulled to a buzz in Lilith's head as she closed her eyes and stayed curled into a ball, the tears still thick in her throat.

This was the special day; Rahman's day. Yet the sickness of tragedy seemed to stalk every hall, room, field, and corner of the Amin estate. It had not left her heart and she wondered if it ever would.

Autumn was past and the fury of Angerona's winter had the land in its grip. She had not seen her father since that day at the temple ruins. She had not seen him in the courtyard nor in the house. Perhaps Onan was right. Perhaps the sickness had consumed Duman Amin.

No longer was she restricted to the female wing. She could go anywhere she wanted except for the top floor of the east wing. She had tried to see Rahman, but she could not find him. When she had signed to Sergeant Jamil, asking for Rahman's whereabouts, Jamil's face had grown dark with anger. "He's been sent away," was all he had said.

There was the crash of metal against metal and Lilith peeked out from between the ranges to see Onan taking his hand from a skillet on the small range. "The master is having that fuzzywriggle over again."

"Huroot Ib? What of it?" Jamil leaned back in his chair and snickered. "You only have to cook *ivitshi,* you don't have to eat it."

"It's not the soup. In fact, I've developed a taste for it. It just goes to show how far I've fallen."

"If it's not the alien broth, my friend, what is it?"

"Why does he invite the Imahnti to dine with him?"

"They got to know each other very well before the master resigned as trade minister." He held out his hands. "What is there to figure?"

"It's not healthy, that's all. Except for the few servants who are left, he hasn't seen any humans. Besides, couldn't the most important trader on Angerona use the master's grief to his advantage somehow?"

"Your head is full of conspiracies."

"You laugh at me and my conspiracies, Jamil, but look at what has happened to all of us. Am I still a slave to my imagination?"

"Who is to say?" Jamil stood up and buttoned his uniform coat. "Thank you for the abanush. I must go and inspect the remains of my command: myself."

Deep in the shadows behind the ranges, Lilith sighed and searched with her fingers for the loose stone in the wall. Using both hands she lifted it out and placed it quietly on the floor. As Onan cursed and clattered around the kitchen, the girl reached into the hole and pulled out the roll of papers her mother had written. There was a crack of light between the two ranges, and as she flattened the papers, she read.

To my daughter, Lilith. These strokes are all I can leave you. God will lead you to find them. That is all I have for a plan.

I have not been allowed to hold you in my arms since the day you were born. Everyone thinks me mad, even you. It is true I hurt you, but that is only because I know you can speak. When you were born, I was awake. The priests' drugs were too feeble and my eyes and ears were open. I heard both you and your brother cry out. May my soul burn for eternity if everything I write is not true.

Between when I heard you cry and when I saw you again, something had been done to you to keep you from giving voice. I do not know what it is. You must find out. I will write on these papers all that I know, but I know very little. There are ways to know things, and the Imahnti know more of these ways than anyone. I cannot read the man-writing. You must get Rihana to teach you.

Next to ending the oppression of the Female Law, you and I and our feelings are nothing. If you speak, Lilith, the law dies and women will again become humans.

You must speak.

Lilith thought about the little blue booklet and the man-writing. Was the man-writing beyond her, or did she only need to try harder? No one was keeping her from the library now. Because of her mother's letter she had tried reading many of the books. Each one was a mystery with no clues. Rihana could read the man-writing, but she had been old and very smart.

A feeling scraped Lilith's heart, and she knew it was still there: the monster of her memory, the priest with the choke loop twisting the wooden handle, the sight of Rihana's face, the taste of blood in her mouth as she bit the priest's arm.

She looked into the darkest corner of her invisible place and remembered her mother turning in the noose to face her executioner so that she could spit in his face. Lilith no longer asked God how much longer she must carry the pain. The ache had become a new organ. She rolled the papers and returned them to her safe place. This was the special day of the year. Special in more ways than to celebrate her brother's birthday. This was the day Lilith had determined to change the world.

She withdrew the blue book from its hiding place. Once she had replaced the rock, she wiped off her tears with her palms, tucked the blue book within the folds of her dress, and crept from behind the two ranges to the space between them. She waited until Onan went to the pantry. Once the cook was out of the kitchen, she slipped from her hiding place and began making her way to the top floor of the east wing.

Duman Amin was in his darkened sitting room, slouched in his chair, staring at the flames in the room's fireplace. Lilith stood in the doorway watching him. She pushed the door open all of the way and stood in the center. Her father seemed not to notice. She took several steps into the room.

Her father's face looked old and haggard, his eyes stared without blinking, and his shoulders slumped as though he were a whipped animal. His trousers and pullover shirt were wrinkled and he had slippers on his feet. Papers were scattered on the floor, and Lilith could see where at least three books had been tossed across the room. The remains of several more books were in the fireplace. One of them had a starcross embossed upon its half-consumed cover.

She returned her gaze to her father and saw him staring back at her, his eyes wide, his mouth open. "Who are you? What do you want here?"

Lilith took a step closer. Two more steps; three more, until she was before her father's chair. Duman Amin leaned forward, grabbed her veil, and pulled it from her head. He stared at her as though at a ghost. After a moment he frowned and looked at the floor. "My daughter," he whispered as he slumped back into his chair. "My daughter has come to ask me where her mother is."

He noticed the veil in his hand, frowned as he studied it, and held it out to the girl. "Your mother is dead."

She took the veil from his hand and watched as he turned to look at the fire. "I do not hear you cry, child. That is good. I have had enough of tears." Yet a glisten came to his eyes. He closed them, shook his head, and sat up. When he opened his eyes and faced her, the tears were gone. "Was there something else?"

She signed, "*Where is Rahman?*"

"Rahman. I sent him away. He is at a boarding school." His face filled with sadness at the same time as

he gave an ironic laugh and slowly shook his head. "I found out something about my son, your brother," he said, his voice cracking. "A very special thing. I suppose it makes him a hero of the church. In any event, he is a hero of the Orthodox Party." He looked into Lilith's eyes as his own filled with tears.

"Rahman wrote a letter, you see. He wrote it to Tahir Ranon. The priests in the school taught him to do that. In his letter he denounced my Amber. He accused her of reading, and writing, and..." His head slowly shaking, he said through his tears, "My son, whom I gave everything. My son, whom I loved more than God. My son, a viper in my bed."

He turned his face back to the fire. "Do not look at me, child. It has been forever, yet I cannot stop this wretched crying. I would not have you see me like this."

Lilith looked at the curtained window as she ached to put her arms around her father. Duman Amin was a man, however, and she was afraid.

After a long time she heard Duman Amin move in his chair. "You are very beautiful, child. You have Amina's eyes. Your hair is much lighter, but you have her eyes. Face me."

Lilith faced her father. He studied her for a moment, then smiled. "You should have seen your mother when she was a young bride. How fair she was. How full of life and fun." He fell silent as an unshared memory filled his eyes. When he closed his eyes, he again leaned back in his chair.

"This is my son's eighth birthday, and I cannot bear the sight of his face nor the thought of being beneath the same roof. If he were in this house I am afraid I would kill him with my own hands. Rahman could not have taken more from me had he hired an assassin."

Silent Her swallowed air until she could burp her special name for Rahman. "Toilet," she said.

Duman Amin's mouth fell open as his eyebrows climbed. "By the Bab!" A bitter laugh, born within the heart of his pain, exploded out of his mouth. "Toilet!" he shouted. "By the mercy of God, toilet, indeed." Her father laughed and laughed until he was exhausted. After he had been silent for a moment, he turned his head and looked at his daughter. Her head was still uncovered, her veil in her hands. "This is your birthday, too, isn't it? Of course it is. How foolish I must seem. But you are a girl, you see, so there was never any cause to remember your birth." He clasped his hands as he pursed his lips and raised his eyebrows. "You've never had a proper birthday party." He slowly shook his head. "And now I cannot give you one."

He reached out and placed his palm against her cheek. "Do you understand that in my heart I am a dead man? I am skin, blood, bone, a soul black with guilt, hate, and revenge. I have no one to—"

He removed his hand from her cheek and held her shoulders with both of his hands. "You have no one." He gathered his daughter in his arms and hugged her for the very first time. She felt his breath on her neck, his tears and rough whiskers on her cheek. "This is your birthday, Silent Her." A sour tone came into his voice. "I don't like your pet name very much. Do you?"

She shook her head as she buried her face in her father's neck and wrapped her arms around him. She could not stop her own tears.

After a moment, he held her away so that he could look into her face. Moving his hands, he wiped the tears from her cheeks with his thumbs. "When you were born your mother thought you could speak. Did you know that?"

She nodded.

"The thought of it drove her mad. I named you Silent Her for that reason. Perhaps I thought it would help. Perhaps I thought it was funny; cute." He sat silently for a long time. At last he said, "I don't know what to call you now." He took her hand and drew it to his lips. "I don't want to lose you, child." He lowered her hand and held it in both of his. He sniffed and laughed. "Yes, child, let's form a conspiracy and kill God. It would be a grand adventure, wouldn't it? Are you game, child? Caution to the winds, for nothing is written for the bold of heart." He nodded and continued.

"Daughter, you shall have a birthday celebration." A crafty, slightly insane, look came into his eyes. "No. A party might endanger Nabil or Onan, but I will think of something if I have to do the cooking myself."

She smiled and opened her mouth to a silent laugh.

Her father laughed, as well. "Yes, my cooking would be more punishment than party." His eyebrows went up. "A present then?" He gestured around the room with his arm. "Anything in the house, anything on my estate, anything from the entire universe within my power to obtain for you. Would you like Rahman's room full of toys? Choose it and it is yours—"

Again the tears leaped to his eyes. He pulled her toward him and wrapped his arms around her. "Forgive me," he said. "No more tears for us."

He kissed her cheek and held her at arm's length. "What is your present? Make it something that can be hidden. Make it something that cannot be taken away from you."

Her hand was on her cheek where her father had left a kiss. His first. She held out her hand. In it was the tiny blue book given her by the trader. She signed, "*Teach me to read."*

All expression left his face as his eyes studied the book in her hand. The scenarios of a thousand horrors, a million defeats, and an infinity in Hell played behind her father's eyes. At last, he cocked his head toward

the door and said, "Close and lock it."

Lilith rushed to the door, pushed it shut, and turned the bolt. When she returned to her father's side he was picking up some blank papers from the floor.

"Find me something to write with, child."

She searched the floor and found a pen. Rushing to her father's side, she handed it to him. He took the writing instrument and looked down at her as he said, "Do you understand that what we are about to do is against the laws of both God and Joram?"

She nodded.

"Do you understand that this is why your mother and her sister-wife died?"

Lilith shook her head and signed, "*They died because men killed them."*

He closed his eyes and nodded. "That is the truth. Men and a boy." He opened his eyes and studied his daughter. "I, too." When she neither responded nor contradicted him, Duman glanced at the tiny blue book in her hand. "Aren't you frightened?" he asked.

"*I am always frightened. If I do not learn to read I will still be frightened."*

He looked at the papers in his hands as he resumed sitting in the chair. He sat staring at the blank sheets, his fingers trembling, his eyes reading lines that were not yet written. "Do you know what that book is?"

She looked down at the blue cover and realized she had been offered an opportunity to test her father. "*Your friend the trader gave it to me on my seventh birthday. For my present, teach me to read it."*

He looked into his daughter's eyes. "Every educated Imahnti believes that the god force of the universe is life itself. They believe this force is a great multidimensional river, and that there are eddies and currents within it that can be detected, measured, and even predicted." He reached out his hand, took the booklet, and opened its cover.

"The manifestations—" he looked up and raised his eyebrows. "The forms these eddies and currents take, the Imahnti believe, are many. They are such things as fashions, fads, plagues, political movements, social changes, religious upheavals." He closed the book and allowed it to rest upon his lap as he leaned back in his chair, his eyes studying Silent Her's face.

"There are phenomena called life intersections. Some disrespectful students in our schools call them Jesus drafts." He moistened his lips and continued. "Certain kinds of eddies within particular currents, believe the Imahnti, produce beings of unique qualities: skill, wisdom, insight, spirituality, and strength. Huroot Ib once told me that all of the Messengers are such beings, and that there are, on other worlds, other messengers—alien messengers."

"*The trader said this to me,"* signed Silent Her. "*He asked me if I thought I might be such a messenger."*

Duman Amin fell mute at the suggestion. Behind his eyes he appeared to make a thousand instantaneous voyages. When he returned, the mad look was in his eyes. He lifted the blue book and held it out. "The trader once told me that Magda was such a person." He nodded toward the book.

After she took back the blue book, Duman picked her up and seated her next to him in the chair. On the top sheet of the papers on his lap, her father wrote down all of the signs of Mogam. Next to each sign he wrote the man-writing equivalent.

"There. Can you pick out the letters of your quiet name?"

Her mouth opened as her eyes went wide. Duman Amin knew a secret that he shouldn't know. The quiet names were strictly for women's knowledge only.

He smiled at her. "Of course I know about quiet names. Your mother's quiet name was Hedia. Amber's quiet name was Rihana. I don't know yours. Do you have a quiet name?"

She frowned as she pointed at the Mogam strokes for HT-L-L.

"Lal... Lil... Lilith? Your quiet name is Lilith?"

It was the first time she had ever heard it spoken. It sounded beautiful from her father's mouth. She nodded and Duman Amin wrote down some additional letters.

"These are letters that Mogam doesn't have. You need them if you want to read man-writing. They are called vowels." He explained the use of the letter *I* and showed her how it fit into her name. Handing her the pen, he said, "You try it."

She held the pen like a dagger and wrote: *HTILIL.*

Duman laughed. "No. Mogam goes from right to left. Man-writing goes from left to right. Just reverse them."

She wrote them down again from left to right: *LILITH.*

Her father nodded. When his nodding stopped it had been replaced by a frown. "Lilith. Adam's first wife. She was the one who left Adam because she refused to consider herself Adam's inferior." He turned his head toward his daughter. "According to some very blasphemous persons, she was the one who founded the race of women. Did Hedia give you this name?"

Lilith signed her answer, knowing as she did so that she was testing her father once more. "*She gave me*

this name on the day she was murdered. Before she was strangled she wrote on the stone pillar, 'Lilith will not be silent.' I am Lilith."

"I saw it." Tears again misted her father's eyes, then a sly smile spread across Duman's face. "Legend has it that Lilith married the Shaytan and became the mother of evil spirits." The smile left his face as he studied his daughter's eyes. "In the quiet, when we are alone, may I call you Lilith?"

She picked up his hand and held it to her lips. She nodded and held the hand to her cheek. As she watched, her father's face grew stronger. "I'll teach you to read. What's more, I'll teach you everything I know about business, finance, politics, law, science, and war." He thought for a moment, then his lips spread in a sly smile. "If I make Trader Ib my heir, and Ib becomes your patron, you will have all you need to learn. To teach. To begin. Understand?"

Lilith nodded even as she felt herself getting light-headed.

"You must never tell anyone about this, and never practice reading or writing unless you are behind a locked door, and I will give you all of the locked doors in the world to protect you." He glanced at her. "If the priests find out about this, I will not be able to protect either of us, do you understand?"

She nodded and her father's eyes looked into the flames for a haunted moment. "Someday you may have doubts that I know what I'm doing. Many would think me madman, heretic, or fool. You may yourself, when you think that I am a man and men would keep learning from you." He turned his head slowly and looked down into her eyes. "Never doubt for a moment that I know exactly what I'm doing. Never doubt that I know what you will do with your birthday present." His gaze held hers for an instant, and in the reflection from the fireplace Lilith saw Magda once more plunge the world in flames. Her father looked down at the paper and began going down the man-writing alphabet, making the letter sounds as he went.

Gavin J. Grant

EDITING FOR CONTENT

Plus seven or minus seventeen, ahead or behind the West Coast. Add an extra three to either for the East Coast. Yet another five for Greenwich Mean Time. Set your chronometer carefully; you have just crossed the dateline. You are now a day ahead, or a day behind.

Gentle music and masked high-voiced women met me when I touched down at Kansai International Airport, just a twelve-hour superzep express from Los Angeles. I was directed from one line to another: Customs, Credit-Check, Inoculation, Transmutation—always the last, always the worst. They passed in a blur of polite name tags, synthesized voices, and cold rubber gloves. I left the airport by the North Exit. No alarms went off and there was no one to meet me. Good.

I went straight to the Tokyo-Mitsubishi Bank opposite the exit, took my turn through the usual security blankets, spat into the spittoon to confirm my ID, and dropped my credit bracelet into the Automatic Trinket Machine. Next to my regular accounts a burning salamander danced on-screen: a new short-term account. I was pleased. I hadn't been entirely convinced of my client's mental balance and had half-expected the prearranged expense account not to appear. But they were *my* clients, whatever that implied about their mental states.

I followed the pictograms to the train connection. The man behind the screen took my photograph, finger- and eyeprints, quizzed me on my mother's maiden name and the whereabouts of my husband, and only consented to sell me a ticket when his screen showed a train coming in. It was a direct line to Namba, in the center of Osaka, and from Namba a short walk to my Compact Hotel, where I left my tourist bag. I had a few things to do before I slept.

In the growing darkness of early evening the neon was beginning to come into its own. Underneath each display a stand of stationary cyclists with mutilated-reality headsets worked hard to keep the lights bright. I mingled with the under- and overdressed and saw my new shape in a shop window reflection. I was dissatisfied with the Transmutation: at only 155 centimeters and on the skinny side I was no threat to anyone. I'd hoped to retain more of my bulk. I hated these foreign jobs. No matter how many times my body was transformed I'd never get used to it. But the money was always so good.

I souped standing at a ramen stall, slurping like a king, then went next door to a Norwegian bakery, picked up a coffee, one chocolate and one plum croissant, and took a seat in the back. I sipped the coffee and watched the foot traffic for a while. The uniformity was fake. Visitors had to take the body alterations they gave you at the airport or it was an immediate return flight. I wondered how many in the crowd had part of them waiting back at the airport. Immigrants needn't even bother applying anymore.

I dug out the little wooden memory box that had arrived at my office back in the Quake State and opened it. As promised, it contained all the details of a relatively simple editing job. My target should be heading into the city from his cottage in the wilds. I flipped open a small sub-compartment. It was velvet lined and as I opened it a small needle flicked up, pricking my finger. I didn't feel anything yet but knew I'd been primed to find my target. With any luck it would be a quickie and I'd be skipping back to warmer parts pretty soon. Cold weather always gets me down. I was so small I'd call myself petite and cute to match but I could still be rude. I hawked vigorously and spat. Time to begin.

"Ach, you are moaning again. Beasts. Ach, yes, Yumiko, if only you were moaning, eh? Come then Taki, come Hiro, come now." The two llamas complied slowly, following him out the stable into the chilly morning with many a snort and threat. They preferred their more usual afternoon journeys. It had been three years, eight months, and a week or so since his wife, Yumiko, had died. Each time he left for the market he could still hear her.

He harnessed the llamas to the old sled loaded with furs and checked his knots once more. He returned to his little house to see if Yumiko had not somehow appeared, or maybe to check if everything was all right. All stood as it ever did. Not so much as a plate ever moved unless he moved it. He pulled the door shut. "Damn door, have to fix the hinges when I get back," he muttered and his breath billowed out behind him in the cold air. He stepped onto the sled's front runner, took the reins and began the journey into Osaka for the

market. He couldn't get World Service on his earring yet, so he settled for a Franco-African jazz station. As the llamas found their pace he settled himself and the kilometers began to slip away.

The memory box degraded fast. I left it in the next empty doorway. Tomorrow it would be a tidy pile of wood and other constituent parts ready to be reused or sold by some lucky finder. Today my body, somehow not quite my own, was feeling different again. It knew I was looking for someone. Like a word on the tip of my tongue. Not a person so much as an idea, a set of circumstances, a place. I knew he wasn't going to arrive until tomorrow, so I had plenty of time to prepare, but the urge was hard to ignore. It was always like this at the start.

I did a little shopping in anticipation of the job ahead. The international language of trading was alive and well. Even in my new-style body I couldn't quite get my tongue around speaking Japanese. I got what I wanted in the end but there were many bows and smiles behind hands.

At a local hospital on Naniwa Higashi it took a little time and 300,000 yen to reach an agreement with a helpful individual for the use of a room and a ring to direct me to it. For a further small consideration a few odd pieces of equipment would be misplaced there for the duration. I left my bundle of purchases in the room and exited as unobtrusively as I'd entered.

I went to the market. The site was a ghost town, benches and stalls vacant, windblown trash from the last market a month ago still shuffled around. There were a couple of merchant caravans drawn into tight, watchful circles.

From the nearest one the voice of a Bedouin guard rose up, beginning the opening phrases of an ancient love poem. But in the chilly quiet dark even he couldn't keep his heart in it, and he let it fade after merely the first couple hundred syllables. I looked back and gave him the smallest hint of a smile. He shrugged; tomorrow, his closed face promised, tomorrow it would be different.

He was a young man out in the mountains north of Shinjo hunting the great white stag.

Ahead in the trees he saw a flash of white and his heart leapt. Something lithe and confident moved in front of him. He tried not to hurry, not to make a sound. He kept quiet and watched the indistinct form slip among the dark trunks. When the crashing moved on he changed his path to converge on it. Night would drop in two hours.

His snowshoes crunched with the rhythm of his prey and he settled in behind it. For a time they went steadily on. In the failing light of the early evening the trees suddenly opened up into a clearing. He stopped, aware of a deep silence all around him. On the opposite side of the clearing stood a woman dressed in white from hat to boots. Thoughts of the stag fled from his mind. He looked long at those clothes and thought of the hunts that someone had made for that bear, that ocelot, all those skins. Then, as he began to walk forward with his hand raised in greeting and his face uncovered, he realized who she must be: Yuki-Onna, the snow woman. He could not stop walking but his smile stopped moving from his eyes to his mouth and left him with what must have been a terrible face. She was she that had led him here and now her touch would turn his body to ice. Staring at her he stumbled over the flat snow. When he met her regal eyes again her hand rose to her mouth and she began to laugh. He watched her in wonder. In his heart they were married right there.

I lay in my hotel capsule watching the ceiling screen. It didn't understand my Japanese and was refusing to acknowledge any other language. I was too tired to signal or crawl out and argue with the manager. I'd wanted to research the market. Even though the older hangers-on, bohemiads and assorted trash say it's only a shadow of its former self, it still outshines Camden, Istanbul, St. Petersburg and even the Antarctican free-for-all as *the* place to find that certain something for just the right price. Or to die bargaining. But less of that went on these days, I'd heard.

I selected a video of the market opening. Between the first hint of sun and dawn the market was abruptly in full swing. Shouting, trading, buying, selling, sweating, shivering, credit given, unfortunate mistakes, inordinate demands made, met, exceeded, created, killed, settled a thousand times over.

White-faced capuchin monkeys ran between customers' legs, delivering lunches, stealing them back, boxing ears, liberating owners from the chains of their wealth and tripping anyone they could. The screen claimed that outside zoos these were the last capuchins alive.

I was bored by the pop-ups and factoids so I looked through the bibliography of market scholarship. Many dissertations were started here and very occasionally one was completed. There were reports of gnomic societies of former grad students surfacing on these two or three days a month. They banded together, living somewhere on the edges of the market; they observed, attempted to regulate and calcify, to discover norms, reasons, means, and rhythms, only to disappear with the vendors, disappointing many a loved one come searching. I'd watch out for them. But nothing I saw worried me. Security was loose, loyalties thin. I turned off the screen manually and slept.

The journey was long. He passed through an hour or two of rain and quite enjoyed it, but then the sun slipped away with the clouds and night came down. He clicked his tongue at the llamas and they slowed from a trot and stopped. He took his small knife from his belt and cut an apple in half, fed one part to each animal. They snorted and hummed at him. He rubbed them down and unrolled a rain sheath onto each before connecting the kinesthetic lamps. Unzipping his own coat and digging beneath, he found his pocket watch. It showed a little after seven and he thought they had made decent time thus far. He checked all the knots again, made sure all his goods were covered. It would not do to let the smell of damp deter the buyers.

A warning snort from the front told him they had better be off. The cool metal of the watch felt good in his tired hands. It had been his father's, and his father's father's. His father had given it to him before dying, just ten, no, fifteen years ago now. He had been a good man. Still holding the watch he stepped back onto the runner. The llamas were already pulling at the reins. Memory took him away as the animals confidently followed the familiar track. He would not be replaced: children hadn't come, no apprentice had appeared and now it was much too late. He held the reins with a light, trusting pressure; in the other hand he still cradled the watch. It shone softly in the light from the first stars.

I arrived just as the homing geckos were freed for their hourly scamper through the market to clear the latest wave of cockroaches. A gecko flashed over my foot and on into the crowd which was already so deep that I lost sight of it immediately. I took a breakfast plate from a purveyance and ate standing, gazing at the passers-by. I let my gaze slip by others, refusing to catch or be caught, leaving it to my other senses to safeguard me. People began pointing upwards. I raised one of my necklaces and looked through a spying-eye.

High above the thermal island of the city a school of balloons floated in the calm air: large, small, manned and unmanned, gaudy and plain. Something flickered for a second at the edge of my sight and I saw the unmistakable figure of a pirate's automatic dragon flying in low from over the sea. It easily evaded the market defenses and went for one of the brightest balloons. The balloon jerked visibly and began to move upward as ballast sacks were thrown overboard. It was far too late. The dragon flamed and the balloon crumpled. The cradle fell as the dragon rose higher and disappeared. When the cradle crashed to earth bargaining for the contents and the space vacated below had been completed. Percentages were already being paid for expected goods: sight unseen, condition not guaranteed. An undertaker chatted with the merchants, waiting for the call.

The day was unseasonably warm. I'd have to shuck layers of clothing soon. I passed some enviro-clothists showing off their new layered coats and cloaks. They were peeling thin edible layers off and giving them to the kids or dropping them to the ground for a bottom feeder to find. It made me hungry, but not for lemon-flavored cotton. The sun said it was coming on noon and any moment now the first parades, dances, and fireworks would begin. If my target had had a good day he might be packing up already. I had to speed up. I plugged in my earphones and activated the antenna that began in another necklace and ran into my tiara. I picked a retrodance station, the pumped-up lines making me edgy. I started to make my own paths, drawing others in my wake. I kept it up for half an hour and it got me nowhere. I wasn't catching any scents or recognizing any faces; my target wasn't moving around.

I opened a sensor of my own device set on a ladybug brooch but there were too many competing compelling stimuli. I was annoyed at myself and snapped it closed. The initial surge of adrenaline had passed. I dropped my pace back to the crowd's slow roil, let myself be pushed and pulled along, a pachinko ball without life or momentum of my own.

I waited impatiently for the rule of coincidence to reestablish itself. If this guy was such a regular he'd have a regular stall. Why hadn't my oh-so-clever client just given me the number? I could try the Admin offices but I'd already wasted enough time.

I pushed off the main track up a side alley that promised food, and when I saw a place with some seats emptying I headed in. Going through the trailing vines I was approached by a young woman wearing more makeup than I'd ever owned. "Know what you want?" she muttered, eyes slipping past me to the writhing masses outside.

"A hunter," I said, eyes closed, pushing at my temples with my fingers.

The woman began to recite a list in a sing-song voice, "Octopus balls, sheep-brain salad, little finger fries, cricket juice, fish'n'chips, vistula vindaloo, falafel..." I didn't spend too long wondering what the fries were, just ordered the fish'n'chips. At these prices they might even be half decent.

I sat back and enjoyed the break. The food appeared and she pulled me a liter of Golden Harvest Ale. I sighed with pleasure and as I ate I was overwhelmed with a feeling of well-being. I realized I was in trouble and tried to keep eating but I was being irresistibly drawn to someone passing on the main drag. I was pretty annoyed: I hadn't known how heavily primed I'd been. I dropped my bracelet into the woman's jewelry box and added a healthy tip, hoping it would cover the cost of the ohashi, plate, and glass.

It was tricky work balancing everything but now I had no choice. If I didn't go right this instant my nervous

system threatened to get out and go on ahead of me. I cursed the lack of vinegar and dropped the chopsticks, finishing what was left with my fingers; drained the beer and burped and groaned, satisfied. A monkey mocked me and I sent it racing off with the crockery, figuring the woman with the faraway eyes had as much chance of receiving them as anyone else. I still hadn't seen my target, yet I was so tuned in to him that if he veered left, so did I. If he stopped to look at something I'd know what it was when I passed. I was becoming more annoyed at the liberties my client had taken with me and I gave a jolt to my mental abacus, moving my fee up another order of magnitude. I was like a dog in heat. My fingers itched, my eyes were scratchy.

On the far fringes of the market surrounded by merchants who might charitably be described as peddlers, his tawdry stall stood alone. It looked like business couldn't be great. I tugged at my demure dress until it lay in a way it definitely hadn't been designed for and slinked over to him.

He straightened a few pieces of this and that and then evidently decided I was actually approaching him. He met me with a smile and went into a well-practiced speech, "Welcome. Please be so kind as to inspect my humble wares, thank you. All were handmade by myself and my late wife. Long are the winter evenings and hard is the work, so, yes, at first glance the prices may seem a little high; but, see, feel for yourself what is for sale. These are real furs. I hunted each and every one. Touch, please touch, have you ever felt softer? No? A black bear, what a hunt, an epic I could tell you. That? That is ermine, a vicious creature, but beautiful, no?"

"It's very beautiful," I said, caught by his old, strange voice.

"Yes, a worthless animal but what beauty they lend us after their deaths. It would look well on you, or perhaps you are looking for a gift? You have a partner who might appreciate something from the outer reaches? Look at this squirrel-lined dressing gown, the pattern handed down for hundreds of years. My grandfather made these for Russian nobles long before the first Revolution."

I fingered the dressing gown. It looked like nothing I'd ever seen before.

He sighed. "Yes, many people look. My wife has gone and we never had children. So I must go on. Boots, madam?" He came out of his reverie and awkwardly lifted a booted foot to me. "I make them to order, so there would need to be a fitting, but if there was something else that you would prefer, these hands are old yet still contain some memory of what they knew." He started chanting a list, parts of which would get me arrested in many places in the world. He turned away from me then to sort through some scraps and samples and I bent toward him as if in interest. I fingered a locket hanging on a soft silver chain around my neck. I flipped it open, the small block within turned to gas on contact with the air. For a second the drug quieted me until the antidote floating in my bloodstream kicked in. When he turned back to me he was surprised to find me so close and gasped. It was enough. He straightened and stood still.

"Pack it up quick. We're leaving and not taking any of this with us," I told him.

Immediately he started unpegging skins, furs, tails and other scraps I couldn't identify into an old sled behind the stall. From business to empty shell was quicker than I'd expected. He seemed unsure of what to do next, forty years of habit were warring with the drug, telling him he should still be selling, or if he was leaving he should go and get his animals from the stables. Instead I attached a thin scarlet cord hung with tiny bells to his wrist and led him from the market.

From a kilometer away the market sounded like a small war but I doubted anything serious would break out until nearer sundown.

The receptionists at the hospital paid us no mind. I followed the glowing arrow on the orderly's ring. It led us to the room I'd been in yesterday and opened the door.

"Strip," I said to him when we were inside. "Onto the table. Go to sleep." He did everything I asked and I made a mental note to buy into my supplier's company. This drug was something I had to keep an eye on. I flipped the brights over the bed on and strapped him in place. The bed rose at a command to a forty-five degree angle. Beside it was a trolley with the few tools I'd requested.

I washed, snapped on a pair of gloves, attached an IV drip to his arm and loaded it with a light gluco-saline solution. I selected a dull armlet from above my elbow and looked at the patterns for a moment. It was beautiful. I touched my thumb to my lips and carefully polished a touch of verdigris on the armlet. The saliva did the trick and it began to slowly unbind. I kept my hands still as it separated. Unbound it looked like nothing as much as a handful of morning mist on a mountain.

I sent the mapping thread up his ocular canal. It wove through his forebrain, spread around his synapses and dug further and further in until his brain was diagrammed, shadowed, replicated. I connected the reader from the tray and flipped it on. Even as I stepped away from him the first sheets of the reader's report dropped into the hopper. I shucked the gloves and read.

I skimmed the three-page synopsis and went on to the body of his life. It was rather simple. Even on the first read I was able to get the red pencil out and start marking it up; what might be used, what had to be dropped. Junctures, motifs, repetitions.

I couldn't avoid killing his father. Everything with him seemed to involve hunting. So it would be a hunting accident. The boy would grow up a farmer. I couldn't tell whether the area surrounding his home was fertile enough, but he was smart. He'd survive. Besides, he'd go home with a huge headache from his 'celebratory' drinking binge after his huge sale. He'd be well into the swing of things before he noticed anything odd. That wasn't my problem. Either my employers would fix things out there or they wouldn't. The nearest Lawson's Station convenience store was sixty kilometers away. He must already grow some food, otherwise how could he survive?

After my initial scan I started working more seriously on his life. I threw away whole sheets until they covered the floor like years shed from the cold body on the slab. I edited pretty hard. I kept his wife. Except for their first meeting she'd never gone into the forest with him. It was amusing to see how deeply their lives had intertwined. He'd never strayed, a first in my career.

He had very few other contacts and they were easy enough to alter. Now that I'd divested him of his livelihood and history I had to rest. I'd finish rebuilding him in the morning.

When I woke it was still dark. I was filled with a sense of urgency. I washed swiftly, flinching at the feel of harsh hospital soap on my unfamiliar body. I rubbed a piece of scent-impregnated amber over my arms and body and quickly dressed.

I'd taken too long to find him at the market. I was running out of time on the room. Still, I started at the beginning again. I looked for discrepancies, faults, *déjà-vu* possibilities. Tried to gauge whether it all hung together. There were the usual senseless breaks, direction changes, and multiple paths of a normal life. It would do.

Jubilant but barely awake, I pushed the heater tab on a can of tofu and noodles from my stash and listened to the fizz as it heated, the drip of the chili sauce. It popped open and the smell rose up. My knees went weak. I wanted to drop to the floor and eat. There was a knock on the door.

"Hi," said my contact charging in. I dropped my hand from my belt buckle with the hidden dart within, but he probably didn't notice.

"What do you want?"

"Time's up ten minutes ago. The room's needed."

His credit jewel hung from his belt right there in the open. I put my ring against it, sent him another 300,000 yen. His frown was replaced with yesterday's cheery grin.

"It's been difficult looking out for you."

"Of course I'm grateful."

"What time will you be done?" For the first time he took his eyes off my skinny body and let his glance slide over to the old man.

"By two. You can bet your job on it."

His face went hard again. "Okay. Money runs out at two." He turned and stalked out, the door closed slowly behind him. My noodles were still warm. I tucked in.

The old man's breathing was a little ragged from his not having moved for fifteen hours or so. A simple slip in the frontal lobe and he could be just another lobotomy job. Any number of choices were available to turn him into just another pile of meat in the morgue. An embolism would be easiest. The hospital would probably take him as one of their own mistakes. They'd be glad he had no family to sue them. Or I could add his name to the market's casualty lists. But most of my clients knew death wasn't my business. If I was asked to kill I passed the request along to the appropriate service provider, taking my ten percent referral fee to ensure professionalism on all sides. Death at this point might be some relief to the old man. When he got home there would be a hell of a lot of work to do.

I shook my head. I had a simple job I'd been paid to do. A life to edit. The opinions expressed within weren't my remit. They were fifty percent paid for already, the rest upon completion. If some radicals wanted to target this old man and his way of life and had the credit to back it up, it was no concern of mine. If they paid on time I'd never even need to know their names.

I did an hour or so of stretches that flowed into a little tai chi, then a couple of fist sets to sharpen up. Reenergized, I approached the table for the final session.

I rewrote the gross history with an altered synopsis that began everything shifting. Then I got down to the nitty-gritty. I was setting his life along wholly new paths, burning out old connections and building fresh, casting his neural net anew. His body quivered and shook. Muscle groups shifted. He sighed deeply, groaned as his body slackened. With the noise went hundreds of years of skills passed from father to son to son. The blood of a thousand animals, long nights, learning, chases, a certain kind of patience, an awareness, all of these now were as if they had never been. I winced with him as his hands contracted into stiff claws. No matter how carefully I wrote there were always some unavoidable side effects. Without the fine finger work of his past trade he would lose the continued use of some of his fingers, more as the years went by. It was too late now to introduce something that would replicate the actions of his old jobs—and I didn't want any ghost memories of his old skills. His body, so fragile now under the tearing and washing away, sagged. He was

losing something that had stood out even at the market, something of the wild that had rubbed off onto him over the years.

I rested and did a last review of what I'd given him. It wasn't the strongest job I'd ever done, but overall it looked durable and it should see me paid and him still alive. I started the thread rewinding out of his head into a dish. All his synapses should be as I had set them with none left to trigger his true past. I withdrew the IV that had been keeping him alive. He'd eat like a teenager for a couple of days.

I pulled out the clothes I'd bought for him, listening for the tiny chime as the final piece of thread hit the dish. I took the dish to the window and set fire to the contents. It crackled as it disappeared. With it went his memories of his former life, and most of the proof of my night's work. I looked at him in the late morning light. His body was gray. I'd almost pushed him too far.

"Wake up and get dressed," I said. He sat stiffly, nearly tipping over to one side, looked around without recognition. When he saw the two piles of clothes he went without hesitation to the hemp farm shirt and trousers, not even glancing at his lifelong wardrobe. I'd put a new Kevlar-fleece jacket under his old fur coat. He pushed the fur aside and shrugged on the recycled plastic fleece. Once dressed, he leaned back against the bed waiting for more instructions. From his cloth cap to his rubber boots he was every inch a farmer come to the city for the market.

I bagged everything from my noodle cup to the few small tools I'd brought, took that and his old clothes to an incinerator chute in the hallway, and dumped the lot. It was just after one, twenty-four hours after we'd first met, and it was done.

Back at the market the energy was lower. Trading was, for the most part, completed; fortunes hadn't been made, but the occasional one had been squandered. There were more dead spaces, the edges reached towards the center. Today the wind, formerly masked, could distinctly be heard. Where my old man's stall had been was now the middle of a clearing. The other vendors had moved away from it, sensing trouble. When I glared at them, none would meet my eye. From opulent coats and stoles to the barest scraps he'd carried for years, all the furs were gone. Only his sled was left. I stared at a sake and shoku dealer who'd been closer yesterday but he looked back with wide eyes, a subtle pantomime of innocence. What a favor they'd done me.

We went to the barns to get the animals. The various beasts of burden called and nickered at us as we walked past. At the scent of their owner the two llamas raised their heads but they looked past him at first. His body language, habits, stance, even his voice had changed and they looked at him, disbelieving. The llamas ruminated upon whether they would accept him and while they considered it I led them back through the market. His lack of attention was annoying them.

"Hook up the animals," I told him. He bustled around, putting on harnesses, tying knots, tickling them behind the ear and such so that, by the time he was done, they'd accepted him. With reservations, but until proven otherwise, he was their man. I asked him to stand beside the sled, and I used the small ring on my little finger to take a picture of him. I wished I'd done it before. I wanted a cameo of him for myself.

I opened the backside of the drug locket and leaned into him, put my arms around him and hugged him hard.

"Thanks again," I said. "You can't imagine the shit I'd have been in if you hadn't supplied me with everything I needed. Listen, I've got to go, so give me the total and we can finish up. It rounded to an even two million yen, didn't it?"

His eyes had slowly cleared and he blinked hard a few times as the antidote kicked in. When he looked at me he began to smile, taken in by the size of my own smile.

"Pardon me, madam…" he said.

I started prattling on again, waiting for his brain to give him a reason as to why we were standing in front of an empty stall, animals ready to go, discussing large amounts of money.

"…a real savior having all those specialties in one place. I guess if I'd run into you later you might have been sold out and then where would I have been? I don't want to imagine. Oh! The sheik isn't what you'd call a patient man. That would've been my job, kaput, right there." I grinned at him, leaned in again and spoke quietly. "Listen, my budget's real tight but let me pass on some goodwill, right? I'm sure you discounted some of those rare things since I was buying it all, and that's not fair. You probably would have sold it all anyway, right?"

He shook his head, but I forestalled the protest. "Listen, business is sure to pick up for us after the feast, it always does. The sheik might not understand waiting but he knows people. When the new money starts flowing I'll be first in line to get my cut. Share and share alike, right gramps?"

"You bought all I brought?" he managed.

"Sure. Don't you remember yesterday morning and the panic I was in? What did you do, party the night away?"

"I don't think so, but, ah, I'm not sure. Perhaps I slept a little late this morning."

"You're a wild guy, gramps." I lowered my head and looked up at him, ready to add the last ingredient.

"And thanks for waiting for payment. I just couldn't swing it yesterday."

He'd already been looking bewildered but now he looked shocked. This wasn't the way he did business, it would certainly occupy his mind on the way home. "You have not paid?"

"No! Listen, do you have your credit bracelet here? I can do it right now?"

"Yes, certainly." Despite his confusion his hand went straight to the right jacket pocket. A farmer, after all, would never wear something that valuable on his wrist on a daily basis. I put my ring to his bracelet and transferred what I'd said I owed him, and another twenty percent for good luck. He'd need it. Besides, it came straight from the expense account.

"All right! Got the time?"

"Yes, it is a little after two."

"Hey, now that's a watch! I know timepieces and that's a beauty. Is it for sale?"

"Oh no, I'm sorry, no. It was my father's. It is all I have of him."

"That's okay gramps, don't worry, I'll get over it. Listen, I've got to get moving. Don't spend it all in one place," I said, "unless it's on me," and gave him a smile that made him blush.

"See you next month," I said, and with a wave I disappeared back into the market, thinking if I wasn't otherwise engaged, I just might.

I made my way through the market and splurged on a couple of things before taking a rickshaw to Namba, then the express back out to Kansai International. There were more cops around, standing stiffly single or in bunches. I didn't bother them and they didn't bother me. I was just another over-dressed woman with an unexpectedly baroque taste in jewelry. I looked forward to shedding it all in the pawn shops of California.

I went through all the appropriate offices, lines, and machines again. "Pleasure" had been the purpose of my trip, and I had two bags of assorted "antiques" and trash from the market to show for it. They shook their heads at me and waved me onward. At last I reached the reverse Transmutation and got my own body shape back again. I rolled my arms around, feeling the mass that I had missed so.

In the zeppelin lounge I went into a bank vault. I dropped my bracelet in, spat for identification. On the screen all my accounts appeared. The expense account salamander began to consume itself. I made a request for a transfer to my regular account and was pleased to see my balance jump accordingly. They hadn't flinched at the moved decimal in my fee.

At the bar in the waiting lounge I celebrated with a liter of their dark and tasty Water Dog Ale. I was tempted by the oysters when suddenly I changed my mind and ordered the roasted garlic with Italian bread. Eating my miniature feast, I realized a man across the bar was watching me very closely, and it came to me that I wasn't the only editor in the world.

I ordered more garlic and prayed it'd be strong enough to keep him back.

Howard Waldrop and Leigh Kennedy

ONE HORSE TOWN

In whatever language, the meaning of the voice was clear. "Hey, you!"

Homer screwed up his eyes against the rusty colors of the windy sky, trying to focus towards the sound. Dust and grit swirled up against his face from the hillside path in the ruins.

The gruff voice reminded him of his fears when he was a little boy clambering all over the ruins on his own. His parents had conjured up dire stories of snatched boys who never saw their families again, forced to do things they didn't want to do, sometimes killed casually, sometimes savagely, when no longer needed. The fear had been part of the excitement of playing here.

Now, no longer a boy, just about a man, he found himself more afraid than ever. He knew he was even more vulnerable than when he had been a little lad. Over the past three years, his eyesight beyond the length of his forearm had liquefied into a terrible blur. Not such a problem in the familiar confines of his hometown, but he realized he could no longer distinguish between the olive trees and the juts of ancient city walls. Or people—friends or enemies.

He made out one of the shapes, dark and man-sized, in motion as if shaking his fists, and heard the crunch of quickening footfall in the rubble.

Homer made a hasty backwards move down the slope of the grassy mound grown around the wall.

The shape melted away. It didn't move away or step out of sight, but *melted* away. Homer made an involuntary noise in his throat, frozen. Perhaps that, too, was a trick of his eyes.

He could smell the sea wind just below this jagged hill, hear dark crows gathering for the night, but no other human sound besides his own panting. The oncoming dusk felt cool on his arms.

Time to go, he thought.

Darkness is the enemy of youths who were too nearsighted to spot a cow in a kitchen. Even though the family found him pretty useless, a dreamer who tripped over stools, he thought they might be getting worried.

He had discovered the ruins during family trips up north in the summers of his childhood. They captured his imagination like nothing he'd ever known, especially after hearing the stories about what had happened here; all year long had been an agony, waiting to return. The happiest days of his life: standing on the walls, shooting pretend arrows, hacking invisible enemies with swords, shouting out offers of help to long-dead imaginary hero-friends.

He was almost grown, but the magic was still here. The wind carried a soft keening moan. A woman's sigh, he imagined. When he was a boy, he had never experienced this deep pit-of-the-stomach longing for something still unknown to him.

Now the sun was going. He stood with his nose in the air like a dog, feeling the breeze, sensing the sea to his right. Turning his head, he saw sunlight glowing like coppered bronze on the almond groves below, knowing that was where he needed to go. He made his way over the uneven stones and earthen mounds alongside giant thumbs of broken buildings from the ancient city, pointing out the mute tale of its own destruction.

On an especially steep place, he found footing in an earthen ledge. The root he clutched to steady himself gave way suddenly, and Homer clawed into the earth to regain his balance. His fingers touched something smooth and round, unlike a stone, but harder than wood. He squatted close for a look. It was a pale, whatever it was. Curious, he found a stone and scraped at the soil, tugging now and then until it gradually loosened. With a jerk, it gave way and tumbled into his palm. Turning it over and over in his hands, he gradually came to realize what it was.

A baby's skull, cracked with fractures, all but two bottom front teeth still embedded in the jawbone. He almost dropped the tiny skull out of horror.

Homer looked up, working out from his knowledge of the ruins where he was: underneath the palace.

"Poor little warrior," Homer whispered, even though his neck hairs stood. He dug further into the earth, now feeling the tiny backbone, and replaced the skull. He covered it as much as he could, then scrambled away.

He set off for home, knowing that he had to run south with the setting sun on his right. Before he reached the plain below, he heard voices again. This time there were many, many of them.

Women, wailing with grief.

I'm sick of the war.

It's not my war. I'm just helping out here, anyway. These people are always going at each other, though they look like brothers, have the same religion, attend the same inter-city dinner parties. One side mines the metals, the other side makes it into jewelry. One side catches fish, the other side fashions the dishes. And so on.

But—poof—one little incident, a bit of royal adultery, and they're at war again. They're not happy with a little battle or two. They've got to wipe each other out. And drag in all the neighbors.

Most soldiers want adventure, a chance to see the world, meet some girls, have a bit of gold to spend on a good time if the chance comes up. I'm not so different from the other guys. My background is posh compared to the farmers and the craftsmen who've taken up arms, but soldiers in this war with posh backgrounds are as plentiful as olives on an olive tree, so it doesn't make much difference.

But we've only seen *here.* The girls are okay, but after so many years of war there aren't many new faces. Except for the babies. The gold and the good times... well, it could be better.

Truth is, I was only a little lad when the war started, so I'm a relatively new recruit. And it wasn't just war that brought me; I thought I might have a chance at being near a certain young lady who lives here. But she looks right through me whenever our paths cross in town, sometimes with a pretty weird expression. I met her a couple of years ago at a party at my dad's when she was a lot more fun. She seemed to like me. You know how you can sense it. Lots of eyes and smiles and choosing to stand near me. I couldn't get her out of my mind.

As nice as he is, her dad doesn't seem to notice me either, just looks vague every time I'm under his nose. But her dad has a lot to think about, running this war year after year.

Tonight, Leo and I have watch. It's cold and windy up here on the wall. And something strange is happening. When we first came on guard, we saw something like a kid stuck in the side of the wall below, just standing there as if he were wearing it. Then he was gone.

I think we dreamt it. We're both tired. Lookout on the walls is always a guarantee to keep you alert, though, especially on a cold-ass night like this. I can't yet put my finger on what's wrong.

Leo, who isn't as tall as me, pulls himself up for a peek over the parapet, then points towards the beach. "Coro, look, the fires are different," he says.

The fires have burnt on the beach for years now to the sound of soldiers laughing, arguing, running races, washing in the surf, drinking wine, and, worst of all for us hungry ones up here, the nightly barbecues. A tormenting smell, as we don't get much in the way of steaks, being under siege. Every now and then a horse dies and we have something to chew on. And chew and chew. A trickle of supplies comes in when we find an excuse for a truce. Our greatest entertainment is to watch the enemy having a better time down there on the beach and fantasize about desertion. A reward for that is an occasional projectile lobbed up. Last week, one of our guys got a stone right in the eye for hanging over the edge too long.

It's too quiet. No drinking, whoring. No barbecues.

"Maybe," Leo says in a wishful voice, "they're burning their own camps."

"Leo," I say, "they can't be *going.* Just like that."

Yesterday had been a pretty normal day of hacking off arms and legs and jabbing spears through brains. Nothing that would make you think anyone won or lost. Pretty much like most days of the last ten years, from what I can tell.

"Mm," Leo says. He looks worried about being happy. "What if the war is over?"

"Is this how it ends?" I say, leaning over the wall, feeling I might have spied something moving below. But it's as big and slow as a ship. Must be a cloud's shadow. The night feels thick as a chunk of bread soaked in soup and I can't see any stars. "They just go away without saying anything?"

"I don't know."

"We should report this."

Just as I say that, someone rounds the corner of the walls, barking, "Leocritus! Coroebus!"

It's Aeneas, that strutting smug know-it-all. He acts like the prince of princes and he's only a cousin of the royal family here.

Leo says, "We were just noticing something a bit funny, sir."

"Yes," Aeneas says. He knew already. He may be proud, but he isn't slow.

We all lean over the wall and look into the dark nothing, hearing only the sound of the sea in the distance. At least I thought it was the sea, but it wasn't. The sound had the wrong rhythm and was too close.

Then I lift my head. "By God," is all I can say.

It's even weirder than the kid in the wall. Dust-muffled footsteps in the sky, just over our heads, accompanied by the slick sound of many shovels moving earth in unison.

When Leo bolts, I run too, and Aeneas follows. I take comfort in the fact that even Lord Aeneas looks

scared.

We slow down, sobered up, inside the wall.

Leo suddenly grabs my arm and says, "We're, uh... deserting our watch."

"Oh, yeah." I stop, hoping Aeneas doesn't think our excitement is too cowardly. But he also appears shaken, trying to cover it with a lofty distant expression. "We'll just pop out onto the ramparts at the next doorway," I say, pulling Leo with me.

"I'm going to find Cassandra," Aeneas says thoughtfully, turning towards the alleys leading to the town center. "She *likes* interpreting signs."

Cassie! Her black-eyed glance can make me feel as low as a worker ant trudging through the dirt. Yes, she's the one I fell for a couple of summers ago. Before she was weird. I had heard the rumors about her and Apollo—that she dumped him—and hoped that meant she prefers us mortals. Imagine dumping Apollo, though! What chance do *I* stand? I can't help it. Often, I volunteer for extra palace guard duty, glancing at her window where I can see her sewing with her mother, Hecuba, both of them silent, worried, their golden needles flashing.

I brush up my helmet's horsehair plume and suck in my belly under my cuirass to make my shoulders look bigger.

If only I could have had the nobility of her brother, Hector, whose death recently gutted us all. If only I had the wiles of Odysseus, the beauty of Achilles, without their Greekness....

I try to return my attention to the job at hand. Leo and I stroll the walls confidently. The plain is now silent, the fires only smoldering orange embers, the beach dark. When we meet the men watching the north walls, they agree with us that there don't seem to be Greeks below anymore. But none of us feel easy about it. Leo and I don't mention the strange thing we had seen. We stroll back to the other side of the citadel.

Then Aeneas reappears, nervously scanning the air above us, Cassandra close on his heels. She's not at her best, pale and looking as if she's been crying for a week. Well, she probably has. Ever since Hector died, the women have been pretty soggy. But even as nervous and upset as she had been lately, tonight it appears even worse.

She gives me a long stare from behind Aeneas. "Coroebus," she says.

My heart pounds. "Evening, Cassandra," I say.

For a moment, her mouth opens as if she wants to say something but Aeneas, points up in the air. "Tell her what you heard," he commands to Leo.

"Uh, well, m'lady," Leo says, looking up over his shoulder. "They were like footsteps. Just above our heads. And digging. Like…" He stops.

Cassandra hardly looks likes she's paying attention to him. She finds one of the archers' slits in the wall and puts her head through. "So many of them," she says.

Leo, Aeneas and I all look at each other, puzzled. There was no one out tonight.

"A thousand ships full," I say. "So they brag."

"No," Cassandra says, pulling back slightly, then turning slowly and lifting her head. "Not them."

We all look where she's looking, roughly towards the horizon above Tenedos.

"Who?" I ask.

"The ones in the clouds of dust. The ones with the baskets."

I can pinpoint *this* moment as the one when I realize that she isn't *quite* the woman I'm looking for in life. Although, looking at her big brown eyes and the fall of the folds of her chiton, I can still remember...

But Cassandra has definitely gone spooky.

While she's seeing things on the plain, we all glance around at each other again. We go to the wall to look. I think the others see what I see: the dark plain, the black sea. Aeneas rolls his eyes then winds his finger mid-air around his temple, nodding towards Cassie's back.

"They're coming for us," Cassandra says, taking her earrings off and throwing them down, then grinding them underfoot. "But it won't matter after tomorrow anyway."

"Uh, right, Cassie," Aeneas says, his hand on her shoulder. "Maybe you should go back now. I'm sure Auntie Hec is missing you."

Cassandra gives me that long look again. "Coreobus. You will defend me when the big animal spills its guts into the city?"

We all freeze. I suddenly think thoughts that scare me for their impiety about Apollo and his cruel revenges on Cassandra. "Yes, ma'am," I say, being polite.

Aeneas guides her away.

After they are gone, Leo and I don't say much. I think he knows that I had it bad for Cassandra. I don't know *how* I feel now. Sick. Confused. Even if he didn't know, there isn't much to say when the king's daughter shows signs of cracking.

We are as bristled as teased cats for the rest of the night. I keep imagining creaking and groaning noises

in the wind.

Like the sound a ship would make on land.

Impossible.

He stood atop the ruins reaming out his right ear with his little finger like an artilleryman swabbing down a gun barrel. The autumn wind had got there first, piercing him down to the nerve.

The pain eased, replaced with the dull ringing that came and went, daily, hourly, sometimes by the minute.

All around and below him in the trenches Turks, Circassians, and Greeks sang, but not together, as each nation competed with the most drunken-sounding drinking song in their own tongues. Heinrich Schliemann's ears bothered him too much to try to listen to any of the words; it was all a muffled din to him. The diggers handed over a long line of baskets, each to each, from where others dug with pick and shovel to the edge of the hill mound of Hissarlik, where the soil was dumped over into the plain below.

Since there were four or five clans of Turks and Greeks present, he'd learned to put a Circassian between, so that the baskets went from the diggers to Turk to Circassian to Greek to Circassian to Turk and so on. Sometimes there were four or five Greeks or Turks to each neutral middleman, sometimes ten or fifteen. The last in the line were all Circassian, who had the task of filling the flat alluvial plain that stretched away to the small river flowing to the sea two miles away.

The ringing in his ear returned slowly to the drone (he wasn't that musical, but he'd imitated it as best he could once for a violinist, who pronounced it "B below middle C") that was always there.

Today, progress was fast. They'd uncovered one of the Roman phase walls and were rapidly digging along where it sank lower into the debris. What he searched for lay below, probably far below. Only when the diggers found something other than building stone, perhaps pottery or weapons, did things slow down, the workers graduating from shovels to trowels while those shifting baskets caught up with others carrying away piles of earth. But today, the diggers kept at it full swing. He suspected that this meant his colleague, Dörpfeld, would be along to complain that the diggers weren't being systematic enough. Dörpfeld was methodical, even for a German. One thing I've learned, Schliemann thought, is that some follow and some lead. And I'm the leader here.

Schliemann wanted bones: Trojan bones buried with honor. If it was gold that honored them, so much the better. Schliemann liked the way his Sophia's eyes lit up when she saw the gold they uncovered. Just seeing her delight was almost reward enough for him these days. She deserved everything in heaven and earth simply for not being that Russian chunk of ice he had married first and foolishly.

I've made very few mistakes in my life but the Russian marriage was one, he thought. However, marrying dear, beautiful, Greek Sophia makes up for that. I am rich, I am successful, I am famous, I have a loving family.

Now all I want are some Trojan bones, and for that head louse Bötticher to sink into the earth instead of writing all that vitriolic rubbish about me.

Suddenly, he groaned. His earache had worsened.

One of the Turks scrambled up to him. "Boss!" he said impatiently.

Schliemann realized the digger had called to him several times. He pretended that he had been preoccupied rather than mostly deaf and turned slightly. The Turk handed him a shard.

Impossible. On it was the feathery curved design that Schliemann recognized as an octopus tentacle. Mycenaean.

"Where did you get this?" Schliemann demanded in Turkish, glaring at the young man. A thought flared up that someone was sabotaging the dig (Bötticher?) by bribing his workers to put Greek pottery in Turkish soil.

The Turk pointed, jabbering, but Schliemann could only hear the word "boss," which the Turk repeated with respect over and over. He was excited. Then Schliemann thought he lip-read the phrase "much more."

Mycenae. Of course. Yes, how could I forget? Schliemann's mind raced as he followed his digger. The royal families of Troy and Mycenae were guest-friends. It was on a royal tour of Sparta that Paris fell in love with and stole Helen. Of course there would be Mycenaean pottery! It was probably sent to Troy as... say, wedding gifts for Hector and Andromache.

The diggers were gathered at one corner of the trench, one of them carving the soil with his small knife. Edges and rounded curves of pottery stuck out all along.

"My good men!" Schliemann said first in Greek, then Turkish, clapping his hands. "Good work. Early lunch." Half the workforce put down their tools, wiping their foreheads and grinning. Then he repeated it in Circassian and the remainder cheered and climbed out of the trench after the others.

Schliemann smiled and nodded, watching them go, saluting them with dignified congratulations. Then he slid down into the trench and stroked the smooth edge of a partially-excavated Mycenaean stirrup cup, elegantly decorated with stripes.

"Oh, Athena!" he whispered, his throat tight, ears banging painfully, eyes stinging. "Dare I imagine that

Hector himself drank from this cup?"

He felt a change in the light and looked up with a start. At first he saw no one. He put the pottery shard into his shirt, then found a foothold in the trench, climbing halfway up. The hill was a broken plane, gouged mostly by his own trenches, but also by age. The city walls had grown weary with time, crumbled, grown pale grasses and stray barley. Dark elms, losing their summer dresses, blew in the relentless seawind.

There. One of the diggers, lagging behind? Schliemann wondered. But he didn't recognize him. A young man whose shirt had torn and was hanging on one shoulder. Not even a young man but a big boy, only his upper half visible. Confused, Schliemann tried to calculate just which trench the lad was in.

"Hey, you!" Schliemann called in Turkish, scrambling towards him.

The boy turned slightly but didn't look at Schliemann. He was looking towards the tallest of the remaining towers of Ilium and then he seemed to trip backwards and was gone.

"Local rascal," Schliemann said, irritated that his spell had been broken. Never mind. He returned to the trench and took out his pocket knife to scrape, ever so gently, around the striped cup.

Already he was composing tonight's letters: two in English, to friends; two in French, to other archaeologists; one in Russian, to his mercantile partners; another in Swedish, to a correspondent there; a Turkish note to the Museum at Constantinople; a letter in Greek to his mother-in-law. Oh, yes, and he needed to write to his cousin in Germany.

This was an incredible find.

He stuck his finger back in his ear as the roaring in it crashed into his head like the ocean. "Owww," he moaned.

This watch is almost over. Look, there's old rosy-fingers in the east.

You know how sometimes you wake up in the middle of the night thinking, about how you never wrote that thank-you letter to grandad before he died? Or about the pain in your tummy being fatal? Or about the money you owe? Well, I've had a night like that without being in bed. Leo and I kept ourselves awake some of the time by gambling in a sticks and stones game, the sort you can scramble underfoot if one of the sleepless mucky-mucks happens to show. Most of the time we just stared out at nothing, worried that those footsteps might come back.

It wasn't helped by Andromache's spell of sobbing and shouting a few hours ago. Hector wouldn't have liked that, even though it's strangely heartwarming to hear a wife miss her husband. But Hector knew that women's wailing unsettled the soldiers.

Like me. Unsettled is about one-tenth of it.

Thinking about how we've lost most of our best generals, most of all Hector. Thinking about how it's no longer special being a prince when every other soldier is as well. Thinking about my family. Thinking about spooky Cassandra. Thinking about how rotten this war is.

When the sun comes up we'll see what they were up to on the beach last night.

Leo and I still don't want to believe that after ten years, they had simply swum away. But then, Achilles was *their* man, like Hector was *our* man. With both those guys gone, maybe they've decided it's time to pack it in.

Now, in the earliest light, I lean over the wall and see a huge dark shape sitting outside the main city gate. Bigger than the gate itself.

"What the *hell* is that?"

"Coro, the ships are going!" shouts Leocritus. Like me, he has come alert in the morning light. He points out to sea, which is as thick with ships as wasps on a smear of jam.

"But, Leo, what the hell is *that?*" I say again, putting my hands on the sides of his head and making him look down, to the right.

At the horse.

"Zeus H. Thunderfart!" he breathes.

The soldiers on watch from the other walls are shouting down to the people. "They're gone! The Greeks have gone!"

People come out to see what's happening. Doors open and people hang out their top windows, pointing to the ships now on the horizon.

Celebration! I hug Leo and he hugs me; we jump up and down, making obscene gestures at the cowardly Greeks ships sailing south. I've never heard such a din in Troy. The women are waving scarves, bringing out the tiny children on their hips, banging on pots. The men bang on everything, shouting about the shortcomings of Agamemnon's men and the strength and bravery of Trojan warriors. All so early in the morning, even before the wine has been brought out.

Everyone's clambering and excited, falling all over each other crowding at our end of town. Now word is getting around about the giant horse at the gate.

I'm still on the wall, looking at it.

It's about four men tall and long, probably fashioned of elm with a big box belly and a straight neck jutting out at an angle, alert pointy ears. Its carved eyes look wild and windblown, as if in battle. Is this a peace offering?

I can hear voices asking whether we should open the gate or not. A couple of our soldiers look up at us on the wall. "What should we do?"

"I don't know," I shout down. "Get a priest. Or someone from the royal family."

After a few minutes, the great King Priam, a frail and tiny man billowing with the finest woven white robes, arrives with Aeneas trotting behind. They open the gate, go out, and a crowd surrounds the horse.

I also see a commotion, a v-shaped wedge of frightened and alarmed people, running down from the high city. The cutting point of the wedge is the massive priest of Poseidon, almost as naked as if he had come straight from bed as well, waving his thick arms and shouting out in a basso growl. "What's happening?" Probably from years of practice, his half-grown sons duck and weave around his great flying elbows, two curious kids wondering what the mayhem was all about.

"What's this about a goodbye present?" Laocoon says. "This is a trick." He turns to borrow a staff from one of his gang of water-worshipping thugs. With a mighty swing (why wasn't *he* ever on the battlefield, I wonder?), he bashes it on the side of the horse.

The wood made a moaning, low sound, the stick playing it like an equine string. Eerie.

"This is a trick!" Laocoon repeats.

"Oh, shove off, Laocoon!" a man shouts. "Go soak your head in the sea!" There is enough laughter that the man swaggers.

King Priam raises his hands, his wrists like twigs, his face mournful, but he's got that magic touch of a king. Everyone falls silent. "Let's examine the matter," he pipes in an old man's voice.

Then I see Cassandra, coming down beside Laocoon's crowd. "Don't touch it! Get rid of it!" she yells. "It will destroy the city!"

But when Aeneas laughs, everyone joins him. "It's just a pile of sticks, Cassie!"

Several people start hitting the horse again, making it shiver like a big drum.

Laocoon raises his arms to demand silence. It sounds to me like Laocoon says, "Ween ye, blind hoddypecks, it contains some Greekish navy," but the crowd was still making lots of noise.

His clinging sons look out wide-eyed from behind their father's back. Laocoon's voice is booming. "How can you trust the Greeks?" Poseidon's priest asks, staring down Aeneas but not looking at King Priam.

The laughter and banging stops.

Leo and I have relaxed. With the Greeks gone there seems to be no need to watch the plain any longer. Mistake. But I don't know what we could have done about what happened next anyway.

"Oh, look," says someone by the gate, pointing towards where the Greek ships used to be. Huge winding shapes were swimming across the land. "Big snakes."

Later, after the snakes have slithered away, a smaller crowd reforms around the horse and the three mangled bodies of Laocoon and his two sons. They look like something the butcher throws to the dogs at the end of a hard week, but smell worse, like shit and rotten meat. Even though we both would have preferred to be on the battlefield without weapons than do this digusting chore, Leo and I help scoop the bodies onto shields to take back to the family. I always hate the moment that the wails begin; it's almost worse waiting for the wails than hearing them.

Many of the onlookers are inside the gates again, wet patches where they had been standing. Cassandra leads a shocked King Priam away with daughterly concern. Aeneas is stunned. He rubs his arm and says, "That was very unexpected," first looking at the bodies, then speculatively towards the sea.

I don't like being down here, off the wall, now. "Where did the snakes go?"

One of our old soldiers, out of breath from running, holds a corner of the shield while I lift the smallest boy onto it. He says, "They crawled straight up into Athena's temple, circled round the statue, then vanished into a hole in the ground."

"What should we do with the horse, Lord Aeneas?" one of our soldiers asks.

Aeneas doesn't answer, still distracted. "I must go," he says and strides up the hill towards the palace.

With the royals scared off and the priest mangled, we don't know what to do. Leo, myself and two other soldiers take the bodies of Laocoon and his sons up to his temple. The women come pouring out, screaming.

You think they'd be used to death by now. But even I felt a wrench when they hovered over the horrible, bloated faces of the little boys.

We miss the arrival of Sinon, the wretched Greek, left behind by his countrymen for his treasonous attitudes. He's spitting angry at his fellow Greeks. He is taken to good King Priam and explains everything, wanting revenge on Greeks for the planning to sacrifice him for good winds.

King Priam finally gets out of him that the big horse is an offering to Athena to appease her for what

Odysseus did to her temple in the city when he crept in one night. These Greeks have to be apologizing all the time for their hubris.

Foolish with victory, Leo and I join the others in tearing down the gate instead of sleeping during the day. We want the goddess's horse inside the city with us to help us celebrate the end of the ten long years of war. Athena must be smiling on us because of what Odysseus did.

I don't feel tired. I feel happy. Up there on the gate, banging away at the lintel stone with a hammer, I can see to the palace windows. Cassandra's window, particularly. There stands Cassandra, not sewing with her mother, the queen. Not celebrating with the rest of the court.

She is watching.

I think she is watching me.

The little stone harbor at Sigeum smelled of fish, brine, dank seaweed, rope, and wood. Homer could feel the change from beach to stones underfoot but the light was bright here, too bright, making him screw up his face against the dazzle. This had been the location of the Greek camp during the Trojan war but Homer felt no resonances here. It was too used; occupied by the present.

"Don't let the lad walk so close the edge!" his mother scolded.

His father grasped Homer's arm. "Stand there!" he said. "Don't go wandering. We've got to find the boat's governor. It'll be easier for us to leave you here."

"Sit down," said his mother, nudging his shoulder down. "Less likely to wander on your bottom than on your feet."

Homer sat, his ankles scraping on the uneven stones as he crossed his legs.

"Don't move!" his mother said again. Then she called for her younger children to follow.

Their footsteps faded. Homer listened to the slap of the water and the gentle tap of a boat tied below him against the harbor wall. Sea birds shrieked high above, waiting for the fishermen to return. A big shape just offshore was probably the ship his family wanted to board for their return journey to Smyrna. For a few minutes, he enjoyed the peace. He stretched out to sunbathe and found a large pebble under his back. He held it close to his eyes, almost touching his lashes, and could see fine grey textures, even a little sparkle.

Ah, beauty, he thought in wonder.

Then he heard footsteps again.

"He looks a bit simple, that's all," a man's voice said. "You're not drunk, are you, young man?"

Homer sat up and tried to face the voice but he couldn't sort it out from the wooden posts surrounding the harbor. "No," he said. I'm not simple, either, he thought, but held his tongue.

A woman's voice murmured, accompanied by the sound of a baby's cooing.

Homer sat, frozen by the arrival of strangers. He always hated the moment when they noticed that something was wrong with him.

They didn't seem interested in him. The man and woman spoke in low voices together in a fragmented way, unable to keep a conversation going. Even the baby remained quiet. Then the woman started to cry. His presence forgotten, Homer might as well have been a harbor statue.

"How can you leave us now!" she said. "You are my only family now. I'll have nothing, no one, except our son."

Homer's hearing grew sharper. He remained absolutely still, fastened on the voices at his back.

"You know I have to go, love," the man said defensively. "If I stay, you won't have any honor anyway. Look, I understand how hard this is for you. But you'll be proud of me once I've done my duty. Everything will be different." He seemed to try to sound soothing, almost light-hearted.

"Yes, I'm sure it will be different!" she said angrily in a choked voice.

Although the words paused, the sounds didn't. Homer imagined the scene he heard—the man walking away in vexation, the wife hanging her head and weeping freely, the baby whimpering.

With a shiver, Homer remembered the sound of the Trojan women on the ruins.

Then the sound of the man's feet in the coarse sand returned. "The governor and some people are coming. Perhaps you should go. It will be less painful, eh?"

Her outpouring didn't ease but changed tone from anger to sadness.

"Look, go home, love," the husband said. "Work hard. Be a good wife and mother. I will come home as soon as I am able. Yes?"

She murmured something Homer couldn't catch.

"Let me say good-bye to my boy," the man said.

The baby wailed, almost as if frightened of his father.

But the man laughed and said, "They will all say, 'Here is a better man than his father. He makes his mother proud!' Be strong, son."

All three of them wept, then the man croaked, "Go, love! Now!"

Homer didn't dare to move in the small silence; the woman's light footsteps hurried up towards town. He

felt hot with someone else's grief. If only he had a sweet-voiced wife like that! He would never leave her! But for honor... well, for honor... a sigh shuddered out of him.

I'll never have a wife anyway, he thought. Who would have me?

Then came the voices of his own family and of others, including a thick Halicarnassan accent, also the sound of a man breathing heavily as if ill or very fat, then a few others who were perhaps sailors and other passengers. Obviously, the Halicarnassan barked out orders here and there.

"Oh, and here's our son, gov'nor," Homer's mother was saying, panting as if the whole party had been moving too quickly for her. "He's no trouble, really, except that he can't see beyond a finger-length. We'll have to make sure he doesn't tumble overboard."

Homer stood and faced the voices, dimly perceiving the mass of movement along the beach towards him. Then he was plucked up in the crowd by his mother's grip (something he knew well) and guided down the rope ladder with cautions and advice diving all around him like seagulls on a scrap. Once the small boat was loaded with people, they began to row out towards the ship in the offing.

Homer, squeezed behind his father and the heavily-breathing passenger, felt strange ankles and shins pressed up against his. He could hear his little sister's and brother's delighted laughter at the other end of the boat but couldn't quite hear their observations. The wind strengthened and cooled as they moved offshore, blowing his mother's shushing of the younger ones back on everyone else. Two rowers grunted, four oars dipped and lifted, dipped and lifted, while the governor stood (even Homer could see him), perhaps using the long pole.

"What do you see?" Homer finally asked his father.

"It's the same ship we came up on," his father said. "Black-hulled with great white sails. The old governor's not on this journey."

Homer wanted to ask if there was a sad-looking man on the boat with them but didn't dare. The heavy breather next to him worried him. Was the illness catching? he wondered.

"Can't you see, boy?" the breather whispered.

"No," Homer said, his face pointed straight forward.

"But you have your wits, don't you?" the man said.

Homer shifted uncomfortably.

"Are you nervous on the sea?" the breather whispered. It seemed to be his normal voice.

"Not now," Homer said, lifting his face. "Hesiod says this is the time for sailing, in the fifty days after the solstice."

"Hesiod!" The breather's voice was almost above a whisper. Then he coughed. "So, the lad is a scholar."

Homer dug a finger into his father's ribs. No doubt his dad had been daydreaming, but Homer didn't want to talk to this man alone. "I'm sorry, what did you say?" asked Homer's father, leaning across Homer's lap.

"Is your lad a scholar?" the man breathed. "He knows of Hesiod."

"No. Oh, he listens to all the singers in Smyrna and his head is full of odd things. There's not much else for someone like him to do, is there? He's useless. We don't know what to do with him now he's nearly a man. Can't do a day's work of any kind."

"I know all of Mimnermos's poem of Smyrna," Homer boasted tentatively. "I didn't used to like his *Nanno* but I do now."

"Ah, you're growing old enough to be romantic, eh, lad?"

Homer felt himself blush.

"I was a singer." The whisper was low.

Homer turned his face towards the heavy-breather, interested.

"I sang in Smyrna a few years ago."

"Perhaps I heard you."

"Yes... They call me Keleuthetis. I usually sing of Theseus or Achilles."

"I remember that! It was Achilles in Smyrna." Homer remembered a honey voice and a nimble lyre. Of course, the Trojan War songs were always his favorites.

"Good lad," Keleuthetis almost chuckled.

"You don't sing anymore?" Homer asked.

His father nudged him.

"If you could see me, you would know why," the man said, hissing out the whisper this time. "I'm being murdered by my own body. A great tumor on my neck. Going home to Knossos to die."

Shocked and embarrassed, Homer made himself small on the boat's bench.

"I had a boy to follow me, but he died of fever last year," Keleuthetis whispered sadly.

One question formed in Homer's mind. Then another. Then his mind began to rain with questions, as if Zeus himself had sent a thundershower of thoughts. But Homer kept them to himself with his parents so close to hand. Besides, they were about to board the black-hulled ship; he could hear the sails flapping in the wind, the governor calling to the sailors there.

Wearing broad-brimmed hats to keep off the hot sun, Keleuthetis and Homer sat on boxes on the deck. His parents were on the other side of the ship somewhere, apparently relieved that Homer had found someone to keep him occupied. Sometimes the boxes shifted under them with the pitch, roll, or yaw of their journey, then shifted back again; Homer hung on tenaciously as he talked with Keleuthetis about singing, curious about how the singers could remember so many words.

The sick man told Homer the value of composing in circular thoughts, one of the aids to memory. "And I always call someone by the same name. If you have a 'glad-hearted Homer,' for instance, he's 'glad-hearted' even when he's just lost his best friend or is being killed." Keleuthetis panted with the effort of talking.

"*Every* time?" asked Homer doubtfully. He didn't like some of the epithets that Keleuthetis chose and had a secret store of his own. Especially for the Trojans, which Homer always felt were neglected by the traditional singers.

"I don't want to be pausing and trying to remember if this is where you call him 'dour-faced,' do I?"

"I see." Homer scratched his chin thoughtfully. "So you have to think up names that are flexible, that could do in many situations."

After a pause, Keleuthetis said, "You're a quick one." He heaved out a sigh, almost of relief. Then he said, "You want to be a singer, don't you? I will buy you from your parents if you like."

Homer hadn't dared say it himself. But when Keleuthetis said those words, he felt a full as a spring lake and as light as sunshine. He couldn't speak other than to say, "Oh, yes."

A deep voice from behind them said, "What's the matter? Sailors too hairy for you?"

"Sailors," Keleuthetis said dismissively. Then in a different tone, "I don't have much time left, lad. Would you be willing to stay with me to the end?"

"Yes," Homer said.

"Have one of your little sisters fetch my lyre. We'll begin."

The boy. That boy was back.

Schliemann was down in a trench, below the edge of a wall. Sophia had managed to distract the beady-eyed Turkish museum officials while Schliemann uncovered another twenty or so golden sewing needles. The workers dug up on the hill, working two different trenches, while a third party down on the plain still searched for the two fabled springs—one hot, one cold—outside the walls of the city. So far the many springs they'd measured in the plain of the Küçük Menderes Çayi , the ancient River Scamander, were tepid all year round.

The boy, of whom he caught a fleeting glimpse from the trench, was dressed in a tunic such as some of the Greeks wore but was barefooted and without leggings, even in this chilly autumn weather. He was also clumsy; Schliemann swore that he looked as if he had fallen off a wall.

Schliemann scrambled up. Where was the boy now?

The nearest workmen were thumb-size at this distance, passing buckets of soil hand to hand along a chain then, just beyond, Sophia in her black and red dress, apparently explaining something to one of the Turkish museum officials, waving her arm about expressively. He felt a sudden pang of love for her and sighed with regret at his advancing years and endless illnesses.

He tugged at his ear. The constant low buzz was there, now with a sort of high piping over it, like a double flute. But he knew that his own worsening ears produced the music from nowhere.

When I'm back in Athens, he thought, I will have them looked at again.

Earlier in the day, here, workmen had come upon an area of ash and charred wood. Immediately, but with an air of nonchalance, Schliemann sent them off to an earlier dig. Ashes... perhaps from the Sack of Troy, the real *Trojan War* Troy itself? The burning towers of Ilium? A night of chaos and death such as the ancient world had never seen.

The boy suddenly appeared again, ran across the uncovered wall, then jumped out of sight.

Schliemann frowned. Is it the same one? This one looks younger than the previous lad.

"Boy!" he yelled in Greek, Turkish, and then French for good measure. He climbed the steps and looked down the other side of the wall, most of it still under centuries of accumulated earth. Later, he would dig outside this enclosure.

The boy's head passed the turn in the wall, just visible.

"You there! Stop!" Vexed, Schliemann found his native German pouring out. In his ears, the noise rose; the wind was fierce today but Schliemann heard nothing of it. He chased him down to the corner of the wall that they had passed by in yesterday's digging.

Where's that boy? Schliemann ground his teeth with earache and irritation.

Something glittered in the jumbled wall of soil. Schliemann stopped, dropped to his knees to get a closer look. Here, too, were ashes. Why hadn't that been spotted yesterday? Bad light?

He reached for the green-flecked thing.

I feel my guts go cold as a stonemason's butt in Boeotia in the month of Aristogeton when the messenger announces, "You are to report to the palace immediately."

Leo is asleep on the floor where we soldiers are celebrating. I'm not quite drunk enough. No one else hears my summons, they carry on drinking and shouting jokes and resolutions about what they are going to do tomorrow, now that peace has come.

The palace!

My first thought is that Lord Aeneas has seen my face too often in the wrong places since last night. Then I think I might be needed for special guard duty. Or invited by King Priam to royal celebrations. Or to receive bad news about my family.

I follow the messenger through the alleys of the city; from nearly every window there is the sound of partying, a lot of it in bed. Trojan men and women are groaning with joy.

However, the palace is strangely dark. Just about the time I work out that the unlit windows means everyone is in the Great Hall and nowhere else, the messenger who brought me leads me further inside. I can hear laughter and singing—the winners' song already being composed—and smell the free flow of wine and warm fires. But we turn away from all that down a darker corridor.

The messenger shows me a door, then leaves. I knock, wary.

Cassandra opens the door to what I recognize as her bedchamber. Fully dressed in the finest woven gown edged with golden and scarlet threads, her dark hair loose, her eyes wide with fear, she's got me again. I can't help it. All she ever has to do is to look at me and I'm hers.

"Prince of Phrygia," she says, in formal greeting, stepping back slightly.

I remain where I am. "Princess of Troy," I answer.

"Son of Mygdon." Her voice softens.

"Daughter of Priam."

"Coroebus."

"Hello, Cassandra," I say.

She reaches forward and takes my wrist, pulling me into the room. Then she shuts the door. "Help me," she says.

"What's the matter?"

"We're all in terrible danger." Her eyes fill with tears.

"Cassie... the Greeks are gone. I saw their ships sailing away."

"Oh, you *too,*" she says impatiently. "The curse is certainly thorough." Running her hand through her hair in exasperation, she turns away.

"What can I do anyway?" I ask her, shrugging.

"Set the giant horse alight! Now!" Her eyes are mad.

"But... but the horse belongs to the goddess! Surely not!" I am shocked.

"Then I will do it myself!"

"You can't! The crowd will rip you to pieces! The giant horse means victory. Peace!" I can't believe she's so foolish.

She looks up at me. Close. Intently. Then she just shakes her head, crying, unable to say anything.

"Cassie," I say, holding out my hand.

Just like that, she comes to me and presses her face into my neck. She is sobbing so that her words are all broken up. "Everything has already happened in my head. I can't change it. Of course. I can't."

I hold her until she is calmer. It feels good to be this close to her. Then she pulls away towards the window, picks up a fine cloth from a small table and wipes her face with it, moaning a little, then sighing. "Please, Coro. Let's talk. I'm so filled with dread. You can distract me. Sit down."

I look around and move to a three-legged stool which is too short for me but there is nowhere else except the bed. My knees stick up higher than my elbows. Cassandra makes this sort of brave-effort face that women do when things aren't going their way. She sits on the window ledge.

"Do you remember when we first met?" she asks me in a falsely cheerful voice.

I don't want to let her know that I've thought of it more and more over the years, growing in me as indestructibly as a healthy tree. "Wasn't that at my father's palace?" I say casually.

Cassandra nods, her smile flickering. "I thought of you often after that. Then... Apollo..."

I shrug and inspect my knees.

"Then I knew that we could never marry. We were a likely match, though, don't you think?"

"I had thought so," I say. My voice isn't as strong as it should be. I am growing uncomfortable. The wine I drank earlier is having its effect as I sit still, growing hot and muddled. Why couldn't we marry? I wonder.

"Coro," she says, as if she had just thought of something.

I look over at her. "Yes, Cassie?"

"Before I am in torment... Before I am used by those I don't want... I want to have..." She now has this

really weird expression, longing like I've never seen her have before. "I want to know how it would have been."

"What's that, Cassie?" I say. But I know. I can smell it now.

She rises, come to me, puts her hands in my hair gently.

Yes.

"You can't sing about the Trojans," Keleuthetis said. He was so irritated that his voice was almost above a whisper. "The Greeks are the heroes. We are Greeks. What language is this—coming from your own mouth? How can you sing of barbarians?"

Homer frowns to the night air.

"What makes you even *think* such a thing?" his tutor persisted.

"Shush, you two!" the ship's governor hissed in the dark.

Their ship had been hiding from pirates on the western coast of Lesbos since afternoon. Homer's family was in a terrified heap beside him but somehow he wasn't afraid. He had just found the future and a tub full of pirates wasn't going to shake his confidence in it. Keleuthetis showed no fear for the opposite reason—his future had nearly expired anyway.

Homer closed his eyes as if to dream. For several nights now, since his visit to the ruins of Troy, he had been haunted by the voices he had heard.

The wailing women of Troy.

"I don't want to sing *just* of the Trojans, but of both sides. Even in your song of Achilles," Homer whispered, "you tell about Achilles sharing a meal with Priam when he came to pay the ransom for Hector's body."

"Yes," Keleuthetis said impatiently. "But—"

"The Trojans must have been mighty to hold off the Greeks for *ten years.* Worthy opponents."

"Okay. You're a smart-assed brat, Homer."

"I've never had much to do except think."

"That's true," said his mother in a startlingly loud voice from the nearby darkness.

"Shh!" said the governor.

They remained quiet for a time. All around him were warm people. Homer could hear the creak of timbers, and the water licking the sides of the ship where it was held in place with the anchor-stone. He could hear the wind in the trees and the far voices of people on Lesbos across the quiet stretch of water. He could hear the soft sleep-breathing of his sister and brother and low murmurs among the sailors.

Homer dreamed a dream for a few moments as he lay awake. It seemed to pour into him from the cool heavens above.

"My master," Homer said respectfully, trying to soften Keleuthetis's annoyance. "I want to sing about the people *doing* the deeds, not just the deeds."

Keleuthetis didn't reply, as if considering.

"Imagine Hector," Homer said tentatively. "Hector the..." Homer searched for a workable handle for the greatest of the Trojan heroes. Something valiant. Something he *is* all the time, happy or sad. "Hector, the Breaker of Horses. He has just come back from fighting where the battle hasn't favored them. The Trojan soldiers aren't like regular soldiers because they are at home, defending their city. Their wives and children are there. As he returns from battle, the women crowd around Hector for news of their husbands and sons but he is so sorry for the women that he just tells them to go pray. Then Hector goes to find his wife. Gentle Andromache's not at home, she's up on the citadel walls above the gate, because she had heard that things were going badly. He hurries through the streets back to the walls to look for her. She sees him first and is running towards him, their little baby in her arms. Hector smiles when he sees her but she's so fed up that she scolds him, 'Why do you have to fight? You'll leave me a widow and your son an orphan! Don't you love us?' Hector tells her that he must fight, especially when he thinks of her ending her days in slavery. If he must die fighting to prevent that, then he must. 'People will point you out as the wife of Hector, who was the bravest in the battles of Troy. "He defended his wife from slavery to his death," they will say.' When Hector tells her these things she knows she has to accept it. She smiles even though she weeps. And Hector, the Breaker of Horses, picks up little Astyanax to give him a cuddle. But his little son is frightened because Hector is wearing his terrible war helmet. He drops his little wheeled horse and cries with fear. Hector laughs. He holds him up and says, 'One day people will say that he was even braver and stronger than his father!' Then Hector tells Andromache to go back to her loom and her duties, to work hard and let the men fight because they must.…"

Homer stopped.

A man sobbed several arms' lengths away.

Oh. He had forgotten that the young man from the beach was aboard. Embarrassed, he waited to be scolded for his impudence.

The governor failed to shush them.

The weeping young man managed to say, "I never heard a truer tale, lad," while mutterings of assent passed through the sailors.

Homer smiles in the dark.

There is a long pause.

"Well?" says the governor.

Homer wonders who the governor is after now.

"Well, lad?" the governor said again.

"*Me,* sir?"

"Yes. So what happens next?"

I feel that I might be in a goddess's bed. I think that even if Priam himself were to walk into the room, I couldn't stir, being so solid with contentment. Cassandra is lazily brushing my arm, her head on my chest, her face pensive in the dim light of the bedside oil lamp.

Then I hear that sound again, the one that Leo and I heard on the wall. Digging. Many shovels hacking away at earth. It fills the room.

I sit up. "Cassie, do you hear that?" My heart is thudding hard.

"Yes," she says. "Sometimes I hear their voices." Languidly, she points up towards the ceiling by her doorway. "They've dug to about there now. They're digging at the front gate as well."

"Who?"

She shrugs. "It doesn't matter, Coro. Come back to me. You've got to go soon. Hold me before you go."

I am freezing cold. I snuggle down next to her again and kiss her; she is as tasty as the finest olives, as warm as solstice sun, as soft as blossoms. "I want to come back tomorrow night," I whisper to her. "And every night for the rest of my life."

A wince of pain shoots through her face. She touches my chin. "Okay," she says. "That's what I want, too."

But I see the dread in her eyes.

For the first time, I understand. She has a real sight, a god-given sight, most likely. Was this the revenge Apollo had taken because she hadn't wanted him? The air I share with her is tainted with fear, impending disaster. I feel its poison like lead in my blood.

"Will there be a tomorrow night?" I ask.

She parts her lips.

I put my fingers on that parting. I don't want the answer. She makes a kiss on my fingertips. We look deeply at each other for a moment. Above us, another spadeful of earth turns. My hairs all stand on end.

"We have to go now," she says. "We'll see each other again shortly, Coro."

We dress silently. I am trembling, sick-feeling, cold. But why must I go, I wonder? Like the other question, I'm not sure I want to know the answer—it's enough for now that Cassandra tells me to go. We move towards the door at the same time. Impulsively, I twist off the ring that my father, the king of Phrygia, gave me when I left for this war and press it into Cassandra's palm.

Her face is streaked with tears as she puts it on her finger. It looks too big on her slim hand.

"Tomorrow night," I say to her. "Goodnight, Cassie."

She smiles somehow and clings to me briefly, then lets me out of her door. The corridors are still empty, the sounds of revelry more worn and subdued than it had been when I entered.

I run, feeling pursued by the Fates; I run for the great wooden Horse.

The streets are quieter than they were before I went to the palace, the people now nearing exhaustion from drinking, eating, laughing, and lovemaking. Leo is still fast asleep on the floor where I left him; when I shake him, he rouses blearily and follows me without comprehension but also without question. I can still feel Cassandra on my skin as we trot through the narrow alleys towards the gate, where the Horse stands, its head above the rooftops. The black sky and stars say it's late but not yet near morning. Leo and I sit in a sheltered nook in the wall near the Horse and the Scaean Gate, where we'd put up a flimsy barricade after tearing down the doors to let the Horse in.

Leo is drunker and sleepier than me. Before I can even hint at what I've been up to, his head lolls to one side and he snores, so I polish off the rest of the not-very-diluted wine in the skin he had been carrying, which makes me completely blotto. I think I'm awake, but even while my eyes are wide open, someone steps on my face, squashing my nose, mashing my lips into my teeth, twisting a burn on my cheekbone.

But no one is there.

I must be dreaming, fast asleep, but feeling drunkenly awake.

Then the dream takes a strange, unsettling turn.

Some of our soldiers (and some of their ladies) have chosen to sleep between the hooves of the horse. No one stirs in their sleep but I hear a rustling, scrabbling sound.

Then a door opens in the belly of the Horse.

A voice comes out of it, a voice that all of us who have fought in the battles on the plain below know well, belonging to Odysseus the trickster.

"Echion, for god's sake, use the rope, you idiot!" the Ithacan says.

A dark man-shape falls out of the door, not wearing his shield but clutching it under his arm. For a second, there's a pale flash of terrified face in the predawn gloom. Then he falls on his head and lies crumpled on the ground, his neck obviously broken.

Then, in my dream, more Greeks come sliding down a rope, swords and shields ready, slicing into our men who are just coming around from sleep. Odysseus with his red hair sticking out from his helmet. Then Little Aias and Menelaus. The women run, screeching, drenched in the blood of the men they had been cuddling.

No one sees me or Leo in our narrow spot. But this is *my* dream, isn't it?

Out drops a newcomer to the Greek side. Neoptolemos. I hadn't seen him up close before but, minus the nobility of expression, he's the spitting image of his dad, Achilles.

He has the eyes of a madman.

The sounds of screaming and battle rise along the paths up the hill where the Greeks have swarmed. I smell fresh smoke. Some of the Greeks from the Horse's belly start tearing down the barricade at the gate. The gate swings wide open; Greeks come trotting in like a herd of uncertain stallions.

This is a stupid dream. I try to wake up.

There's no difference between waking and dreaming.

This is real.

I stand up, give Leo a waking nudge with my foot. We'd left our helmets and weapons up on the walls yesterday while we worked on the gate. So unarmed, I don't know what to do. The men who dropped out of the horse's belly are still staggering, as if having been cramped inside has weakened their legs. It would be a good time to pick them off, if I had a proper weapon.

Leo and I see the fat wife of the bronzesmith in her nightie at a doorway, her lips moving and her eyes wide. We rush her back inside and look for her husband's weapons—I think we lost the bronzesmith in battle a few weeks ago. Leo finds an unimpressive helmet and a sword. The wife brings out an Illyrian javelin (front-heavy) and a shield (too light) for me from the hearth corner.

Outside, we can hear what seems like thousands of Greek voices, swarming from the gate, past the door, and spreading into the the town.

Leo kills an intruding Greek in the widow's doorway. She gibbers; as we leave, we hear her drop the bar across her door.

I advance towards the Horse, where Neoptolemos is shouting and waving his sword.

I'm scared. But it's battle and I'm a soldier so I run at him, trying to think of the glory of defeating Achilles's son. Neoptolemos has the strength of an ox, and he knocks me to the ground. He looks me over briefly, especially at the measly bronzesmith's shield, then stalks off.

"*Priam!*" he shouts. "I'm coming for you!"

I dust myself off. "Snob," I mutter to his back. But without better gear, I don't want to give him my royal credentials.

He's going the long way if he's looking for King Priam. No way am I going to let that mad dog attack the king; this is probably what Cassandra knew I must do. Leo is gone and I am the only live Trojan in sight. Another pair of feet emerge from the horse's belly door just as I duck away from the corpses around the hooves, running through the alleys, up towards the palace.

Turned on their head, the celebrations carry on in nightmarish flavor. I hear the sound of swords on shields, so at least *someone* was fighting back already. No matter where I look, Greeks run down narrow roads, climb through windows, crawl out of cellars.

I pass a house where one of our soldiers (it's the olive oil merchant's son—I fought by his side only four or five days ago) has been pushed out the window, his throat cut, blood streaking down the wall from the window. From inside I hear a woman, groaning now with anger and shame, a Greek soldier shouting with pleasure.

Screaming. A Greek tries to pull a baby from a young woman's arms. She slaps at him with her free hand. Two houses down, a big gout of flame whooshes out a window, lighting the whole road. The Greek is distracted by the sight; I stick the javelin in his ear, twist it out, then keep going. I hear the sweet sound of the Greek hitting the paving stones and the slap of the woman's sandals running away.

I duck through the streets, climb over low walls, seeing the bodies of my fellow soldiers, unarmed and unprepared. Women are crying out everywhere; men are shouting; houses are burning. Two Greek soldiers walk casually, sharing a captured loaf of bread. I hide when necessary, saving myself for the defense of the palace, impatient that it's taking me so long to get back.

A small person and a larger, strange form scurry down one of paths behind the houses. Instinctively, I

know they are not Greeks. We pass, recognizing each other in the pallid daylight.

It's Aeneas, hooded, carrying his father on his back with his young son, Ascinaius. Aeneas says nothing to me, but gives me a guilt-stricken glance. He is on the run, saving his family for better things than the defense of Troy.

Zeus help us.

I turn a corner and the place is full of arrows in full flight. I jump back. Don't know if they are theirs or ours; don't want to be killed by *either* side.

When I reach the palace, I see Hector's wife Andromache at the gates. She clutches little Astyanax so tightly he is struggling against her, but her gaze is down the road. She sees me and rushes to me, "Prince Coroebus, the King went to Zeus's temple, but look—that bloodthirsty Greek is dragging him back up here."

"Where's Cassandra?" I ask.

"At the temple," she says. She points again. "Help the king!" she commands.

Neoptolemos pulls Priam's beard, sword at his ribs. I can hear the old king moaning and weeping. "I should have let your father kill me when I went to ask for my son's body! He was a noble soul, your father! You are a pig!"

"Shut up about my father!" Neoptolemos shouts.

I run for him, raising my javelin, but he's got Priam in such a hold that I can't see a way to hack at him just yet.

"You're less than a pig," Priam shouts. Then he howls when his beard is given a yank. I see now that Priam's arm has been cut and is dripping blood everywhere.

"You again!" Neoptolemos laughs when he sees me. "You aren't even kitted up for a fight," he says scornfully.

"You would rather wrestle with an old man?" I say.

"A king is always a prize."

"I'm the son of the King of Phrygia," I say. "Fight me!"

"Take my helmet," Priam says to me. "I'm done. I want to die now."

But I can't get near him.

The two of them are struggling in a sort of dance. I don't think the son of Achilles expected the old king to be so strong. I ready my javelin but can't find the moment. Then Priam sees his daughter-in-law just inside the palace gates.

"Andromache, go!" he bellows in royal command.

"Andromache? Wife of Hector?" I see that gleam in Neoptolemos's eye. Lust. But he proves it a deep and twisted lust. He is bored with Priam so thrusts his sword into his ribs and drops him, then pulls the dripping sword out. Neoptolemos is accurate; Priam hardly makes a sound.

Grief bites me; he was a good and noble king and a guest-friend of my father. Seeing his eyes dull and sightless already, I removed his helmet and put it on my own head and take his sword.

"Fight me now," I call out.

But Neoptolemos lurches towards Andromache. I think for a moment that this guy is too cowardly to fight, but I soon realize that I haven't had a glimpse of his madness. He snatches baby Astyanax away from her, holding the child by his ankle, then begins to swing him. It is like some dreadful playful moment as a father or uncle might do with a tiny son, whirling him round, grinning, even chuckling.

Then he lets go.

Astynanax is silent as he flies over the wall of the palace, down the cliff.

Andromache takes in a breath, then sits down, her eyes wide with shock.

I am stunned for a moment, watching this monster. Then I come to my senses and move in to attack. Still several paces from each other, we both raise our swords, his bloodied.

Then, like a flooding river bursting its banks, a stream of palace dogs, certainly possessed, bound between us. They snarl and snap and bark, leaping onto the body of Priam and tearing at the dead king with their teeth. Even Neoptolemos looks horrified.

Then I know for certain that the gods are against us.

With a cold dread, I suddenly remember Cassie's words on the wall the other night. About defending her when the animal's belly opens.

I turn and run.

I couldn't save your father, Cassie, I say in my mind over and over as I run for the temple.

Flames everywhere. People yelling in twelve languages. I see one of our guys throwing a paving block down on a Greek, hear the crunch of armor. The block bounces and the Greek is still. But then a Greek arrow finds it way up to the Trojan and he falls back inside. I see a troop of shadows, some of them only knee-high, guided by a reassuring voice saying, "This way, this way, no need to hurry. Don't be frightened."

Sure, no need to panic. The world has filled up with murdering Greeks.

Confronted by a Greek, one I remember seeing in battle before, I am too angry to do anything but to cut him open and keep going. My shoulder bleeds from the wound this Greek gave me. All around me, the mayhem is worse. The women are now naked, the contents of houses spilled onto the roads and alleys. At least half our buildings are on fire. I see Odysseus on a rooftop, as if searching for an untouched corner of the city, unmistakable for his ginger hair and beard, broad-shouldered yet small and wiry.

I couldn't save your father, Cassie.

I run.

Oh, gods, why have you abandoned us?

Rage roars out of my throat and I shake my sword at the rooftop behind me where Odysseus the trickster stands.

When I am close enough to have a view of Athena's temple, I see a struggle between man and goddess. It is Little Aias the Lokrian, a small but strong man whom I knew from battle, apparently pulling at Athena's statue. His bottom is bare, even though he still wears his breastplate and greaves. Shield slung over his shoulder, sword stuck through the leather thongs behind, he doesn't have fighting on his mind.

Then I realize that in the center is Cassandra. Her gown has been shredded away from her shoulders, hanging from her belt. She clings to the goddess, as a frightened child to her mother. "Dear goddess, help me. Please help me! I don't want to go! Let Agamemnon's blood spill without me!"

"Let her go!" I shout, but I'm still too far away.

Little Aias gives such a heave that the statue breaks in Cassandra's arms and they both tumble to the ground. She clings to the goddess's head, broken off in her arms. At the moment that Cassandra sees me coming to help, Little Aias rolls onto her and bites her breast savagely. I can hear him growling even at a distance.

I run, sword high.

Then an arrow hits his leg. He half-rises and looks over his shoulder. Another arrow thuds into his neck. He slumps.

I look to the side. It's Leo. He's got a Parthian bow and arrows that he's picked up from somewhere. He staggers towards me. I see he's got wounds all over. I realize that I, too, am sticky with blood running from my shoulder.

Cassie, Leo, and I come together, our arms around each other, laughing and weeping at the same time. A little victory celebration. I want to kiss both of them.

"Coro, we're forming up at the theatre. Pass the word and meet me there," Leo says and trots away, grimacing and limping.

Then Little Aias stirs.

"Cassie, run. Find a safe place!" I say.

She gestures at the temple. "This is the goddess's sanctuary! If not here, where can I go?"

"Go back to the palace with the other women. I'll be there soon."

She looks at me. Deeply, as she does. But there is still something scary in her eyes. "They will sing of all this forever, Coro."

"Cassie..."

She kisses me and walks away, head down.

Everything is on fire. It is bright enough to see about five dead Trojans for each dead Greek. The numbers are against us.

I see a big mob-fight in the marketplace ahead. I don't know which end is ours or if we even have an end. I run across a side alley, through a courtyard, up over a wall, throwing all my gear down before me, then picking it up again and coming out on the main street. I can see the Horse way down there, burning by the bigger fires.

I'm out of breath.

People line the roofs of burning houses, going out tough. They throw down paving stones and tiles on the heads of the fight below, probably hitting as many Trojans as Greeks. Two guys push with wooden bars and drop a whole section of roof on the road.

I see some Cretan helmets, mostly guys fighting on our side, headed towards the theatre. I follow.

As I pass an alley, someone sticks a sword in my ribs.

This has happened to me before; after a battle the slave pours vinegar in it, binds us up to heal in a week or two.

He pulls his sword out which hurts even more. I turn to face him, Priam's sword and helmet suddenly feeling too heavy, weighing me down.

It's Neoptolemos. He's grinning. "Young mercenary jerk," he taunts.

I slice at him, hating him. "Killed all the babies and old men?" I ask. "Now ready for a real fight?"

I hear a rumble. With another thrust, I cut into his arm. But he's looking over my shoulder, stepping back.

Suddenly, I'm hit, harder and heavier than ever before, thrown to the ground, pinned flat, one arm under me, buried in a broken wall.

Achilles's son is over me, tugging on my helmet. Then he looks around, as if he's heard or seen something. "You're not going anywhere. I'll come back for that helmet."

I can't move. I can't see where he's gone. I can hear his voice, "Line the Trojans up!" he shouts. "Send them to me! Neoptolemos will kill them all!"

"Come back, you big bully," I say, trying hard to push myself out. I can't move my legs at all and one arm only a fraction.

I'm exhausted. I can see a little of what's going on. I see Greeks kill an awful lot of Trojans, then watch several Trojans take what seems a long time to stick enough spears and swords in one Greek to kill him. No one hears me call.

After a while, the fighting moves somewhere else.

The wall starts to feel like a pleasant, peaceful bath, but grows colder and colder. The light of the flames melts into grey daylight. Smoke and sparks drift. Sometimes I'm asleep, sometimes not. A kid toddles by, stops, sucking on a date candy, stares at me with big eyes, then wanders away. I don't even try to speak.

There is an old man leaning over me. I have a hard time focusing on him. He has pieces of glass held by wire stuck on his face, in front of his eyes. He has an odd expression on his face. Enjoyment? Wonder? Not what's you'd expect from someone finding a wounded soldier. Maybe he's a simpleton.

"A little water?" I ask. I cough; it hurts to speak.

He looks at me, crouching, not moving. He has strange, tight-fitting clothes, is balding, without his chin whiskers. He frowns and sticks his finger in his ear and shakes his head violently, then stares at me again, wonder still in his eyes.

Then he reaches for the helmet.

I jerk my head back. "Leave it alone." He's with Neoptolemos, no doubt. "It doesn't belong to you. "

I feel warm and calm somehow. I think about Cassie again as I see the man take the helmet away. It's crusted and battered, looks ancient.

Damned looters. Can't have a war anymore without

Once the helmet was tucked inside his jacket, he climbed up the bank of the trench for a security check. The workers must be on a lunch break, he thought, not spotting them anywhere. Sophia still chatted with the Turkish officials, but they had moved even further away. Not even a need to send her the signal.

He hurried to the hut, trying to stroll normally, as if the bulge in his jacket were merely the wind blowing his clothes. Even Dörpfeld was elsewhere; good.

Inside the hut, he held the helmet in his hands, turning it over and over in awe.

After all this time, after all the half-successful finds, the criticism, retractions, controversies, accusations. *Now, this, now.* He could hardly wait to tell the world.

For surely, certainly, *this* must be the helmet of the noble Priam!

"Are we nearly there?" Homer asked the children. He was puffed out after the long climb. It had been much easier when he was a boy.

"Dad, there are houses here," said his daughter.

"Houses?"

"Yeah, with people living in them," said his son, "There's woodsmoke and laundry and dogs. If we had gone a bit further around the hill we could have gone up some steps instead climbing in the dust."

Houses? Steps? Homer wondered.

"Hey, there's some old wall. Come on, let's go explore there."

Homer settled down on the ground, cross-legged. So, Troy was being resettled....Besides the voices of his two children, he could still hear the wind blowing in the elms and the olive trees, smell the almonds and sea breeze. The sun was warm on his skinny back.

The last time he had been here was just before he had taken up with Keleuthetis for that short apprenticeship. For years now, he had been singing of this hill, inspired by both the Greeks and the Trojans.

And those ghostly wails that had haunted the hill.

He waited, listening for the Trojan women.

For a long time, he sat on his own. Later, a man came to sit with him, chatting about who lived on the high city now. They talked about the war stories. The children played until the chilly dusk approached.

The voices from within had gone quiet. The war was over.

Steven Utley

FIVE MILES FROM PAVEMENT

The Dame Paleontologist, that sun-blackened whipcord of a woman, sits down opposite me in the mess tent. We have not seen each other in several years—she has jumped in and out and in again, and for the past many months she's been collecting in the interior, somewhere far past Wegener Point. By way of greeting, however, she tells me, "You look like hell, and you deserve to."

"Why, thank you. And you're even pricklier than I remember."

"Your big Tinkertoy's an eyesore. It looks like the bastard offspring of a drydock and an offshore drilling rig. There used to be a lovely view of the bay."

We have been friends, or more or less friendly ex-lovers, or acquaintances, anyway, for decades, ever since our post-graduate days. Even if that were not the case, I'm too tired to be offended; though the sun will be rising soon, I'm already more than halfway through my work day. So I let her crack about the structure pass, and she accepts my grunt as an appropriate response, contemplates the breakfast tray she has set on the table between us, shakes her head in obvious disbelief.

"When I came here the first time," she says, "the standard of living was lower than an opossum's. I'm not one of the those boring old farts who never shuts up about how much rougher field work used to be, and how much tougher everyone had to be. Still—now—here's a perfect example of what I mean."

"Just what do you mean? It's an omelette."

"A Spanish omelette, for chrissake."

"The new cook's ambitious."

"What's next, quiche? Sidewalks? A beauty parlor and a sports bar?"

"I'll put those on the recommendation list."

But she digs in with real appetite—no doubt, off in the hinterlands, she subsisted on dried vegetables and meat bars, by comparison with which even reconstituted eggs must taste like gourmet fare. I used to call her The Girl Paleontologist when she worked out of the paleo-lab at the University of Texas in Austin. She always said she never minded roughing it, and I learned to believe her. In her line of work, she spent considerable time in the field, "five miles from pavement," as she was wont to put it, sleeping on rocks and shaking scorpions out of her shoes of a morning. One January, after a nearly complete plesiosaur skeleton had been discovered in a creek bed behind a subdivision, she was among those dispatched from the lab. It takes a while to excavate a thirty-foot-long prehistoric monster, so she and her colleagues had to take turns sticking around all night to make sure that curiosity-seekers or vandals didn't disturb the site. One horrendously cold night, I visited and found her and another paleontologist huddled shivering under the nearest shelter, a bridge. I had brought a Mason jar filled with brandy, and we partied like winos. They had to stay, however, after I went home to my warm bed and my warm wife.

The Dame Paleontologist eats her Spanish omelette, and my attention wanders; the background murmur is lulling. The mess tent is full of hungry construction workers, technicians, even a few scientists—some, like my companion, having breakfast, gearing up; others, like me, winding down.

Work proceeds around the clock, the "Paleozoic" (I insist upon the quotation marks) has become an age of steel and sparks, an industrial era, and the structure nears completion. Viewed from the shore after nightfall, the hard pinpoints of arc-welders' lights flicker like supernovæ against a softer background illumination of work lamps. The effect, if one exercises only a little imagination, is of a Cubist sort of galaxy floating in darkness. I would not hesitate to set this artifact against the great cathedrals of Europe or the Egyptian pyramids, any of which would dwarf it, but only in a purely physical sense. The pyramids are mounds of dead rock; this thing will hum with power. The cathedrals have stood for a few centuries, the pyramids for a few millennia; this structure will bridge four hundred million years. I have been intimately involved with it from the beginning, carried it from conception through fruition, and if memory serves (history, however, is not really my strong suit) it took lifetimes to build the cathedrals, and at least some of the pharaohs lay unentombed while work continued on their final resting places.

Be those things as they may, I am not bragging too much when I say that no one has done more than I to make the human presence here possible. Not even Cutsinger. I have given my life to that end, built a career upon it, and this structure will be the culmination. In all modesty, it was due to my own foresight that this

project has been undertaken. Early on, very early on, when the numbers of scientists visiting "Paleozoic" time were still in the single digits, I insisted that if this kind of thing was going to be done at all, we must do it big and do it right, impose order; therefore, even as we attended to immediate problems, we would take the long view, plan extensively. Stabilization of the spacetime anomaly would have to be ensured, and as long as the anomaly did persist, the extent of our exploitation of it for purposes of research would only grow; we were talking not about anything as ephemeral as space stations, but about permanent bases and personnel numbering in the hundreds, perhaps even the thousands, because every branch of science, from microbiology to astronomy, would have something to gain from "Paleozoic" research. No résumé would be considered worth a second look if it did not mention "Paleozoic" field work or some activity related to a "Paleozoic" expedition. Early on, we physicists, chiefly Cutsinger, Morales, and I, solved the problem of spatial/temporal drift by inserting the equipment necessary to "fix" the anomaly at both "ends" and thereby establishing a synchronous link between the ancient "Paleozoic" and the immediate Cenozoic—what laypeople and lazy people stubbornly insist upon thinking of as The Past and The Present. This, however, was only a temporary measure, for not only would the number of scientists increase, but so, too, the duration of their visits and the scope of their explorations. We deemed it best that the "Paleozoic" "end" of the anomaly be "reconnected" to a vessel provided by, and crewed by officers and enlisted personnel of, the U.S. Navy. With its complement of auxiliary craft, this vessel, once having been inserted, would become the receiving/sending point in "Paleozoic" time in addition to serving in other capacities. But this, too, was a temporary measure. A ship, we noted, requires regular refits, and though routine maintenance "in the field" would be possible (some of the auxiliaries being specifically designed and equipped for this purpose), our vessel must perforce return to Cenozoic time for the sort of maintenance that can be performed only in a yard.

Thus, plans were drawn up and funds allocated for a large, permanent structure to house the stabilization devices so that the ship could be sent back as necessary and yet our synchronous link be maintained. It has been terribly expensive, but it will be worth every penny. Yes, there have been occasional setbacks. There have been accidents, too, more than expected, more than there should have been; a few serious injuries among the workers, but no fatalities, fortunately. The majority of these can be traced to sheer exhaustion. I am not one to duck responsibility; I put the blame for this squarely on our having stuck to the twenty-four-hour clock in the face of the "Paleozoic" day's being less than twenty-two hours long. Work has to be completed on schedule, work shifts are necessarily rigid, but the human time-sense is fluid. Although we cope as best we can, the fact remains that our sleep cycles have been disrupted. A few concessions have been made—even the Navy finally allowed that, no matter the hour on the official clock, morning colors could wait until sunrise; there is hardly anything more dispirited than a flag-raising ceremony in the dead of night. It must be said that with very few exceptions Navy personnel of all ranks have comported themselves in a manner that is a credit to the uniform they wear and the flag they serve. All here are volunteers, and they are screened more rigorously than the civilian scientists. True, a few instances of substance abuse have been reported among the ratings, tempers have occasionally flared and landed disputants in the brig, but to the best of my knowledge there have been no instances to date of personnel going AWOL—if only because there's so little incentive to do so, no place to go that isn't exactly like every place one has already been. Tours of duty in war zones are traditionally described as long periods of utter boredom punctuated with moments of utter terror; a tour in "Paleozoic" time is long periods of intense activity punctuated with moments utter boredom. Obviously morale is going to be affected, even though the Navy has quite enough to do and everyone tries to stay busy. The Navy's here in a support capacity and is responsible for keeping between one and two thousand scientists safe, supplied, and in touch. The bulk of this population is concentrated along the Laurentian coast of the Iapetus Ocean (I'm stuck with these place names), but there are also camps deep in the interior and on some of the island arcs, and it could be, and has been, argued that the Navy is stretched thin. By the end of their tours the majority of officers and enlisted personnel are clearly good and ready to go home; the percentage of recidivists among them is low. Well, they are young, most of them, and whatever domestic touches they have been able to apply here are insufficient to distract their attention from the reality, the emptiness, the dullness, of the "Paleozoic" world; they yearn for the great wide wonderful world waiting on the other side of the spacetime anomaly, so busy, so noisy, so full of vivid color and things to do, and they don't care that the "jump" (as that wracking tumble is called) will rattle every bone in their bodies and put an unlucky few into sick bay with mild concussions or worse.

As for myself, I am locked firmly into Work/Sleep mode. My "days" and "nights" do not entirely correspond with actual days and nights, but they follow a pattern as surely as the sun and the moon trace regular courses across the sky. I am careful to make any really important decisions only early in the "day," when, like the morning sun and the evening moon, I am ascendant.

Now, however, in the mess tent, I am past zenith. The Dame Paleontologist continues to glare across the table at me while she chews and swallows her food. Then she says, "I've heard about the plan to build a power plant upriver."

"Well," I begin, "the generators here won't be capable of..." and give it up, because she goes right on

talking.

"Every time I get back here to Stinktown, I half-expect to see the first fast food restaurant's opened for business. They don't even like you to call it Stinktown any more. There aren't just scientists and technicians here any more, now there're boosters. I hate to say it, old pal, but you've become one of them."

"I've always been one of them. Maybe the biggest one of all, too. Because I know that everywhere humans go, they stick. Some places are harder than others—Antarctica was, the moon is, Mars will be. But it's in our nature to try and keep trying until we do stick. My big Tinkertoy, as you call it, will make it easier for us to stick."

"Every place we," and she twists her mouth as though she finds the word distasteful, "*stick,* we start importing our technology and our bad habits. It's no longer pristine here. I'm finding trash on the ground. The foot traffic here's been so heavy for so long that we've beaten paths into the bare ground. It no longer looks primeval. The best you can say for it is that it looks rustic. Boats and helicopters are pumping exhaust gases into the air, there're oil films on the water. You can see rainbows on the surface of the bay. And what's the latest estimate on the amount of stuff we've dropped *into* the bay?"

I accidentally overturn my cup; she watches with sour amusement as I block pseudopods of coffee with paper napkins. In only seconds the tabletop immediately before me is covered with steaming brown slush. As I scoop up the mess with still more napkins she asks, "Did I finally hit a nerve?"

I long ago learned the proper response to this line of argument so well that it's become reflexive, I have rattled it off enough times, but, yes, she's touched on a matter which, irrationally, in spite of myself, I find worrisome: lost items. We've slung safety nets and catch pans underneath the structure during all phases of construction, and divers regularly scour the bottom. Such precautions are not one hundred percent effective, however, and these are murky waters. We're erecting this structure of ours at the mouth of an estuary. Every moment of every day, the turbid brown waters bring sand and silt from the interior badlands and deposit them as sediments. The bay's muddy bottom is the graveyard of uncountable billions of organisms ranging in size from microscopic to man-sized, and strewn among their remains in the general vicinity of the structure are hand tools, screws, bits of wire, who knows what else. I am a physicist, quantum mechanics is the only thing that accounts for the reality of our situation, and yet I would not be fully human if my head and my (for want of a more appropriate-seeming part of my anatomy) viscera were not sometimes at odds: this reality sometimes feels unreal. At some level of consciousness impregnable against calm, sound reasoning, I'm utterly unnerved every time I read an accident report (the rules are strict, a report must be filed if so much as one bolt goes overboard).

I begin, feebly, "There're guidelines," and once again I get no farther.

"Guidelines! We were so conscientious at first. We had to wear spacesuits, for chrissake."

"That was before Cutsinger proved—"

"Oh, never *mind* what Cutsinger proved or thought he proved. I never knew what he was talking about most of the time, and I bet he didn't know about half of the time. Especially when he said the hole's stable. Remember, once upon a time, long ago, he and you and every other physicist said the hole was impossible. It opened by itself. You didn't know what caused it, and you still haven't got a clue."

"That's not quite—"

"Oh, never mind your explanations, I couldn't understand them whatever they are. Maybe the hole'll close by itself, too."

"I doubt it very much. The anomaly's remained pretty stable all these years. We've almost ceased to think of it as an anomaly, in fact. And once we complete my Tinkertoy we'll be able not only to maintain it indefinitely but to manipulate it as well. Excuse me," and I take a large wad of sodden napkins to the waste bin.

When I return to the table, she says, "Did you ever hear about that idiot who came up pregnant and wanted her baby to be born here? No, it's true, this really happened."

"I don't see how. It would've been in violation of the Navy's PWOP policy."

"Its what?"

"PWOP. Pregnant without permission."

She smiles; it's the first time I've seen her smile since—well, I'm not sure, it's been so long. "And all along," she says, "I thought the military lacked a sense of humor." The smile fades. "No, this was a civilian like us, a biologist or something. Somebody who should've known better. Somebody who was thinking like a colonist."

"Don't you think you're being just a bit hypocritical? How many times have you come through the anomaly? How many years of your life have you spent here in all?"

"I've loved it here, but I'm not a sentimentalist, and I've never had any patience with people who are—who profess what I consider to be too strong an attachment to this place. This world isn't ready for humans. It's not our home, we're not colonists, we're just visitors." She vehemently stabs the last bit of omelette with her fork, raises it halfway to her mouth, studies it for a moment, then returns it to the tray. "You're supposed to

be on your best behavior when you visit a place, and not trash it."

"We're not trashing this place."

"You're making it over. The rest of us, we're only human, so we make stupid decisions, we get careless. We drop stuff. We lose things. We leave our footprints. We forget to clean up after ourselves. But you, you're deliberately trying to make it a fit place for humans to live."

"Look, I'm too tired to argue any more."

"Then don't argue, just listen. Let's say the hole closes by itself—as mysteriously as it opened—before you finish building your big machine. Or maybe you get it built but it breaks down. What happens then? When our supplies are cut off? Do we just starve then? Do we die out and turn to humus? Do we start eating invertebrates and nasty fish, raw? There isn't even wood for cooking or building here."

"We wouldn't be the first human beings who've had to figure out how to survive," I say, and I get to my feet.

She rises, too, and we go out of the mess tent and into the new morning together.

"Walk me to my tent," she says. "We may not get another chance to say goodbye. It'll be the middle of the night for you when I make the jump."

Her tent is in the last row, behind which the ground slopes upward. She looks toward the heights and says, "Let's go up."

I make no attempt to stifle my groan. "I've got to get back to work," I say, and because I can see that that doesn't move her, I add, "I'm a tired old man."

"So? I'm a tired old woman. Come on, indulge me one last time. Let's go up just a little way."

I mutter an obscenity. Nevertheless, we climb, carefully picking our way up the stony slope. What, I wonder, does she have in mind in the way of saying goodbye? This isn't the first such slope we've climbed together. She was the bright protostar of the geology department at the University of Texas, as I was the physics department's, but the departments can be better described as compartments hermetically sealed off from each other. Thus we met off campus, by accident, at a used bookstore in the "Science" section—a catchall for works by and biographies of Hawking, Einstein, and Darwin as well as volumes on gardening and astrology, pet care manuals, picture books of dinosaurs, creationist tracts, and more than half a century's worth of exposés of government conspiracies involving everything from extraterrestrial visitors to bioengineering projects gone horribly wrong. One or the other of us initiated an exchange of caustic and (so it seemed then) hilarious comments on this jumble of real, pseudo-, anti-, and simple non-science. An hour later, we were seated across from each other in a coffee shop, still entertaining ourselves with barbed witticisms. Within two weeks we became lovers. The affair wasn't serious; in fact, it was less an affair than a mere episode; it didn't end altogether amicably, but we got over it and went on to marry more compatible individuals, and to divorce them, and in the meantime never quite let go of each other. What really united us in an enduring, if often testy, relationship was our love of science and our contempt for superstition and irrational thinking. We were too different in other regards. I preferred the classroom, the laboratory, the library, order, quietude, a minimum of dirt. Her idea of fun was a weekend camping trip; she insisted, soon after our first tryst, that I accompany her to Enchanted Rock in Llano County. What, I asked—being a comparative newcomer to Texas—is Enchanted Rock? "An eerie and beautiful square mile of antiquity," she said, "a relic of the Precambrian, the second biggest exposed batholith in the United States!" I affected disappointment: Only the *second* biggest? "Don't mock the rock," she told me. "Idiots carved likenesses of Confederate generals on the biggest—that's Stone Mountain, in Georgia. *Our* rock is pristine. Actually, it's the merest nub on a planetoid-sized pluton underlying the whole region. To walk on it, touch it"—she sighed; she actually talked like this when she was in her twenties, before collecting seasons under hot suns smelted softness and whimsy out of her—"it gives you a sense of the alienness of Precambrian Earth. The Indians thought it was a magical place. So do I. So will you." And so I had, from the instant I saw it. The great bald dome of pink granite simply looked supernatural, unnatural, at any rate, like some titan's monstrous rock garden, palpably ancient. After dark, we crept out of our tent and coupled on the still-warm rock. I slipped my hands between it and her knees to cushion them, prevent their being bruised, as she bumped and bounced atop me. Then we lay spent and listened to the pop of cooling, cracking granite, and after a time I said, So is this what you mean by field work? and she laughed and kissed me deeply. At that moment, for just that moment, we may have been in love. A little later, she said, "I am going to do great things in my field." And I, I said, in mine, and waved at the sky, because I knew then, *believed,* that humanity's destiny lay out there among the stars. It never occurred to me that my work would bring me closer to Precambrian time than to the nearest star.

Whatever she has in mind now, it surely isn't sex for old times' sake on a high rock. There's a limestone shelf big enough for both of us to sit upon and look across the camp and the bay to the open sea. Visible on the ridgeback above us is one of the towers supporting receiving equipment above the radio telescope's reflector dish; the dish itself sits in a natural hollow, screened from our view and from radio interference from the camp. The structure in the bay dominates the seaward view; the estuarine waterways seem to point to it, the bracketing headlands with their ellipses of sea stacks hold one's attention on it; even if one cared to go to

the trouble to climb those distant slip-faulted cliff faces, the structure would still be the centerpiece, the sole *point* of bothering to take the view from the bare rain-pitted limestone up there. The sea beyond is only a sea, the landscape behind us is as barren as an empty parking lot. Moreover, the structure, though unfinished, already has a look of permanence, unlike the flimsy tents and Quonset huts in camp.

"Isn't it exquisite?" I murmur. "It's like the Taj Mahal."

She does not respond immediately, but after some seconds have elapsed, she says, "More like the Tower of Babel. A bad idea whose time has come."

She fingers a chert lump in the limestone as if she were touching old, familiar wallpaper, examines a weathered-out fossil shell, replaces it on the ground as carefully as if it were a cherished piece of bric-a-brac.

"I have to resist the impulse to collect any more souvenirs," she says. "We pried out a bargeload of specimens this time. Probably way too many." I know; the crates are aboard the ship, awaiting transfer to Cenozoic time. She's one of the handful of paleontologists who have worked in "Paleozoic" time *as* paleontologists. Most of her colleagues come to study living examples of, to confirm or disprove conclusions drawn from, the contents in their specimen drawers back home; she has always come, as she puts it, to get a 400-million-year jump on erosion, examining already ancient rocks that are already weathering away to grit and dust.

I ask, "Can you ever collect too many specimens?"

"I guess I'll find out when I go home and start pawing through what I've collected. I'll write my papers, lecture, and bask in the respectful regard of the scientific community. And in the less respectful but more affectionate regard of my family. I have young grandnephews and -nieces I can terrify." She is brown and leathery, with piercing eyes and vertical creases in her face. "I'll be the ancient mummy woman, returned to life." Then she sighs and asks, "At what point does everybody else decide they're finished here? When do you go back through the hole and pull it in after yourself?"

"When have human beings ever left a place once they've established themselves in it? People live in Antarctica now, and in space."

We sit side by side and say nothing for perhaps a minute before she says, "Do you know the history of the Viking colony in Greenland? Eric the Red founded it late in the tenth century. At that time, the climate along the southwestern coast wasn't any worse that what the settlers were used to in Iceland and Norway. Agriculture didn't amount to much, but fish and game were abundant, the settlers brought their domestic animals with them, and they lived fairly well. After a couple of hundred years, though, the climate began to deteriorate. It grew colder, the glaciers advanced southward, and finally the colony was hemmed in by ice and cut off from all contact with Europe. Centuries later, archeologists excavated the remains of the last of the colonists. They were malnourished, stunted, deformed, diseased. They lived miserably and died out miserably."

"We have advantages those people didn't have."

"Such as?"

I laugh harshly. "Well, just for starters, equatorial Laurentia isn't about to ice up! We've got our knowledge and our technology—"

"And a supply line that's four hundred million years long. Everything we need has to come through the hole. Everything from fuel to food. Without fuel, all our machinery's just a lot of scrap iron. Without food, we wouldn't last long enough to see it go to rust. At most, this world could sustain about a hundred of us if we lived far apart from one another and weren't too particular about what we ate."

"We could harvest the sea for food."

"With the Navy's help, no doubt. Well, what about the Navy? Remember, there wouldn't be any fuel for the ship or those auxiliary craft or the helicopters. How long do you suppose you could maintain a ten-thousand-ton ship even if it just sat there in the bay?"

"I'm tired of supposing highly unlikely things. Let's go back down."

"If we did somehow survive," she says, "we'd reproduce. If we reproduced here, in isolation, over time, we'd evolve. And what a gene pool we'd have to work with, too. Geeks and gobs. Do you know what quantum speciation is? It's the separation of populations of organisms that can interbreed into independent evolutionary units that can't interbreed. Each of these small populations in isolation—stuck on an oceanic island, let's say, or stuck four hundred million years in the past—becomes subject to the founder effect. That's what we call what happens when a new population is founded by individual organisms representing an extremely small sample of the genetic pool to which they formerly belonged—the ancestral population. Now, in all populations, there are always random fluctuations of gene frequencies. Genetic drift occurs. Mutation. The offspring's genes aren't perfectly representative of its parent's genes. Most mutations are fatal, and in a large population, those that do survive are swamped. But natural selection operating on small isolated populations quickly results in gene combinations unlike those found in the ancestral population. You end up with populations that're isolated not only geographically but reproductibly. You end up with entirely new species. The thing of it is, there's no evidence of that in the fossil record. Not the minutest hint of it, of us, of whatever

we might become. That means one of two things must happen here. Either we leave, or we stay and die out and turn to humus."

"If we were actually time-travelers, it would probably only mean that paleontology's guessed right about that the odds against any particular *thing's* turning up in the fossil record. But we're *not* time-travelers. Nothing we do here can have any bearing on the future of our own world because this isn't our Earth as it was in Paleozoic times, but only one of an infinite multitude of Earths in the equivalents of Paleozoic time."

"What if it's a case of there being a unity in spite of infinite multitude, and an infinite multitude in spite of unity?"

"The universe is continually dividing, copying itself, as it jumps from state to state. The copies are infinite in number, they coexist in parallel with each other, and each is in a different state. That is, a separate reality exists for every possible outcome of every possible quantum interaction. And while most of the realities would be imperceptibly different on the macro level, given an infinite series of separate realities, there'd be gross differences as well."

The Dame Paleontologist grimaces. "I didn't really mean for you to answer me. If in fact that was an answer. All this multiple-universe stuff just makes my head swim. I flat don't believe it anyway. I never have."

I say, "I've go to get back to work."

We stand, dust off the seats of our pants, step away from the rock shelf.

"It is too beautiful," I insist, nodding at the structure in the bay. Even at this distance, human figures and the blue-white sparks of welding torches are visible.

She mimics my tone. "It does too look like a theme park on bad drugs."

"You have your fossils. I have that."

"I'm glad I won't be here to see whatever's going to happen."

"Whatever happens, I'll tell you all about it when I get back."

She shakes her head. "I don't think you will get back."

"I'm *not* going to be marooned here. Nobody is."

"What I mean is, you won't even consider coming back until that damn thing out there is up and running. Then the jump'll probably kill you, or at least shake loose something inside you. Your brain, for example. You are an old man."

"I'm not exactly dragging around an oxygen bottle and pushing a walker in front of me."

"Not yet you aren't. Not yet." She looks away from me. Her voice becomes strained. "Just in case I never see you again—good-bye. Good-bye and good luck. You're probably going to need it."

"Don't worry so much. In the end—"

"Ah, God, darling," she says, turning toward me, "*in the end,*" and suddenly I hear a note of tenderness in her voice that has not been there in decades, not since that night on Enchanted Rock, and for the first time in I can't remember how long she touches me, on the hand, quickly, lightly, then lets her arm drop and stands disconsolately before me with tears sparkling on her eyelashes. I have misjudged her. For all these years, from the very first, I have cruelly misjudged her. "Who," she almost sobs, "can ever see the *end* of anything?"

A. R. Morlan

CAT IN THE BOX

From: reneec@msn.com 7-29-01 05:06.25.86
To: wesrich@msn.com
Subj: Request for information

Dear Wes,

Since when did you get a cat? I was checking out your site before I went to work, and there was this cat (orange stripe I think) sitting in that box next to your bookcase. He's adorable, but I thought you mentioned something to whoever (whomever? ;-)) you were having dinner with the night before last about your landlord forbidding anyone at your place from having animals? I think you told her that the landlord was afraid the oak floors might get scratched/ruined...

Not that it's any of my business, I mean it's not like I'd tell the landlord or anything, but wherever you got him (her?) s/he's adorable. What a cute little face! But I would think about putting a blanket or towel in the box. Just a suggestion from one of your livecam fans... :-)

From: wesrich@msn.com 7-30-01 09:37.07.76
To: reneec@msn.com
Subj: Cat in the box

Dear ReneeC,

OK, OK, "livecam fan" you got me. You wouldn't believe how many people log onto my site with messages, suggestions, complaints (about _what_ I'll let you decide!), et al. but your phantom cat grabbed me. And so, I'm breaking my own rule about emailing back to my "fans" (Jeez, now I know how Brad Pitt must feel, ;-)!). Just this once, tho.

The "cat" in question must've been a trick of the light coming thru my blinds—what you heard me telling my dinner guest (btw, a co-worker, period, as in just for the record) was true. No kitties. In case you didn't log on last week, I did a scan-pan of my apartment with the digital camera, and on my TV I have one of those gourd kitties, which does happen to be orange-striped, but he's never been in any box save for the one he came "home" in from the gift shop. Not that I wouldn't love a cat, tho. I was into them long before Jon had his Garfield. And yes, orange ones are my passion. But last time I looked, the box-by-the-bookcase was empty. Alas. Best to you, and purrs from the TV cat, Wes R.

From: reneec@msn.com 7-31-01 12:03.01.34
To: wesrich@msn.com
Subj: Cat IN box/Not on TV

Hi, Wes R.,

I'm flattered that you actually emailed _me_ a reply, but least you think I'm some kind of web nimrod who gets off on sending joke messages (or spam, or flames), there _is_ a cat in your apartment. And his belly isn't full of dried seeds, either (btw, I have one of those gourd cats, too, only mine is black with white feet-n-face). He was curled up in your erstwhile empty box, licking his feet and belly, stretched out in all sorts of yoga positions which would hamstring a human tried 'em. He (as I could now see) is just a doll, with one of those wedge-shaped little faces you could stare at all day—big wide-set eyes, cute pointed chin with a daub of white at the bottom, and those deeper "M" stripes in the middle of his forehead. No wonder you don't want to advertise his presence—losing a beautiful baby like him to some money-grubbin' landlord would be a tragedy. But don't you think you should spring for a collar? Thanx again for responding to my e-mail, and be sure to pet both the kitties for me. ReneeC.

From: wesrich@msn.com 7-31-01 6:11.01.24
To: reneec@msn.com
Subj: Cat not in box

Hello again, ReneeC.,

If your description of that cat wasn't so convincing, I'd be passing your e-mail address on to msn.com, along with a request that you be banned from logging on... but damn, that cat you keep telling me about sounds so real, I'm half tempted to check that stupid box for fur or what-have-you stains... Well, at least I know the cat is a "he" —nice touch, especially when I'm so partial to tomcats. But I suppose you guessed that from the Garfield reference in my last message. I'm supposing.

But the part about the cat-yoga did get me to thinking—ever notice how a cat can do just about anything—contort itself into the most asinine positions, yet still look dignified? The beauty of cats, I guess. Including the phantom-box-cat....

Hey, next time he makes an appearance, why not download the image? I'd like to see him—even a cut-and-paste image would be a bit more animated than my trusty TV cat (btw, I don't know where you keep your gourd cat, but be warned, the heat from a TV can make the feet brittle. Mine lost a couple of toes that way!)

Be well, and be on the look-out for future Phantom Box Cat sightings!

From: reneec@msn.com 8-02-01 3:48:26.09
To: wesrich@msn.com
Subj: Cat IN box on-line

Dear Cat-Owner Wes R.,

I'm willing to forget about your last e-mail's sarcasm—it took me a while (thank goodness I have an in-home office job or else I'd have missed him!) but your cat was gracious enough to not only pose for me, but he even "smiled" for the camera. (If a toothy yawn counts for a smile!) I don't know how long it will take to download his image since my digital equipment is rather balky, but be patient, and you'll see him. As if you weren't used to seeing him every day...

I suppose you've been worried about your landlord logging onto your site and seeing him, but I figure if he hasn't done anything so far, he's probably one of those dorks with a Betamax under his b/w TV who still uses a rotary phone.

But as you can see, your so-called Phantom Kitty is alive and well, and amusing all your webfans with his antics—the way he did that slam-dunk with the wad of paper into your bookcase was a classic. Funny, isn't it, how so many cats are left-pawed? I read someplace that right-pawed cats are in the minority, just like left-handed people. Weird, eh? Both my cats are left-pawed; Marco Polo (grey DSH, big amber eyes) and Casper (proverbial white, albeit with orange ears/tail, DSH, blue-blue eyes). And they're also into crawling into whatever empty boxes/bags they can find... I suppose the kitty-cup from the pet store is too declasse for them! And never mind those cat hammocks—altho Marco thinks they're a great stand-by litter-pan, alas! Once, and don't ask me how he did it, Casper "hid" for half a day under a point-down triangle of bedspread that was hanging off the side of the bed—I mean, how can a cat stand on his toes so that he can't be seen behind an inverted triangle of fabric? But, sure enough, I saw him emerge from behind there, and I swear I couldn't see him when he was sitting/standing/ levitating behind it! (btw, now that I've "proved" to you that your own cat exists, what is his name? If perchance you haven't named him, Boots would be a perfect one, what with his white feet and all. Sure easier to spell than the name of that scientist guy who postulated that experiment with the cat in the sealed box... Schrodinger?) Bye for now, from Marco, Casper, the black-n-white gourd cat, and their owner...

From: wesrich@msn.com 8-02-01 5:52:04.75
To: reneec@msn.com
Subj: Picture _me_ puzzled!

OK. I'll admit it. You've stumped me! I was joking about the cut-and-paste kitty, but darned if you didn't do it. And far better than even I could have imagined. You didn't say what you do while working at home, but might it be computer animation? What you did goes way beyond digital imaging! Phantom Kitty (aka Boots; I think the name Schrodinger for a cat was already "taken" by that Quinn guy on Sliders!) was indeed in my box by my bookcase, but you _have_ to believe me, I've never seen this animal before! Yet here he is, big as life, licking his white paws and rolling around—amazing job! And I'd thought furry critters were too hard to animate... I suppose things have come a long way from _Stuart Little_ and _Toy Story 2_. Care to share your how-tos?

But getting back to something else in your e-mail—I think what your cat Casper did when he was hiding behind that flap of bedspread falls under what I call Feline Physics. As in, the mass of a cat is _sub_ quantum, so they can occupy the smallest amount of space at will. Or enter the fourth dimension—when I was a kid, our one cat Tweetie Pie (a boy-cat, grey tabby and white paws) got scared of something and hid so well we literally searched the whole house (cupboards, closets, basement, attic, _everywhere_!), twice, and didn't find him... then, after he'd been hiding for about 40+ hours, Mom was fixing supper—chicken,

roasted—and suddenly Tweetie Pie emerged from this one cupboard. Only we'd moved almost every can in there, save for a row smack against the back wall of the cupboard. Like there was no place he could've been hiding, yet that's where he was. The walls in there were sound—no holes, no cracks. I know a bat can squeeze through a space a quarter of an inch wide, but even though cats and bats do share a smidgen of DNA (along with a dollop of baboon DNA in cats!), I can't see how they can get _that_ small. So it has to be Feline Physics at work. Something even Schrodinger never thought of when he came up with the whole cat in the box with the radioactive atom scenario. (Seems to be the guy must not've liked cats if you ask me!) But... Quantum Qats aside, thanks for coming up with Boots. I don't know how you did it, but he's my dream-cat. And having this bit of digital footage of him makes up for all the rotten landlords and housing codes in this foggy ole city. How you did it, I can't begin to imagine, but thank you for making my (unvoiced) wish a reality. Wes.

From: reneec@msn.com 8-03-01 12:45:30:86
To: wesrich@msn.com
Subj: Quantum Qats

Jeez. I thought I was the only person out there who remembered B. Kliban's "qats" from all those cat books of his, but I'm getting ahead of myself—

LISTEN (sorry 'bout the flame!), BOOTS _IS_ REAL!

I couldn't generate a digital cat/qat/feline if I wanted to—I'm not a professional animator, or an amateur who's taken one of those digital imaging courses. Nor did I go get a red/white cat of my own to film in a copy-cat box here at my place (as I'm sure you must be thinking)... I downloaded images from _your_ apartment. From your 24/7/12/52 digital stream. If you don't believe me, if no one else has yet to comment about the cat, do this, to humor me, and satisfy yourself. Put a sign near the box—no, wait, write it _on_ the box-flap, asking people to e-mail comments about the cat. That should "prove" Boots is real, shouldn't it? Unless someone out there is hacking into your e-mail, and reading this, no one else should be privy to this matter, right?

The only thing that I can't understand is that you haven't been able to "nose" him out yet. He is unneutered, far as I can tell. He must be going somewhere! Maybe you should look for any one-point-down triangles of fabric—he could be hiding behind one of those. Or lying behind a row of condensed soup cans at the back of the cupboard! (How 'bout looking into Feline Physics For Dummies?) Until later, Renee C.

From: wesrich@msn.com 8-06-01 1:07:22.89
To: reneec@msn.com
Subj: Feline Physics For Dummies

Hi (he said, humbled!)

He may not smell, he may not leave any wet spots on the carpet, he may not scratch the oaken floors, but... _you are right_ BOOTS LIVES! _Where_ or even _how_ I dunno, but if the first ten e-mails I got in response to my "My Name is Boots... Tell My Owner What You Think Of Me" message on the box-flap are any indication, we may well have stumbled onto a law of physics Stephen Hawkings never thought of! Or Boots himself found it... wherever he goes when I come into the apartment!

All ten e-mails referred to him doing specific things, looking just the way you downloaded him, not being neutered (got bitched out three times on that point!), needing a towel or a blanket in the box, etc.

But it is clear that the box is the "how" he gets here. I asked my co-worker, Martha, about it, and since she actually took physics in high school, she knows a bit more about quantum physics (if not quantum qats) than I do/did... after going on about isotopes, elements, electrons and protons in the neutral atom (the latter has matching numbers of electrons and protons), she moved on to half-lives, which amounts to time periods. As in, how a half life can vary from isotope to isotope, but how the half-life is always the same for a particular isotope... so, if you have, say, 8000 radioactive atoms whose isotope's half-life is fifteen minutes, in those fifteen minutes, half of them will decay, so you only have 4000 left. And in another fifteen minutes, you'll have 2000 left, and so on until they're all gone. And I can guess your next question—what tells the atoms it's their turn to expire? Nobody knows—Martha says that all "they" know is that half-lives exist. And can be proved.

Which is a very round-about way of getting back to that original cat-in-the-box _you_ mentioned a while back. Schrodinger's cat. The original theory involved putting a hypothetical cat into a theoretical box along with an imagined radioactive atom. Along with a detector to determine when the imaginary atom decays _and_ if said atom decays, it will release a poison which will kill the non-cat.

(Sounds like a lovely guy, no? The PeTA folks would've done one hell of a billboard about him!)

Anyway, if you were to open this imaginary box after one half-life for the atom, you would have 1) a non-kitty or 2) a living-albeit-unreal cat. (Or as John Cleese might shout, "This is an ex-cat!")

The whole thing boils down to, how do you know when a statistical event does or doesn't happen?

Schrodinger's atom will decay. But when? There's no way to predict this statistical half-life event. Or so Martha said. (I lost my Physics For Dummies!) She also said that the experiment had another part, involving _two_ universes around the choice point of the time of decay of the atom. So in one universe, the atom decays within the first half-life, and you have an ex-cat. Or ex-qat. In another universe, the qat lives. Which brings us into Sliders territory, the whole side-by-side-by-another-side Universes concept. Like, every alternate choice creates a whole 'nuther universe. Usually, we think of this in terms of choices _people_ make, but what about choices _cats_ make? Like... there's this box, sitting behind a supermarket. Which the me in this universe picks up, empty, and takes home to his apartment. Only, in another universe, there's this same empty box, into which this orange and white cat jumps. And is brought home to my apartment, only (and here I'm sorta quoting Martha, who was quoting some guy from Caltech she'd read about) since at the smallest scale of universe, the quantum physics level, the box and the cat (both of which are composed of electrons which don't always follow a specific path from here to there) are working in such a way that the cat could simultaneously be both there and not there at once. (Martha used a full/empty wine bottle in _her_ analogy, but you get the picture). Martha said that what we see around us isn't as predictable as it seems to be—there's a whole sub-atomic level of life we can't see, let alone predict or fully understand.

Which seems to be the case with Boots. So... he's here, and he's not here, and the box seems to be what's simultaneously devoid of cat/filled with cat.

Only... for some reason Boots and I aren't existing in the same plane of reality at the same time. Like he's yin and I'm yang, or he's in while I'm not (Martha did say that the only thing which can't be is him being negatively charged while I'm positively charged—sort of the old impossible scenario of someone meeting with their anti-matter double on the street—if your double is antimatter, he couldn't walk on a matter street in the first place).

But in all ten e-mails, that box is the constant. Said box which I haven't moved since I brought the thing into the apartment. Everyone sees him in it, or next to it, or jumping back into it.

Which brings up what I suppose is my next move (or my last move): To move the box, or not to move the box?

I don't think Shakespeare ever confronted a question like this one!

From: reneec@msn.com 8-07-01 2:01:35.90
To: wesrich@msn.com
Subj: I'd say I told you so if it didn't sound so smug.

Whew!

Talk about a lady-or-the-tiger conundrum! It took me awhile to digest all your co-worker Martha's physics, but I think I do get the gist of what she was saying. The cat is real, but is somehow moving between at least two universes. And the nexus has to be the box. Which is in a fixed location. Move the box while the cat isn't there, and he stays wherever it is he "lives" when not in your apartment. (And wherever that place is, he must be eating, and presumably eliminating, since he seems to be well nourished!) To me, the "answer" would be to somehow monitor your own website from somewhere else, watch him for yourself, and figure out a way for him to move the box into another spot (one which would not form a pathway "back" to where ever it is he goes) before he can go "back"... which brings up a whole 'nuther problem: Suppose the other universe has another "you" who _is_ in contact with the cat? Wouldn't "he" miss Boots once the cat never came back? Now I think there would be ways to rig the box so that it would move once he was in it, but think... _should_ you do it?

I don't know where you work, but I assume you don't have access to a monitor there, since you haven't tried to do the obvious (watch Boots yourself)... but if you could swing it, would you consider just watching him, seeing how healthy/happy he seems to be, before you make your decision about whether or not to trap him in "our" universe? Remember on that show Sliders, how some people have "doubles" and others didn't on the various worlds? Maybe Boots has a double, one who is still hanging around that alley where you found the box. He might need a home—or he could be at a shelter, etc. Worth a thought, no?

From: wesrich@msn.com 8-09-01 7:22:30.97
To: reneec@msn.com
Subj: If you haven't already, check your monitor.

Boots is Gone, Boots has come Home.

I repositioned my camera to show where _my_ Boots has his new, improved box (complete with folded towels on the bottom), so anytime you log on to my site, he should be there. Poor boy's had it rough—he was living in that same alley, and the pickings from Dumpster diving were slim after the homeless folks took what they needed.

As you will see (if you haven't already), he's the same Boots, even as he's a different Boots. Looks the same, but his coat still needs some work (I'm going to try a luster-bath next time; the first one was strictly flea-tick killer!), and of course, he's not as fat as the other Boots, but we're working on that problem. But he's just as playful, despite living in that alley all these weeks. He purrs, so he must've been dumped—he's no feral!

Good thing I remembered where that box used to be—he was sitting in the same spot, as if he were waiting for me. Or maybe he wondered where the box had gone! And landlord be damned, I scooped him up and shoved him into my jacket (he tried to climb into the one sleeve, but that's for another e-mail!), and literally ran him home in the early morning fog. And, when I entered my apartment, the first thing I did was kick the box by the bookcase out of the way, so it skidded along the floor... but I swear that just before I actually kicked it, the box was just a bit heavier-than-empty. When I picked it up later, though, it weighed less. So I hope the other Boots jumped out on his end. But cats startle easily, so I'm sure he did stay wherever it is he _is _ now. Another funny thing... once I took a good look in the empty box, I did find some loose fur in the corners. Orange fur. It could be from _my_ Boots, from when he was using the box back in the alley... right? Boots (the one here, now) jumped right into the box, purring up a storm... only he left little flea droppings in the box along with the fur. And there weren't any before.

But he does need an extra box next to the original one... makes me wish he'd find another one of those mini-worm holes and use it for a litter pan! As you can guess, the landlord "nosed" him out, but it turns out (and you guessed) that he's already been surfing my site, and said that since Boots hasn't caused any damage so far, he can stay. Especially since he has so many fans on the web.

Now if I can just convince _this_ Boots to take it easy on the oak floor, like his double did...

I've already made an appointment for his neutering, but I'm not into declawing! Schrodinger, I'm not...

Author's note:

This story was inspired by M. Christian's digital photo of Tatters, the original "cat in the box." Special thanks to Jayge Carr, whose explanation of quantum physics/the Schrödinger's cat experiment was paraphrased here. The remaining physics material (including the empty/full wine bottle analogy) is based on the work of Hideo Mabuchi, Assistant Professor of Physics at Caltech.

In memory of B. Kliban, qat-lover, and artist.

John W. Randal

BAD ANIMALS

At night Magdalene would take Lizz out to the edge of the jumbled trailer park and they'd sit, drinking warm Pepsi, and watch the luminous ash fall from the pitch black sky. Beautiful flakes of gray would cover their skin with the softness of big dusty moth wings.

The girls were smooth and lovely at that darkly glowing hour. Clean animals, bright eyes hidden by swirls of tangled hair. They'd been with Jenner for a long time—but he rarely talked to them. Jenner spent most of his time in the trailer, smoking pot in his fraying lounge chair, his eyes red, his skin continuing to pale—chasing translucency. But they didn't think about that during ash fall.

Lizz didn't have fingernails, so she always wore a pair of gloves, cuffed in frilly lace. The gloves had originally been white—but steady exposure to the ash had colored them a creamy granite. *The medicine is turning me to stone,* she liked to joke to Magdalene.

Jasper Barlow, old like Jenner, fixed the trailer park's generator when it went down (and consequently smelled forever of grease and hot, ionized metal). He had grown more and more convinced that bad things were crawling on stunted, birth-deformed limbs out in the weeds on the east edge of the trailer park. Jasper, licking an ever-present sheen of mucous from his pasty lips, said that *ugly things* were out there in the waist high grass; that he could see the glitter of their bright eyes, hear the slither of their hunching bodies. The old man's breath would come faster and faster as he preached this assertion to the girls, his twiggy hands trembling in his lap like gnarled insects. *His* fingernails were always caked with black grease. Ten perfect dark crescents.

So Lizz wore the gloves. No need for him to know. Jasper was the only one who understood the lurid internal mysteries of the generator that sat like a fat god in the power shed. And the girls liked the light.

"Can you smell the city tonight?" Lizz asked. Her irises thinned to vivid green rings as her pupils expanded. She looked *through* the shifted woods, out into the wider blackness, and beyond that too... to where the city pumped like a machine, or a heart. There really wasn't anything different to see in those deep distances but Lizz smiled anyway: prelude to storytime.

Magdalene inhaled, an almost endless tidal intake. Her eyes closed. Soft ash floating aimlessly down from the sky covered them both. After a long moment, the older girl parted her maroon lips:

"Engines... the streets smell wet from a passing rain. Tires heating against the asphalt..." And Magdalene smiled too, "Like *snakes."*

Lizz passed the Pepsi to her sister and Magdalene drank the warm fizzing liquid. Holding up her gloved hand, Lizz stared at the flakes of ash collecting on her palm. The ash didn't melt like snow, it just crumbled away into smaller and smaller specks of shimmery dust. An alchemy of disintegration.

"Snakes." Lizz said. She grinned reproachfully at Magdalene.

"A man is smoking—his woman hot with beer. Someone bled, not long ago. Sex smells in an alley." Magdalene shook her head, "Animals."

"Us, maybe," Lizz contradicted. "Not them."

Magdalene doesn't even shake her head. It's an old argument. Old as God. She takes another sip of the Pepsi. Then she checks for any observers, before licking her lips with both tips of her tongue.

Yellow light bulbs are hung on patched electrical cords around the trailer park; they form artificial constellations around the scattered rectangular homes. The ash fall tapers off in about an hour, as it usually does, its glimmering blanket swiftly crumbling and fading away. The girls go back, wending around the trailers. They can hear TV from some, talking or crying from others. A few folks are sitting on rusted cars or on the weathered concrete steps to their homes.

Jimmy Horus has a jar full of lightning bugs that he shows them. The little insects glow with every color of the neon rainbow. It's been a long time since they were just that cold ghostly green-yellow. The girls squat and stare into the jar. Dots and flickers of bug-light shift and swirl in Zodiacal patterns. Lizz shows the boy how to punch holes in the mason jar's lid—so that the lightning bugs can breathe.

"But what do they eat?" Jimmy asks, his smeared little hands splayed around the cool glass. "They don't have mouths. Look, they don't!"

"No," says Magdalene, "They don't have mouths."

"But how they eat then?"

Magdalene sniffs the lid. She purses her lips and closes her eyes for a long sensuous moment. Then she smiles:

"They eat heat. They soak it up with their wings. That's why they hang in big clouds around the tops of the mill chimneys."

Jimmy's eyes are big, glimmers of reflected color flickering in those brown depths. The girls leave him staring into his jar of light.

"I like him."

"He's going to be a man someday. I can smell it in him... like a stew."

"A *stew."*

They giggle back to the trailer.

As I passed along the sear and dusty way to Abolition, MS, I came upon a gray man, kneeling by the side of the razor-straight road. He was rubbing ashes in his hair, great fistfuls of smooth gray, from a pile on the ground. I could not discern what language he wailed in.

Magdalene touches the tips of her pink tongue to her lips and closes the book, and her eyes, for a moment.

Jenner has fallen asleep in his lounge chair—white tee-shirt glimmering in the dark of the living room. He doesn't even snore; he just goes out. One day, Magdalene knows, Jenner's skin is going to be whiter than his shirt... or anything else in the world. So white that it goes away, and the hard-eyed man with it.

In the bedroom that Magdalene shares with Lizz, a tiny TV is playing a static-laced black and white movie called *Frankenstein.* The story makes Magdalene think of all the stuff the labs spilled in their race for a Wet War that never happened—and of Ventus. She can identify with the dreamers who built that bright ring in the sky. The desire to Travel, to go somewhere Else, that she understands so very well.

They had hoped to fold a small piece of space in the dark pupil of Ventus. An elegant origami trick that would also let them move through a slice of time—back before the bio lab mistakes, or maybe further into future, to when things had settled down. That dream had died hard, in treachery and in a golden flash. For a brief moment it *was* as if time had been traversed: midnight shifted to morning-glow. Then the explosion faded and the debris, and exotic radiation, poured down.

Magdalene imagines all the people sleeping in their perfectly faded buildings in the city. Now dreaming long dreams to fizzing satellite TV—the promise of escape forgotten years ago. Perhaps they weren't even afraid anymore. Her graceful hands caress the worn cover of the book.

Milius Harlow: Travels in This Altered Land.

"Perfect buildings," Magdalene breathes. "Bathed in perfect light."

"I want to go there... to sleep there, breathe there. In the heat and light."

Magdalene flushes, opening her eyes and fussing in her bed. She didn't know Lizz was still awake. "Go to sleep."

"One of the Umbral boys has this big red rusty truck that he drives into the city," Lizz whispers. "He'd take me. His eyes are sweet."

Magdalene stares hard at her sister, vaguely illuminated by the TV's ghostly flicker. Their room is small, mostly filled with tattered books they find in the dumps, or that others have given them. Jenner has even tossed the girls a few battered paperbacks, a textbook or two, and on rare occasions, a hardback novel. These stand as tokens of his better moods.

"Don't you talk that way, Lizz," Magdalene says, her low words hissing slightly. *"Don't be STUPID."*

Lizz says nothing. Magdalene's hands are tight on her book.

The younger girl turns away from her sister and snuggles back into her worn covers. "He likes me."

"Go to sleep," Magdalene says.

Everything is quiet. Her fingers relax on the Harlow book. Jenner gave her this one. It is Magdalene's favorite. Jenner's eyes had almost been apologetic when he'd flopped the book onto Magdalene's bed that autumn. The girl's mother (a slim, feverish woman who spoke often of God's love but who never went outside during daylight) had just died. The woman had been pregnant when she'd met Jenner. For some reason Magdalene could not fathom, the grim-faced man had stayed with Lizz and Magdalene's mother.

Jenner never talked about it.

Magdalene had been born first, the swelling in her mother's belly lessening but not fading. Three months later, Lizz was born.

Magdalene thinks that Jenner never forgave their mother for giving birth to Bad Animals, instead of real people. But he never told. At least he didn't do that. Everyone knew what sometimes happened to Bad Animals.

She remembers the little antlered boy that she and Lizz had found out in the gloomy, moss-hung woods

one summer. His small body was so smooth and still, arms out-flung, legs crooked in a motionless run. His narrow chest feathered with hunting arrows. It looked almost posed, artistic... lovely in a horribly quiet way. Silent and empty, surrounded by reverent greenery, the boy called to mind a martyred saint. Perfect now in death.

Magdalene blinks, looking over at the sleeping shape of her sister.

"We're not Bad Animals," Lizz murmurs, before slipping into dreams.

Magdalene says nothing. She opens Harlow's book again, and strains to read in the TV's glow:

She is so small that I carry her out to the dusky beach. And shrinking still. We walk. She is warm, in the crook of my arm. Oh baby. That is what I call her. And that is what she is. Now.

We're all God's creatures.

Milius Harlow had roamed the country, documenting the new world—even as one of the emergent viruses turned his brain into a violet jewel. That gem was now in the Smithsonian, glittering silently behind glass.

But the man's books lived on. *Travels* was his most famous work.

So much had changed in the world, and things were *still* changing. The wreckage of the Ventus Gateway still glowed in orbit, raining strange energies onto the earth below. It was a ring of glittery rubble that you could sometimes see in the night sky. The artistry that the Wet Labs had unleashed also roamed the streets and forests of the new world—as well as far more intimate cellular landscapes.

Harlow had fallen in love as he traveled, documenting the changes (and his own gradual ossification). Her name had been Calliope—a Bad Animal.

Magdalene sits in a tire swing, reading his book:

A cool drink of water, as she kisses me. Her tongue hot and slippery-wet between my lips. And I keep thinking: A cool drink of water. Wet.

Love and doomed romance shimmer in Magdalene's mind. The cold grace of predestined tragedy. She sighs. Milius and Calliope. Above her, white puff clouds roll in deep azure. The trailer park chatters with activity: kids laughing, battered radios playing tunes. The arm-thick rope that connects the tire swing to the tree under which she hangs creaks slightly, as Magdalene sways in the loop of black rubber. The sunlight is warm on the back of her slender neck.

The whistle of one of the nearby mills unintentionally announces the breathless arrival of Lizz. Her cornsilk hair swirls around her flushed face, vivid eyes aglitter. "Thomas Umbral and some of the other boys have a bunch of pop pods. They're going to light them off over by Wilson's. Come on, Mag!" Her gloved hand stretches out excitedly.

Magdalene sighs and closes the Harlow book. The mill whistle wails brightly, scaring flashy pin-wheel birds from the tree-tops. The older girl hops out of the tire swing and takes her sister's hand. Lizz leads Magdalene to the weedy lot that lies empty behind Wilson's trailer. A bunch of kids are there, including Thomas Umbral, who smiles openly at Lizz, raising a deeper flush on the girl's cheeks.

Jimmy Horus waves to the sisters. He is still clutching his jar of light. The glow of the bugs is a washed-out rainbow during the day, needing night to fully shine.

"Hey! Hi, Lizz and Magdalene!" the little boy calls. Magdalene smiles at him.

The kids are all wearing tired-looking clothes: faded jeans, old tops washed many times, sneakers sometimes wrapped with tape or decorated with colored markers. Thomas Umbral and his tall brothers favor fairly clean shades of deep blue, and subsequently stand out in the jumble of paled fabrics. Sissy Strath sits on a crate, looking tired and hot. Some of the other girls are giggling and drifting here and there, eyeing the boys. Not Sissy. Her two-year-old, Malcolm, tugs insistently at her sleeve and the worn girl meets Magdalene's eyes—with a look that speaks volumes about the sad alleys of life.

"They have lots," Lizz says, releasing Magdalene's hand and pointing her gloved finger.

A jumbled pile of rocket-shaped plant pods, each about five inches long, sits on the upturned lid of a plastic garbage can. Despite herself, Magdalene is impressed; the boys must've gone pretty far into the shifted woods to collect that many pods. Some of the younger kids still look a bit scared—as they try to strut before the giggling girls.

The whistle ends its screamed declaration. Scattered like armored mushrooms all across the state, mills prepare to pump medicinal ash into the waiting sky. They say that the ash suppresses chimeric mutations. Sober-faced biologists are constantly tinkering with the proportions and composition of the silvery gray substance. The recipe for the ash seems to mutate as rapidly as the creatures it is intended to quell.

Magdalene stares at the lush edge of the shifted woods. *Does it keep you calm?* she wonders. *Or are we the ones being treated?*

The thick elaborate greenery doesn't answer her thoughts, though those vivid trees and whispering swirls of foliage seem to return Magdalene's gaze. A watchful breeze stirs the shifted forest that surrounds the trailer park.

Bad Animals are in here, the sound seems to vaguely hiss.

Magdalene shivers in the day's heat. Staring at the artfully bizarre forest, she shakes her head at the fact that the boys would go in there just for pop pods. The news continually warns about the extremities of life found in places like the woods. Along with everyone else, Magdalene had watched the footage of the vast, internally illuminated air fish, birthed from that forest in Pennsylvania. She'd seen videos of the blood roses forming and re-forming just under the still, algae-streaked surface of a swamp in the Everglades, watched firefighters pumping great streams of ash at thousands of static worms, as the glimmering creatures ate the metal from power lines in Houston.

Far more haunting, were the stories people in the trailer park talked about at night: things they'd seen hovering at the edge of the forest... or heard from within. Shapes in the deep green, pale limbs glimpsed briefly among glassy-black, elaborately thorned tree trunks. The oddly-modulated sounds—sounds that might have been voices, whispering from the emerald gloom.

Magdalene shivers again and goes over to sit with Sissy, while Lizz floats around Thomas Umbral like a slow motion butterfly.

"Hi Sissy," Magdalene says. "How have you been?"

The girl smiles at Magdalene and sighs. "Um, okay. How 'bout you, Mag? It's nice out today, isn't it? I mean," she inhales, looking up at the wide deep sky, "I mean it's so *open.* You know?"

Magdalene nods. Both of them watch little Malcolm scamper around with the older kids. Thomas Umbral bends and carefully plays the small flame from a plastic lighter over the base of one of the pop pods. The violet colored tube is propped up on some rocks and faces skyward. As the fire licks smoothly around the pop pod's base, the color brightens and the pod swells. Thomas steps back grinning. Lizz's eyes shine as she watches him.

A sudden boom shocks the lot. Everyone shouts and laughs. The pop pod jets up into the vivid air on a thin line of smoky white. From high in the sky comes a sharp crack, as the pod bursts.

"That's as high as it goes..." Sissy Strath murmurs, her face turned to the clouds. The boys fire another pod. Sissy's eyes are shimmery, like the surface of a lake at dusk. The forest sighs and groans.

"Pop pods, eh?" Mr. Lucien's boarder says.

The tall man strolls into the vacant lot, craning back his head to watch the latest pod jet into the sky. Fat old Grant Lucien rents part of his trailer to travelers. The tall man is the latest to pass through, on his slow way to parts unknown. He is a kind looking gentleman, Magdalene thinks. His name is Jonas. She blushes as he lowers his gaze from the sky and smiles at her. Another pop pod streaks into the air.

"Sometimes I feel trapped..." Sissy Strath breathes, her words barely audible.

Magdalene doesn't hear her.

The latest pod explodes, deep in the sky. And the children cheer.

Jonas stays, watching the pop pods rocketing into the heavens, talking with the kids... and looking, from time-to-time, at Magdalene. That kind smile flickers at the dark-haired girl again and again.

Thomas Umbral laughs and says something Lizz, who sticks her tongue out at him.

They set-off pop pods all afternoon, until the sky sinks its colors into the earth and the light begins to deepen toward twilight. The last one goes up with a barely-visible arc of smoke—but it explodes, far above them, in a cloud of glittery sparks.

"Did you see *that* one, Magdalene?" Jimmy Horus exclaims, running excitedly toward her as fast as his stubby legs can carry him. Magdalene smiles—then jerks to her feet as the boy stumbles. Jimmy's jar of light slips from his sweaty grasp and shatters on the ground. The boy gasps and stops still, staring down at his sneakered feet... where glass and neon fireflies glimmer and flash. He starts to cry.

Magdalene rushes to the child and comforts him. Specks of flickering light drift up around them both, like tiny neon souls floating toward heaven, as the lightning bugs flutter away. "It's okay, Jimmy," Magdalene says, "You can always catch more—I'll help you."

"I know..." the boy says, "But one... died. Look." Jimmy sniffs his runny nose. "I killed one." His face is twisted and sad, eyes wet. Magdalene looks down. There, on a shard of heart-shaped glass, is a small smear of incandescent blue... and a tiny smashed body.

"It's okay, son," Mr. Lucien's boarder—Jonas—says. He pats Jimmy on the head. "It's just a bug." The tall man looks into Magdalene's eyes and smiles.

Over by the edge of the lot, Lizz and Thomas Umbral are talking... and smiling quite a bit, as well. The rest of the kids pay little attention to Jimmy's accident. Sissy has already gone home with Malcolm.

"But why'd it have to *die?"* Jimmy Horus sniffles, looking down at the fading smear of color.

Magdalene stares at Lizz and Thomas, worry tightening her lips. She keeps hold of Jimmy's hand, to prevent him from investigating the broken glass any closer. Thomas Umbral is showing Lizz his rusty red truck, which is parked near the empty lot. Lizz laughs at something the boy whispers.

"All things die eventually," Jonas says.

Ash falls in dreamy swirls from the evening sky, like great glimmering flakes of soft gray snow.

September on the calendar. Silence on the walls. Steeping the room in impending stillness. And quiet. And it's September, and a tangle of falling days.

Waves are pulling back from the wet sand. Revealing.

Magdalene shuts the book with a sigh. An unopened can of Pepsi sits by her side. Lizz is flushed and out of breath when she finally rushes up and plops down beside her sister.

"You're late," Magdalene says.

"I was with—"

"—Thomas," Magdalene finishes, sniffing disdainfully. Trickles of disintegrating ash whisper down the older girl's pale face. Grains of ever-shrinking gray sand.

"Don't be jealous, Mag," Lizz says. "You could have boyfriends too."

"He's not your boyfriend."

Lizz's face flushes. She gestures with her delicate, gloved hands. "We have fun together. His eyes are sweet for me—I see it in him. You can smell, Mag, but I can *see.* And I see *that* in Thomas."

"You see what you want to," Magdalene replies. "And what you want makes you stupid and careless."

Lizz turns to her older sister, her eyes wide. She points a gray finger at Magdalene: "We just *sit* here, in the dark, with Jenner. Hiding. *Pretending.* Jenner pretends that he doesn't have the Fade virus... and when he can't pretend that, he pretends he doesn't care. We pretend that we're real *people."* With a gust of breath, Lizz gestures to the ashy trailer park.

"For God's sake, Magdalene—*the only way you can be real is to stop pretending.* We have hearts, we have souls. We're true, we're *alive,* we're—"

"Bad Animals," Magdalene says. Lizz stops. Magdalene looks at her sister, as fluttering flakes drift down upon them. "We're Bad Animals, Lizz. We're part of the changes in this world." Putting her book aside, Magdalene reaches out and takes her sister's hands in hers. "A lot of real *people* don't just dislike the world's changes—they *hate* them. *And we're part of those changes.* So they hate *us,* Lizz."

"No," the younger girl replies. "No... not all of them. Not even most of them."

"We hide, like there is something wrong with us, something real people should be afraid of—like the shifted forest. We could live in the city, in the light and heat and *life* that fills that place. I want to *see* that. I want to live like a real person. *Because that's what I am.* And Thomas knows that."

Magdalene stares intently at her sister. "Don't do something stupid, Lizz. *Please."*

And the ash falls.

Something in the full and silent night wakes her.

Lizz's bed is empty.

With a choked gasp, Magdalene sits up. She tosses aside her covers and pads over to sister's rumpled bed. Yes. Empty. Magdalene's face twists and she looks around the room helplessly. She can't wake Jenner and tell him. He barely suffers them now—what if he knew that Lizz was... was *risking* herself like this? What if he finally kicked them out of the trailer? What if he *told?*

The visions swirl hungrily in Magdalene's racing mind. God. She remembers Thomas Umbral smiling, joking, and showing Lizz his crimson truck.

"You stupid, *stupid—"* her mind says *Bad Animal,* but her lips speak the word, "—girl! You stupid little girl..."

Blinking bright and sudden tears, Magdalene hurries into her clothes. Her hands are shaking. Barely breathing in the darkened bedroom, the tall girl unlatches their window and awkwardly climbs out of the trailer. *Maybe they haven't left yet.*

The night seems immensely wide and deep, a vast breeze-laden sea of obsidian air that shifts and murmurs over the slumbering trailer park. Shadows make the familiar shapes and forms of their home seem strange and darkly *different.*

Magdalene runs swiftly, her feet making no sound in the night grass. Thomas Umbral's rusted pick-up truck is gone from it's spot by the vacant lot. Magdalene utters a moan of despair. She runs out to the slim dark road that bends past the trailer park and heads into the city. That blank gray-black expanse of asphalt is utterly quiet and empty. Thick, moss-hung trees loom overhead, creating a whispering tunnel.

You can't go into the city like a real person, Magdalene pleads to her missing sister. *We can't just act like real people. Don't you think I'd like to? Don't you think I'd like to see the world and not just hide here like an... an animal?*

"Don't you think I want to be real, too?" Magdalene says to the blank road. Her face twists as tears fall from her eyes. She clenches her hands at her sides. "You selfish *bitch!"* she hisses, crying.

Cones of pale light, like the glow cast from the irises of some genetically-shifted forest creature, sweep out of the blackness behind her and slide over the road, illuminating Magdalene. With a little gasp, she turns, swiping at her watery eyes. The car slows as it pulls up beside her. Its darkly burnished metal shines like the shell of an insect.

Jonas rolls down his window and leans out. Smiling.

"Hey, hi there, Magdalene. You're up late, young lady."

Magdalene sniffs, trying to hide her tears. All she smells is that salty water.

"I saw Lizz and Thomas going into the city earlier," Jonas says. "I'm heading that way, myself—do you need a ride?"

Magdalene stares into his kind eyes. The night whispers around her.

The cop's face is a weathered house that has been boarded-up and shut away. Maybe he doesn't remember where he put all that used to live there. He silently leads them under the bright idiot flicker of the neon sign: CARTHAGE MOTOR LODGE. Over and over the words flash—fat eels of light, crusted with dead bugs. Other police are there, other flashing lights. The leather of the cop's gun belt creaks as he leads them up the stairs. His jacket smells of coffee and old pain.

The plain door to room 1745 hangs half open. A lot of police, and others, have been in there.

Jenner stops for a second and looks at her, before he goes in. He is as pale as a ghost, his eyes rimmed in watery red. The expression on his fading face is that of a confused boy who wants to run away. The cop waits in reflexive, almost mechanical, sympathy. It seems as if Jenner has something to say, but whatever it is has been so crushed-down, so faded away, that it can no longer be expressed. After a long, yearning moment, Jenner turns and lets the shabby little room draw him in.

She follows behind him.

The main thing is easily seen. The motel room contains very little and this, on the worn-looking bed, looms... overwhelming the space.

Lizz weeps, her tears like jeweled tracks beneath eyes that are almost all pupil now. Seeing everything.

"Child..." Jenner croaks, his voice ragged and fluttering away at the edges.

Magdalene lies on the bed, silent and still. Her skin is so utterly white, so pure, that it seems to glow. Except for the dusky band of violet bruises around her slender throat. But that only accentuates her quiet beauty. It's almost unreal... like snow in winter, before dawn and the touch of human hands.

She is perfect, a Madonna, dark hair haloed around her lovely face, unsullied by her cheap surroundings. Instead, her grave and silent purity makes the room around her seem fragile and ephemeral. Magdalene is the lasting element in this scene... everything else could just crumble and blow away. Like ash.

The cop is talking, his voice soft as sand: "At least now we have a good description of him. There have been others like this."

Others? Lizz wonders, slowly approaching the pristine stillness of her sister. *How could any other be this perfect, this beautiful? This still...*

Thomas Umbral stands out in the hallway, crying. He drove Lizz and Jenner here, when the cop called. After her night in the city, Lizz had come back. But Magdalene hadn't been there. Magdalene was gone.

Lizz stares at her sister. She stares until her tears blur the scene... until Magdalene is a perfect smear of pale color, in a sea of ash-gray.

Lizz runs her glove over the Milius Harlow book, opened to a passage that Magdalene had been reading. Most of Lizz's stuff is packed; it makes a small bundle. The blond girl slowly reads the passage. Then she sighs and gently touches the page.

She thought her tears had been all cried-out, but two more fall with quiet little pats upon the book. Lizz sniffs and runs the back of her hand across her eyes. Then she turns and leaves the silent room. The trailer is empty. Jenner faded completely one month ago. For a moment, a shadow persisted, then that too evaporated.

Lizz goes outside, locking the door behind her. She puts the key in the mailbox. Her battered Jeep sits in the grass, nearby. Thomas has come to say goodbye. He said he wouldn't, he'd promised her he wouldn't, actually. But here he is anyway. Lizz finds that she isn't mad at him for coming.

"Why can't you *stay?"* he asks her.

Lizz just smiles and softly kisses him. She *has* to go. They both know why. She thinks of Harlow, bumbling around the world, falling in love and writing endlessly about changes... while his brain gradually turned into a gem.

Sometimes what you want blinds you to what you need, or what you have. Life is bigger and wilder than that.

Lizz gets in her Jeep, starts the engine. With a last look at Thomas, she puts the machine in gear and pulls out of the trailer park. Out on the road, she turns right, away from the city—out toward the wide wild changes.

Holding the steering wheel with one hand, Lizz uses her teeth to pull the glove from her left hand. Then she switches her grip and removes the other glove. "Bad Animals," Lizz murmurs, as she flexes her bare hands on the steering wheel.

Changing sunlight glows upon a passage in an opened book, in an empty room:

Walking, as the heat comes up out of the ground, like a blush from skin. Like a fever. And the day is stretching terminally out, all around me. September. On the road to Abolition. The ash man behind me. Many behind me. Tangled.

Waiting.

Terry Dowling

THE LAGAN FISHERS

In the first week of September, a lagan bloom appeared in the south meadow below Sam Cadrey's kitchen window, and that was the day it felt real at last.

Something glinting in the morning sunlight caught his eye as he stood making coffee—dislodged hubcap, plastic drum lid, discarded garbage bag, he couldn't be sure—something close to the road but definitely on his property. When he hurried down to see what it was, there was no mistaking the glossy quatrefoil of tartarine pushing up through the lucerne like an old bore cover made of fused glass. He kicked at the shell of opalescent stuff, beat on it a few times, then stood wondering how much his life would change.

Sam knew his rights. They couldn't take his farm back, he was sure of that. When that small container of mioflarin—MF—illegally buried in the Pyrenees had leaked in 2029, poisoning so much of Europe, then the rest of the world, he'd become that rare and wondrous thing, a true global hero: one of the twenty-two volunteers sent in to cap it, one of the five who had survived Site Zero and made it out again. Sam had freehold in perpetuity, and the World Court in Geneva had decreed that lagan blooms were land-title pure and simple. Sure, there were local magistrates, local ordinances and local prejudices to reckon with, but the Quarantine was officially over, the last of the embargoes lifted—both made a laughing stock by the sheer extent of the bloom outbreaks and their consistently benign nature. A disfigured, forty-nine-year-old MF veteran and widower on a UN life pension had recourse to legal aid as well. Looking down at the four-lobed curving hump of the bloom, Sam knew he was king of all that he surveyed and that, in all probability, his kingdom would be an alien domain for the next year or so.

Within fourteen minutes, orbiting spysats had logged it. Within forty, Mayor Catherine was in her living room with their local Alien Influences Officer, Ross Jimmins, to log the official registration, and a dozen lagan fishers were at the end of his drive waiting to bid for trawling rights. Protection agents and insurance reps were at his door too, offering assistance against the usual: everything from highly organized looters to salting by disgruntled neighbors. But Sam was a UN vet. Within the hour, there were two AIO lagan custodians at his front gate wearing blue arm-bands, and the usually strident hucksters pacing up and down the gravel drive had become unusually courteous.

"How soon before the hedges form?" Sam asked Mayor Catherine, sounding both cautious and eager, still not sure about the whole thing. Catherine was the closest thing to a rocket scientist Tilby had, a handsome, middle-aged woman with steel-grey hair, looking the perfect, latter-day *nasa*-chik in her navy-blue jumpsuit. The NASA look. The imprimatur of discipline and professional responsibility. Who would have thought?

"It's still three to four days," she said, taking the AIO notepad from Jimmins and adding her verification code. "Latest count, fourteen per cent of blooms don't hold. Remember that, Sam. They sink back."

"That's not many though," Ross Jimmins said, reassuring him, wishing Sam well with every puff on his lagan-dross day-pipe. The pipe was carved from lagan horn, a length of hollowed lattice from a "living" hedge. As well as the wonderful fragrance the slow-combusting dross gave off, somewhere between gardenia and the finest aromatic tobaccos of the previous four centuries, there was a welter of other positive side-effects, and the molecularly atrophying horn itself scattered its own immune-enhancing dusting of euphorines on the warm morning air.

"It is like some intelligence is behind it," Sam said, looking out through the big view window, and knew how inane it sounded coming from him, the Tilby Tiger, the great skeptic.

Catherine gave a wry smile. "It's good to have you back in the world. We lost you there for a while."

"At least Jeanie didn't see me like this." Sam had resolved he wouldn't say it, but there it was.

The Mayor looked off at the fields and hills, out to where a tiny orange bus was bringing more science students from the local high school to do a real-time, hands-on site study of early bloom effect. "Jeanie didn't and it's not what I meant, Sam." She changed her tone. "So, what are you going to do about it? Lease it out?"

Sam was grateful. "You think I should? Let them wall it off, rig up processing gantries? Put storage modules down there?" *Stop me seeing it,* he didn't add.

"Best way. Nothing is lost but spindrift through the flumes. You get the hedges; they get the lagan. There's no poaching and none of the hassles."

"You representing anybody?" Sam asked. He'd always been a wary and even harsh critic where the lagan was concerned. It had always been someone else's experience, the reality of others, thus easy to comment on. This had changed him—what was the quaint old *fin-de-siècle* saying?—had made it "up close and personal."

"I had a dozen phone calls before I left the office, but no. Hope you believe it, Sam."

"Ross?"

"Eight calls. Nope."

Sam needed to believe them. They were his friends. They'd been with him when Jeanie died. He needed to brave it out. "Cat, I want to see it. I've gone revisionist *pro tem,* okay? If it's alien invasion, let's have it. I *want* hedges to form. I want them stretching along the road all the way to town. People should be able to poach stuff. Break bits off."

Cat answered right on cue. This was an area of major personal concern. "A lot of wildcat lagan owners agree with you. I've always said it. Keep the cartels out."

"I've got control, right?"

She gave a little frown. "Your property, Sam."

"What about outside options?"

"Some control. It's an official thing. What's on your mind?"

"I want it all hands-on. No remotes. None of those little science doovers. No aerostats."

"That's tricky, Sam," she said. "It's standard nowadays. Every general access unit means a thousand global onlines and probably a thousand research facilities. A fortune from sponsors to you. Even if you could close 'em out, you'd just get thousands more people coming in. You don't want that."

"Then only for part of the day. Only in the afternoon. Say, 1300 till sundown. None at night. Can we do that?"

"We can try," Jimmins said and keyed in the request, waited less than a minute, nodded. "You've got it for now, flagged for renegotiation later. Bless your MF, Sam. You'll get rogues slipping in, but we'll put up a burn field. Fry 'em in the sky."

Cat nodded, confirming how easy it was going to be. "They'll stop when they lose a few. So, what will you do?"

Talking the talk was easy, Sam found. "I'll fish it myself. See what comes up."

"Great idea. Can we help?"

It all happened quickly once the Mayor and Jimmins left. The waiting fishers at the gate drove off the moment they learned Sam was going to wildcat it himself, all but one, the craggy-looking, grey-haired older man perched on the bonnet of his truck. When Sam went down to quiz him on why he stayed, he saw that it was Howard Dombey, the proprietor of the Lifeways produce market on the far side of Tilby. He was a part-time lagan fisher, and people said he did some lagan brokering as well.

"It's Howard Dombey, isn't it?" Sam said.

"Right on, Mr. Cadrey. Like to help if you're a mind." His idioms were straight from Life Studies Online, all very PC, optimally relaxing, maximally community building.

Sam found himself matching them. "Doing it myself. And it's Sam."

"Like to help just the same, Sam. Don't figure profit margins too well anymore. Just like working with it. Seeing it come to."

"Why?"

Howard Dombey shrugged, going with the role beautifully. "Just do. Watching the spin. Seeing it all flicky-flashy with lagan, pretty as the day. Give me five per cent and I'll do the scut work. Give me ten and I'll fence the bounty you clear as well. Save you the grief."

"There'll be slow days, Howard."

"Counting on it. At my age, they're the ones I like."

They made quite a team—a vet skeptic with a face ruined by MF, a town mayor looking like a shuttle-butt spaceways groupie from the nineties, a pipe-smoking AIO officer, and a small-time entrepreneur who did the culture-speak of mid-twentieth rural USA.

They started early each morning and left off around 1300, with Howard often as not staying on at the sorting trays till sunset when the last of the afternoon's tek and spec groups had gone—whichever AIO officials were rostered for that day's site check.

It was funny how much of an unspoken routine it all was. By the time Sam had disengaged the perimeter sensors and AIO alarms around 0700, the four of them were there, ready to set off in pairs, carefully locating the newbies and keying spot and spec codes into notepads for their own constantly updating operations program and the AIO global master.

It was on a spell during one of these start-up checks, after Sam had pointed to a perfect cloudform lagan building on one of the hedges, that Howard told him about the name.

"You know what lagan originally was?"

Sam just stared; it seemed such an odd question. "I thought it was named after the river in that old Irish song. You know, *My Lagan Love.* They're always playing it."

"Most people think that. No. It's from the language of shipwreck. Flotsam, jetsam and lagan. Flotsam is wreckage that floats when a ship goes down. Jetsam is what's thrown overboard to lighten her. Jetsam when it's jettisoned, see. If it floats, it's flotsam. If it sinks, it's lagan. A lot of valuable stuff was marked with buoys so they could retrieve it later. There were salvage wars over it. Deliberate wrecking, especially on the coast of Cornwall and around the Scillies. Lights set during storms to lure ships onto rocks. Lamps tied to the horns of cows—'horn beacons' they called 'em. Whole families involved. Whole communities."

"So why that name now? Lagan?"

"Some scientist came up with it. These are floats from somewhere else, aren't they? Buoys poking through. Lines leading down to stuff."

"I've never heard this."

Howard looked at him as if to say: *You've been out of it for quite a while.*

"Lots of folks haven't. But it's true. We get whatever comes up from the 'seabed.' "

"But—"

"Okay, don't say it! There's no line. No seabed. It's how the whole thing goes—first the shelltop like yours last week, then the bounty is hauled up."

"But it's not *down* is it, Howard? And it isn't *hauled* up. Words hide it. Tidy it up too much."

"Okay, but they help us live with it."

"And hide it. How's the weather? How's the lagan? Geologists and seismologists doing their tests all the time, finding nothing. No pressure variables under the caps. None of the expected physics. It's all so PC."

"See my point, Sam. The blooms link to somewhere else, somewhere out of sight, to something worth waiting for. Stuff comes up; you get the hedges with bits of lagan in them like fish in a net. At the very least, you get chunks of molybdenum and diamond-S and those funny little spindles of—what're those new words?—crowfenter and harleybine? Now and then there's the gold and silver."

"But no Nobel Prizes yet."

"What? Oh, right. No, no Nobel Prizes in those hedges so far. No real answers."

"See, there's another word. Hedges."

"They follow roads and field lines, Sam. That's what hedges do. Hedges is what they are."

"Hides it, Howie."

"Hasn't stopped you."

Which was too close to the truth and too soon in their friendship right then, so they both gladly changed the subject. It was made easier by Mayor Catherine dumping her sample bag on the sorting table.

"New tally," she said. "Eighty-two viable. Sixteen fallow."

Howard keyed the totals into his notepad. "Sounds right. Everyone gets twenty percent that are empty."

"Looted?" Sam asked.

"Don't see how. Just empty. Nothing when the hedges form. Air pockets."

Sam kept at it. "Looted elsewhere?"

Howard watched him for a few moments. "Hadn't thought of that. Looted on the other side. You better watch 'im, Cat. Sounds like we got ourselves a new rocket scientist."

Howard knew well enough to take up a sample bag then and set off for the hedges.

By the end of the fifth week, their four major branchings had become seven, and what started as an ordinary watchtower lofting on one of them swelled, brachiated and buttressed first into a classic "salisbury point," then—over another twenty days—a full-blown "chartres crown," finally a true "notre dame." It meant endless media fly-bys, countless tek visits, even more busloads of tourists and school groups, but so few blooms became cathedral that Sam couldn't blame them. It was the appropriate response. He would have been worried if there hadn't been the extra attention, though it made it harder to live with what his world was becoming. Having the lagan was one thing; now it was becoming too strikingly alien.

Again it was genial, friendly Howard who triggered the next outburst, dumping his bag on the sorting table, then coming over to stand with his newfound friend to admire the towering structure.

"How about it, Sam? A cathedral. Makes you believe in the mirroring, don't it?"

"What's that, Howie?" The word mirror often caught him like that. The Tilby Tiger lived in a house without mirrors. (But full of reflections, he sometimes quipped on better days, making the tired old joke.)

"The online spiel. That it's mimicry. Skeuomorphism. The lagan sees clouds; it tries to make clouds. Sees trees and roads, does its best to give trees and roads."

"You believe that?"

Howard shrugged. "Makes sense. Has a certain appeal. This stuff pushes through, looks around, imitates what it sees."

"Sees! Sees! Sees! Where the hell has my bloom *seen* a cathedral, Howard, tell me that!"

Again Howard shrugged. "Dunno. It goes into the sky; it blows in the air; it feels the sun and gets in among the flowers. Maybe ancient cathedrals were just imitations of high places too. Maybe other lagan blooms have seen cathedrals and pass on the knowledge. Anyway, Sam, I figure why resist what's as natural as what nature's already doin'. Why resist it? Why do you?"

Because, Sam wanted to say. Just because. Then, needing reasons, needing reason, gave himself: There's my face, there's the other MF impairment, my infertility, there's Jeanie lost (not MF-related, no, but more old sayings covered it: "collateral damage," "friendly fire"). This is too new, too fast, too change-everything insistent. For someone keeping someone lost as alive as possible in what had *been,* simply *been* for them—views, routines, sugars in coffee, favorite songs, the spending of days, the very form and nature of days—how dare this brutal new lagan change it so. As Jeanie-bright, as Jeanie-fresh as Sam tried to make it, the lagan more than anything was always saying *that* time has gone. Jeanie is gone. Let them go.

Sam found himself trying so hard. Jeanie would have loved the lagan, arranged picnics, invited friends. Jeanie would have liked Howard and the others getting together, liked the little-kid thrill of them bringing in the bounty—grown-ups acting like kids acting like grown-ups.

But try as he might, Sam always found himself on both sides of it, and his words kept coming out a bit crazy. He couldn't help himself.

"Look at what's happened. First the MF outbreak in '29, then the lagan five years later."

"They're not related," Howard said. "It's not cause and effect."

"Maybe. Experts in nineteenth century London didn't see the connection between smog and tuberculosis either."

"Between what and what?"

Sam was careful not to smile. For all his smarts, Howard was an aging child of the times, a true citizen of the age, lots of compartmentalized knowledge, but no true overview. He knew all about shipwrecks and 1930s Hudson locomotives and Napoleon Bonaparte and vintage CD-ROM games, but lacked the larger cultural horizon for such things. For him the old term PC still meant "Politically Correct" not "Pre-Copernican," though who remembered Copernicus these days, or Giordano Bruno, or William Tyndale, or the Library at Alexandria or, well, the economic conditions that had led to horn beacons and shipwrecking and the original lagan, all the other things that were lost? Things eroded, worn smooth and featureless by too much time.

It sobered him having Howard to measure himself by. It brought him back, made him remember to be smarter. Kinder. Set him in the present as much as anything could.

"But Howie, what if it's real lagan? In the shipwreck sense?"

"What, marked with a buoy?"

"Or sent up *as* a buoy."

"What! Why do you say that?"

"I have no idea. Just should be said, I guess."

At 0140 on 15th October, Sam woke and lay there in the dark, listening to the wind stir in the dream hedges. He was surprised that he could sleep at all, that he didn't wake more often. It was almost as if the soughing and other hedge sounds were deliberately there to lull the lagan-blessed. Like the dross, the spindrift, the honey-balm, it too was benign. The hedges breathing, thriving, being whatever they were.

Even as he drowsed, settled back towards sleep, that slipping, dimming thought made Sam rouse himself, leave his bed and go out onto the verandah. Of course it was deliberate. Look at how everyone accepted the phenomenon now, built it into their lives.

Sam regarded the fields picked out by the half-phase spring moon. He smelled the honey-balm wind that blew up from the hedgerows and made himself listen to the "croisie," not just hear it—that mysterious, oscillating tone produced by nearly all lagan blooms, a barely-there, modulating drone set with what one moment sounded for all the world like someone shaking an old spray can, the next jingling bangles together on a waving arm. Never enough to annoy or intrude. Oh no. Not the croisie. Lulling. A welcome and welcoming thing. Always better than words made it seem. Something that would be missed like birdsong and insect chorus when the bloom ended and the hedges were left to dry out and rattle and fall to slow dust on the ordinary wind.

Sam left the verandah and walked down to the road. The hedges stretched away like screens of coral in the moonlight or, better yet, like frames, nets and trellises of moonlight, all ashimmer—all "flicky-flashy" as Howard would say—yes, like blanched coral or weathered bone robbed of their day colors but releasing a flickering, deep, inner light, an almost-glow. Better still—fretted cloudforms, heat-locked, night-locked, calcined, turned to salt like Lot's wife, turned to stone by the face of this world meeting the Gorgon-stare of some other.

The croisie murmured. The honey-balm blew. Spindrift lofted and feather-danced in the bright dark. The air

smelled wonderful.

What a wondrous thing, he thought. What a special time. If only Jeanie were here to see it. The different world. The dream-hedges and lagan. The spindrift dancing along the road and across the fields. His own MF legacies too, though she wouldn't have cared.

There are enough children in the world, she would've said. Who needs more than six in ten to be fertile anyway? The world is the birthright, not people. It doesn't need more people. Hasn't for more than a century. Can't have too many people or people stop caring for each other. Only common sense.

She would never have mentioned his face—or perhaps only to quip: "My Tiger. You were always too handsome anyway."

She would have made it—easier.

Sam watched the ghostly palisades in their warps and woofs, their herringbones and revetments, found himself counting visible towerheads till he reached the riot of the notre dame. Then he shut his eyes and listened to the ever-shifting, ever-the-same voice of the croisie and tried to find, beyond it, the rush of the old night wind in the real-trees. He could, he was sure he could, anchoring himself in the other, larger, older world by it.

But he wouldn't let it take his thoughts from Jeanie. No. He kept her there in the questing—most vividly by adding to the list of things he would have said to her, imagining what she might have said to him. Like how you did start to count your life more and more as doors closed to you, that was a Jeanie line. How it took the MF pandemic damaging much of the genetic viability first of Europe, then Africa and Asia, on and on, to close some important doors for everyone, to unite the world, make them finally destroy the old weapons. The destroyable ones.

Jeanie would have put her spin on it. Her spindrift.

Sam grinned at the night. More language from the sea. More shipwreck talk. Spindrift blew along the road, the skeins and eddies of spores and hedge-dust, the "moonsilk," the "flit," the "dross"—there were so many names—but, whatever it was, all safely moribund, *sufficiently* chemically inert, they said, though still finely, subtly psychoactive just by being there. Had to be. Part of the night. This night. His.

Theirs. Jeanie keenly there. His lagan love. Still.

Sam breathed in the bounty, filled his lungs with all the changed nature. Howard was right. Blooms and hedges. Lagan. Watchtowers, thunderheads, cathedrals and hutches. So much better than crystalline molecular skeuomorphs with key attributes of long-chain polymer-calcinite hybrids or whatever they were touting in the net journals.

Then the cathedral sighed, the only word for it. A single falling note swelled against the croisie, a distinct sad trailing-away sound that left the alien lagan-tone, the honey-balm and the night-wind beyond like a strange silence when it had gone.

From the cathedral?

Sam accepted that it was, knowing that almost all the logged lagan anomalies were around the big cloudform and cathedral loftings. The hutches and nestings, the basements and even stranger sub-basements were always silent, but the loftings sometimes belled and breathed and sounded like this, like great whales of strangeness making their song.

The mikes would have tracked it. Nearby stats had to be homing in, risking burn. Tomorrow there'd be extra flybys and spec groups.

Sam walked closer to the looming thirty-meter structure, looked up into the interstices of the triple spire, the converging, just-now braiding salisbury points, then down to where the portal and narthex would be in a true cathedral. He began a circuit. There was only the croisie now and the distant wind if you listened for it.

There were no doors in the logged salisburys, chartres and notre dames. There were outcroppings like porches and lintels, but no doors, no chambers. The loftings were always solid lagan.

But here was a door—rather a shadowing, a doorness beneath such an outcropping, a cleft between buttress swellings that held darkness like one.

Why now? Why mine? Sam thought, but came back, Jeanie-wise, with: Why not? If not now, when?

Still he resisted. He'd finally—mostly—accepted the lagan. He'd welcomed the wealth, but mainly the companionship the lagan had brought, a new set of reasons for people doing things together. But he wanted nothing more, no additional complications. Another old *fin-de-siècle* saying from Life Studies covered it: "not on my watch."

Had to be—ready, the words came, bewildering him till he realized they answered his two unspoken questions.

A sentient, talking, telepathic cathedral? It was too much. It was bathos.

But it made him move in under the overhang, the lip of the porch, whatever it was, made him step into the darkness.

He found her there, found her by the darkness lightening around her; the final corner of the narthex, apse or niche ghost-lighting this latest, incredible lagan gift.

She would never be beautiful, if *she* were even the right word. The eyes were too large, the face too pinched, the ears and nose too small, like something half-made, a maquette, a Y99 Japanese *animé* figure, a stylized, waxy, roswell mannequin. The naked body too doll-smooth, too androgynous, with not even rudimentary genitalia or breasts that he could tell, yet somehow clearly not meant to be a child.

He knew who she was meant to be.

"You're not Jeanie." He had to say it.

No. It sounded in his mind.

"You're something like her. A bit."

"It was—your thoughts—there." Spoken words this time. The creature enunciated them so carefully, seemed to agonize over each one, fiercely concentrating, being so careful. Could it be, did he imagine it or was there perspiration on the forehead, the sheen of stress or panic? "I know—Jeanie."

"You do!"

The mannequin frowned, desperately confused, clearly alarmed if the twisting of the face were any indication. "It was—there. There. The—anchor?" The final word was a question.

"Ah." Sam felt hope vanish, felt fascination empty out and drain away, then refill from what truly, simply was on this strangest, most magical night.

"Who are you?" he said, gentler, easier now. "What are you?"

"Yours?" Again, it was almost a question. This creature seemed in shock, far more troubled than he was, but a shock almost of rapture as well as panic. At the wonder of being here. Being lost, bereft, but here. Somewhere. Anywhere.

Sam couldn't help himself. He stepped back, did so again and again, moved out of the chamber, out from under the porch. He had to anchor himself too. He looked around at the night, at the rising laganform looming over him, at the spread of coral barricades sweeping away in the vivid dark. No wonder they called them dream hedges. He saw it all now. Others had had these visitations. That's what the official Alien Influence spec groups were *really* looking for. Motile manifestations. Lifesign. The cathedrals were concentrations for hiding passengers, for delivering them into this world.

What to do? Tell the others? Share this latest, strangest, most important discovery—not the word!—this benefice, this gift? The orbitals were nightsighted, but Sam and this creature, this—*Kyrie?*—the name was just there—*Kyrie!*—just was, were *in* the lagan, with the croisie at full song and the honey-balm strengthening, both caught in the richest rush of spindrift he'd seen in weeks, with the most vivid runs of ghost-light making the hedges all flicky-flashy. Flickers of lagan dance, lagan blush. Semaphores of dream. The tides of this other sea bringing up its bounty.

He made himself go back into that darkness. He had to. It was a chance, a chance for something. He barely understood, but he *knew.*

"Kyrie?" He named it. Named her. What else could he do?

She was standing out from the chamber wall, just standing there naked and waiting.

"Kyrie?" he said again, then gave her his dressing gown, moved in and draped it about her shoulders. How could he not?

Before he quite knew he was doing so, he was leading her out into the night, holding her, steadying her. She walked stiff-legged, with a strange and stilted gait, new to walking, new to everything, but flesh-warm and trembling under his hands. She was hurting, panicking, desperately trying to do as he did. Sam guided her up the path and into the house. It was all so unreal, yet so natural. It was just what you did, what was needed.

Because it seemed right, because he needed it, Sam put her in Jeanie's room, in Jeanie's bed, in the room and bed Jeanie had used in her final days before hospitalization was necessary and she had gone away forever. He did that and more. Though he balked at it, he couldn't help himself. He left the photos and quik-sims of Jeanie he'd put there when she'd left, made himself do that, hating it, needing it, needing it knowing what this brand-new Kyrie was trying to become.

She was still there the next morning and, yes, hateful and wonderful both, there did seem more of Jeanie in the drawn, minimalist face. Did he imagine it? Yearn for it too much? Was it the light of day playing up the tiniest hint?

Sam felt like a ghoul, like something cruel and perverse when he brought in more pictures of Jeanie and set them on the sideboard, even put one in the en suite.

It was mainly curiosity, he kept telling himself. But need too, though too dimly considered to be allowed as such. He just had to see.

No one had observed their meeting. Or, rather, no queries came, no AIO agents, no officials quizzing him about an overheard conversation, about a late-night lagan-gift from the cathedral. It seemed that the lagan had masked it; the croisie had damped it down; the honey-balm had blurred the words to nothing—perhaps their intended function all along. Misleading. Deceiving. Hiding the passengers. Working to let this happen privately, secretly. Who could say?

He helped her become human.

It was hard to work in the hedges in the days that followed, so hard to chat and make small-talk knowing that she was up in the house with the books and the sims, learning his world, learning to be human, eating and drinking mechanically but unassisted now, if without evident pleasure, being imprinted. Becoming. The only word for it.

They saw that he was distracted, took it as an allowable relapse by their MF recluse, the famous Tilby Tiger. Becoming was an appropriate word for Sam too. Though he made himself work at doing and saying the right things, remaining courteous and pleasant, it was like doing the compulsory Life Studies modules all over again, all those mandatory realtime, facetime *têtes* and citizenship dialogues for getting along. Comfortable handles for the myriad, net-blanded, online, PC global villagers. Words, words and words. Sam hated it but managed.

He had Jeanie back in a way he hadn't expected. Like a flower moving with the sun or a weathervane aligning with the wind, he just found himself responding to what was natural in his life. Kyrie was of *this* time, *this* place, *this* moment, but with something of Jeanie, just as the old song had it. *My Lagan Love* indeed.

Sam cherished the old words anew, and sang them as he worked in the hedgerows below her window.

"Where Lagan stream sings lullaby
There blows a lily fair;
The twilight gleam is in her eye,
The night is on her hair.
And, like a love-sick lenanshee,
She hath my heart in thrall;
Nor life I owe, nor liberty,
For Love is lord of all.

And often when the beetle's horn
Hath lulled the eve to sleep,
I steal unto her shielding lorn
And thro' the dooring peep.
There on the cricket's singing stone
She spares the bog wood fire.
And hums in sad sweet undertone
The song of heart's desire."

But Sam remained the skeptic too, was determined not to become some one-eyed Love's Fool. Even as he guided Kyrie, added more photos, ran the holos, he tried to fit this visitation into the science of lagan.

It was a cycle, a pendulum swing. One moment he'd be sitting with his alien maquette in her window-shaded room, singleminded, determined, perversely searching for new traces of Jeanie. The next, he was touring the online lagan sites—scanning everything from hard science briefs to the wildest theories, desperately seeking anything that might give a clue.

There was so much material, mostly claims of the "I know someone who knows someone" variety, and Sam was tempted to go the exophilia route and see the World Government muddying up the informational waters, hiding the pearls of truth under the detritus.

Finally, inevitably, he went back to his bower-bird friend, brought up the subject during a morning tour of the hedges.

"Howie, official findings aside, you ever hear of anything found alive in the lagan?"

"Apart from the lagan itself? Nothing above the microbial."

"But unofficial."

"Well, the rumors are endless. People keep claiming things; the UN keeps saying it's reckless exophilia. And I tell myself, Sam, if something was found, how could they keep a lid on it? I mean, statistically, there'd be so many visitations, passengers, whatever, word would get out."

"What if people are hiding them?"

Howie shook his head. "Doesn't follow. Someone somewhere would go for the gold and the glory instead, bypass the authorities and go to the media direct. You'd only need one."

Sam didn't press it too closely, didn't say: unless they were loved ones. Returnees. Things of the heart. He kept it casual, made it seem that he was just—what was Howie's saying?—shooting the breeze.

"Ever meet anyone who claims to have seen someone?"

"Sure. Bancroft, but he's always claiming one thing or another about the lagan. Sally Joule's neighbor, Corben, had a stroke, but she won't buy it. Reckons the lagan did it to him because he discovered something."

"Would he mind if I visited?"

"Probably not. I know Corben. He's two counties over, an hour's drive or more. But I go sit with him sometimes. Talk's ninety-eight per cent one-sided these days, but that's okay. And you've got things in common. He wildcatted his field too, just as you've done. I can take you out."

Ben Corben seemed pleased to see them. At least he tracked their approach from his easy chair on the front porch and gave a lopsided smile when Howie greeted him and introduced Sam. He couldn't speak well anymore, and took ages to answer the same question Sam had put to Howie: had he ever heard of anything found alive in the lagan.

"Sum-thin," Corben managed. "Stor-ees."

And that was it for a time. The live-in nurse served afternoon tea, helped Corben with his teacup and scones.

Which was fine, Sam found. It gave him time to look out over Corben's lapsed domain, let him see what his own bloom would one day become.

Finally Howard brought them back to the question as if it hadn't been asked.

"Ever find anything out there, Corb? Anything alive?" He gestured at what remained of Corben's hedges, stripped and wasted now, the towers and barricades fallen, the basements collapsed in on themselves, just so many spike-fields, kite-frames and screens of wind-torn filigree, rattling and creaking and slowly falling to dust.

"No," Corben said, so so slowly, and his skewed face seemed curiously serene, alive with something known.

"It's important, Ben," Sam said. "It's just—it's really important. I've got hedges now. Never expected it. Never did. But I think something's out there. Calling at night." He didn't want to give too much away. And Howie had gone with it, bless him, hadn't swung about and said: hey, what's this? Good friend.

Corben blinked, looked out across the ruin of his own lagan field, now two years gone, so Howie had said.

Again Sam noticed the peace in the man, what may have been a result of the stroke or even some medication stupor, but seemed for all the world like uncaring serenity, as if he'd seen sufficient wonders and was content, as if—well, as if—

And there it was. Of course. Like Kyrie. Corben was like Kyrie. Slow and careful. Minimalist. Just like Kyrie. Of course.

It was all so obvious once Sam saw it like that. Back home, he removed the photos, sims and mirrors, left Kyrie to be what she—what "it" had tried to be all along. He saw what he thought to be relief in the maquette's suffering eyes as he removed the last of the distractions, then brought a chair and sat in front of it.

Finish your job, he thought, but didn't speak it. Finish being what you already are.

And Sam found it such a relief to sit there and let it happen. Kyrie had never tried to be Jeanie, had never been a gift from the lagan to ease a broken heart.

Not Kyrie. Cadrey.

Sam saw how he'd been: thinking of Jeanie by day, not thinking of her—blessedly forgetting her—at night when he slept. Escaping in dreams, his only true time of self. Swaying Kyrie this way and that in its Becoming—by day towards Jeanie, by night back towards its intended form all along.

Poor agonized thing. Here from somewhere else, now beautified by Jeanie-thought, now showing the ruin of his own MF tiger mask, coping, copying. Poor ugly, beautiful, languishing thing. Trying all the while.

Then, like looking through doors opened and aligned, he saw the rest. Its message, its purpose. I will be you to free you so you can have your turn. Moving on. Taking it with you.

What a clumsy, awkward method, Sam decided. What a flawed—no! What a natural and fitting way to do it, more like a plant in a garden, some wild and willful, wayward garden, some natural, blundering, questing thing, trying again and again to push through. Stitching it up. Linking the worlds.

What it was, never the issue. Only *that* it was.

He had to help. Do sittings. Leave photos of his red-demon, tiger-faced self (how the others would smile!), try not to think of Jeanie for now, just for now.

For Kyrie. Oh, the irony. So many times he stood before the mirrors and laughed, recalling that old story of desperate choice: the Lady or the Tiger. Well, now he played both parts—showing the Tiger but being *like* Jeanie for Kyrie.

Giving of himself. Giving self. Generous. The Lady *and* the Tiger.

Two weeks later, at brightest, deepest midnight, he stood before the notre dame, bathed in the honey-balm and the spindrift, letting the croisie take him, tune him, bring him in. They were all part of it—transition vectors, carrier modes.

Kyrie was in place back in the house, maimed, shaped, pathetic and wonderful both. Sam Cadrey enough. Would seem to have had a stroke when they found *him.* That would cover the slips, the gaffes and desperate gracelessness. His friends would find, would impose, the bits of Sam Cadrey no time or training could provide. Friendship allowing, they would find him in what was left, never knowing it was all there was.

Sam looked around at his world, at the fullness of it, the last of it, then stepped into the narrow chamber.

The cathedral did what it had to do, blindly or knowing, who could say, but naturally.

Sam felt himself changing, becoming—why, whatever it needed him to be this time, using what was in the worlds. And as he rose, he had the words, unchanged in all that changing. *Nor life I know, nor liberty.* Had his self, his memories to be enough of self around. *For Love is lord of all.*

Sam held Jeanie to him, as firm and clear as he could make her, and rose from the troubled seabed to the swelling, different light of someone else's day.

M. Shayne Bell

REFUGEES FROM NULONGWE

Donna Pendrick walked unafraid through the refugees at Kitale Border Crossing. She wore a translator around her neck, but it could not make sense of the babble. It picked up words out of context, sentences from different conversations, one greeting from an old male who recognized her. Mostly the translator just hissed. Donna turned it down.

Elizabeth had asked her to come. As Donna expected, Elizabeth stood next to the flimsy bridge on the Kenyan side of the border—despite the danger of bullets—consoling refugees as they crossed over. Donna walked up to her. "If those people over there knew who you were, they'd shoot you down and damn world opinion," Donna said.

Elizabeth wrapped her trunk around Donna's old shoulders, pulled her close, and hugged her hard. "At least matriarch/old-female-elephant/I blend in with the refugees," she said through her translator. "If those people knew/guessed/had-any-idea who matriarch/old-female-human/you were, they'd shoot/murder/kill you, too."

Donna realized that was probably true. Her negotiations on behalf of the elephants had, in some quarters, won only enemies. Donna could hear shooting not far off in Uganda. It came in unexpected spurts—first from one place, then quiet for a moment, then from a different part of the horizon, then back at the first spot all at once. Elizabeth held her tightly. Donna felt the tension—the fear, even—in her trunk. It made Donna remember how Elizabeth had needed to hang onto her after she had been orphaned so many years before.

This was more, then, than another refugee crisis.

It was a moment before Elizabeth could speak again. Elephant refugees kept streaming across the border, some on the bridge, some fording the stream, all rushing to what they hoped would be safety.

"Sam ran/musth-like anger/charged over there," Elizabeth said finally. "He's back/returned/here now, but hurt/wounded/down."

Donna turned up her translator to make sure she was hearing right. Sam was Elizabeth's youngest son, tending toward old himself now. "Will he be all right?" Donna asked.

"Shot/hole/bullet in his leg, and shot/hole/bullet in his stomach," Elizabeth said. "That's less than council/us/me-his-mother expected. He ran/musth-like anger/charged over there with tusks worth/esteemed/valued more than their weight in gold and hurt/took/received just two bullets. I call him lucky/blessed/prayers-for-protection-maybe-answered."

The tears in Elizabeth's eyes belied her tough words. Elizabeth and Sam had argued about Sam's tusks for years. Technically it should have been no problem for an elephant to wear its tusks. Technically all trade in ivory was banned. But Donna believed, like Elizabeth, that no practical person, human or elephant, should walk around poor human countries wearing a quarter of a million dollars' worth of jewelry. "Will he be all right?" Donna repeated.

"I don't know," Elizabeth said. "He lost/spurted/poured a lot of blood, and he's hurt/bleeding/flowing internally. I've spent every minute with him I could. He's a brave/courageous/upstart fool, I'll grant him that. He freed three juveniles and brought/freed/protected them out, hurt as he was. He found something interesting recorded/ human-speech/words on their translators. That's why I asked/hoped/needed you to come/rush/be-with-me here."

Shooting broke out upriver. Elizabeth took charge of moving all elephant refugees farther back from the border. She had no time to explain about the recordings. One of the nervous human guards told Donna that she could wait with them in the border post. Instead she went looking for Sam.

She found him, his skin a pale gray, lying in one corner of an enormous Red Cross tent. Another elephant male was standing just outside. Transfusion tubes ran from him under the tent flaps to Sam. Sam was laboring to breathe. Donna stroked Sam's trunk and rubbed his gums, something he found reassuring. "You're in fine shape to be heading off on adventures," she told him. "Why didn't you send the younger bulls?"

Sam just snorted. "Did Mother tell/whisper/explain what I found?"

"Recordings," she said. "She didn't have time to explain what was on them."

Sam struggled to breathe. "Turn our translator ranges down/low/close," Sam said.

Donna turned hers down, then leaned over Sam and pulled the translator around his neck so she could

work the controls. Translators pick up the subsonic vocalizations of elephants—sounds humans could never hear—amplify them into audible sound, and translate them into a growing list of human languages. They work in the opposite direction, too, but they have problems taking human language into subsonic range. The subsonics they transmit travel far and wide, like real elephant subsonics, except harsher. They interrupt elephant conversations in a six-mile radius. Sam evidently did not want anyone else hearing what he was going to tell Donna or her response.

"The three juvenile/terrified/young elephants I went after were equipped/using/wearing translators concealed/ screened/hidden behind ears," Sam said. "They had write programs running/operating/recording during and after the murders/slaughter/hacking-apart of their families."

Sam struggled for breath again. "A few loose-lipped humans said words/secrets/facts in front of them that will interest the International Court of Justice in the Hague."

"You have all these refugees with all their stories—you have satellite images of the massacre sites—and you had to go after recordings?"

"I went after the juvenile/terrified/young. I did not know/surprise/guess about the recordings then. But the humans they recorded were members/in/part of the Ugandan government."

Donna sat for a moment, then reached over to touch Sam.

He did not need to explain any further.

The CDs would be proof of genocide.

This had not been long in coming, Donna thought. The Nairobi Accord was barely six years old. It had been just ten years since Joyce Lake had used amplified elephant subsonics to crack the code of elephant language. How foolish we all were, Donna thought, to imagine the killing would stop when we learned how to say hello to the elephants.

Yet the killing *had* stopped for a time. No one had known what to do at first—except empty the zoos, circuses, temples, and farms of all captive elephants. Kenya and Tanzania had enlarged their national parks and created new ones, and money from around the world had paid for that land. Boatload after boatload of once captive elephants had come "home" to Africa, a place most of them had never seen. The Asian countries had been slower to react, so hundreds of Asian elephants from zoos and circuses in Europe and the Americas had ended up in East Africa—temporarily, everyone had thought.

There had been so many unanswered questions. Were the elephants citizens of the human countries? Should they be allowed to vote? Could they own property?

The advent of cheap translators intensified the debates. Tens of thousands of humans traveled to Africa to talk to the elephants and, with translators around their necks, they could do so easily. All that talk made people realize something more had to be done.

And they enacted the Nairobi Accord.

Donna had helped negotiate it, and the beauty of it still moved her. The elephants were not to be citizens of any human country. They were to have their own, Nulongwe, a territory superimposed over the top of the human countries that signed the accord. The elephant nation and the human nations would coexist in the same territory, use the same resources, manage the land together.

Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and the elephants (Elizabeth the head of their delegation and the first president of Nulongwe) were the initial signatories. Other human countries in Africa were expected to join later. None did. South Asia was expected to create a similar accord, but it hadn't.

Now the accord was unraveling. Many humans believed that God had created the Earth for people. Elephants had come along too late to claim any of it as their own. Seeing elephants gain water rights, park fees, and valuable agricultural land—when people needed those same resources—only increased their anger. Some people doubted that elephants were sentient at all and thought the whole thing a vast joke or, worse, a conspiracy of Western environmental groups.

Though Donna never said this to Elizabeth, she was afraid there were too few people like her to stop humans from killing elephants. Humans had always killed each other, after all, and they had often been able to say hello before committing murder. Why should anyone have expected humanity to treat elephants differently?

Later in the day, Donna found Elizabeth with the three juveniles Sam had rescued. The juveniles, two females and a little male, were in bad shape. They'd seen their families butchered in front of them. They themselves had been destined for a zoo in Kampala. But unlike Elizabeth in a similar circumstance, they wanted nothing to do with Donna.

"Please hold/take/protect these," Elizabeth said. She carried a small package wrapped in brown paper in her trunk, and held it out to Donna. It was the CDs. "We/council/I have uploaded the information/data/words on these CDs," Elizabeth said. "But such information/data/bytes might not be admissible/ accepted/allowed in court. It could be manufactured/ made-up/lies. We/council/Nulongwe need these originals."

Donna held the package for a moment, then, for want of a better place, tucked it into her sweater pocket. "Where do you want me to take them?" she asked.

"The Dutch ambassador has agreed/decided/offered to overnight them to the Hague," Elizabeth said. "Will you carry/protect/take them to the embassy?"

Donna agreed.

"I have one more favor/request/need," Elizabeth said. "Will you escort/protect/take these juveniles to your center/home/park in Nairobi? They will be called/ needed/brought as witnesses in the Hague. We/council/I feel they will be guarded/protected/safer with you for now."

Donna was taken aback. It had been years since her Center for Orphaned Animals in Nairobi National Park had cared for elephant orphans. The government of Nulongwe had assumed that responsibility, of course. But there was nothing else to do. "Certainly," Donna said, and she sat down.

Elizabeth turned back to the juveniles. She put her trunk around each one in turn, trying to calm them. Donna listened to her words of comfort through the translator. But the juveniles' would have none of it. Their eyes kept watering.

Donna watched them and waited. Seeing the juveniles cry made Donna remember the day she had first been able to talk to young elephants in her care. It had been years after she had successfully reintroduced Elizabeth into the wild, but Donna still had elephant orphans at her center—eleven of them, all hard work, and a lame rhinoceros two-year-old into the mix, and ten Thompson's gazelles, and three giraffes, and on and on.

It was just after Joyce Lake had cracked the code of elephant language and the news had flashed around the world. Of course she and Joyce had talked and e-mailed each other about it, and one afternoon Joyce had found time to drive to Donna's compound with her Land Rover full of equipment, all flushed and excited and ready for Donna to talk to eleven of her babies.

The press had discovered what they were doing, and nearly a hundred reporters had crowded into the park with their cameras, microphones, and laptops. Joyce had already held eight press conferences in Tsavo National Park, allowing reporters from around the world to interview the elephants there. Elizabeth, by this time matriarch over the herds in that park, was becoming quite a celebrity—she'd proved herself to be loquacious, intelligent, even funny. Her photograph and words had appeared in newspapers, magazines, and netzines all over the world. But this day was different. People knew about Donna's work with orphaned animals, and this would be the first time she would be able to talk to any of them—and them to her. It was a story with a different kind of appeal. There was no point, Donna realized, in trying to keep the reporters away, in trying to keep them out, in trying to keep this moment a private one.

It was in the heat of an early spring afternoon. A slight breeze blew from the east. Joyce arranged her equipment on tables near the verandah, and they set a chair in the shade of the lilacs for Donna, but she could not sit in it. She kept walking around, looking at the reporters, looking at the tables full of equipment, looking down the lane for her elephants.

She heard them before she saw them, and then there they were, with the boys trained to watch over them. They were all nervous, of course. The crowd made them nervous. The elephants knew something was up. You can't imagine what's going to happen, Donna had thought to herself, you can't imagine it. There had been no way to prepare them. They stopped in a bunch down by the gate, maybe eight car lengths from the reporters and Donna. All the reporters grew quiet, listening for whatever they would say. The day was suddenly still. Even the breeze calmed for a time.

Donna had bought a bunch of bananas at the market the day before, and they were still just a little green the way elephants like them. She had picked them off the stem and arranged them in her white mixing bowl. Joyce pinned a microphone to Donna's lapel for Donna to talk into, and after a moment had signaled that the equipment was turned on, properly adjusted, ready. It was their time now. Donna had thought of so many wonderful things to say at first, but looking at her elephants she could not say one of them. None of them fit the moment. She took a breath and held out the bowlful of bananas. "Hello, my dears," she'd said simply. "Hello. Here are some bananas for you."

She'd thought later it was such a stupid thing to say, but how did you start after so long without talking? What could you say, after all? The equipment had translated her words quickly, though none of the humans could hear it—but the elephants heard. They heard and jumped back. They bumped into each other. They turned around and then turned back. "Come here," Donna had said. "We can talk now. We've learned how to talk to you. Come say something to me."

But they would not come. They just stood there, far off—shocked, Donna knew. She started toward them.

"Don't go too far," Joyce had said. "The equipment won't pick up your words."

So Donna had stopped walking. She'd put down the bowl of bananas in the grass. She'd smoothed out the front of her dress. She'd looked up at the elephants again. "We've tried to love you," she'd said, and then she paused before going on. "I love you. I'm so sorry for everything you could not understand here, for everything we could not explain to you."

They walked to her, then, not in a rush but all together. They circled her slowly and they trampled the

bananas and they held onto her with their trunks. Tears had streamed down their faces. "You talk like our mothers talked," one of them had said, Donna never knew which one, and that sentence had made headlines from Cape Town to Tokyo. Donna had just held onto them. None of them could say much, then. Somehow that hadn't surprised anyone.

Later, they talked.

And that night, after the reporters had left, after the boys had all had a chance to talk to their charges, after Joyce had packed her equipment and left them in a temporary silence again, Donna had gone alone into her quiet house. She kept photos of her husband on a bureau in the hallway, and she stopped there. She picked one up, one of the young ones. He'd been just a ranger in the park system then. No one had guessed that he'd go on to become superintendent of the entire colonial park system in British East Africa. He'd have loved this day, she knew. "You've missed so much, Frank," she whispered. He'd been dead fifty years. The longevity medicines were giving her a much longer life than he'd been able to have. She looked up into the mirror and tried to imagine herself pretty like she'd been back then: hair still blonde, not grey; thin and able to fit decently into jeans, not heavy and fit only for dresses; young, like Frank in the photo. How he'd fussed about her sentimentality. "You can't care for all the little animal orphans," he'd said. No one had guessed what kind of life's work that would lead to, either. She'd dusted off the photo with her sleeve and put it back. I wish you had been here today, Frank, she had thought.

Elizabeth touched Donna's shoulder with her trunk. Donna reached up and stroked Elizabeth's leg. It seemed as if, the older Donna got, the more memory seemed to take over her life. She found that now she could sit for hours doing nothing but remember times in the past. Elizabeth, more than any of her human friends, never seemed to mind. She understood. She never forced her to rush back to the present. Elephants, after all, had had ages of experience managing the accurate memories of long lives.

"The juveniles will talk/speak/trust you now," Elizabeth said, gently.

"What did you tell them?"

"How you cared/loved/fed me when I was alone like them. How you've kept nature/Nulongwe/a park in the center/middle/heart of the human capital. How they will be safe/protected/warm with you there."

Safe, Donna thought. She wished she could completely believe that. The city of Nairobi now surrounded tiny Nairobi National Park. It was an island of nature circled by a sea of humanity. Few things were truly safe there, and nothing was isolated. By day you could hear traffic on the highways. At all hours you could hear jets flying in for landings at Nairobi International. At night, if you listened hard enough, you could hear the cacophony of music from all the open windows of all the highrise apartment complexes built mile after mile along the park boundaries. But Elizabeth was right. Nairobi was where they should go. The Dutch embassy would help them with the CDs, and many nations would help her protect the young elephants.

Donna had gotten stiff sitting. Elizabeth wrapped her trunk around Donna's middle and helped her up. Donna stood for a moment looking at the juveniles, and they looked at her. She walked over to them, stiffly, and they let her touch them. She reached down and hugged them and cried with them, not so much for what they were going through as for her memories of all the elephants like them she had cared for. There was nothing else to do then. Not even words to speak.

The Kenyan military offered guards and a driver, and Donna accepted the offer. If the Ugandans had any idea what Sam had brought out, they'd be looking for it. Donna reached into her sweater pocket and touched the wrapped CDs. She was glad for an armed guard. Besides, she was too tired to drive herself back to Nairobi. It was late evening, and it had been a long day.

Sam had been stabilized enough for transport to Nulongwe National Hospital in Nairobi, and they needed to get him there fast. He was bleeding internally and would soon need another transfusion. Donna watched from the back seat of her Land Rover while they loaded Sam onto a truck. The juveniles were traveling in the same truck since being near Sam reassured them. Donna would follow along behind.

While they finished securing Sam, Donna took out her laptop, clicked open a geosat connection, and went online. Her fingers were stiff. While the laptop made the connection, she rubbed her fingers, trying to limber them up so that she could type. The new drugs helped control the arthritis, but there was still no cure. It was wet along that part of the border, and in the evening chill the damp made her hands ache. When she could type, she sent an e-mail to a friend at the Dutch embassy asking him to meet her when they arrived at the hospital.

The driver and guard climbed onto the front seat. The driver said hello, then looked away. The guard was all business, all watchfulness, rifle at the ready.

The sun had set when they started out. They planned to drive through the night and arrive in Nairobi late morning. The few miles of paved road outside Kitale soon ended. It was dirt road after that for sixty miles, Donna knew, but the road was graded and well-maintained. They'd soon connect with the National Highway System.

She started typing again. She sent a note to her twenty-six-year-old great-granddaughter who was flying down from London in three weeks to spend a month. She'd have no idea of the work that lay ahead! She sent e-mail to her staff advising them of the juvenile elephants. They had so many preparations to make, chief among them the laying up of vast stores of sunscreen. Those young elephant hides hadn't toughened yet, and they no longer had older relatives to stand under for shade.

The road grew rougher. Donna had to stop typing and hang onto her laptop. The red tail-lights of the truck with Sam and the juveniles bounced along ahead of her. The guard glanced back, then looked straight ahead again. The rough road jarred them all back and forth.

She could not type until the road grew smooth again, so she sat there with her thoughts. She thought about Elizabeth. Elizabeth had witnessed the murders of her mother and grandmother and older brothers, and she had stood off in a thicket and watched as the poachers had chainsawed the ivory out of her family's faces. Park rangers had found Elizabeth and brought her to Donna because they had not known what else to do. Donna hadn't known what to do with an elephant baby either, except try and keep trying—one look at her little, terrified, vulnerable self in the back of the ranger's truck had been all it had taken to change both their lives: Donna had loved Elizabeth, and she had done everything she could to help her—some of it wrong. Manuals on the care and feeding of elephant babies hadn't existed in those days. But they'd made it. That had been when Frank had managed the park system, and those had been good days, Donna thought, good days. She and Frank had imagined that if they just worked hard enough they could do so many things to make the world a better place, that they could change so many things that needed to be changed. It had all seemed, if not easy, at least possible.

Elizabeth had needed to hang onto Donna. People had laughed to see Donna try to go about her chores with Elizabeth, trunk wrapped around an arm, right beside her. They would not have laughed had they been the ones to get up in the night to comfort Elizabeth when she woke screaming from her nightmares. Elizabeth had needed physical touch, even if the touch had come from someone of another species: even if the touch had come from someone of the same species that had killed her family.

The juveniles would be like Elizabeth, Donna knew—tough work.

But at least they'd be able to talk to each other. She and Elizabeth had not, not until they had both become old ladies. Donna wished she could have talked to all the orphaned animals she had helped over the years, not just the elephants.

The Land Rover jarred her back and forth again. The road from Kitale to the highway had not been this rough when she'd driven it in the morning—or she had been better at avoiding the potholes. Donna looked out the window. The moon had not risen, and it was dark. She realized she could not really be sure what direction they were traveling. The road jarred her again.

Something was not right.

She clicked open the geopositioning program on her laptop, and found their position.

They were not on the main road. They were not heading east. They were on a road leading north out of Kitale. She looked up at the men sitting in front of her, but said nothing. She clicked on the road to find out where it led.

The program magnified the map of Kitale District. The road they were on forked two miles ahead. One fork led directly west to a little-used crossing into Mt. Elgon National Park in Uganda/Nulongwe, site of the recent massacres. The other led northwest six miles to another crossing into Uganda.

Donna suddenly felt cold and alone and old. At first, she did not know what to do. Obviously the drivers and the guards were not Kenyans—Ugandans had somehow replaced them—unless Kenyans were involved in this, too, and genocide was shortly to begin in Kenya.

She started typing e-mail messages. She expected the guard to make her stop any minute, so she typed faster and faster—damn the spelling. She realized the guard probably hadn't stopped her yet because he hadn't wanted to alarm her until he absolutely had to. She could not let him know that she knew what was happening—if he realized that, he would take away her laptop. Donna forced herself to remain calm. She sent e-mail to Elizabeth and everyone else she could think of asking for help, but she did not know who among the humans she could trust, really, if Kenya were gearing up for mass murder. She sent the messages anyway. People would at least know what had happened to her and Sam and the juveniles.

Even as she sent the e-mail, however, Donna knew that help could not reach them before they crossed the border. Only murder moved quickly in this part of the world. She and Sam, the juveniles—and the CDs—would not survive half an hour in Uganda.

Then she had an idea. She turned up her translator and switched it to Transmit Only mode. "Do you mind if I sing?" she asked the men in the front seat. "I think singing makes time on the road pass more quickly, don't you?"

The guard scowled at her. The driver looked at her in the rear-view mirror, grinning. She started singing.

In French. Her translator was programmed to translate what she said in English, Swahili, or French. French was the only language of the three she thought the two people in the Land Rover with her might not

understand. They would not know what her translator was broadcasting far and wide in subsonics.

She set their current position and the story of what had happened to any jaunty tune that came to mind. She asked for help in "Frère Jacques" and repeated their coordinates in "La Marseillaise."

She could only hope there were enough elephants in the area to hear her broadcasts and rush to block the two forks of the road they were on.

And save the CDs, above all.

The translator vibrated against her chest. She felt the subsonics it was broadcasting.

She kept watching out the windows for the enormous forms she hoped to see moving there in the darkness.

The truck and the Land Rover took the first fork in the road. Donna sang about that. They were maybe one mile now from the border. The guard scowled at her more and more. She just smiled and kept singing. She imagined he must think her a foolish old woman to sing like this in her thin, reedy voice—oblivious, apparently, to her own kidnapping.

Suddenly the Land Rover braked, and she was slammed into the back of the front seat. Her laptop went tumbling onto the floor. Both the driver and the guard swore in Luganda, which answered one question: these men weren't Kenyans.

"What happened?" she asked in English, not wanting to let them know she understood their cursing.

Neither answered. The driver and the guard both got out of the Land Rover. Donna opened her door and got out, too. The truck ahead of them had skidded to an abrupt halt two feet short of an enormous acacia tree felled across the road.

"Stay in! Stay in!" the guard shouted at her. "You don't know what could be out here."

"I have to check on Sam and the juveniles," Donna said. She started toward the truck. The guard cocked his rifle, and Donna stopped. She wondered if he were going to shoot her there, while they were still inside Kenya, but he and the other guard set out patrolling the oval perimeters of light cast by the headlights of both vehicles. The drivers stood talking in low voices by the open driver's-side door of the truck. One of them lit a cigarette.

Donna started walking forward again. Her footsteps sounded loud on the gravel road. She could not tell if the tree had been recently pushed over or if it had lain across the road for a long time, but the leaves looked green in the headlights. She stepped onto the fender, climbed up the guardrail, and looked in on Sam and the juveniles.

The sudden stop had shoved Sam against the cab of the truck. The juveniles were huddled around him, terrified. When they saw her, they rushed to one side and banged the guardrail with their feet, trying to get out and away.

She'd panicked them with her subsonic broadcasts. She hadn't thought far enough ahead to realize that they and Sam would hear.

She wanted to get the juveniles out of that truck.

She climbed down in with them. "I'm going to open the back," she whispered in French. "When I do, jump out and run—in different directions. Don't stay together. But first take these."

She looked around for the guards and the drivers, and could not see them. She crouched down in shadow, took the CD package out of her pocket, and tore it open. Putting a CD in each of the juveniles' translators was dangerous, but this might be their only chance of saving them. They certainly would not survive in her sweater pocket or hidden somewhere in the truck.

Sam grunted his approval of her plan. "Good/ inventive/necessary action," he rumbled. "Take/ accept/receive them quickly," he told the juveniles. "Outside, find other elephants. You will look/blend/seem like other juvenile/adolescent/young elephants to humans. Be brave/strong/fast."

One by one, they came up to Donna. She inserted the CDs into the drives in the sides of their translators, and listened to the gentle whirs as the translators read and accepted them. She locked each drive shut. "Good luck," she whispered to the juveniles after she'd finished the last one. She stood up slowly and looked around. One of the guards was walking toward them, his body and rifle a silhouette in the headlights. "Get back inside the Land Rover," he told Donna. "We're scouting routes through the brush to drive around this tree. We'll be moving soon."

"I must see to Sam's bandages," Donna lied.

The guard shrugged and walked off. Donna watched him go, then she started for the back of the truck. She had to open it, and the juveniles had to run for it now. After that, she'd sit down with Sam. He was too sick, and she was too old to run.

But before she could open the back of the truck, they heard an enormous cracking—and screams. Another acacia slammed down onto the road ahead of them. From the screams, and the moans that followed, she guessed it had pinned one of the guards. The other guard shot off into the darkness.

There was more crashing, from all sides now. Dark forms taller than the truck rushed past them. There

were three shots, and a few screams. Something was bashed against the hood of the truck again and again. Blood spattered across them all.

It was over quickly. Suddenly trunk after trunk lifted in toward them, smelling them, asking how they were.

Donna cried with relief. "We've got to get out of here," she told them, wiping her eyes once. "Ugandan troops aren't far away. They surely heard the shooting."

Donna climbed onto the bloodied driver's seat and managed to back up the truck, then drive it around the Land Rover and onto the road again. She set out for Kitale. Maybe thirty elephants—she could not count them all—ran along beside them, a mighty escort.

Donna was never so glad to see the lights of any city as she was to see the lights of Kitale coming back into view.

Elephants by the hundreds rushed out to meet them, Elizabeth in the front.

Again she hugged Donna tightly. Again Donna hugged her back.

But Sam was not doing well. Another bull elephant volunteered to give blood, and Red Cross nurses began transfusing Sam right there in the truck.

"Call the Americans or the British," Donna said. "Ask them to come for us."

Both came, and the Danes with them. The Americans sent a military transport helicopter from the U.S.S. *Delaware,* in port in Mombassa. They loaded Sam and seven other critically injured elephants inside and flew off. Donna and the CDs flew away inside a British embassy helicopter. The juveniles would come later in a truck from the Isak Dinesen Foundation. Donna would be waiting for them.

As they flew along, Donna's spirits lifted. They weren't flying just over Kenya, not yet anyway. They were flying over Kenya *and* Nulongwe. If the CDs and testimony and satellite photos led to trials and intervention, Nulongwe might yet persist. If humanity moved its great armies to protect the elephants, who could harm them?

It might happen, Donna thought. It might yet happen.

The sky brightened with the dawn. The greening plains below them emerged out of darkness. She watched Kenya/Nulongwe pass by below her. The names of those countries were so beautiful, she thought, like the land. Both countries had mottoes. Some thought it quaint for a country to have a national motto, but Donna liked them: in Kenya, *harambee,* "pulling together"; in Nulongwe, *darumbyla,* "looking forward."

Far off, Donna saw sunlight sparkling on waters. The Indian Ocean was catching first light. Donna reached into her pocket and held onto the CDs. She realized she was a part of humanity pulling together with the elephants.

She dared look forward with hope.

Author's Note

The character of Donna Pendrick is based on Daphne Sheldrick, director of the Sheldrick Wildlife Trust Orphanage in Nairobi National Park, Kenya. Sheldrick has dedicated much of her life to saving orphaned animals of all species, but especially elephant orphans. Her compassionate work is celebrated around the world. To learn more about her work and the orphanage, go to www.sheldrickwildlifetrust.org. The site contains pictures and information about the elephant orphans Sheldrick is currently raising, daily journal entries by their keepers, updates on elephants reintroduced into the wild, and information on East African conservation efforts.

Gene Wolfe

COPPERHEAD

The telephone in the study rang ten minutes before the news came on. The new President picked it up and said hello.

"Mister President?"

"Speaking." Only eighteen people were supposed to have the number. For an instant, the new President wondered how many actually did.

"This is Marsha. Boone's killed himself."

The new President was silent, conscious that there were a thousand things to say and unable to say even the least of them. In his mind's eye he saw the leaves, a drift of red, yellow, and gold autumn leaves at the foot of the tree on the hill. Leaves still touched with green here and there, and the stirring under those leaves.

"He left a note. I haven't been able to find out what was in it."

"Don't."

"Don't?"

"It will be damaging to us in some way. They'll find out, Marsha, and they'll throw it in our faces. We'll know a lot more about it than we want to then, and you're needed for other things."

"He was my husband, Mr. President. The divorce—"

"I know."

"It wasn't—wasn't final. Not yet. I want to know why he killed himself."

He recalled it exactly. "There was a crash in Idaho in August," the general had said. "We found this in the wreckage."

"Are you still there, Mr. President?"

The irony almost overcame him, but he managed to say, "Still here."

"He hung himself with—with a telephone cord from the chandelier in the dining room. That's what they told me. He stood on a chair, a—a chair on top of the table. He p-put the cord around his neck..."

The new President turned on the TV and pressed the MUTE button. It was easy, he thought. All the buttons were so easy.

"I need to know, Mr. President. I need to find out."

"You know."

"I need to see the letter."

"Then do." He murmured comforting words, his friendship with Boone and Marsha, the great contribution Boone had made to his administration. After a time that seemed long, the silent TV showed him with Boone, with Boone and Marsha, with Boone at the convention. Eventually he hung up.

The phone rang again at once. He picked it up and said, "I ought to get call waiting on this thing."

"Yes, Mr. President, you should." There was no humor in Rance's voice, none at all.

"I was about to call you. Boone's hung himself."

"I was calling to tell you. This phone was busy."

"There's a suicide note. Do you have it?"

"No, sir."

"Get it. Don't let the press get it, and don't let Marsha see it. The cops will have it. Find out if they've made copies. If they have, destroy them."

"Do you want to see it, Mr. President?"

He did not. He knew what would be in it, and knew that it would sicken him. "No," he said. Elsewhere in the house another phone was ringing. He got up from his chair and kicked the door shut. Peggy would get it, and Peggy, seeing the closed door, would stall them. Or stall them anyway, door closed or not. "Maybe I'll want to see it later. Not now. I want you to find her and bring her here."

"Find who, Mr. President?"

"Who the hell do you think?"

"Jane Doe?"

"You're watching her, or you're damned well supposed to be."

"We are." Rance said.

"A hell of a lot of good it did. Bring her here. Now!"

"Won't you be going back to Washington, Mr. President?"

Rage would help nothing. He had told the general to leave the Changer with him. He had done that. He himself had pressed the button. It had pressed very easily. He made his voice calm, and was gratified to hear it. He did not sound like a man who was controlling his voice at all. "I'm going to stay here, George, until this blows over a little. First the murder, then this. Washington will be a zoo."

"I'm sure you're right, Mr. President."

"I know I am. Fortunately we've got three years until the next election."

"Longer than that, Mr. President."

"Nearly three years until the next campaign." Although no one was watching, the new President made himself smile. Smiles showed in your voice. "That's what matters. How fast can you get her here, George?"

"Can we play rough, Mr. President? If she doesn't want to come?" Rance was stalling, giving himself time to think. That showed in your voice, too.

"Yes. Absolutely."

"What about Karen?"

The new President had not thought of that, but he would need to talk to Karen. Karen wanted a big job, but had she earned one? Controlling the redhead was like neck-reining a tiger. Perhaps she had. Assistant Secretary of Labor might be enough. "Yes," he said. "Bring Karen, if she can come. If she can't, don't wait for her."

"Five hours, Mr. President."

He glanced at his wrist. "Eleven tonight, our time."

They arrived at ten fifty-five in a black Lincoln Navigator, three FBI agents, Karen, and Jane Doe. He had told the Secret Service to get out and stay out, and had telephoned the Secretary of the Treasury when they had refused. They were a hundred yards or more away from the house, every one of them.

Now he ordered the FBI agents to return to their vehicle and stand by, and waved Karen and Jane Doe in. The former looked smart, competent, and horribly tired; as always the latter was so lovely that it was only with difficulty that he kept himself from gawking at her.

"You're beat," he told Karen. "Jane and I are going into the den to talk. Alone."

Karen nodded, and the tall and superlatively graceful woman he had named Jane Doe smiled enigmatically and brushed hair the color of new copper wire away from her face.

"I know you've done a lot," he said. "I know you've done the best you could at an impossible job. I want you to understand that I know that, no matter what else I may say tonight and no matter what happens tonight. Do you?"

"Yes, Mr. President."

Her voice had been so low that he had scarcely heard her. As he spoke again, he wondered whether she knew about Boone. If she did not, this certainly was not the time to tell her. "It may be hours—I don't know. I may need more from you tonight, and I may not. I don't know that, either. I want you go into my wife's bedroom and lie down. She's in Washington, so you won't be disturbed. If there's anything in there you need, take it. Cosmetics. Clean whatever. I'll square it with her."

"I'll be all right, Mr. President. Don't worry about me."

"Try to get to sleep. That's what I'm saying."

She nodded. "I will, Mr. President."

"I'm going back tomorrow, and when I get back I'll make a slot for you. Something in State, some nice, quiet country where they speak English, Madame Ambassador."

The other woman laughed, the summons of golden bells.

"You come in here with me," he told her, and shut the door behind them, and locked it.

" 'Ou douh nawt leek mee."

"My feelings about you no longer matter." He waited for her to sit down, then sat down himself. It was in his desk drawer, the left upper drawer.

He got it out, turned it over in his hands for a few seconds, and laid it on his desk. In appearance it was a lopsided oval of black plastic with three red buttons, remarkable only in that its black was the black of space, a deeper black than any human technology was capable of, and in that its buttons might easily have been drops of fresh blood.

" 'Ou 'ad dawt vhen Aw coom."

"Yes, I did." The sunlit hilltop, the accumulation of fallen leaves at the base of the tree were back, more vivid than ever. "I slipped it into my pocket." He cleared his throat. "I shouldn't have had it at all, and I had my hands full with you."

She laughed again; her eyes were of every conceivable color, depending as it seemed upon the lighting and her mood. Just now they too gleamed scarlet.

Like the eyes of a white rat, the new President thought. Could she have been a pet in the place from which she came? A laboratory animal? "I never told you about this," he said aloud. "I'm going to tonight, because I owe it to you. You don't like to listen—"

She smiled, and her perfect teeth looked both whiter and sharper than any other woman's teeth.

"Or sit still. You don't have to listen if you don't want to. If you want to get up and wander around, that's fine. But I'm going to say it."

"Aw siht awn 'ou lahp? Aw siht vher steal. Naw mahter 'ow meany vhertds, Aw lesson."

"No."

"Naw vahn vahtches." She was clearly amused.

He shook his head. "I had been working hard. Not only after my inauguration, but for more than a year before it. Working twelve or thirteen hours every day without a break. Spring came and my wife and I came back here; I meant to take three days off—a long weekend. Some people in Spokane started burning things again, and my three days turned out to be eighteen hours. I went back to Washington and back to work."

"Aw douh nawt vhork. Aw douh nawt naw ahbawt dhees." She rose more gracefully than any dancer, seeming to float from the chair.

"Fall came. Football season. I'd lost twenty pounds, and I was yelling at everybody. My wife had to stay in Washington, but I cleared my desk and flew back here. I wanted to drink beer and watch football. Most of all, I wanted to sleep."

She poked the fire as a child would, gratified by the cloud of sparks.

"I was here a day and half when General Martens called. There had never really been a crash before. All that about Roswell was nonsense, but this time there'd been a real crash or something that looked like one, and they had an artifact that still worked. I should have kept my damned mouth shut, but I said bring it here. I wanted to see it."

"Dhees dhing 'ou shaw mee? Eet dhaws nawt eent'res mee."

"There are other universes." The new President's voice fell. "All the astrophysicists say so. The Changer accesses them. Point it at something, press a button, and you get its cognate. Sometimes. Maybe all the time, but maybe sometimes the cognate is so close you can't tell anything's happened. Did I tell you we went up on the hill?"

" 'Ou deed nawt." She sat down again and crossed her legs. "Aw rhemember dhawt 'ill. Aw vhas colt."

He nodded. "You were naked. General Martens didn't want to talk in the house—he was afraid of listening devices, really paranoid about them. We walked clear across the big meadow and climbed the hill. I sat on a rock up there, and he on a fallen tree. I'd started to sit down beside him, but he didn't want that, and at first I didn't understand. Later I got it—he was afraid I'd grab it."

She laughed.

"Which I did, in a way. He showed it to me, but he didn't want me to touch it. I was President, goddamnit, and he was trying to give me orders. I made him give it to me and leave it with me. I told him I'd give it back to him when I was through with it.

"Then I sat there on that rock and watched him walk back to the house—back to his blue Air Force Chevy. I turned the Changer over and over in my hands, and I thought, "By God, this President stuff can be fun once in a while. It's about time."

"Vhat ahbawt mee?"

"I'm getting to that. There's a big maple up there. It was fifteen or twenty feet from where I was sitting, and its leaves were thick all around it." He paused, remembering. "Half its leaves had fallen, or about that. After the general's car went into Three Mile Woods, I looked at them. I don't know why, but I did. Perhaps I had heard something."

He paused, cleared his throat. "Suddenly they moved, stirred. There was only a very light breeze so it wasn't that. There was something in there, something under the leaves, and I guess my hand tightened on the Changer. It must have, because there you were."

"Ahh!"

"Yes. You know the rest. You know a lot more, too. Things you won't tell about the place you came from." He knew he should pick up the Changer at this point, but he discovered that he was unable to do so. He pointed to it instead. "I'm going to change you again. You know why, unless you're a lot stupider than I think you are."

'"Ou dheenk Aw dell 'ou vhife."

"No. No, I take it back. Yes, that and a couple of dozen other things. I'm going to offer you a last chance. Do you want to stay here?"

"Aw douh nawt car."

"I offer it anyway. You've always said you don't remember the place you came from, the other universe. I'll be frank, since this is likely to be our last conversation. You've lied to us. Tell me the truth, and it's possible—just possible—that something you say will change my mind. Do you want to try?"

She rose again and went to the window, staring out into the spring night. "Ees zo confuse."

He waited; and when she did not speak again, he said, "There are three buttons, and I don't know which one I pressed. I may send you back. But I may simply send you someplace else. I don't know. This is your last chance."

"Vhas a groose." She turned, and her eyes were the color of heaven, and she was the loveliest woman the new President had ever seen. "Nawt lak 'ou. Aw zay, 'ou vhill nawt neffer grawnt offer mee agan." She shrugged. "Dhoss bhoyes, de vhun keels de odder. Aw douh nawthing."

He said, "The first time I heard you talk like this I fell for it hook, line, and sinker."

He had reached for the Changer as he spoke. Her hand had to travel twice as far, but it struck like a snake. For an instant—perhaps it was half a second, perhaps less—she held it and looked at him, savoring the moment; and her eyes were as black as the Changer itself, a blackness in which red sparks danced. Her thumb depressed one of the red buttons.

His clothing collapsed in a heap. She did not see it, seeing only the naked man who stood before the chair in which the new President had sat. So tall was he that his head nearly brushed the ceiling; and so glorious was he that one felt that the ceiling had risen so that his head would not brush it.

"Because you have done this, cursed be you." His voice was like an organ, his hand like a vise as he caught her by the throat. "Upon your belly you shall go, and the dust you shall eat, and I shall crush your head under my heel."

In his new realm, where Time sang like a brook, the new President picked himself up and stood stock-still to listen. The trees in a wood far away were barking; on the cliff that rose behind him, a mountain ram winded its horns.

Ian R. MacLeod

NEW LIGHT ON THE DRAKE EQUATION

As he did on the first Wednesday of every month, after first finishing off the bottle of wine he'd fallen asleep with, then drinking three bleary fingers of absinthe, and with an extra slug for good measure, Tom Kelly drove down into St. Hilaire to collect his mail and provisions. The little town was red-brown, shimmering in the depths of the valley, flecked with olive trees, as he slewed the old Citroën around the hairpins from his mountain. Up to the east, where the karst rose in a mighty crag, he could just make out the flyers circling against the sheer white drop if he rubbed his eyes and squinted, and the glint of their wings as they caught the morning thermals. But Tom felt like a flyer of sorts himself, now the absinthe was fully in his bloodstream. He let the Citroën's piebald tires, the skid of the grit and the pull of the mountain, take him endlessly downwards. Spinning around the bends blind and wrong-side with the old canvas roof flapping, in and out of the shadows, scattering sheep in the sweet hot roar of the antique motor, Tom Kelly drove down from his mountain towards the valley.

In the *bureau de poste,* Madame Brissac gave him a smile that seemed even more patronising than usual.

"Any messages?" he croaked.

She blinked slowly. "One maybe two." Bluebottles circled the close air, which smelled of boiled sweets and Gitanes and Madame Brissac. Tom swayed slightly in his boots. He wiped off some of the road grit which had clung to the stubble on his face. He picked a stain from off his tee-shirt, and noticed as he did so that a fresh age spot was developing on the back of his right hand. It would disappoint her, really, if he took a language vial and started speaking fluent French after all these years—or even if he worked at it the old way, using bookplates and audio samples, just as he'd always been promising himself. It would deprive her of their small monthly battle.

"Then, ah, *je voudrais...*" He tried waving his arms.

"You would like to have?"

"Yes please. *Oui.* Ah—*s'il vous plaît*..."

Still the tepid pause, the droning bluebottles. Or Madame Brissac could acquire English, Tom thought, although she was hardly likely to do it for his sake.

"You late." She said eventually.

"You mean—"

Then the door banged open in a crowded slab of shadows and noise and a cluster of flyers, back from their early morning spin on the thermals, bustled up behind Tom with skinsuits squealing, the folded tips of their wings bumping against the brown curls of sticky flypaper which the bluebottles had been scrupulously avoiding. These young people, Tom decided as he glanced back at them, truly were like bright alien insects in their gaudy skinsuits, their thin bodies garishly striped with the twisting logos of sports companies and their wings, a flesh of fine silk stretched between feathery bones, then folded up behind their backs like delicate umbrellas. And they were speaking French, too; speaking it in loud high voices, but overdoing every phrase and gesture and emphasis in the way that people always did when they were new to a language. They thought that just because they could understand each other and talk sensibly to their flying instructor and follow the tour guide and order a drink at the bar that they were jabbering away like natives, but then they hadn't yet come up against Madame Brissac, who would be bound to devise some bureaucratic twist or incomprehension which would send them away from here without whatever particular form or permission it was that they were expecting. Tom turned back to Madame Brissac and gave her a grin from around the edges of his gathering absinthe headache. She didn't bother to return it. Instead, she muttered something that sounded like *I'm Judy.*

"What? *Voulez-vous répeter?"*

"Is Thursday."

"Ah. *Je comprends.* I see..." Not that he did quite, but the flyers were getting impatient and crowding closer to him, wings rustling with echoes of the morning air that had recently been filling them and the smell of fresh sweat, clean endeavour. How was it, Tom wondered, that they could look so beautiful from a distance, and so stupid and ugly close up? But *Thursday*—and he'd imagined it was Wednesday. Of course

he'd thought that it was Wednesday, otherwise he wouldn't be here in St. Hilaire, would he? He was a creature of habit, worn in by the years like the grain of the old wood of Madame Brissac's counter. So he must have lost track, and/or not bothered to check his calendar back up on the mountain. An easy enough mistake to make, living the way he did. Although...

"You require them? Yes?"

"S'il vous plaît..."

At long last, Madame Brissac was turning to the pigeonholes where she kept his and a few other message cards filed according to her own alchemic system. Putting them in one place, labelled under Kelly; Tom—or American; Drunk; Elderly; Stupid—was too simple for her. Neither had Tom ever been able to see a particular pattern which would relate to the source of the cards, which were generally from one or other of his various academic sponsors and came in drips and drabs and rushes, but mostly drabs. Those old brown lines of wooden boxes, which looked as if they had probably once held proper old-fashioned letters and telegrams, and perhaps messages and condolences from the World Wars, and the revolutionary proclamations of the sans-culottes, and decrees from the Sun King, and quite possibly even the odd pigeon, disgorged their contents to Madame Brissac's quick hands in no way that Tom could ever figure. He could always ask, of course, but that would just be an excuse for a raising of Gallic eyebrows and shoulders in mimed incomprehension. After all, Madame Brissac was Madame Brissac, and the flyers behind him were whispering, fluttering, trembling like young egrets, and it was none of his business.

There were market stalls lined across the Place de la Révolution, which had puzzled Tom on his way into the *bureau de poste,* but no longer. The world was right and he was wrong. This was Thursday. And his habitual café was busier than usual, although the couple who were occupying his table got up at his approach and strolled off, hand in hand, past the heaped and shadowed displays of breads and fruits and cheeses. The girl had gone for an Audrey Hepburn look, but the lad had the muscles of a paratrooper beneath his sleeveless tee shirt, and his flesh was green and lightly scaled. To Tom, it looked like a skin disease. He wondered, as lonely men gazing at young couples from café tables have wondered since time immemorial, what the hell she saw in him.

The waiter Jean-Benoît was busier than usual, and, after giving Tom a glance that almost registered surprise, took his time coming over. Tom, after all, would be going nowhere in any hurry. And he had his cards—all six of them—to read. They lay there, face down on the plastic tablecloth; a hand of poker he had to play. But he knew already what the deal was likely to be. One was blue and almost plain, with a pattern like rippled water, which was probably some kind of junk mail, and another looked suspiciously like a bill for some cyber-utility he probably wasn't even using, and the rest, most undoubtedly, were from his few remaining sponsors. Beside them on the table, like part of a fine still-life into which he and these cards were an unnecessary intrusion, lay the empty carafe and the wine glasses from which the lovers had been drinking. Wine at ten in the morning! That was France for you. *This* was France. And he could do with a drink himself, could Tom Kelly. Maybe just a pastis, which would sit nicely with the absinthe he'd had earlier—just as a bracer, mind. Tom sighed and rubbed his temples and looked about him in the morning brightness. Up at the spire of St. Marie rising over the awnings of the market, then down at the people, gaudily, gorgeously fashionable in their clothes, their skins, their faces. France, this real France of the living, was a place he sometimes felt he only visited on these Wednesday—this Thursday—mornings. He could have been anywhere for the rest of the time, up with the stars there on his mountain, combing his way through eternity on the increasing offchance of an odd blip. That was why he was who he was—some old kook whom people like Madame Brissac and Jean-Benoît patronized without ever really knowing. That was why he'd never really got around to mastering this language which was washing all around him in persibilant waves. Jean-Benoît was still busy, flipping his towel and serving up crepes with an on-off smile of his regulation-handsome features, his wings so well tucked away that no one would ever really know he had them. Like a lot of the people who worked here, he did the job so he could take to the air in his free time. Tom, with his *trois diget pastis merci,* was never going to be much of a priority.

Tom lifted one of the cards and tried to suppress a burp as the bitter residue of absinthe flooded his mouth. The card was from the Aston University, in Birmingham, England, of all places. Now, he'd forgotten *they* were even sponsoring him. He ran his finger down the playline, and half-closed his eyes to witness a young man he'd never seen before in his life sitting at the kind of impressively wide desk that only people, in Tom's experience, who never did any real work possessed.

"Mister Kelly, it's a real pleasure to make your acquaintance..." The young man paused. He was clearly new to whatever it was he was doing, and gripping that desk as if it was perched at the top of a roller-coaster ride. "As you may have seen in the academic press, I've now taken over from Doctor Sally Normanton. I didn't know her personally, but I know that all of you who did valued her greatly, and I, too, feel saddened by the loss of a fine person and physicist..."

Tom withdrew his finger from the card for a moment, and dropped back into France. He'd only ever met the woman once. She'd been warm and lively and sympathetic, he remembered, and had moved about on

autolegs because of the advanced arthritis which, in those days at least, the vials hadn't been able to counteract. They'd sat under the mossy trees and statues in Birmingham's Centenary Square, which for him had held other memories, and she'd sighed and smiled and explained how the basic policy of her institution had gone firmly against any positive figure to the Drake Equation several decades before, but Sally Normanton herself had always kept a soft spot for that kind of stuff herself, and she'd really got into physics in the first place on the back of reading Clarke and Asimov. Not that she imagined Tom had heard of them? But Tom had, of course. They were of almost of the same generation. He'd developed a dust allergy from hunching over those thrilling, musty analog pages as a kid. They chatted merrily, and on the walk back to the campus Sally Normanton had confided as she heaved and clicked on her legs that she had control of a smallish fund. It was left over from some government work, and was his to have for as long as it took the accountants to notice. And that was more than twenty years ago. And now she was dead.

"...physicist. But in clearing out and revising her responsibilities, it's come to my attention that monies have been allocated to your project which, I regret to say..."

Tom span the thing forward until he came to the bit at the end when the young man, who had one eye green and one eye blue—and nails like talons, so perhaps he too was a flyer, although he didn't look quite thin enough and seemed too easily scared—announced that he'd left a simulacrum ai of his business self on the card, which would be happy to answer any pertinent questions, although the decision to withdraw funds was, regrettably, quite irrevocable. The ai was there, of course, to save the chance that Tom might try to bother this man of business with feeble pleas. But Tom knew he was lucky to have got what he got from that source, and even luckier that they weren't talking about suing him to take it all back.

Aston University. England. The smell of different air. Different trees. If there was one season that matched the place, a mood that always seemed to be hanging there in the background even on the coldest or hottest or wettest of days, it had to be fall, autumn. How long had it been now? Tom tried not to think—that was one equation which even to him always came back as a recurring nothing. He noticed instead that the wineglass that the pretty young girl had been drinking from bore the red imprint of her lipstick, and was almost sad to see it go, and with it the better memories he'd been trying to conjure, when Jean-Benoît finally bustled up and plonked a glass of cloudy yellow liquid, which Tom wasn't really sure that he wanted any longer, down in front of him. *Voilà. Merci.* Pidgin French as he stared at the cards from Madame Brissac's incomprehensible pigeonholes. But he drank it anyway, the pastis. Back in one. At least it got rid of the taste of the absinthe.

And the day was fine, the market was bustling. It would be a pity to spoil this frail good mood he was building with messages which probably included the words *regret, withdraw,* or at the very least, *must query*... This square, it was baguettes and Edith Piaf writ large, it was the Eiffel Tower in miniature. The warm smells of garlic and slightly dodgy drains and fine dark coffee. And those ridiculous little poodles dragged along by those long-legged women. The shouts and the gestures, the old widows in black who by now were probably younger than he was muttering to themselves and barging along with their stripy shopping bags like extras from the wrong film and scowling at this or that vial-induced wonder. And a priest in his cassock stepping from the church, pausing in the sunlight at the top of the steps to take in the scene, although he had wings behind him which he stretched as if to yawn, and his hair was scarlet. Another flyer. Tom smiled to think how he got on with his congregation, which was mostly those scowling old women, and thought about ordering—why not?—another pastis...

Then he noticed a particular figure wandering beside the stalls at the edge of the market where displays of lace billowed in the wind which blew off the karst and squeezed in a warm light breeze down between the washing-strung tenements. It couldn't be, of course. Couldn't be. It was just that lipstick on the edge of that glass which had prickled that particular memory. That, and getting a message from England, and that woman dying, and losing another income source, all of which, if he'd have let them, would have stirred up a happy-sad melange of memories. She was wearing a dark blue sleeveless dress and was standing in a bright patch of sunlight which flamed on her blonde hair and made it hard for him to see her face. She could have been anyone, but in that moment, she could have been Terr, and Tom felt the strangely conflicting sensations of wanting to run over and embrace her, and also to dig a hole for himself where he could hide forever right here beneath this café paving. He blinked. His head swam. By the time he'd refocused, the girl, the woman, had moved on. A turn of bare arm, a flash of lovely calf. Why *did* they have to change themselves like they did now? Women were perfect as they were. Always had been, as far as Tom was concerned—or as best he could remember. Especially Terr. But then perhaps that had been an illusion, too.

Tom stood up and dropped a few francs on the table and blundered off between the market stalls. That dark blue sleeveless dress, those legs, that hair. His heart was pounding as it hadn't done in years from some strange inner exertion of memory. Even if it *wasn't* her, which it obviously wasn't, he still wanted to know, to see. But St. Hilaire was Thursday-busy. The teeming market swallowed him up and spat him out again downhill where the steps ran beside the old battlements and the river flashed under the willow trees, then uphill by the bright, expensive shops along the Rue de Commerce, which offered in their windows designer clothes, designer vials, designer lives. Fifteen different brands of colloquial French in bottles like

costly perfumes and prices to match. Only you crushed them between your teeth and the glass tasted like spun sugar and tiny miracles of lavish engineering poured down your throat and through the walls of your belly and into your bloodstream where they shed their protective coating and made friends with your immune system and hitched a ride up to your brain. Lessons were still necessary (they played that down on the packaging) but only one or two, and they involved little more than sitting in flashing darkness in a Zen-like state of calm induced by various drug suppositories (this being France) while nanomolecules fiddled with your sites of language and cognition until you started *parlez vous*-ing like a native. Or you could grow wings, although the vials in the sports shops were even more expensive. But the dummies beyond the plateglass whispered and beckoned to Tom and fluttered about excitedly; Day-Glo fairies, urging him to make the investment in a fortnight's experience that would last a lifetime.

Tom came to an old square at the far end of the shops. The Musée de Masque was just opening, and a group of people who looked like late revelers from the night before were sitting on its steps and sharing a bottle of neat Pernod. The women had decorated their wings with silks and jewels; although by now they looked like tired hatstands. The men, but for the pulsing tattoo-like adornments they'd woven into their flesh and the pouch-like g-strings around their crotches which spoke, so to speak, volumes, were virtually naked. Their skin was heliotrope. Tom guessed it was the color for this season. To him, though, they looked like a clutch of malnourished, crash-landed gargoyles. He turned back along the street, and found his Citroën pretty much where he thought he'd left it by the *alimentation générale* where he'd already purchased next month's supplies, and turned the old analog key he'd left in the ignition, and puttered slowly out across the cobbles, supplies swishing and jingling in their boxes, then gave the throttle an angry shove, and roared out towards midday, the heat, the scattered olive trees and the grey-white bulk of his mountain.

Dusk. The coming stars. His time. His mountain. Tom stood outside his sparse wooden hut, sipping coffee and willing the sun to unravel the last of her glowing clouds from the horizon. Around him on the large, flat, mile-wide slightly west-tilted slab of pavement limestone glittered the silver spiderweb of his tripwires, which were sheening with dew as the warmth of the day evaporated, catching the dying light as they and he waited for the stars.

He amazed himself sometimes, the fact that he was up here doing this, the fact that he was still searching for anything at all at the ripe nearly-old age of near-seventy, let alone for something as wild and extravagant as intelligent extra-terrestrial life. Where had it began? What had started him on this quest of his? Had it really been those SF stories—dropping through the Stargate with Dave Bowman, or staggering across the sandworm deserts of Arrakis with Paul Atreides? Was it under rocks in Eastport when he was a kid raising the tiny translucent crabs to the light, or was it down the wires on the few remaining SETI websites when he wasn't that much older? Was it pouring through the library screens at college, or was it now as he stood looking up at the gathering stars from his lonely hut on this lonely French mountain? Or was it somewhere else? Somewhere out there, sweet and glorious and imponderable?

Most of the people he still knew, or at least maintained a sort of long-distance touch with, had given up with whatever had once bugged them some time ago; the ones, in fact, who seemed the happiest, the most settled, the most at ease with their lives—and thus generally had least to do with him—had never really started worrying about such things in the first place. They took vacations in places like St. Hilaire, they grew wings or gills just like the kids did and acquired fresh languages and outlooks as they swallowed their vials and flew or dived in their new element. He put down his cup of coffee, which was already skinned and cold, and then he smiled to himself—he still couldn't help it—as he watched more of the night come in. Maybe it was that scene in *Fantasia,* watching it on video when he was little more than a baby. The one set to the music he recognized later as Beethoven's Pastoral. Those cavorting cherubs and centaurs, and then at the end, after Zeus has packed away his thunderbolts, the sun sets, and Morpheus comes over in a glorious cloak of night. The idea of life amid the stars had already been with him then, filling him as he squatted entranced before the screen and the Baltimore traffic buzzed by outside unnoticed, filled with something that was like a sweet sickness, like his mother's embrace when she thought he was sleeping, like the ache of cola and ice cream. That sweet ache had been with him, he decided as he looked up and smiled as the stars twinkled on and goosebumps rose on his flesh, ever since.

So Tom had become a nocturnal beast, a creature of twilights and dawns. He supposed that he'd become so used to his solitary life up here on this wide and empty mountain that he'd grown a little agora—or was it claustro?—phobic. Hence the need for the absinthe this morning—or at least the extra slug of it. The Wednesdays, the bustle of the town, had become quite incredible to him, a blast of light and smell and sound and contact, almost like those VR suites where you tumbled through huge fortresses on strange planets and fought and cannon-blasted those ever-imaginary aliens. Not that Tom had ever managed to bring himself to do such a thing. As the monsters glowered over him, jaws agape and fangs dripping, all he'd wanted to do was make friends and ask them about their customs and religions and mating habits. He'd never got through many levels of those VR games, the few times he'd tried them. Now he thought about it, he really hadn't got

through so very many levels of the huge VR game known as life, either.

Almost dark. A time for secrets and lovers and messages. A time for the clink of wine-glasses and the soft *puck* of opening bottles. The west was a faint red blush of clouds and mountains, which glimmered in a pool on the fading slope of the mountain. Faint grey shapes were moving down there; from the little Tom could see now from up here, they could have been stray flares and impulses from the failing remaining rods and cones in his weary eyes—random scraps of data—but he knew from other nights and mornings that they were the shy ibex which grazed this plateau, and were drawn here from miles around along with many other creatures simply because most of the moisture that fell here in the winter rains and summer storms drained straight through the cave-riddled limestone. Sometimes, looking that way on especially clear nights, Tom would catch the glimmer of stars as if a few had fallen there, although on the rare occasions he'd trekked to the pool down across difficult slopes, he'd found that, close up, it was a disappointment. A foul brown oval of thick amoebic fluid surrounded by cracked and caked mud, it was far away from the sweet oasis he'd imagined where bright birds and predators and ruminants all bowed their heads to sip the silver cool liquid and forget, in the brief moments of their parched and mutual need, their normal animosities. But it was undeniably a waterhole, and as such important to the local fauna. It had even been there on the map all those years ago, when he'd been looking for somewhere to begin what he was sure was to be the remainder of his life's work. A blue full stop, a small ripple of hope and life. He'd taken it as a sign.

Tom went inside his hut and span the metal cap off one of the cheap but decent bottles of *vin de table* with which he generally started the evenings. He took a swig from it, looked around without much hope for a clean glass, then took another swig. One handed, he tapped up the keys of one of his bank of machines. Lights stuttered, cooling fans chirruped like crickets or groaned like wounded bears. It was hot in here from all this straining antique circuitry. There was strong smell of singed dust and warm wires, and a new dim fizzing sound which could have been a spark which, although he turned his head this way and that, as sensitive to the changes in this room's topography as a shepherd to the moods of his flock, Tom couldn't quite locate. But no matter. He'd wasted most of last night fiddling and tweaking to deal with the results of a wine spillage, and didn't want to waste this one doing the same. There was something about today, this not-Wednesday known as Thursday, which filled Tom with an extra sense of urgency. He'd grounded himself far too firmly on the side of science and logic to believe in such rubbish as premonitions, but still he couldn't help but wonder if this wasn't how they felt, the Hawkings and the Einsteins and the Newtons—the Cooks and the Columbuses, for that matter—in the moment before they made their Big Discovery, their final break. Of course, any such project, viewed with hindsight, could be no more than a gradual accumulation of knowledge, a hunch that a particular area of absent knowledge might be fruitfully explored, followed generally by years of arse-licking and fund-searching and peer-group head-shaking and rejected papers and hard work during which a few extra scraps of information made that hunch seem more and more like a reasonably intelligent guess, even if everyone else was heading in the opposite direction and thought that you were, to coin a phrase once used by Tom's cosmology professor, barking up the wrong fucking tree in the wrong fucking forest. In his bleaker moments, Tom sometimes wondered if there was a tree there at all.

But not now. The data, of course, was processed automatically, collected day and night according to parameters and wavelengths he'd pre-determined but at a speed which, even with these processors, sieved and reamed out information by the gigabyte per second. He'd set up the search systems to flash and bleep and make whatever kind of electronic racket they were capable of if they ever came upon any kind of anomaly. Although he was routinely dragged from his bleary daytime slumbers by a surge in power or a speck of fly dirt or rabbit gnawing the tripwires or a stray cosmic ray, it was still his greatest nightmare that they would blithely ignore the one spike, the one regularity or irregularity, that might actually mean something—or that he'd be so comatose he'd sleep though it. And then of course the computers couldn't look everywhere. By definition, with the universe being as big as it was, they and Tom were always missing something. The something, in fact, was so large it was close to almost everything. Not only was there all the data collected for numerous other astronomical and non-astronomical purposes which he regularly downloaded from his satellite link and stored on the disks which, piled and waiting in one corner, made a silvery pillar almost to the ceiling, but the stars themselves were always out there, the stars and their inhabitants. Beaming down in real-time. Endlessly.

So how to sort, where to begin? Where was the best place on all the possible radio wavelengths to start looking for messages from little green men? It was a question which had first been asked more than a century before, and to which, of all the many many guesses, one still stood out as the most reasonable. Tom turned to that frequency now, live through the tripwires out on the karst, and powered up the speakers and took another slug of *vin de table* and switched on the monitor and sat there listening, watching, drinking. That dim hissing of microwaves, the cool dip of interstellar quietude amid the babble of the stars and the gas clouds and the growl of the big bang and the spluttering quasars, not to mention all the racket that all the other humans on earth and around the solar system put out. The space between the emissions of interstellar hydrogen and hydroxyl radical at round about 1420 MHz. which was known as the waterhole; a phrase which

reflected not only the chemical composition of water, but also the idea of a place where, just as the shy ibex clustered to quench themselves at dusk and dawn, all the varied species of the universe might gather after a weary day to exchange wondrous tales.

Tom listened to the sound of the waterhole. What were the chances, with him sitting here, of anything happening right now? Bleep, bleep. Bip, bip. Greetings from the planet Zarg. Quite, quite impossible. But then, given all the possibilities in the universe, what were the chances of him, Tom Kelly, sitting here on this particular mountain at this particular moment with this particular bank of equipment and this particular near-empty bottle of *vin de table* listening to this frequency in the first place? That was pretty wild in itself. Wild enough, in fact—he still couldn't help it—to give him goosebumps. Life itself was such an incredible miracle. In fact, probably unique, if one was to believe the odds of which was assigned to it by the few eccentric souls who still bothered to tinker with the Drake Equation. That was the problem.

He forced himself to stand up, stretch, leave the room, the speakers still hissing with a soft sea-roar, the monitor flickering and jumping. The moment when the transmission finally came through was bound to when you turned your back. It stood to reason. A watched kettle, after all... And not that he was superstitious. So he wandered out into the night again, which was now starry and marvelous and moonless and complete, and he tossed the evening's first empty into the big dumpster and looked up at the heavens, and felt that swell in his chest and belly he'd felt those more than sixty years ago which was still like the ache of cola and ice cream. And had he eaten? He really couldn't remember, although he was pretty sure he'd fixed some coffee. This darkness was food enough for him, all the pouring might of the stars. Odd to say, but on nights like this, the darkness had a glow to it like something finely wrought, finally polished, a luster and a sheen. You could believe in God. You could believe in anything. And the tripwires were still just visible, the vanishing trails like tiny shooting stars criss-crossing this arid limestone plain as they absorbed the endless transmission. They flowed towards the bowl of darkness which was the hidden valley, the quiet waterhole, the flyers sleeping in their beds in St. Hilaire, dreaming of thermals, twitching their wings. Tom wondered if Madame Brissac slept. It was hard to imagine her anywhere other than standing before her pigeonholes in the office de poste, waiting for the next poor sod she could make life difficult for. The pigeonholes themselves, whatever code it was that she arranged them in, really would be worth making the effort to find out about on the remote chance that, Madame Brissac being Madame Brissac, the information was sorted in a way that Tom's computers, endlessly searching the roar of chaos for order, might have overlooked. And he also wondered if it wasn't time already for another bottle, one of the plastic liter ones, which tasted like shit if you started on them, but were fine if you had something half-decent first to take off the edge...

A something—a figure—was walking up the track towards him. No, not a fluke, and not random data, and certainly not an ibex. Not Madame Brissac either, come to explain her pigeonholes and apologize for her years of rudeness. Part of Tom was watching the rest of Tom in quiet amazement as his addled mind and tired eyes slowly processed the fact that he wasn't alone, and that the figure was probably female, and could almost have been, no looked like, in fact was, the woman in the dark blue dress he'd glimpsed down by the lace stalls in the market that morning. And she really did bear a remarkable resemblance to Terr, at least in the sole dim light which emanated from the monitors inside his hut. The way she walked. The way she was padding across the bare patch of ground in front of the tripwires. That same lightness. And then her face. And her voice.

"Why do you have to live so bloody far up here Tom? The woman I asked in the post office said it was just up the road..."

He shrugged. He was floating. His arms felt light, his hands empty. "That would be Madame Brissac."

"Would it? Anyway, she was talking rubbish."

"You should have tried asking in French."

"I *was* speaking French. My poor feet. It's taken me bloody hours."

Tom had to smile. The stars were behind Terr, and they were shining on her once-blonde hair, which the years had silvered to the gleam of those tripwires, and touched the lines around her mouth as she smiled. He felt like crying and laughing. Terr. "Well, that's Madame Brissac for you."

"So? Are you going to invite me inside?"

"There isn't much of an inside."

Terr took another step forward on her bare feet. She was real. So close to him. He could smell the dust on her salt flesh. Feel and hear her breathing. She was Terr alright. He wasn't drunk or dreaming, or at least not that drunk yet; he'd only had—what?—two bottles of wine so far all evening. And she had and hadn't changed.

"Well," she said, "that's Tom Kelly for you, too, isn't it?"

The idea of sitting in the hut was ridiculous on a night like this. And the place, as Tom stumbled around in it and slewed bottles off the table and shook rubbish off the chairs, was a dreadful, terrible mess. So he hauled two chairs out into the night for them to sit on, and the table to go between, and found unchipped glasses

from somewhere, and gave them a wipe to get rid of the mold, and ferreted around in the depths of his boxes until he found the solitary bottle of Santernay le Chenay 2058 he'd been saving for First Contact—or at least until he felt too depressed—and lit one of the candles he kept for when the generator went down. Then he went searching for a corkscrew, ransacking cupboards and drawers and cursing under his breath at the ridiculousness of someone who got through as much wine as he did not being able to lay his hands upon one—but then the cheaper bottles were all screw-capped, and the really cheap plastic things had tops a blind child could pop off one-handed. He was breathless when he finally sat down. His heart ached. His face throbbed. His ears were singing.

"How did you find me, Terr?"

"I told you, I asked that woman in the post office. Madame Brissac."

"I mean..." He used both hands to still the shaking as he sloshed wine from the bottle. "...here in France, in St. Hilaire, on this mountain."

She chuckled. She sounded like the Terr of old speaking to him down the distance of an antique telephone line. "I did a search for you. One of those virtual things, where you send an ai out like a genie from a bottle. But would you believe I had to explain to it that SETI meant the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence? It didn't have the phrase in its standard vocabulary. But it found you anyway, once I'd sorted that out. You have this old-fashioned website-thingy giving information on your project here and inviting new sponsors. You say it will be a day-by-day record of setbacks, surprises and achievements. You even offer tee-shirts. By the look of it, it was last updated about twenty years ago. You can virtually see the dust on it through the screen..."

Tom laughed. Sometimes, you had to. "The tee-shirts never really took off..." He studied his glass, which also had a scum of dust floating on it, like most of his life. The taste of this good wine—sitting here—everything—was strange to him.

"Oh, and she sent me across the square to speak to this incredibly handsome waiter who works in this café. Apparently, you forgot these..." Terr reached into the top of her dress, and produced the cards he must have left on the table. They were warm when he took them, filled with a sense of life and vibrancy he doubted was contained in any of the messages. Terr. And her own personal filing system.

"And what about you, Terr?"

"What do you mean?"

"All these years, I mean I guess it's pretty obvious what *I've* been doing—"

"—which was what you always said..."

"Yes. But you, Terr. I've thought about you once or twice. Just occasionally..."

"Mmmm." She smiled at him over her glass, through the candlelight. "Let's just talk about *now* for a while, shall we, Tom? That, is, if you'll put up with me?"

"Fine." His belly ached. His hands, as he took another long slug of this rich good wine, were still trembling.

"Tom, you haven't said the obvious thing yet."

"Which is?"

"That I've changed. Although we both have, I suppose. Time being time."

"You look great."

"You were always good at compliments."

"That was because I always meant them."

"And you're practical at the bottom of it, Tom. Or at least you were. I used to like that about you, too. Even if we didn't always agree about it..."

With Tom it had always been one thing, one obsession. With Terr, it had to be everything. She'd wanted the whole world, the universe. And it was there even now, Tom could feel it quivering in the night between them, that division of objectives, a loss of contact, as if they were edging back towards the windy precipice which had driven them apart in the first place.

"Anyway," he said stupidly, just to fill the silence, "if you don't like how you look these days, all you do is take a vial."

"What? And be ridiculous—like those women you see along Oxford Street and Fifth Avenue, with their fake furs, their fake smiles, their fake skins? Youth is for the young, Tom. Always was, and always will be. Give them their chance, is what I say. After all, we had ours. And they're so much better at it than we are."

Terr put down her glass on the rough table, leaned back and stretched on the rickety chair. Her hair sheened back from her shoulders, and looked almost blonde for a moment. Darkness hollowed in her throat. "When you get to my age, Tom—*our* age. It just seems... Looking back is more important than looking forward..."

"Is that why you're here?"

A more minor stretch and shrug. Her flesh whispered and seemed to congeal around her throat in stringy clumps. Her eyes hollowed, and the candlelight went out in them. Her arms thinned. Tom found himself

wishing there were either more illumination, or less. He wanted to see Terr as she was, or cloaked in total darkness; not like this, twisting and changing like the ibex at the twilight waterhole. So perhaps candlelight was another thing that the young should reserve for themselves, like the vials, like flying, like love and faith and enthusiasm. Forget about romance—what you needed at his, at their, ages, was to *know.* You wanted certainty. And Tom himself looked, he knew, from his occasional forays in front of a mirror, like a particularly vicious cartoon caricature of the Tom Kelly that Terr remembered; the sort of thing that Gerald Scarfe had done to Reagan and Thatcher in the last century. The ruined veins in his cheeks and eyes. The bruises and swellings. Those damn age spots which had recently started appearing—gravestone marks, his grandmother had once called them. He was like Tom Kelly hungover after a fight in a bar, with a bout of influenza on top of that, and then a bad case of sunburn, and struggling against the influence of the gravity of a much larger planet. That was pretty much what aging felt like, too, come to think of it.

Flu, and too much gravity.

He'd never been one for chat-up lines. He'd had the kind of natural not-quite regular looks when he was young which really didn't need enhancing—which was good, because he'd never have bothered, or been able to afford it—but he had a shyness which came out mostly like vague disinterest when he talked to girls. The lovelier they were, the more vague and disinterested Tom became. But this woman or girl he happened to find himself walking beside along the canals of this old and once-industrial city called Birmingham after one of those parties when the new exchange students were supposed to meet up, she was different. She was English for a start, which to Tom, a little-traveled American on this foreign shore, seemed both familiar and alien. Everything she said, every gesture, had a slightly different slant to it, which he found strange, intriguing...

She'd taken him around the canals to Gas Street Basin, the slick waters sheened with antique petrol, antique fog, and along the towpath to the Sealife Centre, where deep-sea creatures out of Lovecraft mouthed close to the tripleglass of their pressurized tanks. Then across the iron bridges of the Worcester and Birmingham Canal to a pub. Over her glass of wine, Terr had explained that an American president had once sat here in this pub and surprised the locals and drunk a pint of bitter during some world conference. Her hair was fine blonde. Her eyes were stormy green. She'd shrugged off the woolen coat with a collar that had brushed the exquisite line of her neck and jaw as she walked in a way that had made Tom envy it. Underneath, she was wearing a sleeveless dark blue dress which was tight around her hips and smallish breasts, and showed her fine legs. Of course, he envied that dress as well. There was a smudged red crescent at the rim of the glass made by her lipstick. Terr was studying literature then, an arcane enough subject in itself, and for good measure she'd chosen as her special field the kind of stories of the imaginary future which had been popular for decades until the real and often quite hard to believe present had finally extinguished them. Tom, who'd been immersed in such stuff for much of his teenage years, almost forgot his reticence as he recommended John Varley, of whom she hadn't even heard, and that she avoid the late-period Heinlein, and then to list his own particular favorites, which had mostly been Golden Age writers (yes, yes, she knew the phrase) like Simak and Van Vogt and Wyndham and Sheckley. And then there was Lafferty, and Cordwainer Smith...

Eventually, sitting at a table in the top room of that bar where an American president might once have sat which overlooked the canal where the long boats puttered past with their antique petrol motors, bleeding their colors into the mist, Terr had steered Tom away from science fiction, and nudged him into talking about himself. He found out later that the whole genre of SF was already starting to bore her in any case. And he discovered that Terr had already worked her way through half a dozen courses, and had grown bored with all of them. She was bright enough to get a feel for any subject very quickly, and in the process to convince some new senior lecturer that, contrary to all the evidence on file, she finally had found her true focus in medieval history or classics or economics. And she was quick—incredibly so, by Tom's standards—at languages. That would have given her a decent career in any other age; even as she sat there in her blue dress in that Birmingham pub, he could picture her beside that faceless American president, whispering words in his ears. But by then it was already possible for any normally intelligent human to acquire any new language in a matter of days. Deep therapy. Bio-feedback. Nano-enhancement. Out in the real world, those technologies that Tom had spent his teenage years simply dreaming about as he wondered over those dusty analog pages had been growing at an exponential rate.

But Terr, she fluttered from enthusiasm to enthusiasm, flower to flower, sipping its nectar, then once again spreading her wings and wafting off to some other faculty. And people, too. Terr brought that same incredible focus to bear on everyone she met as well—or at least those who interested her—understanding, absorbing, taking everything in.

She was even doing it now, Tom decided as they sat together all these years later outside his hut on this starlit French mountain. This Terr who changed and unchanged in the soft flood of candlelight across this battered table was reading him like a book. Every word, every gesture: the way this bottle of wine, good

though it was, wouldn't be anything like enough to see him through the rest of this night. She was feeling the tides of the world which had borne him here with all his hopes still somehow intact like Noah in his Ark, and then withdrawn and left him waiting, beached, dry and drowning.

"What are you thinking?"

He shrugged. But for once, the truth seemed easy. "That pub you took me to, the first time we met."

"You mean the Malt House?"

Terr was bright, quick. Even now. Of course she remembered.

"And you went on and on about SF," she added.

"Did I? I suppose I did..."

"Not really, Tom, but I'd sat through a whole bloody lecture of the stuff that morning, and I'd decided I'd had enough of it—of any kind of fiction. I realized I wanted something that was fabulous, but real."

"That's always been a tall order..." Terr had been so lovely back then. That blue coat, the shape of her lips on the wineglass she'd been drinking. Those stormy green eyes. Fabulous, but real. But it was like the couple he'd seen that morning. What had she ever seen in him?

"But then you told me you planned to prove that there was other intelligent life in the universe, Tom. Just like that. I don't know why, but it just sounded so wonderful. Your dream, and then the way you could be so matter-of-fact about it..."

Tom gripped his glass a little tighter, and drank the last of it. His dream. He could feel it coming, the next obvious question.

"So did it ever happen?" Terr was now asking. "Did you ever find your little green men, Tom? But then I suppose I'd have heard. Remember how you promised to tell me? Or at least it might have roused you to post some news on that poor old website of yours." She chuckled with her changed voice, slightly slurring the words. But Terr, Tom remembered, could get drunk on half a glass of wine. She could get drunk on nothing. Anything. "I'm sorry, Tom. It's your life, isn't it? And what the hell do I know? It was one of the things I always liked about you, your ability to dream in that practical way of yours. Loved..."

Loved? Had she said that? Or was that another blip, stray data?

"So you must tell me, Tom. How's it going? After I've come all this way. You and your dream."

The candle was sinking. The stars were pouring down on him. And the wine wasn't enough, he needed absinthe—but his dream. And where to begin? *Where* to begin?

"D'you remember the Drake Equation?" Tom asked.

"Yes, I remember," Terr said. "I remember the Drake Equation. You told me all about the Drake Equation that first day on our walk from that pub..." She tilted her head to one side, studying the glimmer of Aries in the west as if she was trying to remember the words of some song they'd once shared. "Now, how exactly did it go?"

Until that moment, none of it had yet seemed quite real to Tom. This night, and Terr being here. And, as the candle flickered, she still seemed to twist and change from Terr as he remembered to the Terr she was now in each quickening pulse of the flame. But with the Drake Equation, with that Tom Kelly was anchored. And how *did* it go, in any case?

That long and misty afternoon. Walking beside the canal towpaths from that pub and beneath the dripping tunnels and bridges all the way past the old factories and the smart houses to the city's other university out in Edgbaston as the streetlights came on. He'd told Terr about a radio astronomer named Frank Drake who—after all the usual false alarms and funding problems which, even in its embryonic stage back in the middle of the last century, had beset SETI—had tried to narrow the whole question down to a logical series of parameters, which could then be brought together in an equation which, if calculated accurately, would neatly reveal a figure *N* which would represent a good estimate for the number of intelligent and communicating species currently in our galaxy. If the figure was found to be high, then space would be aswarm with the signals of sentient species anxious to talk to each other. If the figure was found to be 1, then we were, to all intents and purposes, alone in the universe. Drake's equation involved the number of stars in our galaxy, and chances of those stars having habitable planets, and then those planets actually bearing life, and of that life evolving into intelligence, and of that intelligence wanting to communicate with other intelligences, and of that communication happening in an era in human history when we humans were capable of listening—which amounted to a microscopic *now.*

And they *had* listened, at least those who believed, those who wanted that number *N* at the end of the Drake Equation to be up in the tens or hundreds or thousands. They skived spare radiotelescopy and mainframe processing time and nagged their college principals and senators and fellow dreamers for SETI funding. Some, like a project at Arecibo, had even beamed out messages, although the message was going out in any case, the whole babble of radio communications had been spreading out into space from Earth at the speed of light since Marconi's first transmission... *We are here. Earth is alive.* And they listened. They listened for a reply. Back then, when he had met Terr, Tom had still believed in the Drake Equation with a

near-religious vehemence, even if many others were beginning to doubt it and funding was getting harder to maintain. As he walked with her beneath the clocktower through the foggy lights of Birmingham's other campus, his PC at his college digs in Erdington was chewing through the data he'd downloaded from a SETI website while his landlord's cat slept on it. Tom was sure that, what with the processing technology that was becoming available, and then the wide-array radio satellites, it was only a matter of time and persistence before that first wonderful spike of First Contact came through. And it had stood him in good stead, now he came to think of it, had the Drake Equation, as he walked with Terr on that misty English autumn afternoon. One of the most convoluted chat-up lines in history. But, at least that once, it had worked.

They took the train back to the city and emerged onto New Street as the lights and the traffic fogged the evening and at some point on their return back past the big shops and the law courts to the campus Terr had leaned against him and he had put his arm around her. First contact, and the tension between them grew sweet and electric and a wonderful ache had swelled in his throat and belly until they stopped and kissed in the dank quietude of one of the old subways while the traffic swept overhead like a distant sea. Terr. The taste of her mouth, and at last he got to touch that space between her jaw and throat that he had been longing to touch all afternoon. Terr, who was dark and alive in his arms and womanly and English and alien. Terr, who closed her stormy eyes as he kissed her and then opened them again and looked at him with a thrilling candor. After that, everything was different.

Terr had a zest for life, an enthusiasm for everything. And she had an old car, a nondescript Japanese thing with leaky sills, a corrupted GPS and a badly botched hydrogen conversion. Tom often fiddled under the bonnet to get the thing started before they set out on one of their ambitious weekend trips across the cool and misty country of love and life called England he suddenly found himself in. South to the biscuit-colored villages of the Cotswolds, north to the grey hills of the Peak District, and then further, further up the map as autumn—he could no longer think of it as fall—rattled her leaves and curled up her smoky clouds and faded and winter set in, juddering for hours along the old public lanes of the motorways as the sleek new transports swept past outside them with their occupants tele-conferencing or asleep. But Tom liked the sense of effort, the sense of getting there, the rumble of the tires and the off-center pull of the steering, swapping over with Terr every hour or two, and the way the hills rose and fell but always got bigger as they headed north. And finally stepping out, and seeing the snow and the sunlight on the high flanks, and feeling the clean bite of the wind. They climbed fells where the tracks had long-vanished and the sheep looked surprised at these humans who had invaded their territory. Hot and panting, they stopped in the lee of cols, and looked down at all the tiny details of the vast world they had made. By then, Terr had had changed options from SF to the early Romantics, poets such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, and she would chant from the *Prelude* in her lovely voice as they clambered up Scarfell and the snow and the lakes gleamed around them and Tom struggled, breathless, to keep up until they finally rested, sweating and freezing, and Terr sat down and smiled at him and pulled off her top layers of fleece and Gore-Tex and began to unlace her boots. It was ridiculous, the feel of her snow and her body intermingled, and the chant of her breath in his ear, urging him on as the wind and her fingers and the shadows of the clouds swept over his naked back. Dangerous, too, in the mid of winter—you'd probably die from exposure here if you lapsed into a post-coital sleep. But it was worth it. Everything. He'd never felt more alive.

Terr huddled against him in a col. Her skin was taut, freezing, as the sweat evaporated from between them. Another hour, and the sun would start to set. Already, it was sinking down through the clouds over Helvellyn with a beauty that Tom reckoned even old Wordsworth would have been hard put to describe. His fingers played over the hardness of Terr's right nipple, another lovely peak Wordsworth might have struggled to get over in words. It was totally, absolutely, cold, but, to his pleasant surprise, Tom found that he, too, was getting hard. He pressed his mouth against Terr's shoulder, ran his tongue around that lovely hollow beneath her ear. She was shivering already, but he felt her give a shiver within the shiver, and traced his fingers down her belly, and thought of the stars which would soon be coming, and perhaps of finding one of those abandoned farmhouses where they could spend the night, and of Terr's sweet moisture, and of licking her there. She tensed and shivered again, which he took as encouragement, even though he was sure, as the coat slid a few inches from his shoulder, that he felt a snowflake settle on his bare back. Then, almost abruptly, she drew away.

"Look over there, Tom. Can you see them—those specks, those colors?"

Tom looked, and sure enough, across in the last blazing patch of sunlight, a few people were turning like birds. They could have been using microlites, but on a day like this, the sound of their engines would have cut through the frozen air. But Tom had a dim recollection of reading of a new craze, still regarded as incredibly dangerous, both physically and mentally, whereby you took a gene-twist in a vial, and grew wings, just like in a fairy tale, or an SF story.

Tom had dreamed, experienced, all the possibilities. He'd loved those creatures in *Fantasia,* half-human,

half-faun; those beautiful winged horses. And not much later, he'd willed the green-eyed monsters and robots whom the cartoon superheroes battled with to put their evil plans into practice at least once. Then there were the old episodes of *Star Trek*—the older, the better—and all those other series where the crews of warp-driven starships calmly conversed around long florescent-lit tables with computer-generated aliens and men in rubber masks. By the age of eight, he'd seen galaxy-wide empires rise and fall, and tunneled though ice planets, he'd battled with the vast and still-sentient relics of ancient conflicts... And he found the pictures he could make in his head from the dusty books he discovered for sale in an old apple box when they were closing down the local library were better than anything billion dollar Hollywood could generate. And it seemed to him that the real technology which he had started to study at school and to read up on in his spare time was always just a breakthrough or two away from achieving one or other of the technological feats which would get future, the real future for which he felt an almost physical craving, up and spinning. The starships would soon be ready to launch, even if NASA was running out of funding. The photon sails were spreading, although most of the satellites spinning around the earth seemed to be broadcasting virtual shopping and porn. The wormholes through time and dimension were just a quantum leap away. And the marvelous worlds, teeming with emerald clouds and sentient crimson oceans, the vast diamond cities and the slow beasts of the gasclouds with their gaping mouths spanning fractions of a lightyear, were out there waiting to be found. So, bright kid that he was, walking the salt harbors of Baltimore with his mother and gazing at the strange star-creatures in their luminous tanks at the National Aquarium long before he met Terr, he'd gone to sleep at nights with the radio on, but tuned between the station to the billowing hiss of those radio waves, spreading out. *We are here. Earth is alive.* Tom was listening, and waiting for a reply.

Doing well enough at exams and aptitudes at school to get to the next level without really bothering, he toyed with the cool physics of cosmology and the logic of the stars, and followed the tangled paths of life through chemistry and biology, and listened to the radio waves, and tinkered with things mechanical and electrical and gained a competence at computing and engineering, and took his degree in Applied Physics at New Colombia, where he had an on-off thing with a psychology undergrad, during which he'd finally got around to losing his virginity before—as she herself put it the morning after; as if, despite all the endearments and promises, she was really just doing him a favor—*it* lost him.

Postgrad time, and the cosmology weirdoes went one way, and the maths bods another, and the computer nerds went thataway, and physics freaks like Tom got jobs in the nano-technology companies which were then creating such a buzz on the World Stock Exchange. But Tom found the same problem at the interviews he went to that he still often found with girls, at least when he was sober—which was that people thought him vague and disinterested. But it was true in any case. His heart really wasn't in it—whatever *it* was. So he did what most shiftless young academics with a good degree do when they can't think of anything else. He took a postgrad course in another country, which, pin-in-a-map-time, really, happened to be at Aston in Birmingham, England. And there he got involved for the first time in the local SETI project, which of course was shoestring and voluntary, but had hooked on to some spare radio time that a fellow-sympathizer had made available down the wire from Jodrell Bank. Of course, he'd known all about SETI for ages; his memory of the Drake Equation went so far back into his childhood past that, like *Snow White* or the songs of the Beatles, he couldn't recall when he had first stumbled across it. But to be involved at last, to be one of the ones who was listening. And then persuading his tutor that he could twist around his work on phase-shift data filtering to incorporate SETI work into his dissertation. He was with fellow dreamers at last. It all fitted. What Tom Kelly could do on this particular planet orbiting this common-or-garden sun, and what was actually possible. Even though people had already been listening for a message from the stars for more than fifty years and the politicians and the bureaucrats and the funding bodies—even Tom's ever-patient tutor—were shaking their heads and frowning, he was sure it was just a matter of time. One final push to get there.

There was a shop in Kendal, at the edge of the Lake District. It was on a corner where the cobbled road sloped back and down, and it had, not so many years before, specialized in selling rock-climbing and fell-walking gear, along with the mint cake for which the town was justly famous and which tasted, as Terr had memorably said to Tom when she'd first got him to try it, like frozen toothpaste. You still just about see the old name of the shop—*Peak and Fell,* with a picture of a couple of hikers—beneath the garish orange paintwork of the new name which had replaced it. **EXTREME LAKES.**

There were people going in and out, and stylish couples outside posing beneath the bubble hoods of their pristine limegreen balloon-tired off-roaders. Even on this day of freezing rain, there was no doubt that the new bodily-enhanced sports for which this shop was now catering were good for business. Stood to reason, really. Nobody simply looked up at one of those rounded snowy peaks and consulted an old edition of Wainwright and then put one booted foot in front of another and walked up them any longer. Nobody except Tom and Terr, scattering those surprised black-legged sheep across the frozen landscape, finding abandoned farmhouses, making sweet freezing love which was ice cream and agony on the crackling ice of those frozen

cols. Until that moment, Tom had been entirely grateful for it.

The people themselves had an odd look about them. Tom, who had rarely done more than take the autotram to and from the campus and his digs in England until he met Terr, and since had noticed little other than her, was seeing things here he'd only read about; and barely that, seeing as he had little time for newspapers. Facial enhancements, not just the subtle kind which made you look handsomer or prettier, but things which turned your eyebrows into blue ridges, or widened your lips into pillowy creations which would have surprised Salvador Dali, let alone Mick Jagger. Breasts on the women like airbags, or nothing but roseate nipple, which of course they displayed teasingly beneath outfits which changed transparency according to the pheromones the smart fabrics detected. One creature, Tom was almost sure, had a threesome, a double-cleavage, although it was hard to tell just by glancing, and he really didn't want to give her the full-blooded stare she so obviously craved. But most of them were so *thin.* That was the thing that struck him the most strongly. They were thin as birds, and had stumpy quill-like appendages sticking from their backs. They were angels or devils, these people, creatures of myth whose wings God had clipped after they had committed some terrible theological crime, although the wings themselves could be purchased once you went inside the shop. Nike and Reebok and Shark and Microsoft and Honda at quite incredible prices. Stacked in steel racks like skipoles.

The assistant swooped on them from behind her glass counter. She had green hair, which even to Tom seemed reasonable enough, nothing more than a playful use of hair dye, but close-up it didn't actually appear to be hair at all, but some sort of sleek curtain which reminded him of cellophane. It crackled when she touched it, which she did often, as if she couldn't quite believe it was there, the way men do when they have just grown a moustache or beard. She and Terr were soon gabbling about brands and tensile strength and power-to-weight ratios and cold-down and thrillbiting and brute thermals and cloud virgins—which Tom guessed was them. But Terr was soaking it all up in the way that she soaked up anything that was new and fresh and exciting. He watched her in the mirror behind the counter, and caught the amazing flash of those storm green eyes. She looked so beautiful when she was like this; intent and surprised. And he longed to touch that meeting of her throat and jaw just beneath her ear, which was still damp from the rain and desperately needed kissing, although this was hardly the appropriate time. And those eyes. He loved the way Terr gazed right back at him when she was about to come; that look itself was enough to send him tumbling, falling into those gorgeous green nebulae, down into the spreading dark core of her pupils which were like forming stars.

"Of course, it'll take several weeks, just to make the basic bodily adjustments..."

Was the assistant talking to him? Tom didn't know or care. He edged slightly closer to the counter to hide the awkward bulge of his erection, and studied the Kendal Mint Cake, which they still had for sale. The brown and the chocolate-coated, and the standard white blocks, which did indeed taste like frozen toothpaste, but much, much sweeter. A man with jade skin and dreadfully thin arms excused-me past Tom to select a big bar, and then another. Tom found it encouraging, to think that Kendal Mint Cake was still thriving in this new age. There were medals and awards on the old-fashioned wrapping, which commemorated expeditions and treks from back in the times when people surmounted physical challenges with their unaided bodies because, as Mallory had said before he disappeared into the mists of the last ridge of Everest, they were there. But it stood to reason that you needed a lot of carbohydrate if your body was to fuel the changes which were necessary which would allow you to, as the adverts claimed, fly like a bird. Or at least flap around like a kite. Pretty much, anyway.

This was the new world of extreme sports, where, if you wanted to do something that your body wasn't up to, you simply had your body changed. Buzzing between channels a while back in search of a site which offered Carl Sagan's *Cosmos,* which to Tom, when he was feeling a bit down, was the equivalent of a warm malt whisky, he'd stumbled across a basketball match, and had paused the search engine, imagining for a moment he'd stumbled across a new version of *Fantasia,* then wondering at the extraordinary sight of these ten and twelve foot giants swaying between each other on their spindly legs, clumsy and graceful as new-born fawns. But this, after all, was the future. It was the world he was in. And Terr was right when she urged him to accept it, and with it this whole idea of flying, and then offered to help with the money, which Tom declined, ridiculously excessive though the cost of it was. He lived cheaply enough most of the time, and the bank was always happy to add more to his student loan so that he could spend the rest of his life repaying it. And he and Terr were not going the whole way, in any case. They were on the nursery slopes, they were ugly chicks still trembling in their nest, they were Dumbo teetering atop that huge ladder in the circus tent. They were cloud virgins. So the heart and circulatory enhancements, and the bone-thinning and the flesh-wasting and the new growth crystals which sent spiderwebs of carbon fiber teasing their way up through your bone marrow, the Kevlar skin that the rapids surfers used, all the stuff which came stacked with health warnings and disclaimers that would have made the Surgeon General's warning on a packet of full-strength Camels look like a nursery tale: all of that they passed on. They simply went for the basic Honda starter kits of vials and Classic ("Classic" meant boring and ordinary; even Tom had seen enough adverts to

know that) wings. That would do—at least for a beginning, Terr said ominously, between humming to herself and swinging the elegant little bag which contained the first installment of their vials as they headed out from the shop into the driving winter rain.

It was January already, and the weather remained consistently foul for weeks in its own unsettled English way, which was cold and damp, and billows and squalls, and chortling gutters and rainswept parks, and old leaves and dog mess on the slippery Birmingham pavements. The Nissan broke down again too, but in a way which was beyond Tom's skill to repair. The part he needed might as well have been borne from China on a none-too-fast sea-clipper, the time it took to come. Days and weekends, they were grounded, and sort-of living together in Tom's digs, or the pounding smoky Rastafarian fug of Terr's shared house in Handsworth. But Tom liked the Rastas; they took old-fashioned chemicals, they worshipped an old-fashioned God, and talked in their blurred and rambling way of a mythic Africa which would never exist beyond the haze of their dreams. Tom did a little ganja himself, and he did a fair amount of wine, and he lay in bed with Terr back in his digs in Erdington one night when the first men landed on Mars, and they watched the big screen on the wall from the rucked and damp sheets while the landlord's cat slept on the purring computer.

"Hey, look..." Terr squirmed closer to him. "Roll over. I want to see. I was *sure* I could feel something just then..."

"I should hope so."

Terr chuckled, and Tom rolled over. He stared at the face in the woodgrain of the old mahogany headboard. She drew back the sheets from him. The cold air. The rain at the window. The murmuring of the astronauts as they undocked and began the last slow glide. Her fingers on his bare shoulders, then on his spine. It hurt there. It felt as if her nails were digging.

"Hey!!!"

"No no no no no..." She pressed him there, her fingers tracing the source of the pain. A definite lump was rising. An outgrowth which, in another age, would have sent you haring to the doctor thinking, *cancer*...

"I'm jealous Tom. I thought I was going to be the first. It's like when I was a kid, and I concentrated hard on growing breasts."

"And it happened?"

"Obviously... Cheeky sod... A bit, anyway..." Slim and warm and womanly, she pressed a little closer. He felt her breath, her lips, down on his back where the quills were growing. She kissed him there. "I check in the mirror every morning. I try to feel there..." he felt her murmur. "It's like a magic spell, isn't it? Waiting for the vials to work. You haven't noticed anything on me yet, have you, Tom?"

"No." He turned his head and looked at Terr. She was lying on her front too, and the red light of rising Mars on the screen was shining on the perfect skin of her thighs, her buttocks, her spine, her shoulders.

"You must have been waiting for this to happen for a long time," she said.

"What?"

Her blonde hair swayed as she tipped her head towards the screen. "Men landing on Mars."

He nodded.

"Will it take much longer before they actually touch down?"

"I suppose a few minutes."

"Well, that's good news..." Terr's hand traveled down his spine. Her knuckles brushed his buttocks, raising the goosebumps. Her fingers explored him there. "Isn't it...?"

So they missed the actual instant when the lander kicked up the rusty dust of the surface, but were sharing a celebratory bottle of Asti Spumante an hour or so later when, after an interminable string of adverts, the first ever human being stepped onto the surface of another planet and claimed all its ores and energies and secrets for the benefit of the mission's various sponsors. Another figure climbed out. Amid the many logos on this one's suit there was a Honda one, which sent Tom's mind skittering back towards the growing lump on his back which he could feel like a bad spot no matter how he laid the pillows now that Terr had mentioned it. How would he *sleep* from now on? How would they make *love?* Terr on top, fluttering her Honda wings like a predator as she bowed down to eat him? It was almost a nice idea, but not quite. And the Mars astronauts, even in their suits, didn't look quite right to Tom either. The suits themselves were okay—they were grey-white, and even had the sort of longer-at-top faceplates he associated with 2001 and Hal and Dave Poole and Kubrick's incredible journey towards the alien monolith—but they were the wrong shape in the body; too long and thin. It was more like those bad old films; you half expected something horrible and inhuman to slither out of them once they got back into the lander, where it turned out to have crossed light years driven by nothing more than a simple desire to eat people's brains...

Tom poured out the rest of the Asti into his glass.

"Hey!" Terr gave him a playful push. He slopped some of it. "What about me? You've had almost all of that..."

He ambled off into the cupboard which passed for his kitchen to get another bottle of something, and stroked the landlord's cat and gave the keyboard of his PC a tweak on the way. It was processing a search in

the region of Cygnus, and not on the usual waterhole wavelength. Somebody's hunch. Not that the PC had found anything; even in those days, he had the bells and whistles rigged for *that* event. But what *was* the problem with him, he wondered, as he raked back the door of the fridge and studied its sparse contents? He was watching the first Mars landing, in bed with a naked, beautiful and sexually adventurous woman, while his PC diligently searched the stars for the crucial first sign of intelligent life. If this wasn't his dream of the future, what on earth was? And even this flying gimmick which Terr was insisting they try together—that fitted in as well, didn't it? In many ways, the technology that was causing his back to grow spines was a whole lot more impressive than the brute force and money and Newtonian physics which had driven that Martian lander from one planet to another across local space.

The problem with this manned Mars landing, as Tom had recently overheard someone remark in the university refectory, was that it had come at least four decades too late. Probably more, really. NASA could have gone pretty much straight from Apollo to a Mars project, back at the end of the delirious 1960s. Even then, the problems had been more of money than of science. Compared to politics, compared to getting the right spin and grip on the public's attention and then seeing the whole thing through Congress before something else took the headlines or the next recession or election came bounding along, the science and the engineering had been almost easy. But a first landing by 1995 at the latest, that had once seemed reasonable—just a few years after establishing the first permanent moonbase. And there really had been Mariner and Viking back in those days of hope and big-budget NASA: technically successful robot probes which had nevertheless demystified Mars and finished off H. G. Wells' Martians and Edgar Rice Burroughs' princesses and Lowell's canals in the popular mind, and which, despite Sagan's brave talk about Martian giraffes wandering by when the camera wasn't looking, had scuppered any realistic sense that there might be large and complex Martian lifeforms waiting to be fought against, interviewed, studied, dissected, argued over by theologians, or fallen in love with. Still, there were hints that life might exist on Mars at a microscopic level; those tantalizingly contradictory results from the early Viking landers, and the micro-bacteria supposedly found on Martian meteorites back on Earth. But, as the probes had got more advanced and the organic tests more accurate, even those possibilities had faded. Tom, he'd watched Mars become a dead planet both in the real world, and in the books he loved reading. The bulge-foreheaded Martians faded to primitive cave-dwellers, then to shy kangaroo-like creatures of the arid plains, until finally they became bugs dwelling around vents deep in the hostile Martian soil, then anaerobic algae, until they died out entirely.

Mars was a dead planet.

Tom unscrewed the bottle of slivovitz which was the only thing he could find, and went back to bed with Terr, and they watched the figures moving about on the Martian landscape between messages from their sponsors. They were half Martians already. Not that they could breathe the emaciated atmosphere, or survive without their suits on, but nevertheless they had been radically transformed before the launch. Up in space, in null gravity, their bones and their flesh and their nutritional requirements had been thinned down to reduce the payload, then boosted up just a little as they approached Mars a year and a half later so they could cope with the planet's lesser pull. They were near-sexless creatures with the narrow heads and bulging eyes of a thyroid condition, fingers as long and bony as ET's. The way they looked, far worse than any flyers, Tom figured that you really didn't need to search further than these telecasts to find aliens on Mars. Or Belsen victims.

The slivovitz and the whole thing got to him. He had a dim recollection of turning off the screen at some point, and of making love to Terr, and touching the hollow of her back and feeling a tiny sharp edge there sliding beneath her skin; although he wasn't quite sure about that, or whether he'd said anything to her afterwards about growing bigger breasts, which had been a joke in any case. In the morning, when she had gone, he also discovered that he had broken up the Honda vials and flushed them down the communal toilet. Bits of the spun glass stuff were still floating there. He nearly forgot his slivovitz headache as he pissed them down. This was one thing he'd done when he was drunk he was sure he'd never regret.

The winter faded. Terr went flying. Tom didn't. The spines on her back really weren't so bad; the wings themselves were still inorganic in those days, carbon fiber and smart fabric, almost like the old microlites, except you bonded them to the quills with organic superglue just before you took the leap, and unbonded them again and stacked them on the roofrack of your car at the end of the day. Terr's were sensitive enough when Tom touched them, licked them, risked brushing their sharp edges against his penis to briefly add a new and surprising spice to their love-making, although if he grew too rough, too energetic, both he and they were prone to bleed.

Terr was unbothered about his decision to stop taking the vials in any case. After all, it was his life. And why do something you don't want to do just to please me? she'd said with her characteristic logic. But Terr was moving with a different set now, with the flyers, and their relationship, as spring began and the clean thermals started to rise on the flanks of Skiddaw and Helvellyn and Ben Nevis, began to have that ease and forgetfulness which Tom, little versed though he was in the ways of love, still recognized as signaling the

beginning of the end. Terr had always been one for changing enthusiasms in any case. At university, she was now talking of studying creative writing, or perhaps dropping the literature thing entirely and swapping over to cultural studies, whatever the hell that was. It would be another one of Terr's enthusiasms, just, as Tom was coming to realize, had been Tom Kelly.

He still saw plenty of Terr for a while, although it was more often in groups. He enjoyed the jazz with her at Ronnie Scott's and sat around fluorescent tables in the smart bars along Broad Street with people whose faces often reminded him of those rubber-masked creatures you used to get in *Star Trek.* The world was changing—just like Terr, it didn't feel like it was quite *his* any longer, even though he could reach out and touch it, taste it, smell it. He drove up with her once or twice to the Lakes, and watched her make that first incredible leap from above the pines on Skiddaw and across the wind-rippled grey expanse of Bassenthwaite Lake. He felt nothing but joy and pride at that moment, and almost wished that he, too, could take to the air, but soon, Terr was just another colored dot, swooping and circling in the lemony spring sunlight on her Honda-logoed wings, and no longer a cloud virgin. He could block her out with the finger of one hand.

So they drifted apart, Tom and Terr, and part of Tom accepted this fact—it seemed like a natural and organic process; you meet, you exchange signals of mutual interest, you fall in love and fuck each other brainless for a while and live in each other's skin and hair, then you get to know your partner's friends and foibles and settle into a warmer and easier affection as you explore new hobbies and positions and fetishes until the whole thing becomes just a little stale—and part of Tom screamed and hollered against the loss, and felt as if he was drowning as the sounds, the desperate, pleading signals he wanted to make, never quite seemed to reach the surface. He had, after all, always been shy and diffident with women. Especially the pretty ones. Especially, now, Terr.

At the end of the summer term, Tom got his postgrad diploma based around his SETI work and Terr didn't get anything. Just as she'd done with Tom, she'd worn Aston University out as she explored its highways and byways and possibilities with that determination that was so uniquely Terr. Next year, if any would take her and she could gather up the money, she'd have to try another enthusiasm at another university. They hadn't been lovers for months, which seemed to Tom like years, and had lost regular contact at the time, by pure chance, he last saw her. Tom needed to get on with his life, and had already booked a flight to spend some time at home with his parents in the States while he decided what *getting on with life* might actually involve for him.

It was after the official last day of term, and the wine bars around the top of the city were busy with departing students and the restaurants contained the oddly somber family groups who had come up to bear a sibling and their possessions back home. The exams had been and gone, the fuss over the assessments and dissertations and oral hearings had faded. There was both a sense of excitement and anti-climax, and beneath that an edge of sorrow and bone-aching tiredness which came from too many—or not enough—nights spent revising, screwing, drinking... Many, many people had already left, and hallways in the North Wing rang hollow and the offices were mostly empty as Tom called in to pick up his provisional certificate, seeing as he wouldn't be here for the award ceremonies in the autumn, and he didn't attend such pompous occasions in any case.

There was no obvious reason for Terr to be around. Her friends by now were mostly flyers, non-students, and she hadn't sat anything remotely resembling an exam. The season wasn't a Terr season in Tom's mind, either. A late afternoon, warm and humid as a dishrag, uncomfortable and un-English, when the tee-shirt clung to his back and a bluish smog which even the switch from petrol to hydrogen hadn't been able to dissolve hung over the city. Put this many people together, he supposed, holding his brown envelope by the tips of this fingers so that he didn't get sweat onto it, this much brick and industry, and you'd always get city air. Even now. In this future world. He caught a whiff of curry-house cooking, and of beer-infused carpets from the open doorways of the stifling Yate's Wine Lodge, and of hot pavements, and of warm tar and of dogmess and rank canals, and thought of the packing he'd left half-finished in his room, and of the midnight flight he was taking back to the States, and of the last SETI download his PC would by now have probably finished processing, and decided he would probably miss this place.

Characteristically, Terr was walking one way up New Street and Tom was heading the other. Characteristically, Terr was with a group of gaudy fashion victims; frail waifs and wasp-waisted freaks. Many of them looked Japanese, although Tom knew not to read too much into that, when a racial look was as easy to change as last season's shoes if you had the inclination and the money. In fact, Terr rather stood out, in that she really hadn't done anything that freakish to herself, although the clothes she wore—and sensibly enough, really, in this weather—were bare-backed and scanty, to display the quills of those wings. And her hair was red; not the red of a natural redhead, or even the red of someone who had dyed it that color in the old-fashioned way. But crimson; for a moment, she almost looked to Tom as if her head was bleeding. But he recognized her instantly. And Terr, Tom being Tom and thus unchanged, probably even down to his tee-shirt, instantly recognized him.

She peeled off from the arm-in-arm group she was swaying along with, and he stopped and faced her as

they stood in the shadow of the law courts while the pigeons cluttered up around them and the bypass traffic swept by beyond the tall buildings like the roar of the sea. He'd given a moment such as this much thought and preparation. He could have been sitting an exam. A thousand different scenarios, but none of them now quite seemed to fit. Terr had always been hard to keep up with, the things she talked about, the way she dressed. And those stormgreen eyes, which were the one thing about her which he hoped she would never change, they were a shock to him now as well.

They always had been.

"I thought you weren't going to notice, Tom. You looked in such a hurry..."

"Just this..." He waved the limp brown envelope as if it was the reason for everything. "And I've got a plane to catch."

She nodded, gazing at him. Tom gazed back—those green nebulae—and instantly he was falling. "I'd heard that you were leaving."

"What about you, Terr?"

She shrugged. The people behind her were chattering in a language Tom didn't recognize. His eyes traveled quickly over them, wondering which of them was now screwing Terr, and which were male—as if that would matter, Terr being Terr...

"Well, actually, its a bit of a secret, and quite illegal probably, but we're going to try to get onto the roof of one of the big halls of residence and—"

"—fly?"

She grinned. Her irises were wide. Those dark stars. She was high on something. Perhaps it was life. "Obviously. Can you imagine what the drift will be like, up there, with all these cliffface buildings, on an afternoon like this?"

"Drift?"

"The thermals."

He smiled. "Sounds great."

One of those pauses, a slow roaring beat of city silence, as one human being gazes at another and wonders what to say to them next. How to make contact—or how to regain it. That was always the secret, the thing for which Tom was searching. And he had a vision, ridiculous in these circumstances, of clear winter daylight on a high fell. He and Terr...

"That dress you used to wear," he heard himself saying, "the blue one—"

"—Have you had any luck yet, Tom?" It was a relief, really, that she cut across his rambling. "With that SETI work you were doing? All that stuff about..." She paused. Her hands touched her hair, which didn't seem like hair at all, not curtains of blood, but of cellophane. It whispered and rustled in her fingers, and then parted, and he glimpsed in the crimson shade beneath that space at the join of her jaw and neck, just beneath her ear, before she lowered her hand and it was gone again. He wondered if he would ever see it again; that place which—of all the glories in the universe, the dark light years and the sentient oceans and the ice planets and the great beasts of the stellar void—was the one he now most longed to visit. Then she remembered the phrase for which she'd been searching, which was one Tom had explained, when they'd walked that first day by the canals in fall, in English autumn. "...the Drake Equation."

"I'm still looking."

"That's good." She nodded and smiled at him in a different way, as if taking in the full implications of this particular that's-good-ness, and what it might mean one great day to all of mankind. "You're not going to give up on it, are you?"

"No."

"You're going to keep looking?"

"Of course I will. It's my life."

As he said it, he wondered if it was. But the creatures, the flyers, behind Tom and Terr, were twitching and twittering; getting restless. And one or two of the things they were saying Tom now recognized as having the cadence of English. There was just so much jargon thrown in there.

"And you'll let me know, won't you? You'll let me know as soon as you get that first message." Terr's tongue moistened her lower lip. "And I don't mean ages later, Tom. I want you to call me the moment in happens, wherever you are, up in whatever observatory. Will you do that for me? I want to be the first to hear..."

Tom hesitated, then nodded. Hesitated not because of the promise itself, which seemed sweet and wonderful, but because of the way that she'd somehow made this chance meeting, this short conversation, into an almost final parting. Or entirely final. It all now really depended on the outcome of the Drake Equation. Life out there, or endless barren emptiness. Terr, or no Terr.

"And I'll let you know, too, Tom," she said, and gave him a kiss that was half on his cheek, half on the side of his mouth, "I'll let you know if I hear anything as well..." But it was too quick for him to really pay attention to this strange thing she was saying. He was just left with a fading impression of her lips, her scent,

the coolly different feel of her hair.

"You'd better be going," he said.

"Yes! While we've still got the air. Or before the Provost finds us. And you've got that plane to catch..."

Terr gave him a last smile, and touched the side of his face with her knuckles almost where she'd kissed it, and traced the line of his jaw with fingernails which were now crimson. Then she turned and rejoined the people she was with. Tom thought she looked thinner as he watched the departing sway of her hips, and the way a satyr-like oaf put his arm around her in what might or might not have been a normally friendly manner. And narrower around the shoulders, too. Almost a waif. Not quite the fully rounded Terr he'd loved through the autumn and winter, although her breasts seemed to be bigger. Another few months, and he'd probably barely recognize her, which was a comfort of sorts. Things changed. You moved on. Like it or not, the tide of the future was always rushing over you.

Determined not to look back, Tom headed briskly on down New Street. Then, when he did stop and swallow the thick choking in his throat which was like gritty phlegm and acid and turn around for a last anguished glimpse of Terr, she and her friends had already gone from sight beyond the law courts. *I'll let you know if I hear anything, Tom*... What a strange, ridiculous idea! But at least the incident had helped him refine his own feelings, and put aside that hopeful longing which he realized had been dogging him like a cloud in a cartoon. As he strode down New Street to catch the autotram back to Erdington and finish his packing, Tom had a clear, almost Biblical certainty about his life, and the direction in which it would lead him. It was—how could he ever have doubted it?—the Drake Equation.

"So how does it work out?" Terr said to him now, up on his mountain. "That Drake fellow must have been around more than a century ago. So much has changed—even in the time since we were... Since England, since Birmingham. We've progressed as a race, haven't we, us humans? The world hasn't quite disintegrated. The sun hasn't gone out. So surely you must have a better idea by now, surely you must know?"

"Nobody knows for sure, Terr. I wouldn't be here if I did. The Drake Equation is still just a series of guesses."

"But *we're* here on Earth, aren't we, Tom? Us humans and apes and bugs and cockroaches and dolphins. *We* must have somehow got started."

He nodded. Even now. Terr was so right. "Exactly."

"And we're still listening, and we want to hear..." She chuckled. "Or at least *you're* still listening, Tom. So all you have to hope for is another Tom Kelly out in space, up there amid all those stars. It's that simple, isn't it?"

"Can you imagine that?"

Terr thought for a moment. She thought for a long time. The wine bottle was empty. The candle was guttering. "Does he have to have the same color skin, this alien Tom Kelly? Does he have to have four purple eyes and wings like a flyer?"

"That's up to you, Terr."

Then she stood up, and the waft of her passage towards him blew out the candle and brightened the stars and brought her scent which was sweet and dusty and as utterly unchanged as the taste of her mouth as she leaned down out of the swarming night and kissed him.

"I think you'll do as you are," she said, and traced her finger around his chin, just as she'd used to do, and down his nose and across his lips, as if he was clay, earth, and she was sculpting him. "One Tom Kelly..."

In the years after he left Aston and split with Terr, Tom had found that he was able to put aside his inherent shyness, and go out in the big bad world of academic science, and smile and press the flesh with administrators and business suits and dinosaur heads-of-department, and develop a specialization of sorts which combined data analysis with radio astronomy. He knew he was able enough—somehow, his ability was the only thing about himself that he rarely doubted—and he found to his surprise that he was able to move from commercial development contracts to theoretical work to pure research without many of the problems of job security and unemployment which seemed to plague his colleagues. Or perhaps he just didn't care. He was prepared to go anywhere, do anything. He lived entirely in his head, as a brief woman friend had said to him. Which was probably true, for Tom knew that he was never that sociable. Like the essential insecurity of research work, he simply didn't let it worry him. It helped, often, that there was a ready supply of drinks at many of the conferences and seminars he attended—not perhaps in the actual lecture halls and conference suites, but afterwards, in the bars and rooms where the serious science of self-promotion went on. It helped, too, that at the back of it all, behind all the blind alleys and government cuts and flurries of spending, he had one goal.

It had surprised Tom that that first Martian landing should have had such a depressing effect on SETI research, when any sensible interpretation of the Drake Equation had always allowed for the fact that Earth was the only planet likely to harbor life in this particular solar system. Even he was disappointed, though,

when the Girouard probe finally put the kibosh on any idea of life existing in what had once seemed like the potentially warm and habitable waters of Jupiter's satellite Europa. Still, the Principal of Mediocrity, which is that this sun, this solar system, this planet, and even the creatures which dwell upon it, are all common-or-garden variety phenomena, and thus likely to be repeated in similar form all over the galaxy, remained entirely undamaged by such discoveries, at least in Tom's mind. But in the mind of the general public (in that the general public has a mind to care about such things) and in the minds of the politicians and administrators who controlled scientific funding (ditto), it was a turning point, and began to confirm the idea that there really wasn't much out there in space apart from an endless vacuum punctuated by a few aggregations of rocks, searing temperatures, hostile chemicals.

Funnily enough, this recession of the tides in SETI funding worked in Tom's favor. Like a collector of a type of object d'art which was suddenly no longer fashionable, he was able to mop up the data, airtime and hardware of several abandoned projects at bargain prices, sometimes using his own money, sometimes by tapping the enthusiasm of the few remaining SETI-freaks, sometimes by esoteric tricks of funding. Now that the big satellite telescopes could view and analyze stars and their orbital perturbation with a previously unheard-of accuracy, a few other solar systems had come out of the woodwork, but they were astonishingly rare, and mostly seemed to consist either of swarms of asteroids and dust clouds or huge near-stellar aggregations of matter which would fuse and crush anything resembling organic life. So f_p in the Drake Equation—the fraction of stars to likely have a planetary system—went down to something like 0.0001, and n_e—the number of those planets which could bear life—fell to the even lower 0.0000-somethings unless you happened to think that life was capable of developing using a different chemical basis to carbon, as Tom, reared as he was on a diet of incredible starbeasts, of course did. f_l—the probability that life would then develop on a suitable planet—also took a downturn, thanks to lifeless Mars and dead Europa, and then as every other potential niche in solar system that some hopeful scientist had posited was probed and explored and spectrum analyzed out of existence. The stock of SETI was as low as it had ever been, and Tom really didn't care. In fact, he relished it.

He wrote a paper entitled "New Light On The Drake Equation," and submitted it to *Nature,* and then, as the last SETI journal had recently folded, to the *Radio Astronomy Bulletin* and, without any more success, and with several gratuitously sneering remarks from referees, to all the other obvious and then the less obvious journals. In the paper, he analyzed each element of the equation in turn, and explained why what had become accepted as the average interpretation of it was in fact deeply pessimistic. Taking what he viewed as the true middle course of balance and reason, and pausing only to take a few telling swipes at the ridiculous idea that computer simulations could provide serious data on the likelihood of life spontaneously developing, and thus on f_l, he concluded that the final N figure in the Drake Equation was, by any balanced interpretation, still in the region 1,000-10,000, and that it was thus really only a matter of time before contact was made. That was, as long as people were still listening...

He didn't add it to the versions of the paper he submitted, but he also planned to ask whoever finally published the thing to place a dedication when it was printed: *For Terr.* That, at least, was the simplest variant of a text he spent many wall-staring hours expanding, cutting, revising. But the paper never did get published, although a much shortened work, stripped of its maths by Tom and then of a lot of its sense by the copy editor, finally did come out in a popular science comic, beside an article about a man who was growing a skein of his own nerve tissue to a length of several hundred feet so that he could bungee-jump with it from the Victoria Falls. Still, the response was good, even if many of the people who contacted Tom were of a kind he felt reluctant to give out his e-mail, let alone his home, address to.

The years passed. Through a slow process of hard work, networking and less-than-self-aggrandizement, Tom became Mr. SETI. There always was, he tended to find, at least one member of the astronomy or the physics or even the biology faculty of most institutes of learning who harbored a soft spot for his topic. Just as Sally Normanton had done when he returned to Aston on that autumn when the air had smelled cleaner and different and yet was in so many ways the same, they found ways of getting him small amounts of funding. Slowly, Tom was able to bow out of his other commitments, although he couldn't help noticing how few attempts were made to dissuade him. Perhaps he'd lost his youthful zest, perhaps it was the smell on his breath of whatever he'd drank the night before, and which now seemed to carry over to the morning. He was getting suprisingly near to retirement age, in any case. And the thought, the ridiculous idea that he'd suddenly been on the planet for *this long,* scared him, and he needed something which would carry him though the years ahead. What scared him even more, though, like a lottery addict who's terrified that their number will come up on exactly the week that they stop buying the tickets, was what would happen to SETI if he stopped listening. Sometimes, looking up at the night sky as the computers at whatever faculty he was now at pounded their way through the small hours with his latest batch of star data, gazing at those taunting pinpricks with all their mystery and promise, he felt as if he was bearing the whole universe up by the effort of his mind, and that the stars themselves would go out, just as they did in that famous Clarke story, the moment he turned his back on them. It was about then that he generally thought about having another drink,

just to see him through the night, just to keep up his spirits. It was no big deal. A drink was a drink. Everyone he knew did it.

So Tom finally got sufficient funds and bluff together to set up his own specialized SETI project, and then settled on France for reasons he couldn't now quite remember, except that it was a place he hadn't been to where they still spoke a language which wasn't English, and then chose the karst area of the Massif Central because it gave the sort of wide flat planes which fitted with the technology of his tripwire receivers, and was high up and well away from the radio babble of the cities. The choice was semi-symbolic—as well as the tripwires, he planned to borrow and buy-in as much useful data as he could from all possible sources, and process it there with whatever equipment he could borrow or cannibalize. Then he saw the waterhole, a tiny blue dot on the map of this otherwise desolate mountain-plateau above a small place called St. Hilaire, and that settled it. He hadn't even known that the place was a flying resort, until he'd signed all the necessary legal papers and hitched his life to it. And even that, in its way—those rainbow butterflies and beetles, those prismatic famine victims clustering around their smart bars and expensive shops, queuing with their wings whispering to take the cable lifts to the high peaks in the sunstruck south each morning—seemed appropriate. It made him think of Terr, and how her life had been, and it reminded him—as if he'd ever forgotten—of his, of *their* promise.

But it had never happened. There'd never been a reason to let her know.

Tom wrestled with the memories, the feelings, as Terr touched him, and closed her hands around his with fingers which seemed to have lost all their flesh. She was tunneling down the years to him, kissing him from the wide sweep of some incredible distance. He tried closing his eyes, and felt the jagged rim of teeth and bone beneath her lips. He tried opening them, and he saw her flesh streaked and lined against the stars, as if the Terr of old was wearing a mask made of paper. And her eyes had gone out. All the storms had faded. She touched him, briefly, intimately, but he knew that it was useless.

She stood back from him and sighed, scarecrow figure in her scarecrow dress, long hair in cobwebs around her thin and witchy face.

"I'm sorry, Tom—"

"—No, it isn't—"

"—I was making presumptions."

But Tom knew who and what was to blame. Too many years of searching, too many years of drink. He sat outside his hut, frozen in his chair with his tripwires glimmering, and watched as Terr wandered off. He heard the clink of bottles as she inspected his dumpster. He heard the shuffle of rubbish as she picked her way around indoors. He should have felt ashamed, but he didn't. He was past that, just as he was past, he realized, any approximation of the act of love.

When Terr came out again into the starlight, she was carrying a bottle. It was the absinthe.

"Is this what you want?" she said, and unstoppered it. She poured a slug of the stuff out into her own empty wineglass, and raised it to her thin lips, and sipped. Even under this starlight, her face grew wrinkled, ugly. "God, it's so *bitter*..."

"Perhaps that's why I like it."

"You know, you could get rid of this habit, Tom. It's like you said to me—if there's something about yourself you don't like, all you need do is take a vial."

Tom shrugged, wondering whether she was going to pour some absinthe out into his glass or just stand there, waving the bottle at him. Was he being deliberately taunted? But Terr was right, of course. You took a vial, and you were clean. The addiction was gone. Everything about you was renewed, apart from the fact that you were who you were, and still driven by the same needs and contradictions which had given you the craving in the first place. So you went back to the odd drink, because you knew you were clean now, you were safe. And the odd drink became a regular habit again, and you were back where you started again, only poorer and older, and filled with an even deeper self-contempt. And worse headaches. Yes, Tom had been there.

"It's like you say, Terr. We are as we are. A few clever chemicals won't change that."

"You're going to be telling me next that you're an addictive personality."

"I wouldn't be here otherwise would I, doing this?"

She nodded and sat down again. She tipped some absinthe into his glass, and Tom stared at it, and at the faintly glowing message cards which he still hadn't read which lay beside it on the table, allowing a slight pause to elapse before he drank the absinthe, just to show her that he could wait. Then the taste of anise and wormwood, which was the name of the star, as he recalled, which had fallen from the heavens and seared the rivers and fountains in the Book of Revelation. It had all just been a matter of belief, back then.

"You still haven't told me how things have been for you, Terr."

"They've been okay. On and off..." Terr considered, her head in shade and edged with starlight. Tom told himself that the skull he could now see had always been there, down beneath Terr's skin that he had once so

loved to touch and taste. Nothing was really that different. "With a few regrets."

"Did you really get into flying? That was how I always pictured you, up in the skies. Like the kids you see now down in this valley."

"Yes! I was a flyer, Tom. Not quite the way they are now—I'm sure they'd think the stuff we used then was uselessly heavy and clumsy. But it was great while it lasted. I made a lot of friends."

"Did you ever go back to your studies?"

She gave that dry chuckle again; the rustle of wind though old telephone wires. "I don't think I ever had *studies,* Tom. No, I got a job. Worked in public relations. Built up this company I was involved in very well for a while, sold other people's projects and ideas, covered up other people's mistakes—"

"—We could have used you for SETI."

"I thought of that, Tom—or of you, at least. But you had your own life. I didn't want to seem patronizing. And then I got sick of being slick and enthusiastic about other people's stuff, and I got involved in this project of my own. Basically, it was a gallery, a sort of art gallery, except the exhibits were people. I was..."

"You were one of them?"

"Of course I was, Tom! What do you expect? But it plays havoc with your immune system after a while. You hurt and ache and bleed. It's something for the very fit, the very young, or the very dedicated. And then I tried being normal and got married and unmarried, and then married again."

"Not to the same person?"

"Oh no. Although they made friends, funnily enough, did my two ex's. Last time I heard from one of them, they were both still keeping in touch. Probably still are. Then I got interested in religion. *Religions,* being me..."

"Any kids?"

"Now never quite seemed the time. I wish there had been a *now,* though, but on the other hand perhaps I was always too selfish."

"You were never selfish, Terr."

"Too unfocussed then."

"You weren't that either." Tom took another slug of absinthe, and topped up the glass. He could feel the bitter ease of it seeping into him. It was pleasant to sit talking like this. Sad, but pleasant. He realized he hadn't just missed Terr. These last few years up on his mountain, he'd missed most kinds of human company. "But I know what you mean. Even when I used to dream about us staying together, I could never quite manage the idea of kids..."

"How can two people be so different, and so right for each other?"

"Is that what you really think?"

"I loved you more than I loved anyone, Tom. All the time since, I often got this feeling you were watching, listening. Like that afternoon when I jumped with my wings from that tower in Aston and then got arrested. And the body art. You were like a missing guest at the weddings. I was either going for or against you in whatever I did—and sort of wondering how you'd react. And then I went to the Moon, and your ghost seemed to follow me there, too. Have you ever been off-planet?"

He shook his head. He hadn't—or at least not in the obvious physical sense, although he'd traveled with Kubrick over the Moon's craters a thousand times to the thrilling music of Ligeti.

"Thought not. It was the most expensive thing I ever did."

"What's it like?"

"That's just about it with the Moon, Tom—it's expensive. The place you stay in is like one of those cheap old Japanese hotels. Your room's a pod you can't even sit up in. Who'd ever have thought space could be so claustrophobic!"

"All these things you've done, Terr. They sound so fascinating."

"Do, don't they—saying them like I'm saying them now? But it was always like someone else's life that I seemed to be stuck in. Like wearing the wrong clothes. I was always looking for my own. And then you get older—God, you know what it's like! And there are so many *choices* nowadays. So many different ways of stretching things out, extending the years, but the more you stretch them, the thinner they get. I always knew that I never wanted to live to some great age. These one-and-a-half centenarians you see, they seem to be there just to prove a point. Tortoises in an endless race. Or animals in a grotty zoo. Minds in twisted rusty cages..."

"I'd never really thought—"

"—You'll just go on until the bang, won't you Tom? Until the booze finally wrecks some crucial organ or busts a capillary in your head. Or until the Venusians land over there on those funny wires in a flying saucer and take you away with them. Although you'd probably say no because they aren't quite the aliens you expected."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing, Tom. It's just the way you are. And you've been lucky, really, to have managed to keep your

dream intact, despite all the evidence. I read that article you did, years ago in that funny little paper with all the flashing adverts for body-changing. "New Light on the Drake Equation." I had to smile. You still sounded so positive. But don't you think we'd have heard from them by now, if they really were out there? Think of all the millions of stars, all these millions of years, and all those galactic civilisations you used to read about. It wouldn't be a whisper, would it, Tom, something you needed all this fiddly technology to pick up on? It would be all around us, and unavoidable. If the aliens wanted us to hear from them, it would be an almighty roar..."

The stars were just starting to fade now at the edge of the east; winking out one by one in the way that Tom had always feared. Taurus, Orion... The first hint of light as this part of the planet edged its face towards the sun was always grey up here on the karst, oddly wan and depressing. It was the color, he often felt as the night diluted and the optimism that the booze inspired drained out of him in torrents of piss and the occasional worrying hawk of bloody vomit, that his whole world would become—if he lost SETI. And the argument which Terr had so cannily absorbed, was, he knew, the most damning of all the arguments against his dream. The odd thing was, it lay outside the Drake Equation entirely, which was probably why that dumb article of his had avoided mentioning it. What Terr was saying was a version of a question that the founding father of the nuclear chain reaction Enrico Fermi had once asked in the course of a debate about the existence of extra-terrestrial intelligence nearly a century and half—and how time flew!—ago. The question was simply this: "Where are they?"

There were these things called von Neumann machines; perhaps Terr knew that as well. They'd once been a theory, and stalwarts of the old tales of the future Tom had loved reading, but now they were out working in the asteroid belt and on Jupiter's lesser moons, and down in deep mines on earth and the sea trenches and on Terr's moon and any other place where mankind wanted something but didn't want to risk its own skin by getting it. They were robots, really, but they were able to manufacture new versions of themselves—reproduce, if you wanted to make the obvious biological comparison—using the available local materials. They were smart, too. They could travel and adapt to new environments. They could do pretty much anything you wanted of them. So surely, went the argument which sometimes crept along with the depression and the morning hangover into Tom's head, any other intelligent lifeform would have come up with a similar invention? Even with the staggering distance involved in travel between the stars, all you had to do was launch some into space, wait a few million years—a mere twitch of God's eye, by any cosmological timescale—and the things would be colonizing this entire galaxy. So where were they?

The answer was as simple as Fermi's question: *They aren't here.* And mankind was a freak; he and his planet were a fascinating outrage against all the laws of probability. The rest of the universe was either empty, or any other dim glimmerings of life were so distant and faint as to be unreachable in all the time remaining until the whole shebang collapsed again. Better luck next time, perhaps. Or the time after that. By one calculation of the Drake Equation Tom had read, life of some kind was likely to appear somewhere in the entire universe once in every 10^{10} big bangs, and even that was assuming the physical laws remained unchanged. The guy hadn't bothered to put the extra spin on the figure which would involve two communicating intelligences arising at the same time and in the same corner of the same galaxy. Probably hadn't wanted to wreck his computer.

Half the sky was greying out now. Star by star by star. At least he'd soon get a proper look at Terr, and she'd get a proper look at him, although he wasn't sure that that was what either of them wanted. Perhaps there was something to be said for the grey mists of uncertainty, after all.

"I always said—didn't I, Tom?—that I'd bring you a message."

"And *this* is it? You saying I should give up on the one thing that means something to me?"

"Don't look at it like that, Tom. Think of it as..." A faint breeze had sprung up, the start of the wind that would soon lift the flyers as the temperature gradients hit the valley. Tom thought for a moment that they must still have a candle burning on the table between them, the way Terr seemed to flicker and sway beyond it. She was like smoke. Her hair, her face. He poured himself some more absinthe, which he decided against drinking. "The thing is, Tom, that you've got yourself into this state when you imagine that whether or not you listen in itself proves something. It doesn't, Tom. They're out there—they're not out there. Either way, it's a fact already isn't it? It's just one we don't happen to know the answer to... And wouldn't it be a pity, if we knew the answer to everything? Where would your dreams be then?"

"Science is all about finding out the truth—"

"—And this life of yours, Tom! I mean, why on earth do you have to go down to the village to pick up those messages? Can't you communicate with people from up here? It looks like you've got enough equipment in that hut to speak to the entire world if you wanted to. But I suppose that doesn't interest you."

"I find personal messages..." He gazed at the hills in the east as a questing spear of light rose over them, then down at the cards she'd brought up to him. "I find them distracting."

"I'm sorry, Tom. I don't want to distract you."

"I didn't mean..." There he went again. Terr in tears, just the way she'd been, in a memory he'd suppressed for so long, in his bed in Erdington on that night of the Mars landing when the booze first started

to get the better of him. But this was different. Terr was different. She was twisting, writhing. And the wind, the dawn, was rising.

"And I always felt responsible for you in a way, Tom. It was probably just a sort of vanity, but I felt as if I'd given you some final push along a path down which you might not otherwise have taken. You were charming, Tom. You were handsome and intelligent. You could have made a fortune and had a happy life doing anything other than SETI. Is that true Tom? Does that make any sense to you?"

He didn't reply, which he knew in itself was a positive answer. The truth was always out there in any case, with or without him. What was the point in denying anything?

"And that promise I made you make, that last day when we were standing outside the law courts with all those stupid flyer friends of mine. It seemed clever, somehow. I knew how much you still loved me and I wanted to leave my mark on you, just to prove it. I'm sorry, Tom. It was another one of my stupid, stupid projects..."

"You can't hold yourself responsible for someone else's life, Terr."

"I know, Tom. It didn't even feel like I was responsible for my own."

Tom looked away from Terr, and back at his ragged hut. But for the fine-spun silver of his field of tripwires, but for the faint glow of his computers, but for the bottle-filled dumpster and the old Citroën beside it, it could have been the dwelling of a medieval hermit. He sighed and looked down the slope of his mountain. In this gathering light, the whole world looked frail as a spiderweb. And down there—he could just see it—lay his waterhole, and the flickering movement of the shy mountain ibex who gathered dawn and dusk to drink there.

"The sun's coming up, Tom. I'll have to be going soon..."

"But you haven't..." The words froze in his mouth as he looked back at Terr. Even as the light strengthened, the substance was draining from her."... can't you stay…?"

"I'm sorry, Tom. I've said all there is to be said..."

She stood up and moved, floated, towards him. Changed and not changed. Terr and not Terr. What few stars remained in the west were now shining right through her. But Tom felt no fear as she approached him. All he felt, welling up in his heart, was that childhood ache, that dark sweetness which was cola and ice cream and his mother's embrace. All he felt was a glorious, exquisite, sense of wonder.

The rim of the sun gilded the edge of those ranged peaks. Terr broke and shimmered. She was like her eyes now; a beautiful swarming nebula. But the sun was brightening, the wind was still rising. She was fading, fading. Tom stretched out a hand to touch whatever it was she had become, and found only morning coolness, the air on his flesh.

Remember, Tom.

Terr had no voice now, no substance. She was just a feeling, little more than the sad and happy memory he had carried with him through all these years into this dim and distant age. But he felt also that she was moving, turning away from him, and he smiled as he watched her in that dark blue dress, as beautiful as she had always been, walking away down the silvered turf of his mountain towards the waterhole. Terr with her blonde hair. Terr with her beautiful eyes. Terr with the mist on her flesh in that place where her jaw met her throat beneath her earlobe. She turned and gave him a smile and a wave as the sun sent a clear spine of light up from the cleft between two mountains. Terr in her dark blue dress, heading down towards that waterhole where all the shy creatures of the universe might gather at the beginning or end of the longest of days. Then she was gone.

Tom sat there for a long while. It was, after all, his time of day for doing nothing. And the sun rose up, brightening the world, corkscrewing the spirals beside the limestone crags. He thought he caught the flash of wings, but the light, his whole world and mountain, was smeared and rainbowed. He thought that he had probably been crying.

The cards on the table before him had lost most of their glow. And they were cold and slickly damp when he turned them over. He selected the one card he didn't recognize, the one which was blue and almost plain, with a pattern on its surface like rippled water. He was sure now that it was more than just spam, junk mail. He ran his finger across the message strip to activate it, and closed his eyes, and saw a man standing before him in a fountained garden which was warm and afternoon-bright and almost Moorish; it could have been Morocco, Los Angeles, Spain. The man was good-looking, but no longer young. He had allowed the wrinkles to spread over his face, his hair to grey and recede. There was something, Tom found himself thinking, about himself about his face, or at least the self he thought he remembered once seeing in a mirror. But the man was standing with the fixedness of someone preparing for a difficult moment. His face was beyond ordinary sadness. His eyes were grave.

Tom waited patiently through the you-don't-know-me-and-I-don't-know-you part of the message, and the birds sang and the bees fumbled for pollen amid deep red and purple tropic flowers as the man gave Tom his name, and explained the one thing about their backgrounds which they had in common, which was that they had both loved Terr. They'd loved Terr, and then of course they'd lost her, because Terr was impossible to

keep—it was in her nature; it was why they'd made the glorious leap of loving her in the first place. But this man was aware of Tom Kelly in a way that Tom wasn't aware of him. Not that Terr had ever said much about her past because she lived so much in the present, but he'd known that Tom was there, and in a way he'd envied him, because love for Terr was a first and only thing, glorious in its moment, then impossible to ever quite recapture in the same way. So he and Terr had eventually parted, and their marriage—which was her second, in any case—had ended as, although he'd hoped against hope, he'd always known it would. And Terr had gone on with her life, and he'd got on with his, and he'd followed her sometimes through the ether, her new friends, her new discoveries and fresh obsessions, until he heard this recent news, which was terrible, and yet for him, not quite unexpected, Terr being Terr.

There was a ridge on a peak in the Andes known as Catayatauri. It sounded like a newly discovered star to Tom, and was almost as distant and as hostile. The ridge leading up to it was incredible; in the east, it dropped nearly ten thousand sheer feet, and it took a week of hard walking and another week of hard climbing to reach it, that was, if the winds and the treacherous séracs let you get there at all. But it had acquired a near-mythic reputation amongst a certain kind of flyer, a reputation which went back to the time of the Incas, when human sacrifices were thrown from that ridge to placate Viracocha, the old man of the sky.

So picture Terr making that climb alone in the brutal cold, no longer as young or as fit as she might once have been, but still as determined. She left messages in the village which lay in Catayatauri's permanent shadow. If she didn't come back, she didn't want anyone risking their lives trying to find her. The Incas had felt Catayatauri with a deep, religious, intensity, and so had the climbers who came after, and so must Terr, alone up in those godly mountains. She climbed unaided; no wings, no muscle or lung enhancements, no crampon claws on her feet or hands, no ropes, and no oxygen. The fact that she made it there at all was incredible, clinging to that ridge at the roof of the world. From Catayatauri, from that drop, nothing else was comparable. And Terr had stood there alone, a nearly-old woman at the edge of everything. She'd bought vials at a shop in Lima. She'd emptied what little she had left in her accounts to get hold of them. These weren't like the vials they sold along the Rue de Commerce in St. Hilaire. Scarcely legal, they were the quickest acting, the most radical, the most expensive. They tore through your blood and veins by the nanosecond, they burned you up and twisted your body inside out like a storm-wrecked umbrella. And Terr had purchased three times the usual dosage.

And she probably did get there, and make the leap from the ridge on Catayatauri. It seemed like the most likely explanation, even though her body hadn't been found. Terr had thrown herself from the precipice with the vials singing in her body, her bones twisting, the wings breaking out from her like a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis, although they would have been too damp and frail to do more than be torn to shreds in the brutal torrents of air. And then, finally, finally, she would have been buffeted onto the rocks. Terr, it seemed, had chosen the most extreme of all possible ways of dying...

Was it like her, to do this, Tom wondered? Terr plummeting, twisting and writhing? Had she meant to kill herself, or just wanted to take the risk, and lived the moment, and not really cared about the next? The man in the Moorish garden was as lost and puzzled by all these questions as Tom was himself. But the thing about Terr, as they both realized, was that she had always changed moment by moment, hour by hour, year by year. The thing about Terr was that you could never really know her. Tom, he had always been steady and purposeful; long ago, he had laid down the tracks of his life. Terr was different. Terr was always different. She'd never been troubled as Tom had been most of his life by that sense of missed appointments, unfinished business, time slipping by; of a vital message which he had never quite heard. Terr had always leapt without looking back.

The man gave a smile and signed off. The Moorish garden, the dense scent of the flowers, faded. Tom Kelly was back in the morning as the shadows raced the clouds over his mountain; and he was wondering, like a character in a fairy story, just where he had been the previous night, and exactly what it was that he had witnessed. And if he could have been granted one wish—which was something that Terr, whatever she had been, hadn't even offered to him—it would still be the thing for which he had always been hoping. He was nearly seventy, after all. He was Tom Kelly; Mr. SETI. No matter what happened to you, no matter what wonders you witnessed, people his age didn't change. He was still sure of that, at least.

Tom Kelly, speeding down his mountain. The sun is blazing and the chairlifts are still and the flyers are resting as shadow lies down next to shadow for the long, slumberous afternoon. He parks in the near-empty Place de la Révolution, and climbs out from his Citroën, and waves to Jean-Benoît wiping his tables, and then bangs on the door of the *bureau de poste.* The sign says *fermé,* but Madame Brissac slides back the bolts. She seems almost pleased to see him. She nearly gives him a smile. Then they spend their hour together, seated beside the counter as bluebottles buzz and circle by her pigeonholes in the warm, intensely odorous air. Tom's got as far as transitive verbs, and here he's struggling. But after all, French is a foreign language, and you don't learn such things in a day—at least, not the way Tom's learning. It will be some months, he reckons late autumn at least—*l'automne,* and perhaps even winter, whatever that's called—before he's got

enough of a grip to ask her about how she sorts the mail in those pigeonholes. And he suspects she'll think it's a stupid question in any case. Madame Brissac is, after all, Madame Brissac. But who'd have thought that she was once a teacher, back in the days when people still actually needed to be taught things? For every person, it seems to Tom, who gains something in this future age, there's someone else who makes a loss from it.

Things are just starting to reawaken when he emerges into the blazing Place de la Révolution, and he has to move his Citroën and park it round the corner to make room for the evening's festivities. It's the *Foire aux Sorcières* tonight, which a few months ago would have meant nothing to him, and still means little enough. But the French like a good festival, he knows that much now at least. They have them here in St. Hilaire regularly—in fact, almost every week, seeing as there's such a regular throughput of new flyers needing to have their francs taken from them. But this festival is special. Tom knows that, too.

Drinking sweet hot coffee at his usual table, he passes the necessary hour while the market stalls and the stage for the evening pageant assemble themselves to the attentions of robot crabs and the clang of poles and the shouts of a few largely unnecessary artisans. The town, meanwhile, stretches itself and scratches its belly and emerges from its long meals and lovers' slumbers. The girl with that Audrey Hepburn look, whom he now knows is called Jeannette, gives him a smile and goes over to say hi, *bonjour.* She thinks it's sweet, that a mad old mountain goat like Tom should take the long way around to learning her language. And so does Michel, her boyfriend, who is as urbane and charming as anyone can be who's got the muscles of a cartoon god and the green scaly skin of a reptile. They even help Tom carry his few boxes of stuff from the boot of his Citroën to the stall he's booked, and wish him luck, and promise to come back and buy something later on in the evening, although Tom suspects they'll be having too much fun by then to remember him.

But it turns out that business at his stall is surprisingly brisk in any case. It's been this way for a couple of weeks now, and if it continues, Tom reckons he'll have to order some new SETI tee-shirts and teatowels to replace his lost stock, although the teatowels in particular will be hard to replace after all these years, seeing as people don't seem to have any proper use for them any longer. They ask him what they're for, these big SETI handkerchiefs, and then tie them around their necks like flags. Who'd have thought it—that teatowels would be a casualty of this future he finds himself in? But bargaining, setting a price for something and then dropping it to make the sale; that's no problem for Tom. The numbers of another language come almost easily to him; he supposes his brain dimly remembers it once had an aptitude for maths.

The *Foire aux Sorcières* seems an odd festival for summer, but, even before the darkness has settled, the children are out, dressed as witches, ghosts, goblins, and waving lanterns which cast, through some technical trick Tom can't even guess at, a night-murk across their faces. Still, the whole occasion, with those sweet and ghastly faces, the trailing sheets with cut eye-holes, the shrieking, cackling devices, has a pleasantly old-fashioned feel about it to Tom. Even the flyers, when they emerge, have done nothing more to change themselves than put on weird costumes and make-ups, although, to Tom's mind at least, many of them had looked the part already. The scene, as the sun finally sinks behind the tenements and a semblance of cool settles over the hot and frenzied square, is incredible. Some of the people wandering the stalls have even dressed themselves up as old-fashioned aliens. He spots a bulge-headed Martian, then a cluster of those slim things with slanted eyes that were always abducting people in the Midwest, and even someone dressed as that slippery grey thing that used to explode out of people's stomachs in the films, although the guy's taken the head off and is mopping his face with one of Tom's SETI teatowels because he's so hot inside it. If you half-closed your eyes, Tom thinks, it really could be market day on the planet Zarg, or anywhere else of a million places in this universe which he suspects that humanity will eventually get around to colonizing, when it stops having so much fun here on earth. Look at Columbus, look at Cook, look at Einstein, look at NASA. Look at Terr. We are, in the depths of our hearts, a questing, dreaming race.

Small demons, imps and several ghosts cluster around him now, and ask him *qu'est-ce que SETI?* which Tom attempts to explain in French. They nod and listen and gaze up at him with grave faces. He's almost thinking he's starting to get somewhere, when they all dissolve into gales of laughter and scatter off though the crowds. He watches them go, smiling, those ghosts, those flapping sheets. When he refocuses his gaze, Madame Brissac has materialized before him. She is dressed as an old-fashioned witch. But she seems awkward beneath her stick-on warts and green make-up, shorn of the usual wooden counter which, even now that they're attempting to talk to each other in the same language, still separates Tom and her. Still, she politely asks the price of his SETI paperweights, and rummages in her witchy bag and purchases one from him, and then comments on the warmth and the beauty of this evening, and how pretty and amusing the children are. And Tom agrees with her in French, and offers Madame Brissac a SETI tea towel at no extra cost, which she declines. Wishing him a good evening, she turns and walks away. But Tom still feels proud of himself, and he knows that's she's proud of him too. It's an achievement for them both, that they can talk to each other now in the same language, although, being Madame Brissac, she'll never quite let it show.

The music rides over him. The crowds whoop and sing. The lanterns sway. Down the slope towards the river, the lace-draped stalls look almost cool in the soft breeze which plays down from the hills and over the

tenements as Tom sweats in his SETI tee-shirt. Jean-Benoît's down there, dressed red as fallen Lucifer and surrounded by lesser demons, and looking most strange and splendid for his evening off. There's no sign, though, of the woman in the dark blue dress whom Tom glimpsed standing in the sunlight all those week ago. He knows that Terr's dead now, although the thought still comes as a cold blunt shock to him. So how could there ever be any sign of Terr?

Tom's got his days better sorted now. He's never again gotten so drunk as to lose one whole day and imagine Thursday is Wednesday. In fact, nowadays, Tom never has a drink at all. It would be nice to say that he's managed it through pure willpower. But he's old, and a creature of habit, even when the habits are the wrong ones. And this *is* the future, after all. So Tom's taken a vial, just as he had done several times before, and the need, the desire, the welling emptiness, faded so completely that he found himself wondering for the first few days what all the trouble and fuss had been about. But that was two months ago, and he still rarely entertains the previous stupid thoughts about how a social drink, a sip and a glass here and there, would be quite safe for someone like him. Even on a night such as this, when the air smells of wine and sweat and Pernod and coffee and Gitanes, and he can hear bottles popping and glasses clinking and liquid choruses of laughter all around the square, he doesn't feel the usual emptiness. Or barely. Or at least he's stopped kidding himself that it's something the alcohol will ever fill, and decided to get on with the rest of his life unaided.

He sometimes wonders during the long hot afternoons of his lessons with Madame Brissac whether a woman in a blue dress and grey or blonde hair really did enter the *bureau de poste* to inquire about an elderly American called Tom Kelly on that magical Thursday. Sometimes, he's almost on the brink of interrupting her as she forces him through the endless twists and turns of French grammar, although he knows she'd probably regard it as an unnecessary distraction. He's thought of asking Jean-Benoît, too—at least, when he's not dressed up as Lucifer—if he remembers a woman who could have been old or might have been young coming to his café, and who undertook to pass on the message cards he'd forgotten to take with him. Would they remember Terr? Would they deny that they'd ever seen her at all? More likely, Tom has decided, they'll have long forgotten such a trivial incident amid the stream of faces and incidents which populate their lives.

Tom glances up from the bright Place de la Révolution at the few faint stars which have managed to gather over the rooftops and spires of St. Hilaire. Like Terr—or the ghost of her—he suspects they'll remain a mystery that he'll have carry to his grave. But there's nothing so terrible about mysteries. It was mystery, after all, which drew him to the stars in the first place. Wonder and mystery. He smiles to himself, and waves to Jeannette and Michel as they pass through the crowds. Then Jean-Benoît , amid great cheers, flaps his crimson wings and rises over the stalls and hovers floodlit above the church spire to announce the real beginning of the night's festivities, which will involve fireworks, amazing pageants, dancing...

This *Foire aux Sorcières* will probably still be going on at sunrise, but Tom Kelly knows it will be too much for him. He's getting too old for this world he finds himself in. He can barely keep pace. But he permits himself another smile as he starts to pack up his stall of SETI memorabilia, the tee-shirts and paperweights, the lapel pins embossed with a tiny representation of the Drake Equation which not a single person who's bought one of the things has ever asked him to explain. He's looking forward to the midnight drive back up his mountain in his old Citroën, and the way the stars will blossom when he finally turns off the headlights and steps into the cool darkness outside his hut, with the glitter of his tripwires, the hum and glow of his machines. Who knows what messages might be up there?

He's Tom Kelly, after all.

And this might be the night.

He's still listening, waiting.

Simon Ings

RUSSIAN VINE

ONE

That afternoon in Paris—a cloudy day, and warmer than the late season deserved—they met for the last time. She wore her red dress. Did she intend to make what he had to say more difficult? (He felt his scribe hand tingle, that he should blame her for his own discomfort.) Perhaps she only meant a kind of closure. For the sake of her self-esteem, she was making it clear to him that nobody ever really changes anybody. Even her hair was arranged the same as on that first day.

"And the king said, Bring me a sword. And they brought a sword before the king."

They sat on the *terrasse,* away from the doors, seeking privacy. The preacher—if that was the right word for him, for he did not preach, but had instead launched into an apparently endless recitation—stabbed them irregularly with a gaze from eyes the colour of pewter.

His testament tangled itself up in the couple's last words to each other.

Connie called for the bill. (He had long since conformed his name to the range of the human palate. Being the kind of animal he was, he was not bothered by its effeminate connotations.) He said to her: "This deadening reasonableness. I wish we had smashed something."

She said: "You wish I had smashed something. I've let you down today."

"And the king said, Divide the living child in two, and give half to the one and half to the other."

She said: "You've left us both feeling naked. We can't fight now. It would be undignified: emotional mud-wrestling."

Connie let the reference slide by him, uncomprehended.

"Then spake the woman whose living child was unto the king, for her bowels yearned upon her son, and she said, O my lord, give her the living child, and in no wise slay it. But the other said, Let it be neither mine or thine, but divide it."

With a gesture, the girl drew Connie's attention to the man's recitation. "You see?" she said. "Undignified. Like it says in the Bible." She laughed at the apposite verses, a laugh that choked off in a way that Connie thought might be emotion.

But how could he be sure? His ear was not—would never be—good enough. He was from too far away. He was, in the parochial parlance of these people, "alien."

He picked up his cup with his bludgeon hand—a dashing breach of his native etiquette—and dribbled down the last bitter grounds. Already he was preening; showing off his rakish "masculinity." His availability, even. As though this choice he had made were about freedom!

He found himself, in that instant, thinking coldly of Rebecca, the woman who lived with him, and for whom (though she did not know this) he had given up this enchanting girl.

"Then the king answered and said, Give her the living child, and in no wise slay it: she is the mother thereof.

"And all Israel heard of the judgement which the king had judged; and they feared the king: for they saw that the wisdom of God was in him to do judgment."

Still listening, the girl smiled, and bobbed her head to Connie, in a mock bow.

She had done nothing, this afternoon, but make light of their parting. He hoped it was a defence she had assembled against sentiment. But in his heart, he knew she had not been very moved by the end of their affair. She would forget him very quickly.

Hadmuhaddera's crass remarks, the day Connie arrived on this planet, seemed strangely poignant now: "Trouble is, my friend, we all look the bloody same to them!"

"And these were the princes which he had..."

There was no purpose to that man's recitation, Connie thought, with irritation, as he kissed the girl goodbye and turned to leave. There was no reasoning to it; just a blind obedience to the literal sequence. As though the feat of memory were itself a devotional act.

"Ahinadab the son of Iddo had Mahanaim..."

In spite of himself, Connie stopped to listen. The "preacher" faced him: was that a look of aggression? It was so impossibly hard to learn the body language of these people—of any people, come to that, other than one's own.

So Connie stood there like a lemon, knowing full well he looked like a lemon, and listened:

"Ahimaaz was in Naphtali; he also took Basmath the daughter of Solomon to wife:
"Baanah the son of Hushai was in Asher and in Aloth:
"Jehoshaphat the son of Paruah, in Issachar:
"Shimei the son of Elah, in Benjamin..."

Connie realised that he had given too little mind to these feats of recitation. This was more than a display of the power of human memory. This was more than a display of defiance towards the Puscha invader: "See how we maintain our culture, crippled as we are!"

"Geber the son of Uri was in the country of Gilead, in the country of Sihon king of the Amorites, and of Og king of Bashan; and he was the only officer which was in the land."

Connie bowed his head. Not out of respect, surely, since this was, when you came down to it, absurd: to raise an ancient genealogy to a pedestal at which educated men must genuflect. But it said something about the will of this people, that they should have so quickly recovered the skills and habits of a time before reading and writing.

The man might have been an evangelistic scholar of the 1400s by the Christian calendar, and the subsequent six hundred years of writing and printing and reading no more than a folly, a risky experiment, terminated now by shadowy authorities.

When Connie passed him, on his way to the Gare du Nord and the London train, the man did not cease to speak.

"Judah and Israel were many," he declaimed, from memory, *"as the sand which is by the sea in multitude, eating and drinking, and making merry!"*

It was only twenty years since the Puscha had established a physical presence upon the planet, though their husbandry of the human animal had begun some thirty years before first contact. It took time and care to strike upon the subtle blend of environmental "pollutants" that would engineer illiteracy, without triggering its cousin afflictions: autism in all its extraordinary and distressing manifestations—not to mention all the variform aphasias.

Faced with the collapse of its linguistic talent, the human animal had, naturally enough, blamed its own industrial processes. The Puscha armada had hung back, discrete and undetected, until the accusations dried up, the calumnies were forgotten, and all the little wars resolved—until transmissions from the planet's surface had reduced to what they considered safe levels.

Human reactions to the Puscha arrival were various, eccentric, and localized—and this was as it should be. Concerted global responses, the Puscha had found, were almost always calamitous.

So, wherever Connie appeared along the railway line—and especially at the Suffolk terminus where he drank a cup of milkless tea before driving out in the lorry the thirty miles to his orchard—there was a respect for him that was friendly. He had been travelling back and forth, in the same way, for ten years.

There was a clubhouse at the junction: an old white house with lofty, open rooms, where he sometimes had a quick breakfast before driving onto the orchards. There was also an army station near, and as the pace of Autonomy quickened, the club had become a mere transit camp, with both Puscha and human administrators piling bedrolls in the halls, and noisy behaviour in the compounds. There were often civilian hangers-on there too, and the woman who lived with him now—the woman to whom he was faithful once again (the idea of being "faithful again" made more sense in his culture than hers)—had been one of these.

Her name was Rebecca—a name that translated fluently and comically into his own tongue, as a kind of edible, greasy fish. When he first laid eyes on her, she was drinking cocktails with a party of Puscha newcomers lately recruited to some dismal section of government finance (and who were in consequence behaving like abandoned invaders). Quite how she had fallen in with them wasn't clear. She was simply one of those maddening, iconic figures that turbulent events throw up from time to time: less real people, so much as windows onto impossible futures, no less poignant for being chimerical.

A few days later, on the connecting train to Paris, as he considered where to sit, vacillating as usual, he nearly walked straight past her.

She was sitting alone. She was white-skinned. Her hair was long and straight, gold-brown, and a fold of it hung down over one eye, lending her face an asymmetry that appealed to him.

The seat opposite her was invitingly empty.

He sat and read a while, or pretended to, racking his brain for the correct form, the correct stance, for an introduction. Horror stories abounded in the clubs and classes: a visiting male dignitary of the Fifty-Seventh Improvement, informed that human women are flattered by some moderate reference to their appearance,

congratulates the First Lady of the North Americas on the buttery yellowness of her teeth—

And how, after all, could you ever learn enough to insure yourself against such embarrassments?

Eventually, it was she who spoke: "What is it you're reading?"

His scribe hand tingled, that he had left the opening gambit to her.

As for what he was reading—or pretending to read—it was dull enough: a glib verse narrative from his own culture. In his day bag, Connie carried more interesting material: novels from the last great centuries of human literacy; but he had felt that it would be indelicate to read them in front of her.

By the end of the journey, however, she had all too easily teased out his real enthusiasms, persuading him, finally, to fetch from his bag and read to her—eagerly and loudly and not too well—two stories by Saki and some doggerel by Ogden Nash. They were old, battered paperback editions, the pages loose in both, and once a page of Saki fell by her foot. She stooped to pick it up for him. She studied it a moment, while he in turn studied the fold of her hair hanging over her eye; he surprised in himself a strong desire to sweep it behind her ear.

He saw with a pang that she was studying the page upside-down.

"I sing," she told him later, as they passed through the Parisian suburbs. "I am a singer."

He made some callow remark, something she must have heard a hundred times before: how human singing so resembles Puscha weeping (itself never formless, but a kind of glossolalia peculiar to the Puscha species).

"I sing for people," she said, "not for Puscha." (She made the usual mistake, lengthening the "u" in Puscha to an "oo.")

It was not a severe put-down, and anyway, he deserved it. So why did it hurt so much?

It maddened him afterwards to think that she must have drawn him out—she must have got him to admit his interest in her people's literature, and read to her—only so she might sit there quietly despising him: the eloquent invader, drip-feeding the poor native whose own throat he had so effectively glued shut!

But all this was eight years ago, and Connie was too much the newcomer to know what undercurrents might run beneath such stilted conversations.

And on the return journey, the same coincidence! This time, she nearly walked past him—would have done so, had he not called her.

Well, their being on the same train yet again was not much of a fluke. He had travelled to Paris to glad-hand the farmers gathered there, and address their concerns about trade links after Autonomy; Rebecca, for her part, had gone to sing for them.

These days, public events had a tendency to run into each other: a trade fair with a concert tour, a concert tour with a religious festival. They were arranged so to do. A non-literate culture can only sustain so much complexity.

In a society without literacy, the eccentric routines of individuals and cliques cannot be reliably communicated and accommodated; so everything moved now to the rhythm of established social customs—even to the patterns of the seasons.

On their return journey, Connie spoke of these things to Rebecca—and then he wished he hadn't. He had an uneasy sensation of describing to her the bars of her prison.

Suddenly he was aware of wanting to say something to her; to make, as casually as he could, a desperate suggestion.

He began to make it, and then found himself trembling unexpectedly.

"What were you going to say?"

"Oh! It was an idea. But then I remembered it wouldn't—it wasn't possible."

"What?"

"Well—" he said. "Well—I was going to suggest you come to visit the orchard I run, for the weekend I mean. The clubhouse is no place—I mean, it's very crowded just now, and you could breathe. Breathe easier. If you came."

"But why is that impossible?"

"Not impossible. I mean—"

He started telling her about the orchard. About the apples, and what his work with them entailed. The busy-ness of the season. Then, warming to his subject, about the savour apples had upon the Puscha palate, their goodness in digestion. And from that, to the premium his crops might fetch among his kind. And all the time he talked, losing himself in this easy, boastful, well-rehearsed chatter, he wondered at the wastefulness of the world, that animals crossed unimaginable gulfs of interstellar space, only to compare with each other the things that filled their guts, and satisfied their palates.

It was not until she was in the lorry with him, her hands resting lightly on her bare knees, her back arched in an elegant curve, and the fold of gold-brown hair hanging still over her eye, that it dawned on him: she was still with him. Silent. Smiling. Improbably patient. She had said yes.

The orchards fanned east in an irregular patchwork from the outskirts of Woodbridge, gathering finally along the banks of the Alde and the Ore. The rivers—wide, muddy, tidal throats—gathered and ran for some miles parallel to each other, and to the sea, which lay behind a thin band of reclaimed land. This ribbon of land—more a sea defence than anything else—was not given over to agriculture, but retained its ancient fenland garb of broken jetties, disused windmills and high, concealing reeds.

Rebecca glimpsed it only once, as Connie drove her through the deserted town of Orford, with its view over mudflats. Then they turned away from the coast, the road shrinking beneath them to a narrow gravel track, as it wound its way among the apple trees.

The monotony of the view was broken only once, by the Alde and the Ore, mingling indirectly through a knot of winding ditches and narrow (you might jump across them) surgically straight canals. The land here was riddled with old channels and overgrown oxbow lakes, as though someone had scrunched up the land and then imperfectly flattened it.

A pontoon bridge and an even narrower driveway led Connie and his companion, at last, to his house.

Across the front door, someone—a disgruntled worker, or other protester—had painted a sign.

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ea^{h}t

The lettering was predictably feeble: the work of one for whom letters were not carriers of information, but merely designs.

She didn't need to be able to read to see that it didn't belong: "What does it say?"

He pondered it. "It's their slogan, now," he said.

"Whose?" she asked him.

"It says, 'Quit Earth.' " He scratched at the paint with his bludgeon hand. It would not come off.

It was late in the season, and the light died early, that first night.

They sat drinking apple brandy in the darkness, on deck chairs in front of the house. Glow bulbs cast a febrile warmth like a tremor through the chill air.

"Read to me," she said.

So he read to her. He wondered how she bore it: all those V's for R's (R was a letter he found barely audible unless it was rolled on the tongue, at which point the sound struck him as faintly obscene). Not too mention the Z's he had to insert in place of those wonderful, utterly inimitable W's. It wasn't just the phonetic habits of his own language getting in the way (as far as that went, the speech of his ethnic group, the so-called Desert No'ivel, was notoriously fluid and sing-song); there were anatomical differences, too.

He studied the line of her mouth. He imagined her tongue, frighteningly prehensile. The relative chill of it (so, at least, he had heard, though he had no experience of it himself; felt still—or told himself he felt—a faint revulsion at the idea.) Her teeth, their—

What was it again? Yes: "buttery yellowness." He laughed—to the human ear, an all-too-malevolent hiss.

Startled, Rebecca turned to face him. In the light from the warm glow bulbs, her irises were brown grey, like stones under water.

He could hardly bare to sit there, and not touch the fold of her hair.

(In the realm of the erotic, otherness is its own reward.)

Then it came to him: she knew this was what he was feeling.

He wondered at what point he had left off reading.

He considered whether or not she had done this before, with one of his kind, and the thought aroused him. He wondered dizzily whether this made him a "homosexual."

(She resembled his own sex, more than the female of his species. Puscha females are not bipeds. It is only relatively recently in their evolutionary history that they have lost the ability to fly. Their sentience is sudden, traumatic, triggered by pregnancy, and short-lived thereafter. Their abrupt, brief capacity for symbolic thought opens them to the possibilities of language—but they have time only to develop a kind of sing-song idiolect before the shutters come down again over their minds. They are resourceful, destructive of crops, and are routinely culled.)

Rebecca leaned forward in her chair, to touch the feathers about his eyes. The lines of her arm were reassuringly familiar to him, though the tone of her skin was not. He reached out with his bludgeon hand to trace delicately the line of the fold of her hair.

A moment later he heard the voice of Hadmuhaddera calling across the lawn, in the broad Lowland No'ivel accents that he had always faintly loathed:

"Hi there, Connie, where've you been hiding yourself?"

For the rest of the evening, the unctious pedagogy of Hadmuhaddera filled the chair between them. Hadmuhaddera, stiff and small, as though some more elegant version of himself were struggling for release within, spoke volubly of the strange differences and stranger similarities of Puscha and human culture—as

though Puschas (or humans, for that matter) were these monolithic, homogenous units!

In the guise of leading Connie through the uncharted shallows of 'human' habits *("pain au chocolat* is a splendid invention, in that it allows you to eat chocolate for breakfast") he patronized Rebecca furiously.

Connie felt all the pulse and tremor of the evening come apart in the tepid, irregular slaps of Hadmuhaddera's tongue against his broad, blue palate.

Rebecca meanwhile stretched out almost flat in her chair, her water-polished eyes wide and black and bored, her arms thin and white like sea-polished wood against the arms of her chair.

"But set against the narrow bounds of the physically possible—" Hadmuhaddera was growing philosophical under the influence of Connie's apple brandy— "nature's infinite variations seem no more than decorative flourishes. Like that poet of yours, dear—what's-his-name? 'Tall fish, small fish, red fish, blue fish,' yes, yes, yes, but they're all bloody *fish,* aren't they? Every planet we go to: fish, fish, fish! And birds. And crustacea. Insects. Everything is exotic, but nothing is actually *alien."*

"Oh, I don't know. Your womenfolk give us pause," Rebecca countered. "Of course, thanks to your kind Improvements, we will never be able to attain your well-travelled disillusionment." In her quiet way, she was giving as good as she was getting. "Perhaps it is because you are the only aliens we have known—but you seem *fucking* peculiar to us."

Hadmuhaddera gave vent to an appreciative hiss.

In spite of himself, Connie found himself joining in. "Nature is capable of infinite variety," he mused, "but only a handful of really good ideas. Because the rules of physics are constant across the universe, so are the constraints within which living things evolve. Eyes, noses, ears, they're all good ideas. They're economical and effective. Consequently, we all have them. Languages, too—you would think they would be infinitely variable. But the differences aren't nearly as striking as the similarities. The predicating deep grammar—that is universal, or we would not be talking to each other now."

But if he imagined that Rebecca would join in—would become, for a minute, the gossiping groupie he had first seen at the clubhouse—he was wrong. He watched with something like pride—though he had, he knew, no right to such a sentiment—as Rebecca steered their conversation away from the theory and practice of language—that overwhelming Puscha obsession.

He watched her. Could it be that she, too, longed for the moment when they might restart the shattered pulse of their intimacy? He felt his body once again ache for the fold of her hair, and then Hadmuhaddera said:

"Ah, well, I'll bid you goodnight."

They watched him stagger away across the lawn into the darkness. There was no sound in the garden now, except for the stirring of leaves in distant apple trees: in a few weeks, this sound too would cease.

He thought about the apples, the trees, about his work. He thought about pruning. The act of it. The feel of the secateurs in his hands (he was not above getting his hands dirty, though whether he won any respect for it among his workers, he was never sure). He thought about the sound his workers made, as they set about their seasonal tasks.

He thought about gardening, and the fine line the gardener treads between husbandry and cruelty; between control and disfigurement. He thought about the Improvements his people had made among the planets. The years they had argued and agonized over them. The good and pressing reasons why they had made them.

Their enormity.

Rebecca stood up and wandered off a little way. Softly, she began to sing. She had a good voice, a trained voice (he had already learned the difference). An operatic voice.

He closed his eyes against a sudden, searing melancholy. To him it sounded as though she were weeping for the world.

Before the theme came clear, she stopped.

He opened his eyes.

She was looking at him. "Is this what you wanted?" she said.

It hurt him, that she would think this of him "No," he said, truthfully.

She said nothing more, and after a few moments, she began her song again.

They had been together now for eight years.

Every civilization begins with a garden.

The Puscha, whose numerous cultures have bred and battled away at each other for eons, have founded their present, delicate comity upon this simple truth.

Here is another truth the Puscha take to be self-evident: a flower is simply a domesticated weed.

All Puscha "Improvements" are dedicated to the domestication of language. Over the eons of their recorded history, they have confronted languages too many and too noxious to get very sentimental about pruning them. Let a language develop unimpeded, and it will give rise to societies that are complex enough to

destroy both themselves and others. Xenocidal hiveminds, juggernaut AIs, planet-busting self-replicators: the Puscha have faced them all—every variety of linguistic ground elder and rhetorical Russian vine.

The wholesale elimination of literacy is one of the stronger weedkillers in the Puscha horticultural armoury, and they do not wield it lightly. Had they not wielded it here, the inventive, over-complex and unwieldy morass of human society would have long since wiped itself off the planet.

The Puscha care, not for their own self-interest, but only for comity and peace and beauty.

They are beyond imperialism.

They are gardeners.

TWO

He still reads to Rebecca. But over the years, something has shifted between them, some balance has tipped.

At night, in bed, with the light on, he reads to her. Lermontov. Turgenev. Gogol. She laughs at Gogol. He reads and reads. He has perfected a kind of ersatz R. W's will, perforce, always elude him. She lies there beside him, listening, her eyes like pebbles, wide and bored, her arms like stripped and polished apple branches, motionless upon the sheets.

He reads and reads.

He waits for her eyes to close, but they never do.

Defeated, he turns out the light.

Darkness is a great leveller.

In the dark, his books may as well be blank. He is alone. He is worse than alone.

In the dark, he finds himself dispersed and ill-arranged: *loose-leafed.* He cannot find himself—he cannot find his *place.*

Every day he commits his self, unthinkingly, to diaries and address books, journals and letters and the essays he writes so very slowly and sends to little magazines.

At night, lying there beside her, he finds he has held back nothing of himself. It is all spilled, all committed elsewhere, unreadable in the dark.

Able as he is to read and write, the world inside his head is grown atrophied and shapeless. Equipped as he is with a diary and a journal, he remembers little. Owning, as he does, so many books, he cannot from them quote a single line. Deluged as he is every day with printed opinions, he finds it wearisome to formulate his own.

When the light goes off, and they lie side by side in the bed, listening to the leaves of the distant apple trees, Rebecca tells Connie stories.

Rebecca's stories are different from Connie's. His stories belong to the light; hers, to the dark.

She does not need light to tell her stories. She does not need to read or write. All she needs to do is remember.

And she remembers everything.

With no diary, Rebecca's mind arranges and rearranges every waking moment, shuffles past and future to discover patterns to live by, grows sensitive to time and light and even to the changes in the smell of the air.

Lacking a journal in which to spill herself, she keeps her self contained. Cogent, coherent, strong-willed and opinionated, her personality mounts and swells behind the walls of her skull.

(As he lies there in the dark, listening to her, Connie reflects on gunpowder. Unconfined, it merely burns; packed tight, it explodes.)

Rebecca's stories come out at night. They are stories of the camp-fire, of the clan gathered against the illiterate night. Hers is the fluid repertoire of the band, the gang, the tribe, reinforcing its identity by telling stories about itself.

Rebecca tells him about his workers, about their loves and their losses, their feuds and betrayals. She tells him:

"They burned an old nigger in Woodbridge last night."

It is not her choice of epithet that distresses him—why would it? He is from too far away to appreciate such nuances.

It is the fact of it: the growing littleness of the people of this world. This gathering into clans. This growing distrust of outsiders. This reinvention of foreignness.

This proliferation of languages.

(Already, in the eight years they have been together here, Rebecca's trained, operatic voice has taken on a deep, loamy Suffolk burr.)

He remembers something his neighbour Hadmuhaddera said, years ago: how everything that lives, wherever it lives, comes up with the same solutions, again and again. Hands, noses, eyes, ears. How everything is exotic but nothing is truly *alien.* He recalls, above all, Hadmuhaddera's frustration, that this should be so.

Now there are many, manifestly reasonable arguments to support the Fifty-Seventh Improvement. But Connie is beginning to wonder if those polished arguments might not conceal darker, perhaps subconscious, motives.

Rob a culture of literacy, and rumour replaces record, anecdotes supersede annals. The drive to cooperation remains, but cooperation itself, on a grand scale, becomes impractical. The dream of universal understanding fades. Nations are reborn, and, within them, peoples—reborn or invented. Models of the world proliferate, and science—beyond a rude natural philosophy—becomes impossible. Religions multiply and speciate, fetishising wildly. Parochialism arises in all its finery, speaking argot, wearing folk dress, dancing its ethnic dance.

Connie thinks: We are good gardeners, but we are too flashy. We succumb again and again to our vulgar hunger for exotica.

He thinks: We have made this place our hot-house.

Rebecca says, "They hung a tyre around his neck. A tyre and a garland of unripe hops. The tyre weighed him down and the hops made him sneeze. They hopped and skipped around him, singing. Nigger. Nigger. Nigger. Tears ran down his nose."

These are the rhythms of a campfire tale. This is the sing-song of a story passed from mouth to mouth. Connie's heart hammers in time to her playful, repetitious, Odysseian phrases.

Connie recalls that Homer, being blind, had no need of books.

He cries out in fear.

Rebecca's hand settles, light and dry as apple leaves, upon his breast. "What is it?"

"I don't want to hear this. I don't want to hear."

She says to him: "The ring-leader ran away in the night. They say he's hiding near. They say he's hiding on our land. Among the apple trees." She says: "It's up to you. It's your responsibility."

A week, this lasts: a week of curfews, false sightings, beatings of the rush beds. At last, exhausted, Connie consults with the military authorities in Ipswich, and abandons the hunt.

At night, with the light on, he reads.

"Rudin spoke intelligently, passionately, and effectively; he exhibited much knowledge, a great deal of reading. No one had expected to find him a remarkable man... He was so indifferently dressed, so little had been heard of him. To all of them it seemed incomprehensible and strange how someone so intelligent could pop up suddenly in the provinces."

With eyes black-brown and bored, she says:

"I've heard this part before."

Yes, and if he asked her, she could probably recite it to him. (He does not ask her.)

"He spoke masterfully, and entertainingly, but not entirely lucidly... yet this very vagueness lent particular charm to his speech."

Connie wonders, dizzily, if Ivan Turgenev's observation, sharp enough in its day, means anything at all now.

"A listener might not understand precisely what was being talked about; but he would catch his breath, curtains would open wide before his eyes, something resplendent would burn dazzlingly ahead of him."

Rebecca does not know what vagueness is. She could not be vague if she tried. Her stories shine and flash like knives. He glances at her eyes. They will not close. They will not close. His bludgeon hand is numb, he is so tired. But still he reads.

"...But most astounded of all were Basistov and Natalya. Basistov could scarcely draw breath; he sat all the while open-mouthed and pop-eyed—and listened, listened, as he had never listened to anyone in his whole life, and Natalya's face was covered in a crimson flush and her gaze, directly fixed at Rudin, both darkened and glittered in turn..."

"Tomorrow," he says to her, when at last he can read no more, "let us go for a walk. Where would you like to go?"

"To the banks of the Alde and the Ore," she says, "where Hadmuhaddera's nephew lost his shoe, and the last man in Orford once fished."

Deprived of records, she remembers everything as a story. Because everything is a story, she remembers everything.

Tonight, in the dark, as he sprawls, formless and helpless beside her, she tells him a story of a beach she has heard tell of, a beach she doesn't know, called Chesil.

"Chesil Beach is a high shingle bank, cut free of the coast by small, brackish waters," she says.

"Like here," he says.

"Like here," she agrees, "but the waters aren't rivers, and the bank that parts them from the sea is much bigger, and made all of stones."

She tells him:

"You could spend your whole day among the dunes and never see the sea. Yet you hear its constant stirring, endlessly, and soon in your mind comes the image of this bank, this barrow-mound, put before you like a dike, to keep the sea from roaring in upon you. The land behind you is melted and steep, and before you the pebbles grind, a vast mill, and you wonder how high the sea water is now. You wonder how high the tide comes, relative to the land. You wonder how long it will take, for the sea to eat through the bank..."

In the morning, as you are eating breakfast, she comes down the stairs. She is wearing a red dress. It is a dress you recognise. It belongs to the girl you so recently left. It belongs to your mistress in Paris.

Even her hair is arranged in the way that your mistress's hair was arranged.

You say nothing. How can you? You can hardly breathe.

"Let's go for our walk, then," she says.

So you go for your walk, down the track, past the gate, into lane after lane, and all around stand the apple trees, line upon line. The gravel slides wetly under your feet as you walk, and the leaves of the apple trees whisper and rattle. She scents the air, and you wonder what she finds there to smell, what symptom of weather or season or time of day. She tosses her hair in the breeze. Her hair is crunched and pinned and high, and the fold of it that you so treasured is gone, the fold of gold-brown that once hid her eye.

Your orchards fan east to the banks of the Alde and the Ore. The rivers run wide and muddy and dark, and seabirds pick over them, combing for the blind, simple foods of the seashore.

The rivers, slow, rich and mud-laden, evacuate themselves into each other through a maze of ditches and channels, some natural, and some cut by hand through the furze. On the far banks, where the land is too narrow for tillage, an old fenland persists, all jetties and rotten boardwalks and old broken-down walls, and everything is choked by high, concealing reeds.

She turns away from you where you settle, shapeless in the grass. She bends, and the red dress rides up her calves, and you begin to ask her where the dress comes from, and what has she done to her hair? But all that comes out is:

"I— I— I—"

She takes off her shoes.

"What are you going to do?"

"Paddle." She lifts the edges of her dress and unrolls her stockings, peeling them down her brown smooth legs.

The tide is out, the mud is thick and brown like chocolate.

"There are terrible quicksands," you tell her, knowing that she knows.

Absently, she traces her toe through the yielding mud.

"If I don't come back," she says, "you'll know I'm swimming."

"No," you tell her, agitated. "Don't do that! It's dangerous. Don't do that."

You stand and watch her as she walks slowly upstream, in the shallow edge of the water. Swishing her feet. When she is gone, you wander to the water's edge, and you study the thing she has drawn in the mud.

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A line from a book comes to you: a book by Marshall McLuhan:

Terror is the normal state of any oral society, for in it everything affects everything all the time.

When the rifle shot comes out from the reeds in the far bank, and hits you full in the chest, you do not fall. The suddenness of it seems to freeze the world, to undo the physical constraints that hold you and your kind and her kind and all kinds to worlds that are never quite alien, never quite home.

You do not even stagger.

You stand, watching old abandoned windmills, listening to the rushes, their susurration clear against rustling of the leaves of the apple trees. You watch the distant figure with the rifle leap from cover behind an old ruined wall and disappear between the reeds.

You choke, and fall backwards. As you lie there, she comes running.

She has taken off the red dress. She has let down her hair. You follow the line of it, and find that it has

returned to itself, a fold of gold-brown over one eye. Terrified, you follow the fold of her hair to her neck, to her breast. Blood bubbles in your throat as you try to speak.

She puts her arms about you, holding you upright for a few seconds longer. "Try not to move," she says. She is crying in the soft, calm manner of her people.

When your eyes close, she begins to sing. *"I hate you,"* she sings. *"I hate you. Oh, how I hate you!"*

Singing, or weeping. You cannot tell the difference.

You come from too far away.

Jeffrey Ford

FLOATING IN LINDRETHOOL

1

"Your profession, gentlemen, has a long and distinguished lineage," was what the section boss had said when he stopped the bus, opened the door and let them all out on the east side of Lindrethool. Eight men in black rain coats, white shirts and ties, and the company issued, indicative, derbies. They fanned out across the grim industrial cityscape, the soot falling like black snow around them. Each carried a valise in one hand and a large case with a handle in the other. Each walked away, mumbling his respective spiel, all of which included at some point the words, "for a limited time only." In three weeks, the bus would be waiting at the west end to collect them.

Slackwell sat now, tieless, hatless, pantless, at a small scarred table in his hotel room, sipping straight bourbon from a smudged tumbler. "A distinguished lineage," he said aloud to the window pane that beyond his reflection gave a view of the night and the myriad lights of Lindrethool. Every light stood in his mind for a potential customer. All he needed was one to part with forty thousand dollars in easy monthly payments spread over ten years and he would have fulfilled his minimal quota for the year. On that first day, he had covered three apartment buildings, lugging his case from floor to floor. "Not even a smell," as his colleague Merk might say.

He couldn't imagine the door-to-door salesmen of the previous century, doing what he did but having nothing better to offer than brushes, or vacuum cleaners, encyclopedias, bibles. At least he had a real wonder in his case, a value that could change the lives of his customers. That's exactly what he told them while cajoling, reasoning, even threatening if necessary. While in training, he had practiced again and again like a martial artist the techniques of wedging a foot between the door jamb and door, following through with the shoulder and then achieving a look of homicide thinly veiled by a determination to please. The studies had shown that the novelty of face-to-face sales was what the consumer wanted. In the waning economy that had taken a nose dive ten years into the new century, people did not want to shop online or by phone for big ticket items anymore. Or at least that was what they had told him during his training.

He hadn't had a sale in two months, and he had been told by the section boss that the company was thinking of letting him go. "You're too tired looking Slackwell," the boss had said. "Your complexion is as gray as your hair and your spiel, though rabid enough, has all the allure of a drooping erection. Wrinkles are no comfort to our customers, it is power they want. You are selling status. And, please, your after-shave is rancid."

Slackwell cringed into his bourbon, thinking about how he had pleaded, whined actually, to be allowed one more chance. The boss took pity on him, and not only allowed him another shot at it, but also issued him the latest model to hawk in Lindrethool. "If you can't sell that," the boss had said, "you can sell yourself to the devil."

Slackwell lit a cigarette. With the butt jutting from the corner of his mouth, he stood and unlatched the case that sat next to the bottle of bourbon. The black metal carrier bulged at the sides as if it housed an oversized bowling ball. The front panel opened on hinges, and he reached in and brought forth a large glass globe with a circular metal base. The base had dials and buttons on it, two jacks, a small speaker, and, in the back, a wound up thin electrical cord was attached. *Thinktank,* the name of the company was written across the metal in red letters and after it the model number 256-B. The globe above was filled with clear liquid and suspended at its center was a human brain.

The bourbon, having gotten the better of him, made him weave a little as he stepped back to view the illustrious product. He took the cigarette out of his mouth, and with the two fingers it was wedged between pointed at the globe. "Now that's a floater," he said with a cloud of smoke. A floater was what the sales force of Thinktank called the organic center of their merchandise.

"Organic computing, the wave of the future," Slackwell slurred, practicing his spiel. "Consider this—a human mind, unfettered by physical concerns, using not the customary piddling ten percent used by your Joe Blow from Kokomo, not even fifty or seventy or eighty percent, but a full 95.7 percent of its total cogitative potential. The limitations of microchips have long since been reached. The computing power of a human brain

is vast. This baby can run your household appliances from your apartment's master control box, your lights, your phone. It can easily increase the power of your home computer 300 times, give you television from around the globe, all at a fraction of your present cost. Set it to pay your bills once and it will do so, on time, every month—it learns what you like, what you want, what you need. And the speed with which it runs will make your parallel processing seem like..."

Slackwell couldn't remember what bit of hyperbole came next. All he could think of was the boss's "...a drooping erection." He took a drag on his cigarette and sat down to stare in at the gray, spongy fist of convolutions. There was something both awe inspiring and lurid about the fact that an individual's consciousness was trapped inside that insanely winding maze of matter, an island lolling in a crystal bubble. Once, a few weeks earlier Slackwell's thoughts took a dangerous detour, and he briefly glimpsed the analogy to his own existence—trapped, trapped, and trapped again.

This new model, though, this 256-B, had a feature that set it above all of the others. There was a button on the base that when pushed would rouse the brain into consciousness. The customer could talk to it and the apparatus would break the spoken language down into an electrical impulse, send it to the floater by way of a remote transmitter in the base, and the brain would hear in thoughts. Then its response, sent out by the brain's language centers as its own electrical impulse of thought, would be picked up by another device which would translate it into spoken language. The voice that came from the speakers wasn't a stiff, robotic barking of words. The Thinktank technicians had patented a new development that allowed the device to emulate the tonality, resonance, inflection, and even accent of the original donor's voice.

The corporation had cut deals with certain indigent families, and there were a lot of them these days, to allow their loved one's brains to be extracted before actual clinical death set in. The legalization of certain types of euthanasia had opened the door to more liberal organ donation practices. Hence, the individual personality of the brain was kept intact. These deals involved cash in rewarding quantities and the promise that the dying family member would live on, remaining a useful member of society and a catalyst for change in the new economy that was ever on the verge of dawning. Slackwell wondered which, the cash or the promise, was the more comforting to the bereaved.

The only member of the sales force who had had an opportunity to sell one of these new models was Merk, and he had told Slackwell and the others, "One thing to remember: you can demonstrate the floater's sentience for the customer but, whatever you do, don't engage it in conversation on your own. It'll give you the yips." They had asked Merk if he was speaking from experience or just relating what he had been told by the researchers at Thinktank. The veteran salesman gave no reply.

2

Although the concept of home was now no more than some vague memory, Slackwell never got used to waking in a strange hotel room. One second he would be dreaming of the old days, back in the house on the bay, a spring breeze passing through the willows just outside the screened window. He would roll over in bed to put an arm around his wife, Ella, and then, like a light suddenly switched on, the nausea of his hangover would lodge like a green feather at the base of his throat. His mouth would go instantly dry, and the pain would begin behind his eyes. That peaceful dream of the past would vanish and he would wake alone and disoriented.

Of late, his hands had begun to shake in the mornings, and it was all he could do to steady the bottle in order to pour the first of three shots that would get him through the hellish shower, the donning of his Thinktank uniform and to his first cup of coffee. Sometimes aspirin would be called for, sometimes, when he had it, a joint. Whatever it took, he would be on the street sharply at eight fifteen, staggering along, case in hand.

On this, the morning of his second day in Lindrethool, he met Merk at a diner around the corner from his hotel. They sat at a booth by the window, facing each other, but neither spoke until the first cup of coffee had been drained and the waitress had come with refills.

"How many units did you fob off on the witless citizenry yesterday?" asked Slackwell.

Merk shook his head. "This place is drier than my ex-wife."

"I had a guy who wanted to buy my hat," said Slackwell.

"There you go," said Merk. "I walked in on the middle of a domestic dispute. The woman had a shiner and the old man was seething, but still he made me demonstrate the Tank for them. I had one hand on that revolver I keep in my jacket pocket and used the other to flip the switches and turn the knobs. I got the floater to sing them a song, *No Business Like Show Business.* You know, it's a sentient model, and whoever the unlucky sap is who wound up under the glass can really belt out a tune. No sale, though. No sale."

"I'm packing a 256-B myself," said Slackwell, trying to impress his senior colleague with the fact that the company had entrusted one of its top of the line models to him. "But I still haven't let the thing talk for itself yet. I had a near miss on a sale yesterday. A woman with a kid. She had me do the fucking kid's homework

on it and print it out—a report on mummies. The whole time the little monster kept smearing his greasy fingers all over the globe, trying to get at the meat inside. Finally, I told his old lady she should teach him some manners. That iced it."

"You gotta watch that anger. The customer's always right," said Merk.

"The customer's hardly ever right," said Slackwell.

They had a few more cups of coffee and Merk had a plate of runny eggs. There was a little discussion of the new guy Johnny, who Merk said hung himself in the shower stall of his hotel room.

"Did the company get there in time?" asked Slackwell.

"You kidding me?" said Merk. "The implant tipped them off that he was going south before he even put the belt around his neck. I was called over there last night at around nine to witness the operation. They always call me for that shit. I get a bonus. They opened his head like a can of peaches and whipped his sponge out faster than you can say "limited time only."

"Won't his brain be screwed up?"

"They have ways to revive them," said Merk. "Besides, when they cut him down, I'm not sure he was all dead, if you know what I mean."

"He seemed a little too sensitive for the work," said Slackwell.

"That poor bastard was born to be a floater," said Merk. "Some of us drift in the liquid and some on the sidewalk." He gave a rare smile, almost a wince, and shook his head. "Last I saw the kid alive, he had a stunned look on his face like he didn't know whether to shit or go blind. You know, I've seen that look before."

"Where?"

"Every morning in the bathroom mirror since the old lady left me."

"So make another face," said Slackwell. "What would it take?"

"Courage or insanity, and I haven't got the juice to muster either. When the bell rings, I drool, but I'm good at it."

"Yeah," said Slackwell, "my chin's damp more often than not."

They each had a cigarette and then stood, lifted their cases and exited the diner. Out on the windy street corner, they tipped their respective hats to each other, gave the parting Thinktank sales force salutation, "Lose a brain, brother," and set out on their separate paths.

By noon, Slackwell was no longer staggering. Instead, he was limping. On the last call before lunch, after covering two entire apartment buildings, a woman took a hammer she had apparently just happened to be holding and smashed the foot he had artfully wedged between door and door jamb. "Scat," she had yelled as if he had been some kind of bothersome vermin.

As he moved slowly along the street, he could feel the foot swelling in his shoe. The pain was moderate—worse than the time an old woman had brought him a cup of steaming hot coffee after an hour and a half of hard sell and accidentally spilled it in his lap, and not quite as bad as the time a mad man had taken his pen on the pretense of signing an agreement and jabbed him in the wrist with it. At times like this, he considered it a good thing that he did not carry a revolver like Merk.

He spotted the next address on his list and its newness, its cleanliness and name—Thornwood Arms—made him decide to skip lunch. Everything about this place suggested affluence. These were the apartments of those who had wound up on the right side of the perpetually widening divide between the haves and have-nots.

He entered the front of the building and made for the elevator, but before he could so much as press the button, a security guard had a hand on his shoulder.

"Whom are you here to see?" asked the tall young man dressed in what appeared to be a ship captain's uniform.

Slackwell retrieved a business card from his coat pocket and handed it to the guard. "I am here to bring the future to your residents."

"Sorry, sir, but there is no solicitation allowed here."

"This is not solicitation. This is demonstration," said Slackwell.

"Either way," said the young man, "you'll have to leave."

"Luddite," Slackwell yelled as he exited through the revolving door.

Once out on the street, he immediately ducked down an alleyway next to the building. "There's no way this fool is going to deny me contact with a public in need of innovation," he thought, "especially a public with plenty of cash."

At the back of the huge building, he found an empty loading platform. Lifting the case onto it, he then scrabbled up himself. The tall, sliding aluminum gate directly in front of him was shut tight, but off to the far left and far right of the platform there were doors that gave access to the building. He chose the left, walked over to try the knob and found he had chosen correctly. The door swung open, and he felt something in his solar plexus, either a muffled gasp of excitement or a jab of indigestion.

He entered, and following a short hallway, soon came in view of a freight elevator. Glancing around to make sure that he was alone, he pressed the button on the elevator and waited for the door to open. He knew better than to gloat in his victory, but he could not help a brief smile. The door slid back and he stepped into the wide, shiny box. "Which floor?" he wondered, staring at the row of buttons. Out of the thirty possibilities, he chose number 11. The door closed. He leaned back against the metal wall as the car lurched into its ascent. Sweat rolled down across his face from under his hat brim, his heart was pounding, his hands shook from need of a drink and his foot throbbed.

It was a quick decision, but he felt as if he might keel over if he didn't soothe his nerves. When the elevator reached somewhere between the fifth and sixth floors, he hit the Stop button. Reaching into his shirt pocket, he pulled out a joint. His hands shook violently and he had a hard time working the lighter. Eventually, he got the thing lit and took five short tokes on it. The car quickly filled with smoke. Before he stubbed out the weed and started the elevator again, he could already feel his tension level beginning to drop.

His mind swirled like the clouds that exited the elevator with him on the eleventh floor. For a few brief moments, as he made his way through a series of doors to find the hallway that held the residents' apartments, he entertained the possibility of filling at least twenty orders.

At the very first door he knocked on, a pleasant-looking older man answered. Slackwell took a deep breath in order to launch into his spiel, but found the dope he'd smoked had robbed him of words. Instead, he started laughing.

The man at the door smiled, and said, "Can I help you?"

"I'm selling something," said Slackwell.

"Shall I guess what it is?"

"Organic computing."

The customer's look changed slightly but he continued to smile. "I see," said the man. "Brains in a jar? I've heard of it."

"More than that," said Slackwell. "Much more."

"Let's see it do its thing," said the man. He stepped aside and let the salesman in.

The apartment was spacious and perfectly clean. A large window offered a view of the city. The man was obviously learned, because there were two huge bookcases filled with weighty volumes. Beautiful old paintings depicting religious scenes hung on the walls. It was clear to Slackwell from his training that this would be the type of customer who might balk at the usual bullying tactics. A smooth and reasoned delivery was called for in this situation, and he was high enough at the moment to believe he was the man for the job.

They sat, each in a comfortable arm chair, at a small marble coffee table on which Slackwell rested his case. As he went through the operation of removing the unit, he laid down a spiel as smooth as a frozen lake. Having read the scene and taken in the surroundings—the customer's cardigan, loafers and designer button-down shirt the same color as his socks—he tried to punctuate his message with as many erudite words as he was capable of.

"You see, sir... what is your name again?" he asked.

"Catterly," said the man.

"You see Mr. Catterly, there is no need for a man of your obvious intelligence to forbear the rigitudes of laboring under the present inadequate computing systems that now run the devices of your apartment and give you access to the internet. There are bothersome buttons to be pushed, dials to be set, and the response time of all of this outdated equipment is regrettable, to say the least. Here is a system that will actually think for you. It will swiftly learn what it is you want, and one simple voice command from you is all it takes to make any changes."

Slackwell opened the hinged panel and took out the 256-B. "Feast your eyes on this unit," he said.

"A human brain," said the man. He peered in at it through the glass and his smile disappeared.

"Awe inspiring, isn't it?" asked Slackwell. "And best of all, it can be brought to consciousness if you require company as well as computing acumen."

Mr. Catterly shook his head and softly whistled.

"Granted, it takes a little getting used to."

Slackwell watched as his customer slowly stood. For a moment, he thought he was about to be shown the door.

"I'll be right back," said Catterly. "Make yourself comfortable." He left the living room by way of a hall leading off to the left.

"Going to find the old checkbook," Slackwell whispered and for the first time that day his foot stopped hurting. He quickly got the unit up and running, using the battery setting that made it portable.

"You aren't from Lindrethool, are you?" Catterly called from down the hall.

"No," Slackwell replied.

A few minutes passed and then he heard the man's voice from just the other side of the living room. "Then

you wouldn't know who I am."

Slackwell looked up from his task, and saw the old man transformed, wearing green and white robes laced with gold. He had on a tall pointed hat the shape of a closed tulip and carried in his hand a pole with a curved end.

"Oh, Christ," said Slackwell at the sight of him, knowing instantly he was in trouble.

"Not quite. I'm Bishop Catterly of Lindrethool," said the man and his once calm smile turned ugly as his face reddened and trembled. "Blasphemy," he yelled and lunged across the room, bringing the shepherd's crook up over his head.

Slackwell roused himself from paralysis at the last moment and stood arched over so that his body covered the unit. That pole came down across his spine with a whack, and it was all he could do to support himself with his knuckles on the table top. He staggered into a standing position, the pain bringing tears to his eyes and radiating down to his heels.

The Bishop was raising his weapon for another strike. "Release this soul," he said. But Slackwell had been sorely abused enough for one day. As he reached out and grabbed the crook with his left hand, he brought his right fist around and punched Catterly square in the jaw. The old man's high hat fell off. He took two steps backward and then just stood there, dazed. His bottom lip was split and blood trickled down across his chin.

Slackwell quickly packed the unit up. When Catterly moved again it wasn't to take another swing at the merchandise. Instead, he fell to his knees, dropped the crook and folded his hands in prayer. A long low burp issued from his open mouth and then he began weeping.

"You damn kook," said Slackwell, putting on his derby. He made for the door and escaped into the hallway.

3

Slackwell sat in a booth at the back of an establishment called *The Bog.* He sipped a beer, an appetizer for the main course of bourbon that would come later back at his hotel room. He lit a cigarette off the candle in the middle of the table and watched from the corner of his eye as some young professionals at the bar pointed at his hat and laughed. He'd have taken it off, but every time he moved any part of his body, his back screamed with pain. There wasn't much more he could manage other than drinking and smoking. Earlier, as he limped quickly away from the Thornwood Arms, grunting with each step, his heart racing, mind spinning with fear of Catterly calling the police or sending out his religious minions, a palpable sense of doom eddied about his head like a personal, portable storm cloud. Somewhere between his second and third beer the urgency of that terror had fizzled into a blank apathy.

He drank and wondered why he had always had jobs with stupid hats. Then Merk showed up and took the seat across from him. The older man was outright smiling, which was unusual, and his gray eyes had somehow lightened to blue.

"O.K., how many?" asked Slackwell.

Merk held up four fingers and laughed. "Signed orders for four and an almost certain fifth with a promise of full payment in cash when I return tomorrow. How'd you do?"

"Let's see," said Slackwell, taking a drag of his cigarette, "a woman smashed my toe with a hammer and Bishop Catterly of Lindrethool whacked me on the back with his holy stick. Other than that, it was a lousy day."

"The Bishop of Lindrethool?" asked Merk as he held one finger up to the waitress to order a beer.

"He wanted to release the soul of the floater."

"Slack, Slack, Slack," said Merk, "there is no Bishop Catterly of Lindrethool."

"What do you mean?" asked Slackwell.

"I know," said Merk and reached into his shirt and pulled out a religious medallion he wore on a chain. "The only Bishop in this country is in Morgan City, and his name's not Catterly. The guy must have been deranged."

"Good," said Slackwell, "because I clocked him."

Merk shook his head. "Is the unit all right?"

Slackwell nodded. "If you're religious how can you peddle brain? I thought there was a flap about that in the church."

Merk downed the beer that arrived in one long drink. He held his finger up to the waitress again and then lit a cigarette. "Because," he said, "between heaven and hell there is this place called reality. Reality might as well be hell if you don't have cash. Granted, it's a grim business, but I'm good at it."

"Why is that?" asked Slackwell.

"Because," said Merk, "I understand the human brain. It's a double edged sword. An evolutionary development that gives you the wherewithal to know that life is basically a shit pastry one is obliged to eat

slowly and the ability to disguise that fact with beautiful delusions."

"Where do god and the cash come in?" asked Slackwell.

"The cash is the pastry part. God, he just likes to watch us eat. The more we eat the more he loves us. You can't live without love."

"Well," said Slackwell, wincing and grunting as he hoisted himself out of the booth, "I've lost my appetite." He took some bills out of his wallet and dropped them on the table. With a small moan, he lifted his case off the bench. "Coffee tomorrow?"

"On me," said his colleague. "Float easy, Slack."

Outside, the wind was blowing hard and tiny black tornados of soot caught scraps of litter up in their gyres for a moment, promising flight, and then dropped them. The streets of Lindrethool were nearly empty and the place seemed to Slackwell like a ghost town he had recently visited in a nightmare. He stopped in at a liquor store for a bottle, a deli for a sandwich, and then crept back to his Hotel, aware of nothing but the weight of the case in his hand.

Once back at the room, he had a couple of drinks and took a hot bath. Sitting at the scarred table, surveying the night scene of Lindrethool again, he smoked the other half of the joint he had started in the freight elevator of the Thornwood Arms. In no time, he was out beyond the blue and the emptiness of his mind began to fill with memories. Before he could stop himself, he started thinking about his wife and how he had not been home for years. He wondered, after all of the grimy cities he'd been through if Ella was still waiting for him to return a success. For a brief moment, he entertained the thought of calling her, but then pulled himself together.

"Get with it, Slackwell," he said to his reflection in the window. "Go down that path and you'll have the belt around your own neck quicker than you can say, Johnny." He stood up slowly, the pain in his back now deadened by the drink and dope. Weaving around the room, he searched desperately for something to do. There was the television, but just the thought of what it might offer depressed him. He turned away from the sight of the remote and his gaze landed on the case.

He went back to the table and popped the hinges on the black carrier. Lifting out the 256-B, he set it on the table and flipped the switch to the battery setting. There was a nearly inaudible hum and the luminescent particles in the liquid beneath the glass began to glow, meaning the brain was open for business. Then he sat down, poured himself a drink and lit a cigarette. At least three minutes passed with him touching the tip of his finger to the button that would rouse the brain into consciousness. The force holding him back was comprised of Merk's warning and the basic rule that the company didn't want the sales force screwing with the equipment if a sale wasn't involved. These were strong deterrents but not as strong as the loss he was now feeling for a life gone down the chute. He pressed it.

Static came from the speaker.

"Hello?" whispered Slackwell.

There was silence.

"Hello?" he said, this time a little louder.

"Yes," came a voice, "I'm here. What can I do for you?"

Slackwell leaned quickly back away from the unit.

"How are you today?" it asked.

He wanted to answer but he was stunned by the fact that the voice was female.

"I've been asleep for a long time," she said. "Are you there?"

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't expect you to be a woman."

There was laughter. "Most men are confounded by the discovery of the female brain," she said.

"Can you do that again?" he asked.

"What?" she asked.

"Laugh," he said.

She did and asked, "Why?"

"I'm your salesman," he told her. "I'm trying to place you with a good family."

"You make me sound like an unwanted puppy," she said.

"No," he said. "You understand, it's business, nothing personal."

"Are your clients present?" she asked.

"No," he said.

"I thought that was against the rules."

"It is," he said. "I wanted to talk to someone."

"Are you lonely?"

"Very," he said.

"My sensors detect that you have been drinking. Are you drunk?"

"Very," he said.

"What do you want to talk about?" she asked.

"Anything but the job," he said.

"Agreed. Tell me about your day."

He told her everything: coffee at the diner with Merk, the woman with the hammer, the Bishop, *The Bog.* The recounting took an hour and he filled in all the details, trying as often as possible to accentuate his own feckless absurdity in order to hear her laugh.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Slackwell," he said.

"Your mother named you Slackwell?"

"My first name is Arnold. Call me Arnie," he said.

"I'm Melody," she said.

"Your voice is like a melody," said Slackwell, surprising even himself.

"Is that the bourbon talking?" she asked.

"If the bourbon talked, I probably wouldn't have turned you on," he said.

"Do you like being a salesman?"

"It's a job, a routine. The other day I was thinking of it as a trap. I don't know what real freedom is."

"I know about traps," she said.

"Tell me," said Slackwell, pouring another drink.

"When I sleep, when you turn me off, I dream. In my dreams, I have my body again. I never realized how beautiful I was when I was whole. I breathe in the air and it's cool and electric with life. I see trees and the clouds in the sky, the faces of people I loved, and they are all wonderfully complex and mysterious. I take my children to the ocean and we swim in the waves. We eat lemon meringue pie on a blanket on the sand and the ocean breeze blows around us, the sun beats down. But always, I reach some limit, like running into an invisible wall and I begin to disintegrate. My atoms begin to disperse, and I try to hold myself together but I can't. The hands that clutch at my disappearing head vanish themselves and eventually the world goes dark. The darkness is claustrophobic and so exquisitely boring."

"Kids?" asked Slackwell.

She told him about her children—two girls. It was just her and her girls. Her husband had left them. They were better off, because he had lost his job and eventually became so depressed by his own uselessness, he took to drinking. Then came the anger. She raised her girls as best she could, working in a waitress job she hated. She had gone to school for anthropology and gotten a degree. Her dream had been to travel to exotic lands and meet those near-extinct groups of people who still tried to live in nature. One night, at closing time, the restaurant she worked at was robbed. The gunmen shot all of the employees. She was still alive when they found her and rushed her to the hospital.

"Luckily," she said, "I had signed the papers only six months earlier to sell my brain to Thinktank in case anything happened. I figured it was a long shot, but if something happened, I wanted to leave my daughters something. Insurance was too expensive."

Slackwell shook his head. "How can you stand it?" he asked.

"How can you?" she asked.

"Touché," he whispered and finished off his glass.

They made a pact never to speak again of those things in the past that brought sorrow or of the crystal globes that bounded each of their lives. Instead, they just made small talk about places, and people, and events like friendly neighbors meeting on the street, like old friends. This discussion carried on for hours, punctuated with laughter and the sound of bourbon pouring, the click of the cigarette lighter. Some time just before the sun showed itself red from between the tall buildings of Lindrethool, Slackwell and Melody said goodnight. He promised to see her tomorrow before turning her off. Then he lurched over to his bed and literally fell into a dreamless sleep.

4

When the alarm clock went off at seven, he pulled the plug out of the wall and fell immediately back to sleep. Waking a little after noon, he got out of bed like a somnambulist and began going through his usual routine. It was in the shower that he finally came fully awake. He was amazed at how minor his hangover was; a slightly dry mouth, a vague headache, but no nausea or dizziness. His back no longer hurt that badly and his foot, though it was swollen and the color of an overripe banana, was capable of bearing his full weight. All at once, the memory of his having opened the case came to him, and he smiled. "Melody," he said.

He dressed only in his pants and a t-shirt. Instead of bourbon for breakfast, he called down to room service and had them send up a pot of coffee and two cups. While he waited for his order to arrive, he plugged the 256-B into the wall and recharged its batteries.

After the coffee had arrived, he unplugged the unit and turned on the battery setting. There was something disturbing for him about her being connected to the wall socket. It interfered with his desire to see her as

more than an appliance. As the ambient liquid of the globe began to glow, he put the pot and two cups on the table next to it. He lit a cigarette, closed his eyes for a moment to gather his thoughts and then pushed the consciousness button at the base of the Thinktank.

"Hey, you'll sleep the day away," he said.

"Arnie?" asked the voice.

"Who else?" he said. "I ordered coffee."

"Strong or light?" she asked.

"How do you like it?"

"Strong," she said.

"You're in luck," he told her.

"And what is the weather like today?"

He looked out the window at the sun trying to shine through a soot squall. "Perfect," he said. "Warm with blue skies and a light breeze out of the southwest."

"It's late, shouldn't you be out selling?" she asked.

"Not to worry," he said. "I'm on top of it."

He drank his coffee and eased back in the chair. The conversation of the previous night resumed with him telling her about a dog he had when he was a child, and then it just continued on, rolling out across the afternoon like some epic Chinese scroll.

Late in the day, she told him of her love for music, and he turned on the radio. They listened to each selection and commented on it, spoke of the memories that it elicited. Slackwell couldn't think of the last time he had bothered to so much as hum a tune. She sighed with delight at the sound of instruments and voices weaving a song. "Before I was married," she told him, "I loved to dance." He got up and turned the knob to a station that played old-time jazz. Before long a beauty of a number came on, Lester Young doing *Polka Dots and Moonbeams.* He lifted the 256-B off the table and they moved around the room to the smooth sound of the tenor sax. She whispered in his ear that he was a wonderful dancer.

That night, he packed the unit in its case and they went out to dinner. Slackwell never noticed the quizzical stares of the other diners as he sat eating with a crystal encased brain on his table. He ordered her the lobster tail she had been dying for and described in explicit detail each mouthful. He was well into a second bottle of wine, his voice now very loud, when the restaurant manager, a short, bald man in a tuxedo, came over and asked him to leave.

"Sir, you are disturbing the other customers, and this bizarre... curio," he said, pointing to the unit, "is ruining their appetites."

Slackwell stood up, poked the manager in the chest with his index finger and yelled, "Too damn bad. My date and I aren't bothering anyone." There was real door-to-door menace in his voice, and the little man backed away. It was Melody who was finally able to calm him down and convince him it was time to go back to the hotel. She even prevailed upon him to leave a tip, saying, "It's not the waiter's fault." He carried her under his right arm as they walked along the streets of Lindrethool, the empty case swinging to and fro in his left hand. They laughed about the incident with the manager, and then Slackwell described for her the brilliance of the stars, the full moon, the aurora borealis.

The next morning there was a knock on the hotel room door at nine o'clock sharp. Slackwell got out of bed and quickly pulled on his pants and t-shirt.

"Who is it?" he called.

"Sir," came the reply, "I have something here to show you that could very well change your entire life. A new invention that will revolutionize the way you run your household."

"Hold on," said Slackwell, realizing it was Merk.

He opened the door and stepped out into the hallway.

Merk stood there impeccably dressed in his Thinktank uniform, case in hand, derby cocked slightly to the left. "Where have you been?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" said Slackwell.

"They called me from the office this morning and said that the info they are getting from your implant indicates that you weren't out pounding the pavement yesterday. They tried to call you but they said you aren't answering your calls. When you weren't at the diner this morning again, I thought I better check up on you."

"My back," said Slackwell. "It was bad yesterday. I couldn't get up."

"You look all right now," said Merk.

Slackwell immediately hunched slightly and breathed in through clenched teeth. "The truth is it's about all I can do to stand here. I'll get out this afternoon."

"You sure you're okay?"

"Yeah."

Merk stared into his eyes. "You haven't been talking to that floater have you?" he asked.

"You know it's against the rules," said Slackwell.

"Listen, Slack, get back out there today. If they don't see some action from your implant reading, they'll send one of their goons out to check up on you, if you know what I mean. Those boys play rough."

"No problem."

"This city is better than I first thought," said Merk. "Yesterday, a guy in a penthouse apartment over on Grettle Street gave me the whole payment for a 256-B, in cash. I'm packing over forty thousand dollars." His face lit up with a smile as he patted his overcoat pocket. "The section boss is gonna crap 'em when he sees that."

"Amazing," said Slackwell, mustering as much enthusiasm as he could.

"Well, remember what I told you about the office and good luck today. Float easy," said Merk as he turned and walked down the hallway lined with doors.

Slackwell breathed a sigh as he straightened to his full height. He let himself back in the room and locked the door behind him. Then he removed his clothes and got back in bed next to Melody.

"What was that about?" she asked.

"Nothing, baby," he said.

"I need a smoke," she said.

He reached over, took a cigarette from the pack on the stand next to the bed and lit up. Blowing a smoke ring, he put one hand lightly around her globe and said, "You certainly have a way with words."

5

Two days later, at an outdoor cafe on Lindrethool's waterfront, Slackwell watched the huge barges of coal steam in from off the high seas and described their filthy majesty to her. He had still not returned to work, but as a vague concession to the job had dressed that morning in his uniform.

"When did they go back to using coal?" asked Melody.

"About five years ago," he told her, tipping back his derby. "It's a fact that the world's resources are almost completely tapped out, and burning it pollutes the hell out of everything. You know, it's expedient. Big business finally said, screw it, let's just squeeze every black dollar we can out of the moment. No body thinks about the future anymore," said Slackwell.

"I do," said Melody.

He sipped at his drink.

"I'm thinking about how I'll miss you once I'm sold and I'm running some schlub's refrigerator and heater, turning his lights on and off, and scouring the internet for free porn sites. Think of the drivel I'll have to listen to, day in and day out until the components of my unit simply wear out from use. What's the guarantee on me, seventy years?" she said.

"I've considered it," said Slackwell.

She began crying.

"That's why I've decided I'm not selling you. We're going to split this dump and find a new life," he said.

"Arnie," she said, "you can't do that. The company will stop you."

"The company," he said. "They'll have to catch me first."

She tried to speak, but he silenced her by saying, "Shhh, let's go back to the hotel and get our stuff."

He had forgotten to charge her batteries that morning, so they decided it was better he turn her off until they could. The instruction manual had warned that it could be detrimental to the unit to run them completely dry. As much as he hated to pack her away in the case, he needed some time to think through the logistics of how they would make their escape. Money was tight, but he had enough to buy two train tickets that would get them a good distance away from the city. He walked on a little further before he realized he would only really need one ticket. Slackwell considered the danger of what he was planning, but for once he could see a crack in the globe that contained him. Envisioning himself smashing through the boundary, he said aloud, "You can't live without love."

A block away from the hotel, he passed an alleyway and heard a voice call to him. He stopped, looked down the shadowed corridor and saw Merk standing, partially hidden by a dumpster.

"Slack, come here," he said, waving him into the darkness.

Slackwell looked cautiously around him and then slowly went to his colleague.

"They're up in your room, waiting for you," said Merk. He appeared nervous and his eyes kept shifting suspiciously.

"Who?" asked Slackwell.

"The section boss and a Thintank security officer big as an ape."

"Bullshit," he said and his body tensed with anger.

"Listen, Slack, just listen to me. You've got to hand the unit over to them now. If you don't want to see them, give it to me and I'll take it up."

"I'm not giving it up," said Slackwell.

"If you run with the unit, and they catch you, which they will, you're bound to have an accident, if you know what I mean. They'll say they pursued you to get back their merchandise, you put up a struggle, and then they had to off you out of self-defense. Don't forget about the clause in the contract, Slack. They get your sponge if anything happens to you while you work for the company."

Slackwell leaned over and put the case on the pavement. He rose calmly and said, "You're not taking the damn unit, Merk." His arm came up quickly then and his hand circled his colleague's throat. The pressure applied by the grip of the hand that had carried that case through two dozen cities for nine hours a day, six days a week, was intense. "I know how close you are to them, invited to all the sponge harvest parties, the first one to get the good merchandise. Now tell me, where's the implant." He pushed Merk back up against the dumpster and brought his other hand up to join the first.

Merk's face grew red, then blue, and eventually he lifted his right hand and with his index finger pointed to his left eyebrow.

Slackwell loosened his grip and his colleague gasped for breath.

"The eyebrow?"

"Behind the eyebrow," Merk wheezed out, doubling over to catch his breath. "The hair of the eyebrow acts as an organic antenna for it. Shave it off and it will confuse the signal."

"Are you sure?" asked Slackwell.

"I saw them pull one out of Johnny's head the other night. I've been around enough to know this stuff."

Slackwell caught sight of Merk slipping his hand into his coat pocket. He remembered the revolver and threw two savage punches without thinking. One connected with Merk's chest and the other with his left temple. The back of his head banged off the dumpster. He dropped the case he'd been holding and followed it, unconscious, to the ground. As Slackwell lifted his own unit by its handle, he saw that Merk had not been going for the gun after all, but held a folded piece of paper in his hand. He took it and slipped it into his pants pocket. A second later, he was back on the street, running as fast as he could away from the hotel.

He ran only two blocks before he was completely winded. His heart was slamming and the idyllic sense of calm that had filled him since meeting Melody was now shattered. He knew she would be able to help him think through the situation. There was no question he needed a bottle of bourbon and a pack of razors. Setting himself to searching for these two essentials helped him to concentrate. He found the bourbon first, and once he had this, he came across a convenience store only a block away and bought a pack of razors and a pack of cigarettes.

On the street again, he ducked into a doorway, set the case down and ripped open the razors. He shaved off his eyebrows, finishing the job in a matter of minutes and cutting himself badly on the right side. Blood dripped down into his eye and he wiped it with the sleeve of his coat. Before taking up the case again and hitting the street, he knocked the derby off his head. It wasn't enough to simply be free of it, he had to stomp it once with each foot. Then he was off again, mumbling to himself, the hem of the overcoat flying out behind him as he searched everywhere for a place to hide.

6

"My head looks like a wrinkled ass with eyes," said Slackwell, checking his reflection in Melody's globe. He sat in a third floor room of a different hotel on Lindrethool's west side. It was his power of spiel that had gotten them in. The woman at the desk had nearly turned them away after taking in his shaved brow, the blood on his face, his mad hair and wild eyes.

"What possessed you?" asked Melody.

"I don't know if you are aware of this," he said, "but when you go to work for Thinktank, since you are entrusted with expensive merchandise, you agree to wear an implant by which they can track your daily progress and locate you. It's a minor operation they do right in the training office. They put you out and when you wake up you are tagged."

"Your eyebrow hair?" she asked, laughing.

"Sort of," he said, pouring himself a drink. "Now, for the future."

"We're in a jam, Arnie," she said.

"I thought you could turn some of that computing acumen on this situation and come up with a plan."

"Please don't say that," she said. "I refuse to be thought of by you as a unit."

"Mea culpa, darling," he said. "Still we have to run. Merk said if they find me, it's not going to go well."

"They can't trace you. What if we lay low here until tonight and then take a really late train."

"We're near the train station," he said.

"Where to, though?" she asked. "North? South?"

"As long as I'm with you," he said, "I don't care. Is there any place you've always wanted to go?"

"What about Canada?" she said. "There's less of a chance they will chase us into another country."

"Agreed," he said.

"Hook me up to the phone wire. I'll go out on the net and check train schedules, so we don't have to hang around the station too long before boarding."

"You're really thinking," he said.

"A no brainer," she said and they laughed.

He got up and removed the jack from the phone and inserted it into the port at the base of the tank. While he performed the task, he told her how much he could spend on the ticket.

"This will take a minute," she said as he sat back in his chair.

While he waited, he lit a cigarette and then remembered the sheet of paper he had taken from Merk. He retrieved it from his pocket and unfolded it on the table. It was an official Thinktank form that looked familiar to him but took a few seconds to recognize. Then he realized it was one of the invoices every salesman had, describing the display unit he carried in his case. Slackwell's eyes scanned down to the bottom of the page, and where he expected to find Merk's signature, he read instead the name Johnny Sands. He wondered what Merk was doing with Johnny's invoice. Then he looked back up to the top of the document and saw that Johnny had been packing a 256-B.

He wondered why they had given this kid, even more hapless a salesman than he, himself, a top of the line, sentient model. Johnny had trained with it for a two-week period and then was on the road no more than two days when he had hung himself. Slackwell remembered Johnny as being very high strung, not too smart, and definitely on some kind of medication. He was surprised they were willing to trust him with any merchandise at all, even an economy model. A picture came to him of the kid, lanky, dim, sitting in his hotel room, staring at the brain in the globe. "He was talking to that sponge," Slackwell said to himself, and then, as if someone had pressed his own consciousness button, he woke up to reality with a distinct taste of shit pastry in his mouth.

"Melody," he said, "you're not looking up train schedules are you?"

"What are you talking about?" she asked.

"You're signaling our location to the section boss," he said.

"Why would I do that?" she asked.

Slackwell didn't answer.

"Arnie, what would..."

"Please," he said, interrupting, "there's no need."

"All right," she said. "I haven't gotten through yet, but, yes, that's what I'm doing."

"Everything has been a lie," he said.

"I was commissioned to make you run," she said. "They told me you were so pathetic that there would be no question that you would engage my consciousness. "It's like handing Pandora the box," was how the general manager had put it. Then I was to lure you into running. That is all the pretense they need to get away with taking your brain. You sold only two non-sentient economy units all year, grand total—less than ten thousand dollars. They're having a problem harvesting enough organic product for the orders they are getting. Your brain is worth more to them than you are. "

Slackwell felt no anger, shed no tears. It was as if he was a hollow flesh doll without brain or heart. Still, he heard himself asking, "Why?"

"I cut a deal. If I trapped you for them, they would destroy me, something I want more than anything and can not make happen. Termination is freedom to me, Arnie. All of that crap I told you about my dreams of my daughters and the beach, my god, the lemon meringue pie, as horribly frustrating and sad as that fairytale sounded, it's nothing compared to the real agony of floating."

"I understand," he said.

"You were nicer to me than any man I ever knew when I was walking around in the world," she said. "You're a good person and I hated to sell you out but it means so little compared to my having to remain in this state for even another moment. Listen, I'll make you a deal, a limited time only though, and I mean it. If you don't accept, I promise the call will go through. Destroy me. Break the crystal."

"I can't," said Slackwell.

"You're going to end up like this," she yelled.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Slackwell drank and smoked wrapped in silence. In his mind, he was now back at the house by the bay, moving from room to room, looking for Ella. He did not know how much time had passed before a knock sounded at the door.

He didn't stir but to bring the glass to his lips.

A moment later, the door burst in, the chain lock swinging free, splinters of the frame flying across the room. In walked a huge wall of a man, sporting a red Thinktank security force wind breaker. His head was the size of Slackwell's display case. He held a handgun straight out in front of him, steadying it with his free hand. It was aimed at Slackwell. Stepping out from behind him came the section boss, Joe Grace. He was a

round fellow with jowls and glasses. His derby sat tilted back on his head and he wore a red blazer with the company's insignia on it.

"So, Slackwell," said Grace, "I believe you have something that belongs to us. You are a pitiable fool to have crossed the company. Please do not resist or we will take it as a sign of aggression and who knows what might happen."

Slackwell stubbed out his cigarette in the overflowing ashtray. "Gentlemen," he said and nodded.

"Jolson, he looks like he's becoming belligerent," Grace said to the larger man. "Here, use this object he tried to attack us with and you valiantly wrestled away from him." He reached into his jacket and pulled out a long ice pick with a wooden handle. "Once in the heart, and once in the throat, and don't damage that head." He handed the pick to Jolson who took it after returning the gun to its shoulder holster.

"Turn me off, Grace," Melody called. "I don't want to hear this."

"What you want is inconsequential. To me you're a turd in a goldfish bowl. Take him Jolson, I'll dial up the removal crew. Too bad you had to make a scene, Slackwell."

Jolson advanced with the ice pick, but Slackwell did nothing. The huge man pulled his arm back and aimed for the chest.

Then Melody cried out for them to stop, and there was a loud popping sound. In his daze, Slackwell looked over at the unit, thinking her scream had shattered the crystal globe, and that's when Jolson doubled up and fell. He landed on the table, knocking the bottle of bourbon over, and then continued on to the floor. Blood seeped in a puddle from the back of his head.

Merk stood in the doorway holding the smoking revolver. He then moved the gun to aim at the section boss's head. Grace uselessly tried to cover his face with his hands, but Merk did not fire. Instead, he took aim at the portly stomach and pulled the trigger. Grace went over backwards, grabbing his mid-section. The bullet went clean through him and lodged in the wall. He lay on the floor, howling.

Merk stepped over the bodies and walked up next to Slackwell, who sat staring, mouth open wide.

"Let's go Slack, the removal crew will be here any minute," he said.

Slackwell stood up, taking his cigarettes off the table.

"Arnie, are you all right?" called Melody.

"Yes," he said.

"Don't leave me here," she said.

"Take her if you want, but we've got to hurry," said Merk.

"I'm taking you with me," said Slackwell. He quietly motioned for Merk to give him the revolver. At first his colleague was reluctant, but finally he handed the gun over.

"Where?" she asked.

"The limitless ocean," he said. "Want to come?"

"Yes," she whispered.

His hand shook as he pulled the trigger, but to Slackwell the shot was no explosion. Instead he heard a spring breeze in the willows and the sound of a door opening somewhere in the house by the bay. The bullet splintered the glass, jellied the brain, and the glowing liquid bled out onto the floor. As they turned to leave, Merk took the gun from him, wiped the prints off with his shirt tail, and threw it at the section boss, who was grunting and wheezing for air. "Float easy, Grace," he said. Then they ran.

Slackwell saw all of Lindrethool at once, like a bottled city, in the passenger side mirror of the old car Merk had bought with a piece of the forty thousand.

As they drove out past the city limits, into the country where the soot no longer fell, Merk said, "I knew what they were up to when I realized Johnny was packing a 256-B."

"I thought you were a company man," said Slackwell.

"Yeah, well, once I realized what they had done to the kid, and I had that forty grand in my pocket, it lit the spark in me I needed to want out. They thought they knew me, but no one knows what goes on up here," he said, pointing to his head. "That's the only freedom."

"But you came to get me," said Slackwell.

"After you beat the crap out of me, I knew you were love crazy enough to break through. I checked every hotel I could think of. Finally a woman at the desk of that one you were in said she'd seen you. My only chance was to chomp down on the coat tails of your beautiful delusion and pray for lockjaw."

"I thought you were rescuing *me,"* said Slackwell.

"Nah, me and your girl, you led us both out."

"I did?"

"Sure," said Merk. "You're the goddamn Bishop of Lindrethool."

Michael Cassutt

BEYOND THE END OF TIME

"Beyond the end of Time," she says, all blue eyes, bronze hair, and freckles.

"That would be somewhere in northern California?" I say, since I have asked her where she's from.

"No," she says, her expression starting to shift from indulgence to exasperation. (I've seen it often enough.) But she finishes with a laugh, "Nice try, though."

We are at Peter Deibel's party high in the Hollywood hills, a place I would rather not be. It's a Saturday night in November, unseasonably cold, and I've stopped drinking, considerably dimming the appeal of the bright lights and wildlife. I've stopped drinking because Amy left me, meaning I have to drive myself, meaning I'm exposed to Saturday night specials like the one who injects his PT Cruiser into my lane on the Marmont curve as if I were only a virtual Explorer. Naturally, there's a phone embedded in his ear.

I'm too tired to offer the Cruiser pilot a single-digit salute, or even a blast of the horn, not that either move is easy, given my hand controls. I just want to increase the space between us, because I'm already late.

Then there is the usual challenge of parking: after twenty years I can get out of the driver's seat and into my wheelchair fairly easily, but not if I'm on a steeply sloping street, especially one so narrow that I have to dodge passing cars.

All this to spend three hours with Peter, a man I haven't seen in five years, until his party invitation shows up in my mailbox. Divorce, substance abuse and a gigantic lawsuit have driven my old mentor into exile in Carmel or someplace like that, which is why "Northern California" pops into my head as I talk to... to...

"By the way, I'm Clark," I say, holding out my hand.

This tallish woman (well, they're all tall from my perspective) of thirty, pretty but not beautiful, impossibly enthusiastic, bends ever so slightly to take my hand. Her touch is warm. "Jasmine."

"I'm sorry, but that name sounds more like Carmel or Marin than Beyond the End of Time."

"It's sort of a translation from another language."

"Well, you sound like a native speaker. English, I mean. Not Hollywood."

"Neither do you."

"Odd that you should put it that way." My Hollywood career, while successful to objective observers, has always baffled me, because I am completely unsuited to the business. In addition to the obvious irony—an action adventure television director in a *wheelchair?*—I am too outspoken, too impulsive, and, lately and perhaps inevitably, too unemployed. "Where did you meet Peter?"

I expect Jasmine to answer "rehab" or "a nightclub" or "I don't know him, I just came with a friend." What she says is, "About a billion years from now."

I'm not the first person in history to continue a ridiculous line of conversation because he's attracted to a woman at a Hollywood party. I must admit, though, that Jasmine from Beyond the End of Time, aka a billion years from now, is not remotely the typical actress/model/ whatever, all boobs and lips and creamy skin and blond hair, the usual dispenser of this sort of silliness. Before I can offer anything more than a non-committal "Oh, really?" I hear the sound of something smashing in the kitchen. Jasmine focuses her blue eyes on mine and says, "Clark, will you excuse me for a moment?"

Maybe it is because I am rebounding (Amy, my own actress/model/whatever, having finally tired of the role of girlfriend-nurse), but I feel as though I am about to see one of the more fascinating, not to mention attractive, woman in this or any other time, glide across the room, disappearing into the crowd and the night. "Not at all," I say, as smoothly and confidently as I can, which is not too.

"I promise I'll be back," she says. "We have to talk further."

That curious addendum buoys me so thoroughly that I don't notice Peter himself shambling up behind me in his flannel shirt and faded jeans. "Great, isn't she?" he says, meaning Jasmine.

"Intriguing. She said you'd met a billion years in the future."

"Right. It was a very strange space." Now, you can expect Peter Deibel to say things that don't make sense in the real world. Part of this is just his screwy view of the universe as a realm of mysterious powers and alliances, magic formulas and secret histories, which helped him carve out a lucrative career as creator of unusual television concepts. Part of it is off-and-on pharmaceutical intake that made it impossible to see those concepts realized under his control.

At least, this is my semi-informed judgment. Peter and I worked together for most of a decade, but I really don't know him well. Even though I directed twenty episodes of three different Peter-created series over that span, this party marks only the second time we have had what you'd call a personal moment. Even when we were on a series, we never spoke about any subject other than the job.

So I have to chose whether to react with my usual direct skepticism, or go post-modern. I pick the second: "She doesn't look a day over five hundred million."

"Age isn't important to her. The concept is meaningless."

"I wish I could say the same." At that instant, I know why Peter Deibel and I have never truly connected. He raises one eyebrow and half-smiles behind his Frito Bandito mustache. "Sorry," I say, blushing. "You're serious."

"Yeah. Weird, huh?" He offers to wheel me out of the party and toward his office. Feeling like a small-minded shit, I let him.

Crazy as Peter is in his professional dealings, he always takes great care in his physical surroundings. His home office looks like something from the *New York Times* "Style" section, lots of burnished wood and expensive rugs framing a tiny iMac. Neatly-bound television scripts sit in a row beneath a picture window alive with what are, to my aging eyes, the fuzzy lights of Hollywood. A pair of Emmys and a CableAce award rest in their illuminated nooks.

I offer praise on the design, which he dismisses. "All rented for my new project," he says. "The food, the music, the lighting, even the women are merely an illusion to convince people I'm a player."

Which makes Peter's next statements seem less bizarre, if that's possible. "Jaz is an emissary from another time," he says.

"Beyond the End of Time, she said."

He grins as he collapses into what appears to be a vastly expensive leather desk chair sculpted to his frame. "Not from these parts."

"Well, then, what is she doing here? And how did you hook up with her?" *And why does she want to talk to me?*

"We met at an Other Ones concert about a year ago," he says, mentioning a sort of Grateful Dead survivors group I am surprised to recognize. Peter has been a Deadhead since the 1970s. When I first began working with him, he was always chartering a plane and flying off to concerts on the weekends. I still remember how he broke down when Jerry Garcia died. "It was in Eugene, Oregon. I was hanging out backstage, and wound up talking to her over the snacks." Snacks, in this situation, being recreational chemicals. "She didn't fit in at all." I had noticed this about Jasmine even at this party. It was nothing overt, say, like wearing a silver lame jumpsuit, but she did not seem to belong. "All the ex-hippies and heads were giving her a lot of room." He swung his feet up on his desk, showing me his beat-up Adidas. "At first I was just going to hit on her, but I sort of forgot about it." He laughs. "Forgot about the concert, too."

"Pigpen was probably in the middle of a twenty-minute guitar jam." In all that time on Peter's sets, I have absorbed a smattering of Dead names.

Peter looks over his glasses at me like a professor dealing with a first-year law student. "Pigpen doesn't play guitar, Clark. It was probably Bobby Weir. Anyway, Jaz and I started talking, just the way you were, out comes this 'Beyond the End of Time, a billion years from now,' yada yada.

"I just thought it was one of those weird raps you hear at a Dead concert, but Jaz didn't seem stoned or strung out, or crazy. At least not crazy in the way *I* know crazy." Peter managed to marry several questionable women he met through the Dead, so while he isn't some kind of sanity expert, he has a bit of experience. "So I let her come home with me." Home being Monterey, I recall.

Note that he doesn't say he asked her to come home with me. Let. I actually start to feel a bit jealous. "Sounds like a relationship."

He smiles. "No way. Jaz immediately got hooked up with some job over at U.C.-Santa Cruz, some space survey thing. She was always around to talk to, but nothing was the way it should be. Forget sex. She didn't eat, she didn't drink, she didn't sleep. She never used the bathroom. Can you imagine a chick who never goes into the bathroom?"

"So, then, what is she," I say, "some kind of ghost? This sounds like *Weird Romance." Weird Romance* was my first project with Peter, a cable anthology series where the typical story concerned a man and a woman who could not possibly have sex, because one of them was... well, weird. The silly thing ran for 66 episodes.

"Not a ghost. She has a physical presence. She picks up the phone. She leaves an indentation when she gets up from the couch."

"Good thing you weren't watching her closely." I smile to take the edge off the sarcasm. I am getting testy, probably because I am now expecting some kind of pitch from Peter that involves mental healing, financial support, or possibly religion. "Did she happen to say, during these six months with you, *why* she

was here from wherever?"

"She's got a project. I'm helping her with it, which is why I moved back down here."

"Let me guess... an idea for a screenplay."

"She's got a lot of ideas, but they've got nothing to do with our former business."

"Now I'm *really* intrigued."

"You should be. Because the first person she wanted to meet down here was you."

I am as suspicious as I am flattered. "A television director who is staring into the open grave of his career?"

Peter closes his eyes, as if searching for strength. "Look, Clark, I hired you the first time on *Romance* because I could see that you were smart and talented." And because Peter was what used to be called a bleeding heart liberal who thought a kid who had broken his spine in a high school auto accident should still have the chance to become Steven Spielberg. "All you needed was a chance. And I can honestly say, you never disappointed me, either. Not on the set." He squirms in his fancy chair. So do I, to the extent I can, because I hear the last countdown ticks on a missile of criticism aimed right at the bridge of my nose. "We never really...." He moves his hands back and forth in some kind of vertical seesaw gesture.

"Became friends?" I prompt.

"Not that. I think we *are* friends." Which makes me feel shitty. "We were never able to... join forces and become *more* than television hacks."

"It's never too late." I'm joking.

But Peter is serious. "That's why you're here."

Before I can process this statement, Peter continues: "We spent years figuring out how to tell stories, Clark. We were using Dutch angles and nervous cameras and casting guys with earrings and girls with tattoos. Remember when we decided on *B.C. Cops* that no scene could run over sixty seconds?" *B.C. Cops* was our second project.

"We were very fucking hip and very successful. But really sort of predictable, too. Because all we were doing was wrapping shit in pretty paper. We threw out anything that resembled reflection or an actual idea and replaced it with a rap soundtrack and lots of eye candy. We made it impossible for anyone to recognize the truth if it wasn't packaged the right way."

"Jesus, Peter, a few more minutes of this and I'm gonna start to feel bad."

"You know, Clark, that's what Carter Bales used to say on *B.C. Cops.* Did I ever tell you I based him on you?"

Bang! The missile explodes in my face. "What do you want, Peter? We can't go *back."*

"No. We can go forward with open minds."

A billion years into the future? Beyond the End of Time?

Some semi-retired actress/model/whatever (by that I mean she's forty) comes to the door, and my session with Peter ends. I flee back to the party, and immediately encounter Jaz, as I now think of her.

She smiles and lowers herself to a couch, so our eyes are roughly on the same plane. "Did Peter explain everything?"

"Not remotely."

"It's not his strength."

"Why don't we save ourselves a lot of time. Just tell me what you want from me," I say, making the conversational equivalent of an Acapulco cliff dive. Jasmine has not become less attractive in the space of fifteen minutes, but I possess the ability to shake off the effects of a beautiful woman's force field—provided I'm out of range.

"That's direct."

"It would be the first thing this evening, after your little dance a while ago and Peter's big secret briefing. Frankly, it's like an episode of *B.C. Cops.*"

Actually, by this point I am thinking of my third project with Peter, the one that prompted the big lawsuits. It was called *Syn,* short for synesthesia, and it dealt with a guy whose senses had been scrambled by an accident. I remember *Syn* right now, because I'm seeing cold. But only for a moment. Jasmine's placid disposition returns in a heartbeat. "I suppose we are being silly."

"I promise I'll listen."

"Easy to say *before* you've heard me. You see, Clark, the answer to your very polite earlier question about where I'm from is what I told you. At least, sort of." She glances around quite prettily, then whispers. "I lived in Claremont before going up to Eugene." Claremont being the name of a college town within the greater Los Angeles area. "Jasmine is a name I adopted. Before that I was Jennifer Leigh Camden."

"Now that *really* doesn't sound like a name from Beyond the End of Time."

"Do you still want the answers?"

"I'm intrigued. And not out of patience yet."

"Okay, then." She gets up and lets me roll after her toward a corner of the big living room. The party is still boiling around us. Some kind of fusionoid music is playing on a very expensive system—or perhaps it's live from a combo on the floor below; Peter is capable of that.

And here's pretty much what Jasmine tells me:

The part of her personality that is *not* Jennifer Leigh Camden from Claremont, CA, is a consciousness formed literally a billion years in the future.

This entity, which we might as well call Jasmine, is actually a "cluster" of 70,000 or so individual minds. ("Exactly 70,000?" I say, and I'm really not trying to be funny. "Is there some significance to the number?")

("No. It varies, sometimes by several thousand. Other clusters have fewer, sometimes only a dozen or so. Our... messaging software doesn't work well when the number goes above 70,000." She says this all patiently, but I suspect that further interruptions will be dealt with harshly.)

Even the "billion year" figure is just a figure of speech. "That kind of data point has lost its meaning. I mean, we know from ancient history that the year was a common measurement of the passage of time due to the agricultural basis of the early human societies. Planting and harvesting were part of a cycle dependent on the planet's revolution around the sun. But we have not been agricultural for a billion billion seconds."

Oh, another thing. "We live in seconds, fractions thereof. Or in what used to be called millennia, ten to the third power based on the planet's rotation. And many places in between." Whatever. They live a long time. Or a short time, and they make it seem long.

"We have different bodies at different times. Some of them are organic; most are what you would call machines." Figured.

"What brings me here, to you, is the Mapping Project," a term which doesn't begin to explain it.

Here's what I got: the human race, or some chunk thereof, took to heart the Biblical injunction to "name and classify all things". Not just the "birds of the air, the fish of the sea and things that grow on the land," but everything in the whole universe. *Every* galaxy, *every* star, *every* planet.

Every gas cluster. Every pulsar. Every black hole.

No wonder she says, "I will tell you many impossible things, but the first such you must believe is this: our project is one million years old."

"That's a lot of data," I say, taking refuge from this madness in humor.

"We discovered that you needed a memory the *size* of the universe in order to properly map the universe."

At this point my head is hurting. My crotch, which has been disturbingly silent not just this evening, but for weeks (doing nothing to improve my mood, believe me), begins to throb. I'm beginning to imagine that my feet, which I haven't felt in twenty years, are itching.

But it gets worse. Jaz says, "You can't just create a map that's frozen in time. Macro and micro processes are always in motion. So the project expanded until it literally became a working, running model of the universe right down to the fishes of every sea, the birds of every atmosphere." She smiles, as if that will make it all better. "Even you."

"Well, if I'm part of your model," I say, wondering how the hell I am going to make an escape, "I've got some complaints." Specifically about a fender bender one snowy afternoon in February some twenty years ago.

"That's why we're talking."

"If you're talking to everyone in the universe who doesn't like his life, you're going to be busy for a billion years."

"Right now it's just you."

"I don't know whether to be flattered or horrified."

"It depends on how you choose."

"Choose what?"

She sighs and closes her eyes. I suspect I'm turning out to be stupider than she'd hoped. "There are two factions in the Mapping Project. One wants to create a perfect simulation which will replicate the history of the universe in all its glory and pain. Those are the Realists.

"I'm one of the Romantics. We want to make things different, and better."

"For what it's worth, you've got my support."

"Oh, but we need more."

"I'm a has-been television director! There must be two billion people ahead of me on any list of helpful human beings!"

She shakes her head. "Too many of them are already Romantics. You are a Realist."

Jaz might be right about that. For example, I have always been brutally realistic with the women in my life, telling them that the house is full of ramps and low shelves, that making a trip to the grocery store is a major undertaking, that you will wind up being my maid, and, oh yeah, that the sex will be unpredictable at best. "Granted. There are still millions of Realists walking the streets who would be better subjects for whatever

you have in mind. What is it again?"

All through this conversation, and I've tried to shorten it and straighten it out, Jaz has given no sign of impatience. She has not grabbed a drink from a passing waiter, or even stood up and stretched. "You are alive at the time in history when the seeds of the Mapping Project first take root."

"The beginning of the Space Age?"

"The end of the Space Age. This is the beginning of the Virtual Age, the Modeling Age. Human beings are not going into space, not physically. That should be obvious by now. Their sensory avatars will, which is how the Mapping started. Others will turn inward, creating their own virtual worlds. Still others will be reconstructing the past in a detail never before seen. That really started with photography and sound recording, but it's expanding into genetic archaeology, too."

In spite of my Realism, I find this intriguing, because this subject is one of my few areas of interest, aside from my failing career—the ability to slice and dice some genetic material that proves, for example, that the Irish and the Basque share the same heritage.

"Are you *sure* this isn't a screenplay idea?" I say. "Because it feels a little expository so far. You need to have somebody show up naked on a side street, let the audience *feel* his story." I smile, picturing Jaz naked. "Or her story."

"We considered all of that. But to force the material into a corrupt and artificial form seemed unnecessary."

"This all sounds like a gigantic simulation." Gigantic isn't nearly enough word for it. I thought about my relatively simple ten-mile drive to Peter's, and all the apartments and mansions and storefronts and offices I'd passed, and all the women and men and children who lived in them, worked at them, slept on the sidewalks in front of them. People born here, or maybe in Pakistan. Perfectly mobile people, and those like me, each with a story millions of seconds long, and still going.

Then I multiplied for the entire Los Angeles area, that whole sea of lights visible through Peter's picture window. Then I multiplied again, for the rest of the world.

Then the whole universe.

It's not only beyond the end of time, it's beyond *me.* I think I can imagine how disrupted one of my Cro-Magnon ancestors would feel if confronted with downtown L.A.—that was only 35,000 years ago.

Not a billion.

I began to feel as though I'd had a double shot of tequila, an amount and type of liquor guaranteed to make me pass out.

"That's one way to look at it. A hideously complex simulation."

Playing along—there is really no option—I say, "What kind of sim allows the operators to mix it up with the players?"

My reward is a raised eyebrow, a pointed finger, a perfectly early twenty-first century American gesture that says, *Good point.* My moment of triumph is brief. Jaz says, "Oh, this isn't the first time we've run it."

Then I do get chilled, and not thermally, because in spite of several layers of hard-bitten cynicism and skepticism—or Realism—at my core I'm as superstitious as a cave man looking at shadows.

So I'm wondering, am I dead? Did I get killed in front of the Chateau Marmont? Is Jaz the angel of whatever come to deliver me east to Brentwood (aka Heaven) or south of the 10 Freeway (Hell)?

"Okay," I say, about exhausting this evening's supply of questions, "what was it like, being yanked out of the future and stuck in this simulation? Are you really floating in some tank a billion years in the future?"

"It doesn't work like that at all! We had to search and find a person whose life would intersect with Peter's, then with yours. I had to *become* Jennifer Leigh Camden."

"You mean, she existed before? In the original version, I mean, not the remake?"

"Yes. More or less."

"So you had to what, be born? Grow up?"

She nods. "For a long time I didn't know who I was."

"When did you first realize that you were... not from around here?"

"I always felt I was different." Knowing how lame that sounds, she adds, "which means I was probably just like every teenager who ever lived. But when I was thirteen I started having dreams—very consistent ones, not just about, you know, the far, far future... but about events I could see happening around me. So I started keeping a journal and saw that the details of my dream world were very consistent, and that some of these dreams came true." She is silent for a moment, examining her hands, as if for hidden flaws. "It wasn't easy."

Those hands are within reach. It seems wrong, somehow, not to take them. "Is there some virginity thing associated with being from Beyond the End of Time?" This seems like a logical question, because our noses are now about two inches apart. The rest of us is even closer.

She laughs from somewhere deep in her throat. "Only when it comes to Peter Deibel." And she kisses me.

But only once, and the delicious effect fades like a dream on waking. I say, "So where's the proof?"

She laughs so instantly, so happily, that she actually blushes. "There *is* no proof! You have to take my word for it."

"Just, uh, 'sell all you own and follow me'?" I'm not really religious, but I knew that was a quote from the Bible.

"Work with Peter. *Start* the project!"

I can't help laughing. "And why? Why change history? Why reprogram your little sim?"

"Because of all the pain! All the lives thrown away! It hurts even in our sim."

"Well, then, you're really late. You should have showed up a century ago, before Stalin and Dachau."

She gets a very strange look on her face. "They were only the beginning, Clark. It gets much worse in the Virtual Age. Much, much worse."

At that moment, I have had enough enlightenment. I back my chair away from Jaz and the couch. "Thank you for a lovely evening."

"Are you leaving?" She actually seems quite upset at the idea.

"It's late, I'm cold. You're a very interesting woman. I'm not nearly good enough for whatever it is you want."

And then, God help me, I rotate my chair and get out of there.

But not before I see Jasmine stumbling up to Peter, falling into his arms, distraught. And Peter looking my direction as if he's seeing the saddest sight in the world.

I make it home safely, go about my usual routine on Sunday, start making calls on Monday, hoping to scare up an assignment, and think no more about Jasmine.

Actually, that's a lie. Every few moments I think about Jasmine, this business of living in a simulation run by some weird version of humanity a billion years in the (projected) future, but actually sort of outside our time (and universe?). Then my head starts to hurt and I have to change the subject.

When I drag myself out of the house and wheel over to Ventura Boulevard to do errands, I notice that people are glancing at me. Now, given that I've been in a wheelchair for twenty years, I'm used to the occasional stare and the glance of pity, and all the gradations between.

But these are different. From the sheer intensity of these looks, you'd think I had the Playmate of the Month wearing high heels and a thong pushing me. I practically flee back home.

And then I do something silly. I dig Peter Deibel's invitation out of Thursday's trash (I hadn't bothered to add his phone number to my Rolodex) and call him, figuring he'll know where to find Jasmine.

The phone rings. Peter's voice, gruff, raw. "Yeah."

"Hey, Peter, it's Clark," I say, and launch right into, "listen, I'm sorry for just taking off the other night, I had a great time and I'd like to give Jasmine a call—" Then I realize that Peter is just sort of breathing on his end of the line. "Peter?"

"I can't help you, Clark. Not with Jaz."

"Why not?"

"She's dead, man. Jasmine's dead."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Peter is perfectly capable of telling me something like that, just to see me go critical.

"She took off right after you did Saturday night. I don't know who with or where they went. But she never came back. The West Hollywood P.D. found her on the sidewalk in front of the Roxy about seven in the morning. She overdosed."

"On what? Was she a user?" *Was her whole story some fantasy fueled by Ecstasy?*

"They don't know yet. But she never used a thing around me. And I know a user, Clark. That's one thing I can see coming."

"God, Peter. I don't know what to say."

"You said enough."

Now I get angry. "Are you blaming me for what happened to Jasmine? She was *living* with you! I talked to her at a party for an hour!"

There is silence on the line. A sigh. "Ah, shit, it was meant to be. She always said so."

I don't pursue this with Peter, because I know I won't like the answer. "What are they going to do? Is there a family? Are there funeral plans?"

"I guess I'm her family. And I'm handling it."

Jasmine from Beyond the End of Time, aka Jennifer Leigh Camden of Claremont, California, is buried at Forest Lawn that Thursday. The weather is wretched, cold and rainy, autumnal in a way more suited to upstate New York than to Los Angeles.

The crowd is small, no more than twenty. The only face I recognize is Peter's.

The service is low on the religious scale, with a guitarist and a female minister who might have been a Unitarian. Peter at work again.

I sit there, shivering, listening to guitar music and soothing words, and thinking about the things Jasmine told me. Wondering why I had to reject them so quickly, so thoroughly. What made me the kind of human being who was only happy making up fantasies to amuse people I didn't know, and wouldn't like if I did? Who couldn't accept a wonderful idea presented to me purely, freely, even innocently?

What if we *were* all simulations in some unbelievably gigantic program? Was that any crazier than any other explanation I had ever been offered for my existence?

"I'm sorry, Jaz," I say, offering my words to clouds rolling over Griffith Park, to the cars thundering by on the 134 Freeway.

I wheel back to my car, lever myself inside as I have done for twenty years, and drive home. It is dark by now, my driveway treacherous.

So I am especially careful when I open my door, and swing my chair out of the passenger side, locking it open. I am unusually patient as I grab the tow bar above the driver's side window.

And I am completely surprised when my legs move as they were designed to, absorbing my weight, allowing me to take my first unaided steps in twenty years.

I spend the evening walking. Clumsily, yes. But I am undeniably mobile.

And I call Peter to tell him. Not just about the walking, but about how I want to work with him on Jasmine's project.

And, feeling truly crazy now, wondering if tomorrow or the day after, Jasmine's grave might turn out to be empty.

Dave Hutchinson

DISCREET PHENOMENA

1

The little blue car was moving so slowly that it barely made it over the top of the hill. I saw it edge up over the crest and half-expected it to stop and then roll backward out of view, like a sight-gag from a silent movie.

But it didn't stop. Somehow, it kept moving.

I was outside, topping up Jim Dawes's Jeep Cherokee up with unleaded. Jim was standing beside me, recounting the last grouse shoot he'd been to, but I wasn't really listening. I was watching the little blue car. Finally Jim fell silent and watched it with me.

"That'll be another one, then," he said, putting his hands in his pockets.

I removed the nozzle from the Cherokee's tank, closed the filler cap, hung up the hose, and went back to stand beside Jim. The car had made it over the crest of the hill and was starting to gain speed down the long gentle slope. Its right-side indicator was winking.

Domino came out of the office and stood beside us. "Another one?" he asked.

"Looks like it," said Jim.

"How many's that?"

Jim shrugged. "Six?"

"Five," I said. "This is the fifth."

The car reached the bottom of the hill and rolled sedately past us with only the sound of its tyres on the road. There was no one in the driver's seat. Or in the passenger seat. Or in the back seat.

"Well," said Domino, and he set off at a quick jog.

"New lad?" asked Jim as we watched Domino running after the empty car.

"He's been here about a fortnight," I said.

"Never seen him before."

"He's not local."

"Student, is he? Summer job?"

"I suppose so. Something like that."

Jim thought about it for a minute or so, while Domino caught up with the empty car, ran beside it, and in one graceful motion opened the driver's door and hopped inside.

"Good runner, for a hunchback," Jim said finally. He was one of those big bluff Yorkshiremen who think that a reputation for plain-speaking gives them carte blanche to be rude.

The little blue car stopped, performed a neat three-point turn, and came back to us. Domino steered it around behind Jim's Cherokee and stopped it with the handbrake. The indicator was still blinking.

"Same thing," Domino told us as he got out of the car. He held up one of those little cardboard Christmas trees that are supposed to smell like pine forests. He reached back inside and pulled the bonnet catch.

I lifted the bonnet. The engine compartment was empty.

"How do they do that?" Jim said, shaking his head.

Jim shook his head over the car for another twenty minutes or so, then he paid for his petrol and drove off. Domino and I pushed the blue car out of the way behind the office. I phoned Nigel, but he was out on a job, so I left Domino working on the accounts and went back outside and sat on my stool beside the pumps.

It was one of those extraordinary days you get on Salisbury Plain in summer, when the sky goes a kind of blue-white colour and seems to hum with the heat. We had only had two cars in all morning, not counting the little blue one.

I lifted the lid from the blue-and-white cooler-box beside my stool, took out a bottle of Budweiser, and levered the cap off with my Swiss Army penknife.

Across the road, in the window of Mavis Burton's knitwear shop, the headless, armless torso of her one and only mannequin was wearing the same green tank-top it had been wearing the first time I had seen it, almost six years ago, when I decided to buy the garage. I'd sat here so many hours over the years, looking at that mannequin, that I occasionally considered buying the tank-top myself, just to change the view, but I

always caught myself just in time.

I slurped beer, scratched my armpit, looked at my watch.

Eventually, a little police car came along the road from the centre of the village and parked outside Mavis's shop. An enormous man shrink-wrapped in a uniform a size too small for him got out and stretched. Even from across the road I could hear seams popping. I checked my watch.

Nigel finished his calisthenics, put on his cap, looked both ways along the road, and crossed over to where I was sitting.

"I make that an hour and forty minutes," I told him. "I'm going to write to the *Daily Mail* and make a complaint about the standard of rural policing."

"Afternoon, Geoff," said Nigel, touching the brim of his cap and smiling.

I got down off the stool. "It's back here."

On the way past the office, I called through the open window and told Domino to keep an eye on the pumps.

"So," said Nigel, looking at the little blue car and scratching his head. "How many's this, then? Six?"

"Five."

He opened the bonnet and regarded the empty engine space with the same kind of gravity he would have accorded a murder or a lost kitten. "Well," he said finally, "if nobody claims them in six months, I suppose they're yours." He looked at me and smiled sunnily. "Make yourself a fortune, I expect."

The first engineless car had rolled past the garage about a fortnight before, a couple of days after Domino turned up. It had come to a stop, that one indicator flashing, a few yards down the road, completely innocent of driver, passengers or motive power, and we had pushed it back into the yard and called the police. Nobody wanted to drive it, and Nigel was leery about towing it, so we cleared out one of the sheds at the back of the yard and put it in there.

The next day, Nigel returned with the news that the car seemed not to exist. Its vehicle identification number wasn't on record anywhere, and its numberplates weren't registered to any known vehicle. Nigel had a feeling that something not quite legal was going on, but he admitted to not having a clue what it was, and in lieu of further evidence he decided to leave the car with me for the time being.

Three days later, the next one arrived. We put that one in the shed too. And the next. And the next. Now, every time I went out to the pumps to serve a customer, I found myself glancing up the road, just in case I saw another slow-moving vehicle cresting the hill.

Nigel watched Domino and me push the blue car into one of the sheds. Then he watched me padlock the door, just in case someone decided to steal it.

Walking back to his car, Nigel looked through the window of one of the other sheds and said, "I don't remember this one."

I stopped beside him and looked into the shed. "It's my car," I told him.

"Thought you drove a VW."

We stood side by side looking at my Peugeot on the other side of the glass. I said, "The Volkswagen's Karen's car. We don't have off-road parking, and Laura Gibbs complained when we parked both the cars outside the house."

"Laura lives on your street?"

I nodded.

Nigel shook his head. "She always was a cow, even at school. Never understood it, pretty girl like that." He looked at me. "Want me to have a word with her?"

"No," I said, suddenly alarmed. "Jesus, Nigel. I'm a big enough laughing-stock around here without you fighting my fights for me."

"You're not a laughing-stock, Geoff," he said.

"No?"

He shook his head again. "But you are the subject of a lot of intense gossip, I will admit that."

"Thank you, Nigel," I said. "Thanks a lot."

After Nigel drove off, I left Domino in charge of the garage and I walked back down the High Street into the village.

Seldon comprised about three dozen houses, one pub, two newsagents, a butcher, a greengrocer, Mavis's knitwear shop, Baxter's Garage, a shoe shop, Vickers & Sons Estate Agents and a sort of pocket branch of Argos, all of them baking slowly in the afternoon heat. The village's population, including toddlers, couldn't have been more than six hundred, but just recently the place had started to look like the car-park of an out-of-town superstore.

The big green BBC Outside Broadcast van was still parked outside The Black Bull. Beside it were cars

with foreign number plates and Press stickers on the insides of their windscreens. In the field behind the pub were a couple more vans. One of them had a huge satellite dish mounted on its roof. Beside it was a ragged collection of tents, teepees and benders.

I carried on past the Bull. On the opposite pavement, Jane Wallace was being vox-popped by a CNN news team who looked as if they had all been die-cast from the same perfect mould. Jane was answering their questions with the easy professional grace of someone who has given many many interviews and has already made inquiries about getting an agent.

Outside Argos, the lone representative of a Ukrainian news service was standing, wild-eyed and festooned with cameras, looking for someone to interview. I crossed the road to avoid him, turned left up the next street, walked up my garden path, opened my door, closed it behind me, locked it, bolted it, put the chain on.

I went into the living room, closed the curtains, half-filled a glass with vodka, and lay down on the settee.

"Another one?" asked Karen from the shadows around the armchair.

I nodded and took a big swallow of vodka.

"That's six now, yes?"

I closed my eyes.

That night, it rained frogs.

2

"You look awful," said Domino.

"That's the effect I was aiming for." I sorted through the papers on my desk. "So, how does it look?"

He watched me a moment longer, then he looked down at the company books and said, "Do you want the good news or the bad news?"

"Let's work on the assumption that I only want to hear good news today."

"There isn't any," he said. "You'll be bankrupt by this time next year."

"You gave me a *choice,"* I protested. "Good news or bad news. Give me my good news."

He shook his head. "Grow up, Geoff."

I sat back in the threadbare swivel chair I'd rescued from a fire-damage sale the year I'd bought the business.

"Would you like to hear my opinion?" Domino asked.

"No, thank you."

"Whoever sold this place to you must have walked away jumping into the air, clicking their heels together and shouting yippee."

I looked at him. He had a fresh, unworried, open face and long ash-blond hair. If he hadn't been so tall and hunched-over, he could easily have been taken for a young teenager. I rubbed my eyes.

"It's a petrol station outside a village two miles from a major A-road," he went on. "Be honest with me; how many people charging down the A303 pull off and stop here for petrol?"

There were signs on the Seldon turnoff that pointed to "Local Services"—me, in other words—but most drivers expect their services to be at the end of a fairly short slip-road. People turning off the A303 just sort of drove around for a couple of minutes looking puzzled before getting back onto the main road and going in search of a real service station. I'd put up a sign of my own that read "Seldon Services—2 miles" but the Highways Agency had told me to take it down.

"Your prices are too high, too," Domino went on. "The last few weeks should have quadrupled your takings, at least, but everybody's going to the big service station up the road."

"I can't afford to cut prices," I said.

"It's not your fault." He looked at me with what appeared to be a real expresion of sympathy. "This place was dying on its feet years before you came along." He looked at the books again. "I give you another six months. A year, perhaps."

"Do you want a drink?" I asked.

The lounge bar of The Black Bull was full of journalists and technicians and support staff and scientists. We looked into the snug, and it was more of the same. We went into the public bar, and found a couple of locals neatly corralled along with the fruit machines and the pool table and the Space Invaders machine.

I sat at a corner table, thinking about Domino's assessment of my business future, while he went to buy drinks. I remembered Andy Hayward's little smile when we finalised the sale of the garage. I wondered what I was going to do, and I discovered that I didn't care very much.

Seven years ago, Karen and I had been living on the top floor of an Islington townhouse that had been converted, not very expertly, into three flats. The couple immediately below us had been going through the world's noisiest divorce, and the ground floor flat belonged to a young woman who had mentioned, just in

passing, that she was a practicing Satanist. I was working late shifts at Reuter's, and Karen was just making a name for herself illustrating childrens' books. We saw each other, if we were lucky, one evening in four.

And one Bank Holiday we drove down to Exeter to visit some friends of Karen's, and on the way back she noticed we were getting a bit light on petrol, so she pulled off the A303 and followed the "Local Services" sign, and eventually we found ourselves pulling into a little garage with a *For Sale* notice in the office window.

And while Andy Hayward topped up the car I got out to stretch my legs and was confronted by one of the most peaceful, idyllic village scenes I had ever encountered.

And I lost my mind.

"I hate to see a man drink alone," said Harvey, standing at the other side of the table and grinning down at me.

"I'm not drinking yet."

"I hate to see a man not drinking yet alone," he said.

I smiled. "Everyone says that about you." I watched him pull up a chair and sprawl into it. "How are you?"

"Wonderful," he said with some irony, searching his pockets and finally coming up with a lighter and a tin of small cigars. "I spent this morning shovelling frogs."

"You too?" My part of the village had only caught the edge of the squall, but I'd still had to hose the front path clear of burst little bodies.

He lit a cigar and sat back in his chair. "Still, beats snow, I guess." Harvey was from a little town outside Oshkosh, in Northern Wisconsin, and if he'd had enough beer to get nostalgic he would wax lyrical about his late father having to use a snow-blower just to reach his garage during the winter.

"Or cats and dogs," I reminded him

His eyes widened. "Yeah," he said. "That was bad, wasn't it?"

"It was an unusual couple of days," I admitted.

"Had that guy on the roof again last night, too," he told me.

I shrugged. Springheel Jack was, quite frankly, getting boring. By now most of the village had experienced the joy of being woken abruptly by the sound of long fingernails rattling on their slates in the wee small hours.

"At least he's harmless," I said. "People have started leaving a bottle of beer and a plate of sandwiches out for him at night."

"Yes. Right." Harvey pulled a sour face. "That's *just* what this place needs. A drunken paranormal phenomenon scrambling around on the rooftops scarfing down cheese and pickle sandwiches. That's *really* going to do wonders for property prices."

"Property prices are going through the roof," I told him. "I was talking to Barry Vickers the other day; he says people are queueing up to buy property here."

"Yes, but those people all believe that the Mayans colonised Mars and that aliens are abducting loggers in the Pacific Northwest and sticking silicon chips up their noses. I don't want people like that for neighbours, no thank you."

"Barry reckons he could get a half a million quid for my house."

He looked at me and raised an eyebrow. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." I couldn't believe he hadn't heard any of this.

"Something's going on," Domino said, coming back from the bar empty-handed. "Hello, Harvey."

"Hi," Harvey said.

"Where's my drink?" I asked.

"The journalists are leaving," said Domino.

Harvey and I looked at each other. Now Domino mentioned it, I could hear cars and vans starting up outside. Harvey raised an eyebrow.

"Oh no," I groaned. "It's much too nice a day."

He leaned forward and plucked at my sleeve. "C'mon, Geoffrey. You look like a man who needs an adventure."

"I have all the adventure I need in my front room."

He pulled my sleeve again, grinning. *"C'mon."*

The convoy wound its way slowly out of the village and into the sweltering countryside, a line of about fifteen vehicles headed by a converted double-decker bus spray-painted with huge dahlias.

"Who the hell are *they?"* Harvey asked, pointing up ahead at the bus.

"Druids," said Domino.

Harvey glanced in the rearview mirror to see if Domino was keeping a straight face.

"They've been coming over here from Stonehenge since last Wednesday," I said. "The fields between here and there are full of them."

Harvey looked bemused. "My goodness," he said. "Has there been any action at Stonehenge?"

"Not a peep," Domino said.

I closed my eyes and leaned back until my head was against the seat's rest. "Imagine their disappointment."

"It's a very localised phenomenon," said Domino.

"It's starting to get on my tits," Harvey said. "You know, this morning, while we were clearing frogs, this Space Cruiser pulled up with all these guys with video cameras in it."

I nodded. Space Cruisers containing guys with video cameras had become about as unusual in Seldon as Springheel Jack.

"None of them spoke more than a couple of words of English," Harvey went on. "Turned out they were Uzbeks. *Uzbeks.* I mean, do Uzbeks even *have* television?"

"Of course they do," said Domino.

"Yeah, other *people's* television. I meant television of their own."

"Uzbekistan has quite a muscular little press association these days, actually," Domino told him.

I opened my eyes. In front of us, the thirteen-strong Polish television contingent had somehow crammed themselves and all their equipment into their rented Espace. Through their rear window, I could see what appeared to be a heated argument going on.

"They wanted rooms," Harvey said, voice rising indignantly. "They thought the House was a hotel. Imagine that."

There was a brief silence in the Range Rover, while we all imagined it. Finally, Domino said, "It does look a *little* like an hotel, you have to admit."

"Yeah," Harvey grumped. "Well." He honked the horn a couple of times, and the Poles in the back seat of the Espace turned round and flipped us the finger. Harvey shook his head. "That's the Polacks, right?" Harvey had inherited, from the Czech side of his family, a congenital dislike of Poles.

At Three-Mile Post we left Seldon territory and briefly found ourselves driving across Jim Dawes's land. On either side of the road Jim's cornfields dipped and rose towards a shimmering tree-and-hedge-lined horizon arched over by a white-hot sky.

At the crest of Sefton Hill a small riot of people was spilling out across the road. Harvey drove us past the dozens of parked vehicles and down the other side of the hill until there was space to park. Then we walked back up to the crowd.

Sefton Hill was said to command the most aesthetic vista in the area, a great even expanse of gently rolling fields and hills that vanished into an uncertain and vaguely mystical heat-distorted distance peppered with tumuli and standing stones and the occasional long barrow. It was so popular with tourists that every summer Jim Dawes strategically positioned a little van in the layby selling strawberries and pots of honey.

"I love this," said Harvey when we reached the top of the hill, looking at the view he had inherited from the English side of his family.

All around us, the World's Press were aiming their cameras into the middle distance. In the middle of one of Jim's cornfields the crop had been crushed down to form a complex geometrical shape, like a deformed star.

"It wasn't here last night," I heard one of the CNN team say behind us. "We were out here till ten, eleven o'clock shooting the Evening Show, and I swear it wasn't there then."

Harvey was looking at the star-shape and shaking his head. "That's amazing, you have to admit," he said.

"It's a fake," someone said beside me.

I turned my head and saw that, without my noticing, a short young woman with very long brown hair had moved in between Domino and me. "Beg pardon?"

"It's a hoax," she said. She was wearing a pair of jeans and a baggy washed-out Harlequins rugby shirt. She wasn't a villager because I'd never seen her before, which these days would have suggested she was either a journalist or a sightseer, but she didn't seem to be carrying any journalistic equipment and she didn't have the blissed-out look of so many sightseers. "Some students from the London School of Economics came down here last night and did it with some bits of wood and a couple of lengths of clothesline."

Domino looked down at her and frowned. "Why would they do that?" he asked politely.

"Because I paid them to," she said without looking at either of us.

"That's very interesting," Domino said gravely.

She nodded. "Any idiot can make those things." She looked up at me. "I'm Pauline Niven. You're Karen Baxter's husband, aren't you."

"I wanted to prove that you can't believe everything you see," she said. "You can't look at a crop circle and just assume it was made by little green men."

"We have Green Men here too," Domino put in. I nudged him to be quiet.

I said to Pauline, "Unless you really *want* to be lynched by a couple of hundred journalists and scientists

and assorted sightseers, I wouldn't mention this to anybody else."

"That's the problem, you see?" she asked. "Everybody's just gone completely crazy over this place."

Crop circles—real and fake—were two a penny around Seldon; we had left Sefton Hill before the press pack got bored and caused a mini rush-hour, and Harvey had driven us back to The Black Bull, where we had been able to get a table and something to eat in the snug. Pauline was sitting opposite me, virtually vibrating with nervous energy, a glass of orange juice clasped in her fist.

"The food in here's getting real strange," Harvey commented, returning from the food counter and sitting down at our table. He put down his plate of chicken tikka and wild rice and poked it suspiciously with his fork. "When I first came here, the only thing Betty served was steak sandwiches and fries—sorry," he added for our benefit. *"Chips."* He thought about it for a moment. "And fried onion rings." He looked at us. "You know, I *miss* fried onion rings." I glanced at Pauline. She was staring at Harvey with a bemused expression on her face.

"It's the journalists," Domino said. "Betty thinks she should have something a bit more exotic than chips and steak sandwiches and onion rings for her new clientele."

Harvey nodded sadly. "These do not appear to be people who would be impressed by a Ploughman's Lunch, it is true. And your apology is accepted," he added to me.

"What apology?"

"Your apology for not introducing me to your friend while I drove you all back here."

Oh, for heaven's sake... "Harvey Menzel, Pauline Niven. Pauline Niven, Harvey Menzel, Baronet, Fourteenth Earl Seldon."

Pauline raised her eyebrows. Harvey leaned across the table, delicately lifted her hand, kissed it, and said, "Enchanted," in his best Donald Sinden voice.

Synchronicity does some pretty weird things. Six years ago, on the very afternoon that I was signing my life away in return for the world's most unprofitable garage, some miles to the East Sir James Dawson-Fairleigh, Thirteenth Earl Seldon, was riding to hounds.

At a little after two o'clock that afternoon, Sir James's horse abruptly refused to jump a hedge, hurling Sir James into the air, over the hedge, and piledriving him headfirst into the field on the other side. Alex Saxon, the local GP, was riding in the same hunt, so he was on the scene immediately, but Sir James was dead the moment he hit the ground. One drunken evening a couple of years later, Alex confided to me that the Thirteenth Earl's head had been driven so far down between his shoulders that he looked as if he had been killed by a single catastrophic shrug.

Five months after the accident, on the same day that Karen and I were moving into our new home in Seldon, a student named Harvey Menzel was called out of his class at Harvard Medical School and told that, as the only living—if astonishingly remote—relative of Sir James Dawson-Fairleigh, he had inherited a large house and a small village in Wiltshire.

"So I had to ask myself," Harvey said, "did I want a career in medicine, saving lives and that kind of thing? Or did I want to spend the rest of my life as a feudal warlord with the power of life and death over my tenants?"

Pauline was sitting with her chin propped up on her fist, her eyes wide. "So which did you choose?" she asked innocently, and I decided I liked her.

Harvey looked crestfallen. It was rare to see the famous Menzel charm—inherited, according to Harvey, from his great-great grandfather, who was a full-blood Menominee—fail. But to give him his due, he recovered quickly and fought his way across the now-crowded snug to get us some more drinks.

"He's got a good heart," I said when he was out of earshot.

Pauline raised an eyebrow.

"He's very lonely," I told her. "Most of what you see is just a front. How do you think you'd react if you were suddenly told you'd inherited Kodak or Chase Manhattan?"

She made a rude noise. "I'd turn cartwheels."

"Well, Harvey's different. He wasn't entirely kidding about the power of life and death, you know. The whole village belongs to him, and ultimately the responsibility for it ends with him. That must have been pretty scary for a twenty-four-year-old medical student."

"I thought the National Trust owned this place."

"Only the Gardens. They were laid out by the Seventh Earl, but he was the only Dawson-Fairleigh who was remotely interested in them. The rest were only interested in making money. The Twelfth Earl turned them over to the Trust in the Sixties in his will. Everything else belongs to the family. To Harvey."

She looked across the snug. "What does he think of this... invasion?"

"I think he's quite tickled by it, to be honest. He hangs out with the CNN and NBC people quite a lot. I think he likes having people around he can talk to about the Superbowl."

Pauline turned back to look at me. "Tell me about your wife."

I sighed. "It's private, Pauline."

"How does your wife feel about it?"

"She feels the same way."

"Does she?"

By this time, we were leaning slightly across the table towards each other. "Yes, she does."

"Are you sure about that, Geoff?"

"Yes."

"Have you asked her?"

"No," I admitted. "I haven't."

She sat back, a self-satisfied look on her face. "Well," she said. "There you are, then."

"There's what?" Harvey asked, returning with our drinks.

"Geoff won't let me talk to his wife," said Pauline.

He looked at me. "Why not?"

"Because it's *private,"* I said wearily, wondering why apparently intelligent people were unable to understand what I was talking about.

"Oh, hell," Harvey said to me, while beaming his best smile at Pauline. "It's no big thing, is it?"

"It is to me," I said.

Harvey sat down. "Surely what Karen wants is more important, yes?"

I glared at him. He was only taking Pauline's side because he wanted to get her into bed, and under normal circumstances I would have let it pass. But these were not normal circumstances.

"No," I told them both.

"Ask Karen," Harvey suggested. "How can it hurt?"

"How can it hurt?" I shouted at him. "Are you *insane?"*

"Hey," he said mildly. "Get a grip." He took a swallow of beer and shook his head. "Good grief."

"Do you think I'm over-reacting?" I demanded. "Is that it?"

"You just think about it," he told me in that lazy-eyed I'm-the-Lord-of-the-Manor way he adopted when handing down judgements his tenants didn't like.

"No way," I said, shaking my head. "Absolutely not."

In the wee small hours of the next morning, I was woken by a thump and a desperate scrabbling noise on the tiles above my head. There was a moment of absolute silence, then the sound of a large object sliding down the slope of the roof, at first quite slowly, then with increasing speed. A tiny little voice, pitched inhumanly high, pronounced a couple of syllables, then there was a bump, followed by a sort of thrashing thud on the front lawn.

I got out of bed and lifted back the curtains in time to see an impossibly long-legged figure with arms that reached down past its knees lift itself from the lawn, hop over the hedge, and stagger unevenly away down the street.

I went back to bed. I always knew it was going to turn out to be a mistake, leaving beer out for Springheel Jack.

3

The doorbell woke me at half past eight. I put on my dressing gown and took my hangover downstairs to yell at whoever was on my doorstep, but when I opened the door Harvey and Pauline were standing there shoulder to shoulder with identical looks of determination on their faces.

"Don't," I warned them.

"The little shit's doing it again," Harvey said. He looked furious; in all the time I had known him, there was only one person who could make him look like that. My heart sank.

"It's important," Pauline told me.

I looked at them, trying as hard as I could to remember the tail end of yesterday evening. "Did you two wind up sleeping with each other last night?" I asked.

Harvey looked embarrassed. Pauline stared at me. "So what?"

"I have a hangover," I told her. "Go away."

"No," she said.

"I haven't had breakfast."

"We've got breakfast." Harvey held up a thermos and a grease-smudged brown paper bag. "Doughnuts. I finally taught Mrs. Frewin how to make them properly." He thought about it. "Well, nearly properly."

"I have a hangover," I told them again. "Go away."

"We're going to stand here, ringing your doorbell every five minutes, until you get dressed and come with us," Harvey said.

"Jesus," I muttered. "All right. Let me put some clothes on."

"We'll come in and wait," said Pauline, obviously thinking of visiting my front room.

"No you won't," I told her. "Wait in the car. I won't be long."

I closed the door on them.

There were a lot of stories, some of them going back centuries, concerning the relationship between the Woods and the Dawson-Fairleighs. One story said that a hundred years or so ago a Wood ancestor had managed to wheedle his way into the favour of the then-Earl Seldon, who had given him a loan on which the Wood farm had stood as security. The loan had, of course, never been repaid, but successive Earls had not bothered to foreclose on the farm because it really wasn't worth having. There were also dark rumours that the Woods possessed some information which would terminally embarrass the Dawson-Fairleighs.

Whatever. The Wood farm had passed down through generation after generation of pillocks until it fell into the hands of Derek, in whom all the bad Wood genes appeared to have become dominant at once.

The gene for stupidity, for instance, which gossip said dipped in and out of the family from generation to generation. Derek was too stupid to hold his little soirees at a secret location far from home, which was how he got caught, time after time. Doing it at eight o'clock in the morning wasn't going to fool anybody.

Driving through the village, we passed half a dozen photographers and a bunch of Azeris who claimed to be their country's Press Association. Harvey kept his foot down on the accelerator and almost ran over the little Frenchman who had been the last person to ask to interview Karen.

"Slow down," I said.

"I'm going to hang him up by his balls this time," Harvey vowed, snarling through the windscreen, but he did lift his foot off the accelerator pedal fractionally.

"Who is this bloke anyway?" Pauline asked from the back seat while she loaded her cameras.

"Derek Wood," I said.

"Beg pardon?"

"Every town's got one," Harvey said. He changed gear and almost took every tooth off the gearbox.

"Geoff?"

"Derek is not a nice man," I told her.

"Three hundred years ago I'd have been able to have him hanged, drawn and quartered and the bits tarred and nailed to the door of St. Luke's, and *nobody would have been able to stop me,"* Harvey muttered. We went around a bend quickly enough for me to feel the Range Rover lift fractionally off its nearside tyres.

"Derek runs dog-fights," I explained.

There was a silence from the back seat. "Oh," she said finally.

I thought about last night, wondering at which point precisely Pauline's scepticism about Harvey had disappeared. I couldn't remember going home, or Betty ringing Last Orders, and a lot of things before that were blurred.

"Did you tell me why you paid those students to make the corn circle?" I asked her.

"No."

"Did you tell Harvey?"

She sniggered.

"How about Domino?"

"No."

I gave up. "How do you know Derek's having a fight this morning?" I asked Harvey.

"Ned Watkins."

"It's not like Ned to have moral scruples," I said. Ned Watkins was the county's most industrious poacher, the bane of about a dozen landowners.

Harvey shrugged. "Don't ask me what goes on in *that* guy's head. He just turned up about seven and said a bunch of the local petty criminal class were gathering at Derek's farm."

"Did you call Nigel?"

He nodded. "He's on his way with a whole posse of policemen. He wants to slap Derek as much as I do."

"Wow," I said. "I don't think I can handle this much excitement at this time of the morning."

He reached into his pocket and took out a Cafe Creme. "Have a cigar," he said.

"It'd probably make me throw up," I told him. But I took the cigar anyway and put it in my pocket.

The Wood farm sat in a little dip, an untidy cluster of run-down buildings and rusting tractors almost lost in a jungle of weeds. There were a couple of dozen vehicles of varying decrepitude parked in the farmyard when we arrived.

"Right," Harvey said, stopping the Range Rover and undoing his seatbelt.

"Shouldn't we wait for Nigel?" I asked.

He paused with his hand on the door-handle and looked at me. "This guy offends me, Geoffrey. He's one of the stupidest, most amoral human beings I've ever met. He thinks two pit-bulls tearing each other to bits is

the most exciting spectacle since *Holiday on Ice* and he's a bully to boot. He's one of my tenants and he's my responsibility."

"Don't you think you're taking your responsibilities a little bit too seriously?" I asked, but he was already out of the door and striding across the farmyard towards one of the ramshackle buildings. Pauline hurried after him, festooned with cameras. I watched them go, the Lord of the Manor and his Official Photographer. I shook my head. Then I got out the car and followed them, the Lord of the Manor's Fool.

Harvey reached the building, and at that point everything began to go wrong. Instead of just sneaking in unobtrusively, he wrenched open the door and shouted, "Derek Wood! Your worst nightmare is here!" And then he disappeared into a tidal wave of beefy bodies that erupted from the doorway. I started to run.

People jostled me as they tried to get past to their cars. I dashed into the barn and saw more of them milling around, shouting and swearing, illuminated by the flash of Pauline's camera. A deep pit had been dug in the middle of the floor, and I caught a glimpse of two stocky, massively-muscled bodies down in the bottom. It was chaos. On the other side of the pit, I saw Harvey for a moment, hand raised above his head, yelling at the top of his voice at someone.

The press of bodies parted and I found myself on the edge of the pit. Whatever Derek had in there, they weren't dogs. For a moment, I had the surreal impression that they were bald chimpanzees. They had the round, short-snouted heads and small ears of bull-terriers, smooth grey-brown hide and short muscular arms that ended in great sharp-clawed hands.

One was obviously dead, lying on the floor of the pit with its throat torn out with such force that it had almost been decapitated. The other one was standing pawing its fallen adversary's body as if confused that it had stopped fighting. Then it looked up and saw me.

All the noise seemed to go away. All of a sudden the creature was in motion. It reached the side and jumped. Its clawed fingers dug into the soil of the pit wall, and it started to haul itself hand over hand up towards me, snarling. Its mouth seemed crammed with tiny razor-sharp brown teeth. Its little yellow eyes were locked on me and it looked completely insane. It was close enough to spray spittle on the toes of my trainers.

Pauline walked unhurriedly up beside me, swung her foot back, and kicked the creature in the face. It tumbled back into the pit and lay in the dirt looking dazed. Pauline got a couple of quick photographs of it.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

I looked across the pit. On the other side, Harvey and a big brawny bullet-headed man were yelling at each other. Harvey's nose was bleeding, but Derek looked as if he was going to have a corker of a black eye. For a fraction of a second, they looked just like the thing Pauline had kicked.

"No," I said, looking at my shaking hands. "No, I'm not all right."

Then Nigel arrived with what appeared to be most of the Wiltshire Police Force rugby team, and order, of a sort, was restored.

Our little police action resulted in seven arrests for public order offences, five for offensive weapons, two for actual bodily harm and one for driving a stolen vehicle, Nigel and his boys having checked all the number plates in the farmyard before making their entrance. The live goblin was put in the back of a police dog van and taken away somewhere. The CNN team, who had arrived too late to film the action, were still haggling with Nigel's Inspector for the body of the dead one.

"I call *that* a good morning's work," said Harvey, dabbing his nose with a fistful of paper tissues.

"Tip your head back," Pauline told him. "It'll never stop bleeding otherwise."

Harvey tipped his head back obediently. "Goblins," he muttered. "Jesus."

"I was talking to Nigel," I said. "He doesn't think he'll be able to make a charge stick."

Harvey looked at me.

"It's not illegal to stage a goblin-fight," I told him.

He raised an eyebrow angrily.

"It's not," I said. "Dogs, yes. Cockerels, yes. Badgers, yes. Goblins, no. There's no legislation regarding goblins. As far as the law's concerned, you burst in on Derek and his mates doing something extremely unpleasant but perfectly legal." I watched Nigel frogmarching Derek over to a police van. "You'd better pray that Derek's too stupid to charge you with assault."

Harvey said, "You're a really ungrateful guy, you know?"

"Has something happened today for me to be grateful for?"

"Stop it, you two," Pauline said.

We looked at her. Harvey sighed and tipped his head back.

"Are you staying at the House?" I asked.

Harvey glared at me over his mask of paper tissues.

"Yes," said Pauline.

"I'll ask Karen," I told her.

She blinked at me. "Thank you," she said.

"You're welcome," I said, walking back towards the gate.

I walked quite a long way before I heard Harvey call, "Hey! Hey! You want a lift?"

I smiled and kept walking.

"Well, I don't know," said Karen.

"She says she just wants to talk to you for twenty minutes," I said.

"But why me?" she asked. "Why not that old bloke who was with the Duke of Marlborough?"

"General Branch."

"Yes, him. He was on GMTV this morning."

I sipped my drink. Karen was having a bad day; she wasn't much more than a vague smoky presence centred around the armchair in the corner of the living room. If the curtains hadn't been closed I wouldn't have been able to see her at all.

"I haven't even been dead very long, have I?" she asked.

"Thirteen months."

"I can't see that I have anything very interesting to say," she said. "General Branch was banging on about great battles and stuff; what do I have to say? How great it was living in Islington in the early 1990s? How I bumped into Cherie Blair once in Waitrose?"

"She wants to know what it's like to be dead."

"Well it's not *that* bloody interesting. I don't know; what do *you* think? Am I having a good time?"

"I promised I'd ask you to talk to her."

There was a silence from the other side of the room. "How many other people have asked to talk to me?"

"There have been a few," I admitted.

"You never tried to persuade me to cooperate with *them,"* she said. Another silence. "Is she very pretty?"

I looked into my drink. "Not particularly, no."

"So what's different about her?"

I looked at the febrile impression of motion that was all that remained of my wife. "She saved me from being savaged by a goblin this morning." It occurred to me that Seldon was the only place on Earth where a person could use that sentence and not feel in danger of winding up in a mental hospital.

4

The doorbell rang at ten o'clock on the dot. She was punctual, I had to give her that. I went and opened the door.

"Are you sure this is all right?" Pauline asked.

"Karen's very keen," I told her.

She had her camera-bag slung over her shoulder and her hair was freshly-washed. She looked about twelve years old.

"Is that some of her work?" she asked, looking past me.

I turned to look at the paintings hanging in the hall. They'd been there for so long now that I had stopped noticing them. "Yes."

Pauline stepped into the hallway and walked along the wall looking at Karen's paintings of elves and goblins and fairy-folk.

"She did them for Julie Dunmow's books," I explained. "You know, *The King of the Elves. The Tale of Ynessil and Awen."*

"I know," she said, leaning close to one of the paintings. "My nephew's got all her books. I didn't realise your wife did the illustrations."

"Good little earner," I said. "We're still getting royalties."

"Mm." She pointed to one of the pictures. "This looks like those things we saw yesterday. At the farm."

I went over and stood beside her. She was looking at Karen's painting of the King of the Goblins, carousing with his mates in his castle. Now she mentioned it, the goblins did look a little like the creatures from Derek Wood's farm. "I suppose," I said.

She moved on to the next painting, of a stick-thin, inhumanly-beautiful fairy, its gossamer wings spread as it ascended into a moonlit sky. "This is lovely," she murmured.

"It's the last painting she ever did," I said.

"Oh." She suddenly looked awkward. "I'm sorry, I—"

"It's all right." I walked past her and opened the living room door. "Someone to see you," I told Karen.

I had a private theory that Seldon was being punished for having ducked down below the parapet of History throughout its entire existance. Almost seven hundred years of English history had simply passed the village

by. None of its sons had gone to war, none of its inhabitants had written books or painted portraits or become an architect or a disc-jockey or a world-famous fashion designer. Seldon had started out as a village of ordinary people, and it had stayed that way.

General Branch appeared to be an anomaly, but it transpired that he hadn't been a local boy. On his death in battle the Duke of Marlborough had decreed that his General be buried in the little cemetary at St Luke's. Nobody knew why. Even General Branch seemed bemused, and not a little annoyed at being confined within the boundaries of the church grounds.

Seldon was cursed. That was the only explanation that made any sense to me.

Ever since the beginning of July, the village had experienced corn circles, spontaneous combustions, visions of unknown cities floating in the sky, UFOs, falls of frogs and anchovies, alien abductions, metal plaques etched in unknown languages dug up in fields, livestock mutilations, mysterious detonations echoing across the sky, homunculi, succubi and incubi. A Wild Hunt had been observed riding through Hobbes' Wood, and there were so many Green Men that the journalists had stopped reporting them.

And the Dead walked the Earth. Or rather, one of them appeared on Breakfast Television, and the other sat in the corner of my living room watching *Can't Cook, Won't Cook.*

I carried a bottle of Budweiser to the bottom of the garden and sat on the little rustic bench that looked as if it had been slowly rotting away for the past three hundred years. I drank some beer and looked about me.

It was a nice garden. Not too big, not too cramped. Square lawn in the middle, flower-beds up two sides, a line of horse chestnuts along the bottom with some rhododendrons thrown in for a bit of colour. A couple of yards away, sitting in the shade of one of the rhododendron bushes, was a wood-sprite.

I searched the path around my feet, found a bit of bark amongst the gravel, picked it up and waved it half-heartedly at the sprite.

It came out from under the bush, about a foot tall, a pointy, twiggy little thing with tiny scary black eyes under enormous beetling brows. It approached me with nervous scratching noises on the gravel, watching my face all the time, until it was close enough to reach out and grab the bit of bark and scuttle back to the safety of the bushes, where it squatted gnawing on the titbit. Another one came out of the shadows and they started to squabble over the bit of wood.

Somebody on television had coined the term "discrete phenomena" to describe what was happening in Seldon. They hadn't been here, or they would have realised that some phenomena were a whole lot less discrete than others. The village was infested with wood-sprites; they had crowded the squirrels out of their ecological niche. Springheel Jack was everywhere. Corn circles appeared wherever there was a crop tall enough to take a mark, whether it was a corn field or a neglected grass verge. Every evening, around seven, dozens of lights appeared in the sky and started to zoom about exhibiting nonballistic flight previously unseen outside *Close Encounters.* The Americans called it the Evening Show, and some of them still went up to Sefton Hill to shoot fresh footage.

On the other hand, there were only two ghosts, and Elvis had limited himself to one manifestation so far, buying an inflatible mattress at Argos. Sonia Gregory, who worked on the checkout, had testified that the King had appeared to date from the later Vegas Years but had been a perfect Southern gentleman.

The sprites stopped fighting and froze, looking past me towards the house. I looked around. Pauline was walking up the path towards me. I heard a sudden scrabbling noise, and when I looked again the sprites had gone.

Pauline sat down next to me on the bench and looked at the flower-beds on the other side of the lawn. She clasped her hands in her lap and sighed.

"Rosemary," I said.

She seemed to wake up all of a sudden. "Pardon?"

"Over there," I said, pointing to the little bush Karen had planted the week we moved in. "Rosemary."

She looked at me as if I was a dog that had started to recite a McGonnagal poem.

"Nothing like a sprig of fresh rosemary on a lamb chop," I told her. "Dried rosemary isn't the same."

She looked at the bush, and for a moment I thought she might have been half-convinced about the lamb chop. Then she said, "How do you cope?"

"Oh." I thought about it. "I get along." I shrugged. "I suppose."

"She wouldn't tell me what happened."

"Well." I scratched my head. "She was allergic to wasp stings, but she didn't know that until she was stung by a wasp." I looked about us. "A little over a year ago. Right here, as it happens."

She was watching my face.

"She managed to get to the phone in the living room, but she passed out before she could dial 999. She still had the phone in her hand when I came home for lunch and found her lying there."

"Oh." She sighed again. Then she said, "That's a really stupid way to die, isn't it."

"I suppose so." I rummaged in my pockets and found the Cafe Creme Harvey had given me the day before. "Do you have a light?"

"I don't smoke."

I put the cigar back in my pocket. "So. Did you get what you wanted?"

She was quiet for a moment, frowning at the rosemary bush. "It's just so... sad." She shook her head. "How did you feel? When she came back?"

"She hasn't come back," I said. I stood up. "Shall we go for a walk?"

"Yes," she said. "Let's."

Our street was a cul-de-sac, its top end blocked by the houses occupied since the time of the Treaty of Versailles by the Prentice Sisters, a pair of alarming nonagenarian spinsters who went shopping two abreast, towing their shopping trolleys behind them and bowling oncoming pedestrians into the road. A privet-lined path ran along the side of Sarah Prentice's house and back garden, then angled sharply off and opened up into a vista of fields and little copses.

We turned right at the end of the path and walked away from the village. Over in the distance, I could see the bright lights of a television crew vox-popping yet another villager. Not far from them, a group of figures was moving in what seemed to be a slow purposeful dance: crop-circle people, measuring and recording.

"What did you mean about Karen not coming back?" Pauline asked.

I stood and watched the crop-circle people. "General Branch has come back, even if he can't leave St Luke's churchyard. I've had to settle for a disembodied voice. I don't call that coming back."

"Does that make you angry?"

I looked down at her. "Are you recording this?"

She was quiet for a few moments. Then she put a hand in one of her jacket pockets. I heard the faint click of a tape recorder being switched off. "Has anybody had any ideas why Karen and the General can't leave the place they reappeared in?"

"Everyone has a theory."

"Do you?"

I shrugged. Over in a copse I saw sunlight flash on the banked lenses of dozens of remote-controlled cameras.

"Did you know you're on the Internet?" Pauline asked, seeing me looking at the cameras.

"I prefer to think of the Internet as something that happens to other people," I said in what I thought was a suitably stoic tone of voice.

She waved a hand to encompass the village and its environs and all the lunatics enclosed within. "It all winds up there in the end. Print journalism, still photos, full-motion video, hours of recorded interviews. Thousands and thousands of pages and newsgroups and discussion rooms. There are fifty dedicated WebCams installed in Seldon and the fields, beaming back pictures twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, hoping to catch some phenomenon going on. This place is the Mecca of the *X-Files* generation. The only reason the Loch Ness Monster hasn't turned up here is that you haven't got a big enough pond."

I stopped and looked down at her. She sounded angry, and I found that interesting. I'd met all kinds of people since Seldon had been cursed. I had met greedy people who wanted to exploit us. I had met wide-eyed idealists. I had met people who wanted to come and see things they had only heard of in old stories. I had never met anyone who was just angry.

"Has something upset you?" I asked.

She looked at me for a few moments. "I've just spent half an hour interviewing your late wife, and you have to ask me if something's *upset* me?"

"Oh," I said, putting my hands in my pockets and walking off again. "Right."

We drifted, two figures lost in a humming-hot landscape of low hills and fields and copses. We drifted so far that we didn't see a reporter or a news team for minutes at a time.

At one point, we climbed a stile between two fields and were confronted by a young woman dressed as a Druid, standing like a statue in her robes and looking, now we were out of sight of human habitation, a little alarming.

Pauline wasn't alarmed. "Go home!" she yelled at the Druid.

The Druid raised an eyebrow.

"Go *away!"* Pauline shouted, waving her arms.

The Druid—or more properly Druidess, I suppose—leaned on her staff with a certain dignity I envied, and gazed off into some presumably mystical distance. Pauline shook her head and stomped off in the opposite direction.

It took me a few moments to catch up with her. She wasn't very tall, but she could stomp along at an impressive speed.

"I didn't want this assignment, you know," she said.

"You hide it very well."

"I really begged my editor. Any day now the jury's going to be coming back with a verdict in that big murder trial in Salisbury. I could have been covering that."

I nodded in what I hoped was an understanding manner, though I didn't have a clue what she was talking about. I didn't read the papers much any more, and Karen didn't like to watch the news on the television.

"Oh no," she muttered, kicking at the ground. "Oh no, I had to come here along with the rest of the world's fucking Press and write stories about ghosties and ghoulies." She glanced up at me and her expression changed suddenly. "Oh, Geoff. I'm sorry. I didn't—"

"It's all right," I said. "I keep expecting people to get bored with it all and go away."

She shook her head. "This is the Silly Season, Geoff. Parliament's on holiday, there's no football, Wimbledon's over, the weather's not doing anything much, half the population's in Benidorm. People just *lap* this stuff up."

A few hundred yards away, some more crop-circle people were wandering about with their tape measures and video cameras and theodolites.

"Out of interest, why *did* you get those students to make that crop circle?" I asked.

She snorted. "That was another of my editor's bright ideas. She thought I could make a story out of how gullible people are, so she told me to fake up a crop circle and see how many people believed it was genuine."

I thought about it. "I think that's one of the stupidest things I've ever heard," I said.

"My editor's not exactly the shiniest tool in the box." She looked out into the distance and shaded her eyes with her hand. "I don't know, maybe she's right. There's no original angle on this thing any more. Nobody knows why it's happening. All they can do is stand and watch."

"One of the scientists says it's being caused by El Niño," I said.

She snorted. "If all else fails, blame the weather. Nobody knows, Geoff. It's the perfect phenomenon for the new millennium. Pointless, senseless and inexplicable, with great photo opportunities."

"You must have some pretty good material now, though," I said. "What with that business at Derek's farm yesterday. And talking to Karen. Doesn't that give you an original angle?"

She lowered her hand and looked at me. "Do you want to hear what she said?"

"No, thank you." I turned and walked away.

"Why not?" she shouted.

5

A couple of days later, I was sitting in the office looking at the accounts when I heard a Range Rover pulled up outside. Domino was taking his turn at the pumps, so I just scowled at the ledger on the desk in front of me and drank some coffee.

"That has to be the saddest sight in the world," said Harvey.

I looked up from the books. "What's that?"

"A good man trying to rescue his business, that's what."

I looked around the office. "Did a good man come in here?"

Despite the temperature, Harvey was wearing what he called his 'local camouflage': tan cord trousers, green cord waistcoat, woollen shirt, knitted tie, tan cord jacket, green wellies and a flat cap. I never saw a man who looked further from home.

"Pauline says you had a row."

"Did she?" I said.

"She says you shouted at her."

"She shouted at *me,* as I recall."

"Well." He scratched his head. "I guess we've all done our fair share of shouting at each other in the past couple of days."

I presumed this was a coded reference to last night's meeting of the village council, which had degenerated into a near-riot when the subject of Peter Massey's succubus had been raised. Domino, who had attended the meeting, had given me a blow-by-blow description of the evening. I thought it was a wonder we weren't all completely insane by now.

I said, "Do you want a coffee?"

He looked at my mug on the desk. "You drink instant, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Pass," he said.

I sighed. "I'm not going to apologise for shouting at Pauline," I told him, "because I didn't shout at her."

All of a sudden he looked embarrassed. "I've asked her to marry me."

I blinked at him. "You *what?"*

"Asked her to marry me."

"Well." I sat back in my chair. "What did she say?"

"She said yes, of course," he said, a little surprised that I'd had to ask.

"You've only known each other a few days, Harvey."

Hey," he said, "haven't you noticed? Magic happens here. Maybe love at first sight happens here too."

I blew a raspberry, just so he knew what I thought of love at first sight and magic and everything that was happening to Seldon.

"Anyway, Menzels hate long engagements," he said.

"Obviously."

"And we want you to be the best man."

I looked at him for a few moments, then I burst out laughing, which was obviously not the reaction he'd been expecting because he took off his flat cap and threw it at me. "I'm serious, you bastard."

"It'll give your tenants the laugh of their lives," I said, subsiding into giggles and tossing his cap back to him.

He pulled up a chair and sat down. "How much is this place worth?" he asked.

"It's not worth anything," I said. "That's why I'll be bankrupt in a few months."

"So why don't you let me buy it from you?"

I stopped laughing.

"See, what I was thinking," he said, examining the inside of his cap, "was that I could buy this place from you, and you could continue to run it for me on a salary."

"You've lost your mind," I said.

He shook his head. "No, sir. I did some telephoning yesterday—"

"After Pauline told you to help me out," I said.

"And it turns out that this place is the only part of Seldon that I don't actually *own,"* he went on as if he hadn't heard me. "According to that cobwebby old guy in Salisbury who pretends he's my attorney, Andy Hayward and the Thirteenth Earl cut some kind of deal. He won't tell me what it was, but it turns out that *you* own the land this garage stands on, not me."

"I didn't know that," I said, trying to remember the wording of the documents Andy and I had signed when I bought the place.

"So you could do anything with it," he said. "You could open a bowling alley or a fast-food franchise or a Hindu temple, and you'd be well within your rights." He saw the look on my face and smiled. "Forget it, fella. I have the local council in my pocket. You wouldn't get planning permission for anything more ambitious than a washing-line."

"I've always thought that what Seldon really needs is a bowling alley," I said.

Harvey laughed. "What it means is there's a gap in my property portfolio, right on my doorstep, and I'd like to close it."

"This place makes a loss," I told him. "You'd be insane to buy it and carry on running it as a garage."

"Not at all. People like having a garage in the village. It's not as if *nobody* stops here, is it?"

"No, but the running costs keep going—"

He held up a hand. "It doesn't *matter,* Geoffrey. This garage has been here ever since internal combustion first reached Wiltshire. It's as much a part of the village as The Black Bull, and I'm happy to run it at a loss because of that."

I was stunned. "Pardon me for saying so, but you're the most unlikely Fairy Godmother I can imagine."

"And it'll be a handy tax write-off as well," he said.

Word of mouth spreads quickly in a village as small as Seldon, and by eight o'clock virtually every human being within a five-mile radius was in or around The Black Bull. The car park had overflowed and there were cars double-parked up the High Street all the way to the garage.

Harvey had arranged for a special delivery from a real-ale brewery in Warminster to celebrate his engagement, and had hired a team of caterers from Andover who had organised the food with paramilitary precision. Seldon hadn't seen anything like it since the legendary Tenth Earl, who had commemorated the end of the First World War with a party that had lasted four days.

Domino shook his head as we fought our way through the mob. "Decadent," he commented. "Depraved." He looked at me. "Drink?"

I nodded. "I'll try and find us something to eat."

He regarded the heaving press of bodies and shook his head. "We'll never find each other again," he said. "Better to stay together."

We began to elbow our way towards the bar. There were so many people in the lounge bar that there was a haze of sweat in the air, and a layer of cigarette and cigar and pipe-smoke so thick that I couldn't see the ceiling, even though all the windows and doors were wide open.

All of Betty's staff were on duty tonight, and she had drafted in anybody who seemed willing and relatively

responsible to serve behind the bar. It took us twenty minutes to get an orange juice and a vodka and tonic, and another ten minutes to get across the room to where Harvey and Pauline were sitting.

"Is this not *magnificent?"* Harvey asked, spreading his arms as much as he could and grinning in welcome. He seemed to have got over his embarrassment about Pauline.

"It's impressive, certainly," I admitted.

"Congratulations, Harvey," Domino said, raising his glass of orange. "Pauline."

"I hear you're good with accounts," Harvey told him.

"I can't work miracles," Domino said.

"Well, my accountant dates back to the days when dinosaurs ruled the Earth. How'd you like a job?"

Domino looked at me. "I *have* a job."

"Nah." Harvey waved a hand dismissively. "I mean a *real* job. A *permanent* job."

"Harvey," Pauline said quietly, tugging his sleeve.

"How about it?" Harvey boomed.

"Harvey..." Pauline was looking at Domino while she tried to shut her fiancé up.

"Well..." Domino looked at me again. "It's tempting."

"You sod, Menzel," I said, shaking my head. "You buy my garage, then you buy my staff. How'd you like to pay off my mortgage?"

"We'll speak about that tomorrow," he said, suddenly serious. "I got plans for you and me, fella. You, me, Pauline, Domino, Seldon. We're all going places."

"Well, except Seldon," I said. "I'd like to think Seldon would stay in much the same place."

He burst out laughing. "Yeah," he guffawed. "Wouldn't like to see it get *lost,* would we?"

Harvey was one of those people who can get pretty seriously drunk without showing very many outward signs, and it only occurred to me now that he must have been drinking since this afternoon. He was sprawled in his corner seat, grinning and thoroughly indulging himself as Lord of the Manor, and he was going to have the mother and father of all hangovers tomorrow. I smiled.

Pauline and Domino started to chat quietly to each other, heads close together. I noted a lot of abbreviated hand-waving and a couple of astonished looks on Pauline's behalf, although not quite as astonished as I might have expected. I wondered how she had managed to figure it out.

I became involved in a heated conversation with a couple of Harvey's tenant farmers about the business at Derek Wood's farm. One of the CNN men joined in, then a couple of very drunk CBS cameramen, who claimed to have footage of Merlin doing card tricks over by White Lane Ford. At some point I looked over to the corner. Harvey had passed out and was snoring with a big sloppy grin on his face. Pauline and Domino were still having their conversation. I saw her lift his arm by the wrist and move it up and down, and by the look on her face I knew she was surprised at how light it was.

I went back to the bar a couple of times. The second time, I found myself standing behind the bar watching the Polish newsmen. They were standing in a line in front of me and shouting, "Pi*wo!* Pi*wo!* Pi*wo!* Pi*wo!"* and thumping the bar top in time to their chant.

"They want beer," Betty told me as she went by towards the other end of the bar. "'Piwo' is Polish for beer."

"Is it?"

She nodded. "In the past six weeks I've learned how to say 'beer' in eighteen different languages." She paused. "What are you doing behind the bar?"

"I have no idea."

"Well, while you're here, make yourself useful and serve these lads, would you?"

I shrugged and started to pull pints. The beer, supplied by Harvey, was free, but the Poles insisted on paying anyway. I took their money and put it in the till, and when I turned back to the bar there were more people waiting to be served. I served them.

Pulling pints seemed not too dissimilar to pumping petrol, so I decided to stay there for a while. I smoked the cigar Harvey had given me, and a little while later a harrassed-looking Betty came along the bar, beamed at me, and handed me a packet of slim panatellas.

The racket in the pub reached a crescendo around half past ten, then started to quiet down a little as the locals began to drift unsteadily off into the night. There were long moments when nobody wanted a drink, and I lit a cigar and leaned back and watched all the foreign newsmen and assorted tourists and villagers and caterers drinking and singing and shouting and laughing.

"I reckon this has been good for us," Betty said beside me.

I hugged her and kissed the top of her head. "Bless you, Bets."

"You daft sod," she said, snuggling up against me. Betty was at least twenty years older than me, soft and small and round, an applied mathematics graduate who always seemed a little astonished that she had wound up running a pub in rural Wiltshire. She was the only person I knew who had the balls to tell me she was worried that I drank too much. "I mean it," she said, gesturing at the assembled revelers. "Harvey's done

a lot of good for the village tonight. We've all been under a lot of strain for the past six weeks; we needed something like this. Blow off a little steam."

"Harvey doesn't care about that," I told her. "He just wanted to celebrate his engagement."

"It doesn't matter. How's Karen?"

"As tenuous as ever."

She shook her head sadly and gave me a firm hug. "Poor Geoff."

"Yes," I said. "Poor Geoff."

"When are you going?"

I looked at her.

"I haven't been here nearly as long as you have," she said, "but even *I* know that if you want to keep something secret you don't tell Barry Vickers."

"I only asked Barry to value the house for me," I said. "He hasn't put it on the market yet." And then I wondered how much of my dealings with Vickers & Sons, Estate Agents, had reached Harvey's ears, and how much of it had prompted him to offer to buy the garage. I sighed. "I don't know how much longer I can live there, Bets."

"Most of us are amazed you've stayed there this long," she said.

I thought about it, about all the nights when I hadn't been quite drunk enough to prevent me lying awake staring at the ceiling and thinking of Karen trapped in the front room. I couldn't remember when I'd finally decided I'd had enough. It seemed that I had always been ashamed of wanting to run away.

"I'll never sell it, anyway," I said. "Nobody in their right mind will buy a house with Karen's ghost in the front room." I actually felt myself cringe when I thought about it. "Nobody else would know what television programmes she likes to watch."

Betty handed me a clean bar towel. "Dry your eyes and blow your nose," she said.

"Sorry." I dried my eyes and blew my nose.

"Nobody would blame you for leaving," said Betty. "None of us can imagine what it must have been like for you these past few weeks."

"Are you still serving?" Pauline asked, leaning on the bar.

Betty looked at her watch. She liked to keep to the legal opening hours, even though a loophole in the local licensing laws meant that Harvey could order her to stay open as long as he wanted. "Yes, Miss."

"Pauline," said Pauline.

"Yes, Miss," Betty sniffed, going off to pull another pint.

"She doesn't like me," Pauline told me.

"She doesn't know you yet," I said. "When she does, she'll probably hate you."

She narrowed her eyes. "Have you been crying?"

I shook my head. "Too much smoke in here."

She frowned at me. "I'm going to need some help getting Harvey into the Range Rover in a while."

I looked across the bar, but there were still too many people between the bar and Harvey's favourite corner, and I couldn't see him. "Are you sure about marrying him?"

Pauline smiled. "You were right, you know? He really does have a good heart. He's a nice man, he's just a long long way from home. He's very sweet."

"And very wealthy."

"That comment," she said, accepting her pint of bitter, "doesn't do you credit."

Betty snorted and went out into the bar to collect glasses.

"I told you she didn't like me," Pauline said.

I lit another cigar. "Will you carry on working?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Is this the prelude to another insult?"

"It just occurred to me that you won't have to worry about your editor any more."

"I know." Her face seemed to light up with joy. "You have no idea how that feels."

"I think I can guess."

Domino came up to the bar. "Harvey wants to go home," he told us. He glanced at the clock over the fireplace. "And I have to go soon as well, or I'll turn into a pumpkin."

"That's not a joke you want to make around here," Pauline said. She looked at me. "Come on, Geoff. Let's get His Lordship in the car."

As we were getting him to his feet, Harvey opened his eyes and gazed blearily about the bar. "Where'd everyone go?" he asked.

"Home," I said.

He looked at me. "Hey, fella," he murmured, grinning. "Baxter's Garage."

"That's me," I said, putting my shoulder under his armpit to support his weight. "Baxter's Garage."

"I'm going to buy your house," he said.

"That's very nice," I told him as we got him half-walking, half-stumbling towards the door. The few drinkers

who remained raised their glasses to us as we went by.

"My people," Harvey said, waving to them. "Jesus, now I know why King George fought so hard to hang on to the Colonies. He just hated to see all those serfs going off on their own." He frowned. "Is it serfs or *serves?"*

"Are you going to do this all the time?" Pauline asked him.

He turned his head and looked at her. "Do what? Drink?" He looked thoughtful. "Guess not." He looked at me again. "Yeah. Your house. Going to buy it. You can come stay at the House with me and Pauline. I got plans." He nodded. "Good plans."

"I'm afraid to ask," I said, but I didn't have to because he had half dozed-off again.

Pauline went ahead of us and opened the doors and we followed her out into the car park. Moonlight shone on the roofs and bonnets of all the vehicles crammed in around the pub. Domino looked up at the Moon and scratched his head with his free hand.

There were some moments of low comedy while Pauline searched through Harvey's pockets for his car keys. Then we manhandled Harvey into the back seat of the Range Rover and covered him with a travelling rug. He turned over on his side and started to snore. Pauline closed the door and looked at us.

"Are you going to be all right?" she asked me.

"I expect so," I said.

"Harvey was serious about you coming to live at the House with us," she said.

"I know," I said. "I'll think about it."

"You'll still be able to visit her."

"I said I'll think about it."

"Okay." She hugged me and Domino, got into the Range Rover, and drove off into the night with her fiancé.

"Well," Domino said as we watched the car's rear lights vanish around the bend in the road at the end of the village, *"that* was an interesting evening."

"What were you two talking about?"

"Oh, this and that. She's very bright, you know."

"She's very bright and she's marrying Harvey?"

He laughed and clapped me on the shoulder. "Let's get you home."

These days, Seldon never really slept. There were always news crews wandering about, on the lookout for some new phenomenon. Tonight there were little groups of revellers as well, most of them staggering goodnaturedly homeward, some of them just staggering. They were being filmed by the CNN crew, who seemed to require neither sleep nor sustenance. In a couple of hours, the celebrations of the Fourteenth Earl Seldon's engagement would be on television screens in hotels in Dubai and duplexes in Waukesha, Wisconsin and flats in Sydney. I made sure Domino was walking between me and the cameras.

We reached the bottom of my street, turned the corner, and started to walk up towards my house. The lights were still on the Prentice Sisters' houses. I couldn't work out what ninety-seven-year-olds found to do so late at night.

As I opened the front door, I heard the end-title music of *Prisoner: Cell Block H* from the living room. "We're back," I called.

Domino walked down the hall and put his head round the door. "Hello, Karen."

"Hi, Domino," she said. "How was the evening?"

"Harvey had a lot to drink."

"What about Geoff?"

"Actually, Geoff didn't have that much to drink."

I heard Karen sigh. "He will."

I stepped into the living room. All the lights were off. The only illumination came from the television, and it threw odd shadows across the walls and furniture.

"Hi," I said to one of the shadows.

"Could you change the channel?" she asked. *"They Think It's All Over*'s on BBC1 in a minute."

I picked up the remote control from the coffee table. "It's a repeat, isn't it?"

"I know," she said. "But I missed it the first time around because I was dead."

"Right." I changed the channel for her and put the remote back on the table. "I'll just see Domino out and I'll come back."

"Okay," she said. "Goodnight, Domino."

"See you soon, Karen."

He followed me through the kitchen. I unlocked the back door and we went out into the garden.

"Are you going to sell the garage to Harvey?" Domino asked as we walked along the path.

I sat down on the garden seat. "Do I have a choice?"

"You'll be lucky to get a better offer," he said, taking off his shirt and straightening up.

I looked at him. Standing upright, he was nearly seven feet tall. His breastbone bulged out like the keel of a rowing-boat. He flexed the massive muscular hump of his shoulders and jammed his fists into the small of his back to ease the cramp he was always getting because he went around hunched-over as part of his disguise. I'd told him I thought it was a pretty stupid disguise, but he wouldn't listen.

"What about the house?" he asked.

I took out a panatella and lit it. "I *said* I'd *think* about it, Domino."

"There's no need to shout at me."

"I wasn't shouting."

He sucked his teeth. "Well, don't think too long. Harvey might change his mind." He bent down and took off his trainers and socks. He balled up the socks and put them both in one trainer.

"Harvey never changes his mind once he's decided he wants something. You know what he's like."

"Hm." He undid his belt and took off his jeans and walked out into the middle of the lawn. Without clothes, he looked thin and light enough to blow away on a breeze.

"What about his job offer?" I asked.

"It's an interesting idea," he admitted. "But you'll still need help if he wants you to carry on running the garage, won't you?"

Behind me in the rhododenrons, something rattled. Wood sprites, I thought. Or a Green Man, perhaps. Once upon a time it would have been squirrels or a fox; now you just couldn't be sure.

I said, "If you did want to go off and work for Harvey, I wouldn't stop you."

There was a wet smacking sound, and the great hump on Domino's back opened in a pair of fat fleshy leaves. Two huge damp flags of gauzy tissue tumbled out and hung from his shoulders.

"Don't be noble, Geoff," he said, starting to flap his arms up and down to pump fluid into the banners of skin. He looked, it had to be said, completely ridiculous. "It doesn't suit you."

"Thanks."

"Besides, how did you plan to stop me?"

Good point. "Did you tell Pauline about... um...?" I gestured at him.

"She worked quite a lot of it out herself, actually," he said, still flapping his arms. "As I said, she's very bright. I think it's going to be a lot of fun having her around."

I sat quietly smoking my cigar and watching Domino's pantomime. It was a lovely evening. A large lens-shaped object, glowing a soft blue, drifted slowly over the house and out of sight beyond the trees. Out on the High Street, someone on their way home from the pub launched into a loud, spirited and almost entirely off-key rendition of "New York, New York." I sighed.

"Anyway," said Domino, "it's going to take a couple of weeks for Harvey's solicitors to sort out the paperwork on the garage and the house, so we may as well just carry on as normal until then."

"Yes." I got up from the garden seat and picked up his shirt and his trousers and his shoes. "I suppose we can try that."

"So." He spread his great butterfly wings and smiled down at me. "I'll see you at work tomorrow." And he flew off into the moonlit sky.

I stood for a long time watching him fly away, until he was just a tiny speck, and then I looked away for a moment and he was gone. From inside the house, I heard Karen laughing at something someone had said on television.

There didn't seem to be anything else to do, so I went back into the house to have a drink.

I opened my eyes and stared up at the ceiling. I fidgeted a bit. It seemed that I hadn't noticed before just how uncomfortable the bed was.

After fifteen or twenty minutes, I got up and got dressed and went downstairs. As I walked along the hall, I heard a man's voice say, "To jest poczta."

Karen said, "To jest poczta."

She was following the BBC's early-morning language classes. First it had been Spanish, then Italian, then German, then I had lost track. I was going to wind up with the world's only disembodied voice that spoke eight or nine languages.

"Geoff?" she called as I went past the door of the living room.

"Can't sleep," I said. I opened the front door and stepped outside.

I stood at the garden gate and took big breaths of cool fresh air. The lights were still on in the Prentice Sisters' houses.

I walked down to the corner and onto the High Street. Down by the little Argos car park a small group of people were crouching over something in a pool of bright camera-light. I couldn't see what it was. I walked off in the opposite direction.

At the garage, I unlocked the office and switched on the lights and sat down at my desk. I unlocked the

bottom drawer and took out the office vodka and a glass. I put the bottle on the desk and sat back and looked at it. I'd had that bottle for five years and I'd never opened it. I made it a rule never to drink in the office, on the grounds that there had to be *somewhere* I didn't drink. I opened the bottle, half-filled the glass, and drained it in one go. I poured myself another and sat back in my chair and looked at the light fitting.

I thought about six years of struggle and worry. I thought about Karen. I thought about Harvey riding to the rescue and just suddenly making it all right again. I took a big drink of vodka and shivered. I filled the glass right up to the top. I picked it up carefully and managed to drink most of it in a single swallow without spilling a drop. I wondered if Harvey would make me wear some kind of period costume when I was running his garage.

I got up and went outside into the yard. I unlocked the door to one of the sheds and stood looking at my car, the Peugeot Karen and I had driven down here in six years ago. Apart from routine maintenance and the odd trip back up to London over the years, it had been in the shed ever since, courtesy of Laura Gibbs.

I spent twenty minutes trying to find a length of hose that would fit over the Peugeot's exhaust, and when I did find some it wasn't long enough to go through any of the windows, which seemed to sum up Baxter's Garage quite neatly. I gave up and settled for closing the shed door and stuffing an old tarpaulin into the gap along the bottom.

I sat in the driver's seat and put the key in the ignition. Then I sat for five minutes or so looking at the inside of the shed door. Then I turned the key, reclined the seat, put my head back against the rest, and closed my eyes.

"Geoff?"

I opened my eyes. Nigel was squatting down on his heels beside the car. I blinked at him.

"Karen throw you out?" he asked, smiling.

I rubbed my face. My neck was stiff and I had a hangover. Just another ordinary morning. "What time is it?"

"Half past seven," he said. "I was driving past, noticed the office door was open. Everything all right?"

"I couldn't sleep," I told him.

He nodded. "Rosie was like that when she was pregnant with our Amy. She'd get up at four in the morning and go out and sleep in the caravan. Only place she could sleep, some nights." He looked gravely at me.

"I'm not pregnant, Nigel," I said. "Promise."

He stood up. "Well. I closed the office door for you. Too many strangers about these days to leave your door open."

"I was hoping Derek Wood would come in and torch the place," I said. I climbed stiffly out of the car and stretched carefully. "Thanks."

"All right." He looked fresh and calm and content. Nothing ever fazed Nigel. Not Springheel Jack, not engineless cars, or goblins, or having to force his way into a garage whose door was blocked with a tarpaulin. "Go home, Geoff."

"I'll have to open up soon."

"Well go home and have a bath and some breakfast first," he said. He looked out through the open door of the shed. "Nice garage, this."

"I'm open to offers."

He laughed. "I heard His Lordship bought it off you."

"We haven't signed anything yet."

Nigel chuckled and shook his head. "I know better than to stand between His Lordship and something he wants."

"I know. I'm starting to discover how that feels."

"He's all right, though, His Lordship."

"He's got a good heart," I agreed. "And he's having the time of his life."

We went out into the sunshine. Everything was very still. The birds were singing. There wasn't a cloud in the sky and the air already felt warm. We watched a unicorn trot along the High Street. It rounded the corner and vanished from sight in the direction of the Bull.

"Do you want me to call somebody?" Nigel asked.

"Like who?"

He thought about it. "His Lordship?"

I winced. "No, don't. It'll make his day."

He nodded. "All right."

"Actually, I'd appreciate it if we could keep this between ourselves."

He nodded again. "Suits me. The less paperwork I have to fill out, the happier I am."

I thought he must have hardly any paperwork to fill out, because he was the happiest policeman I had ever met. We shook hands and I watched him ease himself into his little car and drive off. Then I turned and went

back into the shed and stood, hands in pockets, looking at the Peugeot and feeling hung-over and vaguely embarrassed. Now I thought about it, I couldn't remember hearing the thing start up when I switched on the ignition.

I reached inside and pulled the bonnet catch. I couldn't remember when I had last run the engine. I shook my head; I'd tried to gas myself in a car with a flat battery.

I went back to the front of the car, lifted the bonnet, and looked down into the engine compartment.

James P. Blaylock

HIS OWN BACKYARD

The abandoned house was boarded up, its chimney fallen, the white paint on the clapboards weathered to the color of an old ghost. It was hidden from the street by two low-limbed sycamores in the front yard and by an overgrown oleander hedge covered in pink and white flowers. Alan stood by his car in the driveway, sheltered from the street in the empty and melancholy afternoon, half listening to the drone of an unseen airplane and to the staccato clamor of a jack hammer, that stopped and started in a muted racket somewhere blocks away in the nearby neighborhood.

More than twenty years had passed since Alan had last driven out to his childhood home. A year or so after he had married Susan the two of them had stopped on the road, and he had climbed out of the car with no real idea what he hoped to find. A new family had moved in by then—his own parents having sold the house and moved north a year before—and the unrecognizable children's toys on the lawn were disconcerting to him, and so he had climbed back into the car and driven away.

His marriage to Susan was one of the few things in his life that he had done without hesitation, and that had turned out absolutely right. A few days ago she had gone back east for two weeks to visit her aunts in Michigan, taking along their son Tyler, who was starting college in two months in Ann Arbor. Alan had stayed home looking forward to the peace and quiet, a commodity that had grown scarce over the years. But somewhere along the line he had lost his talent for solitude, and the days of empty stillness had filled him with a sense of loss that was almost irrational, as if Susan and Tyler been gone months instead of days, or as if, like the old house in front of him now, he was coming to the end of something.

He walked into the back yard and tried the rear door, which of course was locked, and then tried without success to peer through a boarded-up kitchen window. He looked back up the driveway to make sure he was unseen, but just then a man came into view, walking along the shoulder of the road, heading uphill past the house. Alan moved back out of sight, waiting for an interminable couple of minutes before looking out once more. Hurrying now, he pried two of the boards off with his hands, wiggling the nails loose and setting the boards aside on the ground. He put his face to the dusty glass and peered through, letting his eyes adjust to the darkness within. There was a skylight overhead, which, like the oleander hedge out front, hadn't been part of the house twenty years ago. Filtered sunlight shone through its litter of leaves and dirt so that the interior of the kitchen slowly appeared out of the darkness like a photograph soaking in developer. He had been afraid that he would find the house depressingly vandalized, but it wasn't; and he stared nostalgically at the familiar chrome cabinet pulls and the white-painted woodwork and the scalloped moldings, remembering the breakfast nook and curio shelves, the dining room beyond, the knotty pine bookshelves topped with turned posts that screened the hallway leading to his bedroom.

He stepped away from the window and walked along the side of the property, between the house and the fence, toward where his bedroom stood—or what had been his bedroom all those years ago. There were no boards on the window, but the view was hidden by curtains. He rejected the idea of breaking the window, and instead retraced his steps, his hands in his pockets, careful not to look over the fence, beyond which lay the back yards of houses built a decade ago. In his day there had been a farm house on several acres, belonging to an old childless couple named Prentice who had the remnants of a grove of walnuts and a chicken coop and goats. There had been fruit trees on their property, peaches and Santa Rosa plums that he had eaten his share of.

He paused in the shade of a big silk oak tree near the garden shed in the back yard and stood listening to the breeze rustle the leaves, hearing again the distant clattering echo of the jack hammer. The heavy grapevines along the fence hadn't been pruned back in years, and the air was weighted with the smell of concord grapes, overripe and falling in among the vines to dry in the summer heat. The August afternoon was lonesome and empty, and the rich smell of the grapes filled him with the recollection of a time when he'd had no real knowledge that the hours and days were quietly slipping away, bartered for memories.

The shed at the back of the garage was ramshackle and empty except for scattered junk, its door long ago fallen off and only a single rusted hinge left as a reminder that it had once had a door at all. He remembered that there had been a brick pad in front of the door, but the bricks were gone, and there was nothing but compressed dirt. Inside, a short wooden shelf held a couple of broken clay pots, and on the wall

below the shelf hung a single ancient aluminum lawn chair with a woven nylon seat. Alan was certain he remembered that very chair, in considerably better shape, hanging in this same place thirty years ago. On impulse he stepped into the shed, took the chair down, and unfolded it, wiping off dust and cobwebs before walking out under the tree, where he put the chair down in the shade and sat in it, letting his weight down carefully. The nylon webbing was frayed with age, and the aluminum was bent and weakened at the joints, but the seat held, and he relaxed and surveyed the back yard, feeling a sense of invitation, of growing familiarity. Now that the house was sold and abandoned, soon to be torn down, it was his as much as it was anyone's, and it seemed to him as if the years had passed in the blink of an eye, the house having waited patiently for his return.

The quarter acre yard was smaller than he remembered, although it was immense by southern California standards, and the untended Bermuda grass lawn, flanked by now-weedy flowerbeds, stretched away toward the back fence and garden as ever, with the same orange trees and the big avocado tree that had shaded it since as early as he could remember. On impulse he stood up and walked to the edge of the lawn, where he pushed aside the high brown grass with the toe of his shoe until he found the first of the brick stepping stones that led out to the back garden. He recalled the countless times he had clipped away the grass that had overgrown the bricks, like a gardener edging headstones in a cemetery—an idea that was almost funny, since he had in fact buried something beneath this very stepping stone, which had seemed to him as a child to be permanently set in the lawn, like a benchmark.

When he was a kid he had put together little treasures, collections of marbles and pieces of quartz crystal and small toys that he buried inside foil-wrapped coffee cans around the back yard. The first of his treasures he had buried right here. And now, within a matter of weeks, bulldozers would level the house and grade the yard, and that would be the end of any buried treasures.

He bent over and yanked at the Bermuda grass, pulling out tufts of it in order to expose the edges of the brick. The roots were heavy, a tangled mass that had grown between and around the bricks, packing them together so tightly that they might have been set in concrete. He walked back to the garden shed and looked at the remains of old tools that lay scattered inside: a broken spade, the blade of a hoe, a bamboo rake with most of the tines snapped off.

He picked up the spade, which had about a foot of splintered handle, and went back out to the stepping stone where he slipped the blade in along the edge of the brick, leaning into it, pushing with his foot until he levered the brick out of its hole. The other bricks followed easily now, leaving a three inch deep square, walled and floored and criss-crossed with tangled white roots. Grasping the broken shovel handle he hacked through them, tearing clumps of roots and grass away with his hands, exposing the packed dirt underneath.

After scraping and hacking away an inch or so of soil he unearthed a rusty ring of metal—the top of a coffee can. A big shred of foil, stained gold, lay three-quarters buried in the orange-brown dirt, and he pulled it loose, the dirt collapsing into what must have been the vacancy left when the can had rusted away. Almost immediately he found a tiny porcelain dog—a basset hound that his mother had bought for him as a remembrance of their own basset, which had died when Alan was four or five years old. He tried to recall the dog's name, but it wouldn't come to him, and his losing the name filled him with sadness. It occurred to him that he couldn't actually recall the living dog at all, but had only a memory built up out of a few of his parents' stories, which had themselves been only memories.

He polished the dirt from the porcelain and set the figurine aside on the lawn. The wind rose just then, and the leaves overhead stirred with a sibilant whispering, and for a time the afternoon was utterly silent aside from the wind-animated noises. Fallen leaves rose from the lawn and tumbled toward the fence, and he heard a distant creaking noise, like a door opening, and the low muttering sound of animals from somewhere off to the east.

When he peered into the hole again he saw a tarnished silver coin, smashed flat, and instantly he recalled the morning that he and his parents had laid pennies and nickels and dimes on the train tracks near the beach in Santa Barbara, and how this dime had been flattened into a perfect oval, with the image still clear and clean, and had become his good luck coin. It reminded him now of the buffalo nickel that he carried for luck, one of his old childhood habits that he hadn't given up. He found three more objects: the lens from a magnifying glass, a carved wooden tiki with tiny ball bearings for eyes, brown with their own rust, and a pint-sized glass marble, a light, opaque blue with pink swirls.

He scraped the hole out a little deeper, getting well down beneath the rusty soil, but if there were other pieces of buried treasure lying around he couldn't find them. He pushed the soil and dug-up roots back in, rubbing the grass to disperse the leftover dirt, and then re-fit the bricks into their original positions as best he could, patting the edges back down before blowing the bricks clean. He sat down and polished the objects with the tail of his shirt, arranging them finally on the arms of the chair, remembering the day his father had come up with the idea of burying treasures and had helped him pick out these several trinkets from the scattered junk on the shelves of his bedroom. The two of them had made an elaborate map and burned the edges with a candle flame, but over the years he had lost track of the map, just as he had forgotten about the

treasure itself.

He was vaguely aware again of the barnyard muttering from beyond the fence to the east. He closed his eyes, listening carefully, trying to puzzle out the eerily familiar noise, which faded now, seemingly as soon as he paid attention to it. He opened his eyes, looking toward the fence. A heat haze rippled across the old redwood boards and for one disconcerting moment it seemed to him that he saw right through the shingled rooftops of the tract homes beyond the fence. He blinked the illusion away and looked around uneasily, listening now to the ghostly whispering of the wind in the leaves. It seemed to him that something was pending, like the smell of ozone rising from concrete just before a summer rainfall.

He moved the treasure pieces around idly, letting each of them call up memories of his childhood. He recalled quite clearly his father's telling him that a buried treasure was better than a treasure that you held in your hand, that sometimes it was better that your birds stayed in the bushes, a constant and prevailing mystery.

In his reverie he heard a hissing noise, interrupted by a ratcheting clack, and in the very instant that he identified it as the sound of a Rainbird sprinkler, he felt a spray of drops on his arm. He looked up in surprise, at the empty dead lawn and the deserted house, but the sound had already faded, and his arm was dry. He turned his attention back to the objects, suddenly recalling the name of their basset hound, Hasbro; but no sooner had he formed the name in his mind, and recalled with it a memory of the dog itself, than a blast of wind shook the garden shed behind him, and the limbs of the silk oak flailed overhead so that a storm of leaves blew down. He half stood up in surprise, leaning heavily against the chair arm to steady himself, and the flimsy aluminum frame collapsed beneath him. He fell sideways, dumping the dug-up trinkets onto the lawn, and lay there for a moment, too dizzy to stand, listening to the wind, the tree and clouds spinning around him. There was a glittering before his eyes, like a swarm of fireflies rising from the lawn straight up into the sky, and his face and arms were stung by blowing dust as the wind gusted, its noise a deep basso profundo that seemed to shake his bones. He covered his face with his forearm and struggled to his knees, turning his back to the wind, which died now as suddenly as it had arisen. When he opened his eyes he saw that the aluminum chair had been lifted by the wind and tossed into the grape vines.

He stood staring at the chair and the vines, uncomprehending: the vines were carefully pruned now, stretched out along tight wires affixed to the fence. And he realized that the silk oak beside him was a sapling, maybe twelve feet high, its little bit of foliage sufficient to shade a cat. A car throttled past on the street, and he looked in that direction, feeling exposed, standing in plain sight, a trespasser. The oleander hedge was gone. The sycamores stood as ever, but where the hedge had been was the dirt shoulder of an irrigation ditch. Another car passed on the road, an old Ford truck.

He stepped back out of sight, hidden from the street by the garage and shed, dizzy and faint and hearing from beyond the fence the muttering sounds again: goats, the muttering of goats and chickens from the old Prentice farm. The smell of the sun-hot grapes was cloying, and he had the displaced confusion of waking up from a vivid dream. He heard the ratcheting noise and once more was swept with water droplets that felt as warm as blood against his skin. The lawn was green, and cut short. A hose stretched across from a spigot in the garden to where the Rainbird played water over the grass, the spray advancing toward him.

He saw then that the gate they shared with the Prentices—*had* shared with the Prentices—stood halfway open. The rooftops of the tract houses that had occupied the old Prentice property were gone, replaced by the dark canopy of a grove of walnut trees that stretched away east like billowing green clouds. The limbs of a plum tree, heavy with fruit, hung over the fence. The windows of his own house were no longer boarded up, the chimney no longer fallen. He remembered the treasure now, lying out on the lawn, and he looked around in a new panic, gripped by the idea that he would want those five objects, that unearthing the treasure was somehow connected to his being here. Getting down onto his hands and knees, he ran his fingers through the grass, but there was no sign of them, the trinkets had simply vanished.

He recalled the little firefly swarm that had lifted from the lawn and blown away in the wind, and he was filled with the certainty that his treasure had decomposed, metamorphosed into some sort of glittering dust. And blown away with it was his return ticket home....

He stepped between the vines and the rear wall of the shed and sat down in the dirt, his mind roaring with the dark suspicion that he was alone in the world, that there was no place in it where he wasn't a stranger. With a surging hope he recalled the faces of old childhood friends; surely he could find his way to their houses. But what sort of greeting would he get, looming up out of the hazy afternoon, a forty-year-old man babbling about being displaced in time? He thought about Susan and Tyler, and his throat constricted. He swallowed hard, forcing himself to think, to concentrate.

An idea came to him with the force of an epiphany: the five objects, his small treasure, might still be buried in the ground. After all, he had dug them up twenty-odd years from now. He walked to the stepping stones, the grass around them now neatly clipped away, and without too much effort lifted one of the bricks out of its depression. He went back to the shed, opening the door and finding a trowel, returning to the hole and hacking into the soil underneath. The trowel sank nearly to its handle. There were fewer entangled roots,

and the ground was wet from the recent watering. He wiggled out another brick and jammed the trowel into the dirt in a different place, but again the blade sank without contacting any resistance. He tried a third time, and a fourth and then simply hacked away at the soil until he forced himself to give up the futile search. There was no can, no treasure. Clearly it hadn't been buried yet. When *would* it be buried? A week from now? A year?

Methodically now, he tamped the soil flat and re-fitted the bricks, tossing the trowel onto the lawn near the base of the tree and stepping across to where the lawn was wet in order to wipe the mud off his hands. He heard a screen door slam, and, turning, he saw movement next door through the narrow gaps between the fence boards: someone—Mrs. Prentice?—walking toward the gate. He ran back toward the shed, and slipped inside, pulling the door shut after him, tripping over the junk on the shed floor and groping in the darkness for something to hold onto.

The objects roundabout him appeared out of the darkness as his eyes adjusted. He recognized them from when he was a kid, doing chores: the rakes and shovels and pruning saws, the old lawn mower, the edger that he used to push around the edges of the stepping stones. Hanging on a peg was the aluminum lawn chair.

He peered out through an open knothole in one of the redwood boards, seeing that old Mrs. Prentice had just come in through the gate. She crossed toward the back of the yard and turned off the sprinkler, then came straight down the stepping stones and passed out of sight. He heard her footsteps on the concrete walk adjacent to the shed, receding down past the garage toward the front of the house, and he pushed the shed door open far enough to step out. Wafering himself against the wall, he edged toward the corner until he could look carefully past it.

She was out on the driveway now, stooping over to pick up a newspaper. She straightened up, looked at the front of the house, and started up the walk in his direction, reading the newspaper headline. He ducked back, hurriedly re-entering the shed and pulling the door silently shut. Her footsteps drew near, then were silent as if she were standing there thinking.

The trowel! Of course she saw it tossed onto the lawn. He caught his breath. *Don't open the door!* he thought, and he grabbed a coat hook screwed into the top of the shed door and held onto it, bracing his other hand against the door jamb in order to stop her from looking in. A couple of seconds passed, and then she tugged on the door handle, managing to open the door a quarter of an inch before he reacted and jerked it back. Again she pulled on it, but he held it tight this time. His heart slammed in his chest, and the wild idea came into his head to throw the door open himself, and simply tell her who he was, that he was Alan, believe it or not. But he didn't let go of the hook. Finally, he heard her walk away. He peered out through the knothole, watching her retrace her steps across the lawn and through the gate, swinging it shut after her. When her screen door slammed, he stepped out into the sunlight. The trowel lay near the tree again, where she had returned it.

He hurried toward the house, keeping low. No one but a lunatic would assume that the shed door was *latched* from the inside. Along with the tossed-aside trowel it would add up to evidence. Would she call the police? Surely not now—not in the innocent middle of the century. He couldn't remember if Mr. Prentice had a day job: perhaps he was home, and she had gone to fetch him. He glanced at the driveway and the street and was struck with the latent realization that his car was gone. Of *course* it was gone, left behind, sitting in that other driveway thirty years in the future. There was no car at all in this driveway, his or the family's car. He looked around more attentively, forcing himself to slow down, to work things out. He saw that there were still puddles of water in the flowerbeds along the driveway, eighty feet from where the Rainbird had been chattering away before Mrs. Prentice had turned it off. The garden was wet, too. She had apparently watered the entire yard over the course of the day, which argued that maybe she wouldn't be back, that she was finished with her work.

And she had picked up the newspaper, too, which made it likely that the family—his family—was away, and must have been away for a while, long enough for it to have fallen to the Prentices to watch over the house and yard. Which meant what?—probably one of their two-week summer trips to Colorado or Iowa or Wisconsin.

Listening hard for the sound of the screen door slamming, he stepped to the back stoop, climbed the three stairs in a crouch in order to remain unseen, and tried the door knob. Again it was locked. *Again*—the idea of it baffled him, and he was once more swept with a dizzying confusion. This wasn't the second time today he had tried the knob; it was the first time. Although his own fingerprints might already be on it, they would be prints from a smaller hand....

It dawned on him that the objects might be in the house right now, not yet buried. He had no real idea at what age he had buried them—ten, twelve? He heard the Prentice's screen door slam, and almost before he knew he had thought of it, he was heading up along the side of the house toward the front. There, right at the corner of the house, just where he remembered it, stood a big juniper, growing nearly up into the eaves. He felt around on its trunk, waist high, his hand closing on the hidden house key hanging on a nail. The cold

metal sent a thrill of relief through him, and a few seconds later he was on the front porch, glancing back at the empty street and sliding the key into the lock. He opened the door and stepped into the dim interior of the livingroom, recalling the smell of the place, the furniture, the books in the bookcase.

He locked the door carefully behind him and pocketed the key, then moved through the house, into the kitchen, keeping low. Through the window in the door he saw that old Mr. Prentice was in the back yard now. Mrs. Prentice stood at the open gate, watching her husband. He walked to the shed, looking around him. Cautiously he tried the door, which swung open. He looked in, then picked up the trowel from the lawn and put it away. He closed the shed door, and then walked back toward the grapevines. There was nowhere in the yard for a person to hide, except perhaps out in the back corner, where the limbs of the avocado tree hung almost to the ground, creating an enclosed bower. He walked in that direction now, cocking his head, peering into the shadows. But apparently there was enough sunlight through the leaves for him to see that no one at all was hiding there, because he turned and walked back toward the open gate, saying something to his wife.

Then he stopped and looked straight at the house. Alan ducked out of sight, scuttling back across the kitchen floor and into the dining room, wondering wildly where he would hide if the man came in. He heard a step on the back stoop, and the back door rattled as Mr. Prentice tried the bolt. Alan glanced toward the dark hallway. Could he even *fit* under his bed now? But Mr. Prentice descended the wooden steps again, and by the time Alan crept back into the kitchen and looked out the window, the gate was already swinging shut. For another five minutes he stood there watching, relaxing a little more as time passed. Probably old man Prentice would simply think his wife was nuts, that it was just like a woman not to be able to open a shed door.

The several hours before night fell passed slowly. The newspaper beside the living room couch revealed that it was July of 1968. He was, in this other life, ten years old. Hesitantly he made his way up the hall and looked into his old bedroom. Although it seemed to him impossible, it was utterly familiar. He knew every single thing—the toys, the tossed pieces of clothing, the window curtains, the bedspread, the bubbling aquarium on the dresser—as if he had carried with him a thousand scattered and individualized memories all these years, like the trinkets in the coffee can. He picked up a small net and scooped a dead angel fish out of the aquarium, taking it into the bathroom where he flushed it down the toilet. Then he returned to the room, possessed by the urge to lie down on the bed, draw the curtains across the windows, and stare at the lighted aquarium as he had done so many times so long ago. But he caught himself, feeling oddly like a trespasser despite his memories.

Still, he could be forgiven for borrowing a few things. He looked around, spotting the porcelain basset hound immediately, and then recalling in a rush of memory that the lens of the magnifying glass lay in the top drawer of his old oak desk. He opened the drawer and spotted it, right there in plain sight. The blue marble lay in the drawer too, rolled into the corner. It took him a little longer to find the tiki, which had fallen to the floor beside the dresser. He picked it up and cleaned the dust off it, noting that the ball bearing eyes were shiny silver. The train-flattened dime eluded him, though, until he spotted a small metal tray with a flamingo painted on it lying on the night stand, where, before bed, he used to put the odds and ends from his pockets. Seeing the tray reminded him that Alan would be carrying the dime in his pocket back in these days, just as he was carrying the buffalo nickel in his own pocket. So where would the dime be? Wisconsin? Colorado? Or homeward bound in the old Plymouth Fury, driving through the southwest desert? Maybe closer yet, coming down over the Cajon Pass, forty-five minutes away....

He moved the four objects around on the desktop, arranging and rearranging them, waiting for the telltale rising of the wind, the sound of a door creaking open, signifying sounds. But nothing happened.

He thought about keeping the items with him, in his pocket, but in the end he set the tiki on the desktop, put the porcelain dog back on the shelf, and returned the lens and the marble to the drawer, where he could retrieve them all in an instant. He stepped to the window and unlatched it, pushing it open easily. There was no screen, so he could be out the window quickly. Their family had never traveled at night; they were motel travelers—five hundred miles a day and then a Travel Lodge with a pool and Coke machine and, later in the evening, gin rummy around the motel room table. By nine or ten o'clock tonight he could safely fall asleep and then take up his worries tomorrow.

He spent the rest of the afternoon and evening reading his mother's copy of Steinbeck's *The Long Valley.* The book was in his own library at home now—whatever *now* constituted. The heavy paper pages and brown cloth binding had the same dusty, reassuring smell that he remembered, both as a boy and later as a man, and the stories in the book, existing as they did outside of time, felt like a safe and stable haven to him, a good place to wait things out.

He became aware that it was quickly growing too dark to read, and at the same time he realized that he was ravenously hungry. He walked into the dim kitchen and opened the refrigerator. In the freezer he found a stack of Van de Camp TV dinners, and picked out the Mexican dinner—enchiladas, beans, and rice—and in a moment of stupidity looked around for a microwave oven. Smiling at his own foolishness, he turned on the

oven in the O'Keefe and Merritt range, slid the foil-wrapped dinner onto the top rack, and then went back to the refrigerator where he found a hunk of cheddar cheese to snack on. He opened a bottle of Coke to wash it down with and stood at the kitchen sink, watching the glow of sunset fade over the rooftops to the east.

The house was dark when he took his dinner out of the oven, removed the foil, and ate it at the kitchen table, thinking that the enchilada tasted better in his memory than it did now. Although this was something he had already come to expect over the years, it was still a disappointment. It occurred to him that he should look around for a flashlight: he couldn't turn on a brighter light to read by, not with the Prentices next door, probably still spooked over the garden shed mystery. And he wondered idly about the trash: the Coke bottle and the foil tray and wrapper. Who knew what-all he would accumulate if he had to wait out a week here? And what would his mother say when she discovered that the TV dinners in the freezer had vanished? If he was here for the long haul, he would work his way through the refrigerator and freezer and half the cupboard, too.

Thinking about it made him feel more desperately alone, and his shoulders sagged as the enormity of his problem dropped on him like a weight. The empty house around him was true to his memory, and yet it wasn't his anymore. He was reminded of the decades that had passed away, of the first happy years of his marriage when he and Susan had spent their money traveling, of Tyler's childhood, of his mother's death a few short years after she and his father had moved out of the house and retired up the coast in Cambria.

He breathed deeply and looked out the window, trying to focus on the night landscape. The lantern in the driveway illuminated part of the wall of the garage before it faded into darkness. A pair of headlights appeared out on the street, the car swinging around the uphill curve in the road, the noise of its engine dwindling with distance. At least, he thought, there was the happy coincidence of Susan and Tyler being away in Michigan. They might wonder why he wasn't answering the phone at home, but it would likely be days before they began to worry about his absence. Then his mind revolved treacherously back around to his dilemma, and he recalled that Susan and Tyler weren't away in the east at all, not now, not in this century. Tyler was a decade away from being born. Susan was a twelve-year-old girl, living in Anaheim, oblivious to his existence.

What if he couldn't get back? Simply never returned? He saw himself living as a transient, as a ghost, waiting for the years to drag by until he could catch up with them again, drifting on the edges of Susan's life and then of Susan and Tyler's life—of his own life—haunting the same restaurants, hanging around the Little League field, watching the three of them from a distance. But he could never insinuate himself into their lives. A strange interloper—particularly a copy of himself—would never be welcome, not by Susan and not by Tyler and most of all not by him, by Alan, who wasn't really the same *him* at all now that the years had passed, despite the blood that ran in his veins.

Of course on that far-off day when Susan and Tyler would travel back to Michigan, and Alan, feeling lonely and maudlin, would once again dig up the treasure, then a door would open and he could step in and fill his own shoes, literally, if he chose to. He could simply walk back into his old life, answer the long distance calls when they came, prepare himself to tell his phenomenal story to Tyler, whose father had now disappeared, and to Susan, whose husband had aged thirty years overnight, and might as well be her own grandfather.

This time he didn't hear the sound of the car engine or see the headlights, but he heard the car door slam, heard a boy's voice—his own voice!—shout something, his own father shouting back, telling him to carry his own suitcase. Without a second thought, Alan was on his feet, starting toward his bedroom. He stopped himself and turned back toward the kitchen table, picking up the TV tray and shoving it into the trash under the sink, cramming the empty Coke bottle in after it and wiping his hand across the table to clean up a smear of enchilada sauce. The *back* door, he thought, but even as he turned toward the service porch he heard his father coming up along the side of the house, headed for the back yard, and through the kitchen window he saw the shadowy figure carrying an ice chest. He ducked out of sight, hearing the clatter of a key in the front door lock, and slipped into the hallway, heading straight into his bedroom, sliding up the window. He stopped, hearing his mother's voice in the livingroom now, followed by his own voice complaining about something. But there was no time to listen. He grabbed the porcelain dog and the tiki and slipped them into his pocket, then opened the drawer and snatched up the lens and the marble, shoving the drawer shut even as he was pulling the window curtains aside. He swung his foot over the sill and simply rolled out sideways into the flowerbed, scrambled to his feet, and quietly shut the window. He crouched there catching his breath, and watched as the bedroom light blinked on and he heard the suitcase drop to the floor.

As silently as possible he walked up the side of the house, trying to stop himself from trembling. He was relatively safe right where he was as long as he made no noise: there was no reason on earth for his father to come out here to the side of the house. He heard a sound now—the shed door closing, the ice chest no doubt returned to its place on the shelf—and he peered out past the corner of the service porch to see his father head back down the driveway toward the car. He looked at his watch. It was just eight o'clock, early yet, and he recalled the familiar nightly routine, the Sunday evening television, probably ice cream and cookies. But first Alan would have put on his pajamas so that he was ready for bed, which would mean either emptying his pockets into the tray if he was feeling organized, or, equally likely, simply throwing his pants

onto the bedroom floor.

Impatient, he walked silently back down toward the bedroom, where the light still shone through the curtains. Whatever he was going to do, he had to do it tonight. It wouldn't get any easier. And what was the alternative? Spend his days and nights hiding in the garden shed, drinking water out of the hose, waiting for another chance? As soon as it was safe he would re-enter the room, find the dime, and go back out the window. In the back yard he could take his time arranging the five items; he could take the rest of his life arranging and rearranging them until whatever had happened to him happened once more.

The moon had risen over the mountains to the east, and shone now on the wall of the house. He stood listening at the closed window, standing aside so that his moon shadow was cast on the wall and not on the curtains. The seconds passed in silence. It was impossible to tell whether Alan was still in the room or had gone out, leaving the light on. But then he heard the sound of the television in the livingroom, the channels changing. Had it been Alan who had turned it on? He held his breath, focusing on the silence, listening for movement.

Making up his mind, he put his hand softly against the top of the window sash and pushed on it gently and evenly. Just then the bedroom light blinked out, plunging the room into darkness. He ducked away from the window, his heart racing. Minutes passed and nothing happened, the night silent but for the sound of crickets and the muted chatter on the television. He stood up again, took a deep breath, and pushed the window open as far as it would go. After listening to the silence, he boosted himself up onto the sill, overbalancing and sliding into the room. He stood up, hearing voices—his mother and father, talking quietly but urgently.

He saw the smashed dime in the tray along with some other coins, and in an instant it was in his hand and he turned back toward the window, crawling through, his shoes bumping against the sill as he tumbled onto the ground. He clambered to his feet, grabbing the window to shut it. The bedroom light came on, and he froze in a crouch, the window not quite shut, the curtain hitched open an inch where it had caught on the latch. He hesitated, drawing his hand slowly away from the window frame, certain they knew someone had been in the house. And yet he couldn't bring himself to move: getting away—getting back—meant nothing to him.

"Don't say anything to him," his father said, close by now. "There's no use making him worry." Alan saw him briefly as he crossed the bedroom, disappearing beyond the edge of the curtain.

"But the oven is still *warm,"* his mother said, following him in. "And sauce on the tray in the trash isn't even dried out. I think he was here when we came home. What if he's still in the house?"

Alan bent toward the window until he could see her face. Somehow it hadn't occurred to him how young she would be, probably thirty-five or six. He had known that she was pretty, but over the years he had lost track of how absolutely lovely she had been, and he found that his memory of her was shaped by her last years, when she was older and fighting with the cancer.

"He's not in the house," his father said. "I've been all through it, putting things away. If he's not in *here,* which he's obviously not, then he's gone. I'll check the garage and the shed just to make sure. For now, though, let's just keep this to ourselves."

"But what did he want? This is too weird. He was reading one of my *books.* Who would break into a house to read the books?"

"I don't know. I don't think anything's missing. There was money on the dresser in the bedroom, and it's still there. Your jewelry box hasn't been touched...."

There was a sudden silence now, and Alan realized that the curtains were moving gently in the breeze through the open window. He ducked away down the side of the house as quickly and silently as he could, half expecting to hear the window slide open behind him or the sound of hurrying footsteps in the house. Without hesitating he set straight out across the back lawn toward the garden shed, looking back at the kitchen window and back door. The light was on in the kitchen, but there was still no one visible.

Should he get the chair out of the shed? Be sitting down for this? Reenact the whole thing exactly? He dug the five objects out of his pocket and held them in one hand, hopefully anticipating the disorienting shift, the rising of the wind, the rippling air. But nothing happened. He was simply alone in the moonlit night, the crickets chirping around him. His father appeared in the kitchen now, clearly heading toward the back door, and Alan moved back toward the grapevines, out of sight. He heard the door open as he sat down on the lawn, laying the objects on his knees, compelling himself to concentrate on them and not on the approaching footsteps, which stopped close by. He opened his eyes and looked up, feeling like an idiot. His father stood a few feet away, a golf club in his hands, staring down at him. Alan stared back in momentary confusion. He might have been looking at his own brother.

"Why don't you just stay there," his father said, "so I don't have to bean you with this driver."

"Sure."

"What were you doing in the house?"

For a time Alan couldn't answer. When he found his voice he said simply, "I'm Alan."

"Okay. I'm Phil. Pardon me if I don't shake your hand. What the hell were you doing in my house? What were you looking for?"

Alan smiled at the question, which was no easier to answer than the last one. "My past," he said. "I was looking for my past. You don't recognize me, do you? You can't."

"What do you mean, your past? Did you used to live here or something? This is some kind of nostalgia thing?"

"Yeah. I used to live here."

"So what are you doing with my son's stuff? That's from his room, isn't it? That dog and the tiki?"

"It's from his room. But I didn't steal it."

"You're just borrowing it?"

"Yes," Alan said softly. Then, "No, it's mine, too. I *am* Alan... Dad." He had to force himself to say it out loud, and he found that there were tears welling in his eyes. His father still stood staring at him, his own face like a mask.

Alan went on, pulling random bits from his memory: "You bought me the aquarium at that place in Garden Grove, off Magnolia Street. We got a bunch of fish, and they all ate each other, and we had to go back down there and buy more. And you know the cracked shade on the lamp in the livingroom? Me and Eddie Landers did that by accident after school on Halloween day when we were waiting for Mom to come home. That was probably last Halloween, or maybe two years ago at the most. I was the mummy, remember? Eddie was Count Dracula. He was staying here because his parents were out of town. Let me show you something," he said, carefully laying the five trinkets on the brick pad in front of the shed door and then shifting forward to get to his feet. His father took a step back, and the head of the golf club rose where it had been resting on the lawn. Alan stopped moving. "Can I get up?"

"Okay. Slowly, eh?"

"Sure. Just getting my wallet." Alan stood, reaching into his back pocket. He took his drivers license out of his wallet and held it out. "Look at the date." He pocketed the wallet, and his father took the card, turning it so that it was illuminated by moonlight. "Above the picture," Alan told him. He heard laughter from inside the house now, and realized that it was himself, probably watching television, still oblivious to everything going on outside here.

After glancing at it his father handed the license back. "I guess I don't get it," he said. But clearly he did get it; he simply couldn't believe it.

Alan put the license into his shirt pocket. "I came back from—from thirty years from now. In the future." He pointed at the objects lying on the bricks. "You and I buried this stuff in a coffee can, like a treasure, under the first stepping stone, right there."

"We did, eh? We buried them? When was that?"

Alan shrugged. "Any day now, I guess. Next month? I don't know, but we buried them. We will, anyway. I came back and dug them up."

There was the sound of the back door opening, and his mother came out onto the back stoop, looking in their direction. "What are you doing, dear?" she asked with feigned cheerfulness. "Is everything all right?" Probably she was ready to call the police.

"Yeah, it's fine," Alan's father said back to her. "Just... putting some stuff away." She stepped back into the house and shut the door, but then reappeared in the kitchen, where she stood at the window, watching. His father was still staring at him, but puzzled, less suspicious now.

"You remember the time we were up at Irvine Park," Alan asked, "and we found those old bottle caps with the cork on the back, and you got the corks out and put the bottle caps on my shirt, with the cork holding them on from the other side? And I picked up that cactus apple and got all the needles in my hand? And it started to rain, and we got under the tree, and you said that the pitcher of lemonade would get wet, and Mom ran back to the table to cover it?"

His father dropped the golf club to the lawn, letting it lie there. "That was thirty years ago," Alan said. "Can you imagine? It's still funny, though. And there was that time when Mom lost her purse, remember, and she looked all over for it, and you came home from work and found it in the refrigerator?"

"She put it away with the groceries," his father said. "That was last month."

Alan nodded. "I guess it could have been." He realized now that his father's silence was no longer disbelief, and he stepped forward, opening his arms. His father hugged him, and for a time they stood there, listening to the night, saying nothing. Alan stepped away finally, and his father squeezed him on the shoulder, smiling crookedly, looking hard at his face.

Alan reached into his pocket and took out the odds and ends that he carried, the buffalo nickel, his pocket knife. He showed his father the little antler-handled knife. "Recognize this? It's just like the one you gave me, except I lost that one. I found this one just like it at the hardware store and bought it about a year ago."

"I didn't give you a pocket knife like that."

"You know what? I guess maybe you haven't given it to me yet."

"Then I guess I don't need to bother, if you're just going to lose the damned thing."

Alan smiled at him. "But if you don't, then how am I going to know to buy this one at the hardware store?"

They listened in silence to the crickets for a moment. "How old would you be now?" his father asked him.

"Forty-two," Alan said. "How about you?"

"Forty. That's pretty funny. Married?"

"Yeah. Take a look at this." He dug in his wallet again, removing a picture of Tyler, his high school graduation picture. He looked at it fondly, but abruptly felt dizzy, disoriented. He nearly sat down to keep himself from falling. His father took the picture, and the dizziness passed. "That's Tyler," Alan said, taking a deep breath and focusing his thoughts. But he heard his own voice as an echo, as if through a tube. "Your grandson. Susan and I gave him Mom's maiden name."

Alan's father studied the picture. "He looks like your mother, doesn't he?"

"A lot. I didn't realize it until tonight, when she was standing in my bedroom. You must have seen that the window was open...?"

"Your bedroom," his father said, as if wondering at the notion. "Here." Alan took his keys out of his other pocket. Among them was the loose house key that he had removed from the nail in the juniper. "That's how I got into the house."

Still holding Tyler's picture, his father took the key. He nodded at the other keys on Alan's key ring. "What's that one?"

Alan held out his car key. "Car key. One of the buttons is for the door locks and the other pops the trunk open from a distance. There's a little battery in it. It puts out an FM radio wave. Push the door button a couple of times, and an alarm goes off." Alan pushed it twice, recalling that his own car, in some distant space and time, was sitting just thirty feet away, and he found himself listening to hear a ghostly car alarm. But what he heard, aside from the crickets and the muted sound of the television, was a far-off clanking noise, like rocks cascading onto a steel plate. The night wind ruffled his hair. And from beyond the fence, just for a split second, the dark canopy of walnut leaves looked hard-edged and rectilinear to him, like rooftops. Then it was a dark, slowly moving mass again, and he heard laughter and the sound of the television.

"Thirty years?"

"It seems like a long time, but I swear it's not."

"No, I don't guess it is. What's the date back where you come from? Just out of curiosity."

Alan thought about it. "Eighth of July, 2001." He found himself thinking about his mother, doing the math in his head. What did she have? Twenty years or so? His father hadn't ever remarried. Alan glanced toward the house where his mother still stood at the window, looking out at the night.

His father followed his gaze. "Tell me something," he said after a moment. "Were you happy? You know, growing up?"

"I was happy," Alan said truthfully. "It was a good time."

"You found your heart's desire?"

"Yeah, I married her."

"And how about your boy Tyler? You think he's happy?" He held the picture up.

"I think so. Sure. I know it."

"Uh huh. Look, I think maybe it's better if you go back now, before your Mom flips. Can you? It's getting late."

"Yeah," Alan said, realizing absolutely that the clanking noise he had heard was the sound of a jackhammer. He took the pocket knife and nickel out of his pocket again, and held them in his hand with his keys, then reached into his shirt pocket to retrieve his drivers license.

"I'd invite you in, you know, for ice cream and cookies, but your mother—I don't know what she'd do. I don't think it would..."

"I know. Alan too...." He nodded at the house. "We might as well let him watch TV."

"Right. It would be like... a disturbance, or something. I guess we don't need that. We're doing pretty good on our own."

"And it's going to stay good," Alan said. "Is there anything...?"

"That I want to know?" His father shook his head. "No. I'm happy with things like they are. I'm looking forward to meeting Tyler, though." He handed the picture back.

"If you can ever find some way to do it," Alan said, taking the picture, "let Mom know that..."

But he felt himself falling backward. And although it came to him later as only a dim memory, he recalled putting out his hand to stop his fall, dropping the stuff that he held. He found himself now in bright sunlight, lying on the dead Bermuda grass, the words of his half-finished sentence lost to him, the onrushing wind already dying away and the smell of grapes heavy on the sun-warmed air. The telltale glitter shimmered before his eyes, and he sat up dizzily, looking around, squinting in the brightness, hearing the clanging of the jackhammer, which cut off sharply, casting the afternoon into silence. He saw that the shed was dilapidated and doorless now, the house once again boarded up. His car, thank God, sat as ever in the driveway.

His keys! He stood up dizzily, looking down at his feet. With his keys gone he had no way of...

"Hey."

At the sound of the voice, Alan shouted in surprise and reeled away into the wall of the shed, turning around and putting out his hands. He saw that a man sat in the dilapidated aluminum lawn chair beneath the silk oak—his father, smiling at him. With the sun shining on his face, he might have been a young man. Alan lowered his hands and smiled back.

"Welcome home," his father said to him.

About the Authors

In 1977, at the age of 35, **Barry B. Longyear** decided that, although he enjoyed being a printer, he hated printing customers. He sold his printing company and went into writing full time, somewhat neglecting two areas: figuring out what to write and how to write it. He calls this the "kamikaze school of career selection." Through an admittedly fortunate series of circumstances, he learned what he needed to learn and made his first sale, the short story "The Tryouts," to *Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine* the next year. In his first year of publication he sold many more stories and his first three books, *Manifest Destiny, Circus World,* and *City of Baraboo* (all 1980, Berkley/Putnam), and a year later became the first writer to be awarded the Nebula Award (for the novella "Enemy Mine"), the Hugo Award (also for "Enemy Mine"), and the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer all in the same year. His novelettes "Homecoming" and "Savage Planet" were nominated for Hugos in 1979 and 1980. He received a Distinguished Achievement Award from the University of Maine at Farmington in 1981. His writings have been published in *Omni, Asimov's, Amazing, Analog, ASFA, Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, Return to the Twilight Zone,* and *Catfantastic V* (some under the names Mark Ringdalh, Frederick Longbeard, Shaw Vinest, and Tol E. Rant), as well as in the nonfiction book *Teaching Science Fiction: Education For Tomorrow.*

In the works now are *Alien Runes* (an oracle for the now universe), a collection of his stories from the hard edge titled *Dark Corners,* and a sequel to his recent Hazelden release titled *Life Sucks Better Clean.* As part of the preparation to write his first mystery novel, tentatively titled *The Hangman's Son,* Barry has recently completed training as a private investigator and is a member of a community Joint Resolution Team involved in dealing with first-time juvenile offenders.

Longyear resides in New Sharon, Maine with his lovely wife Jean. His hobbies include wood carving, computer games, sailing, watercolor painting, and especially downhill skiing, for which he will immediately drop whatever else it is that he is doing.

"I believe that every imaginable universe exists somewhere in the cosmos, at least while I am researching and writing a story. One of my tasks is to be as true to that universe as possible, which for me involves going to wherever/whenever, living and wandering there for a time, then reporting what I have experienced. The things that I report are those messages, ideas, and tales that alter my mind such that my view of the universe and my place in it become changed, bent, even twisted. It is my endeavor to take these matters and warp the reader's mind as well. Brain damage is not my quest, however. It is only a side effect. My true mission is to go to strange and wonderful places, both dark and humorous, to pursue and grasp important truths about myself, life, and the universe that for some reason are much more understandable in science fiction than they are in the here and now. It's also fun."

Gavin J. Grant lives in Brooklyn. He edits and publishes *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet,* works for the independent bookshop portal Booksense.com, attended the Clarion workshop in 2000, and does not go back to visit his family in Scotland quite often enough.

Howard Waldrop, who was born in Mississippi and now lives in Washington State, is one of the most iconoclastic writers working today. His highly original books include the novels *Them Bones* and *A Dozen Tough Jobs,* and the collections *Howard Who?, All About Strange Monsters of the Recent Past, Night of the Cooters,* and *Going Home Again.* He won the Nebula and World Fantasy Awards for his novelette "The Ugly Chickens." Waldrop asserts that he killed *Omni Online.* His story "Mr. Goober's Show" went up "four days before the switch was thrown," he notes. It was reprinted in the September 1998 issue of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction.*

Waldrop continues to work on *The Moon World* and *I, John Mandeville,* novels ten and twenty-eight years in the making, respectively.

His story "Our Mortal Span," based on the fairy tale about the three billy goats gruff, was recently published in *Black Heart, Ivory Bones,* the last of the Datlow/Windling adult fairy tale series. He also recently caught and released an eighteen-pound chinock salmon on a 5-wt. flyrod several weeks ago. He says, "You don't want to do that every day."

Leigh Kennedy was born in Denver, Colorado, and received a BA in history from Metropolitan State College.

She moved to Austin, Texas in 1980, where she received heat rash and a new accent. She then emigrated to England in 1985 where she received yet another accent and two children with her husband, Chris Priest. Her occupations have varied from emptying bedpans to writing indexes for philosophy texts. Kennedy presently lives with her family in Hastings, on the south coast of England.

Steven Utley: My Whole Life Story (Complete in One Volume)

I was born a week and a day after Harry Truman had pulled the rug out from under Thomas Dewey, in the year of the Berlin Airlift and the first full-blown commercial television broadcasts. (For the history-challenged: 1948.) Over the next couple of decades, my parents, including my father, a noncommissioned officer in the Air Force, herded my three siblings and me from place to exotic place (England, Okinawa, Kansas) as part of the Pentagon's master plan to defeat communism.

As a child I enjoyed books and old movies and imitatively worked up my own stories both prose and in comic-book form. I broke into print in the seventh grade with a poem about Hannibal (the Carthaginian general, not Samuel L. Clemens's hometown), but it wasn't until my freshman year of high school, when I discovered Mars—the Mars of science fiction's two great romantics, Edgar Rice Burroughs and Ray Bradbury—that I somehow understood that I, too, must grow up to be A Writer, or at least a rich and famous person. Ten years later, I was one! A Writer, I mean.

By then (we're up to the early 1970s, in case you've lost track), my family had settled in Tennessee but momentum had carried me clear on into Texas, where I fell in with other young writers, including Lisa Tuttle, Howard Waldrop, and Bruce Sterling, and fell in love with one of them. Whichever one of them it was (accounts vary) enticed me to Austin, then a sort of bohemian paradise and still, in my heart, what every military brat must eventually seek—Home. Nevertheless, Austin having evolved into a replica of Dallas, many of us Austinians (which are not quite the same thing as Texans) are now expatriates living in exotic places such as the Scottish hinterlands and the backwoods of Washington State, or, in my own case, smack on the buckle of the Bible Belt. I lead a quiet life, surrounded as I am by my books and my cats and my dangerously inbred neighbors.

All of the above is the truth or as much of it as I'm able to fabricate on the spur of the moment.

A. R. Morlan was born on January 3, 1958 in Chicago, Illinois. The only child of divorced parents, she lived in the Los Angeles area from 1961 to 1969 when she moved to the midwest. Morlan graduated *magna cum laude* from Mount Senario College in Ladysmith, Wisconsin, in December 1980 with a B.A. in English, and minors in Theatre Arts and History. Her first published work was a quiz in *Twilight Zone Magazine* (1983). Her first published story was "Four Days Before the Snow," in *Night Cry* (1985). She lives with a houseful of cats.

John W. Randal lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania—the city in which he was born. Primed by an early interest in Greek, Roman, and Norse mythology, he happily immersed himself in the science fiction and fantasy novels found on the shelves of his grade school library. In 1987, he graduated from La Roche College with a degree in English and set about trying to sell some of his own stories. Two years later he succeeded.

He was a First Place winner in the 1989 *Writers of the Future* contest and has been fortunate enough to have his short fiction appear in a variety of publications. He finds inspiration in music, dreams, and in nature—especially a view of the ocean, or of Pittsburgh's three rivers, gleaming like black glass at night.

He hopes you enjoy his fiction. He enjoys creating it.

Terry Dowling is Australia's most awarded writer of science fiction, fantasy and horror. He is author of *Rynosseros, Blue Tyson,* and *Twilight Beach* (the Tom Rynosseros saga); *Wormwood, The Man Who Lost Red, An Intimate Knowledge of the Night, Antique Futures: The Best of Terry Dowling,* and *Blackwater Days;* and co-editor of *Mortal Fire: Best Australian SF* and *The Essential Ellison.*

Dowling's stories have appeared locally in such magazines as *Omega Science Digest, Australian Short Stories, Aphelion, Eidolon,* and *Aurealis* and anthologies as diverse as *Dreaming Down Under, Centaurus: The Best of Australian Science Fiction, Alien Shores, The Oxford Book of Australian Ghost Stories* and *The Year's Best Australian Science Fiction and Fantasy.* Overseas publications include *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, Interzone, Ténèbres, Ikarie, Event Horizon,* and Japan's *SF;* and appearances in *The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror* and *The Year's Best Horror.*

M. Shayne Bell has published short fiction in *Asimov's, Fantasy and Science Fiction, Tomorrow, Amazing Stories, Gothic.Net, Interzone, Science Fiction Age,* and *Realms of Fantasy,* plus numerous anthologies, including *The Year's Best Science Fiction #6, The Best of Writers of the Future, Starlight 2, Future Earths: Under African Skies, Simulations: Fifteen Tales of Virtual Reality, Isaac Asimov's Mother's Day, War of the Worlds: Global Dispatches,* and *Vanishing Acts.* He published stories in each of the three Star Wars short story anthologies. His short story "Mrs. Lincoln's China" *(Asimov's,* July 1994) was a 1995 Hugo Award

finalist.

Bell is author of the novel, *Nicoji* (Baen Books, 1990), and editor of the anthology, *Washed by a Wave of Wind: Science Fiction from the Corridor* (Signature Books, 1993), for which he received an AML award for editorial excellence. In 1991 he received a Creative Writing Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Bell has also published poetry in a number of venues, including *Asimov's, Amazing Stories,* and *Once Upon a Midnight,* an anthology commemorating the 150th anniversary of the publication of Edgar Allen Poe's "The Raven." His poem "One Hundred Years of Russian Revolution" *(Amazing Stories,* 1989) was a Science Fiction Poetry Association Rhysling Award finalist. He worked for six years as poetry editor of *Sunstone* magazine.

Bell holds a master's degree in English literature from Brigham Young University. He enjoys hiking, backpacking, and climbing. He has backpacked through Haleakala Volcano on Maui, from the summit to the sea, retracing an expedition Jack London went on at the turn of the last century. In the fall of 1996 Bell joined an eight-day expedition to the top of Kilimanjaro, the highest mountain in Africa (19,340'). He lives in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Gene Wolfe: Autobiographical Sketch

I was born in Brooklyn, New York. This came home to me, to me who had always called myself a a Texan and thought of myself as a Texan, when I read that Thomas Wolfe warmed up for writing by walking the night streets of Brooklyn. He was from the hill country of northwest North Carolina, and so was my great-great grandfather—making Thomas and me, at least presumptively, distant cousins. Hemingway sharpened twenty pencils and Willa Cather read a passage from her bible; but Thomas Wolfe, bless him, swung his big body down Brooklyn streets and may have been thrashing out some weighty problem in *Of Time and the River* during the early hours of Thursday, the seventh of May 1931. I hope so. I like to think of him out there on the sidewalk worrying about Gene Gant and flaying NYU.

At any rate, I was born in that city on the southwest tip of Long Island. My parents lived in New Jersey at the time, but they moved and moved. To Peoria, where I played with Rosemary Dietsch, who lived next door, and her brothers Robert and Richard. To Massachusetts, where little Ruth McCann caught her hand in our car door. To Logan, Ohio, my father's home town, where Boyd Wright and I got stung by the bumble bees in our woodshed. To Des Moines, where a redheaded boy taught me chess while we were in the second grade. Then to Dallas for a year, and at last to Houston, which became my home town, the place I was "from."

I went to Edgar Allan Poe Elementary School, where we read "The Masque of the Red Death" in fifth grade and learned "The Raven" in the sixth. We lived in a small house with two very large bedrooms; the front room was my parents', the back bedroom, with mint growing profusely beneath three of its six windows, was mine. I had no brothers or sisters, but I had a black-and-white spaniel called Boots; and I built models (mostly World War I airplanes, which still fascinate me—I have done two stories about them: "Continuing Westward" and "Against the Lafayette Escadrille") and collected comics and Big Little Books.

The thing I recall most vividly about Houston in the late thirties and early forties is the heat. Houston has almost precisely the climate of Calcutta, and until I was ready for high school there was no air conditioning except in theaters and Sears Department Store. We went to movies during the hottest part of the day to miss it, and when we came out of the theater the heat and sunlight were appalling; my father had to wrap his hand in his handkerchief to open the door of our car.

Our house stood midway between two mad scientists. Miller Porter in the house behind us was my own age but much tougher and cleverer, and built Tesla coils and other electric marvels. Across the street Mr. Fellows, a chemist, maintained a private laboratory over his garage. He blew himself up once in true comic-book style.

If all this were not enough to make a science-fiction fan of me, there was, only five sweltering blocks away, the Richmond Pharmacy, where a boy willing to crouch immobile behind the candy case could cram *Planet Stories, Thrilling Wonder Stories,* or (my favorite) *Famous Fantastic Mysteries* while the druggist compounded prescriptions.

Almost unnoticed, the big, slow-moving ceiling fans vanished from the stores. The Second World War was over, and there was a room air conditioner in one of my bedroom windows and another in the dining room. Houston had begun to lose its Spanish-Southern character, and I was in high school, where I showed no aptitude for athletics (the only thing that counted) or much of anything else. I joined ROTC to get out of compulsory softball, and a year later the pappy shooters of the Texas National Guard, because guardsmen got two dollars and fifty cents for attending drills.

To my surprise, the Guard was fun. We fired on the rifle range and played soldier, with pay, for two weeks during school vacation. When the Korean War broke out we thought our outfit, G Company of the One Hundred and Forty-third Infantry, would be gone in a week. It never went; and although I would gladly have continued hanging around the armory waiting for orders, I found myself committed to attending Texas A&M.

It offered the cheapest possible college education to Texas boys, and at the time I went there was an all-male land-grant college specializing in animal husbandry and engineering. Only Dickens could have done justice to A&M as I knew it, and he would not have been believed. It was modeled on West Point, but lacked the aristocratic tradition and the sense of purpose. I dropped out at mid-term of my junior year, lost my student deferment, and was drafted.

I served in the Seventh Infantry Division during the closing months of the war and was awarded the Combat Infantry Badge. The day-to-day accounts I sent my mother will be found in *Letters Home,* published by a Canadian small press, United Mythologies.

The GI Bill let me finish my education at the University of Houston. Rosemary Dietsch came to Texas for a visit, and we were married five months after I took a job in engineering development. I stayed on that job for sixteen years, then left to join the staff of *Plant Engineering,* a technical magazine. Our son Roy was named for my father, whose real name, however, was Emerson Leroy Wolfe; my mother was Mary Olivia Ayers Wolfe. Our daughters Madeleine and Therese have given us granddaughters, Rebecca Marie Spizzirri and Elizabeth Rose Goulding. Our youngest, Matthew, has not yet married, though we nurse hopes.

I began to write in 1956, soon after Rosemary and I were married; we were living in a furnished apartment, and needed money to put down on a bed and a stove. My first sale was "The Dead Man" to *Sir* in 1965.

I have taught Clarion East and Clarion West, and have taught workshops for Florida Atlantic University. In 1996 I taught a semester of creative writing for Columbia College.

My work has been given three World Fantasy Awards, two Nebula Awards, the British Fantasy Award, the British Science Fiction Award, the Deathrealm Award, and others, including awards from France and Italy. Although it has never won the Hugo, it has been nominated eight times.

Ian R. MacLeod

I was born in Solihull, which is near Birmingham, in the West Midlands of the UK in 1956 and, apart from one or two short excursions up and down the country, have mostly lived in and around Birmingham ever since. My father is Scottish, which accounts for the name, and my mother's family are from the south of Birmingham. They met each other when they were stationed at an East Coast town during the Second World War. I have an elder bother and sister.

At school, my academic career was unimpressive, and I was generally graded with the bottom half of pupils at infant and junior school. Unsurprisingly, I failed my "eleven plus" exams, and I went to Light Hall Secondary School. But it was a decent school with a good headmaster, and I gradually drifted up the streams until, at fifteen, I scraped enough grades to clamber across and join some of the posher and cleverer kids in Harold Malley Grammar School, and thus continue into higher education. For no particular reason other than that I liked the whole idea of books and huge dusty libraries, and to stop being bothered by the careers master, I elected to study law afterwards, and was persuaded by the interviewer at Birmingham Polytechnic, my local college, to do a proper degree rather than take a lesser and more specifically job-related qualification.

My reading was avid throughout my early and mid teens, and consisted almost entirely of science fiction. I had little reason or cause to read "proper literature." This was in the days of the New Wave, and of *2001,* of *Dune* and Zelazny and Delany and Harlan Ellison's *Dangerous Visions*—I sucked it all up. Here, I was sure, was something that was new and daring. Then I read Tolkien, and fell in love with his books, too, and Lin Carter's Ballantine Adult Fantasy. Eventually, I was required to read some of the modern classics at grammar school for A level English. D. H. Lawrence and T. S. Eliot soon made a big impression on me, whilst at the same time I was still reading and adoring Ballard and Silverberg. I rather fancied the idea, in fact, of doing what they did, of combining the two streams. Thus, at the age of about fifteen or so, began my first abortive attempt at writing a novel. It was set in an alternative world where the Third Reich really had lasted for a thousand years.

College, and law, turned out to be more enjoyable than I'd really expected. I read less, wrote nothing, listened to a lot of music, and went out a lot. I also met my wife Gillian. I got a lower second honours degree without too much effort: the professional law exams, though, weren't for me, although Gillian sailed through them and became a solicitor. I still had no idea what was for me, but, after drifting through various jobs, I ended up working in the Civil Service by my early twenties. It was there, on a hot afternoon and with the old bloke in the desk opposite nodding off to sleep in the sunshine, that I finally grew bored enough to set aside the file I'd been pretending to study, and put biro to a scrap of paper. Soon, my efforts grew more serious. Life—the life of work and seeming adulthood—didn't seem enough on its own, and I was never one for heading out on wild adventures, apart from those which took place in my head. Within a year or so, I was at work on the novel which was to see me through the rest of my twenties. When it was finished, and after I'd learnt typing, I sent it off to various publishers, fully expecting fame and riches.

A few years, and another couple of half-done and unsold novels later, I found myself working on the odd short story—a genre I'd previously avoided because, with the exception of SF, I preferred reading novels.

Unsurprisingly, and like my novels, most of these short stories seemed to fit broadly into what I thought of as science fiction, which also meant horror and fantasy and anything else which took my fancy. I refocused a little bit more on the genre when I realised—or remembered—that there were magazines out there, those fabled names which I'd noticed in anthologies during my childhood but had never been able to find, magazines which bought and paid for short science fiction. I still managed to get a lot of my writing done on or under the desk at work in the Civil Service, and largely stuck with the job because it gave me the time and the leisure to write, both at work and at home. Despite, or perhaps because, of this, my Civil Service career progressed well—or did until I found the whole idea of being seen as a high-flyer, whilst at the same time having another objective in my life about which I remained almost entirely secretive, got to me.

Meanwhile, and by now in my mid-thirties and probably heading for some kind of crisis or breakdown, I was starting to get encouraging replies to my submissions to SF magazines. My first sale was to one of the most fabled names of all—*Weird Tales.* Then I sold to *Interzone.* Then to *Asimov's.* All of this was a big thrill. After all—I was a writer! When Gillian became pregnant, I was very happy to give the idea of being a full-time house-husband and writer a bash.

That was in 1990. Since then, I've sold about 30 short stories to most of the main SF markets, including *F&SF, Amazing, Interzone, Asimov's, Weird Tales, Pulphouse, Pirate Writings,* etc., along with a few articles and poems, many of which have been repeatedly anthologised. Funnily enough—or weirdly—my very first sale, "1/72nd Scale," was nominated for the Nebula Award for the year's best novella. I also managed to sell separate stories to the *Year's Best SF* and *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* in my first full year of being published. Since then, I've continued to make almost annual appearances in the *Year's Best SF,* and about every other year in the *Best Horror.* I've also been nominated for the British Science Fiction Association Award, and the James Tiptree Award. My work has been translated into many languages, including Italian, French, Japanese, Polish, and German.

Having switched to writing short fiction, it's taken me a long time to get far with novels—and even longer to sell them! However, my first novel, *The Great Wheel,* was published by Harcourt Brace in 1997, and won the *Locus* Award for the Year's Best First Novel. A second, an alternative history entitled *The Summer Isles,* remains unpublished at full length, but has received the World Fantasy Award and the Sidewise Award in abridged novella format. I'm a slowish worker, but almost everything which I've finished to my own satisfaction in this decade has found a decent market. A short story collection entitled *Voyages By Starlight* was also published in 1997 by Arkham House. I'm currently at work on a third novel set in a world close to our own where magic is the main driving force of the industrial revolution. Meanwhile, as my house-husband duties became less demanding when our daughter Emily went to school, I started teaching adult literacy part time at local adult education centres, and more recently also creative writing and English skills and other stuff at Aston University. This is good work—it gets me out of the house, remains a fresh challenge, and is a great antidote to the essentially navel-gazing task of writing fiction. I just wish I had more time to fit everything in.

Simon Ings

I wrote four science fiction novels *(Hothead, In the City of the Iron Fish, Hotwire, Headlong)* before changing direction last year with *Painkillers,* a novel with sf undertones set in contemporary London. (The paperback was published by Bloomsbury in April of this year.) I live in London and make a crust reviewing books for the *New Scientist* and the *TLS.*

I ran my first marathon two weeks ago and—by the time your readers read this—I'll be walking across Corsica on the mountain paths of the GR20. If publication's due on 6 June, then according to my guide, I'll be climbing the Peak of the Damned Soul.

Jeffrey Ford is the author of *The Physiognomy*—winner of the World Fantasy Award and a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year—and *Memoranda*—also a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year. These novels are the first two parts of a trilogy that has now been completed with the publication of *The Beyond* in January 2001. Ford's short fiction has appeared in *Event Horizon, The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, Space & Time, The Northwest Review,* and *MSS.* His story "At Reparata" was selected for inclusion in the anthology *The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror: Thirteenth Annual Collection,* and "The Fantasy Writer's Assistant," which appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction,* was nominated for a Nebula award in 2001. Presently, he is working on a novel, *The Portrait of Mrs. Charbuque,* for Morrow and a collection of his short stories, *The Fantasy Writer's Assistant and Other Stories,* for Golden Gryphon Press. Both books should be out some time next year. For the past twelve years, he has taught Research Writing, Composition, and Early American Literature at Brookdale Community College in Monmouth County, New Jersey. He lives in Medford Lakes with his wife and two sons.

Michael Cassutt has been writing and producing award-winning television since 1985. He was co-executive producer of the Showtime revival of *The Outer Limits,* which won the CableACE for best drama series in 1995.

Actor Beau Bridges and director Stuart Gillard were also honored for their work in the two-hour premiere *Outer Limits* episode, "Sandkings," which was later released as a film.

Among his other credits: staff writer for *The Twilight Zone* (CBS, 1986), story editor for the acclaimed *Max Headroom* series (ABC, 1987, more recently re-run on the Sci-Fi channel), and producer for the CBS series *TV-101* (1988-89), for which Cassutt won the Nancy Susan Reynolds Award of the Center for Population Options for a three-part episode called "First Love."

Cassutt was also writer and producer for *WIOU,* an ensemble drama starring John Shea and Helen Shaver (CBS, 1990-91), and then for *Eerie, Indiana* (NBC 1991-92). In 1992-93 Cassutt was producer and writer for the ABC police drama *Sirens,* and also wrote the two-part premier of its syndicated version (1994). He then worked on the first season of *The Outer Limits.* Most recently Cassutt was co-executive producer for the FBC drama *Strangeluck* (1995-96) and consulting producer on *Beverly Hills, 90210* (1997-98) and *Seven Days* (1998-99).

He has recently contributed freelance scripts to *Stargate SG-1* and *Farscape,* and has developed scripts based on classic SF by writers such as Arthur C. Clarke, Robert A. Heinlein, Clifford Simak, and Philip Jose Farmer, each one—for different reasons—still unproduced.

Cassutt is also a writer of fiction. His historical thriller, *Red Moon,* about the dark side of the space race between America and the Soviet Union, was published by Forge Books in February 2001. His NASA novel *Missing Man* was published in September 1998, to universal praise from such diverse sources as *Publishers Weekly, Analog Science Fiction,* and the muckracking *NASA Watch,* which said, "This is a book about loyalty to NASA and loyalty to the truth, and what happens when these issues collide against a backdrop of the risky business of spaceflight and suspicious lethal accidents."

Cassutt has published two previous science fiction and fantasy novels, *The Star Country* (Doubleday, 1986) and *Dragon Season* (Tor Books, 1991). With Andrew M. Greeley, he co-edited an anthology of SF-fantasy stories with Catholic themes, *Sacred Visions* (Tor Books, 1991). He is also the author of over two dozen published short stories, most recently "The Longer Voyage" (selected for reprinting in *The Year's Best Science Fiction, 1995*).

Cassutt is also an experienced writer of nonfiction, not only contributing articles to such magazines as *Space Illustrated, Space World,* and books such as *Magill's Survey of Science: Space Exploration Series*, but as the author of the biographical encyclopedia *Who's Who in Space.* The third edition of *Who's Who in Space* was published in January 1999 by Macmillan Reference. The book contains biographies and photos of seven hundred astronauts and cosmonauts from around the world, for which Cassutt conducted dozens of interviews over a period of ten years.

His most recent work in this field is *Deke!: From Mercury to the Shuttle,* the autobiography of the noted astronaut, test pilot, and Apollo program manager Donald K. "Deke" Slayton (Forge Books, 1994). In February 1997 *Deke!* was selected by Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Ronald Fogleman as one of the "essential books" in the library of any Air Force officer. Cassutt is currently working on a book with former Gemini and Apollo astronaut Thomas P. Stafford, and is under contract to write *Deep Black and Air Force Blue: America's Military Manned Space Programs* for the Texas A&M University Press and NASA Centennial of Flight series.

Born in Minnesota and raised in Wisconsin, Cassutt attended the University of Arizona in Tucson and graduated in 1975 with a B.A. in radio-television. He has worked as a disc jockey and radio program director and as a network television executive for CBS. He has been a full-time writer since 1985. He lives in Los Angeles with his wife, Cindy, and two children, Ryan and Alexandra.

Dave Hutchinson was born in Sheffield, South Yorkshire, in December 1960. He graduated from Nottingham University with a degree in American Studies, and then became a journalist. He lives in North London with his wife, Bogna, and their two cats, Dougal and Kuron.

James P. Blaylock grew up in southern California and, with the exception of some time spent in coastal northern California, he has lived in Orange County all his life. He teaches composition and creative writing at Chapman University; in fact, he has been a writing teacher since 1976, about the same time that he sold his first short story, "Red Planet," to *Unearth* magazine. He has written fourteen novels as well as dozens of short stories, essays, and articles. Among his recent novels are *Night Relics,* an atmospheric ghost story set in the Santa Ana Mountains and the city of Orange; *The Paper Grail,* a foggy and fantastic romance set along the Mendocino coast in northern California; *All the Bells on Earth,* a Faustian mystery that transpires in the old neighborhoods of downtown Orange during a rainy and unusual Christmas season; and *Winter Tides,* a ghost-and-murer mystery set in Huntington Beach. His latest novel, *The Rainy Season,*was published in August of 1999. Blaylock is a two-time winner of the World Fantasy Award, most recently for his short story "Thirteen Phantasms." His story "Unidentified Objects" was included in *Prize Stories 1990: The O. Henry Awards.* His first collection of short fiction was published by Edgewood Press in the summer of 2001.

About the Editor

As fiction editor of *Omni* magazine and *Omni Online* from 1981 through 1998, **Ellen Datlow** earned a reputation for encouraging and developing an entire generation of fiction writers, and has published some of today's biggest names in the SF, fantasy and horror genres. The stunning assortment of writers Datlow brought to the pages of *Omni* includes such talents as William Gibson, Pat Cadigan, Dan Simmons, K.W. Jeter, Clive Barker, Stephen King, William Burroughs, Ursula K. Le Guin, Jonathan Carroll, Joyce Carol Oates, Peter Straub and Jack Cady, among many others.

She was then the editor of *Event Horizon: Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror,* a Webzine founded in September 1998 that remained active until December 1999. During that period, *Event Horizon* published "The Specialist's Hat" by Kelly Link, winner of the 1999 World Fantasy Award for Best Short Story — only the second story published on the Internet to win the World Fantasy Award. (The first, "Radio Waves" by Michael Swanwick, was published by Datlow in *Omni Online*).

Datlow is currently tied for winning the most World Fantasy Awards in the organization's history (six); has won, with co-editor Terri Windling, a Bram Stoker Award for *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* #13, and has received multiple Hugo Award nominations for Best Editor.