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"[It] was the result of their vision of ... America as a monstrous danceland, extending from coast to coast, roofed by a starless night, with hot bands propelling thousands of lonely couples with an accelerating, Saturday-night intensity."

—John Clellon Holmes, *Go*, 1952.

1.

A Dread of Yardbulls

February, and his father could talk only of his own impending death, swearing wildly that he saw coveys of Yardbulls massing specifically for him, ragged-winged specks afloat like flakes of ash in the warped fulgurant smokes of the northern rim of the world. Cold soul in a chilly Trackside/Trackview flat, the old man raved freely at those odd intervals when Diego Patchen forced a reluctantly filial visit upon him, as if caching all his hourly fears and recriminations until the arrival of his lone child. Much to the son's astonishment, but true to the old man's character, Diego thought to detect in his father's fearful vituperations a note of savage pride, as if the postulated quantity of Yardbulls necessary to drag the antique sinner to his posthumous fate merited some perverse applause.

The Seasonsun gone entirely from the sky that month, slush heaped the gutters of Broadway, as if all the flavored-ice carts of August had spilled their contents, both Trackside and Riverside. (Did the distant, generally imperceptible heat from the Wrong Side of the Tracks possibly melt the slush slightly at the

corresponding curbing, while the cooling mists of the Other Shore gelled more firmly the parallel glaciated sluice? Perhaps, but perhaps not. True, in summer residents of Trackage buildings claimed to swelter more than their cross-Broadway neighbors, while heralding a compensatory lowering of the thermostat in winter. And equally true, Riverside dwellers shivered a wee bit more in winter, but boasted of their residential coolth when rat days raged beneath the ascendant Seasonsun. But Diego, favoring the rationalism of an ingeniator, was inclined to believe that neither effect from the antipodal regions was real, but only psychosomatic reactions to the respective proximity of Tracks and River.) Going out to visit the old man was an offputting chore in the best of weathers, but particularly tiresome at this time of the year.

Diego lived in the Borough of Gritsavage. Population: 100,000 or so, distributed up and down one hundred Blocks; current Mayor: the loudly opinionated Jobo Copperknob; ambiance: despite the Borough's grim appellation, quite cultured and congenial. Diego's digs: a Streetview apartment on the 10,394,850th Block of Broadway, above a fruit and vegetable store named Gimlett's Produce. (His father dwelled just a few Blocks Downtown.) The bluestone building housing Diego and his immediate neighbors occupied the Riverside of Broadway.

Streetview and Riverside both: sweet. (Not always thus. Diego frequently winced to remember a childhood of grim days and eerie nights spent in the same apartment that now housed the dying Gaddis Patchen. The subliminally whispering distant flames from the Wrong Side of the Tracks cast capering shadows on young Diego's bedroom walls no matter how firmly he tried to paste the lowered green oilcloth rollershade against the window glass before sleep. And the regular roar of Uptown-bound trains rattled those same panes. What Diego enjoyed nowadays, he had earned through his own endeavors, not effortless inheritance.)

This overcast winter morning, Diego, lazing a-bed, found real wakefulness hard to attain. A late night out with friends—involving too many cigarettes, an excess of highflown bloviation and a constant stream of hops-heavy Rude Bravo beer from the neighboring Borough of Shankbush—had taken its predictable toll. Mired in his clammy sheets, Diego's sour mood allowed him to contemplate only the many injustices thrust upon him by existence, rather than any of the compensating glories. Thus the parade of his thoughts featured such performers as these:

His cheap and refractory landlord, Rexall Glyptis, who had for months running now failed to hire even an apprentice ingeniator to repair the radiators in Diego's apartment, a failure made all the more galling by the fact that the heatful steam itself was free, piped beneath every Block as part of the ineffable infrastructure of the Linear City.

His best friend, the impulsive and wily Zohar Kush, who had discovered the saloon in the 10,395,001st Block of Broadway named The Lookalike Boys, where Rude Bravo flowed like liquid suicide, and who had insisted on staging a drinking contest with some of the Shankbush locals.

Kush's newest lover, the capricious Milagra Eventyr, who had, by sensually occupying Diego's lap at one point in the boozy, bleary evening, precipitated a fight with Diego's own lover, the formidable Volusia Bittern.

Volusia, in turn, came in for her share of mild mental recriminations, as Diego recalled how she had punctuated her jealous accusations with a wild swing at Milagra—a swing which fortunately, given Volusia's physical proportions *vis a vis* Milagra, had failed to connect, due to a certain boozy skewing of perceptions. The hot temper some devilishly attractive women had!

And then of course one could not omit from the catalog of infamy Yale Drumgoole, Diego's fellow writer. Although neither a proponent nor practitioner of CF and consequently a member of a rival literary

camp, Yale had been invited along for the night's spree. But Drumgoole's one accomplishment of the evening had been only to prove his utter inability to process internally more than five pints of Rude Bravo without blithely and crudely propositioning the wife of the brutish bouncer of The Lookalike Boys, thus earning the Patchen party summary ejection into the Shankbush slush, which differed not one whit in its wet chilly properties from the slush one-hundred-and-fifty-one Blocks Downtown.

Memories of the sight of the puffy flesh around Yale's left eye mottling colorfully as they all rode the Subway home cheered Diego up slightly, and he inched several toes out from under the blankets to test the air. Much too frigid. Perhaps there was some veracity after all to the notion that Riverside buildings were prone to effects from the Other Shore....

Music might help. Diego dashed a lean bare arm out to snap on the radio on his bedstand. Once its tubes warmed, brilliant trumpet notes, unmistakably phrased, swelled like a chorus of Fisherwives, and Diego's heart immediately lifted.

Rumbold Prague was a genius, maybe the only genius Diego personally knew. The black musician, his phtisic visage perpetually cool behind his onyx-lensed cheaters, dapper in his trademark gabardine trousers and loose silk shirts, typified for Diego all that art could achieve. Diego's own prose was most accomplished, he knew, wherever he let it be inspired by and emulate the unpredictable fluencies of Prague's lyrical compositions.

The cut ended, and the announcer came on. "That was 'The Road Goes Ever On.' Rumbold Prague, trumpet. Lydia Kinch, sax. Scripps Skagway, piano. Lucerne Canebrake, bass. Reddy Diggins, drums. From the Roughwood shellacker, *Burning Fountains*, catalog number RLP4039. Next up, Percival Ragland's 'Aeota.' But first, the ten o'clock news."

Diego groaned. Ten o'clock! If he were to cram both a visit to his father and some writing into the hours between this moment and his dinner date with Volusia Bittern, he had not a second to spare. But a dilemma presented itself: the order of his actions. Were he to begin writing immediately, he might labor on in a creative trance, unwitting of the time, and miss any chance to visit Gaddis Patchen. Go first to his father, and Diego would almost certainly emerge from his boyhood home full of strong emotions that would taint that day's writing.

After momentary hesitation, Diego let duty to his blood win out. He was a professional writer, after all. Surely he could put by any distractions to his craft. Did Rumbold Prague let his hypothetically ill-tempered father sour his embouchure? Not likely!

Diego hopped out of bed, clad only in his skivvies. After a hot shower (at least that utility had survived the incompetence of Rexall Glyptis) and the application of his favorite cologne, Meyerbeer's No. 7, to his near-beardless face (*curse these boyish looks!* thought Diego for the uncounted time), he felt halfway human again. Dressing in his favored winter outfit of tweed trousers, denim shirt, wool vest and baggy black jacket, he acknowledged that his stomach might have forgiven last night's excesses enough to accept a meal. But a quick check of the icebox revealed nothing fit for human consumption, and Diego resolved to pick up something enroute to his father's. He scuffled into his battered brogues and left his apartment with a wistful glance at his disordered writing desk.

Tripping lightly down the single flight of stairs to the street—familiar banister smooth under his touch, metal insets on the wooden risers offering firm purchase, old cooking odors historying the habits of his neighbors—Diego found himself alternately rehearsing the next section of his story in progress and trying to come up with some conversational tactic that might jar his father from his accustomed paranoid rut.

Once on the busy sidewalk, Diego immediately encountered Lyle Gimlett arranging some cold-tolerant produce—potatoes, turnips, apples and the like—in his outdoor stands to attract whatever trade he could from the bustling mass of pedestrians. The burly, slope-browed businessman—as always, a five o'clock shadow lending his face a smudgy look—hailed Diego in a friendly fashion.

“Patchen! In the market for some fresh bananas? The latest Trains have brought some particularly fine ones. Can't say when we'll see their likes again.”

“Sure, Lyle. Save me a bunch of green ones, and I'll pick them up later today.”

Diego rucked up his jacket collar against the chill and made to move off, but Gimlett stopped him with a hand on Diego's elbow. The grocer leaned in conspiratorially and said, “Any chance you and your pals will be getting more of these soon?”

From beneath the bib of his white stained apron, Gimlett produced an odd locket. Strung on a leather cord threaded through a drilled hole, a thick iridescent reptilian scale big as a fat potato chip shimmered in chromatic uncertainty across most of the spectrum.

Diego flinched from the sight. Bad memories of dire times, when he had been down on his luck and willing to take risks that nowadays appeared unacceptable, tumbled out of the mental attic trunks where he had thought them safely stored.

“I—you need to talk to Zohar Kush about more scales.”

“Fine, fine, you both come around some evening after the store's closed. I'll give you a good price for them, since I can sell as many of these as you can get me. People always need a little good luck. Here, take an apple, Diego.”

Diego accepted the fruit and hustled off. But once out of sight of Gimlett, he consigned the fruit to the gutter, despite his hunger, where it sat cradled in dirty winter icy suspension like an insouciant autumn orphan.

* * * *

The gelidly slick blacktop of Broadway hosted its usual complement of pushcarts and cyclists struggling through the chunky slop, as well as the occasional oddball electrical buggy cobbled together by one journeyman ingeniator or another, for the inventor's own use or a client's. (These one-of-a-kind vehicles ranged from tiny single-rider buckboards not much bigger than a bicycle-wheeled couch to the elaborate charabanque crafted by Tolkan Sinsalida and owned by Mayor Copperknob.) Heading downtown, Diego felt the steadily rising Daysun in a clean sky warm his shoulders as the orb made its regular slow transit over Broadway from Uptown morning ascension to Downtown evening decline. Muscles loosened, and he registered surprise that he had been hunching them at all. His father's morose long dying, Gimlett's greedy unsettling request—both barbs must have sunk into him and twisted.

Sighting the newsstand where he gave his trade, chock-a-block with colorful mags, Diego suddenly realized that today marked the publication of a new issue of his favorite magazine, *Mirror Worlds*. Moreover, said issue would contain a new story by none other than Diego Patchen, voted by the readers of *MW* as their favorite writer the past two months running! Picking up his pace, Diego hastened to the stand, to be greeted by Snarky Chuff.

Clad in numerous layers against the chill, including several scarves, two pairs of soiled fingerless gloves and an assortment of mad-patterned clashing shirts and trousers, Chuff maintained his overpacked stand

under all weathers, from well before Daysunup to the hour when crowds of theatergoers streamed homeward. Diego imagined that the smallish, good-natured, ageless vendor slept somewhere within the sturdy but makeshift structure, and found it impossible, despite straining his considerable professional talents, to visualize him in any other locale.

“Diego my friend!” called Chuff, efficiently dealing out newspapers and journals to customers as he chatted. “Fresh issue of your mag here! Already sold three today, on the strength of your byline. And the new story looks a corker!”

Diego grinned and flushed a shade brighter than the cold air warranted. “Thanks, Snarky. I’ll double your sales then. Give me three copies, please.”

Chuff paused to wipe his dribbling nose with one partially gusseted finger, then removed three copies of *Mirror Worlds* from a rack holding two or four dozen other CF mags constrained by a fat elastic band stretched across their ranks. “Three bulls, six calves, eight scintilla. Or two wives, ten kids, twelve scintilla.”

Diego rummaged his pockets for coins, eventually coming up with three old wives, their golden patina darkened by time and much handling so as to nearly obscure each graven portrait of a Fisherwife angling athwart a cloud. “Bulls are down then today.”

“Yes indeedy. Bulls and wives not at par today! Makes me happy to see the wives up. During Copperknob’s first term, you might recall, wives never dipped below two to one against bulls, and Gritsavage prospered like a limber-fingered man in a crowd of quadruple amputees with itchy arses.”

Diego deposited the magazines into a capacious hip pocket. “Before my time, I’m afraid. You’re a Riverman by nature then. I never knew.”

Chuff looked down the nearest short Cross Street, Block Gritsavage-848, toward the broad River, dotted with boats and Ships and the occasional errant ice floe. “No truck with Trains for Snarky. Blasted dirty things, no matter how many fine and needful goods they haul. Give me the clean River over the gritty Tracks anytime.”

Diego smiled at this revelation of an aspect of Chuff’s hidden character. “When was the last time you enjoyed a River outing then, Snarky?”

Pondering, Chuff thought aloud: “Well, let’s see.... The Mayor at the time was Olympia Barrios and my sister down in Saladtown had just had her third child. He’s retired now at forty-five, with a fine pension from the meatcutters. Quince Holman was running weekend cruises down at Slip Gritsavage-748, and I was courting a girl named Fatu Coppard. She had a brother name of Rhynton who had once ridden the rods all the way to Saperaeude just to save Subway fare...”

Growing impatient, Diego interrupted the ramble. “So it was some while ago then. Isn’t it about time you took a day off and enjoyed yourself once more?”

The normally unflappable Chuff looked stunned. “Who’d mind the stand while I skylarked? Who’d sell you your precious rags and sheets? Enjoy myself! Not in the plan, Patchen! Not in the plan!”

Diego departed grinning, with a smile and a friendly wave.

Kerner’s Lunchroom beckoned at Block Gritsavage-845 and Diego ducked inside, swiftly enveloped by

a welcome steamy fug compounded of bacon grease, brewing coffee and chef's sweat. Seated on a stool at the marble counter, he ordered an egg sandwich on wheat toast with a side of scrapple, orange juice and a double jamoke. While he waited for his food, he took out one of the copies of *Mirror Worlds* and opened to his story.

Hmmm, not a bad illustration this time. The story was titled "Big World, Little World" and the artist had translated Diego's descriptions accurately. Diego's pivotal conceit in this story had been that a world could exist where conditions allowed a smaller world, a companion venue, to manifest in the sky of the larger world. Diego had invented the term "sororal" for this unlikely little tag-along. The artist—Gropius Catternach, who had done such good work for another of Diego's stories last month—had depicted a fantastical Ship of the skies lifting off toward the sororal, which was represented by a distant torus with topographical features dimly sketched.

Diego's food arrived and he absentmindedly began to eat, while reading over his own words with a mixture of pleasure and angst. He winced at several typos, and on the third such resolved to buttonhole his editor, Winslow Compounce, about the shiftlessness of *MW's* proofreaders.

Finished with breakfast and story both, Diego paid, checked his watch, jumped at the nearness of the dial's admonitory hands to eleven, and hastened away.

Crossing Broadway at Block Gritsavage-842, Diego saw his father's Trackside building just a few dozen yards away. (Was it a shade warmer all of a sudden? Diego turned down his collar.) In this neighborhood the sidewalks were old-fashioned slate, the legacy of some enterprising Mayor reigning long before Diego's birth, and of an unpredictable bounty of stone disgorged by Train or Ship. On these pewter-gray slabs had Diego's whole childhood been enacted, it seemed. Long games of stickball and ringolevio, scuffed knees, triumphant shouts and tearful snufflings. How the youthful memories, never far from the surface, heaved up their prophetic forms!

Diego paused in front of one impressive building, all columns and arched windows: a branch of Gritsavage's Public Library system. Here, alcoved snugly in all seasons, from summer when the cinders and dust of the Track blew in the windows to coat sills and clothing, to winter when ice cemented down the polluting particles, providing welcome relief, Diego had huddled with book after book, learning what he could become.

Hurried passersby brushed past Diego, waking him from his reflections, and he strode on.

Just two buildings away from his father's, the urge for a cigarette overtook him—quite possibly a subliminal stalling tactic, Diego wryly acknowledged—and he turned into Evenson's Variety.

The tight, taut, jampacked store had changed little since Diego's childhood. Behind the counter, stocking shelves with mechanical preciseness: Prosper Evenson, a tub of a man with bald pate. Running the hand-cranked cash register, his wife, Esmin, half his size and mousy in coloring and demeanor.

"Prosper, Esmin, hello. How's business?"

"Not bad," replied the man before his wife could open her mouth. "What will it be today, sir?"

"A pack of Seraglios, please, and some matches."

Prosper delivered the requisites with a series of the most economical movements, and Esmin rang them up. Diego's gaze fell upon a new punchboard set up by the register, and he said, "I'll take a chance too."

“Ten scintillas,” murmured Esmin. Diego surrendered the coins and received in turn an instrument like a short slim awl with an angular grip.

The vibrantly lithographed upright punchboard, about two feet across by three feet tall by an inch deep, featured hundreds of small foil-capped holes across most of its expanse. The top quarter of the board was devoted to an eye-catching advertisement for itself: a garishly colored cartoon of a lingerie-clad woman in her bedroom being watched by a battery of leering Peeping Toms, as well as some exclamatory phrases concerning prizes, odds, winning combinations and the mutual excitement of voyeurs and exhibitionists.

Diego gripped the awl, choose a hole at random and plunged the device in. Removed, the awl had captured a tight roll of paper. Diego slid the slip off and unfurled it. “Shoe, star, hat, heart, lightning bolt.”

“Sorry, not a winner,” instantly declaimed Prosper.

“Mind if I check myself?”

Prosper compressed his lips grimly, but said, “Suit yourself.”

Diego studied the punchboard and confirmed the shopkeeper's judgment. “Ah, well, maybe next time.”

At the exit, Diego overtook a stout old woman in a tatty fur coat and hat like a collapsed cake. Huffing, the woman juggled two large paper sacks full of groceries.

“Mrs. Loblolly? Let me help you with those.”

The woman looked over her shoulder, recognized Diego, smiled and said in a raspy voice, “Bless you, Patchen. You always were a thoughtful boy.”

Outside, Diego managed to get a Seraglio alight by hefting both bags in one arm. Puffing the sweet smoke, he walked Mrs. Loblolly back to her apartment in the same building Gaddis Patchen inhabited.

“How's your father doing? We never see him out and about anymore.”

“I'm afraid you won't again, Mrs. Loblolly. He's dying. Cancer of the stomach. He's not too bad off actually, in a physical way, but the disease has broken his spirit. All he can do is sit and watch the Wrong Side of the Tracks.”

“Ah, he fears the Yardbolls will soon have him. You should try to convince him that none of us know which kind of Pompatic will come for us in our final hour. He might just as well find himself surrounded by a band of lovely Fisherwives in his last moments. Why, just look above you. Don't the Bulls and Wives flock equally?”

Diego craned his neck to gauge the sky. It took him a moment or two to focus on the perpetual residents of the atmosphere, so used was he to ignoring them.

High above the buildings, for as far as Diego could see both Uptown and Downtown, circled a moderate yet significant number of Yardbolls and Fisherwives, icons of force and grace, indistinct at their conventional cruising altitudes. At random moments, leathery or plummy-winged individuals would drop down, arrowing toward various sites where their clients confronted mortality, revealing motion-blurred

impressions of their finer features. Other Pompatics bearing their submissive charges aloft on their one-way journeys headed for either the Wrong Side of the Track or the Other Shore, to be replaced by empty-handed fellows.

Diego dropped his gaze and shrugged, inured to the commonplace sight. “Of course I agree. But he's full of a kind of self-loathing that won't allow him to see otherwise.”

“Is he still chastising himself over your mother's death?”

Diego made no reply, but paused to study a sturdy, albeit age-warped tree planted in a square of soil substituting for one slate cell of the sidewalk.

“Does this old thing still bloom every spring?”

“Without fail,” replied Mrs. Loblolly.

Diego smoked silently as they ascended the familiar stoop. Not until they reached the first-floor door of Mrs. Loblolly's apartment did he answer his ex-neighbor's earlier query.

“Not only has he never stopped blaming himself, but he wants to drag me down with him into his sewer of guilt.”

* * * *

The poorly lit third floor corridor of Diego's boyhood home hosted both an unsettling chill and an assortment of odors—cheap cigars, spilled beer, dirty carpets, insecticide—intimately familiar to him. At the door to Gaddis Patchen's apartment, Diego knocked, then called out, “Father, it's me.”

Receiving no welcome, Diego let himself in with a key.

An additional scent of bodily corruption, layered with curdled milk odors (Gaddis could tolerate only ameliorative liquids for his diet) supplemented the exterior stinks. Diego's eyes instantly assimilated the unchanging interior: overstuffed furniture a generation old, antimacassars concealing splits in the cloth; a rachitic wooden table listing to starboard; framed prints of sentimental scenes such as “Children Conducted over the Abyss by Fisherwives” and “Mayoral Ball at Ennoia.” The overall effect was that of a museum of desuetude.

Gaddis Patchen slept in a chair turned to face one open window, only the top of his closely shorn head visible from the entrance, while radiators banged futilely against the invasive air. Diego moved to the side of his father. Draped with a handknit coverlet, Gaddis seemed to have dwindled further into his hunched stricken body since the last visit. Disease had planed away the elder man's grizzled features to a human likeness of what one saw when a crew of ingeniators lifted a manhole cover to plumb the City's hidden structures: an underlying circuitry designed for ugly functionality, bent by hard usage and punished by sheer time.

Diego adjusted the blanket about his father's shoulders, then quietly closed the window. He sat beside the ailing man, lit up a second Seraglio, and smoked contemplatively. After fifteen minutes Gaddis awoke, urged to consciousness perhaps by the tobacco fumes. His eyes focused reluctantly, but once he recognized Diego, he assumed a new energy born more of malice than pleasure.

“About time you paid a visit! Get me some milk! And warm it up!”

Diego complied silently. Gaddis took the mug in a gnarled hand and sipped. Milk dribbled the old man's bristled chin. He set the glass down shakily on an adjacent table, nearly missing the surface entirely, but catching himself before disaster.

Diego employed what he hoped was a non-controversial opening remark. "Has Doctor Teasel been by today yet?"

Gaddis snorted. "That quack! What can he do for me?"

"He's still giving you painkillers, isn't he?"

"Note for yourself." Gaddis nodded leftward, and Diego saw a kit packed with opiate syrettes. "I use them as little as possible. I need to stay alert for Pompatics. They won't take me without a tussle!"

"Dad—wouldn't you reconsider going to the hospital? The Firzaud Memorial up in 'eight-fifty-nine is quite pleasant—"

"Bah! Are you truly so wild about me wasting your pitiful patrimony on something useless? You know my diagnosis. Hopeless! Why occupy a bed someone else could be using? And isn't that a Riverside hospital? Why should I make it even minimally harder for the Bulls to find me when it's my time? No doubt such effrontery would just increase my destined portion of pain."

Diego began to lose patience. "First off, Dad, you can't be sure what kind of Pompatic will receive you. Any sensible person will tell you that. Why, Mrs. Loblolly agrees with me—"

"Have you been talking with that old biddy about me? You'll kindly stop such gossip, and tell her to mind her own business! I know quite well that I'm Bull-food for sure."

"Dad, it's some kind of crazy reverse hubris to say that! No one can weigh their own soul. What makes you claim such an end? Only self-pity and self-contempt. And does anyone even know what truly awaits us after death in either realm? No, of course not."

Gaddis remained unspeaking, his fervid eyes forsaking his son to resume their incessant vigil Trackward. A Train churned by then, its comforting guttural rumble turning the windowpane into a crude tympanum.

Diego dared to raise the unspeakable. "Dad, is it what happened to Mom? Do you still feel responsible somehow? Relieve your mind of that awful burden! Please! It was *not* your fault!"

Surprisingly, the normally splenetic Gaddis did not immediately jump down Diego's throat. The old man seemed to conduct some internal review for a minute before speaking, and even then his voice was unwontedly calm and level.

"I remember the day like yesterday. I have never ceased to relive it. An innocent outing on the River—that bitch of a River! A small boat, a lovely wife, and a child of three. Sunlight and laughter, a picnic lunch and a damn fool with his guitar. Then fog rolled up, cushy as marshmallows, and the big Ship came by, a behemoth oblivious to the minnows it would crush. The next thing I knew, we were all in the water, and only I could swim. You clung to me like a little leech, intent only on saving your own hide, and how could I dive then for poor, poor Phonecia? You would have drowned for sure. So instead she did. And then *they* were there, four Fisherwives, diving beneath the waters to raise up her dripping corpse and bear it away to the Other Shore. *Four Wives*, do you hear me! That's how heavy her soul was with virtue! They took her into a realm I'll surely never see, due to all my sins of inattention, all my bad choices

that were no choices at all!”

Diego offered no reply or counter-accusation to this sad, one-sided antique account. He had long ago made his own peace with his mother's demise—how could a three-year-old possibly be responsible for such a tragedy?—but could think of no way to inculcate a similar reconciliation within his father's shrunken breast.

After a further interval of wordlessness, Diego stood.

“Can I get you anything else?”

“No. Just leave me for the Bulls.”

Diego buttoned his coat, and felt the weight in one pocket.

“Here's a copy of my latest story.”

“Put it with the others.”

Diego added the magazine to a dusty, tottering pile of its kind, then let himself out, locking the door behind him.

Out on the sidewalk, he halted again for a moment by the old tree. Home plate, safety base, climbable perch useful for spying imagined pirate Ships sailing down Broadway—Winter-bare, its frail limbs seemed to deny any future bloom.

* * * *

Diego's solid, reliable old typewriter, a Brashear Vestal, offered up the smooth ivory surface of its keys like the receptive fingertips of a lover, eager to suck from his corresponding digits all the confused hurt engendered by the visit to his father and transmogrify the pain into beauty. Once back in his apartment, Diego had gone immediately to his desk. Sorting through the manuscript pages he had produced yesterday, he quickly found himself enwrapped once more in the newest world of his imaginings, ready once again to add his individual efforts to pushing forward the sturdy literary vessel known as Cosmogonic Fiction as best he knew how.

Seated before his machine—with a squat ticking windup clock placed prominently before him to remind him of his approaching date with Volusia Bittern—Diego began to compose. He wore his coat still, the room being cold as a rack of beef from a Train's freezer car. (On the way in, Diego had hammered on Rexall Glyptis's door without response, hoping to accost the landlord about the failed radiators.) A cup of steaming tea warmed his hands during odd moments of inactive pondering. From the radio spilled the cool tones of Rumbold Prague, the musician's serenely lilting trumpet stacking note upon note into the elegant architecture of “The Mayor of Maidenhead.” After a time, Diego's clacking typewriter seemed almost entrained to the music's rhythm.

Diego's current novella under the platen was titled “The Death Mediators,” and dealt with a fabulous world wherein the process of dying presented even greater mysteries than it did in reality. In the universe of Diego's conception, there were no Yardbolls or Fisherwives! One grand stroke of invention, from which all else rigorously followed.

Lacking the occult services of the Pompatics, the inhabitants of this world had to deal with the remains of their comrades as best they could. Corpses were literally burned, or weighted and sunk into the waters of

this strange realm. A corps of Death Mediators had evolved to handle this unpleasant task, necessarily charging a fee for their services. But poverty often forced the underclass to dispose of their bodies illegally, by simple dumping or by sneaking the remains onto the otherworldly equivalent of Trains or Ships.

Moreover, because the ultimate destination of souls was unknown, a parasitic class of charlatans had arisen, mystics claiming conflicting knowledge about various posthumous fates for humanity. Without even the simple sight of the Wrong Side of the Tracks or the Other Shore to guide them, however dimly, the average desperate person sought for certainty and reassurance in the glib, fantastical visions of these conmen.

Diego had taken the radical position of making his protagonist one of these unethical scammers. He knew he was risking losing his audience by featuring such an unsympathetic lead, but the challenge of truly developing this alien psyche was one he could not refuse. And if he brought the portraits of both narrator and society off convincingly, "The Death Mediators" would surely astound. It was not impossible that Diego would find it nominated for an award next year. After all, his work had come tantalizingly close to the ballot in the past.

For long hours Diego wrote, forgetting even to smoke. His tea went cold, Prague's music segued into the less-accomplished tunes of his peers, and the Daysun inched toward its Downtown evening berth. Unexceptional noises from Broadway, interspersed almost subliminally with foghorns and steamwhistles alike, penetrated his concentration not at all.

When the little alarm clock sprang into action, its shrill bell nearly caused Diego to jump out of his skin. Typing furiously he finished a paragraph, pulled the paper from the grip of the Vestal and piled it upon the satisfyingly high stack. He grabbed a wrinkled tie from a hook on the back of a door and began to knot it. Pocketing his Seraglios, he rediscovered the remaining two issues of *Mirror Worlds* in his jacket. One he removed and tossed onto an endtable. The other he kept for Volusia.

Hurrying from home, Diego soon attained the wintry street.

His destination: Joss Diomede's Steak House. His reward for a hard day's work: a hearty meal with his fiendishly attractive beloved.

The host at Diomede's recalled Diego from previous visits, but the writer did not for one moment fantasize that any literary fame preceded him. No, surely Volusia alone—instantly imprinting her dramatic presence on any male mind—had earned her co-diner a place in the host's memory. The man's next words confirmed this.

"Will the, ah, fiery young lady be dining with you tonight, sir?"

"None other, Wetzl."

"Allow me show you to the table she expressed a certain satisfaction with last time, then."

Seated, consulting a menu, Diego congratulated himself on not arriving late for his date. Often his writing threw a spanner into the machinery of his best intentions to attend upon Volusia promptly. But pride in his accomplishment soon melted under half an hour's wait, dissolving to a surly sulk, for on this occasion Volusia herself was nowhere to be seen at the appointed time.

Three drinks later—tonight Diego had a fancy for Arcanums, a potent and newly fashionable concoction

of brandy, rum, lime juice, egg whites, seltzer, and a dash of almond essence—all his eagerness had been replaced by an irrational irateness, similar to the funk that had enveloped him this morning upon waking. To distract himself from his own mood, Diego lit up yet another Seraglio and ordered a fourth Arcanum. While waiting, he removed his pocket notebook and a pencil and began to scribble down fragmentary story ideas engendered by the liquor:

World where wide range of animals exists, not just fish, pigeons, c.roaches, rats. Some live in people's homes. Called "companionables."

Parallel cities isolated beyond WSOTT and TOS. How to communicate?

Sky Ships dominate travel. Prot. is Captain.

*Ingeniators who *discover* new things rather than just repair/tinker.*

Scales cheap as dirt—source?

Possibility of remote viewing.

A commotion at Wetzel's station near the entrance drew Diego's attention away from his jottings. A crowd of white-aproned lackeys surrounded a woman taller than any of them. The staff was trying to stop the woman from entering the restaurant, but she was having none of their guff. Scattering the ineffectual waiters and busboys with broad sweeps of her arms, the woman made a beeline into the main dining room, heading straight for Diego, the shocked gazes of every guest tracking her as if she were nude.

But Volusia had committed no such gaffe; rather, she was still dressed in her work clothes, and this outfit bore messy evidence of her most recent stint at her demanding job.

Volusia Bittern was a firewarden, a lieutenant with the Esmond Casterline Irregulars, one of Gritsavage's ten firefighting companies. Her garb consisted of a scuttle-shaped crimson hardhat embellished with gold sigils; a Vulcanized greatcoat, ankle-length and fortified with enormous brass clasps; a double-breasted, brass-buttoned, royal blue wool jacket; matching breeks; and rubber hipboots upheld with galluses that bore various badges along their elastic lengths. Her respirator dangled on her chest from its cord around her neck.

As she strode boldly across the room, Volusia peeled off her outer garment and passed it blithely to a stunned waiter. Her uniform beneath gave grim testimony of recent battle. The outer skin of her boots was sheened with water, and the boots themselves squished audibly as she walked. Her hat exhibited a deep dent in the crown. A scorched patch of jacket on her shoulder had evidently caught fire before being extinguished. And even a yard or two away, Diego could smell the smoke thick as musk on her.

On a lesser woman, this outfit in this condition might have merited pity. But Volusia was no typical member of her sex. Over six feet tall, she outweighed Diego by fifty pounds, not an ounce of any of her broad honeyed flesh susceptible to trimming as fat. Her capacious bosom counterbalanced by fertile hips, her strong hands capable of nearly concealing the shaft of an axe when paired along its length, Volusia loomed among most women—and many men—like a burly wrestler at a convention of midgets.

Diego's girlfriend swept up to his table. She caught sight of the copy of *Mirror Worlds* that he had placed as a surprise on her seat.

“A new story! That's the sweetest thing I've seen all day! Let me give you a kiss!”

Volusia suited actions to words, swooping down to pinion Diego and plaster a wet enveloping kiss across most of his mouth and part of his chin. His nostrils filled with the smoke woven into her hair. She straightened up, then said, “Okay, now you give me one to prove you're not angry with me for being so late!” Before Diego could make a move to comply, she repeated her buss.

Reeling, Diego had a sense that the audience of diners wanted to break out into applause, but restrained themselves only out a sense of propriety.

Laughing, Volusia doffed her cap. A yard or so of wavy auburn tresses spilled out, waterfaling her shoulders. She dropped the hat carelessly on the table, sending an empty water glass to the floor with a crash, then heaved herself heavily into her seat, atop the very magazine she had just exclaimed over, but which was now forgotten in her lusty exuberance.

“Fisherwife's tits, I'm starving! Waiter! Menus here!”

As the waiter scurried over, Diego studied Volusia's animated features: thick eyebrows roofed darkling eyes; a nose more plebian than refined made no apologies for its dominance; and a wide, full-lipped mouth caverned spectacularly white teeth, teeth given more visual prominence by her vespertine complexion.

Taken as a complete composition, Volusia's face carried a beauty unlike any Diego had ever seen in a woman, and he marvelled once again that she should love him.

“I'll have a raft of shrimp, a green salad, and a sixteen-ounce porterhouse—extra rare, and that's sixteen ounces *after* cooking! Oh, and two baked potatoes and a side of onion rings. What are you drinking, Dee? Arcanums? Yuk! Bring me a schooner of draft Tatwig's, please.”

Diego followed Volusia's order with his own: “Um, the pork chops and rice please. Well-done on the chops.”

Volusia clicked her tongue. “Pigeon scraps! But I suppose you don't burn more than a dozens calories an hour in front of your silly machine. Not that the results aren't splendid. But of course what you do could hardly be considered real work.”

The liquor in Diego's veins sharpened his response unwarrantedly, since he had been subjected to this type of playful chivvying often before. “Oh, I suppose that only your manic playing with hoses and ladders like some kind of perpetual adolescent counts as worthwhile labor.”

Volusia's laughter boomed around the room. “Saving lives and keeping Gritsavage from turning into Ghetto Blocks *is* the only real work, Dee! But I will admit that my noble profession has its lighter side. Why, do you know what kept me busy tonight right up until a few minutes ago? A blaze at Staller's!”

Diego brightened at this news. “Not a bad one, I assume from your tone. No injuries, I hope. But tell me—who did you see there?”

Volusia's beer had arrived, and she quaffed half at one gulp, leaving herself with creamy mustache. “Who but our illustrious Mayor? There he was when I got to the second floor, plump and naked as a fish, with three of Staller's most expensive fillies clinging to him and shrieking their heads off. And yes, I saw Copperknob's copper knob!” Volusia's laughter cascaded forth again, a happy carillon. “Anyway, I

got them all down the back staircase and into the Mayor's charabanc before the newspaper shutterbugs could snap a single picture. And that slavering pack included Mason Gingerpane, and you know how often he misses a shot! Never! Yes, I think the Mayor will be mighty grateful to Miss Bittern in the future. In fact, I expect that my long-delayed promotion might very well come about a lot sooner now.”

“That's wonderful,” Diego said flatly. “You deserve it.”

“Such enthusiasm. What's the matter? Oh, your story!” Volusia hoisted one haunch and removed the magazine. Its cover was damp and creased. “Oh, I'm so sorry, dear! But look—you can still make out your name on the cover, and the inside is fine! And Catternach did the illustration! How wonderful! I promise you I'll read this tonight.”

“But I thought we might go dancing. Prague is playing at the Wintourian Ballroom—”

“Never! As you might have noticed, I'm not exactly wearing my dancing shoes. And besides, I saw some paintings in that whorehouse that gave me a few novel ideas we need to implement immediately.”

“Volusia, please—!”

Volusia leaned across the table then, and whispered elaborate descriptions and suggestions to Diego that he found hard, in his writerly capacity, to judge by purely linguistic criteria, so potent were they on a hormonal level.

On the way out of the restaurant, Volusia stopped by the punchboard, bought a chance, and won.

“Six bulls! This goes to the Widow's and Orphans Fund! Or maybe I'll buy Copperknob a gross of sheaths!”

2.

Scalehunting

May brought the Seasonsun many Blocks closer to the citizens of Gritsavage, until that potent, smaller, lower orb was, at its daily apex, almost directly overhead the Borough, carrying with it balmy hours, lighter dress and changed relaxations.

Like the Daysun every morning, when the Seasonsun made its first appearance each year, it could be seen very low in the Uptown skies. But unlike its steadier companion, the Seasonsun did not then rise to complete a course that wheeled it over the entire length of Broadway in a single day. Instead, the Seasonsun moved at right angles to its celestial mate, rising from below the Other Shore and dropping beyond the Wrong Side of the Tracks, all in the same period as the diurnal luminary. Consequently, in late winter the Seasonsun would often be hidden by the dawn Daysun, showing, once the Daysun left it behind, only as a dim, hardly moving dot ‘way up Broadway, dispensing its warmth to distant other Boroughs. As spring progressed, the arcs made by the Seasonsun would become more perceptible, higher, the degrees of its disk more visible. Finally the Seasonsun would become a definite part of the Gritsavage skies, shifting its point of rising a little further each day down the length of the River.

Summer officially began when the Seasonsun rose directly above the central Blocks of the Borough, when it and the Daysun were superimposed at noon for a few moments in the heavens.

The descent into the latter half of the year replicated in reverse this process, with the Seasonsun slipping away further and further Downtown, disappearing finally in December.

Thus cycled the perpetual cruciform empyreal display.

May also brought a host of new developments in the life of Diego Patchen, some enjoyable and jubilating, some distasteful and wearying.

Perhaps most disturbing in this latter category were the alarming changes in Diego's best friend, Zohar Kush.

Diego and Zohar had grown up in the same Block, attending Heywood Stropper Memorial Elementary School together, in due time graduating to PS 5, where Diego had first tested his talents as a member of the school newspaper's staff. Zohar had fully cultivated then his own idiosyncratic, amoral character. A wildman for whom no challenge or prank was deemed too outrageous, Zohar had shown a keen intelligence that he refused to put into the service of any socially approved goal. (His parents played little part in his upbringing. Papa Kush was an amiable drunkard, remaining an apprentice ingeniator right up till retirement and early demise, while Mama Kush labored long hours in a steamy, enervating laundry, emerging as wilted and wrinkled each day as the bags of soiled clothes she handled.)

Barely graduating, Zohar had fallen into a catch-as-catch-can lifestyle, acquiring the bulls and wives necessary for his mean, yet libertied existence in a variety of ways, few of them aboveboard. (Although when Zohar was flush, everybody from Diego on down to random strangers in a bar benefited from his largesse.) Zohar and the cops of Gritsavage were on familiar terms, and Diego's childhood friend had served time in the local jug. But never for long, and for minor charges only.

All well and good—for the most part, then. An exciting, even charmingly disreputable life, which completely suited Zohar Kush's nature and generally harmed no one. Diego had never felt any fear for his friend's survival.

But nowadays Diego found he could not be as sanguine about Zohar's likely fate. Missing from their usual haunts for many weeks, Zohar now verged, Diego suspected, on bad trouble and possibly imminent nervous collapse. And this condition dated precisely to his taking Milagra Eventyr as lover.

When the knock came that May morning on Diego's apartment door, Diego intuited instantly that behind that importunate rapping stood Zohar Kush, and that he was not in good shape. Opening the door proved the truth of his clairvoyance.

Zohar wore a white shirt once expensively fashionable but now spotted with various stains and frayed at the open collar. A pair of chino pants told a tale of hard usage, one knee rent, one rear pocket hanging half off. A hopsacking suitcoat seamed with soot. On unsocked grimy feet: a pair of slip-on boatshoes.

Zohar's crowning physical glory had always been his hair, a disordered mass of black curls as naturally glossy as oil spilled on Broadway's macadam. Many a girl at PS 5 had willingly allowed a range of freedoms with their own persons for a chance to run their hands through that sexy mop. Nowadays, Zohar sported facial hair to complement his coif, in the form of mustache and underlip soul-tuft. Zohar's physique also recalled the youthful wiryness he had been noted for. But a decade-plus of hard, pointless living had scored his sharp-featured face into a torn map of faded adolescent ambition.

Zohar gripped Diego by the elbows upon gaining entrance and focused imploring blue eyes on his friend.

“I need your help, Dee. Desperately. Not for my own sake, but for Milagra's.”

Diego freed himself from Zohar's hands, not brusquely but firmly. “Bull's balls, Zoh, you stink! Where have you been keeping yourself these past months? I haven't seen you since that night in February.”

Zohar allowed himself a small smile. “Ah, what a grand outing that was! I can still taste that first frothing Rude Bravo of the evening, still hear that priggish Drumgoole asking exactly the wrong beautiful woman if she'd like to ‘engage in relations’ with him, still see the look on his face as he snuffled over his contusions in the Subway restroom's mirror! We did have some good times together, didn't we, Dee? Good enough that you'll come to the aid of your old pal now, in his hour of need?”

“Of course, of course, there's no question I'll help you. But from the looks of things, you actually need a day in Diggory's Steambaths, a corps of beauticians, a spending spree at Kobek's Outfitters for some new duds, followed by a cushy job in the Copperknob administration. And I doubt I can supply more than the towel fees at Diggory's.”

“Forget *my* condition, damn you! I tell you, I only bothered you today because Milagra's in rough shape.”

“What's her problem? Aren't you keeping her satisfied in bed? I recall her being all over me for solace that night—”

“Joke all you wish. But your japes won't alter the fact that Milagra's hooked on junk now, and hasn't had a fix in days.”

Diego sank bonelessly into a chair. “No. How—how did this happen?”

Zohar shrugged fatalistically. “How does it happen to anyone? She sampled the stuff, found she liked it, and soon discovered she couldn't live without it.”

“I—I don't know what to say. I've never known anyone who's even tried heroin before.”

“Well, now you do. And believe me, it isn't much of a privilege.”

“Are you hooked too?”

“No, thank the Wives. But I think you're wrong about not knowing any other junkies. You're friends with that musician, Prague, aren't you?”

“Yes. But do you mean—?”

“So I was led to believe by my connection. I'm hoping you'll take me to him and that he'll sell me enough dope to tide Milagra over for a few days.”

Canting his head and knuckling his scalp as if better to process this new information, Diego asked, “Your connection—why can't he supply you with more?”

“The junk comes in by Train or by Ship, and there hasn't been a consignment in weeks.”

“Couldn't you just ride the Subway to the source, wherever it is?”

Zohar laughed, a bitter peal. “The source! Where indeed is it? What Borough? How many millions of Blocks away? I know the source of the junk no more than you know where your writing paper comes from! Who makes our clothes, what Block hosts cattle and sheep and chickens, what Borough produces vegetables and wine, shoes and lipstick? All our goods come in by Train or Ship, and we accept them happily, willing to exchange an occasional shortage for the convenience of not having to produce everything locally ourselves. But the system leaves us at the mercy of these unknown suppliers. And right now their whims are killing my lover.”

Diego stood up. “Okay, okay, you don't have to lecture me on macroeconomics. I'm a professional Cosmogonic Fictioneer! I know how insane our world is, how much unexamined mystery underpins it. And I invent a dozen stranger worlds before breakfast! Let's go pay a call on Rumbold Prague.”

Visiting all of the musician's hangouts took them well into the afternoon. At the radio studio where Prague's live broadcasts often originated, they got trapped by an earnest young ingeniator who wanted to lecture them on some new improvements in equipment that would overcome abstruse atmospheric limitations and let the station extend its range to more than one hundred Blocks. Diego and Zohar extricated themselves from the bore's chatter with difficulty, and headed elsewhere: Rawcliffe's Poolhall where Prague often displayed his gamesmanship; the bar Corcorvado with its exotic hustlers; the trumpeteer's apartment in Gritsavage-875, above Mocko Bosefus's Delicatessen—But nowhere yielded a sign of the musician.

At this final stop, the pair ducked into Bosefus's for a much-needed lunch: hot corned beef and sauerkraut sandwiches paid for by Diego. Unable to connect with the elusive black man, they could only surmise that, suffering from the same exigencies as Milagra, he had either gone to ground within Gritsavage or used his superior knowledge to visit another Borough, however distant, where heroin was in greater supply.

Both the Seasonsun and Daysun were riding the lower quadrants of their invisible rails when the pair admitted defeat.

Zohar's nerves were strained to a pitch Diego had never witnessed before in his normally unflappable friend.

“What will we do, what will we do? She'll die soon, I tell you. She's not strong enough to kick her jones cold. Her arms are so wasted now—”

“Calm down, calm down!” Diego cudged his wits, and was rewarded with a last desperate hope. He winced at what he was about to propose, half-sick with shame, but then Zohar's pitiful expression tipped the balance between antipodal poles of duty.

“Come with me. We're going to pay a social call on my father. Don't ask why, just follow me.”

Far Uptown from Gaddis Patchen's place, Zohar and Diego descended the nearest Trackside entrance to the Subway (an ingress loomed every five Blocks), which gave onto the Downtown platform, a long tiled stretch of musty boredom. Waiting for one of the frequent expresses, Zohar and Diego stood silently, until Zohar spoke.

“Do you remember how I tried to find out once how long the City was?”

“Yes, yes I do.”

“I came down here at three AM one night with a pot of paint and a brush. I tagged the last car, out of sight of the driver, with my name in foot-high letters. Then I made camp on a bench and waited. Every time a new chain of cars rattled into the station, I looked to see if the ultimate car sported my graffiti. I lived on candybars and soda from the vending machines. You brought me a sandwich or two over the next few days, and some hot jamoke. I napped in between arrivals, but I always woke up when they pulled in. I know I never missed a single express. Do you remember how long I held out?”

“Two weeks.”

“That's right. Two weeks, and I never saw my tag again.”

“Workman cleaned your graffiti off. Or they removed that car from service. Or at some terminus the car was shunted onto the Uptown track, and your tag was facing away from you.”

Zohar smiled wanly. “You tried those answers on me twelve years ago, and I didn't buy them then. No, those cars were still traveling Downtown through our unfathomable City after two whole weeks. I'm convinced of it. That's when I got really scared. The enormity of our awful existence overwhelmed me. I've never been the same since. Oh, I might put up a good front, but something broke inside me that day.”

At that moment their express came in and they stepped onboard, matrixed in a rude herd of fellow riders—laborers, businessmen, housewives and children—like cherries in a cake.

Zohar said, “You know, some days I wake up and feel that my painted name is still moving down these rails, and that I won't see it again until I die.”

* * * *

The tree in front of Diego's boyhood home had leafed out in green abundance, but bore no traces of any spring flowering, neither seed nor husk. Abstaining from visiting his father for a whole month, feeling simultaneously guilty and relieved, Diego had missed the promised blooms, if any.

Outside the door to the Patchen apartment Diego said, “Try to get the old man engaged in some chatter, while I take what we need. We can leave before too long.”

Zohar seemed distraught by the prospect of viewing the elder Patchen. “I have such a keen picture of your father in his prime. Very strong and vibrant. Bitter, yes. But he was such a contrast to my mushy, liquor-sodden Dad. Is he really so broken-down these days?”

“Actually, the last time I saw him he was looking a little better. Maybe his disease has gone into remission.”

Diego did not of course really believe this. He knew that any shadow of vigor in his father represented only a plateau in his descent to death. But if such a fantasy offered Zohar any comfort, Diego was glad to retail it, just as he sold his other dreams.

The door creaked as it opened onto the gloomy interior.

“Who's that?” called out Gaddis Patchen in a firm voice. “If that's you, Mrs. Loblolly, I've had enough chicken soup to float a fucking Ship!”

“It's me, Dad. And a friend.”

From his wonted coign of cratered, crusted chair flush against death-inviting window, Gaddis Patchen made the effort to push upward slightly and peer backward. “Is that your rascally chum Kush then? I’ll be bugged by a Bull! Where have you been keeping yourself, Zohar? Making time with all the ladies, I assume.”

Zohar snagged a rail-backed hard chair and sidled around with it to plonk down beside Gaddis. “Ah, neither one of us is what we once were, Mr. Patchen. I’m tied down to a single woman these days. A wonderful girl, but she, um, puts a small crimp in my tomcatting.”

“Tell me all about her, Zohar.”

Diego marvelled, half resentfully, at the easy conversation flowing between Zohar and Gaddis, at the actual civility and congeniality his father chose to employ. But Diego’s heart was not small enough to hold recriminations, especially not with what he intended to do now.

Adjacent to the stack of unread magazines Diego had deposited over the past months teetered a matching pile: a dozen leatherette cases full of unused, hoarded syrettes of painkillers. Doctor Teasel was generous with the drugs—or perhaps Gaddis was deliberately stockpiling the instrumentality of his suicide.

Diego lifted two cases, checked their contents, and slid them into capacious pants pockets.

Rejoining Zohar, Diego inserted himself into the middle of the conversation, relishing his father’s foreign jollity, and also gladdened by the apparent distraction from his own troubles that Zohar was enjoying. Diego went to the kitchen, discovered a bottle of sweet wine that had plainly been found palatable, and brought glasses back for them all.

Half an hour passed before Diego indicated they really had to leave. Zohar came to himself, and, his sense of mission restored, seconded the imperative.

“Don’t be such a stranger in the future, Kush!”

“I won’t, sir. Take care of yourself now.”

“Have no fear, Kush. The struggle is not over by a long stretch.”

Outside Diego revealed to Zohar what he had snatched.

“Oh but no, this is a boon beyond words, Dee! Almost two weeks of salvation for my Milagra here. This stuff is much purer than what she’s used to, and I’ll make sure she rations it accordingly. You are indeed a lifesaver, my friend.”

Zohar impulsively wrapped Diego in a fervent embrace; then, unclenching, he held his friend at arm’s-length to admire him, before hugging him again.

In his conscience-stricken embarrassment, Diego could only jokingly say, “It appears I’m irresistible to both you and Milagra.”

“Let’s hear it from her own lips. Follow me.”

The Subway brought them fifteen blocks further Downtown, almost to the invisible but real border between Gritsavage and its Downtown neighbor, Pergola. Restored to the fresh air of Broadway again, past a barbershop, a florist's and a cigar store, they turned Trackward on the Cross Street labelled Gritsavage-835.

Every building in the Linear City fronted on Broadway and ran for its full length to the margins of either Tracks or River. There were no secondary buildings partway down Cross Streets, no traversable alleys or gangways separating adjoining buildings, just narrow airshafts. But at each Cross Street that defined a Block, the exterior walls of the flanking buildings were of course visible. Plastered with posters and handbills, these walls constituted the City's main public forum for advertisements. Each Cross Street seemed a chute of words and pictures, a palimpsest of beckoning images and solicitations.

On Gritsavage-835, the twinned buildings were of median height, some four stories each, their first floor walls and a portion of each second story lavish with old election posters, patent medicine ads, theatrical enticements and the hucksterism of various magazine and book publishers, girdle-makers and furniture dealers. Although the dropping Daysun did not penetrate here at this moment, the sinking Seasonsun directly ahead of them still illuminated Diego and Zohar, endowing them with but a single personal shadow in contrast to the doubled ones they experienced during other moments of each day.

Down this Cross Street, as on many Trackside ones, trundled some half-dozen garbage men, pushing their big-wheeled, flatbed, slat-sided carts filled with the City's castoffs and trash. The garbage men wore a uniform of bib overalls in a heavy dun fabric, and knee-high mucker's galoshes. (Seeing their boots, Diego thought of Volusia in uniform.) The carts exhibited every conceivable kind of trash, from table scraps to broken lamps, bundled newspapers to dead pigeons, broken crockery to snap-backed rats. As one, the carters trundled onward toward the Tracks.

Falling in behind the smelly, silent procession, Diego found himself speechless. It was as if he had accidentally become participant in some funerary pilgrimage, deceased unknown. Zohar, however, seemed untroubled by their fellow travelers.

“We'll be home soon, Dee. Just a little further.”

The Cross Street ended, as did every Trackside one, at a strip of oil-soaked cinders, grit and jagged stones. A few feet away ran the Tracks themselves. The backsides of many commercial buildings featured docks extending outward from wide doors to mate with boxcars for easy unloading of goods.

At this point on the Tracks, provision had been made to allow the carts easy access: a slight wooden ramp rose to the level of the Tracks without actually touching them; between and beyond the Tracks the tripartite ramp continued. After looking Downtown to the faroff vanishing point for any approaching Train, the garbage men maneuvered their carts past the rails, one by one bumping over the gaps.

Now they stood, technically, on the Wrong Side of the Tracks. But the domain of the Yardbolls, the unfathomable home of the Pompatics, lay much further away across the barren plain, separated by more than sheer physical distance.

Zohar hastened past the slow carts and entered the vast midden that ranged in low smoldering heaps as far as the eye could see. Diego scurried after him in the admonitory twilight.

Through the feculent maze they wended their way, until finally a hut materialized around a bend. Constructed of a bewildering variety of materials, the shack resembled a drunkard's dream.

Zohar's sheepishness was layered with resignation. "Not the nicest digs I've ever enjoyed, but the rent is reasonable. Milagra's habit, you see, takes a good chunk of our income. In a word, most of it."

The sheet-metal door depended from leather-strap hinges. Swinging the barrier aside, Zohar shuffled through. Diego bent his head and followed.

A kerosene lantern wick'd to amber life. Diego swept the shack's interior in a glance: two low stools, a crate for a table (bearing a junkie's set of works), a shelf of tattered books and magazines (was that a copy of *Mirror Worlds* ?), a basin and ewer, a thin sour-smelling cotton pallet elevated on more crates. And on that pallet, Milagra Eventyr.

The painfully thin woman resembled the pretty flirty girl of February as a rake resembled a guitar. Sunken-chested, knob-jointed, gaunt-cheeked, needle-tracked. Only Milagra's long nigrescent hair, fine as a baby's, recalled her earlier good looks.

With the dawn of the lamp, Milagra began to stir and moan. Her eyes opened, but seemed indifferent to vision. "Oh, Mopsy, it hurts, it hurts! And the razoos! They're everywhere! I think one got into my gut! Mopsy, please, I need my fix! Or at least some lunatic soup!"

"Is it withdrawal that's making her talk so crazy?" Diego asked.

Zohar had dropped to the packed earth floor beside the pallet, and was unlimbering a syrette. "She's not babbling. Milagra was born and raised in Milkville. That Borough is ten thousand Blocks away. They use a lot of words we don't. Razoo, that's a rat. Lunatic soup is booze." Zohar tied Milagra off at her left bicep, found her crook-fleshed vein and shot her up with only half the contents of the needle. She unfurled a deep sigh, and almost instantly collapsed into slack-muscled oblivion.

A Train rumbled past, shaking flakes of rust from the ceiling. Huffing his own gust of relief, Zohar straightened up and smiled bravely. "I'd offer you some refreshments, Dee, but as you can see, the larder holds no caviar or champagne at the moment."

"Zoh, you can't continue living like this! These conditions are abysmal!"

"Oh but no, Dee, I certainly don't want to subsist in such a mean environment. But what choice do I have? Assuming the dope drought alleviates, money will still be lacking for anything else."

Diego's impulses fought each other for a long half minute, self-preservation battling charity, before he said, "Gimlett wants more scales."

"Oh but no, Diego! This solves everything!"

* * * *

The back storage room at Gimlett's smelled of onions and cabbage, bananas and parsley, and was chilly as a Glyptis radiator. At this hour well past midnight no muted sounds of gossiping, produce-plumping housewives filtered inward past the heavy door, the store shuttered and dark. Gimlett hovered over his two freelance minions now as if they were a pair of exotic fruits whose price he was trying to fix. Brandishing his scale medallion at them, he reiterated for the final time his needs.

"If you bring back entirely scales of this size and quality, my hopes will be fulfilled to the maximum. I can offer you ten bulls or seven wives apiece for such specimens. Inferior grades of scales will earn respectively less money."

Zohar meditatively tossed a large flashlight from one hand to the next. “And your markup to the customers is...?”

Gimlett grinned in a mingy manner. “That's no concern of yours, Kush. I'm offering you a fair price.”

“What if we just cut you out and try to sell scales ourselves?”

Gimlett's selfish grin expanded to irritating dimensions. “Do you have the illicit connections with the complaisant but vindictive police that I have so laboriously fostered all these years? Do you recall the penalties for harvesting scales? Five to ten years. If I learned that you two were attempting to go behind my back—why, it would be my simple civic duty to turn you both in.”

Diego rushed to assure Gimlett that they had no such intentions, but Zohar beat him to a response. “Actually, we disdain such petty commerce, such a merchant's role. We are both magnanimous artists and adventurers, who perform this amusing ritual now and then simply for the esthetic kicks. The money you pay us will all go toward endowing a new upper floor on Vansyckle's Museum of Fine Arts. I was only asking about the, ah, retail price of scales to gauge the health of the Gritsavage economy.”

“So long as we understand each other. Now, do you have everything you'll need?”

“Thanks to your generosity, sir, our equipage lacks naught.” Zohar kicked the knapsack at his feet. “Ropes, picks, pinch bars, shovels, poisoned bait—we have it all.”

“Very well, let's see your backsides, then, until you return with the goods. You'll find the cart outside.”

So dismissing them, Gimlett let the friends out of the front door. On Broadway the pushcart received their packs beneath a concealing tarp. Each man took a handle and headed the cart Uptown. Diego caught the scents of the River, of fried foods and cheap cigars. A janitor tossed a bucket of sudsy water into Broadway's gutter. A sidewalk vendor—improbably still trying to sell at this hour men and women's stockings from a tray supported from a strap around his neck—seemed asleep standing up. A redheaded streetwalker leaned wearily against the wall of a cheap hotel.

In the heavens, the nocturnally scintillant forms of Yardbolls and Fisherwives inscribed trajectories of mortality, crosshatching the skies, while from pool to pool of streetlight radiance Diego and Zohar rolled, miming the garbage collectors they had followed just two days ago.

“He did say ‘eight-sixty-five, didn't he?’” Zohar asked.

“Yes. It seems the authorities have closed up our old hole at ‘eight-forty.’”

“A different segment of the Citybeast then. Nice fresh outer scales and no boiling blood at first. But unknown mazes of infrastructure as well.”

Diego made no reply, concentrating instead on keeping his heart from racing out of control.

At the Riverside Subway entrance at Gritsavage-865, the scalehunters chained up their cart and reclaimed their packs, casting shifty glances left and right. At this hour, Subway traffic would be at its lowest ebb, reflected in the lesser frequency of expresses. All they had to worry about was a chance cop patrolling the Uptown platform.

But once belowground they found they could unshackle their breaths in relief: the long platform was empty of any save a handful of passengers. And only one, a bearded fellow wearing clothes unlike any commonly seen in this Borough, seemed to take special cognizance of their bulky equipment. As Diego and Zohar moved past him, he said, “Goodly snaffling, boychiks. Ye laminars be moughty faunchable.”

Diego responded with a smile and kindly nod. Once well past the man, he said, “Have you ever heard an accent or speech like that?”

“Never. And I thought Milagra's Milktown patois was thick. She's recovering quite splendidly, by the way, Dee, and sends all her love.”

“Yes, well, I'm glad for both of you. But you must realize that this is definitely my final scalehunting venture. The work's too insanely spooky for me. Not to mention the legal consequences, or being complicit with that melonhead Gimlett. And now that I'm selling more stories, I don't need the money so badly as I did a few years ago.”

Zohar's vulpine smile enlivened his face. “Understood, pard. A big enough stake for me and Milagra to get back on our feet is all I need. Once I have a respectable address and have cleaned up my act, it's gainful and legal employment for yours truly. Perhaps you'll encounter me next behind the sales counter of Lammergeyer's Fine Wines, chatting up customers knowledgably about the latest vintage from Stinchcomb or Winkelreed.”

Now they stood at the platform's end. They shucked their packs, and Zohar dropped down into the channel of the tracks. Diego quickly passed the packs to him, then let himself down as well.

“Need I whisper the words ‘third rail’ into your not-so-virginal ear?”

“And that's another thing I absolutely *hate* about this job!”

Flashlights casting bobbing blobs of light ahead of them, the pair scuttled swiftly down the tunnel, anxious against the sound of an approaching express. But their luck held, and they attained their goal without encountering any commuter juggernaut.

A riveted rusted tunnel door bore a chalked X across its panels. A giant padlock and chain seemingly secured it, but the lock's mechanism was gutted, and the hasp slipped free with a twist.

Beyond the door, sweaty pipes and bundled cables adorned a brick passage just shoulder-wide and head-scrappingly high. The cloistered air here smelled of ozone and steam.

Diego laid a hand on some bunched wires. “You know, this gives me an idea for a story. Suppose you could transmit voices down just such a network of wires, instead of electricity alone?”

“A kind of wired radio?”

“Not exactly. I'm thinking a one-to-one mode, me with an instrument in my home talking to you with an instrument in yours. Then people in distant parts of the City could be in communication with one another. Wouldn't that revolutionize existence?”

“I suppose. But what could I possibly have to say to my counterpart in Cromornos? ‘How's the weather in your Block?’ ‘What's a pair of new shoes cost where you are?’”

Diego dropped his hand from the cables, disappointed. “I suppose it's a dumb idea after all. But you have to bluesky a lot in my game...”

A half mile down the service passage, a manhole cover leaped into view under the flashlights' lances. With pinchbars they hoisted up the lid, with ropes knotted around an anchored cable guide they descended.

The sewers of Gritsavage appeared more archaic than any other portion of the City, although surely they must have been contemporary with the construction of the vast majority of buildings lining Broadway. (Fire alone wrote any particular building's demise; construction of a replacement was contingent on sporadic resupply of the needed materials, with the occasional vacant lot often remaining for years like a gap in the City's infinite smile.) Massive blocks of rawly quarried stone, slimed with mold, arched overhead and troughed underfoot, with only a narrow ledge on either side of the concavity affording purchase above swill, slops, storm-runoff and shit, all heading toward unknown outfall or recirculation.

An impressive rat swam by, snout periscoping the fetid air. Zohar said, “We'll move away from our exit here before we dump the trove of poison bait.”

Some distance away from the dangling ropes, opposite the direction they intended to travel, they set up a deadly banquet for the sewer rats, hoping to lure many of the nasty denizens away from the locale where the scalehunting work would occur.

Zohar laughed. “Eat hearty, razoos! This time you'll learn about the price of a free lunch!”

Diego and Zohar found the next promised landmark after a short interval of crabbed travel: a segment of wall, undermined by high floods, had collapsed, three or four sizable blocks tumbling into the dirty stream. Using picks and shovels, the men enlarged the Riverside hole to permit them a cramped entrance to what lay beyond.

The musty, stagnant realm behind the sewer wall showed no signs of human artifice. A sense of distant enclosure supplied the only hint at the immense volume of space contained here, for their pitiful lights could not reveal any walls or roof, at whatever remove, and certainly no sky or stars.

Where was the River? wondered Diego, not for the first time in his scalehunting career. Could they be below its bed? It did not seem probable, for their descent from the Subway level had encompassed only about ten feet, and the River was much deeper than that. Diego suddenly flashed on an image of a pencil lying on his desktop: was their whole City—River, Tracks and all—just such a unitary construct, lying on some inconceivably vaster plain? Even the mind of a professional Cosmogonic Fictioneer boggled at the concept.

The floor of this new realm began just far enough below their feet to accommodate the structure of the sewer trough. Below their perch stretched a paving of dead, dull scales robbed of their shimmering superstitious virtues, virtues worth ten bulls or seven wives apiece.

“How far off do you think the live ones begin?”

“Only one way to find out.”

They vaulted down, the surface greeting their weight with a curious resiliency, and set off.

Some uncountable number of paces onward, Diego's beam revealed fresh scales: iridescent, overlapping

tesserae laid by no man's hand.

“All right. Let's get busy.” Suiting actions to words, Zohar bent and pinched the trailing edge of one scale, then pulled like plucking a petal off a flower. The scale came away easily, but was followed by a swelling drop of bright alizarine blood which, upon contact with the air, instantly began to boil and bubble without losing any of its substance. A second, a third, a fourth drop soon followed, forcing Zohar to move a few paces away from the nasty liquid for his subsequent sacrilege.

Diego, meanwhile, hefting his flashlight in his left hand, was harvesting his own scales, tossing each into his pack, carefully avoiding the corrosive, sugary smelling blood pools accumulating on the floor at each point of his thievery.

The men worked determinedly, perforce moving further apart in search of fresh fields. Diego tried to always maintain a sense of where their egress lay. The notion of wandering across this indeterminate, signpostless terrain until he died of thirst did not appeal to even the shred of romantic melancholy Diego possessed.

And if he did die here, how would the Pompatics ever find his soul? That notion alone was nearly enough to scare the wits out of him.

At last their packs were full, and they reunited. The lake of burbling blood now stretched across a Block or so, a seething crimson swamp at the roots of their world, emblemizing their despoilage. No wonder the authorities frowned implacably on this vulturine activity.

Like Diego, Zohar, despite his effervescent manner, must have been thinking nighted thoughts, for now he said, “Have you ever heard the legend of the scalehunter who assaulted this living bedrock more grievously, Dee? For one reason or another, or no good reason at all, he drove his pickaxe deep into this gory turf. They say the convulsions of the Citybeast turned a million Blocks into so much rubble in the space of a few seconds.”

Diego shivered, but felt obliged to question this tale. “And where and when did this catastrophe occur? And why is there no record of even a slight aftershock from this quake in the annals of Gritsavage?”

“Ah, as to where and when, I cannot say. But the why is easy.”

Zohar paused, forcing Diego to say, “Really?”

“Really. You see, the assault happened so far away and so recently that the wave is still travelling toward us, down the indeterminate length of the City. I expect it to arrive any day now.”

Diego's rationalism bade him counter this assertion. “How did you learn about this catastrophe in advance of the actual wave? How did information travel faster than the event itself?”

“Oh, did I forget to mention earlier? Your hypothetical system of communication by wire—it already exists. But only for the elite.”

Diego sized up his friend's expression. But even after knowing Zohar all his life, Diego could not tell if he were joking or not.

Soiree and Suicide

By August, several distinct improvements in the fortunes of Zohar Kush and Milagra Eventyr were notable. Bolstered by the money Gimlett had paid Zohar for his share of the scales—equivalent to about three month's wages for the average citizen—the couple had relocated to more civilized quarters, a small flat above Berm's Laundry in Gritsavage-841, an apartment of three rooms in a line, perpetually redolent of soap and starch. As if the proximity of the laundry had altered their sensibilities, both lovers had spruced themselves up to a considerable degree as well. In Zohar's case the transformation was simple, requiring nothing more than the bath and new outfits Diego had earlier prescribed. But Milagra had required nutritional and medical assistance as well, and Zohar had attended to those remedies with diligent affection. Nowadays, although still relatively gaunt, Milagra no longer appeared on the point of death, and had regained some measure of her former attractiveness.

And once the heroin shortage had evaporated—with the Trains carrying the illicit drug once more, their workers handing packages discreetly over to local dealers during transfers of more innocent freight—Milagra had arrived at some kind of moderate dosage regimen, injecting enough drug for maintenance without instances of obvious nodding-off or self-destruction.

“She'd like more, of course,” Zohar confided to Diego, “but I don't permit it. The old pursestrings are tightly knotted in my grip, and since I'm the only one working, she has no say in the matter.”

Diego refrained from mentioning lurid options whereby Milagra might conceivably earn money outside Zohar's ken.

Zohar's own new job was not, as fancifully predicted, with Lammergeyer's Fine Wines, but rather in Teagarden's Pinball Arcade. Wearing a striped apron full of heavy scintilla coins, Zohar changed paper money and redeemed Skee-ball tokens for tawdry prizes, swept the floor and tended the cotton-candy and popcorn machines, and promoted punchboard use.

“Just call me the impresario of immaturity, Dee, a regular maestro of cheap thrills.”

So respectable by comparison with their past selves were Zohar and Milagra now that Volusia Bittern did not even object when Diego suggested that the two couples rendezvous to celebrate Volusia's promotion. The newly nominated Captain in the Esmond Casterline Irregulars was so elated, her natural ebullience so overflowing at her advancement, that Diego could have invited a squadron of flophouse bums and not been reprimanded.

On that Friday night, they all met at Famagusta's Lobster House, a rather expensive place to which Diego had never before been. Diego and Volusia showed up first, the writer squiring the firefighter on his arm. Diego thought his woman had never looked sexier. Her thick sheaf of hair, still damp from a shower following their lovemaking, had been pulled back and secured with a silk scarf. Her flower-printed chiffon dress clung to her muscled frame like plaster over bricks, the buttress of her generous breasts some fanciful architect's master embellishment. Bare-legged, she wore brown loafers with stack heels that added two inches to her extension above Diego's height. Her lipsticked mouth invited smearing. Every eye in the restaurant tracked her entrance.

“Max! Where *is* that lazy clamshucker? Doesn't he know how to run his own dive? He has important guests tonight, and we want the best table in the house!”

Maxwell Famagusta emerged from the kitchen in response to the bellowing. A rolypoly balding giant

with tattoos of anchors on both forearms, he exuded a vitality to match Volusia's, and seemed thrilled to be challenged by her in this outrageous public manner.

“You damnable hosewench! I didn't recognize you with a clean face! Where's your usual layer of soot and ashes? And who's this milkskinned whelp with you? What of our hot date tonight?”

“Don't you think I can handle two men together? But I fear you're completely out of the picture, Max. Nowadays I favor only artists. They're so much more creative in bed. And Diego screws as good as he writes—which is to say, brilliantly!”

Mortified, Diego accepted a suit-rumpling handshake from Famagusta and a hearty clap on the back that almost separated spine from ribs. “Good luck, lad! You'll need it to keep *this* one content!”

Famagusta's was located at the Riverside end of Cross Street Gritsavage-905. The building there that backed up onto the water housed the kitchen and interior seating. But the restaurant spilled out onto the adjacent Slip, a long concrete jetty adapted from coarser uses to fine dining by improvements such as plank flooring and velvet ropes running from stanchion to stanchion. And on such a splendid summer evening, demand for those canopied outdoor tables was greatest. But Max Famagusta swept Diego and Volusia past a glaring line of waiting diners and ensconced them at the prize table, directly at the end of the Slip.

“We're expecting two more, Max.”

“I'll shuttle them out promptly.”

Menu in hand, Diego paused a moment to contemplate the crepuscular view. Wider by several orders of magnitude than Broadway, the River stretched away endlessly to left and right. Crafts of varying dimensions, their running lights green and red, blue, white and amber, plied the placid bosom of its waters, sounding horns and whistles. But all vessels stayed in a channel that began at the midpoint of the River: beyond that invisible boundary began the curling fogs that shrouded the Other Shore.

“How many lobsters do you think I can eat, sweetling?”

“How many can we afford is the question.”

“Piker! Would you scant your starving girlfriend? It's only a meal, after all. What if I liked furcoats and diamonds? In any case, I'm footing tonight's bill. My first paycheck at Captain's salary just came through. I'm even treating your indigent friends.”

“Well, if you insist. But of course, Zohar is not technically indigent anymore.”

“Not except in spirit. And we've settled his status privately just in time, for here they come!”

Down the Slip ambled Zohar Kush and Milagra Eventyr. The man wore a summerweight suit of linen, his dramatic puffball of hair lofting in the breeze. But his companion had chosen to cover up in a long-sleeved black cotton shirt, inky denim pants and a pair of clunky brakeman's boots. Combined with her long coal-dark hair, this outfit made her seem some undertaker's bride. Sunglasses shaded her eyes.

Diego stood, Volusia followed, facilitating a round of kisses and clasping. Once all four were seated, Zohar immediately earned Diego's silent praise by saying, “Volusia, you are surely the most beautiful Captain of firefighters in the entire history of Gritsavage. Congratulations!”

Milagra was picking at a shredded corner of her menu, and did not look up when she said, “Yeah, nice bit of jyro, kid.”

“I owe it all to our illustrious Mayor! Once I had him by the nuts, everything else followed! But I won't accept your good wishes until we have glasses in our hands. Waiter! Waiter! A bottle of your best Mocambo, please!”

The champagne came quickly, and soon they were toasting not only Volusia's promotion, but every conceivable achievement, however small.

“And here's to the snot-nosed tyke whose jammed finger I successfully pried out of a coin slot today!”

“Excelsior!”

By the time their dinners were ordered and arrived—platters of steaming shellfish, bowls of rich creamy chowder, mountains of crisp golden onion rings—they were well into their third bottle. Volusia's uninhibited laughter vied with the ship's bells.

“By the way,” said Volusia, pausing with a lobster claw uplifted, “Diego and I have been invited to a real swanky do at the Mayor's mansion.”

Diego licked fingers clean of butter. “We were?”

“Yes. I just got the invitation today. It's a ball in honor of the visiting Mayor of Palmerdale. A week from tonight.”

“Oh but no, this is truly marvelous, Vol. You two are climbing the social ladder with both hands.”

Although Milagra had kept pace with champagne consumption, she had eaten very little in comparison to her tablemates. Now she peevishly and rudely flung her barely touched lobster back into the River. “You couldn't get me to hang out with such onkus phonies and pretentious guyvos if you paid me.”

Before Volusia could take offense, Diego intervened with special news he had been saving.

“I have a meeting with my editor and his publisher tomorrow. They're planning to collect my stories in a book.”

This bombshell had the requisite effect. Volusia vented several loud ululations of triumph and swept Diego into her arms. Zohar encircled both of his friends in a spontaneous embrace. Only Milagra remained seated, oblivious to their shared joy.

The remainder of the evening was swallowed in a rowdy champagne-fueled carnival to whose charms only Milagra remained immune, each drink plunging her instead deeper into some melancholic fugue, a funk that reminded Diego, for no clear reason, of the lake of frothy blood pooling at the roots of the City.

* * * *

The shabby, well-loved offices of *Mirror Worlds* occupied one corner of the second floor of the building that housed its parent company, Pinney Publishing. That structure also contained on its groundlevel the very presses that turned out Diego's favorite magazine and other Pinney publications; consequently, to enter the gargantuan building, a whole square Block in size, was to be instantly subsumed in the sonic,

vibratory power of the perpetually active behemoth presses. Status in the Pinney organization could be charted easily by how far away from the noise one's office was placed. Directly above the relatively quiet linotype machines, Winslow Compounce's office could be interpreted as the best of a low lot. And to add insult to injury, as Compounce often jovially announced, *Mirror Worlds* earned more than almost any other Pinney magazine.

"Never!" the bulky, rumped, bespectacled editor always said when asked if this contradiction bothered him. "How could such trivial perquisites—or lack thereof—possibly demean the importance of the literary work we're doing here? Cosmogonic Fiction is the most important kind of writing under the suns. Why, I'd conduct my business from the Wrong Side of the Tracks if need be!"

Diego smiled as he let himself in the *MW* anteroom, recalling past stimulating conversations with the opinionated Compounce and anticipating today's meeting. Any visit to the nonpareil editor promised unpredictable delights and challenges.

Behind her own desk in the anteroom, Compounce's Gal Friday—a prim but sardonic spinster named Vizzy Longstreth, her hair always snugged in a tight bun—seemed oblivious to the rumblings from beneath her feet. She waved a pencil at Diego like a bored guard gesturing benignly with a spear and said, "He's got Fischl in there, but you may as well go in too. I know old Pinney wants to see you both as soon as possible, and unless Winnie's interrupted he'll probably hector poor Fischl all morning."

Longstreth was the only person in existence who could call Compounce "Winnie" without suffering searing flames of wrath. Diego smiled, thanked her and passed through to the inner office.

Kufi Fischl perched on the edge of his chair in front of Compounce's liberally paper-bestrewn desk. The young writer's earnest expression and olive complexion contrasted radically with Compounce's fligid, assured face. Wearing his trademark tartan vest despite the windowless office's trapped August heat, stoked by the machinery below, Compounce was lecturing Fischl at full speed, tossing out concepts in a rapidfire sequence whose logical connections were not always transparent.

"Now see here, Fischl, it's not just enough any longer to postulate torus worlds. That was an innovation in its time, of course, but we have to push beyond the consensus wisdom now. Have you ever considered what would happen if any world assumed the configuration of a Mobius strip?"

"I don't quite see—"

"Look here, damn you, it's obvious!" Compounce ripped a strip of paper lengthwise off some hapless author's manuscript. "If we join the ends of this strip, representing our world or a similar one, we get a simple torus. Quite possibly the minimal energy configuration of our own world. The City Beast biting its own tail! But to reach any point on its surface, you are constricted by travel in two spatial dimensions. But what if we add a twist before connecting the terminal edges?"

Compounce suited actions to words, and held up a pinched-together Mobius strip.

"A single planetary surface, no inside or outside. Imagine utilizing a third dimension of travel, descending to the depths of this world, passing right through the center, then emerging onto the other, habitable side! Technically, of course, the same side you started from, but displaced as far from your origin as possible! In effect, you'd have a shortcut through time and space."

A light seemed to spark within Fischl's imagination. "I get it now! What a wild notion! And of course, you double the livable surface area also, by eliminating the useless portion inside the cylinder section."

“Bravo! Now go home to your typewriter and bring me back a revision of ‘A City Circumscribed’ that will knock the socks off the readers next month!”

Fischl departed, trailing clouds of incipient glory. Compounce had already dismissed Fischl from his mind before he was out the door, however, and was now heartily pumping Diego's hand.

“Big day, Patchen, big day! Your very first story collection! Let's look over this table of contents I've drawn up for *Worlds for the Asking*, before we go to meet Pinney. I assume you'll agree with me that these are your best stories.”

Diego consulted the list, bit his tongue for a moment, then spoke. “These are all pretty much the selections I would have made, except for one. ‘The Ethical Ingeniators.’”

Compounce snatched the list back. “What? Are you pulling my leg, son? That's one of your best stories.”

“It was also just the third story I ever sold. I've done much better stuff since then, more mature work.”

Compounce deliberately took his time lighting up a cigarette, making Diego sweat the wait. Then the editor regarded his protege from behind his horn-rimmed glasses with a gaze like a drillbit. “Mature in what sense? The concepts behind ‘The Ethical Ingeniators’ are big and solid and revolutionary as anything we've ever published. Are you getting hung up on non-issues like style, Patchen? You're not turning quotidian on me, are you? The next thing I know you'll tell me you've been submitting vignettes about the love-affairs of your dentist to *The Gritsavage Muse*.”

“No, no, of course not. But Winslow, really, you can't discount style entirely.”

“Certainly not. I'm not some tone-deaf oaf like Mallika Prang over at *Simulacra*, am I? I let you express yourself as you see fit, and I recognize the more elegant turns of your prose. But when it comes down to style versus sense of estrangement, poetry versus ideas, then I have to plump for estrangement and ideas every time. And if a story possesses enough of those, the style just doesn't figure, one way or the other.”

Diego thought he was going mad. Compounce had this effect on him at least once a month, but never before on this particular, sensitive topic. Approaching anger, Diego said, “You can't unyoke the two, Winslow! Each is the interlocking product of the other!”

Compounce cut short the argument with a familiar phrase. “I feel an editorial coming on regarding this topic, Patchen. Let's table the matter until then. Now, can we include the disputed story or not? Remember, it's just one out of the whole batch of winners.”

Diego wearily capitulated. “Sure. Why not?”

“Wonderful! Now, let's go beard Pinney in his luxurious den, shall we?”

The top floor of the Pinney Building could have been in a different portion of the City, a more rarefied and exotic district, so distinct was its ambiance and appurtenances from the rundown hurlyburly of Compounce's domain. Ushered past a series of assistants, Diego and Compounce finally found themselves in an office big as a Subway station, carpeted and appointed like an interior designer's showroom. Nervous and sweating, Diego tried to put aside the feelings of insignificance inspired by this

plush foreign environment; Compounce, bluff as always, truly appeared unawed by his surroundings.

Teague Pinney sat dwarfed by his desk. A shrunken, elderly fellow dressed in a suit worth more than Diego's monthly income, the publisher resembled a homonculus formed of wax around a stainless steel armature. Pinney was in the process of wrapping up a discussion with another writer, a man Diego was surprised to realize was Yale Drumgoole.

Now Drumgoole stood and leaned across the desk to shake the publisher's hand. "Swell, Teague, fifty thousand is fine. See you tonight at the club perhaps? Wonderful!"

Turning, Drumgoole spied Diego and hastened toward him with signs of honest pleasure. A slim, refined fellow, impeccably attired and tanned from many hours spent by rooftop poolsides and on River sculling expeditions, Drumgoole radiated blonde vitality and self-assurance.

"Diego! What a treat! It's been ages since our little debauch this winter. Too, too long. I've heard all about your upcoming first book. A respectable little debut. Where are you heading after this?"

"Downtown."

"Splendid. I'll cool my heels outside for the nonce, and then we'll stroll together for a few Blocks."

Drumgoole exited with a flourish; Diego and Compounce moved to attend on Pinney.

Up close, the aged publisher seemed less a living being than some kind of ingeniator's chess-playing automaton, unblinking and serene. Only a cluster of crumbs at the corners of his lips, as well as a line of sweat around his high shirt-collar, gave lie to that conceit.

"Mr. Patchen, how do you do? My colleague Mr. Compounce has made a strong case for your getting inbetween boards."

Diego took, shook and relinquished a hand stiff and dry as a punchboard. Flustered a moment by Pinney's circumlocution, he could find no proper response. "Um, thank you, sir. My book—ah, my book, yes. Well, I'm very grateful that Pinney Publishing supports Cosmogonic Fiction so strongly."

"Yes, yes, of course. We are a broad spectrum publisher, offering quality fiction to the elite, and various types of entertainments to the masses. This 'other worlds' stuff seems to sell, so of course we feel obliged to publish it. Can't leave all the profits to our competition now, can we? Wouldn't do to let, say, a second-rate firm like Chugai and Munson steal a march on us. No, your book will neatly fill a certain slot in our list."

Compounce handed over the table of contents. "Here's our tentative lineup, sir."

Pinney laboriously extracted a pair of smudge-lensed rimless reading glasses from his breast pocket, unfolded them, donned them, then devoted ten seconds to the list. "All very fine instances of their type, I'm sure, Compounce. You know I trust your judgment in this recondite area."

Diego felt obliged to appear savvy—or at least minimally concerned—about business matters. "Mr. Pinney, sir, might I inquire about terms?"

"Oh, the boilerplate contract for this kind of venture will suffice, I believe. A thousand bulls advance, ten percent royalty, I'm sure our Accounting Department will make it all quite clear to you."

Wanting to bargain upward this meager advance, Diego looked to Compounce for backing. But the editor subtly indicated not to contest the offer.

“When will my book appear?”

“What month is this? August? Well, to be honest with you, once it's typeset and we cobble together some tolerable cover art, we'll likely just slip the actual printing into any old moment when the presses aren't otherwise occupied. It won't take too long to run off about five thousand copies, which is a limit we impose on all our ‘other worlds’ titles. So your book might be out as early as December, or as late as the spring.”

Gusts of conflicting feelings battered Diego. Pride at the notion of actually holding a copy of his first book in just a few months warred with ire at the less-than-ideal treatment of his brainchild. He wanted to ask about so many other facets of this project—advertising, reviews, endorsements—but he could sense that already Pinney's patience was dwindling. So in the end, Diego merely said, “It's an honor to be part of Pinney's line, sir.”

“Of course it is, young man. Now, you just stick to your last, and you'll carve out a fine little niche for yourself among your kind.”

Out in the foremost of Pinney's anterooms, they found Drumgoole waiting, chatting with a pretty red-headed secretary and making her blush. In parting, Compounce shook Diego's hand, extolled his virtues and prospects once more, asked for something new for the October issue of *Mirror Worlds*, then bade him goodbye.

Broadway in August steamed. Children played in their underclothes in front of a blaring fire-hydrant. Vendors stayed immobile under the shade of their cart umbrellas. Litter became embedded in the softening tarmac: bottle caps, matchsticks, string, bits of newspaper. Diego took off his tie, and although Drumgoole did not even loosen his, the other writer remained imperturbably cool.

“So, how did it go with old Teague? Did you hold his feet to the fire for just the terms you wanted?”

“Hardly. I simply took what he offered.”

“Chin up, Dee! Nothing to fret over. Why, I recall *my* first book. That would have been *Coronets for Lovers*. A mere ten thousand advance, and I didn't even specify higher royalties for the second printing! What a callow chap I was! But you'll get to know the ropes before too long.”

Diego's next words practically exploded from him. “Yale, how can you write nothing but quotidian fiction? You're a bright guy. Aren't you interested in the big topics?”

Drumgoole gestured to take in the whole scene before them. “What could be more interesting than this rich social tapestry laid out before us? An infinite necklace of broken dreams and soaring ambitions. I plumb the depths of the human heart, Diego. That's what people want to read about. Their daily concerns. Making a living, friendship, marrying, dying. Face it: the majority of people don't want your absurd flights of fancy. Show them what's under their very noses, but in a fresh light, heightened and amplified. That's the trick to success.”

“But look around you! Our world is one huge enigma! How did it form, how did we get here, what does the rest of the universe contain? How can anything beyond these cosmic mysteries really matter?”

“Those questions are fine fodder for freshman philosophy students, Diego. But after a while, one matures, one's concerns narrow down to what's really vital. That's what you haven't acknowledged yet, that you and your fellow Cosmo Crazies are stuck in a juvenile rut. But I suppose that's the best place for those of your temperament and peculiar abilities. You'd be lost trying to handle quotidian fiction.”

Atop the rude treatment handed out by Pinney, these insults made Diego bunch his fists and picture the black eye Drumgoole had earned himself when last they met. But he forced himself to unclench his hands and offer Drumgoole a perfunctory goodbye.

“I'm taking the Subway from here, Yale. I'll see you sometime in the future.”

“Certainly. Please, give my regards to your tempestuous and well-muscled girlfriend. And how's Kush doing these days?”

“Just fine, all of them. Goodbye.”

Diego exited the Subway adjacent to Snarky Chuff's newsstand. A restless impulse made him stop. Behind his counter, Chuff wore a dirty sleeveless tee-shirt revealing concave chest and canvas shorts over scrawny legs.

“Snarky, tell me about the kind of person who buys *Mirror Worlds* .”

“Ah, the weird and the wonderful they are. No two alike, and each one more elastic-brained than the next! Of course, many of them have to collect all their loose scintilla to afford an issue. But the stimulating discussions I've had with that class of customers would boggle the minds of a dozen college professors.”

Diego picked up a copy of *The Gritsavage Muse* . “And what of the average purchaser of this?”

“Snooty, for the most part. Many of them apparently carrying brooms up their arses. But they often tip me their change. Can't say I know them that well, since they seldom chat with the likes of me.”

Diego brightened immensely. “Snarky, you've just made my day. You've reminded me of the difference between a family and a clique.”

“Glad to be of service, Diego. Now, tell me this—in your last story, where the main character had to dress the plague-ridden corpse of his own sister, who had been killed by the evil mystic—how did you ever get into *his* mind?”

* * * *

“How do I look?”

Outside the Mayoral mansion, with crowds of partygoers swirling past them in the neon-stroked evening, Diego regarded Volusia with awe and deep appreciation. Clad in a black velvet strapless gown and open-toed high-heeled shoes, her hair pinned back with glittering costume-jewelry clips, she appeared to have stepped from a painting, perhaps a vast mural depicting a tea party held by some race of affable giants.

“If beauty came packaged like soap powder, you'd be the Super Economy Size with Extra Added Knockout Power.”

“Just the poetic effect I was striving for. Dope! Promise me you'll stick to your Cosmogonic stuff and never try to write a romance.”

“Exactly the promise Yale Drumgoole recently tried to extract from me.”

“I hope you paid attention to Yale. He's a sharp lad, even if a bit of a pill. Let's go inside now. I can't stand the anticipation!” The enormous crystal-lit ballroom, richly gilt and embellished, dominated the entire third floor of the building at Gritsavage-851, stretching from Broadway back to Tracks. Any windows giving onto the always mildly disconcerting, however familiar view of the Wrong Side of the Tracks remained hidden behind a floor-to-ceiling involuted curtain that served as backdrop to the low stage before it. On that stage tonight, at linen-covered tables, sat Mayor Jobo Copperknob; his honored guest, Mayor Moacyr Quine of Palmerdale; and assorted other favored functionaries, friends, family and financiers from both camps. Off to stageleft, a smaller round platform held a five-piece band. Already the musicians were assembled and warming up. Diego experienced a pleasant surprise to recognize Rumbold Prague's current ensemble: Lydia Kinch, Scripps Skagway, Lucerne Canebrake, and Reddy Diggins. The trumpet player himself, however, had not yet made his entrance.

A huge buffet stretched along the Downtown wall: shrimp on ice, steamship rounds of beef, pineapple-slice-draped hams and barbecued chickenwings, as well as numerous salads and punches. Efficient and gregarious bartenders manned an open bar, whipping up Arcanums, Buzzers, Cosmopolitans and other cocktails. A number of folding chairs offered minimal seating along two walls, but the majority of guests stayed standing, juggling plates and drinks and circulating from one knot of conversationalists to another. The central dancefloor remained empty, cordoned off for the moment by velvet ropes slung between splay-footed brass poles.

“I'm starving!” Volusia announced to the room at large. “Diego, do you realize that my lunch today was cut short by a fire in some crates of cargo at Slip-833? I barely had time to shower and gussy up before meeting you here. Let's eat!”

Diego allowed himself to be dragged to the food. Uneasy in his rented tuxedo, he did not feel up to balancing plate and glass together, and so contented himself with a mug of tart punch, although he was just as hungry as Volusia. While she piled a plate high with meat and rolls, he compromised by stationing himself beside a tray full of canapes and eating one at a time when no one seemed to be looking. Meanwhile, on the dais the special guests were dining on more elegant fare, served by a steady stream of waiters.

Volusia returned to his side, gnawing at a sandwich involving three meats and as many slices of bread.

“Vol, I don't know anyone here! You've got to clue me in on a few of the players.”

Swallowing noisily, Volusia gestured with her half-eaten sandwich. “There's Tolkan Sinsalida, Copperknob's Master Ingeniator. The portly toff a few feet to his left—that's Muzzio Kloves, the punchboard king. That fellow with the camera is Mason Gingerpane of course, and his boss, the *Scimitar's* publisher, is that beady-eyed fellow in the white suit, Ludic Rukenheim. Who else do you want me to identify?”

“That's plenty for now. How do you know so many of these people?”

“I told you. Ever since I rescued his flabby bacon, I'm Copperknob's pet project, his ‘link with the average voter.’ He brings me to official meetings all the time now. That's how I met most of these stuffed shirts.”

Diego shook his head in bewilderment. Volusia's capacity for blithe acceptance of whatever life tossed her way continued to amaze him.

Far across the room, Diego thought to espy a familiar face: the harsh and world-weary black features of Rumbold Prague. Sight of the musician brightened Diego's mood.

“Vol, I spot Rumbold over there. I'm going to go talk to him about something that's been bothering me.”

“Have fun. I think I'll sashay over and tease Copperknob's deputy, Cagney Passwater. He's half in love with me, you know.”

But Diego was already gone.

Maneuvering through the whorls of chattering folks as genteely as he could, Diego lost sight of Prague. Pausing to cast about for his quarry, he found himself standing right next to his publisher, of all people.

The frail yet domineering Teague Pinney stood half supported on the arm of a gorgeous brunette woman, plainly his date for the evening, or perhaps even his wife. Holding forth on art and politics, Pinney did not at first notice Diego. Grateful for this, Diego tried to slip away, but was hailed by none other than Yale Drumgoole, and forced to join the circle.

Pinney generously acknowledged him. “Ah, Mr. Patchen, a pleasant surprise to encounter you at this soiree. Ladies and gentlemen, this is one of our authors, Diego Patchen. He specializes in counterfactual tales.”

“That ‘other worlds’ stuff,” Drumgoole added.

Barely concealed snickers and titters greeted this disclosure, and Diego felt a hot, wild flush envelope him. “Quite right. My compatriots and I earn most of Mr. Pinney's money for him, I believe. Why, my stories probably purchased those gold cufflinks he's sporting. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to find my drug-addicted, pool-playing, gutter-crawling musician friend.”

Diego departed the stunned revelers with a sense of immense satisfaction tinged with rue. Thankfully, he had already received and cashed his advance.

Now however Rumbold Prague was nowhere in evidence. Diego pictured him shooting up in some bathroom prior to his performance. Momentary thoughts of Zohar Kush and Milagra Eventyr naturally trailed this image.

Volusia recaptured Diego before too long. A small mustard stain blotted the broad alluring frontage of her gown.

“Quick, Diego, the dancing's going to start soon! You don't want me to give my entire dancecard over to Passwater and his cronies, do you?”

“By no means.” Diego offered his arm. “Shall we?”

Making their way to the ropes, they arrived just as those barriers were formally lowered. Flowing out onto the dance floor, Diego and Volusia turned to face the band. Vamping, the musicians awaited their leader. Before too long, Rumbold Prague strolled onstage, behind his shades the emblem of disdainful,

self-deprecating unconcern. Spontaneous applause greeted him. He lifted his trumpet to his lips (bright red metal colored like the blood of the City Beast, capped with a golden mute), and a hush fell.

Prague's first notes tore a hole in the heart of every listener. Poignant as death, sweet as first love, evanescent as both, they soared to fill the room with sonic festoons, coiling back on themselves, building to impossible crescendos, diminishing to barely audible whispers. That the music issued from a monolith wearing an unchanging expression of pained disdain only added to its resonance. After a few bars the other musicians fell in behind the bandleader, soft brushes across drums, plucked bass, caressing saxophone, plaintive hammerings from piano.

Volusia clutched Diego to her as if in danger of losing him forever, and they began to dance.

After this number and two others equally mournful and stirring, Diego felt a tap on his shoulder.

Mayor Jobo Copperknob was an athlete gone to seed, impressive still in his shaven-headed magnificence. He had played professional basketball for the Gritsavage Stokers before his turn to politics, and his former lean height had since been swaddled in embonpoint.

“Volusia, my pet! I take it this is your lucky beau. Introduce us, please!”

“Diego Patchen, Gritsavage's best writer, Mayor. His first book's due out any day now, and it's going to make him famous!”

“Volusia, I hardly—”

Copperknob seemed slightly disappointed at the announcement of Diego's profession, as if his job made him unworthy of Volusia's affections. “I suppose you write about all the usual ashcan things. Unfaithful women, poverty, the advertising world.”

“Not at all! I write Cosmogonic Fiction!”

“Wait a minute. You did ‘Shadows of the Inquisitor.’ I loved that story!”

“You read CF?”

“And nothing else. But this is wonderful! This ties in most neatly with a plan I'm about to announce tonight. But first, I insist on a dance or two with my favorite civil servant. Diego, if you don't object—”

“Oh, no, of course, please, go right ahead.”

Diego retreated off the dancefloor and watched with mingled jealousy and pride. Copperknob and Volusia made a dramatic pair. He finally reclaimed his partner when the Mayor moved on to usurp other women.

Finally Volusia had had enough. “My feet are killing me! Let's sit the rest of Prague's noodling out.”

Diego welcomed the break, and they moved to empty chairs.

When the musicians took their first intermission—Prague actually deigned to mutter a curt “Thank you”—Copperknob ascended the main dais and commandeered a microphone.

“Attention, please! I have an important announcement to make.” He signalled for the Mayor of Palmerdale, a quiet thin and dignified chap, to come up beside him. “In return for the generous visit by my good friend Mayor Quine, the city of Gritsavage is launching a cultural embassy to Palmerdale. Comprised of the best and brightest among us, from every trade and walk of life, and led by yours truly, this mission will strengthen the ties between our two fair Boroughs. We will be departing sometime during the next few weeks, giving our ambassadors plenty of time to get their affairs in order for an absence of a couple of months. Our transport will be the *Days on the Yann*, a steamer of no small luxury. Now, we have many of the members of this expedition here with us tonight, and I'd like to invite them up on stage as their names are called, to take a bow and receive your applause.

“Rumbold Prague.

“Mason Gingerpane.

“Cagney Passwater.

“Euple Babayan.

“Volusia Bittern.

“Diego Patchen.”

Of course no other name registered on Diego's stunned sensibilities after his own. Hauled onstage by a beaming Volusia, he could only goggle in dreamlike wonderment at the horde of upturned congratulatory faces focused on him and his new comrades.

But he was not so nonplussed as to miss the delightful look of envy and disbelief worn by the handsome yet sour-visaged Yale Drumgoole.

* * * *

“Oh but no, Dee, this is superlative news!”

Zohar Kush turned away from Diego for a moment to make change for one of the arcade's juvenile patrons. Amidst the clatter of bells, chimes, metal balls smashing into paddles and wooden balls clattering against hinged pins, the friends had to speak loudly to be heard. It was the day after the Mayoral cotillion, and Diego was still flying high from the unforeseen events of that affair.

“You'll get some immense publicity for your book now. Filing reports for the *Scimitar* ! Photos by Gingerpane! Your byline will be on everyone's lips!”

“The Mayor said only a writer of CF could possibly convey the real flavor of our trip.”

“Now that's the kind of patronage and respect you've always merited, Dee. Exactly how far away is Palmerdale, by the way?”

“Nearly two hundred and fifty thousand Blocks. Twenty-five hundred Boroughs! The *Yann* makes roughly a hundred Blocks an hour, so the voyage Downtown should take about two weeks. A little longer coming back against the current. Of course, the Subway would have us there in much less time, but Copperknob could hardly host his entourage in a proper manner. And can you imagine how weary we'd all be after straphanging that long? No, we're really traveling in style!”

“You must have a lot to do before you go.”

“Not really. My packing's minimal, and Compounce has a couple of my stories in inventory to cover an absence of a issue or two. I certainly don't have any hand in producing my book, so Teague Pinney won't require my input. We'll be gone about two months in all. I just need to say goodbye to my father, after making sure Mrs. Loblolly and Doctor Teasel will watch over him regularly. And you'll look in on him from time to time too, I hope.”

“Without fail.” Zohar hesitated a moment before his next query. “Aren't you afraid he'll die while you're gone?”

“Doctor Teasel gives him more time than that. And personally, I figure he'll hang in until I get back, just to have a chance to put me through the emotional wringer some more. Besides, this trip is the opportunity of a lifetime. I can't afford to miss it.”

“Oh, absolutely. Well then, it seems as if you'll have plenty of idle hours for several riotous celebrations with your friends. Let's start tonight! My shift's over in just half an hour. Here's a few tokens. Go play a game or two, then we'll collect Milagra and Volusia and start hitting the bars. Whitstanley's is having ladies' night tonight, and Blackwelder is playing.”

“With Mewborn on drums?”

“Who but?”

“I'm there!”

When they exited onto Broadway, the two Suns were still fairly high. On the way to Zohar's apartment, the friends chatted happily on a number of topics. Diego felt as if the days ahead of him and Zohar were paved with gold.

A twist of Zohar's key let them into the flat. “Milagra! You must hear this! Such stupendous news!”

Diego waited in the front room while Zohar penetrated the rear rooms, calling out his lover's name. Then, silence. When the curly-topped man reemerged, his face was ashen as dead scales.

“She's gone. And she finally found all our savings. I had the money in a hollowed-out book. One of Drumgoole's, in fact.” Zohar essayed a sickly smile. “I thought his writing worthy of being gutted. And anyway she never reads—”

“Zohar, no! Why didn't you bank it?”

“I, ah, I'm not welcome at any of Gritsavage's banks, Dee. A slight misunderstanding in the past.”

“Where could she have gone?”

“Where else? To her dealer. Quickly now! There might still be time—”

The frenzied Subway ride that followed seemed at once infinitely protracted and yet collapsed into seconds. Diego's mind raced, casting about for options and alternatives, ways to help poor Zohar, poor Milagra. But ultimately he had to admit his utter ignorance and helplessness.

A steel door inset in the backside of a mid-Block building was accessible only from the cinder-strewn trough paralleling the Tracks. Streaks of rust from the door's overhang bled down the concrete walls. A rushing Train blew past them in a hot filthy wind as Zohar banged upon the entrance. The setting Seasonsun tinged the coarse grey wall a lurid crimson. Eventually a sliding panel opened to frame a pair of bloodshot eyes.

“Lionel! Is Milagra inside?”

“I don't know, cousin....”

“Open up then, and I'll look.”

Protracted junkie reflexes made the unbolting and opening of the door an interminable agony, but at last they were inside.

Barely illuminated by a few small bulbs, the opium parlor was set up as a flophouse, a jumble of cots, mattresses and bunkbeds. Shooting works littered every available surface not occupied by a body, such as the tops of crates and stools. With barely room to move, Zohar nonetheless immediately began to dart from nodding dreamer to comatose sleeper, peering for his beloved's features. Diego followed more cautiously, not wanting to stick himself.

They found Milagra in a sour-smelling corner of the basement, next to a trio of empty needles. Saliva slimed her cheek and chin, and her breaths came imperceptibly at rare intervals.

Zohar cradled her in his arms. “Three spikes of junk! She hasn't done three spikes in months! Diego, help me, please. We have to get her to a hospital—”

Diego bent to grab Milagra's legs.

And then the Pompatics arrived.

Flowing through the basement wall as if through sheer air, five luminescent Fisherwives filled the room with their briney odor. Half again as large as a human, each pearly monochromatic Wife was cauled within wavery drapery that seemed more an extension of their forms, rather than any robe or mantle. Vast irregular wings like the tissuey integuments of lobsters unfurled behind them, penetrating any inanimate intersecting barriers of wall, ceiling or furniture. A subliminal melodic buzzing that verged on intelligibility filled the ears of the humans. The Pompatics shed melting scintilla like snowflakes of cold light. Their sisterly faces, all different, all generic, conveyed no discernible emotions.

“No!” Zohar screamed.

But all denial and opposition were futile.

Englobing Milagra quite corporeally, the Fisherwives stole her away from Zohar's fanatical embrace as easily as a mother removes a sharp object from an infant's grip. They ascended then through the rafters, the dead human passing with them between the hidden holes in matter as easily as did her guides to the Other Shore.

Zohar collapsed, weeping. Diego fell down beside him. The blankets where Milagra had lain were still warm. Gradually, the distinctive maritime odor of the Wives dissipated.

After a longish while, Zohar finished sobbing. He and Diego helped each other stand. Spotting Milagra's purse, Diego grabbed it, and they made their way outside.

Now it was twilight. By the time they attained Broadway, streetlights were prinking the night.

Moving in no particular direction, the two men exchanged no words for a dozen Blocks. Then Zohar spoke.

“There is nothing left for me in this sad, lonely, heartless Borough, Diego. I'm leaving.” He wearily accepted the purse from Diego, emptied it of cash—which he stuffed carelessly into one pocket—then dropped this relic of Milagra into the gutter.

“When? Where will you go?”

“As far away as I can. Uptown, and beyond.”

4.

Worlds for the Asking

Saying goodbye to Gaddis Patchen a few days prior to the *Yann's* departure provided both expected and unexpected frissons.

As always, Diego found himself killing a minute in Evenson's Variety. He ordered a bottle of celery pop from the perpetually squelched wifely shopkeeper Esmin, and had a go at the latest punchboard with its sports theme involving the Gritsavage Stokers. Surprisingly, Diego actually won a few scintilla, which Prosper Evenson grudgingly paid over. Whistling happily at this good omen, Diego left the store.

Late September, and the leaves of the familiar tree before the stoop of his father's apartment were already crisping against the coming autumn, and seed pods littered the sidewalk. Diego wondered if he would see it bloom next year.

Inside his father's dim, dank lair, Diego announced his intentions. Surprisingly, his father did not selfishly object or contrarily dismiss the trip to Palmerdale. Instead he gave a hearty endorsement, and asked to shake Diego's hand. Stunned, Diego grasped his father's dry withered hand and, a little embarrassed, averted his eyes. Much to his surprise, he saw a copy of *Mirror Worlds* splayed open upon a sidetable, as if Gaddis had been reading one of his son's stories.

“Tell me,” said Gaddis, “how's your friend Zohar Kush doing?”

Diego winced. “Not well. Not well at all.” Diego explained about the death of Milagra Eventyr and Zohar's mad, despairing flight from Gritsavage.

“Her overdose didn't involve those syrettes of mine you stole, did it?”

Diego felt himself redden, and had to swallow a mortifying bolus of guilty chagrin before he could answer. “No, sir. Those were used only as a life-saving measure. She had access to other, harsher drugs by the time of her death. I hope you understand—”

Gaddis Patchen waved a negligent hand. “Of course, of course. I'm not a total naif. I've been up and

down the City in my day, son. The next such emergency, though, why not ask for my help? All right?"

"All right."

When Diego said goodbye to his father, promising to visit him first thing upon his return, he felt that some ancient inner polarities had shifted in both of them.

* * * *

There was a champagne drought on the crisp, windy day of departure: the Trains and Ships stopping in the Borough had been bare of this luxury for weeks, and all stocks on hand had been consumed. Thus the cheering crowds ashore and the excited travelers on deck witnessed the Deputy Mayor, Archer Thornhill, manfully crack a bottle of apple juice across the prow of the *Yann*. Within minutes of this ceremony, Captain Vigo Dassault had them in mid-River and heading Downtown, sunlight sparkling on the silvery wavelets.

Diego deemed those first few days afloat idyllic. A vacation from cares and conventions, the cruise offered all the things Diego enjoyed: good food, hearty drink, stimulating conversation, and frolicsome private nights with the incomparable Volusia Bittern, cuddled in their tiny cabin like loving pigeons in a nest. His only duties: regularly composing a couple of thousands words of reportage, which were filed (via Subway couriers) each time the *Yann* put into a Slip at some foreign Borough, to take on coal and other supplies.

The continually varying yet generically similar landscape of the City rolled past their vessel like some infinite revolving cyclorama. Every hour or so, regular as clockwork, Captain Dassault announced the name of each Borough as they came abreast of it, over the onboard loudspeakers: "Pergola ... Kinderly ... Mousterian Point ... Shiloh ... Clovisford ... Mercosur ... Oudville ... Bridgewater ... Frumentious ... Candlemas ... Smithtown ... Gavrankapetanovichbourg..." Gradually, the drawn-out litany induced a hypnotic sense of estrangement. Their trip would span twenty-five hundred different names! Home seemed incredibly distant after just the first few dozen.

One break in the monotony of the landscape occurred around the 10,224,001th Block, but the change was not a pleasant one. Here the travelers witnessed the worst kind of Ghetto Block: fire had reduced an entire Borough to charred stubs: uninhabited, ominous, and monitory. The passengers could see straight through to the Wrong Side of the Tracks, the channel of vision between that realm and the Other Shore at their backs an unsettling anomaly. Captain Dassault intoned the name of the Borough solemnly—"Cresspandit"—and although the desolation soon fell behind them, the dreary spectacle remained on their souls some time longer.

The weather offered more healthy divertimento. Storms brewed in the cold impenetrable mists of the Other Shore, and emerged from time to time, driving laterally across the River before making landfall athwart the City. As the boiling, crackling turbulences passed over the *Yann*, the crew sprang into furious action and the passengers retreated belowdecks, where they indulged snugly in talk and refreshments.

Diego found his companions an interesting bunch. Their leader, Mayor Jobo Copperknob, proved himself more than the blustery, ego-driven gladhander he often appeared to be when on the public stage. Expressing a genuine selflessness in service to his Borough, the ex-athlete detailed the benefits he expected to obtain from this trip: new artworks, new products, new points of view. Well versed in CF, Copperknob also gave Diego plenty of the kind of discussion he liked best, on matters of the imagination. They argued the merits of various writers and stories for hours at a time.

Tolkan Sinsalida, the Mayor's Master Ingeniator, captured Diego's full attention also. Bright-eyed, short and thin, his bald pate rimmed by a comical grey fringe, Sinsalida possessed a mind equally adept at both practical and theoretical aspects of his field. He captivated Diego with long disquisitions concerning the stultified state of the City's technology, and prospects for change and advancement.

“Because we never built this artificial environment we find ourselves in, but only inherited it—or so all records seem to indicate—we are in the position of children given a radio receiver for investigation, then asked to recreate it out of a jumble of loose, unlabeled parts. The theory behind so much of the City is missing. We don't have the tools to make the tools to make the tools we need!”

Diego felt his mind enlarging after each lecture from Sinsalida, and he already anticipated applying the insights thus garnered to his fiction when he returned home.

Mason Gingerpane, the star photographer for the *Scimitar*, led the party in simple yet amusing games, most of which revolved around cards, singing and alcohol consumption. Grizzled and strife-bitten, worn hard by capturing the shocked faces of the witnesses to a thousand murders and suicides, Gingerpane still managed to affirm life's essential pleasures.

Euple Babayan scared Diego. A sexless, stony philosophy professor at Gritsavage College, she seemed utterly emotionless, a cool reasoning machine unruffled by any exterior circumstances. And the things she could contemplate caused even Diego's professional brain to whirl.

“Do you believe in Block Zero, Patchen?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Gritsavage numbers its blocks in the ten million range, counting from some hypothetical point of origin. We are planning to traverse approximately two percent of those Blocks, to reach Palmerdale. But what if we kept on going? Is there a Block Zero? Or is our numerology just a facade? And if Block Zero exists, what would one see from that ultimate border?”

Diego found both his mind and his tongue tied. He made an excuse and left, and thereafter avoided Babayan as best he could.

Even the oleaginous Cagney Passwater, despite his slimy flirtations directed at a winsomely dismissive Volusia, managed to amuse Diego with his huge stock of dirty jokes.

These and a score of other compatriots, all bright exemplars of their fields, made the time pass swiftly.

Most welcome of all opportunities, however, was the chance to hang with Rumbold Prague.

The imperturbably suave musician spent much time in his private cabin, and Diego suspected him of nodding off for long stretches in heroin's embrace. But there were plenty of women onboard too who entered Prague's cabin to divert him. But when he did emerge to consort with the others, he was a magnetic locus of charm. Not overly demonstrative or chatty, Prague nonetheless took a vital part in many discussions. And finally Diego was able to beard him one-to-one and discuss some of the ramifications of artistic style, those troubling issues raised by his irritating editor Winslow Compounce.

Prague listened to Diego's worries patiently, then tipped his head forward so as to expose twin crescents of bloodshot eyeball over the top of his sunglasses. In his cultured growl, he said simply, “If it's in you, cousin, it's got to come out. And how it comes out is style. But style rises from everything you've ever

seen or done or thought. You couldn't escape or destroy your style if you tried. Best you can consciously do is polish some of the rough edges a bit. Refine your chops, cousin.”

Diego felt an immense load he had been unwittingly carrying evaporate off his shoulders. Listening that night to Prague practice alone on deck (his uninvited audience congregated in the darkness at a respectful distance from the trumpet-player, giving him his solitude while managing not to miss a single sweetly bent note launched into the moist air), Diego found this wordless midnight reiteration of Prague's earlier theory even more illuminating than his speech.

The only exception to this easy congeniality was Mayor Moacyr Quine and his small party. The four or five residents of Palmerdale, dressed in their strange attire, chose not to associate with the Gritsavagers. They took their meals alone. They spoke politely in their queer accents and odd vernacular when addressed but never initiated conversation. And they certainly played no poker, charades or Twenty Questions.

Questioned about this standoffishness, Jobo Copperknob just shrugged. “They do things differently in Palmerdale. Different customs, different attitudes, different priorities. But believe me, my discussions with Quine have convinced me they are eager to treat with us. And after all, what would be the point of going all this way just to visit folks identical to us?”

By mid-October the level of excitement onboard the *Yann* began to rise. Palmerdale lay just a few thousand Blocks away. Soon they would be ashore in a land unlike any they had ever set foot in before.

The night before their slated arrival, Rumbold Prague's improvised runs of gemmed, deracinated notes, squeezed from his blood-red trumpet and wafting across the alien air, communicated to them all their undeniable uprootedness, a bittersweet sensation both chilling and thrilling.

Dreaming in their narrow bunk, Volusia clutched a musing Diego so tightly he felt ready to burst, yet protected by her love.

* * * *

The first week in Palmerdale went swimmingly. Right from their disembarkation one wine-rich October morning, when a large crowd of jubilant citizens and officials greeted them at the Palmerdale-35 Slip with music and shouts of acclaim, the visitors were feted almost nonstop, no luxury spared, their every word regarded as intrinsically interesting.

Conducted to a three-star hotel, *The Pavo Arms*, the party of Gritsavagers were allowed a brief rest before that night's reception. Volusia and Diego flopped down eagerly on their cushy mattress, laughing at the improbability of their being here, so far from home.

“A firefighter and a hack! We've really fooled the whole world!”

“Speak for yourself, Dee. My natural talents are just now getting their proper respect.”

Glad to be away from their companions for a while—the close quarters of the *Yann* had begun to lose their charm toward the end—they indulged in a long hot connubial shower, then ordered a big lunch from room service. Having fallen asleep afterwards, they were waked by a call from the operator around five PM, reminding them of their obligations that evening. They dressed formally, and met the rest of their party in the lobby. Diego thought Volusia's chiffon frock entrancing—as did Passwater, to judge by his leers. Conducted to an oddly assorted fleet of waiting vehicles, they motored Uptown to the Mayoral mansion.

Once inside the big crowded noisy ballroom, Diego was swept by an immense yet twisted *deja vu*. The scene mimicked so vividly, yet with so many prickly skewings, the affair back home when he had been nominated for this very trip that Diego felt his consciousness split in two. Or rather, he experienced a sensation as if his memories had been warped, the present reaching backward to tamper with the past.

For most things in Palmerdale differed, even if only subtly, from their counterparts in Gritsavage. Novel architectural decorations made interiors and exteriors uncannily *off*. The Borough's script, seen on signage, employed several unintelligible characters. Weird fashions added another layer of dissonance. But most strikingly, the speech of the Palmerdale people jarred on Diego's brain. The minimal conversations he had so far shared with the natives would flow smoothly until, about every five or ten words, a rock of foreign usage would obtrude. Sometimes these barriers could be contextually navigated around. Other times they formed a barricade of incomprehension.

And now, when the Mayor of Palmerdale stood to make his speech, this issue could no longer be minimized.

Diego hardly understood half of what was being said.

“Quints and quirkers, I'm fair gozzled here tonight to stand before so many fine barmpots and extend to our new flarty petermans a bowsie come-up. I foresee a long and scrotty jaw-jaw between our two jeezly Boroughs, bringing with it increased trade, stimulating new noddy noshes and oozlum cleversticks—”

Diego strained for a while to follow the speech, but eventually gave up, bobbing his head and smiling in what he hoped was a cross-cultural gesture of gratitude and friendship, and not merely an imitation of a happy idiot. The rest of his compatriots had adopted the same tactic, except for Euple Babayan, who was taking notes on her linen napkin.

Diego spent the rest of Moacyr Quine's oration working out a new story in his head, about a character who woke one morning to discover he couldn't understand the speech of his peers.

The following days constituted a ceaseless whirlwind of activity. En masse and separately, the Gritsavagers met with their doppelgangers among the Palmerdale folk. Diego found that his own brand of writing enjoyed a hearty following a quarter-million Blocks from home. He confabbed with dozens of Cosmogonic Fictioneers, picking up intriguing insights, and hopefully dispensing some as well. And the more conversations he had, the more the lingo of the Palmerdale citizens clarified.

Volusia was elated at her own dealings with the Palmerdale firefighters. “Dee, you won't believe it! They use this beautiful swivel coupling that prevents kinks in the hoses!”

This kind of specialist's enthusiasm seemed the rule among the others as well. And gauged by such collaborations as Prague's inspired jamming with a quartet of Palmerdale musicians, odd rhythms dominant, the cultural embassy was ripening into a sweet and juicy fruit.

But although pleasantly stimulating, these meetings took their toll on Diego's energy and appetite for discussion. So when Jobo Copperknob approached him one night with a whispered proposal involving a brief respite from their obligations, Diego did not hesitate to accept, sparing Volusia only a guilty thought or two.

* * * *

Walking down glow-lamped Broadway in the middle of a pack of his jubilant fellow male Gritsavagers, Diego felt queasily excited. He worried about what Volusia would say if she should ever uncover the truth about this evening's expedition. (The cover story had involved visiting a steambath forbidden to women.) Perhaps he could still slip away....

But then the big, basketball-palming hand of Jobo Copperknob descended on Diego's shoulder, linking him inextricably to the revelers.

“Some strange tail will do us all good, hey, Patchen! Not to dismiss your particular woman, for she's surely beautiful and amorous enough, but even perfection palls after a time.”

Mason Gingerpane said, “Not all of us were lucky enough to have our girlfriends along with us. I was getting so horny I even thought of approaching Babayan. She was the only woman Prague didn't appropriate.”

The hidden-eyed musician grunted and replied, “Ladies love a man with lip control.”

Cagney Passwater ran a hand back over his oiled hair and said, “That reminds me of a joke. Once this horny female ingeniator found herself alone with her mankiller wrench—”

“Please,” Sinsalida said laughingly, “no gratuitous slurs on my profession!”

The dozen or so randy venturers laughed heartily. Banter filled the air for the next few Blocks, the Palmerdale pedestrians regarding the boisterous party of strangers with curiosity but no animosity.

“Ho!” cried Copperknob. “Here's the address I was given. I'll lead the assault!”

Taking the stoop's steps three at a time, Copperknob gained the porch and began pulling the bell. Curtains tweaked aside, and then the door opened.

The buxom woman who greeted them smilingly from beneath frosted bangs was plainly the madame. She resembled, Diego thought, a leggy chorus line dancer retired to become a gourmet chef, with the attendant extra avoirdupois.

“Ah, our kaggish visitors! Welcome, bidders, welcome to the best vadgehouse in Palmerdale! Enter now, and we'll drain your goolies right smart!”

Copperknob and the others piled in.

Diego's heart began to race at the scene that greeted them.

A large parlor, decorated with crimson flocked wallpaper, hosted a score of whores, all gorgeous by gaslight, all skimpily clad. A piano player languorously tickled the keys of an upright. (Choosing art over flesh for the moment, Prague sidled over and began to talk shop with the wry-faced fellow.) Before Diego could quite recover his composure, Copperknob had scooped up two women, fallen onto a couch with his lap full of warm girls, and begun to call for drinks.

Diego found himself prey to a small blonde woman, a drink pressed into his grip. He stuttered his way through a conversation he could barely interpret, given the woman's even broader accent and vocabulary.

“Are you—are you from Palmerdale?”

“Naw, this shufty bint's Ansatz dropped.”

By the time Diego finished his drink, the room's archaic lighting had begun to coat every surface with a golden lambency. He and the petite blonde were kissing when a scream erupted.

Diego jumped to his feet. Copperknob's two whores were clawing at the man's face, forcing him to release them from a friendly embrace. The Mayor's shirt had been partially unbuttoned, revealing a big polychromatic scale resting on his chest. His bloody face wore a look of utter bewilderment.

“Girls, girls, what's the trouble?”

“Scaler! Scaler! He's a scaler!”

The inexplicable accusation was picked up to resound through the whorehouse. From all corners of the establishment patrons and prostitutes ran to the parlor, shouting curses and orders.

Before Diego or his mates could intervene, two burly half-naked men had pinioned the Mayor. The rest of the Gritsavagers faced similar restraints, unable to aid their companion.

Copperknob struggled, his tattered visage hurt and uncomprehending. “Friends, friends, what offense have I given? Just explain, and I'll—”

The Mayor's baffled complaint was cut short when a wild-eyed, curly-topped whore drove a daggerlike letter opener to the hilt into Copperknob's chest.

Blood spumed. Copperknob exhaled a guttural croak and crumpled to the floor.

Omnipresent outsiders heeded this unspoken mortal summons to duty. Brick-skinned Pompatics sieved through the walls instantly: a brace of Yardbulls, their crepey wings a shade redder than their slab-muscled human torsos. The animal-headed death wardens filled the room with their smell: if a hot slate sidewalk came alive and exuded a sour sweat, it might match the odor of the Bulls.

His mind frozen, Diego could only helplessly recall the sweeter smell of the Fisherwives when they had come for Milagra.

Enfolding the Mayor's corpse as tenderly as a mother cushions her baby, the Yardbulls cupped huge gouts of air beneath their wings and angled upward with the transmogrified dead man through the wall.

The arrival and departure of the Pompatics had the effect of cooling the fevered bloodlust among the Palmerdale folk. But Diego and his mates were far from being forgotten. Held roughly by all the customers and their women, the Gritsavagers left the house only in handcuffs and a police wagon.

On his way to jail, Diego supposed that Volusia would forgive him someday.

But would he ever forgive himself?

Diego had sworn he recognized Copperknob's scale as one memorable specimen he himself had plucked from its rightful terrain.

* * * *

The authorities treated the Gritsavagers as if they were infected with some communicable disease: the entire group, men and women alike, was isolated in a giant holding pen at Precinct Palmerdale-40. The conditions—tiered berths, single exposed toilet and sink, lights alive round the clock—were irksome, but not cruel. Still, after the first week of captivity everyone began to chafe.

As ranking members of the cultural expedition, Cagney Passwater and Captain Vigo Dassault were nominated to represent the offenders. But actually there was little enough for them to do. No interrogations, no accusations, no hearings or trial followed the blowup at the whorehouse. Plainly, their “crime” was undeniable, self-explanatory and inexpiable.

Only their condign punishment remained to be disclosed.

Not every Gritsavager wore scales. But those who did had had their good-luck tokens ripped brutally from around their necks.

Naturally, the talk among the prisoners revolved fruitlessly around the whole mess. Various theories were offered to explain their hosts’ fanatical reverence for the scales of the Citybeast. The Gritsavagers found it hard to wrap their minds around such “worship.” In the end, they could only endorse a judgment passed by Euple Babayan:

“These neighbors of ours are undeniably, unfathomably provincial. But so are we, as evidenced by our unthinking offense. The psychic landscape of the City is not only bigger than we imagined, it is bigger than we can imagine.”

Diego wanted to contest this sentiment, as a matter of professional honor, but in the end had to acknowledge his own lack of prescience in the matter.

Tedious days trickled away like water down a sewer drain. Two weeks, three weeks—Tempers flared, with some prisoners becoming morose, others aggressive. Makeshift barriers of blankets were rigged, to afford a semblance of privacy and intimacy. Diego worried about Volusia: her nature demanded a large freedom, and their captivity seemed to drain her more so than most.

In the fifth week the prisoners were told they could go free. The purveyor of this information proved to be Mayor Moacyr Quine himself. Standing beyond the bars that caged them, Quine regarded the eager faces of the Gritsavagers as if he were confronting a box full of trapped cannibalistic rats.

“Your Deputy Mayor has responded to our demands for compensation for your crimes. The money and a formal written apology arrived today via Subway. You are now depeached and firpfooted. You will proceed straight to the Slip, board your vessel, and never return.”

“What of our possessions?” demanded Passwater.

“They have all been burnt, during the rites of appeasement.”

Mason Gingerpane slumped, moaning something about his negatives. Rumbold Prague winced as if gut-punched, and Diego pictured the red trumpet licked by flames. But there was simply no recourse against this effrontery.

The *Days on the Yann* pulled away from Palmerdale and cautiously did not put into shore again until the next day, a score of Boroughs distant. There they appealed to the inter-Borough charitable organization, Traveler’s Aid, which donated some spare clothes and provisions for their return, as well as chits good

for more such in other Boroughs.

Rumbold Prague reboarded triumphantly clutching a banged-up trumpet discovered amongst the TA donations. That night he played a luminous dirge for Copperknob, somehow summoning up the man's spirit in cascades of melancholy notes large as the Mayor himself.

* * * *

Bundled against the early December chill in his old patch-pocketed wool jacket, Diego stood at the forward brass rail of the *Days on the Yann*, watching his home Borough draw closer across the darkling waters, slant-shadowed by sinking Downtown Daysun, Seasonsun long gone beyond daily viewing to warm other districts of the City, leaving these familiar Broadway-bisected buildings that Diego called home ranked like chess pieces before the battle.

Standing beside Diego, Volusia had swathed herself in a ship's blanket as extra comfort against the season's rigors. Since their final harrowing days in Palmerdale, she had been moody and susceptible to moments when she found herself unable to get warm. Diego could hardly fault her personal reaction to the tragedy. He himself remained unsettled and adrift in the wake of the sad climax to their "cultural embassy."

"I'll be so glad to step ashore in lovely, lovely Gritsavage," Volusia said. "I don't care if I never go traveling again."

"Me too. Me neither."

"A shame, really, that our high hopes upon setting out have come to this."

"I just count us lucky to be alive."

* * * *

In front of a shuttered Gimlett's Produce nigh onto midnight, Diego clutched Volusia's hand. The sights and sounds and smells of Gritsavage awoke in him a fierce nostalgia, a heart-stopping thankfulness. His spirits lifted, and already he could begin to imagine the repugnant residue of the recent nightmare evaporating off his soul.

"Diego, I don't want to be alone tonight."

"No, of course not. We'll stay here at my place. Then, in the morning, we'll visit my father."

"Fine. Let's go up."

The apartment smelled stale, and Diego threw open a window. He bumped up the thermostat's controls to convince the radiators to perform. But after half an hour the iron ribcages remained as cold as ever. Fuming, Diego descended to his landlord's apartment to bang on the door. But Rexall Glyptis did not show his face, and Diego retreated in defeat.

"Let's go to your apartment, Vol. This hovel's like an icebox. I'm moving out of this dump tomorrow."

"No, I'm too beat. Toss on another blanket or two, and we'll be fine."

Diego followed her suggestion, and they slipped under the pile of bedclothes. Before they even sensed oblivion's approach, sleep had conquered them.

Around three AM, though, Diego awoke with a start.

Someone was in the room with them, whispering.

“Dee, Dee, can you hear me?”

Tentatively, Diego whispered back. “Who's there? What do you want?”

“Oh but no, this is stupendous! I found you at last, after trying so many times before! Dee, it's I, Zohar!”

Volusia snored on, unrousable. Diego got up and approached his radio. The set evidenced no power, its dial unlit, but nonetheless the voice of Zohar Kush emerged from it.

“I can't talk long, Dee. The traffic's heavy tonight. So just listen. I'm tens of millions of Blocks Uptown now. What a glorious expedition! It's so wonderful! I found the train with my name on it, you know, from all those years ago. And the beer! The beer makes Rude Bravo taste like piss! I'm happy now, Dee. And I can confirm that our City is more awesome than we ever believed. Have faith, my friend. Everything works out for the best.”

“Zoh, Zoh, tell me more!”

But the miraculous radio did not respond, and Diego could only stumble back to bed.

The morning dawned sparkingly. Diego's eyes opened around nine, and he slid out of bed without waking Volusia.

Last night, that strange experience—Just a dream? An instance of sleepwalking? A neurotic episode of wishful thinking and self-hypnosis?

Whatever had happened, Diego knew only that the impossible communication with his departed friend had left him feeling contented, free of angst.

The writer commenced to rummage around his apartment. Over two month's worth of mail had been shoveled onto a tabletop: Glyptis must have done that much for his tenant. Diego sifted through the upper layers, before coming upon a padded envelope bearing a return label from Pinney Publishing.

Seams and seals split, disgorging a copy of *Worlds for the Asking* .

The hefty book's dustjacket merely featured one of Gropius Catternach's finest paintings. A dozen complimentary blurbs heralded the arrival of some stranger named Diego Patchen as the newest star in the firmament of Cosmogonic Fiction.

Tucked inside the book on a piece of *Mirror Worlds* stationery was a note from Winslow Compounce: *Think you can rest on your laurels, Patchen? Far from it! Get busy!*

Diego's huge smile as he roused Volusia provoked a matching one from her. Last night's sleep in a familiar bed appeared to have gone a long way toward restoring her own spirits. She shrieked at the sight of the book, snatched it from him and clasped it to her breasts.

“You young genius, you! Give your biggest fan a sweet tumble!”

Some time later, on their way for breakfast at Kerner's Lunchroom, Diego holding his book in the hand that did not pair Volusia's, they passed Snarky Chuff on duty at his stand.

“I've got a stack of books from my customers ready for autographing, Diego!”

“Later, Snarky, I have to visit my father first and show him this copy!”

Volusia halted before the December-bare tree sentinelling Gaddis Patchen's building.

“Look at those fat buds, Dee! Plenty of flowers by spring!”

In the hallway, some feet away from the door to Diego's childhood apartment, they heard a coarse wailed shout and a crash, as if someone had been direly stricken and fallen to the floor.

Diego fumbled with his key in the door, until Volusia rammed the panels with her shoulder and cracked the lock from the rotten wood.

Gaddis Patchen's toppled throne was empty. Diego rushed to the open window. Of course, as always, Pompatics ranged everywhere across the sky, some burdened, some not emblems of all that lay beyond human ken.

And the whole apartment smelled only of brine.

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