

Flight Risk

by Marc Laidlaw

They brought Foster to the boy by a route of back alleys and parking garages, shifting him from car to car several times, until eventually, although he'd thought he knew the city very well, he found himself uncertain of his whereabouts. They were near the airport, he knew that much. Condemned buildings, empty shops, and the rumbling pall of jet trails over everything. With a massive extension of the runways planned, this part of the city had known it was doomed; the exodus occurred before delays set in. A perfect place to hide the boy without seeming to hide him.

The final car, a black sedan with dented doors and fenders thinned by rust, drew to a stop at the rear of a building that had too many windows to be a warehouse, too few to be a residence. The man riding shotgun stepped out and opened the door. Foster slid from his seat in back, clutching his worn black bag to his gut. Along the alley, tips of garbage poked through humps of snow. There was just enough warmth in the air to carry a threat of the sourness and rot waiting beneath the ice. A black wrought-iron gate swung open in the rear of the building, and a third man, large and heavy browed, appeared there, beckoning. Foster recognized features of gigantism, but felt no thrill at the fact that he was seeing his first giant.

As Foster passed inside, the door clanged shut, cutting the rumble of a jet engine to something felt rather than heard. Foster saw a dim hall with access to a slightly brighter lobby just ahead. The giant held back the accorded bars of an elevator cage. Foster stepped in and waited for the giant to crowd in beside him.

"I'll meet you up there," the giant said, his voice thick with menace. "Don't get off until I let you out."

"No," said Foster. "Of course not."

The giant pressed a button and retreated, letting the doors clang shut. The elevator jerked and began a scraping ascent.

If the illuminated numbers above the door were to be believed, the elevator was skipping floors. More likely the lights were burned out. When the car finally ground to a halt, Foster knew only that he was somewhere above the seventh floor. He waited what seemed a full minute before he heard clanging, and then the giant appeared, hauling open the door and peering in at him. Out of breath and sweating profusely, he made scooping motions with his hands.

"Yes, yes," Foster said, following him out and down the hall.

The giant stopped at a door with 909 painted on a frosted glass pane. He dug into his pocket until he found a ring with two keys on it. In the giant's hand they looked like keys to a child's diary or a toy padlock. He unlocked the door and pushed it open, making it clear to Foster that he should go in first.

Foster heard a hum of voices mixed with the rumble of another jet passing above. They stepped into what had been the waiting room of an office, more recently being used as a residence. The domestic touches were few: a small refrigerator, a microwave oven, a card table and several folding chairs. An old

office desk butted up against a sofa bed. Pizza boxes, cereal cartons, dozens of paper coffee cups. A television with poor reception, volume almost inaudible—the source of the muted voices, probably.

There was another door on the far side of the room, frosted glass pane in its upper half. It was ajar, and through the gap he saw a mattress laid flat on the floor. On it lay small thin legs in parachute pants, bony feet in frayed socks.

The giant saw him looking, gave a shrug in that direction. "Go ahead. Look him over."

The boy glanced up as Foster entered, wary and unsurprised, as if he had already seen many strangers come and go, Foster just another. A movement in the corner startled Foster. A second man stood up, tall and thin, so pale his face might have been a streak of light cast by headlights, sliding along the wall.

"Thank Christ," the man said. "I can get the hell out of here."

"He's not your replacement, Gaunt," said the giant, coming in behind Foster. "This is the doctor."

"Doctor? So when do I get a break?"

"When this is all over."

"When—" Gaunt cut himself short, glaring at Foster. "What does he know?"

"I don't know or care about your business," Foster said. "I am here for the boy."

The pale man laughed. "You're not the only one. Wish the others were as prompt, though."

"Shut up," said the giant. "You need to learn patience."

"That's the doctor's department. Go ahead with him, Doc. I think he needs a good worming myself. Where he comes from, they've got all kinds of crud. Little brat doesn't know how good he's got it here. No appreciation. All the toys we bought him, he just sits there."

"Please," Foster said.

"All right. I'm going out for some swill. Since the doctor's here. If that's okay with you."

"Be quick," the giant said.

The two men stepped out into the other room, leaving Foster and the boy all the privacy they were likely to have. The lock had been removed from the inner door. Foster knelt down next to the mattress.

The boy watched him carefully.

"I am a doctor," Foster said. "Do you know that word? Do you speak English?"

The boy just stared. His hair was as much gray as brown, like the fur of a mangy wolf Foster had seen in the zoo. His eyes were almost as feral, and far more aware of being caged. Foster tried to smile, but felt it might be misinterpreted. A smile could just as easily have foreshadowed cruelties in the boy's recent past.

"Do ... do you know if he's had any inoculations?" he called back into the other room.

"What?" The giant's shadow swam up beyond the frosted glass. "You mean, like, polio shots?"

"The usual vaccines. Measles, mumps, rubella, tetanus. Kid stuff."

"They found him in an orphanage."

"There must have been medical staff."

"The place was a hundred years old. Rotting wood. A lot of the kids were sick from the same thing, but it was nothing you could catch. That plant in Belarus or wherever ... the one where they had the leak ..."

"Hell," Foster said, leaning closer to the boy. "If that's it, if he's that sick—"

"No one's expecting any miracles out of you. We just want to make sure he's strong enough to make it until we've unloaded him. So you check him out."

"If he'll let me."

"He won't give you any trouble. Never has."

Foster reached for the boy's wrist, took his pulse. From his bag he took the stethoscope and listened to the boy's chest through a thin sweater. The boy's breath was warm and smelled of sugar and milk and something else, a smell remembered from youth, working on old radios and television sets. It was like the smell of electrical discharge, yet not quite ozone. And it was stronger, closer to the boy. He leaned in, nostrils flaring, and the boy reared back abruptly.

"Sorry," Foster said. "Didn't mean to—"

"Well?" The giant had come up quietly behind him.

"He's well enough. But he could use some fresh air, some exercise. It's not healthy for a child to be shut up in a place like this."

"It's out of the question. He has toys, if he'd play with them."

Foster hadn't noticed the box full of jumbled plastic pieces pushed into one corner of the room. Decks of cards, sponge-rubber balls. No cars or planes or anything that would make noise. Nothing such a boy would be likely to have any interest in playing with.

Foster rose and walked to the window for a look at the icy day. He poked a few fingers through the dusty blinds. "Air," he whispered.

The window ledge was brick, crusted with grime, mortar that had welled up like grey dough. Pigeons milled somewhere nearby; he could hear them cooing.

There was a very small playground across the street, between old apartment buildings, a few bare trees stretching up from muddy snow around climbing equipment the color of rust. Even looking at the iron bars put the tang of cold metal in his mouth.

"Down there," he said. "There's a playground. It's totally deserted."

"How do you think it would look, this boy, with the two of us?"

"I'll take him myself. There's nothing suspicious in that. He's what ... not even school age? No one will question."

It was impossible to tell what the giant was thinking. His face gave no clue whether he was considering the situation, or had closed himself off to any possibility of compromise.

"I'll take care of him," Foster said. "You can watch from up here. And the other, your friend ..."

"... eh ..."

"Gaunt. He can watch from somewhere closer. In case you're afraid the boy's a flight risk."

The giant made a dismissive gesture. "He has nowhere to run."

Foster glanced over at the boy, who watched them intently, but seemed unable to decode their conversation.

"He speaks no English?"

"None. That's another problem. How will you make him obey you?"

"How do you?"

The giant didn't answer. There was no need. He was an irresistible force, albeit not as malevolent as he seemed. Because now he shrugged and opened his hands, palms upward.

"All right. But I'll stay with you."

"Fine."

"We'll be his uncles. If anyone asks."

"Yes, good," Foster said. "You have some warm clothes for him?"

The giant slipped away and returned with a heavy coat, dark and thick, brand new. The boy was worth that much investment, to someone.

"Don't want him catching cold," the giant said with a shrug, and thrust it at the boy. "Come on," he said. "We're going out. The doctor thinks you need to play."

"He's a child," Foster repeated. "Of course he needs to play."

In the deserted hall, they kept the boy between them. His small face was hidden in the folds of the thick hood. Foster started toward the elevator, but the giant shook his head, wagged a finger. "Not that way."

"You think I might run?"

"With this boy, I take no chances."

The stairwell was not much larger than the elevator car. The boy went first, down to a lobby of cracked marble that reeked of stale cigarette smoke. The giant opened the front door and looked both ways, then waved them through. There were few cars in sight. He motioned at the empty playground. "Go ahead. I'll wait in here. I'd rather not be seen if I can help it."

"Come whenever you like," said Foster. "It will do him good, I'm sure of it."

"Go."

Foster put his hand out, and was both surprised and gratified when the boy took it without hesitation. They needn't run, there was no traffic, but Foster felt like running all the same. On the far sidewalk, he stopped with a hand on the low gate that opened into the park. He grinned down at the boy and was rewarded with a small smile. A hint of color was coming back to his cheeks. Foster truly saw his eyes for

the first time, and they were blue. Blue as the sky that hid somewhere beyond clouds gray as the underside of a trash can lid.

"Go," Foster said, swinging open the gate. "Go play. You know play? You know fun?"

He clapped his hands and gestured at the swings, a roundabout, a teeter-totter. No wonder no one played here. The playground was an anachronism, full of archaic devices considered unacceptably dangerous by insurance brokers. The toys of his childhood, and that of his own children. Fearful mothers and city councilmen had conspired to tear these places down.

The boy looked at him in disbelief, like a wild creature that has been caged and finds itself suddenly free. He stood staring up at Foster, then looked back at the ground-floor façade of the office building. The giant had drawn back inside. The boy spun around and ran toward a towering slide of buckled metal, undoubtedly a dangerous, rickety, tetanus-bearing thing. It took Foster a moment to realize the sharp sound he'd heard as the boy took off was a laugh.

The boy hurtled down the slide, sweeping snow off as he went. From there, leaping across the puddle of slush at the bottom, he rushed toward the swing set and threw himself into a frayed rubber seat, the swing chains grating as he began to push and pull himself into widening arcs. On the highest arc, Foster feared for a moment that the boy was about to hurl himself off into the sky. His face and chest and legs, every part of him, strained upward, where the sun seemed to promise it would soon tear away the clouds. It was such a visceral certainty that he startled himself by taking a step toward the swing, as if to catch the boy.

Then down he came, slowing, slowing, slipping off. The boy rushed to the next amusement—the roundabout. He pushed it round and round and leapt on, then off, pushed it again and again until Foster grew dizzy from watching.

Methodically, the child extracted every bit of amusement from each toy. After a while, Foster looked for somewhere to sit. The snow had begun to melt and the benches were dripping. Mounds of brown sand revealed themselves through mounds of snow. He began to sweat inside his jacket and loosened several buttons. The monkey bars clanged with a hollow sound as the boy climbed to the top. Foster had to suppress an urge he had not felt in many years: the urge to call out a warning. As a father, he had developed the less instinctive response: let the boy be. This was the best Foster felt he could offer the orphan child: the freedom to reach to the sky, proclaiming himself master of this small height, at least for this moment. Let the boy have it. It was little enough.

Across the street, the pale man was just returning from his errand with two paper cups. At that moment, the sun burned a hole through the clouds and set the street gleaming. Foster watched the men talking to each other in the doorway of the building, the giant taking one of the cups, then gesturing across to the playground. Gaunt's confusion turned to anger. He came striding across the street, while the giant snarled something behind him.

Foster put up a hand as if to say there was nothing to be concerned about, but at that moment, he heard fluttering and felt a vast shadow spread over him from behind.

He turned in surprise and growing astonishment as the other men began to shout. Foster saw that the giant, as he came, had reached into his jacket and drawn a gun. But for Foster, that scarcely registered.

The electric smell which he'd whiffed earlier was a strong presence now, but that was the least of it. The boy still stood at the apex of the monkey bars with his hands outstretched, but now he was more clearly signaling, summoning something. Making a gesture of desperate pleading and abandon, as if he were clawing at the sky, as if he were pulling it down to him, as if it were a curtain he would tear into rags. It

was a child's gesture, grasping and selfish and uninhibited, completely unaware of its strength.

And in response, came birds. Pigeons. Muted greys and browns and patched white, spiraling from their roosts on the surrounding buildings. They circled and swept in, drawn to the boy.

As Foster stared, something hit him hard from behind. The giant shoved him aside. Gaunt leapt snarling at the bars, trying to clamber toward the gathering cloud of wings. The bars were icy and slick. Gaunt immediately lost his grip and went down hard, banging his jaw. With a grunt, he collapsed into slush.

The giant began waving his hands in the air, heedless of the gun.

"No!" Foster said. "Put that away!" And lower, "You want someone to see?"

As if anyone would notice a mere gun.

The boy was barely visible now at the center of the birds. How quickly they had gathered. He was lost in there, all but hidden. However, in glimpses Foster saw his face, peaceful and beaming, eyes closed, grinning. Then the wings closed in again.

"Get down from there!" the giant shouted, and he pointed the gun into the mass of wings. Foster had the delirious impression that the whole swarm was shifting ... pulling away from the bars ... impossible, but ...

"Please!" Foster said. "Let me—"

The gun went off. The sound was lost in another, louder sound that tore the atmosphere apart like a sonic boom, accompanied by a flash like that of lightning. The air seemed to crack and split, like a thin sheet of quartz shattering under pressure, firing sparks as it shattered.

Then the light failed and the sun was swallowed up in clouds again, and the sound was but an echo.

Whether it was the gunshot or the other shock that did it, the birds scattered, exploding from the scene as if flung in every direction. For a moment Foster saw the boy hanging in midair, several feet above the monkey bars. Then he fell. His knees struck the bars with a bang. He went through them like a ragdoll, striking his head once as he went. He hit the ground just as Gaunt was rising to his feet with a hand cradling his jaw.

The ozone smell mixed with the dusty miasma of feathers. Foster rushed for the boy, pushing himself through the bars of the cage, lifting him from the snow. He moaned in Foster's arms, beginning to shiver, soaking wet.

The giant put out his arms, and Foster carefully fed the boy to him through the bars. The gun was hidden again.

"He needs to get to a hospital," Foster said.

"No way!" said Gaunt.

They ran across the street, Foster struggling to keep up. "He might be concussed. It is extreme neglect not to—"

"Your fault, doctor," said the giant bitterly. "If anything happens to him ..."

"He needs immediate care—"

"No hospital."

The lobby door slammed shut behind them. This time the giant crowded into the little elevator with the boy, leaving Foster and Gaunt to climb the stairs. Because of me, Foster thought, not for the last time.

As they climbed, Gaunt stopped once to hold a rail and catch his breath. His teeth were chattering. Foster realized the other man was terrified. He struggled to regain control of himself, then grew rigid as he saw Foster staring at him.

"What are you looking at?"

"Nothing. I'm sorry."

"You should be."

It struck him again: *Because of me.*

.....

The boy had a broken leg, that was the only certainty. The giant made several calls, and supplies arrived soon after, then Foster set the leg himself. If there were other more serious injuries, hidden ones, he had to content himself with patching the ones he could see. He worried about the possibility of concussion, other complications, but there was nothing else he could do about them.

The mark on the boy's brow went from bluish black to yellow over several days, as the weather warmed and the snow receded and the streets began to stink. Foster spied the coming of spring from between the blinds, when he wasn't watching the boy. Gaunt and the giant took turns prowling the outer room. They shared the couch with Foster. They would not let him leave. At this point it was out of the question.

He was glad, in a way, because he would have worried to leave the boy in their care. The blue eyes watched him come and go as he pattered about the room and sorted through the contents of his black bag. The boy lay on the mattress, mostly unmoving, and said nothing, only watched him, or the window. The TV muttered at the edge of perception, but he showed no interest in that—unusual child. He kept gazing toward the sky, his attention growing always especially rapt when the pigeons began to stir somewhere above, and when the shadows of winged things went flickering across the blinds.

When Foster smelled the ozone whiff from time to time, he worried, remembering the cyclone of wings.

At one such moment, the giant came storming into the room, scouring the corners with his eyes, as if searching for some traitor or enemy in hiding. His nostrils flared. He strode to the window and drew up the blinds; and there, startling Foster, was something to feed their apprehension.

The crumbling brick ledge was lined with pigeons. Several dozen of them milled about, curiously mute, staring through the cracked and grimy glass as if looking for the boy. The giant let out a yell. He unlocked the window and pushed it up, shedding flakes of ancient paint. The birds swirled away from the screaming giant. Then he slammed the window down so hard the glass cracked, leaving it intact but looking like a puzzle made of shards.

The giant stamped out of the room, then out of the suite. Gaunt paced about in the other room, his pale face swimming back and forth across the rippled glass of the inner door.

Foster sank down on a corner of the mattress and leaned toward the boy, who had learned to trust him enough not to shy away.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I wish I could help you somehow. Do you know what they want with you? What use are you to them?"

The boy stared at him with eyes unblinking and undefeated. So young, Foster thought.

The giant returned less than an hour later, carrying shopping bags. He busied himself in the next room. Foster left the boy and wandered in to watch ominous preparations. The giant had a loaf of cheap white bread. He pinched out lumps of dough and rolled them into balls. The desktop was scattered with flour. The giant dropped a large box back into one of the bags. Not flour, he realized, for the box bore a skull and crossbones.

"What's that for?" he asked.

"I have to protect my investment," the giant said. "You don't know what trouble I'm in if anything happens to that boy."

"Yes, but I don't see—"

"No repeats of the other day. I can't allow it."

Filling his pockets with the dough balls, the giant opened the door to the boy's room. The boy looked on with blue eyes unblinking.

The giant returned to open the cracked window. It opened easily now. He carefully arranged the balls of dough along the ledge, emptying his pockets. He lowered the window gingerly, and then the blinds.

He turned and saw the boy watching him, and brushed his hands together, smiling.

"Nice birdies," the giant said.

By the next morning, the cooing above the casement had ceased. The dough balls were gone. In their place lay a solitary pigeon which must have died in the night and fallen from above. Crumpled and stiff, its glazed eye seemed to stare at Foster through the cracked pane. He stared back at the bird, feeling as if his own eye were equally crazed.

Behind him, a thud. An exhalation. The boy had risen, pulled himself from the bed. He limped up beside Foster, dragging his cast. When he saw the bird, the boy collapsed. Foster felt himself crumbling from within, but he found the strength to catch the boy. The boy had learned to cry soundlessly and without tears. Foster carried him back to the mattress, amazed by his self-control. In the other room, the giant had no clue what transpired in here. The rumble of jets masked whatever sounds they might have made.

"There, there," Foster said, keeping a hand on the boy's back as he shuddered with dry weeping. "It's all right."

The next day was warmer still. The suite began to grow uncomfortable, even suffocating. Foster asked the giant if they could open a window, although he knew the answer in advance. Gaunt and the giant were growing more impatient and nervous; their mood verged on paranoid. Foster gathered that some crucial deadline had come and gone; that someone they were counting on had failed to appear. There were numerous hushed, harsh phone conversations on their countless cell phones, but they were diligent about keeping him in the dark.

"Please," he said, pleading the boy's case, "just the one window, just an inch or so, to let some air in."

"No. Nothing. You saw what happened."

"Just a crack."

Gaunt shot up from his chair, kicking it backward, lunging at him. The giant held him back. Foster retreated.

Foster's only relief from the interior of the room, from the constant haunting of unanswerable questions in the boy's eyes, was to stand at the window and see what passed outside. But always the bird came to dominate his view; his eye incessantly returned to the increasingly active colony it had attracted. The first flies touched down on the dead eye, then darted toward the rawness of flesh inside the gaping beak, and finally lost all caution and began to explore the carcass thoroughly, inside and out. Sometimes he thought he could smell a faint putrid odor, only as much as would have drifted through the fractured pane. But the one time he started to unlock the window, to nudge the bird out of his view and dispel the flies, he found that the giant had appeared at his shoulder.

"If you even touch that lock, I'll break all your fingers."

Foster laced his fingers behind his back and watched the flies touch down on the pale grey ruff of feathers and tap across the glass, tasting everything.

"I want that bird there as a reminder," the giant said.

That night Gaunt and the giant spread an assortment of Chinese take-out containers across the desk and sat on the sofa griping. So weary of their vigil that they had begun to betray bits of it, and to discuss it openly, ignoring Foster.

"—have to do something. They're never coming."

"We lose the money and the boy, is that what you mean?" said the giant. "Throw it all away?"

"The boy's nothing to us except money. And if the money's not coming ..."

"You don't waste something like what he has."

"What does he have? What use is it?"

"That's not a question we have to answer. We just have to find someone who'll make the same deal."

"You're dreaming. It was hard enough to get this one in place."

"There's interest, believe me."

"There's also danger the longer we hold onto him ... if he gets desperate or ... or who knows what he'll do. Those birds, they were nothing. What if he pulls down something else?"

"Like what?"

"Like what. How about something heavier than birds? Something to make a crater where we're sitting."

"That's not his talent."

"How do you know? You're guessing. No one knows the limits exactly. It's just potential right now. In

Belarus, remember, the cluster of debris? Space junk ... all in a radius around the orphanage ..."

"That's ridiculous."

"But if it's not, if he gets upset enough—"

"He likes the doctor. He won't let anything ..."

The giant paused, looked over at the door to the boy's room, saw Foster standing there watching them. He shook his head and stuffed a forkful of noodles into his mouth.

"It's stupid to sit here and wait to be picked up. Admit it. The opportunity's gone. Something happened to them and they'll never—"

At that moment, one of their many cell phones rang. The giant found it among the scattered take-out containers. Foster watched his glum face shift almost imperceptibly. "Yes? Yes. All right, yes." Then he switched it off and put it back down and simply stared at Gaunt.

"You're kidding, right?"

The giant slowly shook his head.

"In the morning," he said.

Foster sank back into the inner room. The boy was asleep, whimpering softly down in the dark. Foster stepped lightly to the window and peered through the blinds as if some new solution might offer itself. No fire escape. Barely enough room on the ledge for the pigeon's flyblown carcass. Even if he dared to unlock it, there was no escape here. If he could, he would have opened the window, he would have raised the boy up, he would have stepped off into space and taken them both away from here.

But he could do nothing. Nothing but watch through the night. The street was rarely busy, except for a brief time in the morning when a flurry of cars passed through on their way to other destinations. The sun came up among TV aerials and satellite dishes and ancient water tanks. The last trace of snow had melted, and the clear sky promised warmth. The flies were already busy, buzzing and bumbling about beyond the glass, nearly as loud as the voices from the other room as the giant and Gaunt roused themselves. Gaunt, in a rare good mood, volunteered to venture out for coffee and rolls.

Foster watched him walk away from the front of the building, nine floors below, and head off on foot. The sun began to beat at the glass, but the boy slept on. An ominous rumble from somewhere above the building made him flinch, then he realized it was only a jet; a tracery of contrails hung in the sky, dissolving. He saw no planes, but he could hear them. It sounded like many of them. With an eye to the sky, Foster traced the web of broken window glass; it was a useless web that couldn't trap a single one of the flies on the far side of the glass. One of the vermin rose up from the flyblown corpse and lit upon the glass; clung there, separated from his fingertip by the thin pane. The thought of the filthy insect coming near the boy repulsed him, and he tapped the glass to frighten it away. Instead, there was a sharp crack, and a small shard tipped out and fell to the bricks with a sharp sound, shattering into bits of angular glitter. The sound of rumbling grew perceptibly louder, Foster's hearing rendered hypersensitive by fear. It didn't help to realize he'd opened the way for flies now; and that the giant might have heard the sound of breaking glass and would come to investigate, disturbing the sleeping boy.

His eye traveled past the ledge, caught by a black car cruising to a stop on the street directly below.

Foster turned away and looked at the boy, wondering if he should wake him.

To his surprise, he found the boy was awake and smiling at him.

"Run," Foster whispered. It made him sound ridiculous in his own ears. His only excuse was that he knew the boy could not understand him.

The car doors opened, and a small dark figure stepped out, and then another. Men in black suits. From up here, they were not much bigger than the flies that had begun to swarm around the bird in the warming light.

The men walked out of sight below the window ledge. He pushed his brow to the glass, but they were hidden. He turned toward the boy, biting his lips, never having felt more helpless in his life. But for some reason, meeting the boy's eyes, he felt suddenly released. It was as if he had done all he could do, and the boy knew it; and although it amounted to nothing, although he had failed completely, still it had been enough.

But there must be something more, Foster told himself. Even if it meant throwing himself in their path, making some extreme gesture no matter how futile.

He put a finger to his lips and gestured toward the other room. The boy nodded. It was the most conspiratorial they had ever been. Foster put his hand briefly on the boy's head, tousled his hair, then stepped into the other room. He made a great show of easing the door shut.

"No need for that," the giant said. "He'll have to wake up soon enough. This is his last day with us."

Foster pretended surprise. "Really? Well ... that's a relief. It's bound to be better for him, wherever he's going."

The giant looked at Foster as if he were impossibly naïve. "If you say so."

Foster glanced back at the door. He had thought the murmuring came from out here, but now he realized it must be coming from another floor completely. It was hard to remember they were not alone in the old office building. Hard to remember, at times, that they were not alone in the whole world.

Out in the hall, he heard the elevator creaking. The giant looked perplexed. He rose to his feet and started toward the boy's room, but Foster stepped deftly toward the hall and the giant had to veer to intercept him.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"I thought I heard someone at the door."

The giant moved between Foster and the hall door. He opened it and looked out. The approaching elevator sounded clear and clangorous. The giant straddled the threshold, as if suspecting that Foster was looking for a chance to slam the door and lock him out.

The elevator stopped. The doors took their time squealing open. Foster peered out past the giant as two men he had never seen stepped out of the lift and looked around in the dimness. The giant beckoned them over and stepped back into the suite, forcing Foster in first.

Someone was talking urgently now in some room nearby. He could almost make out the voices. Foster wondered if the sound was making the men apprehensive. They did not look like men who were ordinarily nervous about anything, but perhaps they knew a little about the boy—enough to fear him.

It occurred to Foster that he had never feared the boy, only feared for him.

"Where is he?" said one of the new men.

The giant said, "I'll get him."

"No," Foster said.

The strangers turned to glare at him. One said, "Who is this?"

"Nobody," said the giant.

"I'm the boy's doctor," Foster said. "He's sleeping. He hasn't been well. He had a blow to the head and he ... he needs rest. He needs special care."

Anger. "Is he serious?"

The giant shrugged. "He's grown attached."

They stared at Foster as if this were unfortunate and unnecessary. Foster had been about to plead his own case, to ask if they would let him come along to care for the boy, but he could see now the futility of such a request. He didn't mind making a fool of himself, but there was little point in wasting his energy. There must be something else he could do.

The murmuring, though still indistinct, had grown louder. Foster realized where the sound was coming from an instant before the others did. He saw the giant's eyes widen as he turned his massive head toward the inner door. The frosted glass was dark, darker than the room had ever been in daylight, even with the blinds shut.

The giant cast a malevolent look at Foster, as if he were behind this somehow, then he took a step toward the door. The two strangers looked on without a clue what they were witnessing.

At that moment, Foster heard banging in the hall and the outer door flew open. The strangers whirled with guns drawn out of nowhere as Gaunt hurled himself into the room, gasping and out of breath from rushing up the stairs.

"Stop him!" he croaked, not even seeing the guns. He lunged at the boy's door.

The giant beat him to it. Foster staggered back toward the hall. The giant hurled himself against the door, but although it could not be locked from within, it seemed to resist his heavy blows.

Gaunt fell in beside him, and the two men threw themselves at the door until the very frame began to crack. The frosted glass pane shattered and the door crashed open in the same instant, unbottling the darkness sealed within.

The room beyond was utterly black and thick and crawling and alive. It was filled with a million seething voices. The giant and Gaunt and the two strangers with their useless guns, all fell back from the demonic cloud with their mouths slowly moving, as if they were trying to mimic or interpret the sounds. But they were not words, not really. They were meaningless, incoherent yet full of expression.

"Get in there!" screamed Gaunt.

"You get in!" the giant cried.

Then Foster did a senseless thing. He turned on the strangers, about whom he knew nothing except that they were likely to be ruthless, and without a second thought he snatched the gun from the hands of the nearest. The man let out a shout, and they all turned to look at Foster. Three guns pointed at him. They

stared at him as if he were crazy, suicidal.

Foster turned toward the inner doorway. He could see the faintest glow from the far window. He fired into the mass, but it was like shooting into smoke. He was thrown backward, his shoulder wrenched by recoil, deafened by the gunshot, the weapon falling from his hand. Even through the shock of sound he could hear glass shatter, and it was the sound of release. From out of the horrible buzzing came a peal of high, pure laughter.

The smoke that wasn't smoke had already cleared by the time he regained his feet. It had thinned so much he could see the walls again, the blinds hanging limp and tattered, the window completely shattered from its frame, and the open sky beyond.

Foster ignored the fallen gun, ignored the guns still aimed at him, and walked alone toward the window.

He stared out into the morning.

Above the rooflines, still rising, still laughing, he caught sight of a dark coherent cloud that surged and gathered and regathered itself. And persisted.

Foster looked down at his hands, which rested on the ledge among strewn shards of glass. A fly spiraled down and landed on his knuckle. It took several steps, rubbed its forelegs together as if giving thanks, then kissed his skin quite tenderly. Foster raised his hand, meaning to lift it up until he could meet its eyes, wondering what he might find there—but the fly was only a fly after all, and too restless for such formalities. Casting itself onto the wind, it hurried to rejoin its legion.

Foster turned to face the other men, ready to accept their blame—whatever came.

Because of me, he thought. And was content.

The End