

The Great Caruso

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*A few years ago, there was a spate of novels from independent presses that focused on the future of cigarette smoking. They bore titles like *Smoke Easy* and *The Last Cigarette* and seemed to reflect widespread vilification of the tobacco industry.*

Now we're in 2005 and here we have a story with a different perspective on the future of cigarette smoking. Those of you who remember M. Shayne Bell's story "Anomalous Structures of My Dreams" from a couple of years ago might begin to wonder if there's a theme anthology in the offing—if there is, we'll leave it to anthologists Jack Dann and Gardner Dozois to come up with a book title that takes our breath away.

Norma gave up smoking when she found out she was pregnant with Lenny. Everybody congratulated her and said how important it was not to smoke when you were pregnant. It was bad for the baby. Norma understood and promised herself she'd start the day he was born. But, heck. He looked so small and wrinkly in the preemie ward of the Albuquerque Hospital and was trying so hard to just to breathe and stay alive, she decided she'd give him a couple of years. Get him past nursing and stuff. Once he was strong enough, she'd go back. Tomas didn't approve of smoke inhalation. Nothing that didn't go up the nose was a good idea. He was ecstatic that she stayed off tobacco. Or, he would have been if he hadn't been shot down the week before she found out she was pregnant. He was fronting for the Turban-Kings but had developed a deep affection for their brand of cocaine. Tomas had been pretty but Norma had always known he wouldn't last long.

With Tomas gone, Norma had to get a job. She sighed and hit the streets. She would have had to find one anyway. After six weeks of fruitless searching, Norma landed a job as a clerk for Frost Fabrications near the University.

She contented her lapsed habit by lingering in the cigarette fumes from the Indians selling turquoise brooches and rings at the corner of Old Town. She could often be found standing in front of the cantina down the street next to an old Mexican smoking a gloriously obnoxious cigar. With the occasional secondhand smoke from disgruntled office workers grabbing a quick one on the loading dock, Norma managed to keep herself on the low end of satisfied. Just a couple of years, she told herself. Then, she'd light up and everything would be fine.

But when Lenny turned five, a whole series of commercials about how secondhand smoke caused learning disabilities were broadcast. Norma was pretty sure that once she started back again she wouldn't be able to keep from smoking in the house. She grimly decided she could stick it out until Lenny got into the habit of studying.

Norma was fifty when Lenny turned ten: the danger years, said the magazines. When anybody could suddenly drop dead of a heart attack. Cigarettes caused heart attacks, didn't they? She didn't want Lenny to have to bury her, did she? Not a ten-year-old boy.

By the time Lenny was thirty and had been on the Albuquerque police force for a while, Norma figured she'd done enough. If she died, she died. She was seventy now. It was now Lenny's duty to bury her. He'd do it eventually one way or the other. Her first puff was everything she'd remembered: the burn down the throat, the tingling all the way to her fingers and toes, the quick, sharp rush up into her face and

behind her eyes. She felt brighter and happier than she'd been in years. It was like the first time she lit up, way back when she was thirteen and living in Portales. And, just like when she was thirteen, after a minute or two she turned green and threw up. Oh, well, she thought philosophically. You pay for your pleasures.

In no time at all she was back up to a couple of packs a day.

Lenny, of course, was appalled.

He came over to her house and tried to talk over the music. There was always music in Norma's house: blues, country, classical, rock. If she could sing it, she had it on. Not that Norma could sing. Her voice had been described as having all the subtlety and color of a downtown bus at rush hour. Norma didn't care.

First Lenny tried desperately to talk her out of it. "Come on, Ma," he pleaded. "It's been years. You're over seventy. Don't throw it away now." Then, he got belligerent and refused to let her come over to his house to see her grandkids. That lasted a week. They lived down the street in the same sort of four-room bungalow she did. If she couldn't go over there, they came over here. Once pleading and threats didn't work, he tried covert operations. He broke into her house after duty and threw away every pack of cigarettes he could find.

This last trick might have worked. Cigarettes were eleven dollars a pack now and she was still at the same job after thirty years. What she needed was a way to smoke cigarettes without having them in the house. Or, better, cigarettes cheap enough she could afford to lose a few packs a month as the cost of doing business.

The Internet, she discovered, holds the answer to all things.

Reginald Cigarettes, a tiny company based in the Sandwich Islands (which used to be Hawaii until they seceded) sold cigarettes by direct mail. This had many advantages. First, she gave them the address of a packing services company nearby—that way Lenny couldn't take them out of the mailbox before she could get to them. Second, they were cheaper since they were being sold from another country (no taxes!). Third, they were also artificial. When she was finally found out and cornered, she could use the site's propaganda about how much better they were than real cigarettes.

Not that Norma cared. She figured she could empty a few packs of Reginalds and stuff them with Marlboros.

But when the Reginalds came, she found she liked them. True, they didn't taste quite as good as Marlboros. But the tingle was better and, as had to happen eventually, when Lenny found out about them and she showed him the pack—

"See?" she cried shrilly. "See? They're better for me."

"Ma," protested Lenny. He looked at the pack. "They still got tobacco in them."

"But look at the numbers on the side. They're *way* better than Marlboros."

Lenny sighed. By that, Norma knew she had won.

She had her cigarettes. All was right with the world.

Five years later, she got up with her usual morning cough. She rolled out of bed and padded downstairs to put on the coffee. While she waited for it to perk, she put on the morning classics station. It was opera

week, which she loved, and they were working their way through some ancient recordings of Enrico Caruso—The Great Caruso, as her mother had said when she was a girl. Still coughing, Norma hacked around the house for a while. Well, she certainly *coughed* like the Great Caruso. While she waited for the really deep one that signaled the start of the day, she thought about renting that old film about him, the one starring Mario Lanza.

Something stuck in her throat. Something that wouldn't come out. Panicky, she went to the sink to get a drink of water, but the spasms in her chest nearly knocked her off her feet. It was all she could to hold on and stand upright. Whatever it was, it clawed its way up her throat and she spat it out into the sink, bloody and covered in mucous.

It was perhaps a quarter of an inch across and twice that in length. She reached down and picked it up. It was spongy and felt surprisingly firm. Norma rinsed it off.

She guessed this was it, then. Just like Lenny had always told her. Lung cancer. Not that she hadn't expected it eventually. Only not so soon. She sighed. You pay for your pleasures.

The radio dimmed a little and Norma reached over and turned it up, still looking at the bit of diseased flesh that had come from inside her.

It vibrated in her hand.

Curious, Norma put her ear to it. Faintly, but unmistakably, it was singing along with Caruso on the radio.

Doing a pretty good job, too.

The doctor had no explanation. They sat in his office as he went over the test results. Norma was dying for a smoke.

Hm. She thought to herself. That was pretty good. She giggled.

Dr. Peabody looked up at her and frowned so Norma stifled herself. This was clearly no laughing matter. She'd laugh later. When she had a cigarette.

"Mrs. Carstairs—"

"Miss."

"Beg pardon?"

"I've never married. Miss will do."

Dr. Peabody nodded. "The truth is I'm not sure what's in your ... lungs. Something's in there. Something's up your trachea and into your larynx. We'll have to run more tests. Do you smoke?"

"Sure do. Two packs a day of Reginalds."

"I see."

Norma could see the effort Dr. Peabody made not to look disgusted.

"Tests." She picked up her purse. "You might want this, then." Norma brought an envelope out of her purse and put it on his desk. It looked a little dry so Norma got up and wet a paper towel and moistened the little thing. Even with the water, it was still dead.

"This is...?"

She put it in his hand and shrugged. "I have no idea. But that's what I got inside me. Coughed it up yesterday. Thought it might help."

Dr. Peabody didn't answer. He was staring at the fleshy bit in his hand.

Dr. Peabody asked her to come back the following week. When she did, he wasn't alone. There were at least three other doctors there for moral support. The medical consensus was, apparently, that she had lung cancer of a rare if not unknown type. She should be admitted at once. In his office, Norma stared at the radiographs as if she were interested. Then she smiled at them sweetly and asked if she could go to the bathroom. They nodded, all together as if they were attached to the same string.

Outside the office, Norma walked down the hall and out through the parking garage. She went home and sat at her kitchen table, drinking a glass of wine and smoking one of her Reginalds.

Dr. Peabody called Lenny, of course. Before the afternoon was finished, Lenny was pounding on her door.

"What do you want, Lenny?" she asked from the other side.

"For Christ's sake, Mom. You *know* what I want. I want you to go to the doctor."

She sipped her wine—the bottle was mostly gone now, dissolved into Norma's healthy glow.

"I don't want to."

"What kind of answer is that? You want to die? Peabody said you got a good chance if you get some treatment now."

She shook her head. Remembered Lenny couldn't see her and said, "No."

"Are you drunk, Mom?"

"No!" she said defensively.

"You shouldn't be drinking at your age."

"I had a deprived childhood and now I'm making up for it."

"Come on, Mom! You got to go."

Norma leaned her head against the door. "No," she said clearly and quietly. "No, I don't."

"Mom!"

"This is my choice," she shouted back at him. "It's my lungs. They were my cigarettes. If I can't choose whether or not to die, what choice *do* I have?"

"Look. If you want to go all Christian Scientist on me, let's call up the Mother Church and ask *them*. They'll tell you to get your ass up to the hospital."

"That's no way to talk to your Mother."

"This is no kind of conversation to have through a door."

"Why not?" She knocked on the wood. "It's a perfectly good door."

He was silent for a minute. She could almost see him rubbing his forehead. "Let me come in."

She shook her head again. "I'll talk to you tomorrow."

Norma left him shouting at the door and walked unsteadily upstairs to bed. You should always have a good, hard bed, Norma reasoned. That way when you get too drunk to stand, you won't roll off.

She couldn't keep Lenny out of her house forever. She didn't even want to. Norma was proud of her son, shy and thin when he was young, now so strong and tall. She always did have a thing for a man in a uniform. That was what had attracted her to Tomas in the first place. The Turban-Kings had uniforms of a sort.

Lenny wanted a good, reasoned argument why she wouldn't go in for treatment. Norma didn't have one. Just a strong feeling that this was the body she came in with; it ought to be the body she went out with.

But he was wearing her down.

A week after she'd left Dr. Peabody, she went to the 7-11 for her regular rations of bread and ice cream. She came home to see a young man sitting on her stoop, a briefcase next to him.

He stood up as she came near. He was odd looking—too thin, for one. His obviously expensive suit that had been cleverly cut to hide it but still, like light through a window, his thinness shone through. His cheekbones were apparent and were it not for the fullness of his lips and his large eyes, he might have looked gaunt. As it was, he had a haunted, shadowed look, like a monk who regretted his vow.

He stepped forward.

"Miss Carstairs?" he asked, holding out his hand.

"Yes," she said warily, stepping back.

"I'm Ben Cori." He dropped his hand to his side. "I'm Reginald Cigarettes."

She looked at him for a moment. Things clicked together in her mind. "This has something to do with my lung cancer."

He smiled at her. "It does."

"What's special about lung cancer if you're a smoker?"

"Can we talk inside?"

Norma shrugged. "Can't hurt me, I suppose."

Ben's hands were long and delicate and his wrists seemed lost in the sleeves of his jacket. Now that he was sitting at her table, Norma had a sudden respect for Ben's tailor. The suit fooled the eye so that he merely appeared to be thin. Ben was a bundle of sticks in a sack.

"So, are you a lawyer?"

Ben put down his coffee. "No. Just the engineer. Also, CEO, COO and CFO. President and Board of Directors. Salesman and website designer. I had to *hire* a lawyer."

She sat up. "I don't get it."

Ben leaned back in his chair. The chair didn't so much as creak under his weight. "I designed the tobacco product. It's made in a small factory down in Cuba. Then, the factory ships the resulting product to a cigarette packing company in North Carolina. From there, the packs go to a shipping company in New Jersey. The website is hosted by a company in South Africa and sends the orders to New Jersey. The U.S. Mail delivers it to you. Reginald is incorporated in Hawaii. The only part of Reginald that really exists is an office in my home in Saint Louis." Ben sipped his coffee.

"I see," said Norma. "You design cigarettes?"

"No," Ben said carefully. "Tobacco *product*. More precisely, I design small machines whose nature it is to take tobacco, tear it apart and rebuild it with reduced carcinogens and toxins. Dried tobacco leaves from all over the South come into the factory and something that resembles dried tobacco leaves come out of the factory. Tobacco product."

"What's that got to do with me?"

Ben opened his briefcase and brought out two radiographs. He carefully placed the first one in front of Norma. "That's your lungs."

"I've seen it. How did you get this?"

"I've been working the net for a while. You can find anything if you have enough time and money." He placed a second radiograph next to the first. "That's a normal case of lung cancer."

Next to each other, the differences were obvious. The normal lung cancer—if such a disease could actually be called normal—looked splotchy and irregular. Her lungs had something in them made up of lines and polygons.

Ben pointed to an irregular rectangle. "I'm pretty sure that's an amplifier. Next to it is a low pass filter. A pretty sophisticated filter from what I can tell. These circles are sensors of some kind."

Looking at the picture made her chest hurt. "What the hell have I got inside of me?"

"I don't know."

"Do you know how it happened?"

Ben nodded. "No. Whatever happened is impossible."

"Impossible?" She pointed at the pictures. "It's right there in front of me."

Ben nodded, smiled at her. "That it is."

"Pretty big stretch to be impossible."

"I know that."

Norma stared at him for a minute. "Okay. Explain it to me."

Ben pulled some more papers from his briefcase. "In my business, mites, tiny machines about the size of a cell, do all the work. We got a bad shipment of mites. Somehow they went ahead and did all the work the normal mites did and left some clusters in the tobacco that got through all of the quality control mechanisms, the heating, the cutting and packaging, the irradiation, until the finished cigarettes reached

you. Then, they suddenly started working inside of you, not in some random destructive manner but in a controlled construction. I can guess what might have happened but, in point of fact, it's impossible."

Norma spoke slowly. "I have tiny machines in my lungs? Machines you built?"

"Close. I don't know what they're encoded to do. Nobody knows."

"How many ... clusters got out?"

"From what I can tell, only one."

"How do you know that?"

Ben spread his hands. "So far, you, and only you, have shown anything." He pointed at Norma.

"Pretty long odds."

"Not as long as some."

"So what are your mites doing to me?"

"I'm not sure. *My* mites were contaminated with other mites with different natures. Mites are built to cooperate so I'm not sure what they are doing."

"What were they *supposed* to do?" asked Norma.

"All different things. One set built musical instruments," said Ben, leaning on the table. "Oboes. Flutes. Tubas. Or, since they came from India, sitars or something. Some were designed to implement a communication system designed in Germany. There were banana preparation mites ordered from Malaysia. Others."

Norma remembered the singing of the fleshy bit.

"I have tiny machines making music in my lungs. *Your* tiny machines."

"As I said, they're not *my* mites. My mites died properly."

"Are you sure you're not a lawyer?"

"If I was a lawyer, I wouldn't be here."

"Why are you here?"

He stared at his hands and didn't speak for a few seconds. "To be present at the creation."

"What does that mean?"

Ben leaned toward her. "By any stretch of the imagination, the mites should have just consumed you, made you into some intermediate random product. *My* mites, acting out of *my* programming, would try to make you into tobacco product. Something that, to you, would be invariably gruesome and fatal. But that's not what the mites inside of you are doing. They're building something inside you. Something *integrated*—which I can see from the pictures, as well as noticing that you're still walking around."

"Walking right down to the clinic so Dr. Peabody can cut them out."

"That's why I'm here. To try to persuade you not to."

Norma stared at him. "Are you nuts?"

Ben smiled. "Maybe. Mites and humans are made up of much the same things: carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, some metals. If we come from the dust of the earth, then so do they. But we created them. Now, something unexpected and impossible has happened. A miracle."

"A *miracle*?"

"Yes."

"That's like saying cancer is a miracle."

Ben shook his head. "Not at all. Cancer is the emergent property of the accumulated errors in an ordered system. It's the consequences of random events."

Norma shook her head. The way he talked made her dizzy. "How's this any different?"

"Cancer in a system makes the system untenable. It doesn't do anything to make the system any better. It's not creative. This is going to make you something better."

"It's going to kill me. That's what it's going to do."

Ben shrugged. "There's a risk to everything. But we come from the earth. So do these mites. The earth speaks through us. They speak through the mites, too." He pointed to the radiographs. "That low pass filter looks a lot like filters used to integrate circuits into nerve cells. *I* didn't design it. None of the programming in any of the contaminant mites had anything like it. They developed this on their own. This is no cancer."

"But like cancer it's going to kill me."

"You were going to let the cancer do that anyway, or you wouldn't have walked out of Peabody's office."

"That was different." Norma thought for a moment. "The cancer was mine. It was my own body telling me it was time to go. These things are ... *invading* me."

"A cluster is made up of a few hundred mites. It's about the size of a mustard seed. It took root in you—not just anybody. It's making something in you—nobody else."

"You're saying these things *chose* me?"

"No. They can't choose anything. They're just little automatons. Like chromosomes or sperm. A baby is the emergent property of the genes but the genes didn't have any choice in the matter. Out of such automata comes you and me. The mites didn't choose you. The earth itself chose you."

"You *are* nuts. These things are still going to kill me."

"We can stack the odds." He brought out an inhaler from his briefcase. "This is FTV. All mites are designed so they stop operation when FTV is present. FTV saturates the air in mite factories as a safety precaution. If you inhale this, it might at least slow down their progress."

"That goes against your plan, doesn't it?"

"No. Think of it as prenatal care. It gives the mites an opportunity to more thoroughly understand their environment."

Norma thought of the singing again.

"What if they escape? I don't want to destroy the world or something."

Ben brought a square instrument out of his briefcase. "This has been sampling the air for the whole time I've been here. Look for yourself. No mites."

"They could be waiting. Like fungus spores."

"Now who's nuts?"

She considered. "Could Peabody cut them out?"

Ben shook his head. "I don't think so. The mites are cooperating. If you cut out a chunk of the network, they'll just try to rebuild it and they'll have to relearn what they lost plus figure out the new topology resulting from the surgery. I think it would just make things worse."

"That's what you would say regardless, isn't it?"

Ben shrugged again and said nothing.

She had been ready to just die and be gone. At least, this way would make it more of an adventure.

She drew a ragged breath. She had no difficulty breathing yet. No more than usual.

"Okay," she said. "I'm in."

Life seemed to settle back to normal. She didn't cough anything up anymore. Her voice cracked and quavered as she spoke. Which, she supposed, was a small price to pay for robots living in her lungs.

Reginald Cigarettes suddenly disappeared from the market. Ben had given Norma prior warning. She had a dozen cases packed carefully in the basement.

About a month after she'd first spoken with Ben, she woke up from a deep sleep jumpy and irritated. When Lenny came by for his morning visit she told him to go away. Her voice was breaking like a fifteen-year-old boy.

"Ma," called Lenny. "Let me in."

She opened the door a crack. "What do you want?"

"Come on, Ma. Don't get crazy on me. Let me in. I'm your son, remember?"

"I know who you are." She stood back to let him in.

"That was a pretty nice station you had on," he said as he stepped in. "Who was singing?"

"Oh, come on!" She held up her hands in exasperation. "You have something to say. It's written all over your face. What is it?"

"Well, Ma. Your birthday is coming up and all—" He stopped and held out an envelope to her. "Happy birthday."

She opened the envelope and slipped on her reading glasses. They were tickets to Opera Southwest. Two of them. To see *Don Giovanni*.

"You always have music around," Lenny said shyly. "I thought you might like to go."

Norma didn't say anything for a moment. "Nearly forty years I've known you," she said and kissed him on the cheek. "And you can still surprise me."

All the next week, she sang along with everything that came over the radio, tuneless or not. Belted it out with Patsy Cline. Harmonized with a Hunk of Burnin' Love. She was a Werewolf in London Born in America seeing Paradise by the Dashboard Lights for the very first time.

Norma was so excited waiting for Lenny to pick her up she made herself pee three times. Just to be sure she wouldn't have to get up in the middle and go to the bathroom.

Lenny wore a tie for the occasion and looked so handsome that Norma decided she'd forgo cigarettes for the night. Just so he'd be happy. She left her pack of Reginalds in the dresser drawer just to make sure.

The drive downtown, the walk into the Hiland Theater, finding their seats in the middle just in front of the orchestra, passed in a happy, warm blur. She settled back in her chair when the lights dimmed and put one hand on Lenny's. The music came up.

I must have heard this a hundred times, she thought. But now, in front of her, sung by people no less flesh and blood than she, it came to life.

In the middle of the second act, where Elvira began her angry solo, Norma leaned forward. For a moment, she had an uncontrollable urge to cough. It subsided before she could do anything to stop it. Then, it came again. Stronger, this time. She was going have one of those hacking fits like when she coughed up the fleshy bit. She could feel it coming on. Norma had to get out of there.

She put one hand over her mouth, stood and walked quickly up the aisle. Lenny stared after her but she was outside in the lobby before he could react.

A bathroom. She couldn't find one. Instead, she walked outside onto Central Street, thinking to cough or throw up in the gutter.

When she filled her lungs, the pain eased and in her mind, she could still hear Elvira's rage, haunted by the Don and her own weakness. She opened her mouth, and it welled up and out of her like clear running water. The vibrating power of it shook her, made her heart pound and her lungs rejoice. Every day she had listened to the radio, the music had been captured and woven into her cells. Now, they were free.

She stopped when Elvira stopped. Lenny was standing in front of her.

"Ma?" he asked. "You okay?"

Norma nodded. She didn't want to speak.

"That was good," he said softly. "Unnatural, of course. But good."

"You think so?"

"Yeah." He nodded. "I do." Lenny didn't say anything for a minute. "Tomorrow we go see Dr. Peabody."

"Hush." She was smiling. Norma felt like a girl again and the world was bright with possibility. She was sixteen, sitting in an old Chevy, smoking and grinning and driving down a road straight as a runway and

smooth as a glass table.

In 1711, for his first opera in London, George Handel advertised he would bring to the stage a chariot pulled across the stage by live horses, fireworks, a raft of tenors sailing through the storm in midair and not one, but two fire-breathing dragons. Consequently, opera, even opera in Albuquerque, was no stranger to novelty.

Ben told Norma she had two advantages going into the audition. One, she was old. It was hard to take a pretty, thirty-year-old diva and make her look seventy-five. Not only was it easier to do the same thing to Norma, she didn't mind and the diva usually did. The second was she had the pipes. Once the director was persuaded to hear her, she had a spot.

Not to say she got the front line roles. She was the old dowager, the mother-in-law, the comic innkeeper's wife, the ancient fortuneteller—in short, any role that suited her age and wasn't big enough to make the younger singers want it. This was fine with Norma. She was having a ball.

Hey, she thought to herself as she sprayed the inhaler down her throat. Look at me. I'm the Great Caruso.

The next two years passed quickly. Norma expected her voice to have a metal, inhuman quality, given its origin. Instead, it was an intensely human voice. "A dark warm revelry," said one critic in Keystone. "Lustrous," said another in Scottsdale. That was as far as she traveled. Opera Southwest had funding problems those years and their concert tours went only as far east as Amarillo and as far west as Needles.

She didn't care. The music never palled. The singing never lost its luster. But one day, she was listening to a recording of Rigoletto as she prepared for the role of Maddalena—being able to read music didn't come with the deal—when she looked up in the mirror. She looked the same. But what was going on inside of her? The quality of her singing seemed to get better over the last two years. She never coughed anymore. The only reminders she had were the daily dose of the inhaler and the two radiographs she had framed and mounted on her wall.

Norma stared at her image in the mirror. She was pushing eighty and could see it in her face. "What's going on in there?"

I should have died two years ago. I'm living on borrowed time.

Norma had a feeling deep inside that the mites were only waiting for her.

"Waiting for me to do what?" she asked Ben as she sipped her coffee. It was a warm March and they had come to an outdoor coffee shop near the theater. It was her birthday.

"What do you mean?" Ben leaned back in his chair, bemused. He was still thin by normal standards but in the last few years, he had filled out. Now, his eyes seemed properly proportioned and his mouth fit in his face. "Aren't you happy?"

"Of course I am."

"Then don't question it."

Norma snorted and stirred her coffee. "This was the miracle you wanted to be present at?"

Ben smiled back at her serenely. "I'm present enough."

"These mites went through a lot of effort to do this to me. Why? What do they have in mind? Why did they stop?"

"The FTV stopped them."

"I don't believe it. I don't think the FTV was much more than a suggestion. I think they *chose* to stop. For some reason."

"You're making them more intelligent than they are." Ben closed his eyes in the spring sun.

"I'm not sure intelligence has anything to do with it." Norma drummed her fingers on the table. "You don't need intelligence to have a purpose. They had a purpose. What was the word you used? My singing was an ... *emergent property* of their purpose."

"What do you think it is?"

"How should I know? Send messages to the moon? A voyage to Arcturus? A better subway?" Norma mulled it over in her mind. "I owe them for this."

"You don't owe them a thing. Think of it as a reward for a life well spent."

Norma chuckled. She had a clockwork sense of time passing. It was her choice. They had made sure of it. Well, she was eighty now. When *should* she choose? Once the mind and gums went, there wouldn't be much left. Why not now, when she still had it?

"Heck," she muttered out loud. "I was ready to let lung cancer kill me. Why not these guys?"

Ben leaned forward, suddenly alert. "What are you talking about?"

Norma watched the way a bicyclist worked his way down the crowded street. "I quit using the inhaler."

"When?"

"Just now."

It didn't take long. The mites were ready. A month after she stopped using the inhaler she woke up in her bed, too weak to reach the phone. Lenny came by on his way to work to say hi and found her. The paramedics came into her room in slow motion. Their hands left trails in the air as they drifted over her; the instruments resting on her chest and face felt as light as down. It made her smile as she drifted off.

She awoke in the hospital, a mask on her face, a crucified Jesus across the room from her. Jesus appeared to be an understanding sort—as understanding, she supposed, as one could be hanging in the air from iron nails driven through wrists and feet.

Norma must have been wired. A moment after she awoke a nurse came in the room and started examining her. Ten minutes later Dr. Peabody entered the room.

Dr. Peabody looked as if he'd been waiting for years to tell her she needed his and only his procedures and therapies. Only his surgery would save her.

Norma pulled the mask off her face. "When can I go home?" she wheezed.

Peabody stopped, his mouth open. It was worth the black spots in her vision to see his face. "Miss Carstairs—"

"Yes. I'm dying. I know. Prescribe a home health aide for me so I can get oxygen at home."

Peabody seemed to gasp for air.

"Is there anything else?" she asked sweetly.

Peabody fled.

Ben came in as Peabody left the room. "Let me guess. You didn't want to do what he said."

Norma nodded and lay back, spent. "Get me out of here. I'll die at home, thank you very much."

Lenny told her she was lucky. Norma's pneumonia wasn't difficult. The pain she expected from lung cancer never materialized. She was spared the emphysemic experience of drowning in her own fluids. There was only a deep and abiding weakness. The lifting of an arm or rolling over in bed became too much effort. Lucky? She thought so.

Lenny moved in. Ben visited daily. Every other day, a home health aide came in and helped bathe her and checked the oxygen.

Norma grew accustomed to the oxygen cannula. While it didn't alter the progress of things, it did make them pass more easily. She imagined the mites accepting the help as they worked.

"You said it was the earth," she said to Ben, smiling. "The earth speaking through me."

"I changed my mind. This is stupidity given substance," said Ben, exasperated. "It's not too late. We can use the FTV."

Lenny was behind him, an anguished look on his face. "Don't leave me, Mama," he said softly.

"Everything leaves," she said softly as she drifted off. "Me, too."

Norma drifted over a forest or factory. She couldn't quite tell. The world was in furious motion: great trees grew and intertwined with one another, their branches mingling without discernible boundaries. Roads melted into bushes melted into seas. The air was filled with the sound of labor: the percussion of hammers, whistling of saws, voices talking. Spider things were working everywhere but turned their faces up to her as she passed in what could only have been a smile, were they so equipped that a smile was possible.

A bench grew out of the earth. She floated down to it and rested.

It's all me, she thought, proud of herself. Every little spider, machine, and factory. All me.

Enrico Caruso sat down next to her. Not the heavy, ham-fisted Caruso of the old photographs. This was a more handsome and gentler looking, Mario Lanza-esque sort of Caruso.

She stared at him. "What? You're a ghost now?"

He laughed, a rich vanilla sound. "Hardly. Your brain cells are dying one by one. We thought this the least we could do." He waved his gentle hands toward the sea. "Nothing here reflects anything like reality, since you're making it up. But, since you're making it up, it's what you want to see."

"Ah," she said and smiled. The music resolved itself into Verdi's *Il Trovatore*. It seemed appropriate.

She had no desire to sing with it. At this moment, it was enough to listen. "Do you know what's

happening in my room?"

Enrico thought for a moment. "I know what you know. You've lapsed into a coma. Lenny is telling Ben what you want done with your remains. Ben is resourceful so it will likely be done."

"We'll sing for them?"

"All across the net."

"Is that what you wanted?"

Enrico shrugged. "It's enough. How about you?"

She smiled into the evening sun. "It's enough."

The dusk was coming. She could see the ocean dim into a gauzy purple haze. Like sunset. Like night. Whatever imaginary vision she had possessed was fading.

The night darkened as she listened to the music of their work.

"You won't be here to see it, of course," Enrico said regretfully as night fell.

Norma took his hand in the darkness to reassure him. It was a warm, strong hand. She held on strongly and laughed. "Just you wait. You ain't seen nothing yet."