

'THE BEAUTIFUL AND DAMNED' BY F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

by Tanith Lee

Tanith Lee's 2007 publications included the last book in her Lionwolf trilogy, *No Flame But Mine* (Macmillan), *Piratica 3* (Hodder), and *Indigara*, a young-adult novella out from Firebird. She tells us two current projects on the violent Bronze Age and Futurist Polluted Cities "are still being researched and constructed." Her latest tale takes a disturbing and violent look at the effects a deadly new plague could have on human society.

* * * *

A man had collapsed in the airport. They were dealing with it in the usual efficient way. It had taken so long to get in through the front-line tome security, and they tried to hustle me on like the rest when I paused to see. I blazed my PI card. They backed away then and let me watch.

God, he was a handsome guy. I mean, he was truly beautiful, the man being lifted on to the trolley. Gold hair, unlined tan of skin, perfect weight—looked like he could run for the Olympian at St. Max. But he was barely conscious now, though softly whimpering, and they'd already set up the float-drip to feed him pain relief and rehydration. His eyes were shut.

The nearest medic glanced at me. "Seen enough? Just stick around," she snapped. Her voice and eyes were full of controlled rage. She wasn't wearing a medi-mask, and she was rather special-looking herself.

I took the elevator up to the next stage of security (heightened now), and another long wait. I was glad I'd brought a book.

* * * *

They are pretty tight, the tomes. Enclosed runway and landing area, outer airlock, double inner airlock, frisker, and then every robo-check known to mankind, plus all the extra ones installed during the past seven months. Iris-reading, prints, bone-marrow stat, DNA, blood and phy stat, skull-template. Molecular shower. Absolvement.

Going the other way, the treatment is even more complex. Four and three quarter hours as opposed to the three needed going in. But who's aiming to leave? Aside, of course, from people like me.

* * * *

“Hi, Jack.”

Good old Edmund Kovalchy. There he was, just the same as ever, twenty to twenty-five pounds overweight, and bald as a balloon.

He led me down the block and into the diner.

It was only around noon, not a lot of custom yet. And there wouldn't be, he assured me, until much later in the day, when citizens surfaced from the haze and made it here for a dunch. Only a couple of diehards sat at tables far off across the big shadowy room, an old woman with green hair scribbling on a notepad, a decanter and glass beside her, and a feller in one corner, who was working his way through the kind of breakfast I—and Ed—used to regularly take when we were twenty-four: double steak, triple egg, mushrooms, carrash, hashes, and a separate big bowl of fries.

“Each to his own poison.”

“Sure,” I said. The two people looked okay. “How are you doing, Edmund, my man?”

“Fine,” he said, grinning. “Gained two extra pounds, so the weight-winner tells me. Oh, and I reckon my very last scalp hair resigned last night. Found it on the pillow. Marianna said that deserved a coffee cake. So she's baking one. You are welcome to drop by around nine tonight, if you can make a break, sample the same.”

We paused awhile, thinking respectfully of Marianna's coffee cake. Funny the way little things hold you.

But his eyes were sad.

Of course they were.

It was only a couple of weeks ago.

“How's she taking it, Ed?”

“She's a warrior, Jack. Y'know that.”

“I know.”

The service wheeled over, and we ordered sandwiches, some rye whiskey for Ed, and a tumbler of fresh orange for me. “Got to watch it till

later.”

“Sure, sure. Make up for it then.”

“Like half the city,” I said.

Maybe I shouldn't have, should have waited. But Ed is one of my oldest friends. We go back such a long way, sometimes I can barely count the dips in the road between now and then. But some of them were steep. And we made it, Ed and I, and Marianna.

“How is it?” he asked me, serious, looking up from his glass. “Any progress?”

“Not much.”

“I thought not,” he said. We're in the same business. His Corp clearance is *omega*. No need to lie, and in fact I couldn't. One of the reasons I was here to see him was to link him in, put him wise. I reached over and laid the little disc, only about the size of a quarter, next to the bottle. “For your eyes only.”

“Yeah.” He slid it into the secure pocket. “My eyes though, Jack, have seen a great many things in this city during the past sixteen weeks.”

“Sure.”

“What goes out on TV-wide?”

“Not a lot. They edit. To spare the Sensitive Viewer.”

He let go a loud gout of laughter which startled me. I had every reason to think he might act unstable, but somehow Ed, of anyone—I'd thought he would handle it. In another second he did. “Sorry, chum. Just makes me angry.”

“It does.” And it does. Some angry, some sad, and some very afraid.

“Aren't they doing a frigging thing?” Now his voice was soft, and his sad eyes fixed only on the whiskey.

“They are trying. But—”

I broke off. And he, not even turning, knew at once why I did.

“Some of them—one of them has come in,” he said, “right?”

“That’s right.”

“Gal or guy?”

“Guy.”

“Look like trouble?”

“Not yet.”

“Christ,” he said. “He’s early. Most of ‘em don’t shift until late afternoon—why would they? How far is he along?”

“Looks a way.”

Ed turned slowly and squinted back into the light where the doorway gave on the sidewalk. He took a brief visual camera shot of what I had seen, a man apparently around thirty-four, built of lean muscle, and with black hair hung to his collar. He was dressed okay, which sometimes they are not, some of them. Especially later, when plenty came out flaunting naked. The man laughed when he saw us looking. Then walked, easy, to our table.

“Hi, fellers.”

“Sorry,” Ed mumbled.

“S’okay. Don’t blame you. And after all, you never know. You may still be able to stare at me next Thanksgiving.”

As he strode off to the service bar, our sandwiches arrived. Only the woman with the green hair stood up and left, walking out with the decanter of yellow wine half-full in her hand.

* * * *

Gane’s Journal X7

* * * *

I was never the pretty one. Ugly duckling, me. Used to upset Mom

more than me, I think. I think she made me self-conscious.

My nose was too big, and my mouth—fat, and my eyes not big enough, and my hair too fine and greasy. And diet all I would, still too heavy. The humiliation of the school scales. And then the weight-loser. Every other kid sloughing off the fat, and poor Gane. Hey, Gane's *gained* another pound!

Lay off the Chocostars, they told me. Never believed I didn't eat them anyway.

Metabolic weight, they said, when I was an anorexic twenty-year-old, losing my hair and weighing in at one hundred and seventy-six pounds.

You're too fat, said Mel, when he ditched me and I was thirty.

You fat cow, said Martin, when he left me the day after my fortieth birthday.

And then, last year. Fall. Then.

Just a little thing.

Hey, Gane! You've finally cracked it! In fall, seven pounds fall from me, like leaves.

"What shampoo is that, Gane? Say, your hair is *brilliant*."

This, about two months before they fix on the dome.

* * * *

After Ed and I split, I took a cab over to Memphis Street. The driver was full of it.

"Y'know what I think it is?" A prompting pause.

"What do you think it is?"

"It's these new pump aerosols."

"Right. How's that?"

"Well, buddy. Ya spray the darn things all over. Some folks gonna

react. What ya expect.”

I expect to hear the theory of every man I meet who isn't creeping through a shadow or beating out his brain on a wall. And I've heard plenty. It's the ME block. It's terrorism-funded. It's extra-terrestrials. It's feral crops that have grown legs and glowing eyes, and run through the night snarling. It's vampires. So: Angry, sad, scared—and stupid. Just plain dumb.

The front for the Corp building on Memphis is a deli, and I climbed up the old paper-screws of fifty-one stairs to reach the office.

There's big security on the door, always was. But now too, another airlock, bullet-proof, bomb-proof, maybe.

Wilson sat behind his desk. He looked the same as ever, too.

“Good to see you, Jack, despite the circumstance.”

“Yeah, likewise.”

I placed the second, larger, disc by his hand, and a robo-service whipped out the wall and squirreled it away.

“How is it outside?”

I told him.

Wilson looked grim. “Since we got closed down, we've gotten a bit of a delay in here finding things out. That wasn't so at the start. Except we get all the news—unexpurgated—for the other three cities involved—”

He consulted his lappo-file as if to avoid my look when I said, dumb as the cabby, “*Three?*”

“Ah, you hadn't heard. Yeah, three now.” He showed me the screen. “Here is the latest. Eastern seaboard. One hundred and eighty-seven confirmed, ninety pending. At this stage, that's enough. They'll be shutting down by this evening. Shut-down gets faster, has to. They were over a month with us, you can imagine the pink tape.”

“Another city under a tome.”

He looked at me. A cold-eyed bastard, Wilson, steel and mirror.

“What else, Jack, do we got?”

* * * *

The *tomes*, it's jargon. Officially they are known as what they are, *domes*. Hygienic, air-proof, waterproof. Not another rainy day, some of them joked, when the first was lowered and cemented into place. Pure self-cleaning, germ-erasing air. And not a chance of a rogue airplane breaking through. Never a cloud without a silver...

* * * *

Gane's Journal X7

* * * *

“Good morning, Miss—uh—” said my regular physician, as I walked into his office.

“Carradene.”

“Carradene? Now that's strange, we already have a Miss Carradene.”

“I am she.”

He smiled. “No you're not.”

I did what I had to around the city. Had gotten through most of it before the deadline. Like Ed, and others, had told me, by then I began to see them coming out of their bolt-holes into the light of deepening afternoon. It reminded me of semi-nocturnal animals leaving their burrows. Dangerous animals, and the rest of the prey-animals then scatter off the veldt. The streets were certainly emptying. The vulnerable ones, whose employers still don't let them off early, club together for a taxi or a hire-bus. There is safety in numbers. Perhaps.

But of course it's less any kind of attack they're afraid of, than just the hell of foreseeing.

Did anyone think it would ever be like this?

Did anyone ever predict it could *happen* like this?

We've watched the movies, the shock-doccus, read—some of us—the history books.

There was an old guy sat on the sidewalk outside Ed's apartment block, drinking a can of Colby's. He looked up and shook his dirty grey locks at me and winked a bleary eye. "You an' me both, sir. The weak shall inherit."

"Sure, pops."

* * * *

Marianna.

I used to have a big thing about her, when Ed and I were in our twenties. But she chose Ed, and a better guy she could not have found, if she had panned the whole state for gold.

And cook ... God, could Marianna cook.

Yes, a cliché. But you see, she *liked* to cook. With her, it was performance art, it was art. And it even lasted. You never forgot. I have dated events sometimes from the food she made—the day of the Lobster with Oranges, the hour of the Cinnamon Cookie—

Ed used to tell me, these past thirty years, you kept your weight down, boy, because you never lived with anyone could cook like Marianna.

In fact, the past half year, I'd had something else to help me there. Better late than never.

She, though, never altered. Well, okay. She was older, around fifty-nine now I guessed, I'd never really known her age. Her hair had greyed but she blonded it at the salon. Her figure was lush but not out of shape. So, a few lines in the rose-petal of her face.

Sure. I still loved her. But now, in the way you love the best of your past. She had never been mine, and I was glad. I wouldn't have made her happy, and Ed—he had.

We had a drink on the balcony. It looked out along Walnut towards Bate Street, and over there now you could see the bars flashing like fallen suns in the black city hollows of the dark. Loud music rumbled and pulsed. But it was faint enough back here.

We talked about nothing, the old times, about when we'd gone to Greece, and to Italy, Venice, the lights on the Grand Canal, that kind of stuff. Pretending that this was just one more lit up night, meant for the young and beautiful, which once (had we?) we had been too.

Then she brought the cake.

It was like a birthday.

She made me cut the first slice.

It was like I remembered. No one cooks like that. It's taxable. And Ed, fat happy Ed, best buddy—how had he *kept* himself to *just* two hundred and thirty pounds?

Over on the dresser was an enhanced photo of Marianna's dad, who died fifteen days ago. He had been eighty-six. At eighty-six, perhaps not so bad. But no, it had been. Bad.

But they'd be all right. They'd be fine. You could see it shine out of them, I thought, the way that other thing *burns* from the rest.

"What's wrong, honey?"

Marianna touched Ed's arm.

I hadn't noticed a thing, caught up in my inner dream, one eye still on the horizon of jangle-tangle disco lights.

"Nothing—just ... I guess a bit of nut stuck in a tooth—"

"*Ed*. I *never* put in any nuts. I know your teeth—you can break a molar on cold butter!"

"Okay, honey, no. I know you wouldn't. Just something—hey, excuse me, folks. I'll go seek the kindness of the dental floss."

Laughing he went, and laughing we let him go.

"Are you all right, Jack?" she said then to me, so tenderly.

"Sure, Marianna. Only I'm sorry I can't get you both out of here."

“When we just repainted the apartment? It’s fine, Jack. Ed wouldn’t go anyhow. He takes the job seriously. And he’s so needed now. Isn’t he?”

“You look wonderful,” I said. “You look—”

“I look *old*,” she said playfully. “And isn’t that *exactly* as it should be at my age?”

Ed came back, wandering back smiling on to the balcony, his glass of wine still in his hand.

“Better, sweetheart?” she asked.

“Yeah, it was nothing. Only a bit of—well, honey, you *said* you didn’t use any nuts.”

Marianna decided there must have been nuts in the flour which no label had revealed. She blamed the tome shut-down, and said she’d have a word at the store.

Only about midnight, as he saw me down in the elevator to the cab I’d ordered via the Corp, did I ask him. “What was wrong in your mouth?”

“Guess it’s nothing, feller.”

“And?”

“Old tooth, right the way back, broken in a ball game and extracted, I was about fourteen. Seems to be...” he paused. He said, as the elevator doors undid, “growing back.”

Outside, the cab and cab driver, and his side-rider in the passenger seat with his .22 special, catch off all through the ride. Beyond the windows the lightning of the lights, and the young lions out all over the streets, spilled like a river of gold and ice and ebony and diamond. Running, screaming, laughing, dancing, performing acrobatics, crying.

A flood of glamour. Going crazy. But the young and the beautiful have always done that.

At the hotel the security netted me in and slammed shut the thick bullet-proof glass of the doors. The cab drove off fast as fire through oil. But next minute there was a paramedic vehicle coming on a siren shriek, and soon the doors undid again to let the medics through. The hotel

receptionist had long, pale hair, and when the trolley carried her out to the vehicle, this hair trailed along the floor. Someone whispered, “I didn’t know—she doesn’t look so different—Christ, we’re in trouble—” She was very beautiful. And her eyes, crystal clear, green as glass, stared at me as they wheeled her by. “Wanna kiss me, gramps?” she murmured. Then smiled, “I guess you’d rather kiss the cunt of hell.”

* * * *

Gane’s Journal X7

* * * *

“Really, Miss Carradene. This is foolish, isn’t it. Perhaps you are a friend, even a relative of the Miss Carradene who is on our books here. I can see a slight resemblance, I admit, in the PI image. But I’m afraid I can’t treat you. I’m *not* your registered physician.”

“They checked my PI at the desk.”

“Yes, yes.”

“So how did I get through if I’m not who I say?” “I really don’t know, Miss Carradene, but identity theft isn’t unknown. Perhaps I should call the police.”

I got up then and walked out of his office.

He’d always been fairly stupid, making a fuss and frightening me over my weight, when I couldn’t do another thing about it. And although there was the big poster out in front, he apparently said all that was nonsense—I’d heard the assistant talking on her CP about this, she thought I couldn’t hear. Well, a month before I wouldn’t have.

Going back home, I bought myself another dress a couple more sizes smaller. I’d gotten a new haircut too. No need to do much with my hair now though. This deep red color. Thick silk.

I saw more of the posters. They were here and there. Anything unusual, consult your health center.

But it was nothing to do with me, whatever that was. I’d only gone to him because I wanted a contraception shot. I had a date tonight. A really good one. (I’d been peri-meno for a while, but I didn’t take risks.) I could

buy the shot anyhow, at Fast-Hosp. I'd just do that.

I was just happy. Finally it was all paying off, the boring grueling exercise, the strict starvation diet, the prayers and lit candles. Even that whole-body alternative vitamin.

I noticed some big tracks running by on the overhead, the kind of rail-vehicle they use for building work. Some copters too, off to the west and east, buzzing around on the sky's edge like big black flies.

But you live in the city, things go on. Don't they.

It was the start of the foundation for the dome—the tome. But I didn't know, and there was still another month before anyone properly did.

* * * *

Alexander the Great wanted to conquer the world, so did Napoleon Bonaparte, and Adolf Hitler. A few others, too, come to that, who didn't make it quite so far, or earn so much media attention.

You get your troops and you march. And you blast and burn and you kill. And then each bit of land, a village, a city, a country, a continent, belongs to you. But you've made a mess of it, getting there. A real mess. In the end all you can really say you are is a king of the dead.

* * * *

The next day I saw to most of the remaining business. A couple of the cab drivers—I made certain I always used a different one—congratulated me. “How old are you? Fifties, I guess. No spring in your step. Like me. Look, see these brown spots on my hands. I count 'em every morning. All present and correct, yessir!”

And then the last one, that afternoon, a young attractive guy who said, “S'okay, mister. I ain't no problem. Look, here's my license. I'm twenty-nine years and four months legit, see? And look, see—broken tooth.”

Something made me say—it had been one helluva day—“You could have broken that this morning. Still be like that, maybe.”

And he swore at me. “You wan' my fuckin' wheels or ya don't.”

“I want them. Pardon my big mouth.”

“Yeah,” he said, letting me in. “Yeah. Ya wanna watch that big mouth of yours.”

“Sure. You’re absolutely right.”

“My dad,” he said. That was all. *My dad*. Another father.

Then, twenty miles on: “He was only forty-seven. Young enough. And fit as they go. Fitter’n me driving this tin can shit around and around. Used to play ball, my dad, for the Ruby League. Ya think—”

“Yeah. I’m sorry.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Just watch your mouth.”

It isn’t better for the fit ones anyway. I could have told him, but I was watching my mouth, as I damn well should have. As I had with Rosso Centi at the Overmile Building.

I’d seen the moment we met. Anyone would.

And he saw me see, by now practiced.

“What do you think, Jack?”

“You tell me,” I said. “If you want.”

“I’ve joined the army,” he said, as we pulled out chairs and sat, with the double-screen lappo-lux between us.

“Army...?”

“The conquering horde, Jack. What else. I’m enlisted.”

Centi was sixty-seven, and he’d kept his hair, something Ed but not I had always envied. Only now that hair was a deep rich molasses brown. Dark eyes clear as a child’s.

A couple of years ago, I’d have thought he’d been off for a plasti-job. But he hadn’t, of course.

We completed the task with the screens, exchanged discs.

A robo brought us coffee.

“I’ve always been healthy, stayed fit,” he said, when we shook hands. “So I won’t have long. See you next time, Jack. Wherever, if ever. Always nice to work with you.”

* * * *

Gane’s Journal X7

* * * *

That date was even hotter than I’d dreamed. Best first date I ever had.

Strange to say—or maybe not—I’d been attracted to a guy about my own age, well, a few years younger, fifty-two, fifty-three. And he, well, he’d taken to me all right.

You get used to what you see in a mirror.

I’d gotten used to seeing this fat ugly thing that wasn’t ever me. And somewhere in the deepest core of the *real* me, gotten used to always knowing I would one day *change*. Cinderella goes to the ball, doesn’t she? Snow White and Beauty get kissed *back* out of living death? And that girl in the mouldy catskin, she gets to throw it off.

My nose, my blubber lips—they had been only fat, obviously. They’d melted back to what they always must have been, there under the disguise of ugly. A *slim* nose, a full but well-shaped mouth, all ready for a prince to kiss.

And two big blue-as-blue eyes.

And redhaired, as if from the finest henna I’d never ever tried, silk hair falling grass-thick over my shoulders, to my new firm full breasts, and just touching my reinvented slender waist and those lovely dancer’s hips. Legs—I had legs now, not chopped-off tree trunks. Ankles you can circle each with one strong hand.

Pretty. I’m so pretty.

He and I had dinner and went to a hotel. I’d never had so much sex in

all my life. He was fit enough, a great lover, even for a guy younger than he was. Or maybe it was already kicking in.

I didn't need, had I known, the contraceptive shot. Shame, really, I could have saved the money. But then, for what.

He said, "I'm old enough to be your ... uncle." Amused at the old line.

"Don't be worried," I said, "I'm—"

"Don't tell me now. God. Twenty-four?"

And, delirious from the wine and the love-making, and the glimpses I caught of myself in the mirrors, I thought, no, I *won't* tell you.

Because I was sixty-one. Hormonal-delayed menopause. Ugly.

But that had been the me before I changed.

After our first date there were several others. He had dough and we went to Flores Beach. And he said, "You've woken me up, Ganey. I never felt so good. I feel *young*. And look, are you proud of me? I've lost three inches off my waist."

Later, when the dome went up, he'd stopped calling me. They all did, all the five men I'd gone with by then. The youngest one, he was about thirty—he stopped first. I don't know now if he knew, or if he—it's worse then. I wish with him I hadn't—but how could I know any of that?

The older ones, maybe I meet them sometimes on the street at night, when we party, and fuck against the walls in the neon lights, and throw bottles to try and smash the bullet-proof glass shutters of the bars. They'll know *me*, but maybe I won't know them. Not like they are now.

* * * *

Who wants to get old?

Who'll buy? Anyone?

None of us?

It's in the smallprint when we're born. When we're struggling through the challenged incapacity of infancy and childhood and the teenage years.

It's the monster behind the glittering door.

Eighteen, twenty-one, twenty-five: the staircase top. Then down.

Nobody wants it, but nobody wants to die either. Unless you make them want it. No one.

* * * *

Ed called me at a quarter to four in the morning, when outside, despite the noise-resistance of the hotel, I could just dimly hear the crash of music and of breaking things, and see, through a nip in the dark blind, a ripple of red light that was a burning car.

"Have to speak soft, Jack. I'm in the downstairs john with the CP. Sorry, sorry to wake you."

"Was awake, Ed." I didn't mention the noises had woken me, the flames. "Working."

"Sure. Sorry, pal."

"What is it? Is it the tooth?"

"Oh boy. If only. It's—it's my frigging *hair*, Jack." He says it on a screaming whisper. "All over my head, growing back. Thought this morning—shaved it. Just tidy up the wisps. But tonight—it itches me. And I can feel it now, like—it's like thick felt, a *nap*, all over my scalp."

"Okay, okay, Ed."

"But I was just normal yesterday. I'd *gained* weight. The weight-winner the doc gave me *showed* it. But tonight I ate, deliberately, I ate like a hog. And I've lost six pounds, Jack."

We stay in silence. A silence rimmed, like the camp in the jungle, by watching unseen sounds and eyes of flame.

"Do you want me to fast-track you into Corp medicare, Ed? Get you a proper check? This may only be—"

"Jack, I can see it. My face. It's different. And Marianna—she can see it too, I can tell."

“Is she—”

“She doesn’t say a word.”

“But *how* is she?”

“Oh—no, she’s—I think she’s fine, Jack. Only. Only. We.” He falters. The longest pause of all. “We had relations yesterday. We do, Jack, y’know. She and I.”

“Listen. We both know this fucking shit gets passed by anything. By a sneeze in a crowded room. By a patch of damp from a sweaty palm on a handrail. A sobbed out *tear*. Even contact with a piece of clothing like a dry clean scarf. You pick it up—”

“I *know*. I know. I just—”

“I know, Ed. It’s okay.”

“Christ, it isn’t. I put the light on in here, Jackie, and I can see my face. Even in four more hours it’s firming up. It’s smoothing off. I always have to stop on the twenty-fifth stair at work, just a quick breath. Only today ... I didn’t have to stop.”

“Let me help. What can I do?”

“How do I know?”

“Come into the medicare. Wilson’s outfit is able—”

“It’s all right.” He sounds deadly calm now. “I’ve booked a session with the doc, did it earlier ... thought he might reassure me. Tomorrow at five PM. Only appointment he has left. Decent guy. He’s just thirty. The other feller—the one Mari and I knew. The arthritis in his knee went, scan showed the bone had straightened, gone back into shape. That was all. He had to leave the practice. Last I heard he killed himself, ran his car into the West Bridge.”

* * * *

Tome.

It comes from two words, one of which obviously is *dome*. Each dome is city-wide, and takes in the suburbs too. They bulldoze out a kind of no man's land at the perimeter. Sure, some people lose their homes, the freeway's interrupted. They rehouse you, inside. And make new tunnels for the rail service. Airlocks, landing strips. But it's surprising how fast they can do it. When they have to.

Condition red.

But why the "t" and not the "d"?

You guessed, possibly. T is for Tomb. A tomb-dome, a *tome*.

Because once it starts it isn't going to stop. One case, two cases, that is the same as one thousand, two million. And rising. Soon to be billions. Like it was, and is, in those other two—*three* now—places.

So all you can do is wall it in, cover it over, put on the lid. Rev up the support services inside and the surveillance. Then monitor, and *care*. But care from a distance.

And censor the TV channels, to protect that Sensitive Viewer, whoever the fuck that can be.

Tome.

Entomed.

* * * *

I was sitting in the waiting area, nicely air-conditioned and noise-proofed, with not unpleasant Muzak playing to keep us all serene, when the redhead walked in.

Long legs, perfect figure, hair swinging to the kind of waist you used to see only in old technicolor movies. Only now, here and there, you see it quite a lot, especially once the afternoon advances.

A hush falls. A few of them put on their little portable masks. But most of them know the masks aren't a lot of use. It will get in at any crack, and it probably did already.

And anyway, maybe this is just one of those rare beings, a naturally

stunningly physically beautiful human.

She speaks to the reception assistants, gives them her card. They process that.

The processing is auto, and there is a partition between the staff here and all the patients, exactly as there is now in there, where Ed is, talking to the doctor.

Even so, the assistants kind of huddle away.

She walks back from the desk and hesitates, looking for a seat that's far off from everyone.

What will it matter, the screens, the separation? Under the tome, with its ever-clean recycling air, the germs of all of us move in a never-ending dance, threading and re-threading, so every breath any of us inhales, *exhales*, is laced with minute unseeable beads of somber potential.

There was outcry when the first tome went up, over and on.

But, like the cement and bomb-proof glass, it settled.

Perhaps this thing can be contained? Surely better to sacrifice X number trillion lives, and so save the greater number, whatever in the end that will be? And there is always, with these events, a percent of natural immunity, too. Not everyone, not all—

“Why don't you sit here?”

She glances at me. Oh, I must be already infected, even if I don't look it, not a smidge. And I'm parked well away from the rest.

“Thanks.”

She sits on the seat next to mine.

After a moment she says, “I shouldn't have come here.”

“Maybe not.”

“Don't know if he'll even see me. My own physician kept refusing to believe I was me. I mean, I'm over sixty. He thought I was insane, or I'd stolen my identity. And then when he changed too—the practice shut.”

“Yes.”

She crosses her legs. Oh, those legs.

She’s lovely. She’s dead.

“I just want to ask them something. I—sort of want to know—how long I’ve got.”

I said, “They can’t always tell. Some have had it six months, or a year. No longer than a year, at least not so far that anyone knows. Others ... It can be sooner.”

“Somebody said the fitter you are the quicker...”

“It can do that. If you’re fine to start with it has less to work on.”

“Like—somebody young. Good-looking. I was obese, or so they said. I looked like shit.” She gives a sudden silky laugh.

Nobody, even if that offends them, takes any apparent notice. They’re all pretending she isn’t here, or that everything is ordinary.

“And, you said, you’re sixty.”

“Yes,” she says.

“That’s good. You’ll probably go over ten months, a full year. That’s the current notion. A friend of mine, his wife’s father was eighty-six, partly blind, and very frail. He was going strong for more than eleven months. And he didn’t get sick. He died in a fight.”

I’m speaking, impartially, of Marianna’s father. I had never been shown a recent image, how he’d become after changing. Only the old photo, the view of a tired old man. I hadn’t seen him either, in the apartment, sixteen weeks back, cursing Marianna, this young handsome godlike naked man of thirty-five or six, with his shining hair and mouth full of flawless teeth and dirt. Young enough to be his daughter’s son. Before Ed managed to throw the naked god out. Was that how Ed had gotten infected? Very likely.

Just a touch will do it.

I reach over and pat the girl’s smooth hand, with its long strong oval

nails. "It's okay. Hang in there. They're working on a cure."

And they are.

Only trouble is, they don't know what this thing is.

Looked at under all those microscopes, in all those cunningly lit dark rooms, that tiny golden evanescent spangle, now here, now gone.

Where has it come from? No one knows. Has it been created willfully, or in error, or has it only spontaneously come to be? No one can tell. Brought in or simply dropped from space, or risen up through millennia from the depths of the guts of the world, it bears no relation to anything known, or even to the premise of the unknown *possible*.

A door comes open up the long room.

Out steps Ed Kovalchy, smiling and quiet. The thick new cap of blond hair sheens on his head. It might not be anything. He might only be white already and regularly shave his scalp.

He walks briskly to me, sees the girl, and looks at her with his sad eyes.

"My name's Gane," she says, "that's Gainor Carradene. Nice to meet you." And she gets up after all and goes out.

And Ed says to me, quiet under the Muzak, "Let's find a bar."

So we go find a bar, although by now it's almost six PM, and on the streets the carnivores are gathering in their glowing pelts of murder.

* * * *

All my life I read books, lots of them. Off a screen, between paper or cloth or leather covers. Always have. My weakness. My eyesight's always been good too, I don't even need spectacles now, in my fifty-sixth year.

So I have, in the course of reading, read about the great disasters, the wars and sieges, the plagues, when mankind, trapped in the pit of a single village or city or country or continent, roiled and rioted, went mad in an orgy of lust and venery, the last supper of hate, before the blackest death of all swept in to claim them.

And that's what happens now.

Once they know they have it, they leave the rules behind. They take off their clothes and their souls and hang them on a hook, and reach deep into the fire of life for one last several times.

Ed didn't care now. He had joined the legion. He sat and drank whiskey, all one bottle, and then he had some more.

He hadn't called Marianna. What could he say?

She knows. She knows.

The young think they won't get this, I mean the truly young ones, the ones who really not only look, but *are* eighteen, twenty, thirty. But they do get it. It just kills them much quicker. Snuffs them out between its amorphous golden fingers. And the children. Quicker still. They just drop. There's not much it can do there, only kill. Maybe it's kinder, then, the fast erasing, like a dab of white-out on a printed page...

It kills them all. It kills anything human, or one must presume *almost* anything, because there will be the cases of natural immunity, even if thus far none have shown up.

Four cities down now, as of eight AM today.

I heard that from Wilson over the scram CP not an hour ago. Over to the west, the latest conquest. Oh, and the first cases showing up in Europe too. One suspect (for one read one thousand) in the far East.

It has a name.

Everything has to have one, doesn't it.

"You're not drinking, Jack," Ed said, slurring a little. "G'on. Let's drink to long life." In the middle of the bar dance floor, where the neons are starting to flash orange and blue and white, a whirling girl with bare breasts that put the goddess of love to shame arcs slowly over and falls to the ground.

None of the others take any notice, except they dance around her for a while. But some minutes after, I see they just dance over her, trampling her into the earth. The floor's wet there, white-wet, blue-wet, orange.

* * * *

Symbiosis—Is an interaction between two differing organisms which come to live in physical association. This relationship is usually of advantage to both, i.e. as with Jentle's coral, whose bright color and luminescence, so attracting to prey, spring from the action of the minute boring worm *Isrulum*. However, as in this particular partnership, if other conditions become unsuitable, the worm will abandon the host it has colonized, at which both color and light are lost, and hollowed out and starved, the coral dies. From the Greek word *Sumbios*—a companion.

* * * *

Parasite—Is an organism existing in or on another and living at the expense of said other. A parasite will normally colonize and destroy the host. From the Latin *Parasitus* via the Greek *Parasitos*—one who eats at another's table.

* * * *

Virus—Is a submicroscopic infective agent (consisting of etc:) able to multiply only within the living walls of a host. From the Latin *Virus*—a poison.

* * * *

Nobody even tries that hard now to stay clear, as I saw for myself first in the airport. The healthy ones are getting blasé, many of them. What can you do? The air is full of it, was so even before the tome. Every breath you take.

Symparasic Virus.

That is the name. SPV for short. Used in code once before everyone started to have to know.

The initial cases went completely overlooked for months, longer, because of the peculiar action, the *method* the virus employs.

Before it kills, it makes beautiful. It corrects any imperfections, restores movement and function to impaired limbs, anatomy, organs, dispenses with aging, reversing time to a level legitimately in balance with existing years—twenties for fifties and early sixties, say, thirties for the ones

over eighty. It banishes infirmity. Whatever is even cosmetically wrong it expunges and makes fine. Whatever is right it improves to the highest degree endurable. The infected, and, by then, dying victims, become glorious, and remain so until the last three to seven hours of their lives.

Why? It's obvious, isn't it. To make them enticing.

SPV likes to colonize. To conquer. That is its sole blind and total ambition. And so each host grows enticing in order to lure further prey—to which the virus can then pass.

That works more or less one hundred hundred percent.

Because we love beautiful things, most of us. We love to look at them and hold them, and kiss them and fuck them, and, at the worst, maybe we just pick up the clean scarf they dropped unknowing on the sidewalk, and sleep with it under the pillow...

It doesn't think, Symparasitic. Doesn't need to. No more than the snow-ball rolling downhill that becomes an avalanche.

But I mentioned the last hours.

A comparatively swift death compared to the kind of stuff the human race has routinely suffered. But not enviable.

Deliquescence. That word will do, I guess. That's enough. Enough for all the world, and for Ed, who was my friend. And Marianna maybe. And that little girl with her auburn-burning hair. Enough.

* * * *

I got him home across the city. The cab driver was one of the night guys from the Corp. He too had his shotgun riding alongside in the passenger seat.

Marianna met me, calm and unruffled as she wouldn't ever have been if I'd just dragged her partner in from one of our youthful drunks of thirty years before.

Once she'd put him to bed, she said to me, "I guess he won't feel bad tomorrow—no hangover. Do I have that right?"

"No. He'll be fine."

“That’s how it works, this—*thing*.”

“SPV. Yes, how it works. Anything goes wrong like that, it puts it right. Alcohol—even tainted food—toxins. Neutralizes them in a few hours.”

We stood in the living room. Books on the walls, the music and TV center, good colors, home comforts.

“If there’s anything I can do, Marianna. Someone’ll be out and see him tomorrow around noon. Henry, I think.”

“Okay,” she said.

“I have to go back to—well, where I have to go. But I can be here again soon as I can if there is anything—”

“No, Jack,” she said firmly. “Don’t come again. Just—let us go now. We all just have to let go, don’t we. It’s all right, Jack.” She smiled at me. “It’s not *if*, after all, is it. Only *when*. The readiness,” she added, with a sudden arch lift of her eyebrows, “is all.”

“Sure. But—”

“Oh, Jack. Do you really think I had my hair bleached this month?”

I stared at her.

She said, “Do you know, I’m such a fool, when I first dropped four pounds I was pleased, thought it was the diet.”

“Christ. Not you.”

“Not me? *Why* not me? *Why* not *Ed*? It’s all of us. Or—most of us. I said, didn’t I, or Shakespeare did, the guy I quoted back there.”

“Yes.” I didn’t know, even then, if I believed her, or would let myself. Don’t now.

She came and kissed me, gentle, on the mouth. “I know I can’t hurt you.”

“No, you can’t. Not that way.”

“Dear Jack. Trust me for this. Ed and I won’t fetch up—like those others. Maybe we can even enjoy ourselves a little before—we have to end it. But that’s what we’ll do. Quietly, here. I know there are no shots, no cure. But there are tablets to make it decent, aren’t there, so we can choose. Ed and I discussed it, weeks ago. Of course we did. That’s what we’ll do.”

“Speak to Henry tomorrow. The tablets. He’ll see to it you get the best.”

“Yes, we will. Thank you, Jack. Good bye, Jack. I’ll tell Ed so-long for you. Nice—lovely, lovely, Jack, to know you.”

* * * *

When I went down, the cab was waiting by the sidewalk, and so was the girl with red hair, Gainor Gane Carradene.

“She’s stable,” said the Corp guy. “I checked her out. She’s about a nine-monther and holding fine. Brain action’s okay. Not pissed and not a crazy. What d’you want I do?”

“I’ll speak to her.”

“I’m right over here.”

She and I walked up the block in the cindery dark between the clear white shine of two street lamps.

Over there, by now, the discos bellowed. Strobes like Northern Lights in the lower sky. Might have been another planet.

“Thanks for what you told me before,” she said. “About the time I have left. You know that kind of stuff, I can see.”

“How did you find me?”

“Followed you. You and the other guy.”

“Why was that?”

“I don’t know.” She raised her beautiful face to look at one single brilliant star high in the aerial corridor between the buildings. “No, I do know. I wondered how you’re not afraid of this—of what I’ve gotten inside me. Because you’re not sick, are you—you don’t have it?”

“I don’t have Symparasic.”

“So why aren’t you afraid? Have they *found* something that can stop it?”

“I’m sorry. I told you, not yet.”

“If you aren’t cured and you aren’t sick—then are you immune?”

“Yes, Gane,” I said. “In a way.”

“So how?”

Her face turned to me now, her eyes—not sad or angry, not stupid or scared, or anything at all. Empty, her eyes. Waiting to be filled, only I couldn’t fill them. Only the star that was somehow caught in both of them, only the star could do that.

“I have cancer, Gane. It’s terminal. Another conquering colonizer, and too major an outfit for even SPV to fight it and win. They say TB is the same in its advanced stages, and one or two other of the big gun parasites. It tries, SPV, can’t get a hold. And no, one won’t cancel out the other. I’m on the same highway, Gane. We all are. We all always were.”

* * * *

Aboard the flight, once we were clear of the locks and covered take-off, out in the liquid night, the human girl came by with snacks and drinks. She looks like a movie star, she has it too. But no one minds. This is a Corp flight, and we all have it here, or something else that won’t let it in. And we all know where we’re headed and what to do about it. Readiness. Yes.

So it doesn’t matter either when she sees what I’m reading, this wonderful novel, one of the best of the twentieth century. The title doesn’t even faze her when she asks, and bends to look. “I read that in high school,” she tells me, and passes on. And I look out the window and watch the city in the tome, one now among seven, soon one among a countless multitude, falling away behind me into the night. Then I go back into the book, which has less to do with any of this than any other thing I can think of. And its name? Everything has to have one. *The Beautiful and Damned* by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

