

STRANGERS WHEN WE MEET

by Kate Wilhelm

Each of this grand master's four previous publications in *Asimov's* has been memorable. Three, "With Thimbles, With Forks, and Hope" (November 1981); "The Gorgon Field" (August 1985); and "I Know What You're Thinking" (November 1994), were nominated for major awards, and the fourth, "The Girl Who Fell Into the Sky" (October 1986), brought home the Nebula. These days, she tells us, she leads a quiet life gardening and spending time with friends, family, and cats. Not long ago, she marked the fiftieth anniversary of her first short story's ("The Mile-Long Spaceship") selection for one of the Year's Best anthologies. "I bought a portable typewriter with the money I got for it, the same typewriter I had rented to try to get a decent final copy in the first place." The bittersweet tale that follows shows us how fortunate it is for all of us that she's still writing as much as ever.

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Edith Dreisser cursed under her breath when a gust of wind blew rain into her face as she struggled to close her umbrella before entering the restaurant. The hostess met her with a sympathetic smile and took the umbrella.

"I'm to meet Dr. Lipsheim," Edith said, taking off her dripping raincoat. The hostess took that, too, and hung it up.

"Dr. Dreisser? He's expecting you. This way, please." She led the way through the dining room, sparsely occupied that late in the afternoon, to a corner booth.

Cal rose to greet her. He was smiling broadly, both hands outstretched to take hers as he bent to kiss her cheek. "Edie, you're looking wonderful, as usual. And you're cold. Irish coffee? Just to take the chill off?"

She grinned and nodded. Cal was seventy or seventy-one, tall and spare, and balder every time she saw him. And he knew how to take off a chill.

He sent the hostess away after telling her to order them both an Irish coffee.

"It was so good of you to come on such short notice," Cal said,

resuming his seat across the booth from her.

“You know perfectly well that an invitation from you is a royal summons,” she said. He had been her advisor, her mentor, and she had worked briefly in the hospital where he had since become the head of the neurology department. She was a research neurophysiologist, or a psychiatrist, depending on which hat she happened to be wearing. Now she had her own graduate students toiling away at her behest. She doubted they would ever hold her in the same kind of near reverence she felt for Cal.

He handed her a menu. “Let’s order when they get around to bringing our coffees,” he said. “Then they’ll leave us alone for a time.”

She had suspected that he had something on his mind other than getting together with an old friend, but she knew there was no point in trying to get to it before he was ready. She consulted the menu.

After a waiter brought the coffee and took their order, Cal said, “I read your piece in the *APA Review*. Very good work. It got a buzz, didn’t it?”

Before she could respond, he continued in a thoughtful way, “Mapping the brain. Not a new idea, of course, but a new approach. Like peeling an onion and mapping each segment as you come to it. No one’s done that adequately before. How’s it coming?”

“Slowly,” she admitted. “Perhaps an impossible task, ambitious but not doable. The problem with student subjects is that the little wretches’ brains are all different, and just when I think I’m getting ahead, the brat gets terminally bored, or else leaves.”

Cal laughed softly. “The joys of brain research.” He sipped his coffee.

“Drop in at the lab some day and have a look at the model I’m constructing. It’s pretty awesome.”

Their food arrived and they chatted about the unseasonable May weather, the worsening traffic day by day in Portland, things inconsequential. Abruptly, Cal pushed his plate back with most of his crab cakes remaining, and he leaned forward.

“Keep eating,” he said, “while I tell you a story. Let me tell it all and then we can talk about it.” He didn’t wait for her nod. “Two weeks ago,” he

said, “there was an accident on the Interstate—a propane tanker overturned, exploded, and killed several people. You may recall it from the news. It turned out that a family of three was involved. Donna Hardesty, her son Travis, and her twenty-five-year-old daughter Rebecca. Mrs. Hardesty and Travis were killed. Rebecca escaped with a head injury, a concussion, and some abrasions and bruises. She was brought to the hospital unconscious, treated and held overnight for evaluation. The following day when she woke up, the doctor on duty examined her and told her that her mother and brother had both died. She became hysterical and had to be quieted with a tranquilizer, but she spent the rest of the day and evening in a state of shock. Typical post-traumatic shock reaction. They kept her a second night, and on the following day she was told a second time about the death of her family, with the same reaction. She refused food, and drank so little that they were compelled to start an IV for fluids. The third day was another repeat. They called me at that time.”

Edith had taken a bite or two as he talked, but then put her fork down and concentrated on what he was saying. “Post trauma amnesia?”

He nodded. “With a vengeance. Edie, that girl is unable to remember from one day to the next—a period of roughly twenty-four hours. We’ve run the usual tests, all negative, no overlooked brain trauma. I made up a story that satisfied her about why she was in the hospital. She has no memory of the accident and whatever she is told on day one is forgotten on day two.”

Edith leaned back and drew in a long breath. “How long has it been now?”

“Thirteen days. She’s twenty-five, twenty-six in June, and has a perfectly normal memory of everything until the day of the accident. She’s highly intelligent, due to start graduate studies in paleontology, at your university, by the way. And, frankly, we don’t know what to do with her. She can’t remain in the hospital, and she can’t be turned loose.”

“Family, other than the immediate ones?”

“No. Her father died when she was sixteen. He had pancreatic cancer, and his death was a relief to everyone, including him, I imagine. Her mother had no living relatives, and we haven’t been able to find anyone else. There’s an attorney handling her affairs, her mother’s attorney. There’s some money, a residence to be sold, life insurance, and there will be more due to the collision. But Rebecca can’t live alone, not with daily amnesia for yesterday.”

He paused, then said, “We had a staff meeting to discuss an institution, a halfway house, a constant home attendant, companion. Anything. She’s very intelligent, as I said, and every single day she needs an explanation about why she’s where she is. She wants to go back to school, finish her studies.”

“What story did you tell her?”

He rubbed his eyes. “I told her that she had dropped off her mother and brother at the airport, which was the plan originally, and that she had driven back to her quad. There was a gas explosion, she was injured, her car totaled, and the quad was damaged and would have to undergo repairs. She accepted it since she had nothing to put in its place. I, or someone else, has told her that same story every day since then. Nine days in a row.”

“Good God,” Edith said.

He was watching her closely as he said, “What your research needs is a standard, textbook brain, one that doesn’t change with the changing seasons, a single brain that you can map layer by layer until you unravel the whole enchilada.”

“Cal, I can’t take on your patient.”

“You can. House her in one of those apartments behind the psych building. Make her a research assistant.” He picked up a folder that had been on the bench next to him and laid it on the table. “Everything we’ve learned about her, complete medical record, schools, everything. Read it overnight and come meet her tomorrow, and then decide.”

She shook her head. “Cal, no one can protect her outside an institution. On campus there are people who know her, who would commiserate, mention the accident, her mother and brother. Hysterical reaction, a trip to a mental institution—what? Will she notice the change of season? End of school year? That she failed to graduate? Until she can deal with the truth, she’ll need a constantly changing story to satisfy her about her situation.” She shook her head harder.

“Exactly,” Cal said. “That’s why a hired attendant wouldn’t really work. Someone who understands the whole situation is called for, a professional. Edie, commencement will be in another week, the campus will empty out, her friends will be gone. I’ll keep her until after the graduation ceremony. Then, as time passes the accident will fade from memory and there will be less and less likelihood of anyone ever mentioning it. We can come up with

a new story for her, and she would be safe there. No one talking to her would ever suspect her amnesia. She's engaging, witty, smart, and she should not be locked away."

When she still didn't touch the folder, he added, "Edie, perhaps you can cure her, or find the trigger that shuts down the memory. Perhaps a method to help others recover from amnesia." More softly he said, "Think of what it would mean to have one brain to work with, one that doesn't get bored, doesn't leave. You could get to the center with such a brain."

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The first two or three days would be the worst, Keith Adams told himself, leaving the Interstate to head to the condo where his mother and stepfather lived. He could hold up for a few days without any trouble, just smile and nod a lot. The problem was that Theodore Zoelich, his stepfather, had turned into a nut since his buy-out retirement, and his mother was stuck on a single refrain. She wanted a grandchild, and Keith was the only route to gaining one. Theodore was bored. Only sixty-two, early retirement, not a golfer or a fisherman, not a gambler, no discernible hobby interest, he had discovered conspiracies, and he saw them wherever he turned his gaze, or more recently, his telescope. Two or three days, Keith repeated under his breath. Smile. Nod.

For the past year Keith had taught earth science in a small obscure college in Idaho Falls, and the year before he had taught it in Wyoming, both one-year contracts. But Faye, his mother, always introduced him as a university professor, and in private asked in a brightly interested, non-prying way how his dissertation was coming. If her desire could make it happen, he would be teaching geniuses at Harvard, but in fact he had not touched the dissertation in the past two years.

It went more or less the way he had anticipated. Faye fluttered about, packing, repacking, making sure he had their car keys, the key to the cabin on the coast. She gave him their itinerary twice, and he didn't remind her that she had emailed it twice before. When he admired her hair, which she was letting go gray since Theodore's retirement, she said, "Well, you know how important it is for a grandchild to have a gray-haired grandma baking cookies for him."

"Mother, you don't know how to bake cookies."

"I can learn." See how far I'm willing to go to do my part, she implied by an arch look. He smiled.

“Keith, come see,” Theodore called from the living room where he had set up his telescope. “I want you to see for yourself what I’ve been talking about. Those men are going into the building. Just watch.” He turned the telescope over to Keith and picked up binoculars.

“Military,” Theodore said. “Can’t disguise military. I can tell every time.”

The condo was a dozen blocks from the university, with a clear view of several university buildings through openings between trees. Keith focused without moving the telescope. Two men in gray suits were striding toward the building.

“Professors,” he said.

“No way. Professors don’t dress like that, don’t walk like that. They slouch. And they don’t have haircuts like that.”

“Auditors, insurance adjustors, board of director members. They could be anyone.”

“Military. The one on the left, he came last week, and now he’s back with his superior. Nine in the morning like today. The first one went in, stayed an hour and marched out. And now he’s back. They’re up to something.”

Smile, Keith thought, moving away from the telescope as the two men entered the building many blocks away.

Theodore glanced toward the other end of the living room and lowered his voice. “I want you to keep a log for me. Be on duty at nine, and again at ten to eleven. Now and then through the day. But especially in the morning. Keep a record for me. Something’s going on and I could be the only one to suspect, but we have this goddamn trip planned and she’d have my scalp if I cancelled out.”

Keith nodded. “Sure. No problem.” Cancel! No way. He would promise to stand on his head in downtown Portland an hour a day if that’s what it would take to get them on their plane the next morning. They planned to visit Theodore’s east coast relatives for a week, spend a week in New York City, then fly to London to start a six-week vacation in Europe. Her life-long dream vacation, Faye had called it.

He had eight weeks to plan his next move. Everything he owned was now in the condo, his nine-year-old Honda parked outside, his bike locked in a rack in the rear of the building, and there was no job in sight. Spying for an hour a day was a small price to pay for eight weeks of freedom, eight weeks to consider his future. He smiled again, and nodded.

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He did his spying daily for the next week, as promised, and jotted down his results. Zilch. After fulfilling his duty, he often walked or rode his bike on the university grounds, winding in and out among the many buildings, visiting the library, the student union, and he realized he missed it all. The small colleges where he had taught would fit, grounds and all, in a corner of this campus. Not many students were about, just graduate students, a few summer session attendees, visitors. On that afternoon during his second week at home, he spotted a girl, woman—he corrected himself—whom he had seen several times either entering or leaving the building he now knew housed the psychology department. It was the same building the two men in suits had entered.

He got off his bike and walked it toward her. She was slender, five five, with shiny chestnut colored hair, short with a little curl. That was what he had noticed when he saw her through the lens of the telescope, shiny beautiful hair. The rest of her was as lovely as her hair, he realized, drawing near.

“Hi,” he said.

She glanced at him and smiled tentatively without speaking. She was carrying a paleontology textbook, one he recognized, and he nodded toward it. “I noticed the fossil book,” he said. “We used that a few times.”

“You’re studying paleontology, too?”

“Archeology. We had to read a couple of chapters about fossils. Make sure we could tell the difference between bones and hand-worked stones or something.”

She laughed. “The bones are more elegant.”

“And more likely to have teeth marks.”

She asked if he was a student here, and he found himself telling her about the two schools where he had taught. They both laughed when he

said the students couldn't handle it if they called the course archeology, it had to be earth science.

"At least you have your master's. Did you go here before you decided to teach?"

"Oregon State. Down in Corvallis. Where are you heading?"

"Nowhere in particular. Exercise. Maybe get a smoothie, or ice cream."

They walked and talked and laughed often. She told him that her mother lived in Silverton, not far from Salem, and about the gas explosion that had wrecked her car and the quad she had been living in. "It seems that I developed some kind of amnesia after the explosion and it's finally clearing up. Enough to let me finish one last paper and go into the graduate program in the fall. The quad's closed for renovations and they let me stay in an apartment on campus for now. Study, work in the psych lab for Dr. Dreisser, catch up. It keeps me pretty busy. As soon as they finish work on the quad I'll move back there. Another few days, probably."

"I'm house sitting for my folks this summer while they vacation in Rome, Paris, all those good places. Lucky stiffs."

They had reached the student union building, where they both had raspberry smoothies, and afterward started back to the psych building. "I should be out sifting dirt looking for trilobites or something," she said in mock distress. "How I spent last summer. Cooler in the lab."

"I should be looking for a job," he said, and changed the subject to movies.

Much too soon they had retraced their steps and approached her building. "I'm Keith, by the way," he said belatedly.

"Rebecca," she said. "I have to go back to work."

"See you tomorrow? About eleven, like today? Another smoothie or something?"

She smiled and nodded. "That would be nice. So long, Keith."

He watched her open the door to the building and enter before he got on his bike and started to pedal away. Tomorrow, he told himself, and

realized he was grinning like an idiot.

The next day she didn't show up. He waited until after two, then rode back to the condo. For three days he repeated this, then decided her quad must have reopened and she probably had moved. He didn't know which quad, and he didn't even know her last name. Just Rebecca.

Every day he fulfilled his duty at the telescope. No military, no suits, a few slouches, a few students. No Rebecca. He noted it in Theodore's notebook.

Then she appeared again. It was later than before, after four. He dashed from the condo, got on his bike and raced to the student union building. She was at an outside table with a smoothie before her, engrossed in the paleontology textbook.

He walked his bike to the table and said, "Hi, again."

She looked up almost absently, keeping her finger on a line in the book. Her smile was more tentative than before. She nodded.

"Have you moved back into the quad?" he asked.

"Is it finished?" she asked eagerly. "All done?"

"Don't you know?"

She shook her head. "I thought that's what you were going to tell me, that it's ready."

"I waited for you," he said, bewildered by her attitude, her distance, treating him like a complete stranger, one she was not interested in.

Her face was very mobile, her expression changing rapidly to reflect whatever she was feeling. Her polite expression changed, registered even more distance and caution as she looked at him with a frown. "Why? When?"

"Yesterday, the day before, the day before that."

She shook her head and closed the book with a snap. "Sorry, Mister. Wrong line."

"Rebecca! Don't you even remember me?"

“I never saw you before in my life! If you don’t leave, I’ll yell for security and charge you with stalking. Get lost!”

She jumped up and walked away swiftly, and he sat down hard at the little table.

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It didn’t make any sense, he told himself that night, pacing angrily. She had enjoyed talking with him, he knew she had, just as much as he had enjoyed being with her. The way they had laughed at the same things, that hadn’t been fake. Her easy laughter, that had been real. Instant rapport. Revealing things about themselves, something he had never done before, and her reserve had lessened as they talked. He hadn’t even thought to give her his cell phone number, or to get hers. They were to meet again, no call necessary.

That brush-off hadn’t been fake either. He had to accept her rejection. She really had not recognized him, remembered him, or else she was one of the greatest actresses ever.

And why wasn’t she out sifting dirt looking for fossils instead of working in a psych lab? He stopped moving. A double major? She had not mentioned anything like that. Dreisser. She had mentioned Dr. Dreisser.

He went to his laptop and looked up Dreissers, sorted through until he found Edith Dreisser at the university, then settled in to read about her. Brain research. Neurophysiology, psychiatry.

What did that have to do with a paleontology major? As an undergraduate, with lots of science and math, plus the other required classes, there couldn’t have been much time to spend in the psych lab. And with little or no training in research techniques in the field of psychology, what could she do? File clerk? Gofer? She had a key to the outer door, he remembered. They didn’t hand out keys to flunkies. He shook his head, paced some more, then sat down hard again. Subject of an experiment? That made more sense than anything else he could come up with, and he considered it. Brainwashing? A new technique for brainwashing? Memory eradication? The image of the two men in suits came to mind, and he tried to push it out again. Theodore’s conspiracy bug had infected him, he thought with a groan. Auditors, he reminded himself. Tax consultants. Trustees. Someone had expected them, admitted them to the building.

No matter how much he tried to make sense of her turnaround, he kept coming back to the thought that no normal person could have forgotten spending two hours with someone else only a few days later. Not unless that person had been brainwashed or drugged, or was nuts. And she definitely was not crazy.

It was very late when he finally went to bed, but he had a plan of action for the coming day or two. He knew how to dig, and dig he would. He intended to sift through whatever dirt was at hand and find the real Rebecca.

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Every morning Edith let herself in at Rebecca's apartment at seven and started coffee. Sometimes Rebecca was already up, sometimes not. Every day Edith told her the revised story, knowing it would have to be revised again, then again, but there was no help for that. She prepared breakfast and, as they ate it, she explained to Rebecca her role in the lab, how she was supposed to be catching up on her work, write one last paper, and then start the graduate program in the fall. Rebecca accepted the story day after day.

The unexpected part was that Edith had become very fond of the girl, had come to agree that Rebecca could not be placed in an institution of any sort. Who would explain her situation to her day by day? Who would take her to a movie now and then, or out for dinner? Who would take her shopping? Treat her like a daughter? She bit her lip at that and rejected the idea.

Although she recognized her own conflicts concerning Rebecca, she felt helpless to control them. The research was going so well that it was extraordinary. It would take years to analyze the data she was accumulating and for the first time, it would all be congruent, coherent. And Rebecca didn't get bored. That was the main advantage. She didn't remember the images, the scents or sounds from one day to the next, and reacted each time as if it were the first time. Layer by layer Edith would be able to track the firing neurons, the many branches, connections, interactions. It filled her with a sense of awe. And a sense of dread. She wanted Rebecca to be well, and she wanted to continue using her until the work was complete. Cal had said she might find the trigger, but would she be able to pull it if she knew it was within her reach? She didn't know, and rejected that question too when it occurred.

After breakfast, when they entered the lab that morning, Edith

introduced everyone. "Rebecca, this is Angela, one of my graduate assistants. And this is Rob, another one. We'll all be working together."

As always it was treated as a first meeting and they all made the proper responses. Early on, when she had caught Rob eyeing Rebecca with a speculative look, she had told him sharply to back off and stay backed off. He had done so, but she kept a watch on him when Rebecca was in the lab.

"What we'll do," Edith told Rebecca that morning, "is have you sit here and wear this helmet. No electricity or anything like that. It's connected to a terminal to record your responses that are fed into the computer as you watch images on the screen, or hear sounds, or even smell things. One hour and you're done for the session. Okay with that?" She showed her the helmet made of microfiber, an electrical insulating layer, and a fine wire mesh lining. It was lightweight and fit snugly, like a cloche. "To make sure there's good contact, I'll spray your hair with this wetting agent, mostly water. It washes right off, or even brushes off when you're done."

Rebecca looked at the helmet, then nodded. "Okay. Do I say anything, or do anything?"

"Nope. Just make yourself comfortable and watch the screen."

And that was it. Images of familiar objects; brief action scenes of planes, or boats; animals; more violent scenes of fighting; car wrecks; a baby crying; a scene blatantly pornographic; a tiger snarling, as if prepared to attack.... Interspersed with the images were the sounds: squealing tires; a woman's laughter; crashing noises; music...

Then it was over. It would be repeated day after day, the same tape, the same images, the same smells, and they all would be new to Rebecca, her reaction spontaneous without a trace of boredom or anticipation corrupting the data.

Late in the afternoon they would have a second session with a different tape. Two hours of data day by day by day, six days a week. Edith would have made it seven days a week, but she knew Rob would balk, and she needed him too much to risk a rebellion. He was one of the best grads she had ever had. They would end up with years of work ahead, revolutionary work, and he would be indispensable. They would finally have a three dimensional neural map of a functioning human brain.

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It was Friday of Keith's fourth week at home. No suits. No Rebecca. He jotted the absence of suits in Theodore's notebook, then he called Dr. Dreisser's number at the psychology department. He got voice mail, and left a curt message: "Dr. Dreisser, my name is Keith Adams and I have to see you about Rebecca Hardesty." He left his number and prepared to wait for her return call. The times he had seen Rebecca through the telescope, before actually meeting her, had usually been at or shortly after eleven. Whatever they were doing to her was over by then and she was free, apparently. He was prepared to wait no longer than twelve, when he would call again, and make clear that he knew illicit research was being conducted, and he would expose it unless Dreisser talked with him.

Edith sat at her desk tapping her fingers on it, regarding the telephone with resignation. It was bound to happen, she thought. She had known that someone from Rebecca's past would show up eventually. During their long talks Rebecca had said there had been no real relationships in the past, just a few brief romances, nothing serious. That had been a tremendous relief. How had this Adams person traced Rebecca to Edith? That was the question. There was no point in asking Rebecca if she had run into him while out walking. But if she had, what had she told him? An old friend would know her story was false, of course.

She shook her head and gave up speculating, then called the number Adams had left.

Keith's hand was sweating when he snatched up his telephone. "Keith Adams," he snapped.

"Mr. Adams, I'm Edith Dreisser. You wish to consult with me?"

"No, Dr. Dreisser. I want to know just what the hell you're doing to Rebecca Hardesty. Why are you messing with her mind? Feeding her a pack of lies? That's what I want to talk about."

"I see," she said coolly. "What exactly is your relationship with Ms. Hardesty? Why do you think I would talk to you about her?"

"Because if you don't, I intend to send an email I already composed to the president of the university, with copies to the provost, two reporters, and several bloggers, accusing you of conducting unethical research, possibly brainwashing a subject, or otherwise tampering with her memory."

"Mr. Adams, just answer one question. How long have you known

her?”

“What difference...? I met her a week ago, but I’ve looked into the things she told me, and it’s nothing but a tissue of lies.”

“Come on around, Mr. Adams. When you arrive call me and I’ll open the door for you. You’re right. We must talk.”

He was surprised by her when she admitted him. He knew she was fifty-one, but she looked younger, with a compact body, dressed in blue jeans and a T-shirt with colorful hummingbirds printed on it. Her hair was dark blond, long, held back with a rubber band. She nodded to him and motioned for him to come in.

“We’ll go to my office,” she said, turned and led the way through the deserted corridor flanked with closed doors. It was very quiet in the building.

She was as surprised by him as he evidently was by her. Younger than she had expected, possibly even a student, tall and lanky, with wind-blown dark hair, a deep tan, and startlingly blue eyes. Also, he was carrying a laptop and he had a grim expression.

In her office, cluttered almost past usefulness, she motioned toward a chair, and took her own chair behind her desk. It was covered with printouts, stacks of folders, notebooks...

“Mr. Adams, I assume that you and Rebecca talked out on the campus—”

He cut her off. “Look, let’s not spar,” he said. “She thinks her mother’s alive and well in Silverton, and that her brother’s in Atlanta at work. And they’re both dead. That’s the starting place.”

Edith shook her head. “Not really, Mr. Adams. She’s suffering from a rare form of amnesia. That’s the starting place.”

“Did you induce it?” he demanded, leaning forward, both hands clenched. “Did you tell her there was a gas explosion? That her quad’s being renovated? That she’ll move back there in a day or two?”

“I really don’t see that any of this is any business of yours,” Edith said deliberately, coolly. “You’re no more than a casual acquaintance. I’m a psychiatrist and she’s my patient.”

“I’m making it my business,” he said. “I met her, talked to her, and that’s reason enough.”

“I see,” Edith said, studying him. After a moment, she nodded. “I’ll tell you about her,” she said. She had no doubt that he had the letter on his computer, that a click of a button would send it on its way, and he knew to whom to send it to ensure questions, an investigation, likely a halt to her work with Rebecca, even if only a temporary halt. His boyish looks were deceptive, she decided, and she told him the story Cal had told her months earlier.

Keith felt sandbagged. She lived one day at a time. Period. One day at a time. No yesterday, just today.

Edith, watching him, could see belief erase all traces of hostility. He knew it was true. They must have met more than once, and Rebecca had forgotten him. He knew it was true.

“Can you cure her?” he asked after a prolonged silence. His voice had become husky.

“I don’t know. There has never been a cure. Spontaneous recovery is what usually happens, if there is any recovery. Often the condition is permanent. Her case is unique. There is nothing in the literature that describes it, and I sent a case history to colleagues to find out if any of them knew of another incident like this. No one else has ever seen amnesia manifest in this way.”

Keith stood up and gazed about the office helplessly, sat down again. “Have you tried telling her about the real accident again?”

“Twice,” Edith said. “Exactly the same outcome as before.”

“Jesus,” he said. “Oh, Jesus.” He looked ready to weep.

“Mr. Adams, Keith, I’m trying to find a cure, a neural pathway to whatever it is blocking her memory. A trigger, you might say. Meanwhile, for your own sake, put her out of mind. Live your own life.”

The light had gone out of his eyes, she thought with pity, when he turned his gaze to her. “Tell me about your meeting,” she said. “Perhaps it will give me a clue.”

He told her about both times, and she nodded. “It was the shared interest in fossils, her paleontology textbook. I think the second encounter is far more likely to be her usual response to a stranger’s intrusion into her space.”

“She doesn’t have a life,” he said dully. “Start each day with a fairy tale, spend time in your lab, walk a little, read the same text day after day, go to bed, sleep, do it all again the next day and the next.”

“Keith, in her mind she just spent a weekend with her family, and before that in her classes, with friends. A day off, that’s all this is for her. She isn’t lonely. Every day is new for her.”

“What are you doing to treat her?” he asked then. “You’re not drugging her, are you? What is the treatment?”

Edith sighed, but there seemed little point now in keeping anything from him. She told him about mapping the neural pathways. “It’s like peeling off one layer after another to see where the connections lead. Someone suggested like the layers of an onion, but that’s too gross, too big. Like the thinnest possible tissue paper. The computer program will ignore each layer after it is recorded, and go on to the next. The secret may well be there, Keith, someplace where the connection fails to fire.”

“You can’t get those reactions without magnetic imaging or something like that,” he said. “Are you using X-rays on her every day? CT scans? I thought we already had pretty good models of the brain.”

“Not really. Think of a globe where we know where the mountains are, the continents, the major rivers. I’m looking for the lesser rivers, the tributaries, for the myriad connections that exist. Why does a particular scent invoke a strong childhood memory? What interactions result in that? How many other interactions are ignored, are dead ends? You’re right, though, in a sense. The brain electricity is too faint for any non-invasive techniques we used in the past to get beyond the major systems—the visual cortex, olfactory, cognitive, and so on. But fine copper wire coated with nanocopper is virtually without resistance. It can pick up the current far below those. That’s what I’m using. With our methods in the past we found the continents, some mountain ranges, and now I’m finding finer details. In Rebecca’s case, I hope to find the dam blocking the flow. And then find a way to remove it.”

He rubbed his eyes, then said, “When she regains her memory, will she remember this, the time it was screwed up?”

“I don’t know,” Edith said. “I just don’t know what to expect.”

“I want to keep seeing her,” he said after a moment, speaking again in the firm, not-to-be-denied voice he had used on the phone, when he first made his demands. “She should have something to remember more than a daily grind. I want to keep seeing her. Take her to dinner, to a movie, dancing, to concerts. I won’t hurt her,” he said more softly. “God knows, I won’t hurt her.”

Just as softly, Edith said, “Keith, she could break your heart.”

He might not have heard. “It will be up to her, won’t it? She isn’t a prisoner.”

“It’s up to her,” Edith agreed. “But she has to be back in her apartment by nine-thirty.” He looked ready to erupt, and she said gently, “Keith, it’s not my curfew. By nine-thirty she is exhausted. By ten she’s asleep.”

He nodded. “Curfew. Okay.”

Then he lifted his laptop and opened it, turned the screen to let her see the letter he had written, and he deleted it. She had not doubted for a second that the letter existed, was ready to send. “Thank you,” she said.

A short time later she led him to the lab. “I’ll introduce you to my assistants, and Rebecca,” she said.

Inside the lab there were several desks and computers, file cabinets, stacks of papers.... In the corner at a desk Rebecca was reading her paleontology text. Both Angela and Rob were at computers, concentrating on scrolling data that appeared to be composed of numbers and symbols. Two printers were turning out hard copies of something.

“Time out for a second,” Edith said just inside the doorway. “I want you to meet an old friend, Keith Adams.”

That surprised him, but he nodded as she introduced her assistants and then Rebecca. She looked up from her book with an interested expression, and not a hint of recognition. Keith took a step or two closer to her, peering at the open page of her book.

“Fossils? Paleontology? We had to read a couple of chapters in that

same book. To teach us the difference between fossils and worked stones, I guess.”

“If a bone is completely mineralized, why isn’t it a stone?” she said, smiling slightly.

“It has its own special category,” he said. “One is shaped by hand, and the other sits and waits for nature to shape it. Fossils are sedentary rocks.”

Rebecca laughed.

“You know where a person could get a sandwich or something?”

“Sure. The student union has a grill.”

“Join me for lunch? I’ll tell you the difference between fossils and true rocks, let you surprise the hell out of your instructor.”

She glanced at Edith.

“Why don’t you show him where it is,” Edith said. “Just be back by three.”

Rebecca hesitated momentarily, then closed the book. “Okay,” she said. “We can argue the point about when is a stone not a stone.”

Across the room Angela was smiling broadly, but Rob looked disturbed, withdrawn. Disturbed, Edith thought again. Why? As far as she had been able to tell, he had backed off completely, and had not crossed the line, but rather treated Rebecca like a sister. Or a highly valued experimental subject.

Keith and Rebecca walked out together talking, and before the outer door closed, Edith heard her laughter again.

* * * *

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, Keith thought, and fully understood the meaning, although when he read it as an arrogant teenaged boy he had scoffed and said, “Make up your mind.” He was euphoric when he was with her, and it was hellish at night, mornings before she appeared, and when she reentered the psych building leaving him outside. He read every article he could find concerning amnesia, and did

not come across a single clue to undo what an evil fate had done to her. No one knew why it happened, why it stopped happening, when it did stop. It could last for seconds, hours, months, years, forever. She might remember the interlude or she might not. It was too variable to predict.

They talked, laughed, joked, argued a little. He suspected that Dreisser was sending her out every day, possibly even agreeing with him that Rebecca needed more than the daily grind, but he didn't really care why, he simply felt grateful.

Then, on duty at the telescope, he saw the suits again. He watched them march to the door, wait a moment until someone opened it, and enter. It was ten after nine. He made a note, and only then realized that he was in week seven. Faye and Theodore would return in another week, and he had not come up with a job, or any plan for the future. The suits emerged ten minutes later. He made a note.

Every day he found a new way to introduce himself to Rebecca, using her textbook as a doorway most often. If she didn't have it with her, he simply asked if she knew where a guy could grab a sandwich, or he came up with something else. As long as he didn't overreach, she was open and friendly, and as they began to walk together and talk, her reserve gradually melted away. He knew he couldn't touch her, or hint that he knew anything about her, or a wall would fall into place with him on the outside. The best of times and the worst of times.

It was winding down, Edith knew. They were nearing the limits of accessible data. Then what? she was asking herself more and more frequently. There was no answer. Of course, the work would be all-consuming when they started the analysis, but that was aside from her question of then what.

Rebecca was starting to express concern that she still had a paper to write and school would begin in a few weeks. She made notes feverishly, and every morning Edith stole the notes and put them in her own purse. Rebecca would have to be told some version of the truth, she decided, not that her mother and brother were dead, but that she had this rare form of amnesia.... Sitting at her desk, tapping her fingers on it, she tried to imagine what it would mean to hear that whatever she did today would be forgotten tomorrow. That her life had basically come to a halt months before. Like a mayfly, she thought. There was no life before or after today. Life without purpose, without goals, hopes. Mere existence for now, this brief period.

There was a knock on her door, and she welcomed the interruption of

her dismal thoughts. "Come on in," she called.

Rob entered, looking as wretched as she was feeling. "Can I talk to you?" he asked hesitantly.

"You know you can," she said. "Have a seat."

Rob Crawford was twenty-eight, a little too thin, and very intense. Sometimes, talking to her alone, he became almost tongue-tied, but the shyness, awkwardness, whatever it was vanished completely in the lab or discussing the work. He was very talented, destined to become an excellent researcher in the field of neuroscience, one of her prize students, she often thought, as she did that day waiting for him to begin.

"Dr. Dreisser, I've done something terrible," he said finally. He looked agonized.

"Relax, Rob," she said. "Take a deep breath and tell me about it."

He swallowed hard and nodded. Haltingly, with awkward pauses, sometimes mumbling, avoiding her gaze, he started. "A couple of months ago a guy came here. He called me first and I let him in. He was a ... a recruiter for the army. They're looking for people. You know, psychologists, psychiatrists, neuroscience majors ... People like that."

He shifted uncomfortably. "I said not interested. He came back with another guy, a major, and they said it was a case of national security and swore me to secrecy. If I told anyone I could be prosecuted. The major knew all about your work, Dr. Dreisser. He said he read your article. He said ... he said I had to cooperate with them, it's the law. He had Rebecca's hospital records and everything."

Edith had grown more and more tense as he talked. She got up and went to a side table where there was a carafe and mugs. She poured them both coffee, and put a mug in front of Rob. He looked at her gratefully.

"Cooperate in what way, Rob?" she said then, sitting again at her desk.

"Report on how the work is coming. If Rebecca is recovering her memory. Things like that." He took a sip of coffee, and kept his gaze on the mug. "They call me every week for a report," he mumbled. "I'm not supposed to tell you. Or anyone else."

“What else, Rob?” Edith asked when he remained silent too long.

He still didn’t look at her. “He, the major, began asking a couple of weeks ago how close to finishing we are. He, I think he knows about diminishing returns, and stuff like that. He came today,” he said more miserably than before. “He wants, wanted, a date or something. Will we be done with this phase next week, this week. You know, just when we’ll move on. And he wanted to go into the lab.” He cleared his throat, sipped coffee, as if his mouth was too dry to continue. “I wouldn’t let him go in, but he looked in at the door. I should have told you right away, but he said ... I mean, national security, classified, prosecution. I mean, he already seemed to know all about it, all about Rebecca. I should have told you,” he mumbled. “I’m sorry, Dr. Dreisser. I’m sorry.”

“Rob, he played the trump card. National security. It’s okay. I’m glad you told me now. We’ll go on from here.”

“I’ll resign, quit, go away if you want me to,” he said, finally looking up.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Of course you won’t quit. What you’ll do is go back to work and let me think about this.” She stood up and walked around her desk, took the mug from his hands, and opened the office door. “Off you go, back to work.”

He jumped up and hurried to the doorway, where he paused and, mumbling again, said, “Thanks. I mean ... thanks.” He blushed furiously when she smiled at him, and then rushed out.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake!” she muttered under her breath, closing the door after him. That last glance at her had expressed nothing short of adoration.

All right, she thought then, resuming her seat at the desk. They knew about the work. Everyone in the field who read the journal knew what she was attempting, with only enough success in the early days to demonstrate that the approach was at least feasible. But the major also knew about Rebecca, and that changed the feasibility from a doubtful possible to probable. One subject, forever naive, one brain to study, and months now put into the effort signified that she was getting results.

He knew about diminishing returns, probably a scientist himself, as well as a major. Army intelligence? CIA? An agency she had never heard of? What would they do with her work if they had it? That major seemed to grasp research methods; he must know that analysis could take many

months, years even. They would classify it, she thought then. They had people who would understand the significance, who would find a way to use it for their own purposes. She tried to banish that thought, that fear, but it persisted. It might never be published if they seized it.

A deep chill swept her then as she thought: even if they weren't interested in the work itself, they could seize the subject, that forever naive subject who forgot all her yesterdays.

Her thoughts were swirling chaotically, and she forced herself to stop, to take it one step at a time. Hospital records. They must have subpoenaed the hospital for them. They had known what they were after. Data mining, searching for amnesia? Possibly, she decided. And she was listed as Rebecca's doctor. A five-minute search would have uncovered her recent paper regarding a new approach to mapping of the brain.

They could take Rebecca, she knew without doubt. Disappear her. She might never surface again. The perfect, forever naive subject who would never reveal the nature of whatever experimentation she had undergone.

She would talk to the attorney who was handling Rebecca's affairs, she decided a few minutes later. Set up a guardianship, make her a ward of the state or something, get a court order forbidding access to her. He would know what legal steps could be taken. She had little or no faith in the law stopping them, not if recent precedents were followed. They could seize whomever they pleased, apparently, but that was the first step. At least try.

She called him and when he said he would be happy to see her, of course, she said, "Now? I could come right over to your office."

Obviously surprised, he said now would be fine.

Fred DeLancey was his name, a big, athletic man, a mountain climber, with pictures of mountains he had climbed all over his office. He pursed his lips as he listened, then he said, "It's a bit tricky, isn't it? No one's made an overt motion toward her at this time."

"I doubt there will be preliminary moves on their part, if they follow the same pattern I've read about. They'll just appear, demand her, and leave, taking her with them."

He nodded absently. "I'll need a day or two to assess the situation,

decide on a course we can adopt. It would be good if you could squirrel her away for a few days. Keep her out of sight, out of reach. You think they'll move this weekend?"

"I think so. That major looked over the lab this morning, probably to see how much equipment they'll haul away. They know we're winding down, that this phase is nearing the end. The worst case scenario is for them to arrive with a moving van on Saturday." It was Thursday.

"Dr. Dreisser, why do you think they'd seize your research as well as Ms. Hardesty?"

"They will not want it published. Anyone trained in the field will realize that I used one subject throughout even if that is not stated or if it is redacted. And with some reflection, they will know that she was naive, not bored, throughout. The next step will be to surmise that the government now has that same subject, and I think with the secrecy mania being exhibited by the current government that is something they would not want known." When he continued to look puzzled, she said, "A trained researcher will know instantly the value of a naive subject who can be subjected to many variations of any given procedure until the most efficacious one is determined."

When she left his office it was with a despairing certainty that he would come up empty-handed. A preemptive court order based on nothing but her fear of what might happen, that's what they wanted from a judge. And she had not been able to guess how much of her fear DeLancey believed was justified. He said he would give her a call on Monday.

* * * *

That night Edith stalked about her small house furiously, making plan after plan, discarding them. She imagined dialogues—he would say so and so and she would respond such and such, then he would threaten, and.... Angrily she discarded that kind of speculation, also. In every case the end was the same with imagined scenes of men carrying out computers, boxes of printouts, stashing them inside a black van. With a man with a buzz cut taking Rebecca out to another black car, something long and shiny, driving away with her. Rebecca would look back to her in bewilderment in that scene.

It was very late when she fell into bed, into a dream of myriad lights flashing, like a condensed Milky Way put in motion. Dots of light raced from one point to another, flashing as molecules were exchanged, racing on,

gathering speed, slowing down, fading out or growing stronger. She heard her own voice lecturing: "There are no non-stop flights in the space of a human brain. There is no one-way track." She came wide awake with the sound.

"No!" she said. "God damn it, no!" It was five in the morning. By the time she got up, made coffee and showered, she knew what she was going to do.

After the morning session that day she did not suggest to Rebecca that she should take a walk to relax. Instead, as soon as Rebecca was seated at the corner desk with her open book, Edith left the building. Keith appeared almost instantly. He never waited for Rebecca in any way that might appear obvious to her, but he watched the building.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "Is something wrong with her?"

"No. She'll be out in a few minutes. Just listen and please don't ask questions. I can't answer any questions at this time. This afternoon she'll be delayed a little, but she'll come out at about four-thirty. I'll be with her. I want you to take her somewhere. Do you have a car?"

He nodded. Three available cars, he thought. "Then what?"

"I want her out of sight for a couple of days, until Monday afternoon. That's all."

"Why?" He couldn't help it. The question came of its own accord.

"No questions for now. Is there someplace where you can spend a day or two? Even a motel, if that's all there is."

"I know someplace private," he said. "Is she willing?"

"I won't tell her until after the next session. I'll go to her apartment with her and tell her, let her pack a few things, and we'll meet you out here." She looked at him searchingly, then said, "You realize that she'll need a plausible explanation in the morning. That she becomes exhausted early and has to go to sleep around ten."

"I'll take care of her," he said. "I know."

"I think you do," Edith said. "One more thing. I don't want anyone to know about this. No one. Do you know where the visitors' parking lot is?" At

his nod, she said, "Leave your car over there. I don't want to know what you're driving or where you'll take her. You have my cell phone number if you need me, and I have yours. I'll call you on Monday."

He nodded grimly, his mind summoning up an image of the suits, Theodore's conviction that something was going on.

"Good. I'll see you later," Edith said. She turned and walked back to the building.

Edith was experiencing an icy calm, but Keith was almost manic at the thought of two or three days with Rebecca. "The only way anyone will get to her is over my blood-soaked body," he said under his breath. He retreated to his viewpoint to wait for another chance meeting with a stranger.

* * * *

As soon as the afternoon session ended that day, Edith said, "Okay, kiddies. Wrap it up. Announcement time." Angela and Rob swivelled around at attention, and Rebecca stopped walking. She had been on the way to the washroom to towel off her hair.

"Something's come up," Edith said. "I can't be here most of tomorrow, so I'm declaring a holiday. A long weekend, two whole days! Any objections?"

Angela clapped, but Rob looked miserable. She was very afraid that he had begun biting his fingernails, but she couldn't deal with that at the moment. She glanced at Rebecca. "I'll walk over to your apartment with you." To the others she said, "I'll see you on Monday. Have fun."

After she stopped by her office to pick up a large briefcase, she and Rebecca left the building by a rear door. A short distance away was a fenced area with a locked gate, and behind the fence was a courtyard and eight or ten small apartments, used by short-time visitors, lecturers, seminar leaders, others who came, did a stint for a week or longer, then left. There were half a dozen grills in the courtyard, picnic tables, shade trees, a comfortable, quiet and private retreat from a noisy campus most of the year. Now, in late summer, only three of the apartments were being used.

Inside Rebecca's unit, Edith said, "I want to try something new with you. I've brought aboard another member of our team, a young man named Keith Adams, and he'll assist me in this."

Rebecca laughed. "I already met him," she exclaimed. "I think he's been looking over the campus. He seems awfully nice."

"He is nice," Edith said. "I thought the two of you would get along. I want to try a change of scene with you for a couple of days, see if it jogs your memory. I believe that such a change can be quite beneficial."

"Go somewhere with Keith?" Rebecca said doubtfully.

"Yes. He's trustworthy and he'll take good care of you. He'll be working for me, and he knows the rules. You have absolutely nothing to be concerned about with him."

"Where will we go?"

Edith shook her head. "That's part of the experiment, not to know too soon. Just somewhere different." She lifted the empty briefcase. "Go pack a few things, a nightshirt or gown, robe, slippers, things like that. No more than you can fit into the case."

"More and more mysterious," Rebecca said. "Okay. You're the doctor."

Edith closed her eyes when Rebecca left to pack. The doctor, she thought bitterly. For all the good she was doing, she might as well be a strip dancer. Do no harm, she thought even more bitterly. Right. She was missing something, she knew, maybe a small detail that could have helped, maybe something big and significant. Something kept eluding her. Or her preoccupation with her research was blinding her to that something.

After Rebecca reentered the psych building that day, Keith was galvanized into frantic activity. He raced back to the condo and threw clothes into his backpack, added extra sweatshirts, piled rain gear on a chair to be tossed into the back seat. He moved his mother's car from the covered parking space and put his Honda there. Hers was a Prius. She was doing her part, she had said when she bought it. He made coffee and filled a Thermos and put the cabin key in his pocket. He had to go shopping, ice for a small cooler, munchies, cheese, cream, fruit, juice. She didn't drink carbonated drinks or beer. She had said ruefully that they burned her tongue.

At a quarter after four he pulled into the parking lot, a ten minute walk from the psych building. That day he made it in five minutes, then had to

wait an agonizing twenty minutes for them to appear.

She had to trust him, Edith thought as they left the apartment and walked around the building to the front entrance. She was placing this girl in his hands for the coming days and she had to trust him. It wasn't the days that worried her, she thought then, but the long nights. Rebecca had to be in bed by ten, and he would no doubt be up for hours after that. She spotted him at the end of the walk, at the edge of the access street that wound in and out around the buildings. The long nights, she thought again. And Rebecca had to be asleep by ten.

She almost stopped walking with the phrase repeating in her mind. She had to be asleep. My God! she thought then. That could be it. That compulsion, that need could be part of the amnesia syndrome! Not simple fatigue, not a lifelong habit, part of the syndrome.

When they drew near Keith, she said to Rebecca, "Wait here a second, will you? Last minute instructions to your escort."

She went on ahead when Rebecca stopped. "Her things are in here," she told Keith, handing him the briefcase. "One thing I want you to try. Don't let her go to sleep if you can help it. Keep her awake as many hours past ten as you can."

"No Doz pills," he said promptly. "Lots of coffee."

If she had thought of it earlier, she could have provided something, but it was too late. No Doz should work. She motioned for Rebecca to join them. "Your escort is ready and waiting. And since you two have already met, no introductions are needed, I think. I'll see you in a couple of days. Good luck!"

"You never even mentioned that you were working for Dr. Dreisser," Rebecca said accusingly.

"What would your reaction have been if I'd said I intended to take you away for a day or two?"

"You would have seen a new speed record set."

They were talking animatedly as they walked away, two young people, students to all appearances. He carried a briefcase, nothing remarkable, nothing memorable if anyone even noticed them. Edith returned to the psych building.

* * * *

“The plan,” Keith said on the way to the car, “is first to go to a supermarket. I want to buy some foam cups for later. Hot coffee. And then Starbucks to fill a Thermos. I put coffee in it, but Mother’s coffee is pretty bad. I’ll dump it and fill it with decent coffee. Okay?”

“Do you have sugar? And something for breakfast? I hate not having something to eat in the morning until you can get out and find an open restaurant.”

He groaned. “No sugar, no breakfast. Your department while I find cups.” That would work out great, he thought. Give him a chance to find No Doz while she was busy. He continued with the plan. “After the housekeeping stuff, a restaurant for dinner before we hit the road. Traffic’s going to be stop and start for the next couple of hours. Friday night, get out of town night. You know any good restaurants nearby?”

“A couple,” she said. “Italian, Mexican, Chinese, Japanese, Moroccan, French, Brazilian...”

* * * *

As soon as Angela and Rob left, Edith checked the lab, made sure everything was turned off, locked up, and went home. Eat something, she told herself, nap. That was laughable. She had never been able to nap, and she knew she would not be able to that evening. There was too much on her mind, too much to do. She began to assemble the things she knew she would need. A stack of CDs, a plastic trash bag, big envelope, a padded one to go inside it.... She remembered that she should eat something and scrambled eggs and made toast, then had little appetite for it.

* * * *

They chose Italian, and were ready to start driving at a quarter after seven. By nine-thirty they would be at the coast and stop for a short walk, have coffee. If she yawned after that, he would stop and they would have more coffee, and each time hers would be spiked.

“It was silly not to tell me where we’re going,” Rebecca said as soon as he turned onto Highway 26. “Now the question is where on the coast?”

“Newport. My folks have a cabin there.”

She sighed. "That's where we always headed when we were kids. Nye Beach, Agate Beach, down past Florence to the dunes to swim in the lakes there. Childhood is wasted on the young. That's what I think. As soon as you get old enough to really appreciate it, you're too busy to just leave everything and take off. I haven't been to the coast since last fall."

* * * *

At eight Edith returned to the psych building. Any colleagues who had been around during the day should be gone by then, and she could not put it off until later because after ten the courtyard by the apartments would be off limits to anyone except the residents. She had no fear of being seen by the cleaning people or a watchman. She often worked into the night.

She entered the lab and locked the door, then turned on all the computers. Three were dedicated to the research project, the fourth was a general-use machine. She had warned Angela and Rob in the beginning that if she caught anyone surfing the Internet, using email or playing games on a dedicated computer, she would turn that person inside out. Suddenly she recalled something her grandfather had said when she was very small, no doubt doing something forbidden. "You do that again and I'll jerk a knot in your tail," he had rumbled. She smiled at the memory that had been locked away for more than forty years.

She examined the files then, starting with Rob's computer that held all the data from the first trial, labeled Map 1, up to and including Rebecca's, number 5. Nothing else was on the computer, and she started copying the whole disk to CDs. She repeated this with Angela's machine, started copying, and went on to the third one that held all the images and sounds she had assembled to put together the final tapes she used. That one would take longer, she suspected, and started the process. The general-use machine held her interest for a few minutes, then she turned it off again. Nothing there concerned the research.

Her next step was to gather all the hard copies, reams of printouts, and put them in the trash bag. Leaving the computers copying data, she took the bag to her office and added the printouts on her desk. She scanned pages of her hand-written notes in two notebooks and, using her own computer, copied the scanned material onto disk, then added the notebooks to the trash bag.

As soon as she was certain she had all the paper copies, she carried the trash bag through the building, out the back door, on to the courtyard

where she used all six grills to distribute them, and finally set them on fire. She felt only an icy calm as she watched paper catch fire, curl, and burn.

“What will Dr. Hardesty do when she finally gets grant money?” Keith asked, driving. They were near enough to the ocean now that he could smell it. It was almost coffee time.

“Dr. Hardesty,” she said. “Sounds good, doesn’t it. Dr. Hardesty will find Lucy’s ancestors, and then track her descendants until she finds the first one to leave Africa and head for Europe.” She paused, then added, “Admittedly it might take awhile. Meanwhile, what will Dr. Adams do with his grant money?”

“Find Atlantis,” he said, his hands tightening on the steering wheel. Fairy tale stuff, he thought. Might as well say he would find a lost civilization on Mars.

“Oh dear,” she said. “I was hoping you’d be around to dig holes for me to poke into looking for bones. But you’ll be deep in the ocean somewhere.”

“Okay, I’ll dig holes.”

“And I’ll come along and tip my hat and say, ‘Dr. Adams, I presume.’”

Neither one was laughing any longer. In a lower voice then she said, “Do you think you’ll hang around when classes start next month?”

“I’ll be around,” he said.

* * * *

It took longer to burn paper than she had anticipated. Accidental fires seemed to race along, but a deliberate fire was stubborn; papers burned around the edges, and those inside resisted the flames. She relighted one grill and inspected the others to find more unburned papers. She should have brought something to stir them with, she realized. She looked under the trees until she found a stick and that made it go faster. She had thought at first that she would shred them, but the shredder was old and slow and it didn’t cross cut, just spat out strips of paper. She had envisioned long tables with people patiently putting together strips of paper, and decided to go with fire.

* * * *

In Cannon Beach they walked down a street or two. There were a lot of people out and about; shops were open, teenagers were singing a school song, marching four abreast.

“Keith,” she said in a faint voice, “can we go back to the car? I’m really tired. Doesn’t seem fair, does it? You do all the driving, and I’m the one who’s tired.”

“No problem. We’ll get out of this and I’ll fix you Dr. Adams’ rejuvenating, secret formula elixir, guaranteed to make you feel like a kid or your money back.”

He drove south a short distance, pulled over at a viewpoint turn out, and poured the coffee. He made hers very sweet, with a lot of cream, and he stirred a No Doz tablet into it.

“Wow!” she said after a sip. “That’s really good! Like a cappuccino. Patent that formula, Dr. Adams.”

“Aim to please, ma’am,” he said. “Just aim to please.”

* * * *

The papers were all ashes, the ashes stirred to dead black heaps, and Edith was back inside. The computers had all stopped working with Disk Full messages on the monitor screens. She put in new disks, then went to her office to make a pot of coffee. She labeled the filled disks, put them in sleeves and the sleeves in the padded envelope.

She began to examine her own computer. Everything she wanted to keep private she moved to a new file she named Keep Out and, finished with that, she copied Keep Out to disk and put it with the others.

When all the disks were complete, she had seven in the envelope, and finally she sat down at Rob’s computer and keyed in new instructions, starting with the first file, Map number 1. She repeated this with the other computers, including her own file Keep Out, then leaned back in her chair and only then realized that tears were on her cheeks, her eyes were burning. Angrily she wiped them with the back of her hand.

* * * *

They ate chips and drank juice and Rebecca babbled as Keith drove

south on the black, winding mountain road to Newport. When her babble slowed down and she yawned, he stopped and they had coffee, and afterward she babbled again.

Finally they arrived at the cabin on a high point overlooking the ocean, invisible, but audible in the rhythm of the surf. It was ten minutes after twelve, and she was still wide awake, filled with nervous energy.

They carried everything inside. "I'll make a fire," he said. "It's cold in here." He started to crumple paper. "Did you ever pull an all-nighter?"

"Are you kidding? We used to get a lot of horror movies and watch them all night, falling asleep on the floor, in chairs, wherever we happened to be. It was different in school. You know, studying for the midterm, or the finals, drinking coffee and then drinking more coffee until dawn."

"Let's do it tonight," he said. "Play Rummy or Scrabble by the fire."

"You're on. Bet you go to sleep before I do."

"How much? A buck?"

"Make it interesting. Ten."

"You're covered. First the fire."

* * * *

Edith checked the computers one last time, then turned them all off, turned off the lights in the lab, and locked the door. In her office she drew out a sheet of paper from a drawer and wrote a brief note: *Dear Cal, please keep the enclosed envelope in a safe place for me. I'll explain next time I see you. It's confidential, of course.*

Done, she thought then, leaning back in her chair with her eyes closed, the envelope addressed to Cal at his home, not the hospital. It was three in the morning. Time to go home and try to get a few hours of sleep. She planned to be back in her office by eight, ready for an uninvited major to drop in.

* * * *

They played Rummy and chess, and they played Scrabble. For long intervals they simply talked, about books, movies, music. She talked about

her dead father, whom she had adored, and he talked about his father, who couldn't stay in any one place more than a year or two, and rode a Harley Davidson. She exulted when she won a game, groaned when she lost, and hotly defended indefensible words playing Scrabble. "Xerox has too become generic!" she argued.

Finally she crashed. "I'm going blind," she said. "Back in a minute." She walked out of the room, staggering, holding onto furniture on her way, and she didn't return. He found her minutes later stretched out on the bed sound asleep. He took off her shoes and put a blanket over her, then stood gazing at her. He realized he was praying, please remember. When you wake up, please remember.

Staggering nearly as much as she had done, he left, walked through the living room to a door to a small balcony. Standing on it in a slight drizzle, with pale fog hiding the ocean, he kept hearing the prayer over and over in his mind: Please remember. The deep blackness of night had yielded to predawn, visible fog, he noticed finally. They had stayed up all night.

He passed up the second bedroom and stretched out on the couch when he returned to the living room. He had to be near enough to hear her when she woke up, be ready to tell her a story, to reassure her that everything was all right, she was all right. His mind was blank. *Please remember.*

* * * *

The call from the major came at eight thirty. He introduced himself, then said, "I'm on official government business, Dr. Dreisser. Please open the door for me."

Or I'll huff and I'll puff and kick the door down, she thought, walking through the corridor. When she opened the door, looking past him, she saw the van, not black at all, but silvery blue. Several suited men were standing by it.

"Dr. Dreisser, I'm Major Thomas Tynsdale, with orders to seize various computers and records, as outlined in this National Security Letter." Sharp features, nice hair turning a bit gray, a stocky build, he looked like a middle school gym teacher. He handed her the document, motioned his men to come forward, and walked past her toward the lab. She followed without a word.

The monitors were all on, the programs halted and the screens filled

with line after line of numbers. He glanced at Rob's computer, turned away, then abruptly swung around again to stare at the screen.

"Start it again," he said in a strained voice.

She did so, and the lines began to scroll. Just numbers, no symbols, no breaks.

"What the hell are you doing?" he demanded then.

"I thought it would be interesting to see if such antiquated machines could solve for π ," she said.

He shoved past her to the computer and sent the program to the start of the file, then to the directory, back to the scrolling lines of numbers.

"It's archived," he said in a grating voice. "You can't overwrite things and get rid of them."

"We don't archive ongoing research. A simple backup is enough. An external hard-drive backup, automatic, of course, in order to keep a running backup of all input."

He had turned livid, with a tic jerking in his cheek. "The hard copies," he snapped. "What did you do with the hard copies?"

"I burned them."

"I don't believe you. You're lying. You're a scientist. You don't destroy ground-breaking research like that."

She said nothing, stood with her arms crossed over her breasts, and she thought, *Neither do we turn it over to a secret agency to bury.*

"I want to see Ms. Hardesty," he said after a moment when Edith continued to stand in silence.

"She isn't here."

"Give me the key to her apartment."

She turned and walked back to her office, to her purse, and brought out the key, handed it to him. He made no motion to leave.

“What have you done with her? Where is she?”

“I don’t know. She went to dinner with a man, Keith Adams, and she hasn’t come back. I don’t know where they are.”

He told her to wait in her office, and she poured coffee, took it to her desk and sat down to wait. She could almost pity the major, she thought. He knew the research she had done, had been doing, and he knew that whatever agency ended up with Rebecca would not be interested in basic research such as this. Torn between the expediency of his job and his training and inclination toward science, he had made his choice and would have many regrets, she believed.

They would come back and ask questions, demand answers, probably make threats, take what they wanted and leave. She could wait them out, for now and for an indefinite time to come. When this madness ended, when sanity returned to the world, the work would surface again, be completed, if not by her, then by another, possibly by Rob.

* * * *

Keith’s sleep was restless, dream filled. Too much caffeine remained in his body for deep sleep. He came wide awake when he heard Rebecca cry out. He stumbled as he rushed to the bedroom. She was sitting upright, staring ahead, deathly pale. She cried out again, “Mother!” She flung her hands over her face, shaking. Fearing the hysteria Edith had talked about, he hesitated only a moment, then ran to the bed and took Rebecca in his arms. She was weeping, shaking.

“She’s dead! Mother is dead! And Travis. They’re dead! Oh, God, they’re both dead! Keith, my mother, my brother! They’re dead!”

He held her as she wept, and he wept with her.