

Thrilling Wonder Stories

by Albert E. Cowdrey

Albert Cowdrey's affection for genre magazines has made itself evident before, most notably in "Twilight States" (July 2005). But never before have we encountered anything like what happened with this story.

Between his sending us this and our publishing it now, the title magazine has been returned to life! The new editor of *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, Winston Engle, most likely is unaware of Mr. Cowdrey's story.

Indeed, he probably thinks he acted of his own volition.

But if we see new stories from Mr. Cowdrey with titles like *Galaxy*, *Argosy*, or *Super-Science*, well, don't be surprised at what ensues.

* * * *

He came from someplace else—anybody could see that. Even Farley himself.

That first morning of summer vacation, with Tommy already outside bellowing, "FAARR!" and wanting to play, Farley turned aside on his way to the front door. Papa was at work selling encyclopedias and Mama had gone shopping, so Farley seized the opportunity to slip into their bedroom.

In the brown shadows, behind the closed drapes, with only the mirror on Mama's vanity glimmering, he threw himself facedown on her side of the double bed and in a kind of intoxication inhaled her scent, a compound of flesh and perspiration, vanishing cream and Chanel No. 5. He could walk into a room where she'd been and detect it in the air. Somehow, he felt, the scent was Mama herself, and it stirred him in some unsayable way.

Tommy shouted again. With a last sniff, Farley jumped up and turned to go. His shadowy form was caught in the round vanity mirror, and he paused long enough to stare at his face. *Oh yeah*, he thought, *somebody did a job on poor old Papa*.

Farley's olive skin and long sharp nose and big ears with the lobes welded to his jaws were nothing like the pale reddish man who slept beside Mama. When Farley was little, he'd believed he was Papa's son. No longer. Papa was just the sitter. Farley's father was a man from ... Mars.

He smiled, half believing it. *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, his favorite reading, was full of Martians and some of them looked remarkably like Farley. Now, arching his brows, making his eyes glare, he twisted his lips and made his evil face.

“Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh,” he chuckled, raising his long-fingered hands like pitchforks. If people knew who his real father was! If people only knew! Then they’d be ascaresd....

From outside came “FARRRRRRRRRR!” again, and he dropped the game of evil like a rejected toy, slammed through the front door and sprang into midair off the end of the porch. It was summer and Farley was twelve and he could only spare so much time wondering who—or even what—his real father was.

* * * *

He and Tommy set out for the canal, gossiping.

“Mama and Papa had another fight last night,” Farley confided. “He didn’t sell enough encyclopedias to be Salesman of the Month.”

“Your folks fight a lot, don’t they, Far?”

“Don’t yours?”

“Sometimes,” Tommy said cautiously. “Not too much.”

“Last night Mama got into the Jim Beam,” said Farley. “She was really hot.”

The fighting used to bother him until he realized that Papa wasn’t his father. Now he could look on from the sidelines and tell himself he enjoyed the show.

“Who won?”

“Oh, Mama always wins. At least she gets in the first word, the middle word, and the last word.”

“What does your Papa do?”

“He takes it.”

The neighborhood lay baking in the hot sun—Cape Cods and Spanish-style houses and Sears Roebuck houses and diminutive Taras for junior executives who liked to think they were living in the Old South instead of the new one. All the windows and doors stood open in the summer heat, and the sounds of radio soap operas mingled with Nat King Cole’s cane-syrup voice singing, *Are you warm, are you real, Mona Lisa?*

The lawns were cushioned in deep green turf and decorated with grinning elves and silver reflecting globes. Farley and Tommy bent and stared into one globe to watch their faces balloon out and their noses stretch. Farley’s was so long anyway that Tommy called him “Elephant Nose” and they had a brief fight, rolling over and over in the hot dry grass.

Farley won, of course, sitting on Tommy and threatening him with his big-knuckled fists until he took back what he’d said. Farley won most of his fights; at school he’d almost been expelled for giving another boy a savage beating. A teacher had called him “a goddamn psycho.”

But this wasn’t a serious fight—lucky for Tommy.

The houses dwindled and vanished at the edge of the marshes, where a drainage canal with sloping concrete sides divided the tame from the wild. The boys walked down the slope with one leg bent and one leg straight until they reached the man-high tunnel of a storm drain. The marsh, the canal, and the drain were their playground; every attempt to lure them to official New Orleans Recreation Department sites met instant rejection.

A year ago, Far had tried scaring Tommy by telling him that an alligator lived in the tunnel, eating rats to stay alive. But Tommy had seen the alligators at the Audubon Zoo and they were anything but scary, lying in their pool like a pile of huge jackstraws, inert as logs and dirty as laundry.

So Far changed the tunnel beast to a monster with lots of fangs and a smell like rotten eggs. Its name was Garmusk.

Since then Garmusk had come and gone, depending on their moods. Sometimes even Far believed that *something* lived in the tunnel; at other times, it was just a joke between them. Today Garmusk returned when they found a dead dog lying beside the canal.

“Tonight, Garmusk, you know? He’ll come out the tunnel and eat it,” Farley proclaimed.

“Wow,” said Tommy uneasily. “I guess you must know him pretty good if you know what he likes to eat.”

“If you were all the time eating rats, wouldn’t you like a nice dog for a change? I would,” said Far, putting on his evil face, and Tommy produced a nervous giggle.

The storm drain was half-dark, cool and damp, the bottom shaped like a shallow V where a little stream of water always trickled, even on days as hot and dry as this one. Their voices waking echoes, they walked until the sunshine faded behind them and they could see, incredibly far off, like a dim star, the tiny light that marked the other exit on Elysian Fields Avenue.

They were talking about maybe, this time, going the whole distance when they heard a rustle, a soft splash, and a scraping sound on the concrete.

“GARMUSK!” Far yelled and the echoes resounded and they turned and ran wildly for the entrance.

Tommy actually outran Farley for once, popping out of the storm drain into the hot breathless sunlight a good four steps ahead of him. Panting, dripping sweat, they sank down on the hot concrete. Tommy, a slight narrow-chested boy with arms and legs like sticks, took a long time getting his breath.

“We better bring the dog into the tunnel for him to eat,” said Farley. “Feed him up, soze he don’t grab us next time.”

While Tommy watched uneasily, Far picked up the dog, finding it still pretty fresh, and laid it just inside like a sacrifice. By now he’d recovered his courage, and he stood peering down the tunnel while his big hands wrestled each other, in a way he had when he was excited.

“We got to find more things for Garmusk,” he said. “We got to feed him or he might come out and eat somebody.”

Tommy thought privately that they should call the cops, but he didn’t dare say so. Far’s whole body was tense and quivering, like a high-tension wire stroked by wind.

“I wonder what else we can give him,” he muttered. “Think about it, Tommy. I’ll think about it, too.”

* * * *

That night at dinner Mama glared at Papa while Olivia, the colored cook, served them. Barely five feet tall, she radiated fury from her small body without saying a word.

The weather did nothing to cool her off. Usually the days were tropical this time of year, with heavy rain falling sometime between two and four in the afternoon. But no rain had fallen today or for weeks past. The heat accumulated in everything, in bricks and walls and slate roofs and even in the hinges of doors. As Olivia washed the dishes, Farley saw sweat stains spreading across her back.

When she was gone he tensed, expecting a fight. But all evening Mama and Papa gave each other the silent treatment. When he kissed them goodnight, they were both real sweet to him to underline their dislike of each other.

The night was stifling. Farley tried to read a story in *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, but the heat of the lamp was too much and he turned it off voluntarily, not even waiting to be yelled at. He lay on his bed, wearing three-button drawers and sweating from every pore.

Sounds of combat began to rise from the bedroom next door. Listening intently, he found out at last what the trouble was. Another promotion Papa hadn’t gotten. Pretty soon Mama began to scream at him.

“Your problem is they know you too well!” she yelled. “They know what you’re worth! Nothing!”

“Now wait a minute, Honey.”

“You think I’m gonna sit on my goddamn ass all my life and wait for you?”

“Hold it down in there!” Farley shouted, producing dead silence.

When she said words like goddamn and ass he knew she’d been into the Jim Beam again. At times like

that she totally forgot that he was in here, an innocent child, listening. Tomorrow she would apologize—not to Papa, of course: to Farley. He already knew how she'd stroke his head and say:

“Honey, I'm so sorry you had to hear all that bad language. I don't know what gets into me sometimes. You know, your Papa and I really do love each other.”

Two truths, one lie. She *was* sorry, and when she was mad she *did* say things she wouldn't say otherwise. The rest was false. The only people Mama really loved were Farley and the man from Mars.

He had no sense of falling asleep, yet woke bathed in sweat. The breathless night had the after-twelve feeling. A little fice dog in the yard next door, an irritating animal named Cissy, was barking as she did all night, every night in hot weather.

Farley got up and padded into the kitchen and got himself a glass and poured water and a shot of Jim into it. Then he went to the window and looked out. The metallic light of a perfect summer moon covered the back yard and the neighbors' rooftops. The shadows were profoundly black, and he wondered how shadows looked on Mars, with the sun so far away and the air so thin and the big brilliant stars of deep space glittering in the black water of the Grand Canal.

Meanwhile Cissy barked and barked and barked.

“Shut up, goddamn it!” he shouted, and she paused exactly two barks before resuming.

He swallowed the whiskey, gagged briefly, then washed the glass and went back to bed and stretched out. His head swam. The heat was worse than before. Sweat was running from his eyebrows into the sockets of his eyes. A puddle was gathering in the hollow over his breastbone and another in his bellybutton. He felt squishy between the toes. He was sweating in the crack of his butt.

Tomorrow he definitely would start campaigning for his own electric fan. Meantime he stared at the dark ceiling and tried to imagine he was Garmusk, lying all alone and cool in his quiet tunnel deep underground.

Gradually he began to feel better, as if his blood were chilling inside him, and he fell asleep, not waking until eight-thirty on his damp bed with sunlight that was bright yellow like drawn butter falling across him, and the sounds of Olivia rattling china in the kitchen.

* * * *

This day was a scorcher too. Farley put in his plea for the fan when Mama was in the middle of her apology for the fight last night, and she said yes without pausing for breath.

He really loved her, sitting there at the breakfast table in a blue cotton wrapper and being nice to him. Her body was smaller than his, and he stared entranced at her heart-shaped smooth face and her huge dark eyes.

No wonder the man from Mars had been attracted, had wanted to talk to her, had sat next to her somewhere, sometime, touching her hand and telling her about his planet, the red cliffs and the red desert, the canals and the blue and purple trees bending over them.

Farley couldn't believe that two such people had done what drawings in the boys' toilet at school claimed that married people did to each other. He decided while buttering his toast that Martians just *thought* their wives and girlfriends pregnant. A lot better than the Earth way, in his opinion.

Mama began dressing to go shopping on Canal Street, and a few minutes later Tommy began yelling outside. Hastily, Farley disposed of his breakfast, attired himself in a pair of khaki shorts and his stinkiest old Keds, and shot out the door.

When the boys reached the storm drain, the dog had vanished. Farley was starry-eyed. He had never really believed that anything this wonderful could actually happen.

"*How'd it TASTE??*" he shouted into the darkness, starting a clamor of echoes.

Tommy stared uneasily down the tunnel. Clearly, he was ready to run and wished that Farley wouldn't make so much noise.

"I hope the dog was enough for him," he whispered.

"He'll get hungry again soon. What can we bring him next?"

They decided on some wieners from Tommy's refrigerator, and they fetched them and put them exactly

where the dog had been. Then they followed the canal to Lake Pontchartrain and went swimming off the seawall, just removing their Keds and jumping in, and afterward letting the fierce sun dry them.

When they returned in the afternoon to check on the wieners, they were lying where they had been before, only covered with ants.

“Damn,” said Farley. “Goddamn. Shit. I can’t sit on my ass all day and wait for him to eat.”

Tommy was impressed by the cussing and tried gamely to keep up. “Goddamn it to hell,” he said. “We wasted those wienies. Ma will want to know what happened to them, too.”

“Tell her you had ‘em for lunch. Garmusk don’t like hot dogs, just cold dogs.”

“So what do we get him, Far?”

Farley turned his odd, slanted dark eyes on Tommy and almost told him the idea that had just come to him, but then didn’t. Tommy wasn’t up to big stuff. Tommy was a drip.

That night Farley’s new fan was buzzing and rotating on his dresser. It didn’t help as much as he had expected. The passing current of wind made him feel chilly and rubbery where it swept over him, but he stayed hot everywhere else. Cissy barked and Farley listened until past midnight, thinking of his idea. Then, prosaically, he fell asleep.

“What we need is rain,” Olivia sighed next morning. But the sky was hard and blue, a steel bowl with the sun burning in it like a blinding flash of light on water.

Farley went swimming again with Tommy. The water was thick and green and warm, and unseen fish slid past them with a rasp of scales and nibbled their toes. Swimming felt so good that they stayed too long and came home looking scorched. That night Mama rubbed Farley with Noxema while he writhed because she was hurting him.

“Oh, Honey, I’m sorry. This is a real sunburn.”

His face, shoulders, ears, chest, back, and both legs were cooked about to medium rare. There was no

possible way to lie in bed without hurting. The fan felt wonderful wherever it touched him, but the burn stung with special vengeance after the wind passed by.

By midnight, Farley was in a mood. At one o'clock he crept to the fence and called softly to Cissy, but she backed off, barking.

Next day his burn kept him home. His well-thumbed library of *Thrilling Wonder Stories* made the morning pass; he sat hunched on a footstool so as not to put his back against anything, turning the dry rustling pages, letting loose the imprisoned robots and rocket ships, the violet beams of the death rays.

At one point Mama hurried through on her way to Canal Street. She was in a great rush, hardly said good-bye, and she forgot her gloves, though she thought that going to Canal Street without gloves was practically the same as going to church without a hat.

The rest of the day passed slowly. Olivia fixed him lunch. In the afternoon he turned on the big Philco radio and listened to soap operas—*Young Widder Brown*, *Portia Faces Life*, *One Man's Family*—until four-thirty when his own programs started coming on: *The Lone Ranger*, *Inner Sanctum Mysteries*.

Mama returned from shopping, and glared at Papa over dinner. The silence was grim, the heat intense. Later on, after a couple of belts of whiskey, she cornered Papa and started screaming at him, paying no attention to Far at all.

“Your stomach's so flat because you spend your life crawling on it!” she bawled.

When she kept on screaming, Farley went outside and looked up into the hot blue dusk, hearing at the edge of his mind bats squeaking as they hunted. Venus burned steadily in the west; he couldn't find the red eye of Mars, but he knew it was there. He searched for it in the growing dark, while his hands wrestled each other.

Later, Papa came out and joined him. He was holding a drink with chinking ice cubes. Old Jim was getting heavy traffic tonight. After swigging a few times, he said, “You're growing up, Far.”

Farley could tell by his voice that he had already had several quick ones. Keeping that iron grip on himself while Mama insulted him must have cost him a lot.

The remark about growing up made Farley uneasy; it often preceded bad news, as in, “You’re growing up, and it’s time you started doing some work around here.”

Papa said, “I really believe you’re taller than I am.”

They had to stand back to back to measure, but of course it was obvious. Farley had noticed it long ago. Papa was small-boned and walked with his toes turned in and his shoulders hunched forward. Farley’s big-boned, spare body was going to grow up until it was even with his big hands and feet.

“In P.E., Mr. Swayze said I’ll be six feet tall by the time I’m fourteen,” he said proudly. “I can beat up any kid in my class.”

Without the slightest warning, Papa said, “I expect you take after your father.”

Farley held his breath. Then whispered, “Who is he?”

“I don’t know. Somebody your mother knew before she met me. I always ... felt like you were my son. You’ll understand these things better when you’re older.”

Tears began to run down Farley’s long, pointed nose. Other fluids were clogging it inside.

“Why don’t you call me George?” Papa suggested in a strangled voice.

Farley hugged him and called him George, then ran away and hid under a neighbor’s azalea bushes. When he came back an hour later, he felt years older.

In the morning he woke to a house that was curiously soundless. Farley padded barefoot into the front bedroom and knew at once that Mama hadn’t slept at home. Her scent was old, from yesterday.

She was back when he came in for lunch. With his peeling sunburn and a baseball bat in his hand he looked like a Norman Rockwell magazine cover come to life, except that Norman Rockwell boys all had freckles and snub noses.

Mama was looking nice, wearing a summer linen dress, with her brown hair in a long bob lying on her shoulders. Dior's New Look had come in, so her dress covered her knees; Farley had just begun to notice ladies' legs, and also that Mama had good ones, slender but not bony, *shapely* he guessed the word was.

She sat on the sofa in the shadows of the living room with a dreamy expression on her face, and after he leaned the bat against the wall she drew him down beside her and lightly touched his face, careless of getting his sweat on her little white hand.

"Far," she said, "you're growing up."

His stomach turned over twice. Here it comes again, he thought.

"Honey," she went on, "did you ever think it was, well, strange that I'm always going shopping and almost never bring anything home?"

As a matter of fact, he didn't. He had a vague idea that ladies shopped the way that kids played. It was just something they did.

"Uhh."

"Well, Honey, you see—a man's been coming to town to visit me. A man I knew a long time ago."

He stared at her, seeing as if for the first time her red raspberry lipstick, her powdered skin, her big starry eyes, and her glossy hair.

"A long, *long* time ago?" he managed to whisper.

"Yes, Honey. Actually, you'd like him. He looks a lot like you."

Farley exhaled. Now he thought he knew what was coming.

“He’s a Cajun,” she went on, smiling. “He’s the biggest General Motors dealer in the Teche country. His place is called Evangeline Motors. He’s a real successful businessman. He lives in a big brick house by the water....”

Abruptly she rose and walked up and down. The smile vanished; she was twisting her hands.

“He was married when I knew him before, and there wasn’t anything we could do about it. I mean, we’re both Catholics, and so that was that. Well, I started going with George, and—it’s all so complicated. George and I got married and I had you. I’ve been so mean to him, I just hate myself, and now I’m going to leave him, and you have to try to understand, Honey, even if you don’t understand everything. You know George and I haven’t been happy together. And it all kind of came to a head, and now—well, this man I told you about, he wants me to go back with him to Opelousas.”

“Are we leaving today?” he whispered, trying to picture the man from Cajunland and the stream of water that had turned out to be a Louisiana bayou, not a Martian canal.

“Well, no, Honey,” she said, looking away from him, “*we’re* not.”

He stared at her.

“It’s not possible,” she said urgently. “Try to understand. Officially, you’re George’s son. And this man, he has children of his own, and he says they’re enough of a handful. Anyway, you love George, and he loves you, and we’ll see each other often, I promise you that. I’ll be back real, real often. And you can come visit us in Opelousas.”

Farley didn’t kill her with the baseball bat, even though it seemed to be there just for that purpose. The idea did not even occur to him. Afterward, he wondered why not.

* * * *

Next day Mama left, in floods of tears, with a man who picked her up in a shiny black Lincoln Continental. Farley hid in the azalea bushes and spied on him; the man had a long nose and wore a white Panama hat, and his big dark hands rested on the plastic wheel with its silver horn ring as he waited for her to join him.

She had ordered Olivia to send her clothes, so she just got in and they drove away together, to Cajunland. Or to Mars, what difference did it make?

The heat didn't break. The city had been thirty-two days without rain and every day the newspapers reported the deaths of people, animals, and trees as front-page news. The papers made it sound like the end of the world because, while places like Arizona might go for three years without rain, in New Orleans it rained all the time and a month of drought in summertime seemed unendurable.

Since Farley's world had in fact ended, the unnatural seemed natural to him. George tried to comfort him, but that was impossible, because he was only the sitter. Farley wanted his mother, and even though he hated the Cajun from Mars worse than anyone he'd ever known, worse than God who had let this happen, he wanted him, too—the father he had seen once, sitting behind the wheel of the great big Lincoln.

Tommy came and called outside the house, but Farley ignored him and after a while he went away. Farley went alone to the canal and sat in the tunnel and wept. Night after night he could not sleep, even when he drank three or four shots from the new bottle of Beam that George had brought home.

Through the long darkneses his anger grew. Mama wasn't the only one who had rages, though his were silent and therefore worse. Cissy barked and barked, and a little after four o'clock on the fourth morning after Mama left, he decided it was time to feed her to Garmusk.

He got up, made a brief stop in the light of the refrigerator, and went outside. The moon was setting and it was low to the west. An ivy-covered fence, a sweet olive, and a tall myrtle tree cast impenetrable shadows. The yard belonged to another planet, with only the incessant insect chorus and Cissy's barking to speak of Earth.

Farley slid through the shadows over the bristly dry grass, listening to the bugs grow silent and then start up again behind him. He knelt by the fence and held out a bit of cold cooked meat. Cissy came over to investigate, half growling, trying a tentative wag of her tail.

Farley had always had strong hands; he got them from the man from Mars. The chickenwire was a problem, but the hexagonal meshes were wide and his long, strong fingers got hold of Cissy's throat and pulled her against the wire. The sudden scuffle, the gurgling gasp, and the final quiver came and went unheard.

Farley slipped into the neighbors' yard for the body and carried it by the tail to the washroom where Olivia labored during the day. He found a pillowcase in the soiled-clothes basket and put Cissy in.

Hunched over like a troll carrying a sack of ore, he left the yard, his rubber Keds silent on the ground. Ceramic elves stared blindly and reflecting globes caught him for an instant in their glimmering orbs. He tried to move in the deep shade of trees and hedges, uneasy at the humpbacked shadow the moon showed him. When he reached the canal the sloping walls lay stark and white as bone. With the marsh so close, millions of insects and frogs chanted deafeningly.

Then in the water, V-shaped wavelets stippled by the moonlight pointed the path of something big swimming just beneath the surface. The ripples ceased; the swimmer knew that Farley was there. He bent and let Cissy's body slip with a soft rustle and splash from the pillowcase into the canal.

For a long moment nothing happened. Then the water surged and something burst upward, scattering spray. Big jaws streamed black and silver and Cissy's dark body was momentarily visible, even her sharp little snout. Something swallowed, gulp, gulp, and sank back into the water.

"Garmusk, was that good?" Farley asked, and a voice that was not his own answered, *Very good.*

Farley sank down, legs shaking. It was like a voice in a dream, yet he wasn't dreaming. One thing he was sure of: it was not a voice he'd ever heard before. It was hoarse and grating and brought with it a long train of echoes as if it spoke from the bottom of a well.

He waited until the lopsided moon set, and in the profound darkness that followed, a thick body heaved itself out of the water, claws scrabbling on the concrete.

Farley almost wept with disappointment. It was only a gator after all—a big one but, after all, just a dumb old lizard that had found a refuge in the tunnel and came out at night to hunt.

The gator raised itself on bent legs and swayed to the mouth of the drain and disappeared very slowly. The gleaming tip of its armored tail was last to go, leaving a long wet mark on the concrete.

"There wasn't no voice," he told himself bitterly. "It was just a 'lucination. I must be going nuts."

Then, deep and hollow, it said *Come again.*

He heard his own whisper. "Are you Garmusk?"

Sometimes.

"What planet you come from?"

I come from Far.

"That's not a planet. That's my name."

I come from Very Far.

The echoes died away. Farley shouted, but only the bugs and frogs answered. In a daze he set out for home.

* * * *

Back in his bed he fell asleep and his rest was deep; Olivia tried to get him up at eight, but he went back to sleep, and at nine, but he slept until ten-oh-five, and woke then only because he was ravenously hungry.

Olivia made him pancakes and smiled to see him gobble them down. He ate like Garmusk, gulping whole mouthfuls at a time.

He was noisy and lively that day. It was Sunday, and George took him for a drive along the beachfront in his old Plymouth and bought him a big shrimp sandwich and a snowball covered with sticky sweet green syrup, and Farley feasted on everything.

That night he heard George say to somebody on the phone, "He's had a rough time, but he's getting over it."

Farley smiled at that. Yet something had changed, or why was he smiling?

Next day he went swimming alone and swam farther out in the lake than he ever had before, as if he were half gator himself. Back home he slammed into the house, thinking of nothing except that he wanted lunch, and there was Mama, waiting for him. The Cajun from Mars had kicked her out.

Farley stared at her, sitting on the couch looking sad, wringing her little hands in a gesture like his own, then raising her face with the shit-eatingest smile he'd ever seen.

Saying, "I'm back, Honey." Then weeping. "I'm so sorry I ever went away. Can you forgive me?"

He said, "Sure, Mama." She hugged and kissed him, and he hugged her back, crying and longing to kiss her, to kill her.

There was a song from the laundry room that day as Olivia celebrated the return of things to near normal. That night George slept on the couch, as if Mama had an exclusive right to their bed whenever she chose to occupy it.

The neighbors were less forgiving; everybody knew the story, having received it from their maids who had it from Olivia. That Sunday, on the way to church, Farley saw neighbor ladies cross the street to avoid meeting Mama. The priest talked grimly about the Seventh Commandment, never mentioning what it was, but every eye was on Mama and she snuck out at *Go, the Mass is ended* without waiting for the finale when the choir, all in different keys, burst into *Day of Wrath*.

Farley returned home with various ideas that had come to him during Mass. He called Tommy on the phone for the first time in days. But Tommy said that he couldn't associate with Farley for a while. His mother had put her foot down; she said that Farley was not to blame, but....

But what? Tommy asked. But nothing, his mother said.

All day Farley slid around the house in the brown shadows, listening. He was trying to get straight exactly what had happened in Cajun country. It wasn't easy, because Mama and Papa didn't talk much and when they did, they tended to skip over the good parts. Yet by nightfall he had gathered a small trove of information.

Apparently the man from Mars had hundreds of relatives in Opelousas. His wife had died less than six months before and the relations were all outraged when he picked up somebody else's wife and brought

her home with him. He had fifteen kids of all ages, none of whom would have anything to do with Mama. When Mama said she was going to divorce Papa, that only made it worse, because everybody knew that divorce was out for Catholics.

The local priest had preached on the unbreakability of marriage vows in both English and French, to make sure the whole congregation understood what he was saying. So after a week, the man from Mars told Mama it wasn't working, he had a business to keep going and perhaps she had better go home. And here she was, not because she wanted to be but because she wasn't welcome where she'd gone and had no place else to go.

Next day Farley brought a flashlight to the tunnel and walked in deeper than ever before. The circle of light bounced crazily off the walls. Echoes accompanied him. The water with its smell of rotten eggs came trickling out of narrow pipes and deep beds of algae that had formed during wet weather lay brown and tangled, waiting for rain. Spiders had spun webs, mosquitoes whined, and wigglers twitched in the remaining pools.

A long way in, Farley smelled something especially bad and played the dancing light across a pile of stinking dung with undigested hair in it. He moved on, and when the tiny star at Elysian Fields had grown to the size of a big shining planet, he reached a catchbasin holding a broad pool of black water.

In the pool something moved, sending ripples against the toes of his Keds. One green eye fleetingly picked up the light, then two.

"It's me," said Farley.

I know.

"Are you inside the gator, Garmusk?"

For the time being.

"Can I go back to Very Far with you? I don't want to go home."

Then step into the pool.

Farley stared, thinking about an article in one of George's encyclopedias. About how an alligator killed: how it seized an arm or a leg, beat the water with its tail until its whole body was revolving, twisted off the limb and swallowed it. When the victim died of pain and shock and blood loss, it left the body to decay and grow soft, then ate the rest a chunk at a time.

Did he have to go through all that to join Garmusk?

He hesitated, touched the pool with one foot and drew it back again. Thinking of the violent death that lay so close made his breath grow short and quick. For a while his whole body vibrated in a tremolo of yearning and repulsion.

Finally, sweating and shaking, he mumbled, "I'm ascaed to."

Tell me what you really want.

"I want to die but I'm ascaed to."

Then do what I do.

"What do you do, Garmusk?"

When I want to die, I kill instead.

Farley backed up slowly, then turned and walked quickly away. His feet squished in the spongy growths of the tunnel and his own pumping blood sang in his ears.

* * * *

He didn't get much sleep that night, though Cissy was gone and his sunburn had healed and the fan kept him cool. In the morning he phoned Tommy, hanging up twice when an adult answered. The third time he got him.

“Far, I ain’t supposed—”

“That’s okay, I won’t tell. Tommy, I seen the gator. He’s laying out sleeping in the tunnel where you can see him.”

“No shit?”

“Nuh uh. You want to go and see him now, before he moves?”

“Uhhhhh....”

“I’ll meet you there in ten minutes. Just don’t tell anybody where you’re going. They’ll get pissed off if you do. They know who you always go there with.”

“Ohhhh ... kay.”

Tommy too was breathing fast: for him, the little drip, disobeying his mother was practically a mortal sin. But also a big thrill.

Far visited the washroom, where Olivia was sitting in an old split-bottom rocker, resting. He told her how happy he was that Mama was back, and that made her smile. He left the washroom with a piece of clothesline in his pocket.

Kneading his big, strong hands together, he set out. When he arrived at the tunnel, he found Tommy waiting for him just inside. Far had thought about bringing a club, but had correctly decided he wouldn’t need it. He’d always been strong for his age, very strong.

And it was interesting—later, when the men were searching for Tommy while his parents stood by and watched. Far hadn’t been sure he could deceive adults, and at first he felt nervous as the men were walking into the tunnel and calling Tommy’s name.

They looked so strange. Why hadn’t he ever noticed before how strange Earth people were? They had

hair on one side of their heads but not the other. Their hands had only one thumb each. Wouldn't two thumbs opposing three fingers give a firmer grip?

In the tunnel the men were starting echoes as they questioned and answered one another. Far found he could switch them off and on, sometimes hearing words and sometimes only noises like the growling of dogs. Some of the men went all the way to the pool, but Garmusk made the gator stay down out of sight, and after a while they came back out and started to question Far again.

“You say Tommy never went in a long way?”

“No sir, he was ascaered to. So was I.”

“You all never seen nobody hanging around here—like a strange man or anything?”

“No sir, there never was nobody around here. That's why we used to come down here to play. I tell you—”

“Yes, son?”

“I just don't think he'd come down here all by himself. He'd a been 'fraid to. I bet he went swimming off the seawall by the lake. He wasn't ascaered out there, because there was always people around.”

Tommy's mother cried out then and said, If only she hadn't forbidden him to play with Far, Far was such a big strong boy and a good swimmer, Tommy would have been safe with him along. Tommy's father put his arms around her, and the men moved on to where the police were already dragging the lake.

Far went home. Mama was waiting for him and she hugged him while he kneaded his big hands, right with left, left with right. She stroked his back and wept and said it might have been him instead of Tommy.

“You're never going down there again, Far. Never, never.”

He waited until she was finished squalling and turned away from her. When she left the room he stood there with his fists still closed and looked at her back, her brown bob, her shapely legs.

That night he slept with tumultuous dreams, and woke early to find immense white clouds piling in from the Gulf, towering like castles into the deep blue sky.

When he set out for the canal, the sky was already turning the color of a gunbarrel. Big drops of rain began to pelt down, hissing on the hot concrete slopes. He took shelter inside the drain and watched it fall in sheets, roaring as if to make up for the whole arid month of June in a single day.

Great waves of coolness set him shivering, for he was shirtless as usual and wearing only his shorts and Keds. He sat down, hugging his goosepimples, and idly, like a shedding snake, began peeling off strips of wrinkled dead white skin. Some of the strips were a foot long and had a curious scaly pattern that fascinated him. He began to eat them and they dissolved on his tongue, as tasteless as communion wafers.

Then his butt felt wet, and he looked down and saw that the stream in the center of the tunnel was running deeper and faster. He stood up and stepped out into the rain and let its cold fury scour him until his hair hung streaming over his eyes like black water weed. He threw his head back and opened his mouth and cold rain filled it in an instant and he gulped it down.

The squall passed and the rain slackened. The stream in the tunnel was running strong and deep, and he heard the gator moving. Claws and scales rasping against concrete, the sound coming and going and vanishing again in the rush of water. Far waded into the waterfall pouring whitely from the tunnel mouth and fought his way up the slope.

The water foamed and swirled around his legs, pushing, demanding, urging him to go back before it was too late. But he was no longer afraid of death, or anything else. He braced himself against the tunnel wall and waited. The gator approached, half swimming, half walking on the bottom of the tunnel. The tip of its snout rose from the water, then its eyes, then its armored back like a moving island. A lightning flash lit up the tunnel, and for an instant its bulging yellow eyes flickered green and the cat pupils narrowed to slits.

Then it was beside him, one eye watching him, a long claw raking his shinbones, and it slipped past, tipping over the edge into the waterfall and sliding down the concrete slope into the deep, swift-running canal. Slowly its great armored tail beat once, twice, in S-shaped sweeps and it moved with the rising current toward Lake Pontchartrain and the marshlands beyond that were its real home.

A desperate fear struck Farley. He drew a gasping breath and shouted, "Wait! Don't go!"

You didn't join me, said his father's voice behind him. *So I'm joining you.*

Farley spun around and stared. The hoarse voice echoed and echoed and echoed again, as if the tunnel were millions of miles long, and the light at the far end a real star.

Then the infinitely distant gleam was approaching, growing bigger and brighter until it was the size of a planet, the size of a moon. It cast shadows, at first dim, then sharp-edged. It ceased to be a flat disc, it swelled into a silver globe and Farley, staring into it, saw—curiously deformed—his own face.

He stopped breathing for a moment, felt as if he were suffocating, took in a shuddering breath, and sucked in the globe like a shining bubble. It burst inside his head like a jolt of liquor, releasing a surge of power. He felt Garmusk moving through him, exploring him as a buyer explores a new house.

Now we're together, the rough voice said, *we'll do anything we want.*

“Anything?”

Anything at all. When you belong nowhere and to nobody, the sky's the limit.

“Bet your goddamn ass,” Farley said aloud, feeling in every fiber of his long, strong muscles the monstrous power of alienage.

* * * *

Back at home, he was standing in the bathroom drying himself when Mama opened the door without knocking. That enraged him and something in his eyes made her shrink back.

“Oh, Honey,” she said, “you don't hate me, do you? I don't think I could stand that.”

She came in and put her arms around him and stroked his bare back, passing her smooth fingers over the scaly ridges left by the burn. She'd been with the bottle again, he could smell it.

“You’re so much like him,” she whispered. “So *much* like him. Every time I look at you I see him.”

He dropped the wet towel and closed his big hands over the back of her neck and stood there for an instant, moving his fingers for a more balanced grip, smiling a little at the thought of what would happen next.