

## **Salad for Two**

by Robert Reed

Yes, it's true—a group of fans did indeed sign us up for the Reed of the Month Club. The service has some glitches to work out (in fact, Robert Reed's story next month reveals some of their secrets—wait for it), but it's generally very good. This month they've provided us with a tale of the future that we found hard to predict.

She couldn't say when the man became real to her. When did he stop being just a faceless customer, rising to the status of Regular? Was it the time he bought eggs and salad greens and a big sack of walnuts along with a tall bottle of extra-virgin olive oil? Years later, Gillian recalled scanning those particular items, or at least she thought she could—memory remains such a fickle business—and while sacking his purchases, she happened to ask about his dinner plans. It was an idle question. She meant nothing by it. But his response was a memorable smile and something said about a salad for two.

The man seemed handsome enough, tall and fit looking, with his dark brown hair kept short and tidy. On the rare occasions when Gillian thought of the customer, she pictured him with that bright smile and mischievous brown eyes. He was always pleasant and probably quite sweet. And no doubt he was a charmer. Something about the way he said, "Salad for two," told her that he was flirting, and yet it didn't bother her. Her question was just idle noise, and his response had to be the same. Besides, boys and men were always hitting on Gillian—a state of affairs that began even before she knew the significance of their happy chatter. She was tall and pretty in an unconventional way—a lean, elegant creature with just enough shyness in her makeup that she would dip her head in public moments, smiling out of simple nervousness. More than anything, it was the shyness that made strange men believe she must be sophisticated or smart, or stuck-up, or maybe out-and-out spoiled. But despite a lifetime of interest from the males in her little world, Gillian seemed to lack the easy confidence enjoyed by girls with only a fraction of her natural gifts.

Later, when it seemed important, she decided that the man became real to her when she bothered to learn his name.

Jason.

"How's your day been, Jason?" she might inquire, stuffing greens and stalks of broccoli into a brown paper sack. "Another salad tonight?"

“It’s been a good day, and maybe so. Haven’t decided.”

Like many of the Regulars, Jason had an account with the grocery store, signing an invoice for each purchase.

“Have a nice evening,” she might tell him, nothing about her words or tone different from what she used with any other customer, Regular or not. At least, she didn’t think there was a difference. “Bye-bye,” she would sing to him.

“Night, Gillian,” Jason would reply, winking brightly while showing that big, joyful smile.

And then she wouldn’t think about the man again. At least not until the next day, if she happened to be at work. And if she were elsewhere, then she probably wouldn’t consider him at all.

His last name was Popper, and Gillian couldn’t decide when she learned that critical detail. But later she would recall an afternoon when the store was especially busy and Gillian had to call out for help. That’s when she realized Jason felt some kind of loyalty to her, or maybe even an ill-defined interest. Because when the adjacent lane opened up, he waved other customers over there just so he could stand in her line, waiting patiently with a gallon of skim milk in one hand and an over-stuffed basket in the other.

Jason Popper became very real after that.

His attentions didn’t go unnoticed. The assistant manager—a mousy-haired woman in the midst of her second divorce—made the point of teasing Gillian about her boyfriend.

“He’s not my boyfriend,” the cashier argued.

“Oh, I know he’s not,” the older woman said with a smile. But then her eyes narrowed and an edge crept into her voice. “Of course you know your boyfriend’s loaded, don’t you?”

Gillian’s boyfriend was a college freshman who had a pesky habit of making her pay for their dates.

“Popper inherited a ton of money,” the assistant manager explained. “From what I hear, he owns a couple hundred shares of Berkshire Hathaway.”

“Is that a lot?” asked Gillian. Which was a reasonable question, since she happened to own sixty shares of automobile stock—a gift from her grandmother; and because of the ongoing bankruptcy, worth little more than two tickets at the cheap movie theatre.

“Just one share of Berkshire Hathaway is a fortune,” Gillian learned. “If he wanted, Jason could buy out this store every day for the rest of his life.”

But weren't quite a few of their customers wealthy?

“But how many are interested in you?”

At that instant, Jason became embarrassingly real. Thinking of him standing in her lane, all those groceries clasped in his hands ... well, Gillian felt herself beginning to blush.

“I wish he'd give me a second look,” the assistant manager complained. Then with a bawdy wink, she added, “I'll tell you what. I'd do a hell of a lot more than just 'wish' him a good evening.”

Maybe there was truth in the accusation. Gillian tried to count the times that Jason didn't use her lane, and after several months, the number was zero. And if she happened to be on break, he would turn and stroll the aisles for a while longer, waiting until she returned. And always, without exception, he found something nice to say. He never actually told Gillian that she was attractive, but when he spoke about the lovely evening, he would stare at her cheekbones and her short curly hair and those big shy eyes that couldn't help but blink and smile at the same time. He was sweet and charming, but not pushy. Never pushy. That was one reason why she felt so comfortable with the gentleman. And of course the difference in their ages insulated her: Jason Popper was probably in his late forties, or even past fifty, while the object of his polite affections was waiting to turn seventeen.

For a year and a half, Jason was a very regular Regular. In smooth, almost imperceptible steps, their relationship evolved to where Gillian began looking forward to their several-times-a-week meetings. With a phrase here and an anecdote there, little details about each other were revealed. Sometimes her real boyfriend visited the store, and at least once, Jason chatted amiably with the boy. But on a different day, he asked Gillian about the two of them—one harmless question leading to several more—and after she had finished answering, he nodded and smiled while

pointing out, "You can do better."

Yet when she finally broke up with the boy, Jason did absolutely nothing to fill the gap in her social life.

Now and again, her friend mentioned a busy life. He was some kind of researcher working for far-flung interests. He sometimes vanished for a week or two, and on his return, she would mention his tan, and he would name a conference in some exotic tropical port-of-call. And there were occasions—usually when she was out on a date with some new boy—when she noticed Jason at a distance. Each time, a different woman was at his side. A few of his dates were barely older than Gillian, but most were closer to his age. If she felt jealous, she was careful not to admit it to herself. Yet each of Jason's dates was beautiful, and sometimes, when Gillian needed encouragement, she imagined herself belonging at the bottom of that select group.

One day, early in their relationship, Jason asked about her college plans. Gillian mentioned several possibilities before confessing that she wasn't sure about anything. Then his smile grew serious, and with his most fatherly tone, he mentioned that her future was being built by an army of engineers and programmers, all working in the growing field of artificial intelligence.

Gillian didn't have a technical mind and his advice meant nothing.

But after that, she took the trouble to Google and Wiki him. In short order, she learned that the man was astonishingly rich. But more than that, the name "Jason Popper" was famous in an odd little corner of mathematics. She had never realized that she knew a rare kind of genius, and his potent little algorithms were fueling research in half a dozen fields, including AIs and cybernetics.

In the end, they were good enough friends that Gillian felt obligated to warn him that she was quitting soon. After countless delays, she finally decided on a college, and it wasn't going to be a local school. She'd work another two weeks at the store, and then she would move a thousand miles to live with her maiden aunt, finding work there to help pay her way while attending a little university in the wild woods of Minnesota.

"Good for you," Jason declared.

That was the first time she felt hurt by him. She was hoping to see disappointment in his face, and perhaps hear a little pain in his voice.

Wasn't she walking out of his life? Yet after more than a year of using her checkout lane, proving his unflagging loyalty, all he could do was offer a grand smile while saying, "The best of luck to you!"

During her last week at the grocery, Gillian didn't see the man once.

Was he traveling? But he hadn't mentioned going anywhere, and lately he had made a point of telling her if he was. She even took time to study the store records, discovering that her friend had shopped here only yesterday, half an hour before she arrived, signing for greens and oil and walnuts and a plastic box of cherry tomatoes—the makings for a salad big enough for two.

On her last day, Gillian worked until closing time.

It was night when she walked out to the old Corolla that her father bought her last year. Sitting in another corner of the parking lot was a sports car. She didn't notice it until it came to life, headlights opening as it crept closer to her. The car was a hybrid running on its muscular batteries, and it silently pulled up alongside her. The driver's window dropped and a familiar voice said, "Gillian," with a suddenness that startled her.

She turned.

Jason was smiling, but something about the expression was different. Wrong. He looked serious and grave and suspicious, but just when she felt a touch of worry, the smile was replaced with a serious shake of the head and the handing over of an envelope, pink and square and bulging from whatever was stuffed inside.

"Good luck to you," the man told her.

"Thank you," she squeaked weakly.

Then he drove away, leaving her alone in the parking lot. Troubled and not certain why, she climbed into her own car and locked the doors and turned on the old-fashioned engine. For a few moments, she stared at the envelope, wondering if the right thing to do was to leave it at the desk, refusing whatever this was because something about the moment and these circumstances felt wrong.

But she had to look. How could she resist? With a long nail, she tore open the envelope, pulling out a greeting card that showed a calico kitten hiding behind a daisy, no words on the outside and nothing inside but a

man's careful scribblings, plus a tidy stack of one hundred dollar bills.

She counted fifteen bills before stopping.

This was exceptionally wrong, she thought. But she couldn't decide what made it wrong. She had done nothing and expected nothing from a man who had plenty of money to spend however he wished.

After a few moments of reflection, she finally read what Jason Popper had written:

"Gillian—

"You're a lovely girl, and have a wonderful youth. I'll come for you after the machines take over.

"Jason."

Beneath his signature was the name of a corporation that only recently went public, and beside it her suitor had jotted down the words, "If you want, use my gift to buy a few shares. They'll make you happy."

And as it happened, they did.

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The new world was smart and flashy-bright and prone to rapid, imaginative transformations—just as Gillian guessed it would be. The poorest human was richer than any emperor of old, and civilization was suddenly wielding an array of fabulous, muscular tools, giving it power over all but the farthest reaches of the solar system. But the Thinkers weren't quite what she'd guessed they would be. In her speculative moments, first at the college in Minnesota and then at graduate school in Boston, she envisioned computers that were a little larger than the machines she worked with, and fancier, and much colder. She knew practically nothing about the engineering of computers or AIs—a limitation she admitted to friends and lovers. But quite a few people knew she was a stockholder in Popper's thriving company, and if she wasn't competent in the tech stuff, then where did she get the good sense to invest at the beginning?

How she told that particular story depended on her audience.

Girlfriends heard a frank, somewhat amusing tale about a flirtatious old man and Gillian's extraordinary good luck. But boyfriends needed to be

handled delicately, and experience taught her to pick between two basic avenues: Jason was a kind, harmless gentleman—basically just a fatherly figure. Or if she wanted to lift her value in the young male's eyes, she would play up the aspects of desire. She would imply that the great man had been interested in her, and perhaps she had encouraged him. On one or two occasions, when she thought she was in love and feared that her young man's attentions were wavering, Gillian would tell certain stories that were not even a little bit true.

It was amazing to see how a lover's mind could be intrigued by the idea of sharing a cramped bed with a billionaire's ex-girlfriend.

Gillian didn't particularly like that game, and when she was older, she consciously decided to tell nothing but the truth.

Yet what was the truth?

A decade had passed and she couldn't feel absolutely certain about the details involving her cashiering job or the customers. And another ten years brought her to an unnerving point where the past was vague and cluttered, but what she remembered with absolute clarity was the precise, much-practiced way she always told her story.

By then, the new world had begun.

Twenty years after the kitten and daisy and money, the Thinkers finally took over civilization—if only along proscribed, carefully regulated lines.

Jason Popper didn't build any of the hyperintelligent machines. But where a dozen other companies took that job, he owned the miraculous algorithms that were working furiously at the core of each newborn machine. And the machines were tinier than any contraption a young cashier would have imagined. One dime would have dwarfed the typical Thinker, and during that first pivotal year, the world's population of AIs could have fit comfortably on any shelf in a tiny neighborhood grocery store.

The results were sudden and world shaking, and for less prepared minds, they were terrifying.

But Gillian found the revolution bracing and quite fun.

The stock she had purchased two decades ago had already split repeatedly, and that following year, when its value was soaring, she sold half of her wealth in order to diversify in ten new industries, using the rest of

her cash to buy a Thinker of her own.

Implantations were not routine yet. But the complications proved minor, the training period frustrating but endurable, and before her forty-first birthday, Gillian found herself in possession of an intelligence that was entirely her own—and she had the medical bills to prove it.

Soon the ancient limits to growth and social change had vanished.

Those first-generation Thinkers dreamed up new power sources and efficient rockets, plus the means not only to fix the Earth's teetering environment, but the tools to reconfigure the worlds and moons of a solar system that was suddenly lying within easy reach.

Before she was fifty, Gillian had her physical self made young again.

Soon after that, she emigrated to Mars, and later, out of love, jumped to a pioneer city floating in the clouds of Titan.

Now and again, she would mention that she knew Jason Popper back in those "before" days. But since everyone had an augmented mind, she had to be careful. Memories were huge, and vast data pools were available even to the average citizen. Her audiences were informed. She learned the hard way not to vary the details of her story, even when it was a new decade and a different world. People still talked to people. That would never change. Inevitably her new friends would ask to see the note that the famous man had written inside the kitten-and-daisy card, and Gillian would have to shake her head, admitting that she hadn't kept it. That pivotal treasure had been lost somewhere between college and graduate school. Then she noticed that people she didn't know were familiar with her non-adventure, and whenever a new face asked to see the treasured gift card, she could be sure that the keen mind behind the face already knew that it was gone.

There was more gossip than ever in the universe, and like gossip in any age, it was both subtle and cruel.

Gillian was lying, some assumed. Not about the cashier job or having some thin connection with the famous Popper. But they felt that the note was a bit of fantasy on her part, or more than a bit. And the money was surely a fiction too. Maybe Popper had suggested that she buy some of his stock, or maybe she had done it on her own. But a lot of people had bankrolled Popper's speculative business; the solar system had enough success stories, it was said, to populate a large asteroid.



Several centuries had passed, nearly a trillion people and near-people and synthetic people scattered across several thousand inhabited worlds. Everyone in Gillian's circle was younger than she, sometimes by ten or twenty decades, and they didn't care to even imagine an existence without Thinkers or their powerful gifts. These were the people most likely to tsk-tsk her salad-for-two stories. One young man—a lover who proved unworthy after just a few painful weeks—was cruel enough to point out what other people only thought:

“Maybe your story's true, Gillian. Sure, I'll give you that. But the machines took over long ago. And where's your savior? Tell me that.”

Gillian knew almost exactly where Jason Popper was. A tiny expert inside her insatiable mind was devoted to tracking his motions and activities, at least as far as public laws and her personal tastes allowed. At the present moment, the great old man was living in seclusion on Earth, splitting his days between three heavily protected mansions.

Of course the “Where is he?” question had occurred to her. Many times.

“But what Jason imagined happening hasn't happened,” she offered. “Because people are still in charge, obviously.”

“Who's talking now?” he snapped. “A human female, or the Thinker rooted in the female's helpless cortex?”

That sour man soon vanished from her life.

Then later, while attending a huge party celebrating another successful stage in the ongoing terraforming of Titan, Gillian found herself sharing air with a young-looking woman whom she didn't recognize and who didn't offer any name.

Gillian didn't even mention Jason Popper.

Yet the woman knew her story. She brought it up, and showing a smug grin, she told the tale in full, right down to the “salad-for-two” line.

“Who are you?” Gillian asked.

“You should ask how I know this.”

"I don't care how," Gillian lied.

But the woman was proud, explaining in rigorous detail all the convoluted pathways that taught her what wasn't really important at all.

Again, Gillian asked, "Who are you?"

The woman looked young, but with an old-style human body, not unlike hers. And she was pretty in the same basic ways. Except of course everyone was beautiful, and it didn't have to mean anything at all.

But an intuition took hold of Gillian.

"How old are you?" she asked.

"My name is Sally Novak, and I'm five and a half years older than you." Then the woman laughed, soaking up all the pleasure from this long-anticipated moment. "I used to work at a health club down the block from your old grocery. Mr. Popper was one of our members, and he always made a point of chatting with me. You know how. In that flirty, didn't-mean-much way of his."

Gillian checked that sketch against a thousand data pools, discovering that the woman might well be telling the truth.

"On my last day at work," Sally said, "Jason handed me a card and gift."

The punch line was obvious.

"Like he did with you, he promised to rescue me when the machines took over."

Gillian's intellect easily absorbed this epiphany, but her emotions took a few moments longer.

"And do you know what else, darling?"

"What?" Gillian managed.

"Over the years, I've met nearly fifty women like you and me. That seedy old boyfriend of ours was having his fun with us. That's what I think. Which begs the question: How many other girls were there that we still don't know about?"

The moment was embarrassing and difficult. But more than anything, it brought to Gillian a distinct, infectious pleasure.

Her life had been long and unexpected—a comfortable, well-to-do existence—and she had grown accustomed to wielding several kinds of genius inside her rebuilt head. But that one moment taught her that it was still possible, not to mention wondrous and delicious, to be so surprised that the body could swoon in the weak gravity, begging permission to fall down.

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Time was vast but always finite, while space would remain two breaths short of infinite; and those were just two components in a multiverse built upon branes and inflationary events, marauding singularities and impossible-fields that worked together to generate every kind of imaginable creation, plus a few more. When given its chance, sentient life always grew to understand that it was inevitably and profoundly tiny. Any intellect, once magnified with a top-flight Thinker, ceased to live in a place of genuine importance. Humanity had been washed clean of tyrants and great souls. Even Jason Popper was important for the famous things done in the deep past. No matter what Gillian might accomplish in her coming days, one girl's history would always be narrow and brief. She might meet ten billion people, but those were just a rough sampling of the vivid souls occupying one end of the galaxy. She could live on a thousand worlds, but that left trillions of beautiful realms that would never know the shape of her hand or the soft, shy pressure of her eyes. And the mind behind those eyes had to pose inevitable questions: Why do you feel this nagging, pernicious sense of loss? And what exactly is it that you believe you are missing?

Years later, Gillian returned to Earth for an extended visit. The world she remembered was gone now, replaced with a crowded, busy, and exceptionally lovely terrain that in no way resembled the place of her birth. With the patience of a woman blessed with time, she stayed with a succession of relatives and old friends, and like any tourist, she tried to absorb the sights and tastes of this new place. Sometimes, seemingly by accident, traces of Jason Popper came forward to be noticed. An acquaintance spotted him hiking in the mountains on the new Pacifica continent, while another claimed that he was right now circumnavigating the globe in a stratospheric glider. Other voices claimed he was investing in a speculative new company using SETI-acquired technologies—an intentional lie, it later turned out, in a useless bid to stir up investors in a soon-to-fail venture. Then rumors surfaced that the old man was building a

submarine, planning to dive deeper than anyone ever had into the Jovian atmosphere. Or was he assembling a starship that would take him to the Centauri suns or the galaxy's heart? And then came the day when knowledgeable sources sadly reported that the man who was among the ten or twelve most responsible for this new world had just fallen ill, suffering from a nameless ailment that was stubbornly resisting every doctor's healing touch.

All of those stories had been told before. Gillian had heard variations of them on Titan, and she imagined she would hear them again, probably for another hundred thousand years. But that was to be expected: To the best of his ability, the man was a recluse, and into his absence flowed every bit of nonsense and spectacular speculation.

But here Gillian was, practically standing in Jason's backyard, and why not make good use of her opportunity?

Once the decision was made, it took less than a second for her quick mind to formulate a worthy plan.

Identifying the recluse's location was the trick. He owned three mansions, each surrounded by walled estates constantly shielded from curious eyes. But the man she knew wouldn't hide in those kinds of places, she reasoned. Too inelegant, and in their own fashion, far too constricting. For several days, she sat alone in a quiet room tucked inside her grandniece's giant house, and in that carefully maintained darkness, she remembered everything about the man who used to visit her in that little neighborhood grocery.

One evening, in a loud voice nobody else could hear, she announced, "I know where to find him."

Ten hours later, she arrived at the front gate of a modest farm at the southern end of Old Italy. A thousand threads of evidence had brought her to this place—electronic traffic and robot traffic, the strangely perfect weather and a few hectares of heavily tilled land that were dedicated to an assortment of heirloom crops.

She could be wrong, yes. But really, where was the harm? Alone, she pressed an old-fashioned button that set loose a series of quiet musical bells. But the bells went unanswered. Invisible eyes watched her standing patiently in the ruddy, early morning light. She felt their mechanical gaze, and she listened carefully to birds singing and the warm wind. And then, just as she reached for the button again, a scrubbed voice came from no

particular location, asking, “What do you want, my dear?”

“A salad for two,” she replied, smiling.

Again, silence washed over her.

Gillian’s patience left her. Nervous frustration—not a popular emotion among modern souls—led to a small, untidy rage. In a single breath, she told the voice her name and the essentials of her story, and when she quit talking, she realized that the heavy oak gate had been pulled open, and on the other side of it stood an ageless and very fit gentleman who was studying her with his own curious brown eyes.

Quietly, Jason Popper said, “Hello, my dear.”

Again, softly this time, she said, “Salad for two.”

But then with a sad shake of the head, the man said, “No. You must be confused. Gillian, is it? It’s been a very long time, and yes, in my day I’ve bought a few groceries. But no matter how hard I try, I can’t remember you.

“And my dear, I don’t believe you remember me either....”

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Beyond the gate stood a massive old oak tree, and in its trunk’s shadow waited a long iron bench where two people who didn’t know one another could sit with distance between them. The very old man invited that slightly younger woman to tell her story again, in detail.

Gillian talked about the grocery and her favorite customer, and then with a string of telling details, she described her last day of work and the spooky walk to the car and how Jason Popper had driven up alongside her and given her a best-wishes card as well as the hundred-dollar bills—

And she paused, arms crossing on her bent-forward chest. “You’re saying this didn’t happen,” she muttered. “Well then, where did my money come from? How could I have afforded your stock in the first place?”

Jason smiled for a moment. “When you graduated from high school, your grandmother gave you those shares as a gift.”

Why did that sound a little familiar?

He pulled a small reader from his hip pocket and showed her a sequence of transaction files that had been uncovered in just the last several seconds. According to what she read, her mother's mother had bought the stock for Gillian, as well as shares in several other new companies that had long since died.

Once again, Jason prompted her to tell her story.

But Gillian could only touch on those next decades. Confused and a little scared, she had to ask, "Why didn't anyone notice that I was lying? These are public records, and you found them easily enough...."

"Yes, I did."

The man had a pleasant, patient smile.

She thought for a moment, and then she said, "Oh."

"Yes?"

"None of this story's true, is it?"

"What do you mean, dear?"

"I never got a gift from you. Not money or card, or anything. And now that I think about it ... I'm not sure you even lived in my home city...."

"For what's it worth, I did visit once. But that was before you were born."

"And I never mentioned you to my friends or lovers. Everything in my head ... I don't think it was there last year, or even last week." She slumped back against the seat, and with a soft, lost sob, she said, "I think I dreamed this story up yesterday. And believed it, somehow."

"Is that so?"

"I think I must be crazy," she muttered.

Which for some reason made him laugh. Then he touched her for the first and final time, on the knee, the hand hard and warm and strong in the ways that a gardener's hand would be, patting her a few times before pulling away again. "No, you're not crazy. And the fault is entirely my own, what's happening to you. Nobody can wear the blame but me."

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The Three Laws protected humanity from the machines, and giving those Laws teeth were hundreds of legal refinements and thousands of wetware programs, plus an army of monitoring agents as well as one bureaucratic empire purposefully starved of creativity or the barest interest in changing the status quo. But more than just that impressive array of public resolve defended humanity. There were subtle, secretive tools at work too. One device was the brainchild of Jason Popper. Or perhaps more than one ... but he confessed to a single pernicious program buried deep in the workings of the first Thinker that Gillian had implanted into her skull.

“This is my guess,” Jason reported. “You’ve enjoyed a fine long life, and with time, you’ve grown accustomed to your augmented mind. But no complex system is perfectly static; no army of safeguards can forever defend every last one of your borders. Coming home to the Earth was the trigger, perhaps. Or maybe this would have happened on Titan. I cannot say for certain. But let’s assume that familiar skies and the taste of this particular wind brought back memories of pre-Thinker days, and naturally you began measuring what you are today against what you used to be.

“You’re homesick, Gillian. Not for a place or even a time, but for that innocent young girl.

“A little harmless longing doesn’t matter, of course. Everybody does it. But that expression, ‘Salad for two,’ is a coded cry for help. And ‘The machines take over,’ has a much more transparent meaning. Together, those phrases should tell an informed observer that the organic portion of your consciousness is losing too much ground to its artificial parts. And even more alarming is this elaborate daydream of yours. Which isn’t really yours, by the way.”

“Then whose is it?”

“Mine, I suppose. There’s a string of implanted partial memories that I created. They’re inside you and millions like you, ready to be woven into anyone’s life story, fragments of a narrative that each person will believe wholly and act upon accordingly. Should they ever be needed, that is.

“What happened to you, Gillian ... quite suddenly you remembered having met me. You wove me into a long ago job, and your daydream told you that our relationship was close enough to be friendly. In the story are

just enough clues to lead you to my home. Which is exactly what I intended. Everyone who embraced that first generation of Thinkers is similarly equipped. Each of you has a warning sign, and from that, the possibility of escape.”

Jason paused.

Gillian stared at her hands—at the backs of her hands and the long palms—and then she closed her eyes, asking, “What do I do?”

“There are quite a few technical fixes,” Jason allowed. “But first you’ll need to decide what is genuinely you and what that ‘you’ desires.”

“Can I have everything artificial removed?”

“If that’s what you wish.”

She offered several less radical options.

“Everything is possible, Gillian.”

Panic took hold. Sitting in the warm shade, in air suffused with the odors of tomatoes and basil, Gillian began to shiver. “I don’t know what I want,” she confessed. “I have no idea what to do ... not at all....”

Jason watched her with a measure of sympathy. But despite his patience and earnestness, she had the strong impression that he had done just this many times before.

She asked, “Are there others? Like me?”

“Of course,” he allowed.

“And do they come here, hunting for you?”

“If they’re on the Earth, they will. Eventually.” He shrugged, adding, “But this is why I allow myself to be found. I’m a fortunate person, and I owe the world a great deal. And believe me, I feel an obligation to help where I can.”

“I want to talk to these other people,” she said.

Jason might or might not have expected that answer. But after another nod, he said, “That seems only reasonable.”



“How often?”

“Do they come to my gate?” Jason Popper sighed and stood again. “Sit here and wait, Gillian. If that’s what you wish. And if I happen to get another visitor today, answer on my behalf. How’s that for a plan?”

“I guess I can try.”

Then the great man reached beneath the bench, into a weathered cupboard, and took out a wide wooden bowl. The bowl was clean but scarred by fork tines and a thousand different hands. “You’ve been through a lot,” he said. “You’re probably hungry. If you want, make yourself a salad while you wait.”

But Gillian barely had time to pick a few greens before the bell at the gate began, quietly but insistently and with much purpose, to ring.