

2. YEAR DAY

IRENE CAME BACK on Year Day. It's a lost day for those of us who were born before 1980. The calendar day that comes between the end of the old year and the start of the new, the day when the lid's off. New York was noisy. Beamed commercials followed me right along, even when I swung over onto the fast roadway. I'd forgotten my earplugs, too.

Irene's voice spoke to me out of the little round grid above the windshield. It was funny how clearly I could hear it, even above all the noise.

'Bill,' the voice said. 'Where are you, Bill?'

It had been six years since I heard the voice. For a minute everything else blanked out and it was as if I were driving along in silence, hearing nothing but Irene. Then I all but sideslipped a police car and the noise, the commercials, the tumult were normal again.

'Let me in, Bill,' Irene's voice said out of the little grid. For a second I almost thought I could. Her voice sounded so small and clear I thought I could reach up my hand and open the grid and take her down, tiny and perfect in my palm, standing there with her high heels denting my hand like little needles. Year Day gives me ideas like that. Anything goes.

I pulled myself together. 'Hello, Irene.' My voice was perfectly calm. 'I'm on my way home. Be there in fifteen minutes. The super will let you in.'

'I'll wait Bill,' the small voice told me.

Then I heard the faraway click of the mike on my apartment door, and I was alone in the car again, feeling strange, feeling afraid, not sure if I wanted to see her, but automatically pulling into the high-speed lane so I could get home quicker.

New York is noisy all the time. On Year Day the pace doubles. Everybody off work, out for a good time, in a spending mood if they ever are. The commercials went crazy. The air bounced and shivered with them. Once or twice the roadway passed through an area lined with special mikes and amplifiers to pick up sound and send out reactions enough out of phase to add up to silence. There were a couple of five-minute drifts like that, like driving in a dream after all the noise, but every minute on the minute a caressing voice told me, 'This silence is coming to you by courtesy of Paradise Homes. Freddi Lester speaking.'

I don't know if Freddi Lester exists. Maybe he's a filmstrip composite. Maybe he isn't. Certainly he's too perfect to be real.

A lot of men bleach their hair now and wear it in curls over the forehead, like Freddi. I've seen his face, projected ten feet high, sliding along the sides of buildings on the street in a circle of light, gliding and molding itself to every projection, and women reaching up to touch it as if it were real. 'Breakfast time with Freddi. Hypnolearn while you sleep-with Freddi's voice. Buy into Paradise Homes.' Yeah.

The roadway rushed out of a silent zone and the blare and roar of

Manhattan hit me. BUY-BUY-BUY! over and over again, in a million different ways, with light and sound and rhythm.

She stood up when I came in. She didn't say anything. She was wearing her hat a new way, and her make-up was different, but I'd have known her anywhere, in a fog, in pitch dark, with my eyes shut. Then she smiled, and I saw that the six years had maybe changed her a little after all, and I hesitated for a second, feeling afraid again. I remembered how right after our divorce a TV call had come from a woman made up to look exactly like Irene. She wanted to sell me advertising insurance.

But today, on this day that doesn't really exist, it didn't matter. Only cash sales are legal on Year Day, anyhow. Of course there aren't any laws to protect a man against the thing I was afraid of, but that wouldn't mean much to Irene. It never had. I doubt if she ever quite grasped the principle that I am real. Not basically, essentially grasped it. Irene is a product of her world. And so, of course, am I.

'This is going to be a tough conversation to start,' I said.

'Does today count?' she asked.

'Maybe it does,' I said. I went over to the server. 'Drinlt?'

'Seven-Twelve-Jay,' she told me, and I dialed it. A pink drink came out. I dialed myself a Scotch and soda. • 'Where have you been?' I asked her. 'Happy?'

'I've been-somewhere. I think I've learned some things. Yes, very happy. Are you?'

I took a quick drink. 'Oh, sure. Happy as a lark. Happy as Freddi Lester.'

She smiled faintly and sipped the pink drink. 'You used to be jealous of Jerome Foret, when he had the Lester spot,' she said. 'You used to wear a Foret double part in your hair, remember?'

'I learn,' I said. 'You notice-no bleach? No curls? I'm not imitating anybody now. You used to be jealous too. I think you're wearing a Niobe Gai hair job.'

She shrugged. 'It was easier than an argument with the hairdresser. Maybe I thought you'd like it. Do you?'

'I like it on you. I try not to look at Niobe Gai. Or Freddi Lester.'

'Even their names are horrible, aren't they?' she said. I was surprised.

'You've changed,' I told her. 'Where have you been?'

She wouldn't look at me. All this time we had been standing about ten feet apart, each a little afraid of the other. She gazed out the window and said, 'Bill. For the last five years I've been living at Paradise Homes.'

I didn't move for a while. Finally I lifted my glass and drank. Only then did I look at her. Now I knew why she seemed different. I'd seen women before

who'd lived at Paradise Homes,

'Evicted?' I asked.

But she shook her head.

'Five years was enough I got a full dose of what I thought I wanted. The-ultimate. I found out I'd been wrong, Bill. That wasn't it.'

'All I know about Paradise Homes,' I said, 'is the commercials. I didn't think it would work, though.'

'You always were ahead of me, Bill,' she said humbly. 'I know that too now. But it sounded good.'

'Nothing's that easy. The real problems can't be solved for us by hiring somebody else to do the work.'

'I know. Now. I suppose I've matured a little. But it's hard. There's so damned much conditioning so early nowadays.'

'How do you expect people to keep alive?' I asked her. 'Total demand's away down to whatever it is today, and production's probably dropped since yesterday. We've got to take in each other's washing to keep going. You need good strong advertising to make money. And, by God, you'd better have money! There just isn't enough to go around, that's all.'

'Do you-are you doing all right?' Irene asked hesitantly.

'Is that an offer or a request?'

'Oh, an offer,' she said. 'I've got enough.'

'Paradise Homes aren't cheap.'

'I bought stock in the Lunar Servile Corporation five years ago, so I'm fairly rich now.'

'That's nice. I'm all right too, thanks. Though I sank a lot in advertising protection insurance. The premiums run high, but it's worth it. I can walk through Times Square now without feeling worried even when the Joysmoke Feelies are running.'

'There isn't any advertising allowed in Paradise Homes,' she said.

'Don't believe it. Now there's a tight-beam sonic that can pierce walls and whisper hypnotism in your ear while you sleep. Even earplugs don't help. It works through bone conductivity.'

'If you live in Paradise Homes, you're protected.'

'You're not now,' I said, 'Why did you leave your nunnery?'

'Maybe I grew up.'

'Maybe.'

'Bill,' she said. 'Bill-have you married?'

I didn't answer, because something tapped at the window,

and there was a little imitation bird fluttering around, trying to flatten itself against the glass. It had some kind of sucker-disk diaphragm on its breast. It must have been a beam transmitter, for suddenly a clear, brisk, unbirdlike voice said, '-so you must taste Creamies you must---' Then the window automatically polarized and kicked the advertibird into space.

'No,' I said. 'I'm not married, Irene.' I looked at her a moment. 'Come out on the balcony,' I said.

The door spun us both out, and the Safeties went on. They're expensive, but they're included in my insurance premiums.

Here it was quiet. The special mikes picked up the yells of the city screaming its commercials to the sky and neutralized them to dead silence. The ultrasonic shook the air enough so that the blazing advertising of New York ran together in a blurred, melting waterfall of meaningless colors.

'What's the matter, Irene?' I asked.

'This,' she said, and put her arms around my neck and kissed me.

After that she drew back and waited. I said again,

'What's the matter, Irene?'

'Nothing left, Bill?' she asked me softly. 'All gone?'

'I don't know,' I said. 'My God, I don't know. I'm afraid to know.' Afraid was the word. I couldn't be sure. We grew up in a commercial world and how can we tell what's real, now? Suddenly I moved my hand over the switchplate and the Safeties shut themselves off.

Instantly the flowing colors knotted into shouting signals in nucolor, as bright by day as by night. EAT DRINK PLAY SLEEP they blazed, screaming in silence for an instant, until the sonic barrier went down and the shout was no longer silent. EAT DRINK PLAY SLEEP! EAT DRINK PLAY SLEEP!

BE BEAUTIFUL!

BE HEALTHY!

BE ADMIRER BE TOPDOG BE RICH-ADMIRER- FAMOUS!

JOYSMOKE! CREAMIES! MARSFOOD!

HURRYHURRYHURRYHURRYHURRY!

NIOBE GAI SAYS-FREDDI LESTER PRESENTS-PARADISE HOMES FOR HAPPY ADJUSTMENT!

EAT DRINK PLAY SLEEP EAT DRINK PLAY SLEEP BUY BUY BUY!

I didn't even realize Irene was screaming until I felt her shaking me and

saw her white face swimming out from that pushing, driving, hypnotic whirl of colors, superadvertising planned by the best psychologists on earth, twisting everybody's arm to squeeze out of them their last cent because there wasn't enough dough to go around any more.

I turned the Safeties on again with one hand. With the other

I held on to Irene. We were both a little punch drunk. The advertising isn't really quite as overwhelming as all that. It just isn't safe to let it hit you suddenly when you're emotionally imbalanced. The commercials work on emotion. They find out your weak spots. They aim at your basic drives.

'It's all right,' I said. 'It's all right, as right as it ever will be. Look. The Safeties are on. The damned stuff can't get in. It's only when you're a kid that it's really bad. You don't know enough to protect yourself. You get conditioned. Stop crying, Irene. Come inside.'

I dialed us another drink. She kept on crying and I kept on talking.

'It's that damned conditioning,' I said. 'Drummed into your head as soon as you're old enough to know what words mean. Movies, TV, magazines, bookreels, every medium of communication there is. Aimed at just one thing-to make you buy. And doing it by trickery. Building up artificial needs and fears until you don't know what's real and what isn't. Nothing's real-not even your breathing. It stinks. Use Kinebreath Chlorophyll Dulces. Damn it, Irene, I know why things went wrong with us.'

'Why?' she asked, muffled through her handkerchief.

'You thought I was Freddi Lester. Maybe I thought you were Niobe Gai. Not real people, changing and reacting all the time. No wonder marriage doesn't work any more. Don't you think I've ever wished it had been different?'

I felt better. That much was out of my system. I waited until she stopped crying. She looked at me over the handkerchief.

'No Niobe Gai?' she said.

'To hell with Niobe Gai.'

'And you aren't going to ask me about Freddi Lester?'

'Why should I? He's nothing but an image, like Niobe Gai. Even in Paradise Homes, I suppose.'

She gave me a curious look over the handkerchief. Then she blew her nose, blinked and smiled at me. It took me a little while to realize why she was waiting.

'The last time,' I reminded her, 'I said some pretty romantic things. This time--'

'Yes?'

'Will you marry me, Irene?'

'Yes, Bill,' she said.

So at one minute after midnight of Year Day we were married. She wanted to wait until the new year really began. Year Day, she said, was too artificial. It wasn't really there. It wasn't real. I was glad to hear her say it. In the old days that was something she wouldn't have known.

Right after the ceremony we put up the Complete Barrier, because of the direct advertising that would be aimed right at us

the minute spot-checkers reported a marriage had taken place. Even so, the ceremony was interrupted twice by jamming Newlywed commercials.

So there we were, shut away safe and quiet in an apartment in New York. Outside, the unrealities blazed and shouted, outdoing each other in promises of fame and fortune for everybody. Everybody could be richer than everybody else. Everybody could be handsomer, smell sweeter, live longer than anyone else in the world. Nobody but us could be us, safe and silent and real in our oasis.

We made plans that night. They were pretty vague. With the little war going on all around the globe there wasn't any safe place to travel. The moon is a penal colony. Mars and Venus are kept iron-curtained by the government. Russia is painfully changing from a political-economic dictatorship to a semi-Buddhist religious society. Only in Africa, where the great weather control experiments are going on, is there any sort of peace, though slavery is still a boiling pot of trouble.

There is no arable land left, of course. We talked about buying the necessary equipment and creating good land, a self-sustaining part-hydroponic unit, just to get away from the urban centers and the commercials. I expect it was all pretty unrealistic.

The next morning, when I woke up, sunlight was slanting in long parallel bars across the bed and Irene wasn't there any more.

There was no message on the wiretape. I waited till afternoon. I kept switching off the Barrier, thinking she might be trying to reach me, and then switching it on again to stop the deluge of Newlywed commercials. I almost went crazy that morning. I couldn't figure out what had happened. I lost count of the times people came to the door wheedling me through the tuned-off' mike, but the one-way glass never showed me Irene's face and I walked up and down all morning, drank coffee that began to taste like glue after the tenth cup, and smoked myself into a state of nausea.

Finally I put an Investigatory Bureau on the job. I didn't like to do it. After our little oasis of silence and warmth and peace last night I hated to set the hounds on her, especially when I thought of her out there in the swirls and torrents of commercials and the clangor that is Manhattan.

An hour later the Investigatory Bureau told me where she was. I couldn't believe it. Again, for a second, it seemed to me that everything went blind and soundless around me and I stood there in a little individual Complete Barrier of my own, wide life too noisy to endure on the other side.

I came out of it to hear the tail end of a sentence coming out of the screen.

'What's that?' I asked.

The man repeated. I said I didn't believe it. Then I begged his pardon, cut the switch, and dialed the number of my bank. The report had been perfectly true. My balance was now zero. Sometime during the morning while I paced in a frenzy my bride had drawn eighty-four thousand dollars out of my account. The dollar isn't worth much now, of course, but it was the savings of a long period and it was all I had.

'We checked on it, of course,' the bank official told me. 'But it was perfectly legal. She was your wife, since the marriage took place one minute after Year Day. The Year Day. amnesty on contractual matters didn't apply.'

'Why didn't you check with me?'

'It was perfectly legal,' he repeated firmly. 'Since the regular bounty for complete withdrawal was paid to us from the total amount, we had no choice.'

Of course. The bounty. I'd forgotten that. Naturally the bank hadn't wanted to check with me. And there wasn't a thing I could do.

'O.K.,' I said. 'Thanks.'

'If we can serve you in any way---' That slid into the bank's color commercial signature, so I clicked off. There was no use wasting a commercial on me.

I put in my earplugs and took the dropper to the third street level. There, the fast slideway shot me across town to the Paradise Homes offices. The homes themselves are mostly underground, but the offices are like a cathedral and the hush was so deep I took the earplugs out again. The lights were remote and blue, and the stained glass made me think of a mortuary.

I got to see one of the top agents before I had to explain my real intentions. I think he almost called the bouncer, but then he got a speculative look in his eye and decided to give me a salesman pitch first.

'Certainly,' he said. 'Glad to oblige you. Come this way. I'll have our Mr. Field assist you.'

He left me at the dropper door. I sank a few hundred feet and was decanted into a warm, luminous corridor, where a large, kindly, rosy-faced man in a dark suit was waiting for me. He had a very friendly voice.

'Paradise Homes is always happy to help,' he purred at me. 'We all know how difficult adjustment is in these troubled times. We create an optimum adaptation for happiness. Now you must let me try to help you, and you'll be surprised to find your problems can be solved more easily than you think.'

'I know they can,' I said. 'Where's my wife?'

'Come this way,' he said, and led me along the corridor. There were doors on each side, some of them with little metal seals too small to read from a distance. Finally we came to an open door. It was dark inside.

'In here,' Mr. Field said, and his large, warm hand gently urged me across the threshold. A soft light came on and I saw a sparsely furnished apartment, rather shoddy, with a minimum of production-line furniture. It was colorless and without character, like a clean but second-rate hotel. I was surprised.

'The bathroom,' Mr. Field said, opening a door.

'That's fine,' I said, not looking. 'Now about my wife---'

'You will notice,' Mr. Field went on calmly, 'that there is a wall bed. This button--' He demonstrated. 'And this button retracts it. The plastic sheets last forever. Once daily a cleansing fluid circulates through the valves in which all Paradise beds nest, and by nightfall you have, in effect, a freshly made, clean bed. You will find this an attraction.'

'I'm sure I will.'

'You will not be disturbed by maid service,' Mr. Field went on. 'Magnetic lines of force make the bed. The electromagnets--'

'Never mind,' I said, as he reached for the button. 'You're wasting your time. Are you going to take me to my wife?'

'We protect our clients,' he said, raising his eyebrows. 'First I must explain to you exactly how Paradise Homes operates. If you'll be patient I feel quite certain you'll understand why this is advisable.'

I thought that over. The little room depressed me. I felt dazed and still incredulous. It was hard to believe that this dreary cubicle was Paradise Homes, but then nothing seemed very real to me that day. I had probably dreamed the whole thing. I thought tritely, from the first moment Irene's voice came to me, clear and small, out of the car's grid, asking to be let in.

She had seemed so-well, so changed, so contrite, so mature, so different from the irresponsible Irene I'd parted from six years earlier. I'd thought this time things would be different, that Year Day would work a kind of magic and give us a second chance, that lost day out of the calendar when the impossible might happen. I still couldn't quite believe--

'And here,' Mr. Field said, pulling a mouthpiece on a tube out of the wall, 'are the facilities for smoking. You may have any brand you wish. We are even prepared to supply you with- ah-imported inhalants, if you care for them. These smokers are set in each wall at five-foot intervals, including the bathroom. While everything in this room is fireproof,' he smiled kindly, 'the occupant may not be. No one can possibly be injured in a Paradise Home.'

'What if he fell out of bed?'

'The floor is resilient.'

'Like a padded cell,' I said. Mr. Field smiled again, shaking his head.

'That kind of thought won't occur to you once you've joined

our happy group of tenants,' he assured me. 'Paradise Homes ensure happiness. Now.' He waved a plump hand at the wall. 'This slot is the food tube. Whatever meals you order arrive here by pneumotube. Or liquid food may be preferred.' He indicated a row of nipples on tubes.

'Very fine,' I said. 'Is that all?'

'Not quite.' He ran his hand along the wall. A faint flicker trembled in the air. I heard a faraway, musical humming. 'If you will sit here for a moment, now--' He pushed me gently into a chair. I let him do it. The ugly little room shimmered before me. I was curious. I waited.

Couldn't anyone tell the difference, I wondered, gazing at the drab carpet and the drab wall unsteady through the shimmer. Because Paradise Homes put out such publicity did people really think this ugliness was luxury? It wouldn't surprise me.

'Now just sit back and relax,' Mr. Field urged kindly. 'Remember, Paradise Homes sponsors Niobe Gai as well as Freddi Lester. We serve both men and women. And we have the answer to all the complex personality problems of this complex age. Consider how difficult it is for a man to adjust to society. Or a man to adjust to a woman. It's really quite impossible, you know, any more. But in Paradise Homes we have the answer. We provide happiness. All human drives and appetites are satisfied. Here is happiness, my dear friend, here is happiness.'

His voice was fading a little. Something was happening to the air. It grew thicker, and the musical humming was more rhythmic, with a hint of articulation in it. Mr. Field kept on talking, softer and softer.

'We are a large organization. One fee covers every possible requirement for the client. Write us a check for as long or as short a period as you like, and you may stay here in this room for that period. It is leased to you. If you wish, the door can be sealed to open only from within until the lease expires. The rental is . . .'

I hardly heard it. His voice was a dying whisper.

The air was curdling like milk, running like the running colors in the balcony Safety.

I could almost hear a new voice speaking.

'Consider,' Mr. Field whispered. 'You grow up conditioned to expect impossibilities. But here we can give you the impossible. Here is happiness. Our fee is very small indeed compared to the great goal within your reach. Here, my friend, you can live perfectly. This is Paradise.'

Niobe Gai stood there in the curdled air, smiling at me.

She is the most beautiful woman in the world. She is equated with all desirable things. She is wealth, fame, happiness, health, fortune. For many

years I have been conditioned to desire all these impossible goals, and to know that Niobe Gai is the epi-

some of them all. But I never saw her before like this, standing here in the same room, firm and real, breathing and warm, holding out her arms....

It was a projection, of course. But complete. All tactile and sensory elements perfect. I could smell her perfume. I could feel her arms clasping me and the light brushing of her hair over my hand, and the shape of her lips. I could feel all this exactly as thousands of other men in the underground apartments would feel her lips as they kissed her. ,

It was that thought, and not any sense of lost realities, that made me push her away and step back. It didn't make any difference to Niobe Gai. She went right on making love to the air.

Then I knew that the last test of sanity had failed me, for it was no longer possible to tell the unreal from the real. The last test fails when the illusion moves into life itself and you can touch and feel and handle the commercial vision as if she were the real woman. There was no defense any more.

I looked at Niobe Gai clasping the empty air. The vision of all beauty and all desirable things in life, making love to nothingness as if it were a real human creature.

Then I opened the door and stepped out into the corridor. Mr. Field was waiting, studying a little note pad in his hand. He looked up at me, and probably he'd had plenty of experience, for he simply shrugged and nodded.

'Well, if you ever should be interested, here's my card,' he said. 'Lots of them do come back, you know. After they've thought it over awhile.'

'Not all,' I said.

'Well, no.' His face was serious. 'Some people seem to have a natural resistance. Maybe you're one of them. If you are, I'm sorry for you. Things are a mess outside. Nobody's fault, really. We've got to keep alive the only ways we know. You think it over. Maybe later on---'

I said, 'Where's my wife?'

'In there,' he said. 'Excuse me for not waiting. I'm rather busy. You can find the lift.'

I heard his footsteps going away. I moved forward and knocked at the door. I waited. There wasn't any answer.

I knocked again, harder and louder. But it had a flat, muffled sound, as if it didn't penetrate the panels at all. The client is protected in Paradise.

I could see now that there was one of the round metal seals attached to the panel; and I was close enough to read the printing. It said, 'Sealed until June 30, 1998. Cash received.'

I did a little sum in my head. Yes, she's used it all, every one of the

eighty-four thousand dollars. Her lease wouldn't run out again for quite a few years.

I wondered what she'd do next time.

I didn't knock again. I followed Mr. Field, found the lift, rose to street level. I got on a fast slideway and let it carry me around Manhattan. The advertising blazed and screamed. I found my earplugs in my pocket and stopped my ears. But that only shut out the sound. Visual commercials whirled and glared and glided across the buildings, slipping around corners, embracing the solid walls. And everywhere I looked was Freddi Lester's face.

Even when I shut my eyes, his after-image burned against my closed lids.