

RICHARD MATHESON

SHOCK!

13 TA-LES OF SHE-ER TER-ROR



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1 - THE CHILDREN OF NOAH

It was just past three a.m. when Mr Ketc-hum dro-ve past the sign that re-ad *Zachry: pop. 67*. He gro-aned. Anot-her in an end-less string of Ma-ine se-asi-de towns. He clo-sed his eyes hard a se-cond, then ope-ned them aga-in and pres-sed down on the ac-ce-le-ra-tor. The Ford sur-ged for-ward un-der him. May-be, with luck, he'd re-ach a de-cent mo-tel so-on. It cer-ta-inly wasn't li-kely the-re'd be one in *Zachry: pop. 67*.

Mr Ketc-hum shif-ted his he-avy fra-me on the se-at and stretc-hed his legs. It had be-en a so-ur va-ca-ti-on. Mo-to-ring thro-ugh New Eng-land's his-to-ric be-a-uty, com-mu-ning with na-tu-re and nos-tal-gia was what he'd plan-ned. Ins-te-ad, he'd fo-und only bo-re-dom, ex-ha-us-ti-on and

over-expen-se.

Mr Ketc-hum was not ple-ased.

The town se-emed fast as-le-ep as he dro-ve along its Ma-in Stre-et. The only so-und was that of the car's en-gi-ne, the only sight that of his ra-ised he-ad be-ams spla-ying out ahe-ad, ligh-ting up anot-her sign. *Spe-ed 15 Li-mit.*

'Sure, su-re,' he mut-te-red dis-gus-tedly, pres-sing down on the gas pe-dal. Three o'clock in the mor-ning and the town fat-hers ex-pec-ted him to cre-ep thro-ugh the-ir lo-usy ham-let. Mr Ketc-hum watc-hed the dark bu-il-dings rush past his win-dow.

Goodbye Zachry, he tho-ught. Fa-re-well, pop. 67.

Then the ot-her car ap-pe-ared in the re-ar-vi-ew mir-ror. Abo-ut half a block be-hind, a se-dan with a tur-ning red spot-light on its ro-of. He knew what kind of car it was. His fo-ot cur-led off the ac-ce-le-ra-tor and he felt his he-art-be-at qu-ic-ken. Was it pos-sib-le they hadn't no-ti-ced how fast he was go-ing?

The qu-es-ti-on was ans-we-red as the dark car pul-led up to the Ford and a man in a big hat le-aned out of the front win-dow. Pull over!' he bar-ked.

Swallowing dryly, Mr Ketc-hum eased his car over to the kerb. He drew up the emer-gency bra-ke, tur-ned the ig-ni-ti-on key and the car was still. The po-li-ce car no-sed in to-wards the kerb and stop-ped. The right front do-or ope-ned.

The gla-re of Mr Ketc-hum's he-ad-lights out-li-ned the dark fi-gu-re ap-pro-ac-hing. He felt aro-und qu-ickly with his left fo-ot and stam-ped down on the knob, dim-ming the lights. He swal-lo-wed aga-in. Dam-ned nu-isan-ce this. Three a.m. in the mid-dle of now-he-re and a hick po-li-ce-man picks him up for spe-eding. Mr Ketc-hum grit-ted his te-eth and wa-ited.

The man in the dark uni-form and wi-de-brim-med hat le-aned over in-to the win-dow. 'Li-cen-ce.'

Mr Ketc-hum slid a sha-king hand in-to his in-si-de poc-ket and drew out his bil-lfold. He felt aro-und for his li-cen-ce. He han-ded it over, no-ti-ced how exp-res-si-on-less the fa-ce of the po-li-ce-man was. He sat the-re qu-i-etly whi-le the po-li-ce-man held a flash-light be-am on the li-cen-ce.

'From New Jer-sey.'

'Yes, that... that's right,' sa-id Mr Ketc-hum.

The po-li-ce-man kept sta-ning at the li-cen-ce. Mr Ketc-hum stir-red rest-les-sly on the se-at and pres-sed his lips to-get-her. 'It hasn't ex-pi-red,' he fi-nal-ly sa-id.

He saw the dark he-ad of the po-li-ce-man lift. Then, he gas-ped as the nar-row circ-le of flash-light blin-ded him. He twis-ted his he-ad away.

The light was go-ne. Mr Ketc-hum blin-ked his wa-te-ring eyes.

'Don't they re-ad traf-fic signs in New Jer-sey?' the po-li-ce-man as-ked.

'Why, I... You me-an the sign that sa-id p-po-pu-la-ti-on sixty-se-ven?'

'No, I don't me-an that sign,' sa-id the po-li-ce-man.

'Oh.' Mr Ketc-hum cle-ared his thro-at. 'Well, that's the only sign I saw,' he sa-id.

'You're a bad dri-ver then.'

'Well, I'm-'

'The sign sa-id the spe-ed li-mit is fif-te-en mi-les an ho-ur. You we-re do-ing fifty.'

'Oh. I... I'm af-ra-id I didn't see it.'

'The spe-ed li-mit is fif-te-en mi-les an ho-ur whet-her you see it or not.'

'Well... at - at *this* ho-ur of the mor-ning?'

'Did you see a ti-me-tab-le on the sign?' the po-li-ce-man as-ked.

'No, of co-ur-se not. I me-an, I didn't see the sign at all.'

'*Didn't* you?'

Mr Ketc-hum felt ha-ir prick-ling along the na-pe of his neck. 'Now, now see he-re,' he be-gan fa-intly, then stop-ped and sta-red at the po-li-ce-man. 'May I ha-ve my li-cen-ce back?' he fi-nal-ly as-ked when the po-li-ce-man didn't spe-ak.

The po-li-ce-man sa-id not-hing. He sto-od on the stre-et, mo-ti-on-less.

'May I -?' Mr Ketc-hum star-ted.

'Follow our car,' sa-id the of-fi-cer ab-ruptly and stro-de away.

Mr Ketc-hum sta-red at him, dumb-fo-un-ded. *Hey wa-it!* he al-most yel-led. The of-fi-cer hadn't even gi-ven him back his li-cen-ce. Mr Ketc-hum felt a sud-den cold-ness in his sto-mach.

'What *is* this?' he mut-te-red as he watc-hed the po-li-ce-man get-ting back in-to his car. The po-li-ce car pul-led away from the kerb, its ro-of light spin-ning aga-in.

Mr Ketc-hum fol-lo-wed.

'This is ri-di-cu-lo-us,' he sa-id alo-ud. They had no right to do this. Was this the Mid-dle Ages? His thick lips pres-sed in-to a jaded mo-uth li-ne as he fol-lo-wed the po-li-ce car along Ma-in Stre-et.

Two blocks up, the po-li-ce car tur-ned. Mr Ketc-hum saw his he-ad-lights splash ac-ross a glass sto-re front. *Hand's Gro-ce-ri-es* re-ad the we-at-her-worn let-ters.

There we-re no lamps on the stre-et. It was li-ke dri-ving along an inky pas-sa-ge. Ahe-ad we-re only the three red eyes of the po-li-ce car's re-ar lights and spot-light; be-hind only im-pe-net-rab-le black-ness. The end of a per-fect day, tho-ught Mr Ketc-hum; pic-ked up for spe-eding in Zachry, Ma-ine. He sho-ok his he-ad and gro-aned. Why hadn't he just spent his va-ca-ti-on in Ne-wark; slept la-te, go-ne to shows, eaten, watc-hed te-le-vi-si-on?

The po-li-ce car tur-ned right at the next cor-ner, then, a block up, tur-ned left aga-in and stop-ped. Mr Ketc-hum pul-led up be-hind it as its lights went out. The-re was no sen-se in this. This was only che-ap me-lod-ra-ma. They co-uld just as easily ha-ve fi-ned him on Ma-in Stre-et. It was the rus-tic mind. De-ba-sing so-me-one from a big city ga-ve them a sen-se of ven-ge-ful emi-nen-ce.

Mr Ketc-hum wa-ited. Well, he wasn't go-ing to hag-gle. He'd pay his fi-ne wit-ho-ut a word and de-part. He jer-ked up the hand bra-ke. Sud-denly he frow-ned, re-ali-sing that they co-uld fi-ne him any-thing they wan-ted. They co-uld char-ge him \$500 if they cho-se! The he-avy man had he-ard sto-ri-es abo-ut small town po-li-ce, abo-ut the ab-so-lu-te aut-ho-ri-ty they wi-el-ded. He cle-ared his thro-at vis-cidly. Well, this is ab-sur-d, he tho-ught. What fo-olish ima-gi-na-ti-on.

The po-li-ce-man ope-ned the do-or.

'Get out,' he sa-id.

There was no light in the stre-et or in any bu-il-ding. Mr Ketc-hum swal-lo-wed. All he co-uld re-al-ly see was the black fi-gu-re of the po-li-ce-man.

'Is this the - sta-ti-on?' he as-ked.

Turn out yo-ur lights and co-me on,' sa-id the po-li-ce-man.

Mr Ketc-hum pus-hed in the chro-me knob and got out. The po-li-ce-man slam-med the do-or. It ma-de a lo-ud, ec-ho-ing no-ise-as if they we-re in-si-de an un-ligh-ted wa-re-ho-use ins-te-ad of on a stre-et. Mr Ketc-hum glan-ced up-ward. The il-lu-si-on was comp-le-te. The-re we-re ne-it-her stars nor mo-on. Sky and earth ran to-get-her blackly.

The po-li-ce-man's hard fin-gers clam-ped on his arm. Mr Ketc-hum lost ba-lan-ce a mo-ment, then ca-ught him-self and fell in-to a qu-ick stri-de be-si-de the tall fi-gu-re of the po-li-ce-man.

'Dark he-re,' he he-ard him-self sa-ying in a vo-ice not en-ti-rely fa-mi-li-ar.

The po-li-ce-man sa-id not-hing. The ot-her po-li-ce-man fell in-to step on the ot-her si-de of him. Mr Ketc-hum told him-self: The-se dam-ned hick-town Na-zis we-re do-ing the-ir best to in-ti-mi-da-te him. Well they wo-uldn't suc-ce-ed.

Mr Ketc-hum suc-ked in a bre-ath of the damp, sea-smel-ling air and let it shud-der out. A crumby town of 67 and they ha-ve two po-li-ce-men pat-rol-ling the stre-ets at three in the mor-ning. Ri-di-cu-lo-us.

He al-most trip-ped over the step when they re-ac-hed it. The po-li-ce-man on his left si-de ca-ught him un-der the el-bow.

'Thank you,' Mr Ketc-hum mut-te-red auto-ma-ti-cal-ly. The po-li-ce-man didn't reply. Mr Ketc-hum lic-ked his lips. Cor-di-al oaf, he tho-ught and ma-na-ged a fle-eting smi-le to him-self. The-re, that was bet-ter. No po-int in let-ting this get to him.

He blin-ked as the do-or was pul-led open and, des-pi-te him-self, felt a sigh of re-li-ef fil-te-ring

through him. It was a po-li-ce sta-ti-on all right. The-re was the po-di-umed desk, the-re a bul-le-tin bo-ard, the-re a black, pot-bel-li-ed sto-ve un-lit, the-re a scar-red bench aga-ainst the wall, the-re a do-or, the-re the flo-or co-ve-red with crac-ked and grimy li-no-le-um that had on-ce be-en gre-en.

'Sit down and wa-it,' sa-id the first po-li-ce-man.

Mr Ketc-hum lo-oked at his le-an, ang-led fa-ce, his swarthy skin. The-re was no di-vi-si-on in his eyes bet-we-en iris and pu-pil. It was all one dark-ness. He wo-re a dark uni-form that fit-ted him lo-osely.

Mr Ketc-hum didn't get to see the ot-her po-li-ce-man be-ca-use both of them went in-to the next ro-om. He sto-od watc-hing the clo-sed do-or a mo-ment. Sho-uld he le-ave, dri-ve away? No, they'd ha-ve his ad-dress on the li-cen-ce. Then aga-in, they might ac-tu-al-ly want him to at-tempt to le-ave. You ne-ver knew what sort of war-ped minds the-se small-town po-li-ce had. They might even - sho-ot him down if he tri-ed to le-ave.

Mr Ketc-hum sat he-avily on the bench. No, he was let-ting ima-gi-na-ti-on run amuck. This was me-re-ly a small town on the Ma-ine se-aco-ast and they we-re me-re-ly going to fi-ne him for-

Well, why didn't they fi-ne him then? What was all this play-acting? The he-avy man pres-sed his lips to-get-her. Very well, let them play it the way they cho-se. This was bet-ter than dri-ving any-way. He clo-sed his eyes. I'll just rest them, he tho-ught.

After a few mo-ments he ope-ned them aga-in. It was dam-ned qu-i-et. He lo-oked aro-und the dimly lit ro-om. The walls we-re dirty and ba-re ex-cept for a clock and one pic-tu-re that hung be-hind the desk. It was a pa-in-ting - mo-re li-kely a rep-ro-duc-ti-on - of a be-ar-ded man. The hat he wo-re was a se-aman's hat. Pro-bably one of Zachry's an-ci-ent ma-ri-ners. No; pro-bably not even that. Pro-bably a Se-ars Ro-ebuck print: *Be-ar-ded Se-aman*.

Mr Ketc-hum grun-ted to him-self. Why a po-li-ce sta-ti-on sho-uld ha-ve such a print was be-yond him. Ex-cept, of co-ur-se, that Zachry was on the At-lan-tic. Pro-bably its ma-in so-ur-ce of in-co-me was from fis-hing. Any-way, what did it mat-ter? Mr Ketc-hum lo-we-red his ga-ze.

In the next ro-om he co-uld he-ar the muf-fled vo-ices of the two po-li-ce-men. He tri-ed to he-ar what they we-re sa-ying but he co-uldn't. He gla-red at the clo-sed do-or. Co-me *on*, will you? he tho-ught. He lo-oked at the clock aga-in. Three twenty-two. He chec-ked it with his wrist watch. Abo-ut right. The do-or ope-ned and the two po-li-ce-men ca-me out.

One of them left. The re-ma-ining one - the one who had ta-ken Mr Ketc-hum's li-cen-ce - went over to the ra-ised desk and switc-hed on the go-ose-neck lamp over it, drew a big led-ger out of the top dra-wer and star-ted wri-ting in it. *At last*, tho-ught Mr Ketc-hum.

A mi-nu-te pas-sed.

'I - ' Mr Ketc-hum cle-ared his thro-at. 'I beg yo-ur - '

His vo-ice bro-ke off as the cold ga-ze of the po-li-ce-man ra-ised from the led-ger and fi-xed on him.

'Are you... That is, am I to be - fi-ned now?'

The po-li-ce-man lo-oked back at the led-ger. 'Wa-it,' he sa-id.

'But it's past three in the mor - ' Mr Ketc-hum ca-ught him-self. He tri-ed to lo-ok coldly bel-li-ge-rent. 'Very well/ he sa-id curtly. 'Wo-uld you kindly tell me how long it will be?'

The po-li-ce-man kept wri-ting in the led-ger. Mr Ketc-hum sat the-re stiffly, lo-oking at him. *In-suf-fe-rab-le*, he tho-ught. This was the last dam-ned ti-me he'd ever go wit-hin a hund-red mi-les of this dam-ned New Eng-land.

The po-li-ce-man lo-oked up. 'Mar-ri-ed?' he as-ked.

Mr Ketc-hum sta-red at him.

'Are you mar-ri-ed?'

'No, I - it's on the li-cen-ce,' Mr Ketc-hum blur-ted. He felt a tre-mor of ple-asu-re at his re-tort and, at the sa-me ti-me, an im-pa-ling of stran-ge dre-ad at tal-king back to the man.

'Family in Jer-sey?' as-ked the po-li-ce-man.

'Yes. I me-an no, Just a sis-ter in Wis-cons - '

Mr Ketc-hum didn't fi-nish. He watc-hed the po-li-ce-man wri-te it down. He wis-hed he co-uld rid

him-self of this qu-e-asy dist-ress.

'Employed?' as-ked the po-li-ce-man.

Mr Ketc-hum swal-lo-wed. 'Well,' he sa-id, 'I - I ha-ve no one par-ti-cu-lar em -'

'Unemployed,' sa-id the po-li-ce-man.

'Not at all; not at *all*,' sa-id Mr Ketc-hum stiffly. 'I'm a - a free-lan-ce sa-les-man. I purc-ha-se stocks and lots from...' His vo-ice fa-ded as the po-li-ce-man lo-oked at him. Mr Ketc-hum swal-lo-wed three ti-mes be-fo-re the lump sta-yed down. He re-ali-sed that he was sit-ting on the very ed-ge of the bench as if po-ised to spring to the de-fen-ce of his li-fe. He for-ced him-self to set-tle back. He drew in a de-ep bre-ath. Re-lax, he told him-self. De-li-be-ra-tely, he clo-sed his *eyes*. The-re. He'd catch a few Winks. May as well ma-ke the best of this, he tho-ught.

The ro-om was still ex-cept for the tinny, re-so-nant tic-king of the clock. Mr Ketc-hum felt his he-art pul-sing with slow, drag-ging be-ats. He shif-ted his he-avy fra-me un-com-for-tably on the hard bench. *Ri-di-cu-lo-us*, he tho-ught.

Mr Ketc-hum ope-ned his eyes and frow-ned. That dam-ned pic-tu-re. You co-uld al-most ima-gi-ne that be-ar-ded se-aman was lo-oking at you.

Uhr

Mr Ketc-hum's mo-uth snap-ped shut, his eyes jer-ked open, iri-ses fla-ring. He star-ted for-ward on the bench, then shrank back.

A swarthy-fa-ced man was bent over him, hand on Mr Ketc-hum's sho-ul-der.

'Yes?' Mr Ketc-hum as-ked, he-art jol-ting.

The man smi-led.

'Chief Ship-ley,' he sa-id. 'Wo-uld you co-me in-to my of-fi-ce?'

'Oh,' sa-id Mr Ketc-hum. 'Yes. Yes.'

He stra-igh-te-ned up, gri-ma-cing at the stif-fness in his back musc-les. The man step-ped back and Mr Ketc-hum pus-hed up with a grunt, his eyes mo-ving auto-ma-ti-cal-ly to the wall clock. It was a few mi-nu-tes past fo-ur.

'Look,' he sa-id, not yet awa-ke eno-ugh to fe-el in-ti-mi-da-ted. 'Why can't I pay my fi-ne and le-ave?'

Shipley's smi-le was wit-ho-ut warmth.

'We run things a lit-tle dif-fe-rent he-re in Zachry,' he sa-id.

They en-te-red a small musty-smel-ling of-fi-ce.

'Sit down,' sa-id the chi-ef, wal-king a-ro-und the desk whi-le Mr Ketc-hum set-tled in-to a stra-ight-bac-ked cha-ir that cre-aked.

'I don't un-der-stand why I can't pay my fi-ne and le-ave.'

'In due co-ur-se,' sa-id Ship-ley.

'But -' Mr Ketc-hum didn't fi-nish. Ship-ley's smi-le ga-ve the ' imp-res-si-on of be-ing no mo-re than a dip-lo-ma-ti-cal-ly ve-iled war-ning. Grit-ting his te-eth, the he-avy man cle-ared his thro-at and wa-ited whi-le the chi-ef lo-oked down at a she-et of pa-per on his desk. He no-ti-ced how po-orly Ship-ley's su-it fit-ted. Yo-kels, the he-avy man tho-ught, don't even know how to dress.

'I see you're not mar-ri-ed,' Ship-ley sa-id.

Mr Ketc-hum sa-id not-hing. Gi-ve them a tas-te of the-ir own no-talk me-di-ci-ne he de-ci-ded.

'Have you fri-ends in Ma-ine?' Ship-ley as-ked.

'Why?'

'Just ro-uti-ne qu-es-ti-ons, Mr Ketc-hum,' sa-id the chi-ef. To-ur only fa-mi-ly is a sis-ter in Wis-con-sin?'

Mr Ketc-hum lo-oked at him wit-ho-ut spe-aking. What had all this to do with a traf-fic vi-ola-ti-on?

'Sir?' as-ked Ship-ley.

'I al-re-ady told you; that is, I told the of-fi-cer. I don't see -'

'Here on bu-si-ness?'

Mr Ketc-hum's mo-uth ope-ned so-und-les-sly.

'Why are you as-king me all the-se qu-es-ti-ons?' he as-ked. *Stop sha-king!* he or-de-red him-self fu-ri-o-usly.

'Routine. Are you he-re on bu-si-ness?'

'I'm on my va-ca-ti-on. And I don't see this at all! I've be-en pa-ti-ent up to now but, *blast it*, I de-mand to be fi-ned and re-le-ased!'

'I'm af-ra-id that's im-pos-sib-le,' sa-id the chi-ef.

Mr Ketc-hum's mo-uth fell open. It was li-ke wa-king up from a night-ma-re and dis-co-ve-ring that the dre-am was still go-ing on. 'I -I don't un-ders-tand,' he sa-id.

'You'll ha-ve to ap-pe-ar be-fo-re the jud-ge.'

'But that's ri-di-cu-lo-us.'

'Is it?'

'Yes, it is. I'm a ci-ti-zen of the Uni-ted Sta-tes. I de-mand my rights.'

Chief Ship-ley's smi-le fa-ded.

'You li-mi-ted tho-se rights when you bro-ke our law,' he sa-id. 'Now you ha-ve to pay for it as we dec-la-re.'

Mr Ketc-hum sta-red blankly at the man. He re-ali-sed that he was comp-le-tely in the-ir hands. They co-uld fi-ne him anyt-hing they ple-ased or put him in ja-il in-de-fi-ni-tely. All the-se qu-es-ti-ons he'd be-en as-ked; he didn't know why they'd as-ked them but he knew that his ans-wers re-ve-aled him as al-most ro-ot-less, with no one who ca-red if he li-ved or -

The ro-om se-emed to tot-ter. Swe-at bro-ke out on his body.

'You can't *do* this,' he sa-id; but it was not an ar-gu-ment.

'You'll ha-ve to spend the night in ja-il,' sa-id the chi-ef. 'In the mor-ning you'll see the jud-ge.'

'But this is ri-di-cu-lo-us!' Mr Ketc-hum burst out. '*Ri-di-cu-lo-us!*'

He ca-ught him-self. 'I'm en-tit-led to one pho-ne call,' he sa-id qu-ickly. 'I can ma-ke a te-lep-ho-ne call. It's my le-gal right,'

'It wo-uld be,' sa-id Ship-ley, 'if the-re was any te-lep-ho-ne ser-vi-ce in Zachry.'

When they to-ok him to his cell, Mr Ketc-hum saw a pa-in-ting in the hall. It was of the sa-me be-ar-ded se-a-man. Mr Ketc-hum didn't no-ti-ce if the eyes fol-lo-wed him or not.

Mr Ketc-hum stir-red. A lo-ok of con-fu-si-on li-ned his sle-ep-num-bed fa-ce. The-re was a clan-king so-und be-hind him; he re-ared up on his el-bow.

A po-li-ce-man ca-me in-to the cell and set down a co-ve-red tray.

'Breakfast,' he sa-id. He was ol-der than the ot-her po-li-ce-men, even ol-der than Ship-ley. His ha-ir was iron-grey, his cle-anly sha-ved fa-ced se-amed aro-und the mo-uth and eyes. His uni-form fit-ted him badly.

As the po-li-ce-man star-ted re-loc-king the do-or, Mr Ketc-hum as-ked, 'When do I see the jud-ge?'

The po-li-ce-man lo-oked at him a mo-ment. 'Don't know/' he sa-id and tur-ned away.

'Wait!' Mr Ketc-hum cal-led out.

The re-ce-ding fo-ots-teps of the po-li-ce-man so-un-ded hol-lowly on the ce-ment flo-or. Mr Ketc-hum kept sta-ring at the spot whe-re the po-li-ce-man had be-en. Ve-ils of sle-ep pe-eled from his mind.

He sat up, rub-bed de-ade-ned fin-gers over his eyes and held up his wrist. Se-ven mi-nu-tes past ni-ne. The he-avy man gri-ma-ced. By God, they we-re go-ing to he-ar abo-ut this! His nost-rils twitc-hed. He snif-fed, star-ted to re-ach for the tray; then pul-led back his hand.

'No,' he mut-te-red. He wo-uldn't eat the-ir dam-ned fo-od. He sat the-re stiffly, do-ub-led at the wa-ist, gla-ring at his sock-co-ve-red fe-et.

His sto-mach grumb-led un-co-ope-ra-ti-vely.

'Well,' he mut-te-red af-ter a mi-nu-te. Swal-lo-wing, he re-ac-hed over and lif-ted off the tray co-ver.

He co-uldn't check the *oh* of surp-ri-se that pas-sed his lips.

The three eggs we-re fri-ed in but-ter, bright yel-low eyes fo-cu-sed stra-ight on the ce-iling, rin-ged abo-ut with long, crisp lengths of me-aty, cor-ru-ga-ted ba-con. Next to them was a plat-ter of fo-ur bo-ok-thick sli-ces of to-ast spre-ad with cre-amy but-ter swirls, a pa-per cup of jel-ly le-aning on them. The-re was a tall glass of frothy oran-ge ju-ice, a dish of straw-ber-ri-es ble-eding in ala-bas-ter cre-am. Fi-nal-ly a tall pot from which wa-ve-red the pun-gent and un-mis-ta-kab-le frag-ran-ce of freshly bre-wed cof-fee.

Mr Ketc-hum pic-ked up the glass of oran-ge ju-ice. He to-ok a few drops in his mo-uth and rol-led them ex-pe-ri-men-tal-ly over his ton-gue. The cit-ric acid ting-led de-li-ci-o-usly on his warm ton-gue. He swal-lo-wed. If it was po-iso-ned it was by a mas-ter's hand. Sa-li-va ti-ded in his mo-uth. He sud-den-ly re-mem-be-red that, just be-fo-re he was pic-ked up, he'd be-en me-aning to stop at a ca-fe for fo-od.

While he ate, wa-rily but de-ci-dedly, Mr Ketc-hum tri-ed to fi-gu-re out the mo-ti-va-ti-on be-hind this mag-ni-fi-cent bre-ak-fast.

It was the ru-ral mind aga-in. They reg-ret-ted the-ir blun-der. It se-emed a flimsy no-ti-on, but the-re it was. The fo-od was su-perb. One thing you had to say for the-se New Eng-lan-ders; they co-uld co-ok li-ke a son-of-a-gun. Bre-ak-fast for Mr Ketc-hum was usu-al-ly a swe-et roll, he-ated, and cof-fee. Sin-ce he was a boy in his fat-her's ho-use he hadn't eaten a bre-ak-fast li-ke this.

He was just put-ting down his third cup of well-cre-amed cof-fee when fo-ots-steps so-un-ded in the hall. Mr Ketc-hum smi-led. Go-od ti-ming, he tho-ught. He sto-od.

Chief Ship-ley stop-ped out-si-de the cell. 'Had yo-ur bre-ak-fast?'

Mr Ketc-hum nod-ded. If the chi-ef ex-pec-ted thanks he was in for a sad surp-ri-se. Mr Ketc-hum pic-ked up his co-at.

The chi-ef didn't mo-ve.

'Well ...?' sa-id Mr Ketc-hum af-ter a few mi-nu-tes. He tri-ed to put it coldly and aut-ho-ri-ta-ti-vely. It ca-me out so-mew-hat less.

Chief Ship-ley lo-oked at him exp-res-si-on-les-sly. Mr Ketc-hum felt his bre-ath fal-te-ring.

'May I in-qu-ire -?' he be-gan.

'Judge isn't in yet,' sa-id Ship-ley.

'But... ' Mr Ketc-hum didn't know what to say.

'Just ca-me in-to tell you,' sa-id Ship-ley. He tur-ned and was go-ne.

Mr Ketc-hum was fu-ri-o-us. He lo-oked down at the re-ma-ins of his bre-ak-fast as if they con-ta-ined the ans-wer to this si-tu-ati-on. He drum-med a fist aga-inst his thigh. *In-suf-fe-rab-le!* What we-re they trying to do - in-ti-mi-da-te him? Well, by God-

- they we-re suc-ce-eding.

Mr Ketc-hum wal-ked over to the bars. He lo-oked up and down the empty hal-lway. The-re was a cold knot in-si-de him. The fo-od se-emed to ha-ve tur-ned to dry le-ad in his sto-mach. He ban-ged the he-el of his right hand on-ce aga-inst the cold bar. By God! By *God!*

It was two o'clock in the af-ter-no-on when Chi-ef Ship-ley and the old po-li-ce-man ca-me to the cell do-or. Word-les-sly the po-li-ce-man o-pe-ned it. Mr Ketc-hum step-ped in-to the hal-lway and wa-ited aga-in, put-ting on his co-at whi-le the do-or was re-loc-ked.

He wal-ked in short, inf-le-xib-le stri-des bet-we-en the two men, not even glan-cing at the pic-tu-re on the wall. 'Whe-re are we go-ing?' he as-ked.

'Judge is sick,' sa-id Ship-ley. 'We're ta-king you out to his ho-use to pay yo-ur fi-ne.'

Mr Ketc-hum suc-ked in his bre-ath. He wo-uld'n't ar-gue with them; he just wo-uld'n't. 'All right,' he sa-id. 'If that's the way you ha-ve to do it.'

'Only way to do it,' sa-id the chi-ef, lo-oking ahe-ad, his fa-ce an exp-res-si-on-less mask.

Mr Ketc-hum pres-sed down the cor-ners of a slim smi-le. This was bet-ter. It was al-most over now. He'd pay his fi-ne and cle-ar out.

It was foggy out-si-de. Sea mist rol-led ac-ross the stre-et li-ke dri-ven smo-ke. Mr Ketc-hum pul-led on his hat and shud-de-red. The damp air se-emed to fil-ter thro-ugh his flesh and dew it-self aro-und his bo-nes. Nasty day, he tho-ught. He mo-ved down the steps, *eyes* se-ar-c-hing for his Ford.

The old po-li-ce-man ope-ned the back do-or of the po-li-ce car and Ship-ley ges-tu-red to-wards the in-si-de.

'What abo-ut *my* car?' Mr Ketc-hum as-ked.

'We'll co-me back he-re af-ter you see the jud-ge,' sa-id Ship-ley.

'Oh. I...'

Mr Ketc-hum he-si-ta-ted. Then he bent over and squ-e-ezed in-to the car, drop-ping down on the back se-at. He shi-ve-red as the cold of the le-at-her pi-er-ced tro-user wo-ol. He ed-ged over as the chi-ef got in.

The po-li-ce-man slam-med the do-or shut. Aga-in that hol-low so-und, li-ke the slam-ming of a cof-fin lid in a crypt. Mr Ketc-hum gri-ma-ced as the si-mi-le oc-cur-red to him.

The po-li-ce-man got in-to the car and Mr Ketc-hum he-ard the mo-tor co-ugh in-to li-qu-id li-fe. He sat the-re bre-at-hing slowly and de-eply whi-le the po-li-ce-man out-cho-ked warmth in-to the en-gi-ne. He lo-ok-ed out the win-dow at his left.

The fog was *just* li-ke smo-ke. They might ha-ve be-en par-ked in a bur-ning ga-ra-ge. Ex-cept for that bo-ne-grip-ping damp-ness. Mr Ketc-hum cle-ared his thro-at. He he-ard the chi-ef shift on the se-at be-si-de him.

'Cold,' Mr Ketc-hum sa-id, auto-ma-ti-cal-ly.

The chi-ef sa-id not-hing.

Mr Ketc-hum pres-sed back as the car pul-led away from the kerb, V-tur-ned and star-ted slowly down the fog-ve-iled stre-et. He lis-te-ned to the crisp si-bi-lan-ce of the tyres on wet pa-ving, the rhythmic swish of the wi-pers as they cle-ared off circ-le seg-ments on the mis-ted winds-hi-eld.

After a mo-ment he lo-ok-ed at his watch. Al-most three. Half a day shot in this blas-ted Zachry.

He lo-ok-ed out thro-ugh the win-dow aga-in as the town ghos-ted past. He tho-ught he saw brick bu-il-dings along the kerb but he wasn't su-re. He lo-ok-ed down at his whi-te hands, then glan-ced over at Ship-ley. The chi-ef was sit-ting stiffly up-right on the se-at, sta-ring stra-ight ahe-ad. Mr Ketc-hum swal-lo-wed. The air se-emed stag-nant in his lungs.

On Ma-in Stre-et the fog se-emed thin-ner. Pro-bably the sea bre-ezes, Mr Ketc-hum tho-ught. He lo-ok-ed up and down the stre-et. All the sto-res and of-fi-ces lo-ok-ed clo-sed. He glan-ced at the ot-her si-de of the stre-et. Sa-me thing.

'Where is every-body?' he as-ked.

'What?'

'I sa-id whe-re *is* ever-y-body?'

'Home,' the chi-ef sa-id.

'Rut it's Wed-nes-day,' sa-id Mr Ketc-hum. 'Aren't yo-ur -sto-res open?'

'Bad day,' sa-id Ship-ley. 'Not worth it.'

Mr Ketc-hum glan-ced at the sal-low fa-ced chi-ef, then withd-rew his lo-ok has-tily. He felt cold pre-mo-ni-ti-on spi-de-ring in his sto-mach aga-in. What in God's na-me *is* this? he as-ked him-self. It had be-en bad eno-ugh in the cell. He-re, trac-king thro-ugh this sea of mist, it was al-to-get-her wor-se.

'That's right,' he he-ard his ner-ve-spar-ked vo-ice sa-ying. The-re are only sixty-se-ven pe-op-le, aren't the-re?'

The chi-ef sa-id not-hing.

'How... h-how old is Zachry?'

In the si-len-ce he he-ard the chi-efs fin-ger jo-ints crack-le dryly.

'Hundred fifty ye-ars,' sa-id Ship-ley.

'That old,' sa-id Mr Ketc-hum. He swal-lo-wed with ef-fort. His thro-at hurt a lit-tle. Co-me *on*, he told him-self. *Re-lax*.

'How co-me it's na-med Zachry?' The words spil-led out, un-cont-rol-led.

'Noah Zachry fo-un-ded it,' sa-id the chi-ef.

'Oh. Oh. I see. I gu-ess that pic-tu-re in the sta-ti-on...?'

'That's right,' sa-id Ship-ley.

Mr Ketc-hum blin-ked. So that was No-ah Zachry, fo-un-der of this town they we-re dri-ving thro-ugh -

- *block af-ter block af-ter block*. The-re was a cold, he-avy sin-king in Mr Ketc-hum's sto-mach as the idea ca-me to him.

In a town so big, why we-re the-re only 67 pe-op-le?

He ope-ned his mo-uth to ask it, then co-uld'n't. The ans-wer might be wrong.

'Why are the-re only -?' The words ca-me out any-way be-fo-re he co-uld stop them. His body jol-ted at the shock of he-ar-ing them.

'What?'

'Nothing, not-hing. That is - ' Mr Ketc-hum drew in a sha-king bre-ath. No help for it. He had to know.

'How co-me the-re are only sixty-se-ven?'

'They go away,' sa-id Ship-ley.

Mr Ketc-hum blin-ked. The ans-wer ca-me as such an an-tic-li-max. His brow fur-ro-wed. Well, what el-se? he as-ked him-self de-fen-si-vely. Re-mo-te an-ti-qu-ated, Zachry wo-uld ha-ve lit-tle at-trac-ti-on for its yo-un-ger ge-ne-ra-ti-ons. Mass gra-vi-ta-ti-on to mo-re in-te-res-ting pla-ces wo-uld be ine-vi-tab-le.

The he-avy man set-tled back aga-inst the se-at. Of co-ur-se. Think how much I want to le-ave the dump, he tho-ught, and I don't even li-ve he-re.

His ga-ze slid for-ward thro-ugh the winds-hi-eld, ca-ught by so-met-hing. A ban-ner han-ging ac-ross the stre-et, bar-be-cue to-night. Ce-leb-ra-ti-on, he tho-ught. They pro-bably went ber-serk every fort-night and had them-sel-ves a rip ro-ar-ing taffy pull or fish-net-men-ding orgy.

'Who was Zachry any-way?' he as-ked. The si-len-ce was get-ting to him aga-in.

'Sea cap-ta-in,' sa-id the chi-ef.

'Oh?'

'Whaled in the So-uth Se-as,' sa-id Ship-ley.

Abruptly, Ma-in Stre-et en-ded. The po-li-ce car ve-ered left on to a dirt ro-ad. Out the win-dow Mr Ketc-hum watc-hed sha-dowy bus-hes gli-de by. The-re was only the so-und of the en-gi-ne la-bo-uring in se-cond and of gra-vel-ly dirt spit-ting out from un-der the tyres. Whe-re do-es the jud-ge li-ve, on a mo-un-ta-in top? He shif-ted his we-ight and grun-ted.

The fog be-gan thin-ning now. Mr Ketc-hum co-uld see grass and tre-es, all with a gre-yish cast to them. The car tur-ned and fa-ced the oce-an. Mr Ketc-hum lo-ok-ed down at the opa-que car-pet of fog be-low. The car kept tur-ning. It fa-ced the crest of the hill aga-in.

Mr Ketc-hum co-ug-hed softly. 'Is... uh, that the jud-ge's ho-use up the-re?' he as-ked.

'Yes,' the chi-ef ans-we-red.

'High,' sa-id Mr Ketc-hum.

The car kept tur-ning on the nar-row, dirt ro-ad, now fa-cing the oce-an, now Zachry, now the ble-ak, hill-top-ping ho-use. It was a gre-yish whi-te ho-use, three sto-reys high, at each end of it the crag of an at-tic to-wer. It lo-ok-ed as old as Zachry it-self, tho-ught Mr Ketc-hum. The car tur-ned. He was fa-cing the fog-crus-ted oce-an aga-in.

Mr Ketc-hum lo-ok-ed down at his hands. Was it a de-cep-ti-on of the light or we-re they re-al-ly sha-king? He tri-ed to swal-low but the-re was no mo-is-tu-re in his thro-at and he co-ug-hed ins-te-ad, rat-tlingly. This was so *stu-pid*, he tho-ught; the-re's no re-ason in the world for this. He saw his hands clench to-get-her.

The car was mo-ving up the fi-nal ri-se to-wards the ho-use now. Mr Ketc-hum felt his bre-aths shor-te-ning. *I don't want to go*, he he-ard so-me-one sa-y-ing in his mind. He felt a sud-den ur-ge to sho-ve out the do-or and run. Musc-les ten-sed emp-ha-ti-cal-ly.

He clo-sed his eyes. For God's sa-ke, *stop* it! he yel-led at him-self. The-re was not-hing wrong abo-ut this but his dis-tor-ted in-terp-re-ta-ti-on of it. The-se we-re mo-dern ti-mes. Things had exp-la-na-ti-ons and pe-op-le had re-asons. Zachry's pe-op-le had a re-ason too; a nar-row dist-rust of

city dwell-ers. This was the-ir so-ci-al-ly ac-cep-tab-le re-ven-ge. That ma-de sen-se. Af-ter all -

The car stop-ped. The chi-ef pus-hed open the do-or on his si-de and got out. The po-li-ce-man re-ac-hed back and ope-ned the ot-her do-or for Mr Ketc-hum. The he-avy man fo-und one of his legs and fo-ot to be numb. He had to clutch at the top of the do-or for sup-port. He stam-ped the fo-ot on the gro-und.

'Went to sle-ep,' he sa-id.

Neither of the men ans-we-red. Mr Ketc-hum glan-ced at the ho-use; he squ-in-ted. He had se-en a dark gre-en dra-pe slip back in-to pla-ce? He win-ced and ma-de a start-led no-ise as his arm was to-uc-hed and the chi-ef ges-tu-red to-wards the ho-use. The three men star-ted to-wards it.

'I, uh... don't ha-ve much cash on me, I'm af-ra-id/ he sa-id. 'I ho-pe a tra-vel-ler's check will be all right.'

'Yes,' sa-id the chi-ef.

They went up to the porch steps, stop-ped in front of the do-or. The po-li-ce-man tur-ned a big, brass key-he-ad and Mr Ketc-hum he-ard a bell ring tin-nily in-si-de. He sto-od lo-oking thro-ugh the do-or cur-ta-ins. In-si-de, he co-uld ma-ke out the ske-le-tal form of a hat rack. He shif-ted we-ight and the bo-ards cre-aked un-der him. The po-li-ce-man rang the bell aga-in.

'Maybe he's - too sick,' Mr Ketc-hum sug-ges-ted fa-intly.

Neither of the men lo-oked at him. Mr Ketc-hum felt his musc-les ten-sing. He glan-ced back over his sho-ul-der. Co-uld they catch him if he ran for it?

He lo-oked back dis-gus-tedly. You pay yo-ur fi-ne and you le-ave, he exp-la-ined pa-ti-ently to him-self. That's all; you pay yo-ur fi-ne and you le-ave.

Inside the ho-use the-re was dark mo-ve-ment. Mr Ketc-hum lo-oked up, start-led in spi-te of him-self. A tall wo-man was ap-pro-ac-hing the do-or.

The do-or ope-ned. The wo-man was thin, we-aring an ank-le-length black dress with a whi-te oval pin at her thro-at. Her fa-ce was swarthy, se-amed with thre-ad-li-ke li-nes. Mr Ketc-hum slip-ped off his hat auto-ma-ti-cal-ly.

'Come in,' sa-id the wo-man.

Mr Ketc-hum step-ped in-to the hall.

'You can le-ave yo-ur hat the-re,' sa-id the wo-man, po-in-ting to-wards the hat rack that lo-oked li-ke a tree ra-va-ged by fla-me. Mr Ketc-hum drop-ped his hat over one of the dark pegs. As he did, his eye was ca-ught by a lar-ge pa-in-ting ne-ar the fo-ot of the sta-ir-ca-se. He star-ted to spe-ak but the wo-man sa-id, 'This way.'

They star-ted down the hall. Mr Ketc-hum sta-red at the pa-in-ting as they pas-sed it.

'Who's that wo-man,' he as-ked, 'stan-ding next to Zachry?'

'His wi-fe,' sa-id the chi-ef.

'But she-'

Mr Ketc-hum's vo-ice bro-ke off sud-denly as he he-ard a whim-per ri-sing in his thro-at. Shoc-ked, he drow-ned it out with a sud-den cle-ar-ing of the thro-at. He felt as-ha-med of him-self. Still... Zachry's wi-fe?

The wo-man ope-ned a do-or. 'Wa-it in he-re,' she sa-id.

The he-avy man wal-ked in. He tur-ned to say so-met-hing to the chi-ef. Just in ti-me to see the do-or shut.

'Say, uh... ' He wal-ked to the do-or and put his hand on the knob. It didn't turn.

He frow-ned. He ig-no-red the pi-le-dri-ver be-ats of his he-art. 'Hey, what's go-ing on?' Che-erily bluff, his vo-ice ec-ho-ed off the walls. Mr Ketc-hum tur-ned and lo-oked aro-und. The ro-om was empty. It was a squ-are empty ro-om.

He tur-ned back to the do-or, lips mo-ving as he so-ught the pro-per words.

'Okay,' he sa-id, ab-ruptly, 'it's very -' He twis-ted the knob sharply. 'Okay, it's a very funny joke.' By God, he was mad. 'I've ta-ken all I'm -'

He whir-led at the so-und, te-eth ba-red.

There was not-hing. The ro-om was still empty. He lo-oked aro-und diz-zily. What was that so-und? A dull so-und, li-ke wa-ter rus-hing.

'Hey,' he sa-id auto-ma-ti-cal-ly. He tur-ned to the do-or. 'Hey!' he yel-led, 'cut it out! Who do you think you are any-way?'

He tur-ned on we-ake-ning legs. The so-und was lo-uder. Mr Ketc-hum ran a hand over his brow. It was co-ve-red with swe-at. It was warm in the-re.

'Okay, okay,' he sa-id, 'it's a fi-ne joke but -'

Before he co-uld go on, his vo-ice had corksc-re-wed in-to an aw-ful, wrac-king sob. Mr Ketc-hum stag-ge-red a lit-tle. He sta-red at the ro-om. He whir-led and fell back aga-inst the do-or. His out flung hand to-uc-hed the wall and jer-ked away.

It was hot.

'*Huh?*' he as-ked inc-re-du-lo-usly.

This was im-pos-sib-le. This was a joke. This was the-ir de-ran-ged idea of a lit-tle joke. It was a ga-me they pla-yed. Sca-re the City Slic-ker was the na-me of the ga-me.

'Okay!' he yel-led. '*Okay?* It's funny, it's very funny! Now let me out of he-re or the-re's go-ing to be tro-ub-le!'

He po-un-ded at the do-or. Sud-denly he kic-ked it. The ro-om was get-ting hot-ter. It was al-most as hot as an -

Mr Ketc-hum was pet-ri-fi-ed. His mo-uth sag-ged open.

The qu-es-ti-ons they'd as-ked him. The lo-ose way the clot-hes fit ever-yo-ne he'd met. The rich fo-od they'd gi-ven him to eat. The empty stre-ets. The sa-va-ge li-ke swarthy co-lo-uring of the men, of the wo-man. The way they'd all lo-oked at him. And the wo-man in the pa-in-ting, No-ah Zachry's wi-fe - *a na-ti-ve wo-man with her te-eth fi-led to a po-int.*

BARBECUE TO-NIGHT.

Mr Ketc-hum scre-amed. He kic-ked and po-un-ded on the do-or. He threw his he-avy body aga-inst it. He shri-eked at the pe-op-le out-si-de.

'Let me out! *Let me out!* LET... ME... OUT!'

The worst part abo-ut it was, he just co-uldn't be-li-eve it was re-al-ly hap-pe-ning.

2 - LEMMINGS

'Whe-re do they all co-me from?' Re-or-don as-ked.

'Everywhere,' sa-id Car-mack.

They we-re stan-ding on the co-ast high-way. As far as they co-uld see the-re was not-hing but cars. Tho-usands of cars we-re jam-med bum-per to bum-per and pres-sed si-de to si-de. The high-way was so-lid with them.

'There co-me so-me mo-re,' sa-id Car-mack.

The two po-li-ce-men lo-oked at the crowd of pe-op-le wal-king to-wards the be-ach. Many of them tal-ked and la-ug-hed. So-me of them we-re very qu-i-et and se-ri-o-us. But they all wal-ked to-wards the be-ach.

Reordon sho-ok his he-ad. 'I don't get it,' he sa-id for the hund-redth ti-me that we-ek. 'I just don't get it.'

Carmack shrug-ged.

'Don't think abo-ut it,' he sa-id. 'It's hap-pe-ning. What el-se is the-re?'

'But it's *crazy.*'

'Well, the-re they go,' sa-id Car-mack.

As the two po-li-ce-men watc-hed, the crowd of pe-op-le mo-ved ac-ross the grey sands of the be-ach and wal-ked in-to the wa-ter. So-me of them star-ted swim-ming. Most of them co-uldn't

be-ca-use of the-ir clot-hes. Car-mack saw a yo-ung wo-man fla-iling at the wa-ter and drag-ged down by the fur co-at she was we-aring.

In se-ve-ral mi-nu-tes they we-re all go-ne. The two po-li-ce-men sta-red at the pla-ce whe-re the pe-op-le had wal-ked in-to the wa-ter.

'How long do-es it go on?' Re-or-don as-ked.

'Until they're go-ne, I gu-ess,' sa-id Car-mack.

'But *why?*'

'You ever re-ad abo-ut the Lem-mings?' Car-mack as-ked.

'No.'

'They're ro-dents who li-ve in the Scan-di-na-vi-an co-unt-ri-es. They ke-ep bre-eding un-til all the-ir fo-od supply is go-ne. Then they mo-ve ac-ross the co-untry, ra-va-ging everyt-hing in the-ir way. When they re-ach the sea they ke-ep go-ing. They swim un-til the-ir strength is go-ne. Mil-li-ons of them.'

'You think that's what *this* is?' as-ked Re-or-don.

'Maybe,' sa-id Car-mack.

'People aren't ro-dents!' Re-or-don sa-id ang-rily.

Carmack didn't ans-wer.

They sto-od on the ed-ge of the high-way wa-iting but no-body ap-pe-ared.

'Where are they?' as-ked Re-or-don.

'Maybe they've all go-ne in,' Car-mack sa-id.

'*All* of them?'

'It's be-en go-ing on for mo-re than a we-ek,' Car-mack sa-id. 'Pe-op-le co-uld ha-ve got-ten he-re from all over. Then the-re are the la-kes.'

Reordon shud-de-red. 'All of them,' he sa-id.

'I don't know,' sa-id Car-mack, 'but they've be-en co-ming right along un-til now.'

'Oh, God,' sa-id Re-or-don.

Carmack to-ok out a ci-ga-ret-te and lit it. 'Well,' he sa-id, 'what now?'

Reordon sig-hed. 'Us?' he sa-id.

'You go,' Car-mack sa-id. 'I'll wa-it a whi-le and see if the-re's an-yo-ne el-se.'

'All right.' Re-or-don put his hand out. 'Go-od-bye, Car-mack,' he sa-id.

They sho-ok hands. 'Go-od-bye, Re-or-don,' Car-mack sa-id.

He sto-od smo-king his ci-ga-ret-te and watc-hing his fri-end walk ac-ross the grey sand of the be-ach and in-to the wa-ter un-til it was over his he-ad. He saw Re-or-don swim a do-zen yards be-fo-re he di-sap-pe-ared.

After a whi-le he put out his ci-ga-ret-te and lo-ok-ed aro-und. Then he wal-ked in-to the wa-ter too.

A mil-li-on cars sto-od empty along the be-ach.

3 - THE SPLENDID SOURCE

'... Then spa-re me yo-ur slan-ders, and re-ad this rat-her at night than in the day-ti-me, and gi-ve it not to yo-ung ma-idens, if the-re be any ... But I fe-ar not-hing for this bo-ok, sin-ce it is ext-rac-ted from a high and splen-did so-ur-ce, from which all that has is-su-ed has had a gre-at suc-cess

- Balzac: *Con-tes Dro-la-ti-qu-es*, Pro-lo-gue

It was the one Unc-le Lyman told in the sum-mer ho-use that did it. Tal-bert was just co-ming up the path when he he-ard the punch li-ne: ' "My God!" cri-ed the act-ress, "I tho-ught you sa-id sar-sa-pa-ril-la!" '

Guffaws exp-lo-ded in the lit-tle ho-use. Tal-bert sto-od mo-ti-on-less, lo-oking thro-ugh the ro-se trel-lis at the la-ug-hing gu-ests. In-si-de his con-to-ur san-dals his to-es fle-xed ru-mi-na-ti-vely. He tho-ught.

Later he to-ok a walk aro-und La-ke Be-an and watc-hed the crystal surf fold over and ob-ser-ved the gli-ding swans and sta-red at the gold-fish and tho-ught.

'I've be-en thin-king,' he sa-id that night.

'No,' sa-id Unc-le Lyman, hap-les-sly. He did not com-mit him-self furt-her. He wa-ited for the blow. Which fell.

'Dirty jokes,' sa-id Tal-bert Be-an III.

'I beg yo-ur par-don?' sa-id Unc-le Lyman.

'Endless ti-des of them co-ve-ring the na-ti-on,'

'I fa-il,' sa-id Unc-le Lyman, 'to grasp the po-int.' Ap-pre-hen-si-on grip-ped his vo-ice.

'I find the su-bj-ect fra-ught with witc-hery,' sa-id Tal-bert.

'With-?'

'Consider,' sa-id Tal-bert. 'Every day, all thro-ugh our land, men tell off-co-lo-ur jokes; in bars and at ball ga-mes; in the-at-re lob-bi-es and at pla-ces of bu-si-ness; on stre-et cor-ners and in loc-ker ro-oms. At ho-me and away, a ve-ri-tab-le de-lu-ge of jokes.'

Talbert pa-used me-aning-ful-ly.

'Who ma-kes them up?' he as-ked.

Uncle Lyman sta-red at his nep-hew with the lo-ok of a fis-her-man who has just ho-ok-ed a sea ser-pent - half awe, half re-vul-si-on.

'I'm af-ra-id -' he be-gan.

'I want to know the so-ur-ce of the-se jokes,' sa-id Tal-bert. 'The-ir ge-ne-sis; the-ir fo-un-ta-in-he-ad,'

'Why?' as-ked Unc-le Lyman. We-akly.

'Because it is re-le-vant,' sa-id Tal-bert. 'Be-ca-use the-se jokes are a part of a cul-tu-re he-re-to-fo-re unp-lum-bed. Be-ca-use they are an ano-maly; a phe-no-me-non ubi-qu-ito-us yet unk-nown.'

Uncle Lyman did not spe-ak. His pal-lid hands cur-led limply on his half-re-ad *Wall Stre-et Jo-ur-nal* Be-hind the po-lis-hed oc-ta-gons of his glas-ses his eyes we-re sus-pen-ded ber-ri-es.

At last he sig-hed.

'And what part,' he in-qu-ired sadly, 'am I to play in this qu-est?'

'We must be-gin,' sa-id Tal-bert, 'with the joke you told in the sum-mer ho-use this af-ter-no-on. Whe-re did you he-ar it?'

'Kulpritt,' Unc-le Lyman sa-id. And-rew Kulp-ritt was one of the bat-tery of law-yers emp-lo-yed by Be-an En-terp-ri-ses.

'Capital,' sa-id Tal-bert. 'Call him up and ask him whe-re *he* he-ar-d it.'

Uncle Lyman drew the sil-ver watch from his poc-ket.

'It's ne-arly mid-night, Tal-bert,' he an-no-un-ced.

Talbert wa-ved away chro-no-logy.

'Now,' he sa-id. 'This is im-por-tant.'

Uncle Lyman exa-mi-ned his nep-hew a mo-ment lon-ger. Then, with a ca-pi-tu-la-ting sigh, he re-ac-hed for one of Be-an Man-si-on's thirty-fi-ve te-lep-ho-nes.

Talbert sto-od toe-fle-xed on a be-ars-kin rug whi-le Unc-le Lyman di-al-led, wa-ited and spo-ke.

'Kulpritt?' sa-id Unc-le Lyman. 'Lyman Be-an. Sorry to wa-ke you up but Tal-bert wants to know whe-re you he-ar-d the joke abo-ut the act-ress who tho-ught the di-rec-tor sa-id sar-sa-pa-ril-la.'

Uncle Lyman lis-te-ned. 'I *sa-id* -' he be-gan aga-in.

A mi-nu-te la-ter he crad-led the re-ce-iver he-avily.

Prentiss,' he sa-id.

'Call him up,' sa-id Tal-bert.

'Talbert; Un-c-le Lyman as-ked.

'Now,' sa-id Tal-bert.

A long bre-ath exu-ded bet-we-en Unc-le Lyman's lips. Ca-re-ful-ly, he fol-ded his *Wall Stre-et*

Jo-ur-nal. He re-ac-hed ac-ross the ma-ho-gany tab-le and tam-ped out his ten-inch ci-gar. Sli-ding a we-ary hand be-ne-ath his smo-king jac-ket, he withd-rew his to-oled le-at-her ad-dress bo-ok.

Prentiss he-ard it from Ge-or-ge Shar-per, C.P.A. Shar-per he-ard it from Ab-ner Ac-ker-man, M.D. Ac-ker-man he-ard it from Wil-li-am Co-ze-ner, Pru-ne Pro-ducts. Co-ze-ner he-ard it from Rod Tas-sell, Mgr, Cypri-an Club. Tas-sell he-ard it from O. Win-ter-bot-tom.

Winterbottom he-ard it from H. Al-berts. Al-berts he-ard it from D. Sil-ver, Sil-ver from B. Phryne, Phryne from E. Ken-nel-ly.

By an odd twist Ken-nel-ly sa-id he he-ard it from Unc-le Lyman.

There is a comp-li-city he-re,' sa-id Tal-bert. The-se jokes are not self-ge-ne-ra-ti-ve.'

It was fo-ur a.m. Unc-le Lyman slum-ped, inert and de-ad-eyed, on his cha-ir.

There has to be a so-ur-ce,' sa-id Tal-bert.

Uncle Lyman re-ma-ined mo-ti-on-less.

'You're not in-te-res-ted,' sa-id Tal-bert inc-re-du-lo-usly.

Uncle Lyman ma-de a no-ise.

'I don't un-ders-tand,' sa-id Tal-bert. 'He-re is a si-tu-ati-on preg-nant with di-vers fas-ci-na-ti-ons. Is the-re a man or wo-man who has ne-ver he-ard an off-co-lo-ur joke? I say not. Yet, is the-re a man or wo-man who knows whe-re the-se jokes co-me from? Aga-in I say not.'

Talbert stro-de for-ce-ful-ly to his pla-ce of mu-sing at the twel-ve fo-ot fi-rep-la-ce. He po-ised the-re, sta-ring in.

'I may be a mil-li-ona-ire,' he sa-id, 'but I am sen-si-ti-ve.' He tur-ned. 'And this phe-no-me-non ex-ci-tes me.'

Uncle Lyman at-temp-ted to Sle-ep whi-le re-ta-ining the fa-ce of a man awa-ke.

'I ha-ve al-ways had mo-re mo-ney than I ne-eded,' sa-id Tal-bert. 'Ca-pi-tal in-vest-ment was un-ne-ces-sary. Thus I tur-ned to in-ves-ting the ot-her as-set my fat-her left - my bra-in.'

Uncle Lyman stir-red; a tho-ught sho-ok lo-ose.

'What ever hap-pe-ned,' he as-ked, 'to that so-ci-ety of yo-urs, the S.P.C.S.P.C.A.?'

'Eh? The So-ci-ety for the Pre-ven-ti-on of Cru-elty to the So-ci-ety for the Pre-ven-ti-on of Cru-elty to Ani-mals? The past.'

'And yo-ur in-te-rest in world prob-lems. What abo-ut that so-ci-olo-gi-cal tre-ati-se you we-re wri-ting

'*Slums: a Po-si-ti-ve Vi-ew*, you me-an?' Tal-bert brus-hed it asi-de. 'Incon-se-qu-en-ce.'

'And isn't the-re anyt-hing left of yo-ur po-li-ti-cal party, the Pro-anti-di-ses-tab-lish-men-ta-ri-anists?'

'Not a shred. Scut-tled by re-ac-ti-ona-ri-es from wit-hin.'

'What abo-ut Bi-me-tal-lism?'

'Oh, that!' Tal-bert smi-led ru-eful-ly. 'Pas-se, de-ar Unc-le. I had be-en re-ading too many Vic-to-ri-an no-vels.'

'Speaking of no-vels, what abo-ut yo-ur li-te-rary cri-ti-cisms? Not-hing do-ing with *The Use of the Se-mi-co-lon in Jane Aus-ten?* or *Ho-ra-tio Al-ger: the Mi-sun-ders-to-od Sa-ti-rist?* To say not-hing of *Was Qu-e-en Eli-za-beth Sha-kes-pe-are?*'

'*Was Sha-kes-pe-are Qu-e-en Eli-za-beth,*' cor-rec-ted Tal-bert. 'No, Unc-le, not-hing do-ing with them. They had mo-men-tary in-te-rest, not-hing mo-re

'I sup-po-se the sa-me holds true for *The Shoe Horn: Pro and Con*, eh? And tho-se sci-en-ti-fic ar-ti-cles - *Re-la-ti-vity Re-Exa-mi-ned* and *Is Evo-lu-ti-on Eno-ugh?*'

'Dead and go-ne,' sa-id Tal-bert, pa-ti-ently, 'de-ad and go-ne. The-se pro-j-ects ne-eded me on-ce. Now I go on to bet-ter things.

'Like who wri-tes dirty jokes,' sa-id Unc-le Lyman.

Talbert nod-ded.

'Like that,' he sa-id.

When the but-ler set the bre-ak-fast tray on the bed Tal-bert sa-id, 'Red-fi-eld, do you know any jokes?'

Redfield lo-oked out im-pas-si-vely thro-ugh the fa-ce an imp-ro-vi-dent na-tu-re had neg-lec-ted to ani-ma-te.

'Jokes, sir?' he in-qu-ired.

'You know,' sa-id Tal-bert. 'Jol-li-ti-es.'

Redfield sto-od by the bed li-ke a corp-se who-se cas-cket had be-en upen-ded and re-mo-ved.

'Well, sir,' he sa-id, a full thirty se-conds la-ter, 'once, when I was a boy I he-ard one

'Yes?' sa-id Tal-bert eagerly.

I be-li-eve it went so-mew-hat as fol-lows,' Red-fi-eld sa-id. 'When - uh - *When* is a port-man-te-au not a -'

'No, no,' sa-id Tal-bert, sha-king his he-ad. 'I me-an *dirty* jokes.'

Redfield's eyeb-rows so-ared. The ver-na-cu-lar was li-ke a fish in his fa-ce.

'You don't know any?' sa-id a di-sap-po-in-ted Tal-bert.

'Begging yo-ur par-don, sir,' sa-id Red-fi-eld. 'If I may ma-ke a sug-ges-ti-on. May I say that the cha-uf-fe-ur is mo-re li-kely to -'

'You know any dirty jokes, Har-ri-son?' Tal-bert as-ked thro-ugh the tu-be as the Rolls Roy-ce pur-red along Be-an Ro-ad to-wards High-way 27.

Harrison lo-oked blank for a mo-ment. He glan-ced back at Tal-bert. Then a grin wrink-led his car-nal jowls.

'Well, sir,' he be-gan, 'the-re's this guy sit-tin' by the run-way eatin' an oni-on, see?'

Talbert un-dip-ped his fo-ur-co-lo-ur pen-cil.

Talbert sto-od in an ele-va-tor ri-sing to the tenth flo-or of the Ga-ult Bu-il-ding.

The ho-ur ri-de to New York had be-en most il-lu-mi-na-ting. Not only had he transc-ri-bed se-ven of the most hor-ren-do-usly vul-gar jokes he had ever he-ard in his li-fe but had ext-rac-ted a pro-mi-se from Har-ri-son to ta-ke him to the va-ri-o-us es-tab-lish-ments whe-re the-se jokes had be-en he-ard.

The hunt was on.

Max Axe,' de-tec-ti-ve agency re-ad the words on the frosty-glas-sed do-or. Tal-bert tur-ned the knob and went in.

Announced by the be-a-uti-ful re-cep-ti-onist, Tal-bert was us-he-red in-to a spar-sely fur-nis-hed of-fi-ce on who-se walls we-re a hun-ting li-cen-ce, a mac-hi-ne gun, and fra-med pho-tog-raphs of the Se-ag-ram fac-tory, the St Va-len-ti-ne's. Day Mas-sac-re in co-lo-ur and Her-bert J. Philb-rick who had led three li-ves.

Mr Axe sho-ok Tal-bert's hand.

'What co-uld I do for ya?' he as-ked.

'First of all,' sa-id Tal-bert, 'do you know any dirty jokes?'

Recovering, Mr Axe told Tal-bert the one abo-ut the mon-key and the elep-hant.

Talbert jot-ted it down. Then he hi-red the agency to in-ves-ti-ga-te the men Unc-le Lyman had pho-ned and un-co-ver anyt-hing that was me-aning-ful.

After he left the agency, Tal-bert be-gan ma-king the ro-unds with Har-ri-son. He he-ard a joke the first pla-ce they went.

'There's this mid-get in a frank-fur-ter su-it, see?' it be-gan.

It was a day of bu-oyant dis-co-very. Tal-bert he-ard the joke abo-ut the cross-eyed plum-ber in the ha-rem, the one abo-ut the pre-ac-her who won an eel at a raf-ple, the one abo-ut the figh-ter pi-lot who went down in fla-mes and the one abo-ut the two Girl Sco-uts who lost the-ir co-oki-es in the La-und-ro-mat.

Among ot-hers.

'I want,' sa-id Tal-bert, 'one ro-und-trip aerop-la-ne tic-ket to San Fran-cis-co and a re-ser-va-ti-on at the Ho-tel Mil-lard Fil-mo-re.'

'May I ask,' as-ked Unc-le Lyman, 'why?'

'While ma-king the ro-unds with Har-ri-son to-day,' exp-la-ined Tal-bert, 'a sa-les-man of la-di-es'

un-der-gar-ments told me that a ve-ri-tab-le cor-nu-co-pia of off-co-lo-ur jokes exists in the per-son of Harry Shu-ler, bel-lboy at the Mil-lard Fil-mo-re. This sa-les-man sa-id that, du-ring a three-day con-ven-ti-on at that ho-tel, he had he-ard mo-re new jokes from Shu-ler than he had he-ard in the first thirty-ni-ne ye-ars of his li-fe.'

'And you are go-ing to -?' Unc-le Lyman be-gan.

'Exactly,' sa-id Tal-bert. 'We must fol-low whe-re the spo-or is stron-gest.'

Talbert,' sa-id Unc-le Lyman, 'why do you *do* the-se things?'

'I am se-arc-hing,' sa-id Tal-bert simply.

For what, damn it!' cri-ed Unc-le Lyman.

'For *me-aning*,' sa-id Tal-bert.

Uncle Lyman co-ve-red his eyes. 'You are the ima-ge of yo-ur mot-her,' he dec-la-red.

'Say not-hing of her,'. char-ged Tal-bert. 'She was the fi-nest wo-man who ever trod the earth.'

Then how co-me she got tramp-led to de-ath at the fu-ne-ral of Ru-dolph Va-len-ti-no?' Unc-le Lyman char-ged back.

That is a ba-se ca-nard,' sa-id Tal-bert, 'and you know it. Mot-her just hap-pe-ned to be pas-sing the church on her way to brin-ging fo-od to the Orp-hans of the Dis-so-lu-te Se-amen - one of her many cha-ri-ti-es - when she was ac-ci-den-tal-ly ca-ught up in the wa-ves of hyste-ri-cal wo-men and swept to her aw-ful end.'

A preg-nant si-len-ce bel-li-ed the vast ro-om. Tal-bert sto-od at a win-dow lo-oking down the hill at La-ke Be-an which his fat-her had had po-ured in 1923.

Think of it,' he sa-id af-ter a mo-ment's ref-lec-ti-on. The na-ti-on ali-ve with off-co-lo-ur jokes - the *world* ali-ve! And the sa-me jokes, Unc-le, *the sa-me jokes*. How? *How?* By what stran-ge me-ans do the-se jokes o'er-le-ap oce-ans, span con-ti-nents? By what inc-re-dib-le mac-hi-nery are the-se jokes pro-mul-ga-ted over mo-un-ta-in and da-le?'

He tur-ned and met Unc-le Lyman's mes-me-ric sta-re.

'*I me-an to know*,' he sa-id.

At ten mi-nu-tes be-fo-re mid-night Tal-bert bo-ar-ded the pla-ne for San Fran-cis-co and to-ok a se-at by the win-dow. Fif-te-en mi-nu-tes la-ter the pla-ne ro-ared down the run-way and no-sed up in-to the black sky.

Talbert tur-ned to the man be-si-de him.

'Do you know any dirty jokes, sir?' he in-qu-ired, pen-cil po-ised.

The man sta-red at him. Tal-bert gul-ped.

'Oh, I *am* sorry,' he sa-id, 'Re-ve-rend.'

When they re-ac-hed the ro-om Tal-bert ga-ve the bel-lboy a crisp fi-ve dol-lar bill and as-ked to he-ar a joke.

Shuler told him the one abo-ut the man sit-ting by the run-way eating an oni-on, see? Tal-bert lis-te-ned, to-es kne-ading in-qu-isi-ti-vely in his sho-es. The joke conc-lu-ded, he as-ked Shu-ler whe-re this and si-mi-lar jokes might be over-he-ard. Shu-ler sa-id at a wharf spot known as Davy Jones' Loc-ker Ro-om.

Early that eve-ning, af-ter drin-king with one of the West Co-ast rep-re-sen-ta-ti-ves of Be-an En-terp-ri-ses, Tal-bert to-ok a ta-xi to Davy Jones' Loc-ker Ro-om. En-te-ring its dim, smo-ke-fog-ged in-te-ri-or, he to-ok a pla-ce at the bar, or-de-red a Screw-d-ri-ver and be-gan to lis-ten.

Within an ho-ur's ti-me he had writ-ten down the joke abo-ut the old ma-id who ca-ught her no-se in the bath-tub fa-ucet, the one abo-ut the three tra-vel-ling sa-les-men and the far-mer's am-bi-dext-ro-us da-ugh-ter, the one abo-ut the nur-se who tho-ught they we-re Spa-nish oli-ves and the one abo-ut the mid-get in the frank-fur-ter su-it. Tal-bert wro-te this last joke un-der his ori-gi-nal transc-rip-ti-on of it, un-der-li-ning chan-ges in con-text at-tri-bu-tab-le to re-gi-onal inf-lu-en-ce.

At 10.16, a man who had just told Tal-bert the one abo-ut the hil-lbil-ly twins and the-ir two-he-aded sis-ter sa-id that Tony, the bar-ten-der, was a vir-tu-al fa-ucet of off-co-lo-ur, jokes, li-me-ricks, anec-do-tes, epig-rams and pro-verbs.

Talbert went over to the bar and asked Tony for the major source of his lewdiana. After reciting the lime-rick about the sex of the asteroid vermin, the bartender referred Talbert to a Mr Frank Bruin, salesman, of Oakland, who happened not to be there that night.

Talbert at once retired to a telephone directory where he discovered five Frank Bruins in Oakland. Entering a booth with a coat pocket sagging change, Talbert began dialling them.

Two of the five Frank Bruins were salesmen. One of them, however, was in Alcatraz at the moment. Talbert traced the remaining Frank Bruin to Hogan's Alleys in Oakland where his wife said that, as usual on Thursday nights, her husband was bowling with the Moonlight Matress Company All-Stars.

Quitting the bar, Talbert chartered a taxi and started across the bay to Oakland, toes in ferment.

Veni, vi-di, vi-ci?

Bruin was not a needle in a haystack.

The moment Talbert entered Hogan's Alleys his eye was caught by a football huddle of men encircling a portly, rosy-domed speaker. Approaching, Talbert was just in time to hear the punch line followed by an explosion of composition laughter. It was the punch line that interrupted.

'"My God!" cried the actress, 'Mr Bruin had uttered, ' "I thought you said a banana split!" '

This variation much excited Talbert who saw in it a verification of a new element - the inter-changeable kicker.

When the group had broken up and drifted, Talbert accosted Mr Bruin and, introducing himself, asked where Mr Bruin had heard that joke.

'Why d'ya ask, boy?' asked Mr Bruin.

'No reason,' said the crafty Talbert.

'I don't remember where I heard it, boy,' said Mr Bruin finally. 'Excuse me, will ya?'

Talbert trailed after him but received no satisfaction - unless it was in the most definitive impression that Bruin was concealing something.

Later, riding back to the Mil-lard Fil-mo-re, Talbert decided to put an Oakland detective agency on Mr Bruin's trail to see what could be seen.

When Talbert reached the hotel there was a telegram waiting for him at the desk.

MR ROD-NEY TASSEL RECEIVED LONG DISTANCE CALL FROM MR GEORGE BULLOCK, CARTHAGE HOTEL, CHICAGO. WAS TOLD JOKE ABOUT MIDGET IN SAMAMI SUIT. MEANINGFUL? -AXE.

Talbert's eyes ignited.

Tally, he murmured, *'ho.'*

An hour later he had checked out of the Mil-lard Fil-mo-re, taxied to the airport and caught a plane for Chicago.

Twenty minutes after he had left the hotel, a man in a dark pin-stripe approached the desk clerk and asked for the room number of Talbert Be-an III. When informed of Talbert's departure the man grew steely-eyed and immediately retired to a telephone booth. He emerged ashen.

'I'm sorry,' said the desk clerk, 'Mr Bullock checked out this morning.'

'Oh.' Talbert's shoulders sagged. All night on the plane he had been checking over his notes, hoping to discern a pattern to the jokes which would encompass type, area of genesis and periodicity. He was weary with fruitless concentration. Now this.

'And he left no forwarding address?' he asked.

'Only Chicago, sir,' said the clerk.

'I see.'

Following a bath and lunc-he-on in his ro-om, a slightly ref-res-hed Tal-bert set-tled down with the te-lep-ho-ne and the di-rec-tory. The-re we-re 47 Ge-or-ge Bul-locks in Chi-ca-go. Tal-bert chec-ked them off as he pho-ned.

At 3.00 o'clock he slum-ped over the re-ce-iver in a de-ad slum-ber. At 4.21, he re-ga-ined cons-ci-o-us-ness and comp-le-ted the re-ma-ining ele-ven calls. The Mr Bul-lock in qu-es-ti-on was not at ho-me, sa-id his ho-use-ke-eper, but was ex-pec-ted in that eve-ning.

'Thank you kindly,' sa-id a ble-ary-eyed Tal-bert and, han-ging up, the-re-upon col-lap-sed on the bed - only to awa-ke a few mi-nu-tes past se-ven and dress qu-ickly. Des-cen-ding to the stre-et, he gul-ped down a sand-wich and a glass of milk, then ha-iled a cab and ma-de the ho-ur ri-de to the ho-me of Ge-or-ge Bul-lock.

The man him-self ans-we-red the bell.

'Yes?' he as-ked.

Talbert int-ro-du-ced him-self and sa-id he had co-me to the Ho-tel Cart-ha-ge early that af-ter-no-on to see him.

'Why?' as-ked Mr Bul-lock.

'So you co-uld tell me whe-re you he-ard that joke abo-ut the mid-get in the sa-la-mi su-it,' sa-id Tal-bert.

'Sir?'

'I sa-id-'

'I he-ard what you sa-id, sir,' sa-id Mr Bul-lock, 'tho-ugh I can-not say that yo-ur re-mark ma-kes any no-ti-ce-ab-le sen-se.'

'I be-li-eve sir,' chal-len-ged Tal-bert, 'that you are hi-ding be-hind fus-ti-an.'

'Behind fus-ti-an, sir?' re-tor-ted Bul-lock. 'I'm af-ra-id -'

'The ga-me is up, sir!' dec-la-red Tal-bert in a rin-ging vo-ice. 'Why don't you ad-mit it and tell me whe-re you got that joke from?'

'I ha-ve not the re-mo-test con-cep-ti-on of what you're tal-king abo-ut, sir!' snap-ped Bul-lock, his words be-li-ed by the pal-lor of his fa-ce.

Talbert flas-hed a Mo-na Li-sa smi-le.

'Indeed?' he sa-id.

And, tur-ning lightly on his he-el, he left Bul-lock tremb-ling in the do-or-way. As he set-tled back aga-ainst the ta-xi cab se-at aga-in, he saw Bul-lock still stan-ding the-re sta-ning at him. Then Bul-lock whir-led and was go-ne.

'Hotel Cart-ha-ge,' sa-id Tal-bert, sa-tis-fi-ed with his bluff.

Riding back, he tho-ught of Bul-lock's agi-ta-ti-on and a thin smi-le tip-ped up the cor-ners of his mo-uth. No do-ubt abo-ut it.

The prey was be-ing run to earth. Now if his sur-mi-se was va-lid the-re wo-uld li-kely be -

A le-an man in a ra-in-co-at and a derby was sit-ting on the bed when Tal-bert en-te-red his ro-om. The man's mo-us-tac-he, li-ke a muddy to-othb-rush, twitc-hed.

'Talbert Be-an?' he as-ked.

Talbert bo-wed.

The sa-me,' he sa-id.

The man, a Co-lo-nel Bis-hop, re-ti-red, lo-ok-ed at Tal-bert with me-tal blue eyes.

'What is yo-ur ga-me, sir?' he as-ked ta-utly.

'I don't un-ders-tand,' to-yed Tal-bert.

'I think you do,' sa-id the Co-lo-nel, 'and you are to co-me with me.'

'Oh?' sa-id Tal-bert.

He fo-und him-self lo-oking down the bar-rel of a.45 ca-lib-re Web-ley Fos-bery.

'Shall we?' sa-id the Co-lo-nel.

'But of co-ur-se,' sa-id Tal-bert co-ol-ly. 'I ha-ve not co-me all this way to re-sist now.'

The ri-de in the pri-va-te pla-ne was a long one. The win-dows we-re blac-ked out and Tal-bert hadn't the fa-in-test idea in which di-rec-ti-on they we-re flying. Ne-it-her the pi-lot nor the Co-lo-nel spo-ke, and Tal-bert's at-tempts at con-ver-sa-ti-on we-re dis-co-ura-ged by a chilly si-len-ce. The Co-lo-nel's pis-tol, still le-vel-led at Tal-bert's chest, ne-ver wa-ve-red, but it did not bot-her Tal-bert. He was exul-tant. All he co-uld think was that his se-arch was en-ding; he was, at last, ap-pro-ac-hing the he-ad-wa-ters of the dirty joke. Af-ter a ti-me, his he-ad nod-ded and he do-zed - to dre-am of mid-gets in frank-fur-ter su-its and act-res-ses who se-emed ob-ses-sed by sar-sa-pa-ril-la or ba-na-na splits or so-me-ti-mes both. How long he slept, and what bo-un-da-ri-es he may ha-ve cross-ed, Tal-bert ne-ver knew. He was awa-ke-ned by a swift loss of al-ti-tu-de and the ste-ely vo-ice of Co-lo-nel Bis-hop: 'We are lan-ding, Mr Be-an.' The Co-lo-nel's grip tigh-te-ned on the pis-tol.

Talbert of-fe-red no re-sis-tan-ce when his *eyes* we-re blind-fol-ded. Fe-eling the Web-ley Fos-bery in the small of his back, he stumb-led out of the pla-ne and crunc-hed over the gro-und of a well-kept airst-rip. The-re was a nip in the air and he felt a bit light-he-aded: Tal-bert sus-pec-ted they had lan-ded in a mo-un-ta-ino-us re-gi-on; but what mo-un-ta-ins, and on what con-ti-nent, he co-uld not gu-ess. His ears and no-se con-ve-yed not-hing of help to his chur-ning mind.

He was sho-ved - no-ne too gen-tly - in-to an auto-mo-bi-le, and then dri-ven swift-ly along what felt li-ke a dirt ro-ad. The tyres crack-led over peb-bles and twigs.

Sudden-ly the blind-fold was re-mo-ved. Tal-bert blin-ked and lo-oked out the win-dows. It was a black and clo-udy night: he co-uld see not-hing but the li-mi-ted vis-ta af-for-ded by the he-ad-lights.

'You are well iso-la-ted,' he sa-id, ap-pre-ci-a-ti-vely. Co-lo-nel Bis-hop re-ma-in-ed tight-lip-ped and vi-gi-lant.

After a fif-te-en-mi-nu-te ri-de along the dark ro-ad, the car pul-led up in front of a tall, un-ligh-ted ho-use. As the mo-tor was cut Tal-bert co-uld he-ar the pul-sing rasp of cric-kets all aro-und.

'Well,' he sa-id.

'Emerge,' sug-ges-ted Co-lo-nel Bis-hop.

'Of co-ur-se.' Tal-bert bent out of the car and was es-cor-ted up the wi-de porch steps by the Co-lo-nel. Be-hind, the car pul-led away in-to the night.

Inside the ho-use, chi-mes bon-ged hol-low-ly as the Co-lo-nel pus-hed a but-ton. They wa-ited in the dark-ness and, in a few mo-ments, ap-pro-ac-hing fo-ots-teps so-un-ded.

A tiny aper-tu-re ope-ned in the he-avy do-or, disc-lo-sing a sing-le bes-pec-tac-led eye. The eye blin-ked on-ce and, with a fa-int ac-cent Tal-bert co-uld not re-cog-ni-se, whis-pe-red fur-ti-vely, 'Why did the wi-dow we-ar black gar-ters?'

'In re-memb-ran-ce,' sa-id Co-lo-nel Bis-hop with gre-at gra-vity, 'of tho-se who pas-sed be-yond.'

The do-or ope-ned.

The ow-ner of the eye was tall, ga-unt, of in-de-ter-mi-nab-le age and na-ti-ona-lity, his ha-ir a dark mass wis-ped with grey. His fa-ce was all ang-les and fa-cets, his eyes pi-er-cing be-hind lar-ge, horn-rim-med glas-ses. He wo-re flan-nel tro-users and a chec-ked jac-ket.

'This is the De-an,' sa-id Co-lo-nel Bis-hop.

'How do you do,' sa-id Tal-bert.

'Come in, co-me *in*,' the De-an in-vi-ted, ex-ten-ding his lar-ge hand to Tal-bert. 'Wel-co-me, Mr Be-an.' He shaf-ted a scol-ding lo-ok at Bis-hop's pis-tol. 'Now, Co-lo-nel,' he sa-id, 'indul-ging in me-lod-ra-ma-tics aga-in? Put it away, de-ar fel-low, put it away.'

'We can't be too ca-re-ful,' grum-ped the Co-lo-nel.

Talbert sto-od in the spa-ci-o-us gra-ce of the entry hall lo-oking aro-und. His ga-ze set-tled, pre-sen-tly, on the cryptic smi-le of the De-an, who sa-id: 'So. You ha-ve fo-und us out, sir,'

Talbert's to-es whip-ped li-ke pen-nants in a ga-le.

He co-ve-red his ex-ci-te-ment with, 'Ha-ve I?'

'Yes,' sa-id the De-an. 'You ha-ve. And a mas-ter-ful disp-lay of in-ves-ti-ga-ti-ve in-tu-iti-on it was,' Talbert lo-oked aro-und.

'So,' he sa-id, vo-ice ba-ted. 'It is *he-re*.'

'Yes,' sa-id the De-an. 'Wo-uld you li-ke to see it?'

'More than anyt-hing in the world,' sa-id Tal-bert fer-vently.

'Come then,' sa-id the De-an.

'Is this wi-se?' the Co-lo-nel war-ned.

'Come,' re-pe-ated the De-an.

The three men star-ted down the hal-lway. For a mo-ment, a sha-de of pre-mo-ni-ti-on dar-ke-ned Tal-bert's mind. It was be-ing ma-de so easy. Was it a trap? In a se-cond the tho-ught had slip-ped away, was-hed off by a cur-rent of ex-ci-ted cu-ri-osity.

They star-ted up a win-ding marb-le sta-ir-ca-se.

'How did you sus-pect?' the De-an in-qu-ired. 'That is to say - what promp-ted you to pro-be the mat-ter?'

'I just tho-ught,' sa-id Tal-bert me-aning-ful-ly. 'He-re are all the-se jokes yet no one se-ems to know whe-re they co-me from. Or *ca-re*.'

'Yes,' ob-ser-ved the De-an, 'we co-unt upon that di-sin-te-rest. What man in ten mil-li-on ever asks, whe-re did you he-ar that joke? Ab-sor-bed in me-mo-ri-sing the joke for fu-tu-re use, he gi-ves no tho-ught to its so-ur-ce. This, of co-ur-se, is our pro-tec-ti-on.'

The De-an smi-led at Tal-bert. 'But not/ he amen-ded, 'from men such as you.'

Talbert's flush went un-no-ti-ced.

They re-ac-hed the lan-ding and be-gan wal-king along a wi-de cor-ri-dor lit on each si-de by the il-lu-mi-na-ti-on of can-de-lab-ra. The-re was no mo-re talk. At the end of the cor-ri-dor they tur-ned right and stop-ped in front of mas-si-ve, iron-hin-ged do-ors.

'Is this wi-se?' the Co-lo-nel as-ked aga-in.

'Too la-te to stop now,' sa-id the De-an and Tal-bert felt a shi-ver flut-ter down his spi-ne. What if it was a trap? He swal-lo-wed, then squ-ared his sho-ul-ders. The De-an had sa-id it. It was too la-te to stop now.

The gre-at do-ors trac-ked open.

'*Et vo-ila*,' sa-id the De-an.

The hal-lway was an ave-nue. Thick wall-to-wall car-pe-ting spon-ged be-ne-ath Tal-bert's fe-et as he wal-ked bet-we-en the Co-lo-nel and the De-an. At pe-ri-odic in-ter-vals along the ce-iling hung mu-sic-emit-ting spe-akers; Tal-bert re-cog-ni-sed the *Ga-i-ete Pa-ri-si-en-ne*. His ga-ze mo-ved to a pe-tit-po-in-ted ta-pestry on which Di-ony-si-an acts en-su-ed abo-ve the stitc-hed mot-to, 'Happy Is the Man Who Is Ma-king So-met-hing.'

'Incredible,' he mur-mu-red. 'He-re; in this ho-use.'

'Exactly,' sa-id the De-an.

Talbert sho-ok his he-ad won-de-ringly.

'To think,' he sa-id.

The De-an pa-used be-fo-re a glass wall and, bra-king, Tal-bert pe-ered in-to an of-fi-ce. Among its rich ap-po-int-ments stro-de a yo-ung man in a stri-ped silk wes-kit with brass but-tons, ges-tu-ring me-aning-ful-ly with a long ci-gar whi-le, cross leg-ged on a le-at-her co-uch, sat a hap-pily swe-ate-red blon-de of rich di-men-si-ons.

The man stop-ped bri-efly and wa-ved to the De-an, smi-led, then re-tur-ned to his spi-ri-ted dic-ta-ting.

'One of our best,' the De-an sa-id.

'But,' stam-me-red Tal-bert, 'I tho-ught that man was on the staff of-'

'He is,' sa-id the De-an. 'And, in his spa-re ti-me, he is al-so one of us.'

Talbert fol-lo-wed on ex-ci-te-ment-num-bed legs.

'But I had no idea,' he sa-id. 'I pre-su-med the or-ga-ni-sa-ti-on to be com-po-sed of men li-ke Bru-in and Bul-lock,'

'They are me-rely our me-ans of pro-mul-ga-ti-on,' exp-la-ined the De-an. 'Our word of mo-ut-hers, you might say. Our *cre-ators* co-me from mo-re exal-ted ranks - exe-cu-ti-ves, sta-tes-men, the bet-ter

pro-fes-si-onal co-mics, edi-tors, no-ve-lists - '

The De-an bro-ke off as the do-or to one of the ot-her of-fi-ces ope-ned and a ba-rely be-ar-ded man in hun-ting clot-hes emer-ged. He sho-ul-de-red past them mut-te-ring true things to him-self.

'Off aga-in?' the De-an as-ked ple-asantly. The big man grun-ted. It was a true grunt. He clum-ped off, lo-nely for a veldt.

'Unbelievable,' sa-id Tal-bert. Such men as the-se?'

'Exactly,' sa-id the De-an.

They strol-led on past the rows of busy of-fi-ces. Tal-bert to-urist-eyed, the De-an smi-ling his man-da-rin smi-le, the Co-lo-nel wor-king his lips as if an-ti-ci-pa-ting the kiss of a to-ad.

'But whe-re did it all be-gin?' a da-zed Tal-bert as-ked.

That is his-tory's sec-ret,' re-j-o-ined the De-an, Ve-iled be-hind ti-me's opa-city. Our ven-tu-re do-es ha-ve its ho-no-ured past, ho-we-ver. Gre-at men ha-ve gra-ced its ca-use - Ben Frank-lin, Mark Twa-in, Dic-kens, Swin-bur-ne, Ra-be-la-is, Bal-zac; oh, the ho-no-ur roll is long. Sha-kes-pe-are, of co-ur-se, and his fri-end Ben Jon-son. Still fart-her back, Cha-ucer, Boc-cac-cio. Furt-her yet, Ho-ra-ce and Se-ne-ca, De-most-he-nes and Pa-utus. Aris-top-ha-nes, Apu-li-e-us. Yea, in the pa-la-ces of Tu-tank-ha-men was our work do-ne; in the black temp-les of Ah-ri-man, the ple-asu-re do-me of Kub-la Khan. Whe-re did it be-gin? Who knows? Scra-ped on rocks, in many a pri-mor-di-al ca-ve, are cer-ta-in dra-wings. And the-re are tho-se among us who be-li-eve that the-se we-re left by the ear-li-est mem-bers of the Brot-her-ho-od. But this, of co-ur-se, is only le-gend

Now they had, re-ac-hed the end of the hal-lway and we-re star-ting down a cus-hi-oned ramp.

'There must be vast sums of mo-ney in-vol-ved in this,' sa-id Tal-bert.

'Heaven fo-re-fend,' dec-la-red the De-an, stop-ping short. 'Do not con-fu-se our work with al-ley ven-ding. Our wor-kers cont-ri-bu-te fre-ely of the-ir ti-me and skill, ca-ring for na-ught sa-ve the Ca-use.'

'Forgive me,' Tal-bert sa-id. Then, ral-lying, he as-ked, 'What Ca-use?'

The De-an's ga-ze fu-sed on in-ward things. He amb-led on slowly, arms be-hind his back.

'The Ca-use of Lo-ve,' he sa-id, 'as op-po-sed to Ha-te. Of Na-tu-re, as op-po-sed to the Un-na-tu-ral. Of Hu-ma-nity, as op-po-sed to In-hu-ma-nity. Of Fre-edom, as op-po-sed to Const-ra-int. Of He-alth, as op-po-sed to Di-se-ase. Yes, Mr Be-an, di-se-ase. The di-se-ase cal-led bi-gotry; the frigh-te-ningly com-mu-ni-cab-le di-se-ase that ta-ints all it to-uc-hes; turns warmth to chill and joy to gu-ilt and go-od to bad. What Ca-use?' He stop-ped dra-ma-ti-cal-ly. The Ca-use of Li-fe, Mr Be-an - as op-po-sed to De-ath!'

The De-an lif-ted a chal-len-ging fin-ger. We see our-sel-ves,' he sa-id, 'as an army of de-di-ca-ted war-ri-ors marc-hing on the strong-holds of pru-dery. Knights Temp-lar with a just and joyo-us mis-si-on.'

'Amen to that,' a fer-vent Tal-bert sa-id.

They en-te-red a lar-ge, cu-bic-le-bor-de-red ro-om. Tal-bert saw men; so-me typing, so-me wri-ting, so-me sta-ning, so-me on te-lep-ho-nes, tal-king in a mul-ti-tu-de of ton-gu-es. The-ir exp-res-si-ons we-re, as one, in-tently aloft. At the far end of the ro-om, exp-res-si-on un-se-en, a man stab-bed plugs in-to a many-eyed switch-bo-ard.

'Our Ap-pren-ti-ce Ro-om,' sa-id the De-an, 'whe-re-in we gro-om our fu-tu-re

His vo-ice di-ed off as a yo-ung man exi-ted one of the cu-bic-les and ap-pro-ac-hed them, pa-per in hand, a smi-le tre-mu-lo-us on his lips.

'Oliver,' sa-id the De-an, nod-ding on-ce.

'I've do-ne a joke, sir,' sa-id Oli-ver. 'May I -?'

'But of co-ur-se,' sa-id the De-an.

Oliver cle-ared vis-cid an-xi-ety from his thro-at, then told a joke abo-ut a lit-tle boy and girl watc-hing a do-ub-les match on the nu-dist co-lony ten-nis co-urt. The De-an smi-led, nod-ding. Oli-ver lo-ok-ed up, pa-ined.

'No?'he sa-id.

'It is not wit-ho-ut me-rit,' en-co-ura-ged the De-an, 'but, as it now stands, you see, it smacks rat-her

too re-mi-nis-cently of the duc-hess-but-ler ef-fect, *Wi-fe of Bath* ca-te-gory. Not to men-ti-on the jus-ti-fi-ably po-pu-lar do-ub-le re-ver-se bis-hop-bar-ma-id gam-bit,'

'Oh, sir,' gri-ved Oli-ver, 'I'll ne-ver pre-va-il.'

'Nonsense,' sa-id the De-an, ad-ding kindly, '*son*. The-se shor-ter jokes are, by all odds, the most dif-fi-cult to mas-ter. They must be co-gent, pre-ci-se; must say so-met-hing of pith and mo-ment.'

'Yes, sir,' mur-mu-red Oli-ver.

'Check with Wo-jci-ec-hows-ki and Sfor-zi-ni,' sa-id the De-an. 'Also Ah-med El-Ha-kim. They'll bri-ef you on use of the Mas-ter In-dex. Eh?' He pat-ted Oli-ver's back.

'Yes, sir.' Oli-ver ma-na-ged a smi-le and re-tur-ned to his cu-bic-le. The De-an sig-hed.

'A somb-re bu-si-ness,' he dec-la-red. 'He'll ne-ver be Class-A. He re-al-ly sho-uld'n't be in the com-po-sing end of it at all but -' He ges-tu-red me-aning-ful-ly. '- the-re is sen-ti-ment in-vol-ved,'

'Oh?' sa-id Tal-bert.

'Yes,' sa-id the De-an. 'It was his gre-at grand-fat-her who, on June 23, 1848, wro-te the first Tra-vel-ling Sa-les-man joke, Ame-ri-can stra-in.'

The De-an and the Co-lo-nel lo-we-red the-ir he-ads a mo-ment in re-ve-ment com-me-mo-ra-ti-on. Tal-bert did the sa-me.

'And so we ha-ve it,' sa-id the De-an. They we-re back down-s-ta-irs, sit-ting in the gre-at li-ving ro-om, sherry ha-ving be-en ser-ved.

'Perhaps you wish to know mo-re,' sa-id the De-an.

'Only one thing,' sa-id Tal-bert.

'And that is, sir?'

'Why ha-ve you shown it to me?'

'Yes,' sa-id the Co-lo-nel, fin-ge-ring at his arm-pit hols-ter, 'why in-de-ed?'

The De-an lo-oked at Tal-bert ca-re-ful-ly as if ba-lan-cing his reply.

'You ha-ven't gu-es-sed?' he sa-id, at last. 'No, I can see you ha-ven't. Mr Be-an... you are not unk-nown to us. Who has not he-ard of yo-ur work, yo-ur unf-lag-ging de-vo-ti-on to so-me-ti-mes obs-cu-re but al-ways worthy ca-uses? What man can help but ad-mi-re yo-ur self-les-sness, yo-ur de-di-ca-ti-on, yo-ur pro-ud de-fi-an-ce of con-ven-ti-on and pre-j-udi-ce?' The De-an pa-used and le-aned for-ward.

'Mr Be-an,' he sa-id softly. 'Tal-bert - may I call you that? - *we want you on our te-am*.'

Talbert ga-ped. His hands be-gan to tremb-le. The Co-lo-nel, re-li-ved, grun-ted and sank back in-to his cha-ir.

No reply ca-me from the flus-te-red Tal-bert, so the De-an con-ti-nu-ed. Think it over. Con-si-der the me-rits of our work. With all due mo-desty, I think I may say that he-re is yo-ur op-por-tu-nity to ally yo-ur-self with the gre-atest ca-use of yo-ur li-fe.'

'I'm spe-ech-less,' sa-id Tal-bert. 'I hardly - that is - how can I...'

But, al-re-ady, the light of con-sec-ra-ti-on was ste-aling in-to his eyes.

4 - LONG DISTANCE CALL

Just be-fo-re the te-lep-ho-ne rang, storm winds top-pled the tree out-si-de her win-dow and jol-ted Miss Ke-ene from her dre-aming sle-ep. She flung her-self up with a gasp, her fra-il hands crump-ling twists of she-et in eit-her palm. Be-ne-ath her flesh-less chest the he-art jer-ked ta-ut, the slug-gish blo-od spur-ted. She sat in ri-gid mu-te-ness, her eyes sta-ring at the night.

In anot-her se-cond, the te-lep-ho-ne rang.

Who *on earth*? The qu-es-ti-on sha-ped un-wit-tingly in her bra-in. Her thin hand fal-te-red in the dark-ness, the fin-gers se-arc-hing a mo-ment and then Miss El-va Ke-ene drew the co-ol re-ce-iver to her ear.

'Hello,' she sa-id.

Outside a can-non of thun-der sho-ok the night, twitc-hing Miss Ke-ene's crip-pled legs. *I've mis-sed the vo-ice*, she tho-ught, *the thun-der has blot-ted out the vo-ice*.

'Hello,' she sa-id aga-in.

There was no so-und. Miss Ke-ene wa-ited in ex-pec-tant let-hargy. Then she re-pe-ated, 'Hel-lo,' in a crac-king vo-ice. Out-si-de the thun-der cras-hed aga-in.

Still no vo-ice spo-ke, not even the so-und of a pho-ne be-ing dis-con-nec-ted met her ears. Her wa-ve-ring hand re-ac-hed out and thum-ped down the re-ce-iver with an angry mo-ti-on.

'Inconsideration,' she mut-te-red, thud-ding back on her pil-low. Al-re-ady her in-firm back ac-hed from the ef-fort of sit-ting.

She for-ced out a we-ary bre-ath. Now she'd ha-ve to suf-fer thro-ugh the who-le tor-men-ting pro-cess of go-ing to sle-ep aga-in - the com-po-sing of jaded musc-les, the ig-no-ring of ab-ra-si-ve pa-in in her legs, the end-less, frust-ra-ting strug-gle to turn off the fa-ucet in her bra-in and ke-ep un-wan-ted tho-ughts from drip-ping. Oh, well, it had to be do-ne; Nur-se Phil-lips in-sis-ted on pro-per rest. El-va Ke-ene bre-at-hed slowly and de-e-ply, drew the co-vers to her chin and la-bo-ured ho-pe-ful-ly for sle-ep.

In va-in.

Her eyes ope-ned and, tur-ning her fa-ce to the win-dow, she watc-hed the storm mo-ve off on light-ning legs. *Why can't I sle-ep*, she fret-ted, *why must I al-ways lie he-re awa-ke li-ke this?*

She knew the ans-wer wit-ho-ut ef-fort. When a li-fe was dull, the smal-lest ele-ment ad-ded se-emed un-na-tu-ral-ly int-ri-gu-ing. And li-fe for Miss Ke-ene was the sorry pat-tern of lying flat' or be-ing prop-ped on pil-lows, re-ading bo-oks which Nur-se Phil-lips bro-ught from the town lib-rary, get-ting no-urish-ment, rest, me-di-ca-ti-on, lis-te-ning to her tiny ra-dio - and wa-iting, *wa-iting* for so-met-hing dif-fe-rent to hap-pen.

Like the te-lep-ho-ne call that wasn't a call.

There hadn't even be-en the so-und of a re-ce-iver rep-la-ced in its crad-le. Miss Ke-ene didn't un-ders-tand that. Why wo-uld an-yo-ne call her exc-han-ge and then lis-ten si-lently whi-le she sa-id 'Hel-lo,' over and over aga-in? *Had* it ac-tu-al-ly be-en an-yo-ne cal-ling?

What she sho-uld ha-ve do-ne, she re-ali-sed then, was to ke-ep lis-te-ning un-til the ot-her per-son ti-red of the joke and put down the re-ce-iver. What she sho-uld ha-ve do-ne was to spe-ak out for-ce-ful-ly abo-ut the in-con-si-de-ra-ti-on of a pran-kish call to a crip-pled ma-iden lady, in the mid-dle of a stormy night. Then, if the-re *had* be-en so-me-one lis-te-ning, who-ever it was wo-uld ha-ve be-en pro-per-ly chas-te-ned by her angry words and...

'Well, of co-ur-se.'

She sa-id it alo-ud in the dark-ness, punc-tu-ating the sen-ten-ce with a cluck of so-mew-hat re-li-eved dis-gust. Of co-ur-se, the te-lep-ho-ne was out of or-der. So-me-one had tri-ed to con-tact her, per-haps Nur-se Phil-lips to see if she was all right. But the ot-her end of the li-ne had bro-ken down in so-me way, al-lo-wing her pho-ne to ring but no ver-bal com-mu-ni-ca-ti-on to be ma-de. Well, of co-ur-se, that was the ca-se.

Miss Ke-ene nod-ded on-ce and clo-sed her eyes gently. *Now to sle-ep*, she tho-ught. Far away, be-yond the co-unty, the storm cle-ared its murky thro-at. *I ho-pe no one is wor-rying*, El-va Ke-ene tho-ught, *that wo-uld be too bad*.

She was thin-king that when the te-lep-ho-ne rang aga-in.

There, she tho-ught, *they are trying to re-ach me aga-in*. She re-ac-hed out hur-ri-edly in the dark-ness, fumb-led un-til she felt the re-ce-iver, then pul-led it to her ear.

'Hello,' sa-id Miss Ke-ene.

Silence.

Her thro-at cont-rac-ted. She knew what was wrong, of co-ur-se, but she didn't li-ke it, no, not at all.

'Hello?' she sa-id ten-ta-ti-vely, not yet cer-ta-in that she was was-ting bre-ath.

There was no reply. She wa-ited a mo-ment, then spo-ke a third ti-me, a lit-tle im-pa-ti-ent now, lo-udly, her shrill vo-ice rin-ging in the dark bed-ro-om. *Hel-lo!*

Nothing. Miss Ke-ene had the sud-den ur-ge to fling, the re-ce-iver away. She for-ced down that cu-ri-o-us ins-tinct - no, she must wa-it; wa-it and lis-ten to he-ar if an-yo-ne hung up the pho-ne on the ot-her end of the li-ne.

So she wa-ited.

The bed-ro-om was very qu-i-et now, but El-va Ke-ene kept stra-ining to he-ar; eit-her the so-und of a re-ce-iver go-ing down or the buzz which usu-al-ly fol-lows. Her chest ro-se and fell in de-li-ca-te lurc-hes, she clo-sed her eyes in con-cent-ra-ti-on, then ope-ned them aga-in and blin-ked at the dark-ness. The-re was no so-und from the te-lep-ho-ne; not a click, not a buzz, not a so-und of so-me-one put-ting down a re-ce-iver.

'Hello!' she cri-ed sud-denly, then pus-hed away the re-ce-iver.

She mis-sed her tar-get. The re-ce-iver drop-ped and thum-ped on-ce on the rug. Miss Ke-ene ner-vo-usly clic-ked on the lamp, win-cing as the lep-ro-us bulb light fil-led her eyes. Qu-ickly, she lay on her si-de and tri-ed to re-ach the si-lent, vo-ice-less te-lep-ho-ne.

But she co-uld'n't stretch far eno-ugh and crip-pled legs pre-ven-ted her from ri-sing. Her thro-at tigh-te-ned. My God, must she le-ave it the-re all night, si-lent and mystif-ying.

Remembering then, she re-ac-hed out ab-ruptly and pres-sed the crad-le arm. On the flo-or, the re-ce-iver clic-ked, then be-gan to buzz nor-mal-ly. El-va Ke-ene swal-lo-wed and drew in a sha-king bre-ath as she slum-ped back on her pil-low.

She threw out ho-oks of re-ason then and pul-led her-self back from pa-nic. *This is ri-di-cu-lo-us, she tho-ught, get-ting up-set over such a tri-vi-al and easily exp-la-ined in-ci-dent. It was the storm, the night, the way in which I'd be-en choc-ked from sle-ep. (What was it that had awa-ke-ned me?) AH the-se things pi-led on the mo-un-ta-in of te-eth-grin-ding mo-no-tony that's my li-fe. Yes, it was bad, very bad.* But it wasn't the in-ci-dent that was bad. It was her re-ac-ti-on to it.

Miss El-va Ke-en num-bed her-self to furt-her pre-mo-ni-ti-ons. *I shall sle-ep now'* she or-de-red her body with a pe-tu-lant sha-ke. She lay very still and re-la-xed. From the flo-or she co-uld he-ar the te-lep-ho-ne buz-zing li-ke the dro-ne of far-off be-es. She ig-no-red it.

Early the next mor-ning, af-ter Nur-se Phil-lips had ta-ken away the bre-ak-fast dis-hes, El-va Ke-en cal-led the te-lep-ho-ne com-pany.

'This is Miss El-va,' she told the ope-ra-tor.

'Oh, yes, Miss El-va,' sa-id the ope-ra-tor, a Miss Finch. 'Can I help you?'

'Last night my te-lep-ho-ne rang twi-ce,' sa-id El-va Ke-ene. 'But when I ans-we-red it, no one spo-ke. And I didn't he-ar any re-ce-iver drop. I didn't even he-ar a di-al to-ne - just si-len-ce.'

'Well, I'll tell you, Miss El-va,' sa-id the che-ery vo-ice of Miss Finch, 'that storm last night just abo-ut ru-ined half our ser-vi-ce. We're be-ing flo-oded with calls abo-ut knoc-ked down li-nes and bad con-nec-ti-ons. I'd say you're pretty lucky yo-ur pho-ne is wor-king at all.'

'Then you think it was pro-bably a bad con-nec-ti-on,' promp-ted Miss Ke-ene, 'ca-used by the storm?'

'Oh, yes, Miss El-va, that's all.'

'Do you think it will hap-pen aga-in?'

'Oh, it *may*,' sa-id Miss Finch. 'It *may*. I re-al-ly co-uld'n't tell you, Miss El-va. But if it do-es hap-pen aga-in, you just call me and then I'll ha-ve one of our men check on it.'

'All right,' sa-id Miss El-va. 'Thank you, de-ar.'

She lay on her pil-lows all mor-ning in a re-la-xed tor-por. *It gi-ves one a sa-tis-fi-ed fe-eling, she tho-ught, to sol-ve a mystery, slight as it is. It had be-en a ter-rib-le storm that ca-used the bad con-nec-ti-on. And no won-der when it had even knoc-ked down the an-ci-ent oak-tree be-si-de the ho-use. That was the no-ise that had awa-ke-ned me of co-ur-se, and a pity it was that the de-ar tree had fal-len. How it sha-ded the ho-use in hot sum-mer months. Oh, well, I sup-po-se I sho-uld be gra-te-ful, she tho-ught, that the tree fell ac-ross the ro-ad and not ac-ross the ho-use.*

The day pas-sed une-vent-ful-ly, an amal-gam of eating, re-ading An-ge-la Thir-kell and the ma-il (two throw-away ad-ver-ti-se-ments and the light bill), plus bri-ef chats with Nur-se Phil-lips. In-de-ed,

ro-uti-ne had set in so pro-perly that when the te-lep-ho-ne rang early that eve-ning, she pic-ked it up wit-ho-ut even thin-king.

'Hello,' she sa-id.

Silence.

It bro-ught her back for a se-cond. Then she cal-led Nur-se Phil-lips.

'What is it?' as-ked the portly wo-man as she trud-ged ac-ross the bed-ro-om rug.

'This is what I was tel-ling you abo-ut,' sa-id El-va Ke-ene, hol-ding out the re-ce-iver. 'Lis-ten!'

Nurse Phil-lips to-ok the re-ce-iver in her hand and pus-hed back grey locks with the ear-pi-ece. Her pla-cid fa-ce re-ma-ined pla-cid. 'The-re's no-body the-re,' she ob-ser-ved.

'That's right,' sa-id Miss Ke-ene. 'That's right. Now you just lis-ten and see if you can he-ar a re-ce-iver be-ing put down. I'm su-re you won't.'

Nurse Phil-lips lis-te-ned for a mo-ment, then sho-ok her he-ad. 'I don't he-ar anyt-hing,' she sa-id and hung up.

'Oh, wa-it!' Miss Ke-ene sa-id hur-ri-edly. 'Oh, well, it do-esn't mat-ter,' she ad-ded, se-e-ing it was al-re-ady down. 'If it hap-pens too of-ten, I'll just call Miss Finch and they'll ha-ve a re-pa-ir-man check on it.'

'I see,' Nur-se Phil-lips sa-id and went back to the li-ving ro-om and Fa-ith Bald-win.

Nurse Phil-lips left the ho-use at eight, le-aving on the bed-si-de tab-le, as usu-al, an ap-ple, a co-okie, a glass of wa-ter and the bot-tle of pills. She puf-fed up the pil-lows be-hind Miss Ke-ene's fra-gi-le back, mo-ved the ra-dio and te-lep-ho-ne a lit-tle clo-ser to the bed, lo-ok-ed aro-und comp-la-cently, then tur-ned for the do-or, sa-ying, 'I'll see you to-mor-row.'

It was fif-te-en mi-nu-tes la-ter when the te-lep-ho-ne rang. Miss Ke-ene pic-ked up the re-ce-iver qu-ickly. She didn't bot-her sa-ying hel-lo this ti-me - she just lis-te-ned.

At first it was the sa-me - an ab-so-lu-te si-len-ce. She lis-te-ned a mo-ment mo-re, im-pa-ti-ently. Then, on the ver-ge of rep-la-cing the re-ce-iver, she he-ard the so-und. Her che-ek twitc-hed, she jer-ked the te-lep-ho-ne back to her ear.

'Hello?' she as-ked ten-sely.

A mur-mu-ring, a dull hum-ming, a rust-ling so-und - what was it? Miss Ke-ene shut her *eyes* tightly, lis-te-ning hard, but she co-uld'n't iden-tify the so-und; it was too soft, too un-de-fi-ned, it de-vi-ated from a sort of whi-ning vib-ra-ti-on... to an es-ca-pe of air... to a bub-bling si-bi-lan-ce. *It must be the so-und of the con-nec-ti-on*, she tho-ught, *it must be the te-le-pho-ne it-self ma-king the no-ise. Per-haps a wi-re blo-wing in the wind so-mew-he-re, per-haps...*

She stop-ped thin-king then. She stop-ped bre-at-hing. The so-und had ce-ased. On-ce mo-re, si-len-ce rang in her ears. She co-uld fe-el the he-art-be-ats stumb-ling in her chest aga-in, the walls of her thro-at clo-sing in. *Oh, this is ri-di-cu-lo-us*, she told her-self. *I've al-re-ady be-en thro-ugh this - it was the storm, the storm!*

She lay back on her pil-lows, the re-ce-iver pres-sed to her ear, ner-vo-us bre-aths fal-te-ring from her nost-rils. She co-uld fe-el un-re-aso-ning dre-ad ri-se li-ke a ti-de wit-hin her, des-pi-te all at-tempts at sa-ne de-duc-ti-on. Her mind kept slip-ping off the glassy perch of re-ason; she kept fal-ling de-eper and de-eper.

Now she shud-de-red vi-olently as the so-unds be-gan aga-in. They co-uld'n't *pos-sibly* be hu-man so-unds, she knew, and yet the-re was so-met-hing abo-ut them, so-me inf-lec-ti-on, so-me al-most iden-ti-fi-ab-le ar-ran-ge-ment of...

Her lips sho-ok and a whi-ne be-gan to ho-ver in her thro-at. But she co-uld'n't put down the te-lep-ho-ne, she simply co-uld'n't. The so-unds held her hypno-ti-sed. Whet-her they we-re the ri-se and fall of the wind or the mut-te-ring of fa-ulty mec-ha-nisms, she didn't know, but they wo-uld not let her go.

'Hello ?' she mur-mu-red, sha-kily.

The so-unds ro-se in vo-lu-me. They rat-tled and sho-ok in her bra-in.

'Hello!' she scre-amed.

'H-e-l~l-o,' ans-we-red a vo-ice on the te-lep-ho-ne. Then Miss Ke-ene fa-in-ted de-ad away.

'Are you cer-ta-in it was so-me-one sa-ying *hel-lo?*' Miss Finch as-ked Miss El-va over the te-lep-ho-ne. 'It might ha-ve be-en the con-nec-ti-on, you know.'

'I tell you it was a *man!*' a sha-king El-va Ke-ene scre-ec-hed. 'It was the sa-me man who kept lis-te-ning to me say hel-lo over and over and over aga-in wit-ho-ut ans-we-ring me back. The sa-me one who ma-de ter-rib-le no-ises over the te-lep-ho-ne!'

Miss Finch cle-ared her thro-at po-li-tely. 'Well, I'll ha-ve a man check yo-ur li-ne, Miss El-va, as so-on as he can. Of co-ur-se, the men are very busy now with all the re-pa-irs on storm wrec-ka-ge, but as so-on as it's pos-sib-le...'

'And what am I go-ing to do if this - this *per-son* calls aga-in?'

'You just hang up on him, Miss El-va.'

'But he ke-eps cal-ling!'

'Well.' Miss Finch's af-fa-bi-lity wa-ve-red. 'Why don't you find out who he is, Miss El-va? If you can do that, why, we can ta-ke im-me-di-ate ac-ti-on, you see and

After she'd hung up, Miss Ke-ene lay aga-inst the pil-lows ten-sely, lis-te-ning to Nur-se Phil-lips sing husky lo-ve songs over the bre-ak-fast dis-hes. Miss Finch didn't be-li-eve her story, that was ap-pa-rent. Miss Finch tho-ught she was a ner-vo-us old wo-man fal-ling prey to ima-gi-na-ti-on. Well, Miss Finch wo-uld find out dif-fe-rently.

'I'll just ke-ep cal-ling her and cal-ling her un-til she *do-es,*' she sa-id ir-ri-tably to Nur-se Phil-lips just be-fo-re af-ter-no-on nap.

'You just do that,' sa-id Nur-se Phil-lips. 'Now ta-ke yo-ur pill and lie down,'

Miss Ke-ene lay in grumpy si-len-ce, her ve-in-rut-ted hands knot-ted at her si-des. It was ten af-ter two and, ex-cept for the bub-bling of Nur-se Phil-lips's front ro-om sno-res, the ho-use was si-lent in the Oc-to-ber af-ter-no-on. *It ma-kes me angry,* tho-ught El-va Ke-ene, *that no one will ta-ke this se-ri-o-usly. Well - her thin lips pres-sed to-get-her - the next ti-me the te-lep-ho-ne rings I'll ma-ke su-re that Nur-se Phil-lips lis-tens un-til she do-es he-ar so-met-hing.*

Exactly then the pho-ne rang.

Miss Ke-ene felt a cold tre-mor la-ce down her body. Even in the day-light with sun-be-ams speck-ling her flo-we-red co-ver-let, the stri-dent rin-ging frigh-te-ened her. She dug por-ce-la-in te-eth in-to her lo-wer lip to ste-ady it. *Shall I ans-wer it?* the qu-es-ti-on ca-me and then, be-fo-re she co-uld even think to ans-wer, her hand pic-ked up the re-ce-iver. A de-ep rag-ged bre-ath; she drew the pho-ne slowly to her ear. She sa-id, 'Hel-lo?'

The vo-ice ans-we-red back, 'Hel-lo?' - hol-low and ina-ni-ma-te.

'Who is this?' Miss Ke-ene as-ked, trying to ke-ep her thro-at cle-ar.

'Hello?'

'Who's cal-ling, ple-ase?'

'Hello?'

'Is an-yo-ne the-re!'

'Hello?'

'Please ... !'

'Hello?'

Miss Ke-ene jam-med down the re-ce-iver and lay on her bed tremb-ling vi-olently, unab-le to catch her bre-ath. *What is it,* beg-ged her mind, *what in God's na-me is it?'*

'Margaret!' she cri-ed. 'Mar-ga-ret!'

In the front ro-om she he-ard Nur-se Phil-lips grunt ab-ruptly and then start co-ug-hing.

'Margaret, ple-ase...!'

Elva Ke-ene he-ard the lar-ge bo-di-ed wo-man ri-se to her fe-et and trud-ge ac-ross the li-ving ro-om flo-or. *I must com-po-se my-sell,* she told her-self, flut-te-ring hands to her fe-ve-red che-eks. *I must tell her exactly what hap-pe-ned, exactly.*

'What is it?' grumb-led the nur-se. 'Do-es yo-ur sto-mach ac-he?'

Miss Ke-ene's thro-at drew in ta-utly as she swal-lo-wed. 'He just cal-led aga-in,' she whis-pe-red.

'Who?'

'That man!'

'What Man?'

'The one who ke-eps cal-ling!' Miss Ke-ene cri-ed. 'He ke-eps sa-ying hel-lo over and over aga-in. That's all he says - hel-lo, hel-lo, hel -'

'Now stop this,' Nur-se Phil-lips scol-ded sto-lidly. 'Tie back and...'

'I don't *want* to lie back!' she sa-id fren-zi-edly. 'I want to know who this ter-rib-le per-son is who ke-eps frigh-te-ning me!'

'Now don't work yo-ur-self in-to a sta-te,' war-ned Nur-se Phil-lips. 'You know how up-set yo-ur sto-mach gets.'

Miss Ke-ene be-gan to sob bit-terly. 'I'm af-ra-id. I'm af-ra-id of him. Why do-es he ke-ep cal-ling me?'

Nurse Phil-lips sto-od by the bed lo-oking down in bo-vi-ne iner-tia. 'Now, what did Miss Finch tell you?' she sa-id softly.

Miss Ke-ene's sha-king lips co-uld not fra-me the ans-wer.

'Did she tell you it was the con-nec-ti-on?' the nur-se so-ot-hed. 'Did she?'

'But it isn't! It's a man, a *man*!'

Nurse Phil-lips ex-pel-led a pa-ti-ent bre-ath. 'If it's a man,' she sa-id, 'then just hang up. You don't ha-ve to talk to him. Just hang up. Is that so hard to do?'

Miss Ke-ene shut te-ar-bright eyes and for-ced her lips in-to a twitc-hing li-ne. In her mind the man's sub-du-ed and list-less vo-ice kept ec-ho-ing. Over and over, the inf-lec-ti-on ne-ver al-te-ring, the qu-es-ti-on ne-ver de-fer-ring to her rep-li-es - just re-pe-ating it-self end-les-sly in do-le-ful apathy. *Hel-lo? Hel-lo?* Ma-king her shud-der to the he-art.

'Look,' Nur-se Phil-lips spo-ke.

She ope-ned her eyes and saw the blur-red ima-ge of the nur-se put-ting the re-ce-iver down on the tab-le.

'There,' Nur-se Phil-lips sa-id, 'no-body can call you now. You le-ave it that way. If you ne-ed anyt-hing all you ha-ve to do is di-al. Now isn't that all right? Isn't it?'

Miss Ke-ene lo-oked ble-akly at the nur-se. Then, af-ter a mo-ment, she nod-ded on-ce. Grud-gingly.

She lay in the dark bed-ro-om, the so-und of the di-al to-ne hum-ming in her ear; ke-eping her awa-ke. *Or am I just tel-ling myself that?* she tho-ught. *Is it re-al-ly ke-eping me awa-ke? Didn't I sle-ep that first night with the re-ce-iver off the ho-ok? No, it wasn't the so-und, it was so-met-hing el-se.*

She clo-sed her *eyes* ob-du-ra-tely. *I won't lis-ten*, she told her-self, *I just won't lis-ten to it*. She drew in tremb-ling bre-aths of the night. But the dark-ness wo-uld not fill her bra-in and blot away the so-und.

Miss Ke-ene felt aro-und on the bed un-til she fo-und her bed jac-ket. She dra-ped it over the re-ce-iver, swat-hing its black smo-oth-ness in wo-ol-ly turns. Then she sank back aga-in, stern bre-at-hed and ta-ut. *I will sle-ep*, she de-man-ded, *I will sle-ep*.

She he-ard it still.

Her body grew ri-gid and ab-ruptly, she un-fo-l-ded the re-ce-iver from its thick wrap-pings and slam-med it down ang-rily on the crad-le. Si-len-ce fil-led the ro-om with de-li-ci-o-us pe-ace. Miss Ke-ene fell back on the pil-low with a fe-eb-le gro-an. *Now to sle-ep*, she tho-ught.

And the te-lep-ho-ne rang.

Her bre-ath snuf-fed off. The rin-ging se-emed to per-me-ate the dark-ness, sur-ro-un-ding her in a clo-ud of ear-lan-cing vib-ra-ti-on. She re-ac-hed out to put the re-ce-iver on the tab-le aga-in, then jer-ked her hand back with a gasp, re-ali-sing she wo-uld he-ar the man's vo-ice aga-in.

Her thro-at pul-sed ner-vo-usly. *What I'll do*, she plan-ned, *what I'll do is ta-ke off the re-ce-iver very qu-ickly - very qu-ickly - and put it down, then push down on the arm and cut off the li-ne. Yes, that's what I'll do!*

She ten-sed her-self and spre-ad her hand out ca-uti-o-ously un-til the rin-ging pho-ne was un-der it. Then, bre-ath held, she fol-lo-wed her plan, slas-hed off the ring, re-ac-hed qu-ickly for the crad-le arm...

And stop-ped, fro-zen, as the man's vo-ice re-ac-hed out thro-ugh the dark-ness to her ears. Whe-re are you?' he as-ked. 'I want to talk to you.'

Claws of ice clam-ped down on Miss Ke-ene's shud-de-ring chest. She lay pet-ri-fi-ed, unab-le to cut off the so-und of the man's dull, exp-res-si-on-less vo-ice, as-king, Whe-re are you? I want to talk to you.'

A so-und from Miss Ke-ene's thro-at, thin and flut-te-ring.

And the man sa-id, 'Whe-re are you? I want to talk to you.'

'No, no,' sob-bed Miss Ke-ene.

'Where are you? I want to...'

She pres-sed the crad-le arm with ta-ut whi-te fin-gers. She held it down for fif-te-en mi-nu-tes be-fo-re let-ting it go.

'I tell you I won't ha-ve it!'

Miss Ke-ene's vo-ice was a fra-yed rib-bon of so-und. She sat inf-le-xibly on the bed, stra-ining her frigh-te-ned an-ger thro-ugh the mo-uth-pi-ecce vents.

'You say you hang up on this man and he still calls?' Miss Finch in-qu-ired.

'I've *ex-p-la-ined* all that!' El-va Ke-ene burst out. 'I had to le-ave the re-ce-iver off the pho-ne all night so he wo-uldn't call. And the buz-zing kept me awa-ke. I didn't get a *wink* of sle-ep! Now, I want this li-ne chec-ked, do you he-ar me? I want you to stop this ter-rib-le thing!'

Her eyes we-re li-ke hard, dark be-ads. The pho-ne al-most slip-ped from her pal-si-ed fin-gers.

'All right, Miss El-va,' sa-id the ope-ra-tor. 'I'll send a man out to-day.'

Thank you, de-ar, thank you,' Miss Ke-ene sa-id. 'Will you call me when

Her vo-ice stop-ped ab-ruptly as a clic-king so-und star-ted on the te-lep-ho-ne.

'The li-ne is busy,' she an-no-un-ced.

The clic-king stop-ped and she went on. To re-pe-at, will you let me know when you find out who this ter-rib-le per-son is V

'Surely, Miss El-va, su-rely. And I'll ha-ve a man check yo-ur te-lep-ho-ne this af-ter-no-on. You're at 127 Mill La-ne, aren't you?'

That's right, de-ar. You will see to it, won't you?'

'I pro-mi-se fa-ith-ful-ly, Miss El-va. First thing to-day.'

Thank you, de-ar,' Miss Ke-ene sa-id, dra-wing in re-li-eved bre-ath.

There we-re no calls from the man all that mor-ning, no-ne that af-ter-no-on. Her tight-ness slowly be-gan to lo-osen. She pla-yed a ga-me of crib-ba-ge with Nur-se Phil-lips and even ma-na-ged a lit-tle la-ugh-ter. It was com-for-ting to know that the te-lep-ho-ne com-pany was wor-king on it now. They'd so-on catch that aw-ful man and bring back her pe-ace of mind.

But when two o'clock ca-me, then three o'clock - and still no re-pa-ir-man at her ho-use - Miss Ke-ene be-gan wor-rying aga-in.

'What's the *mat-ter* with that girl?' she sa-id pet-tishly. 'She pro-mi-sed me fa-ith-ful-ly that a man wo-uld co-me this af-ter-no-on.'

'He'll be he-re,' Nur-se Phil-lips sa-id. 'Be pa-ti-ent.'

Four o'clock ar-ri-ved and no man. Miss Ke-ene wo-uld not play crib-ba-ge, re-ad her bo-ok or lis-ten to her ra-dio. What had be-gun to lo-osen was tigh-te-ning aga-in, inc-re-asing mi-nu-te by mi-nu-te un-til at fi-ve o'clock, when the te-lep-ho-ne rang, her hand spur-ted out ri-gidly from the fla-ring sle-eve of her bed jac-ket and clam-ped down li-ke a claw on the re-ce-iver. *If the man spe-aks*, ra-ced her mind, *if he spe-aks I'll scre-am un-til my he-art stops*.

She pul-led the re-ce-iver to her ear. 'Hel-lo?'

'Miss El-va, this is Miss Finch.'

Her *eyes* clo-sed and bre-ath flut-te-red thro-ugh her lips. 'Yes,' she sa-id.

'About tho-se calls you say you've be-en re-ce-iving.'

'Yes?' In her mind, Miss Finch's words cut-ting - 'tho-se calls you *say* you've be-en re-ce-iving.'

'We sent a man out to tra-ce them,' con-ti-nu-ed Miss Finch. 'I ha-ve his re-port he-re.'

Miss Ke-ene ca-ught her bre-ath. 'Yes?'

'He co-uld'n't find anyt-hing.'

Elva Ke-ene didn't spe-ak. Her grey he-ad lay mo-ti-on-less on the pil-low, the re-ce-iver pres-sed to her ear.

'He says he tra-ced the - the dif-fi-culty to a fal-len wi-re on the ed-ge of town.'

'Fallen wi-re?'

Yes, Miss El-va.' Miss Finch did not so-und happy,

'You're tel-ling me I didn't he-ar anyt-hing?'

Miss Finch's vo-ice was firm. 'The-re's no way an-yo-ne co-uld ha-ve pho-ned you from that lo-ca-ti-on,' she sa-id.

'I tell you a *man* cal-led me!'

Miss Finch was si-lent and Miss Ke-ene's fin-gers tigh-te-ned con-vul-si-vely on the re-ce-iver.

'There must be a pho-ne the-re,' she in-sis-ted. 'The-re must be *so-me* way that man was ab-le to call me.'

'Miss El-va, the wi-re is lying on the gro-und.' She pa-used. 'To-mor-row, our crew will put it back up and you won't be...'

'There *has* to be a way he co-uld call me!'

'Miss El-va, the-re's no one out the-re!'

'Out whe-re, *whe-re*?'

The ope-ra-tor sa-id, 'Miss El-va, it's the ce-me-tery.'

In the black si-len-ce of her bed-ro-om, a crip-pled ma-iden lady lay wa-iting. Her nur-se wo-uld not re-ma-in for the night; her nur-se had pat-ted her and scol-ded her and ig-no-red her.

She was wa-iting for a te-lep-ho-ne call.

She co-uld ha-ve dis-con-nec-ted the pho-ne, but she had not the will. She lay the-re wa-iting, wa-iting, thin-king.

Of the si-len-ce - of ears that had not he-ard, se-eking to he-ar aga-in. Of so-unds bub-ling and mut-te-ring - the first stumb-ling at-tempts at spe-ech by one who had not spo-ken - how long? Of - *hel-lo ? hel-lo ?* - first gre-eting by one long si-lent. Of - *whe-re are you ?* Of (that which ma-de her lie so ri-gidly) the clic-king and the ope-ra-tor spe-aking her ad-dress. Of -

The te-lep-ho-ne rin-ging.

A pa-use. Rin-ging. The rust-le of a night-gown in the dark.

The rin-ging stop-ped.

Listening.

And the te-lep-ho-ne slip-ping from whi-te fin-gers, the *eyes* sta-ring, the thin he-art-be-ats slowly pul-sing.

Outside, the cric-ket-rat-tling night.

Inside, the words still so-un-ding in her bra-in - gi-ving ter-rib-le me-aning to the he-avy, cho-king si-len-ce.

'Hello, Miss El-va. I'll be right over.'

5 - MANTAGE

FADEOUT.

The old man had suc-cum-bed. From its mo-vie he-aven, an et-he-re-al cho-ir pa-e-aned. Amid ro-iling pink clo-uds they sang: *A Mo-ment or Fo-re-ver*. It was the tit-le of the pic-tu-re. Lights

blin-ked on. The vo-ices stop-ped ab-ruptly, the cur-ta-in was lo-we-red, the the-at-re bo-omed with p.a. re-so-nan-ce; a qu-ar-tet sin-ging *A Mo-ment or Fo-re-ver* on the Dec-ca la-bel. Eight hund-red tho-usand co-pi-es a month.

Owen Crow-ley sat slum-ped in his se-at, legs cros-sed, arms slackly fol-ded. He sta-red at the cur-ta-in. Aro-und him, pe-op-le sto-od and stretc-hed, yaw-ned, chat-ted, la-ug-hed. Owen sat the-re, sta-ning. Next to him, Ca-ro-le ro-se and drew on her su-e-de jac-ket. Softly, she was sin-ging with the re-cord, "*Yo-ur mind is the clock that ticks away a mo-ment or fo-re-ver.*"

She stop-ped. "Ho-ney?"

Owen grun-ted. "Are you co-ming?" she as-ked.

He sig-hed. "I sup-po-se." He drag-ged up his jac-ket and fol-lo-wed her as she ed-ged to-ward the ais-le, sho-es crunc-hing over pa-le pop-corn buds and candy wrap-pers. They re-ac-hed the ais-le and Ca-ro-le to-ok his arm.

"Well?" she as-ked. "What did you think?"

Owen had the bur-de-ning imp-res-sion that she had as-ked him that qu-es-ti-on a mil-li-on ti-mes; that the-ir re-la-ti-ons-hip con-sis-ted of an in-fi-ni-tu-de of mo-vie-go-ing and scant mo-re. Was it only two ye-ars sin-ce they'd met; fi-ve months sin-ce the-ir en-ga-ge-ment? It se-emed, mo-men-ta-rily, li-ke the dre-ari-est of eons.

"What's the-re to think?" he sa-id. "It's just anot-her mo-vie."

"I tho-ught you'd li-ke it," Ca-ro-le sa-id, "be-ing a wri-ter yo-ur-self."

He trud-ged ac-ross the lobby with her. They we-re the last ones out. The snack co-un-ter was dar-ke-ned, the so-da mac-hi-ne stil-led of tech-ni-co-lo-red bub-blings. The only so-und was the whis-per of the-ir sho-es ac-ross the car-pe-ting, then the click of them as they hit the outer lobby.

"What is it, Owen?" Ca-ro-le as-ked when he'd go-ne a block wit-ho-ut sa-ying a word.

"They ma-ke me mad," he sa-id.

"Who do-es?" Ca-ro-le as-ked.

"The damn stu-pid pe-op-le who ma-ke tho-se damn stu-pid mo-vi-es," he sa-id.

"Why?" she as-ked.

"Because of the way they gloss over everyt-hing."

"What do you me-an?"

"This wri-ter the pic-tu-re was abo-ut," sa-id Owen. "He was a lot li-ke I am; ta-len-ted and with plenty of dri-ve. But it to-ok him al-most ten ye-ars to get things go-ing. *Ten ye-ars*. So what do-es the stu-pid pic-tu-re do? Glos-ses over them in a few mi-nu-tes. A co-up-le of sce-nes of him sit-ting at his desk, lo-oking bro-ody, a co-up-le of clock shots, a few trays of mas-hed-out butts, so-me empty cof-fee cups, a pi-le of ma-nusc-ripts. So-me bald-he-aded pub-lis-hers with ci-gars sha-king the-ir he-ads no at him, so-me fe-et wal-king on the si-de-walk; and that's it. Ten ye-ars of hard la-bo-ur. It ma-kes me mad."

"But they ha-ve to do that, Owen," Ca-ro-le sa-id. "That's the only way they ha-ve of sho-wing it."

"Then li-fe sho-uld be li-ke that too," he sa-id.

"Oh, you wo-uldn't li-ke that," she sa-id.

"You're wrong. I wo-uld," he sa-id. "Why sho-uld I strug-gle ten ye-ars or mo-re on my wri-ting? Why not get it over with in a co-up-le of mi-nu-tes?"

"It wo-uldn't be the sa-me," she sa-id.

"That's for su-re," he sa-id.

An ho-ur and forty mi-nu-tes la-ter, Owen sat on the cot in his fur-nis-hed ro-om sta-ning at the tab-le on which sat his typew-ri-ter and the half-comp-le-ted ma-nusc-ript of his third no-vel *And Now Go-mor-rah*.

Why not in-de-ed? The idea had de-fi-ni-te ap-pe-al. He knew that, so-me-day, he'd suc-ce-ed. It had to be that way. Ot-her-wi-se, what was he wor-king so hard for? But that tran-si-ti-on, that was the thing. That in-de-fi-ni-te tran-si-ti-on bet-we-en strug-gle and suc-cess. How won-der-ful if that part co-uld be con-den-sed, ab-bre-vi-ated.

Glossed over.

"You know what I wish?" he as-*ked* the in-*tent* yo-*ung* man in the mir-*ror*.

"No, what?" as-*ked* the man.

"I wish," sa-*id* Owen Crow-*ley*, "that li-*fe* co-*uld* be as simp-*le* as a mo-*vie*. All the drud-*gery* set asi-*de* in a few flas-*hes* of we-*ary* lo-*oks*, di-*sap*-*po*-*int*-*ments*, cof-*fee* cups and mid-*night* oil, trays of butts, no's and wal-*king* fe-*et*. Why not?"

On the bu-*re*-*au*, so-*met*-*hing* clic-*ked*. Owen lo-*oked* down at his clock. It was 2:43 a.m.

Oh, well. He shrug-*ged* and went to bed. To-*mor*-*row*, anot-*her* fi-*ve* pa-*ges*, anot-*her* night's work at the toy fac-*tory*.

A ye-*ar* and se-*ven* months went by and not-*hing* hap-*pe*-*ned*. Then, one mor-*ning*, Owen wo-*ke* up, went down to the ma-*il* box and the-*re* it was.

*We are happy to in-*form* you that we want to pub-*lish* yo-*ur* no-*vel* Dre-*am* Wit-*hin* a Dre-*am*.*

"Carole! Ca-*ro*-*le*!" He po-*un*-*ded* on her apart-*ment* do-*or*, he-*art* drum-*ming* from the half-*mi*-*le* sprint from the sub-*way*, the le-*aping* as-*cent* of the sta-*irs*. "*Ca-*ro*-*le*!*"

She jer-*ked* open the do-*or*, fa-*ce* stric-*ken*. "Owen, what-*?*" she be-*gan*, then cri-*ed* out, start-*led*, as he swept her from the flo-*or* and whir-*led* her aro-*und*, the hem of her night-*gown* whip-*ping* sil-*kenly*. "Owen, what is it?" she gas-*ped*.

"Look! Lo-*ok*!" He put her down on the co-*uch* and, kne-*eling*, held out the crump-*led* let-*ter* to her.

"Oh, Owen!"

They clung to each ot-*her* and she la-*ug*-*hed*, she cri-*ed*. He felt the un-*bo*-*und* soft-*ness* of her pres-*ing* at him thro-*ugh* the filmy silk, the mo-*ist* cus-*hi*-*oning* of her lips aga-*inst* his che-*ek*, her warm te-*ars* trick-*ling* down his fa-*ce*. "Oh, Owen. *Dar-*ling*!*"

She cup-*ped* his fa-*ce* with tremb-*ling* hands and kis-*sed* him; then whis-*pe*-*red*, "And you we-*re* wor-*ri*-*ed*."

"No mo-*re*," he sa-*id*. "No mo-*re*!"

The pub-*lis*-*her*'s of-*fi*-*ce* sto-*od* alo-*of*ly re-*gal* abo-*ve* the city; dra-*ped*, pa-*nel*-*led*, still. "If you'll sign he-*re*, Mr. Crow-*ley*," sa-*id* the edi-*tor*. Owen to-*ok* the pen.

*"Hurray! Hur-*roo*!"* He pol-*ka*-*ed* amid a deb-*ris* of cock-*ta*-*il* glas-*ses*, red-*eyed* oli-*ves*, squ-*as*-*hed* hors d'oe-*uv*-*res* and gu-*ests*. Who clap-*ped* and stam-*ped* and sho-*uted* and erec-*ted* mo-*nu*-*men*-*tal* fu-*ri*-*es* in the ne-*igh*-*bo*-*urs*' he-*arts*. Who flo-*wed* and bro-*ke* apart li-*ke* no-*isy* qu-*ick*-*sil*-*ver* thro-*ugh* the ro-*oms* and halls of Ca-*ro*-*le*'s apart-*ment*. Who de-*vo*-*ured* re-*gi*-*men*-*tal* ra-*ti*-*ons*. Who flus-*hed* away Ni-*aga*-*ra*'s of con-*ver*-*ted* al-*co*-*hol*. Who nuz-*zled* in a fog of ni-*co*-*ti*-*ne*. Who gamb-*led* on the fu-*tu*-*re* cen-*sus* in the dark and fur-*co*-*at*-*smel*-*ling* bed-*ro*-*om*.

Owen sprang. He how-*led*. "An In-*di*-*an* I am!" He grab-*bed* the la-*ug*-*hing* Ca-*ro*-*le* by her spil-*ling* ha-*ir*. "An In-*di*-*an* I am, I'll scalp you! No, I won't, I'll kiss you!" He did to wild ap-*pla*-*use* and whist-*les*. She clung to him, the-*ir* bo-*di*-*es* mo-*ul*-*ding*. The clap-*ping* was li-*ke* ra-*pid* fi-*re*. "And for an en-*co*-*re*!" he an-*no*-*un*-*ced*.

Laughter. Che-*ers*. Mu-*sic* po-*un*-*ding*. A gra-*ve*-*yard* of bot-*tles* on the sink. So-*und* and mo-*ve*-*ment*. Com-*mu*-*nity* sin-*ging*. Bed-*lam*. A po-*li*-*ce*-*man* at the do-*or*. "*Co-*me* in, co-*me* in, de-*fen*-*der* of the we-*al*!*" "Now, let's be ha-*ving* a lit-*tle* or-*der* he-*re*, the-*re*'s pe-*op*-*le* want to sle-*ep*."

Silence in the shamb-*les*. They sat to-*get*-*her* on the co-*uch*, watc-*hing* dawn cre-*ep* in ac-*ross* the sills, a night gow-*ned* Ca-*ro*-*le* clin-*ging* to him, half as-*le*-*ep*; Owen pres-*ing* his lips to her warm thro-*at* and fe-*eling*, be-*ne*-*ath* the sa-*tin* skin, the pul-*sing* of her blo-*od*.

*"I lo-*ve* you,*" whis-*pe*-*red* Ca-*ro*-*le*. Her lips, on his, wan-*ted*, to-*ok*. The elect-*ric* rust-*le* of her gown ma-*de* him shud-*der*. He brus-*hed* the straps and watc-*hed* them slit-*her* from the pa-*le* cur-*ving* of her sho-*ul*-*ders*. "Ca-*ro*-*le*, Ca-*ro*-*le*." Her hands we-*re* cat claws on his back.

The te-*lep*-*ho*-*ne* rang, rang. He ope-*ned* an eye. The-*re* was a he-*ated* pitch-*fork* fas-*te*-*ned* to the lid. As the lid mo-*ved* up it plun-*ged* the pitch-*fork* in-*to* his bra-*in*. "*Ooh!*" He win-*ced* his eyes shut and the ro-*om* was go-*ne*. "Go away," he mut-*te*-*red* to the rin-*ging*, rin-*ging*; to the cle-*at* sho-*ed*, squ-*are*-*dan*-*cing* gob-*lins* in his he-*ad*.

Across the void, a door opened and the ringing stopped. Owen sighed.

"Hello?" said Carole. "Oh. Yes, he's here."

He heard the crackle of her gown, the nudging of her fingers on his shoulder. "Owen," she said. "Wake up, darling."

The deep fall of pink-tipped flesh against transparent silk was what he saw. He reached but she went on. Her hand closed over his and drew him up. "The phone," she said.

"More," he said, pulling her against himself.

"The phone."

"Can wait," he said. His voice came muffled from her nape. "I'm breaking fast."

"Darling, the phone."

"Hello?" he said into the black receiver.

"This is Arthur Means, Mr. Crowley," said the voice.

"Yes!" There was an explosion in his brain but he kept on smiling anyway because it was the agent he'd called the day before.

"Can you make it for lunch?" asked Arthur Means.

Owen came back into the living room from showering. From the kitchen came the sound of Carole's slippers on linoleum, the sizzle of bacon, the dark odor of percolating coffee.

Owen stopped. He frowned at the couch where he'd been sleeping. How had he ended there? He'd been in bed with Carole.

The streets, by early morning, were a mystic lot. Manhattan after midnight was an island of intriguing silences, a vast archipelago of crocheting steel and stone. He walked between the silent citizens, his footsteps like the ticking of a bomb.

"Which will explode!" he cried. "*Explo-de!*" cried back the streets of shadowed walls. "Which will explode and throw my shrapnel words through all the world!"

Owen Crowley stopped. He flung out his arms and held the universe. "You're mine!" he yelled.

"*Mine,*" the echo came.

The room was silent as he shed his clothes. He settled on the cot with a happy sigh, crossed his legs and undid lace knots. What time was it? He looked over at the clock. 2:58 a.m.

Fifteen minutes since he'd made his wish.

He grunted in amusement as he dropped his shoe. Weird fancy, that. Yes, it was exactly fifteen minutes if you choose to ignore the one year, seven months and two days since he'd stood over there in his pyjamas, fumbling with a wish. Granted that, in thinking back, those nineteen months seemed quickly past; but not that quickly. If he wished to, he could tally up a reasonable itemization of every miserable day of them.

Owen Crowley chuckled. Weird fancy indeed. Well, it was the mind. The mind was a droll mechanism.

"Carole, let's get married!"

He might have struck her. She stood there, looking dazed.

"What?" she asked.

"*Married!*"

She stared at him. "You mean it?"

He slid his arms around her tightly. "Try me," he said.

"Oh, Owen." She clung to him a moment, then, abruptly, drew back her head and grinned.

"This," she said, "is not so sudden."

It was a white house, lost in summer foliage. The living room was large and cool and they stood together on the walnut floor, holding hands. Outside, leaves were rustling.

"Then by the authority vested in me," said Justice of the Peace Weaver, "by the sovereign state of Connecticut, I now pronounce you man and wife." He smiled. "You may kiss the bride," he said.

Their lips parted and he saw the tears glistening in her eyes.

"How do, Miz Crow-ley," he whis-pe-red.

The Bu-ick hum-med along the qu-i-et co-untry ro-ad. In-si-de, Ca-ro-le le-aned aga-*inst* her hus-band whi-le the ra-dio pla-yed, *A Mo-ment or Fo-re-ver*, ar-ran-ged for strings. "Re-mem-ber that?" he as-ked.

"Mmmm hmmm." She kis-sed his che-ek.

"Now whe-re," he won-de-red, "is that mo-tel the old man re-com-men-ded?"

"Isn't that it up ahe-ad?" she as-ked.

The ti-res crack-led on the gra-vel path, then stop-ped. "Owen, lo-ok," she sa-id. He la-ug-hed. *Al-do We-aver, Ma-na-ger*, re-ad the bot-tom li-ne of the rust-stre-aked wo-oden sign.

"Yes, brot-her Ge-or-ge, he mar-ri-es all the yo-ung folks ro-und abo-ut," sa-id Al-do We-aver as he led them to the-ir ca-bin and un-loc-ked the do-or. Then Al-do crunc-hed away and Ca-ro-le le-aned her back aga-*inst* the do-or un-til the lock clic-ked. In the qu-i-et ro-om, dim from tree sha-de, Ca-ro-le whis-pe-red, "Now you're mi-ne."

They we-re wal-king thro-ugh the empty, ec-ho-ing ro-oms of a lit-tle ho-use in North-port. "Oh, yes," sa-id Ca-ro-le hap-pily. They sto-od be-fo-re the li-ving ro-om win-dows, lo-oking out in-to the sha-dow-dark wo-ods be-yond. Her hand slip-ped in-to his. "Ho-me," she sa-id, "*swe-et* ho-me."

They we-re mo-ving in and it was fur-nis-hed. A se-cond no-vel sold, a third. John was born when winds whip-ped pow-dery snow ac-ross the slo-ping lawn; Lin-da on a sultry, cric-ket ras-ping sum-mer night. Ye-ars cran-ked by, a mo-ving backd-rop on which events we-re pa-in-*ted*.

He sat the-re in the stil-*ness* of his tiny den. He'd sta-yed up la-te cor-rec-ting the gal-leys on his forth-co-ming no-vel *One Fo-ot in Sea*. Now, al-most nod-ding, he twis-ted to-get-her his fo-un-ta-in pen and set it down. "My God, my God," he mur-mu-red, stretc-hing. He was ti-red.

Across the ro-om, stan-ding on the man-tel of the tiny fi-rep-la-ce, the clock buz-zed on-ce. Owen lo-oked at it. 3:15 a.m. It was well past his-

He fo-und him-self sta-*ring* at the clock and, li-ke a slow-tap-ped tym-pa-ni, his he-art was felt. Se-ven-te-en mi-nu-tes la-ter than the last ti-me, tho-ught per-sis-*ted*; thirty-two mi-nu-tes in all.

Owen Crow-ley shi-ve-red and rub-bed his hands as if at so-me ima-gi-nary fla-me. Well, this is idi-otic, he tho-ught; idi-otic to dred-ge up this fan-tasy every ye-ar or so. It was the sort of non-sen-se that co-uld well be-co-me ob-ses-si-on.

He lo-we-red his ga-ze and lo-oked aro-und the ro-om. The sight of ti-me-worn com-forts and ar-ran-ge-ments ma-de him smi-le. This ho-use, its dis-po-si-ti-on, that shelf of ma-nusc-ripts at his left. The-se we-re me-asu-rab-le. The child-ren alo-ne we-re eigh-te-en months of slow tran-si-ti-on just in the ma-king.

He cluc-ked dis-gus-tedly at him-self. This was ab-sur-d; ra-ti-on-a-li-zing to him-self as if the fancy me-ri-*ted* re-but-tal. Cle-ar-ing his thro-at, he ti-di-ed up the sur-fa-ce of his desk with ener-ge-tic mo-ve-ments. The-re. And the-re.

He le-aned back he-avily in his cha-ir. Well, may-be it was a mis-ta-ke to rep-ress it. That the con-cept kept re-tur-ning was pro-of eno-ugh it had a de-fi-ni-te me-aning. Cer-ta-inly, the flim-si-est of de-lu-si-*ons* fo-ught aga-*inst* co-uld di-so-ri-ent the re-ason. All men knew that.

Well, then, fa-ce it, he de-ci-ded. Ti-me was cons-tant; that was the co-re. What va-ri-ed was a per-son's out-lo-*ok* on it. To so-me it drag-ged by on tar-held fe-et, to ot-hers fled on blur-ring wings. It just hap-pe-ned he was one of tho-se to whom ti-me se-emed overly tran-si-ent. So tran-si-ent that it fos-te-red rat-her than dis-pel-led the me-mory of that chil-dish wish he'd ma-de that night mo-re than fi-ve ye-ars be-fo-re.

That was it, of co-ur-se. Months se-emed a wink and ye-ars a bre-ath be-ca-use he vi-ewed them so. And-

The do-or swung open and Ca-ro-le ca-me ac-ross the rug, hol-ding a glass of war-med milk.

"You sho-uld be in bed," he scol-ded.

"So sho-uld you," she ans-we-red, "yet I see you sit-ting he-re. Do you know what ti-me it is?"

"I know," he sa-id.

She set-tled on his lap as he sip-ped the milk. "Gal-leys do-ne?" she as-ked. He nod-ded and slid an

arm aro-und her wa-ist. She kis-sed his temp-le. Out in the win-ter night, a dog bar-ked on-ce. She sig-hed. "It se-ems li-ke only yes-ter-day, do-esn't it?" she sa-id.

He drew in fa-int bre-ath. "I don't think so," he sa-id. "Oh, *you*." She punc-hed him gently on the arm. "This is Ar-tie," sa-id his agent. "Gu-ess what?"

Owen gas-ped. "*No!*"

He fo-und her in the la-undry ro-om, stuf-fing bedc-lot-hes in-to the was-her. "Ho-ney!" he yel-led. She-ets went flying.

"It's hap-pe-ned!" he cri-ed.

"What?"

"The mo-vi-es, the mo-vi-es! They're bu-ying *Nob-les and He-raids!*"

"No!"

"Yes! And, get this now, sit down and get it, go ahe-ad and sit or el-se you'll fall! - they're pa-ying *twel-ve tho-usand, fi-ve hund-red dol-lars* for it!"

"Oh!"

"And that's not all! They're gi-ving me a ten-we-ek gu-aran-tee to do the scre-enp-lay at, *get this - se-ven hund-red and fifty dol-lars* a we-ek!"

She squ-e-aked. "We're rich."

"Not qu-ite," he sa-id, flo-or-pa-cing, "but it's only the be-gin-ning, folks, *on-ly* the be-gin-ning!"

October winds swept in li-ke ti-des over the dark fi-eld. Spot-light rib-bons wi-ped ac-ross the sky.

"I wish the kids we-re he-re," he sa-id, his arm aro-und her.

"They'd just be cold and cranky, dar-ling," Ca-ro-le sa-id.

"Carole, don't you think-"

"Owen, you know I'd co-me with you if I co-uld; but we'd ha-ve to ta-ke Johnny out of scho-ol and, be-si-des, it wo-uld cost so much. It's only ten we-eks, dar-ling. Be-fo-re you know it-"

"Flight twenty-se-ven for Chi-ca-go and Los An-ge-les," in-to-ned the spe-aker, "now bo-ar-ding at Ga-te Three."

"*So so-on.*" Sud-denly, her eyes we-re lost, she pres-sed her wind-chil-led che-ek to his. "Oh, dar-ling, I'll miss you so."

The thick whe-els squ-e-aked be-low, the ca-bin walls sho-ok. Out-si-de, the en-gi-nes ro-ared fas-ter and fas-ter. The fi-eld rus-hed by. Owen lo-ok-ed back. Co-lo-red lights we-re dis-tant now. So-mew-he-re among them, Ca-ro-le sto-od, watc-hing his pla-ne no-se up in-to the black-ness. He set-tled back and clo-sed his eyes a mo-ment. A dre-am, he tho-ught. Flying west to wri-te a mo-vie from his own no-vel. Go-od God, a ve-ri-tab-le dre-am.

He sat the-re on a cor-ner of the le-at-her co-uch. His of-fi-ce was ca-pa-ci-o-us. A pe-nin-su-la of po-lis-hed desk ex-ten-ded from the wall, an up-hols-te-red cha-ir par-ked ne-atly aga-inst it. Twe-ed dra-pes con-ce-aled the hum-ming air con-di-ti-oner, tas-te-ful rep-ro-duc-ti-ons gra-ced the walls and, be-ne-ath his sho-es, the car-pet ga-ve li-ke spon-ge. Owen sig-hed.

A knoc-king bro-ke his re-ve-rie. "Yes?" he as-ked. The snugly-swel-te-red blon-de step-ped in. "I'm Co-ra. I'm yo-ur sec-re-tary," she sa-id. It was Mon-day mor-ning.

"Eighty-five mi-nu-tes, gi-ve or ta-ke," sa-id Mor-ton Zuc-ker-smith, Pro-du-cer. He sig-ned anot-her no-ti-fi-ca-ti-on. "That's a go-od length." He sig-ned anot-her let-ter. "You'll pick the-se things up as you go along." He sig-ned anot-her cont-ract. "It's a world of its own." He stab-bed the pen in-to its onyx she-ath and his sec-re-tary exi-ted, be-ar-ing off the she-af of pa-pers. Zuc-kers-mith le-aned back in his le-at-her cha-ir, hands be-hind his he-ad, his po-lo shir-ted chest bro-ade-ning with air. "A world of its own, kiddy," he sa-id. "Ah. He-re's our girl."

Owen sto-od, his sto-mach musc-les twitc-hing as Lin-da Car-son slip-ped ac-ross the ro-om, one ivory hand ex-ten-ded. "Mor-ton, de-ar," she sa-id.

"Morning, dar-ling." Zuc-kers-mith en-gul-fed her hand in his, then lo-ok-ed to-ward Owen. "De-ar, I'd li-ke you to me-et yo-ur wri-ter for *The Lady and the He-rald*"

"I've be-en so an-xi-o-us to me-et you," sa-id Lin-da Car-son, nee Vir-gi-nia Os-ter-me-yer. "I

lo-ved yo-ur bo-ok. How can I tell you?"

He star-ted up as Co-ra en-te-red. "Don't get up," she sa-id. "I'm just brin-ging you yo-ur pa-ges. We're up to forty-fi-ve."

Owen watc-hed her as she stretc-hed ac-ross the desk. Her swe-aters grew mo-re skin li-ke every day. The ten-se ex-pan-si-on of her bre-at-hing po-sed thre-ats to every fib-re.

"How do-es it re-ad?" he as-ked.

She to-ok it for an in-vi-ta-ti-on to perch ac-ross the co-uch arm at his fe-et. "I think you're do-ing *won-der-ful-ly*," she sa-id. She cros-sed her legs and frothy slip la-ce sig-hed ac-ross her kne-es. "You're very ta-len-ted." She drew in chest-enhan-cing air. "The-re's just a few things he-re and the-re," she sa-id. "I'd tell you what they we-re right now but - well, it's lunch-ti-me and-"

They went to lunch; that day and ot-hers af-ter. Co-ra don-ned a mant-le of ste-wards-hip, gu-iding him as tho-ugh he we-re re-so-ur-ce-less. Bust-ling in with smi-les and cof-fee every mor-ning, tel-ling him what fo-ods we-re best pre-pa-red at din-ner and, fin-ge-ring his arm, le-ading him to the com-mis-sary every af-ter-no-on for oran-ge ju-ice; hin-ting at a p.m. con-ti-nu-an-ce of the-ir re-la-ti-ons-hip; as-su-ming a po-si-ti-on in his li-fe he had no de-si-re for. Ac-tu-al-ly snif-fling one af-ter-no-on af-ter he'd go-ne to lunch wit-ho-ut her; and, as he pat-ted her sho-ul-der in ro-ugh com-mi-se-ra-ti-on, pres-sing aga-inst him sud-denly, her firm lips ta-king the-ir ef-fi-ci-ent due, the ta-ut con-ve-xi-ti-es of her in-den-ting him. He drew back, start-led. "*Co-ra*."

She pat-ted his che-ek: "Don't think abo-ut it, dar-ling. You ha-ve im-por-tant work to do." Then she was go-ne and Owen was sit-ting at his desk, alarm dif-fu-sing to his fin-ger-tips. A we-ek, anot-her we-ek.

"Hi," sa-id Lin-da. "How are you?"

"Fine," he ans-we-red as Co-ra en-te-red, clad in hug-ging ga-bar-di-ne, in clin-ging silk. "Lunch? I'd lo-ve to. Shall I me-et you at the-? Oh. All right!" He hung up. Co-ra sta-red at him.

As he slip-ped on-to the red le-at-her se-at he saw, ac-ross the stre-et, Co-ra at the ga-te, watc-hing him grimly.

"Hello, Owen," Lin-da sa-id. The Lin-coln pur-red in-to the li-ne of traf-fic. This is non-sen-se, Owen tho-ught. He'd ha-ve to try a se-cond ti-me with Co-ra. The first dis-co-ura-ge-ment she'd ta-ken for no-bi-lity; the ges-tu-re of a gal-lant hus-band to-ward his wi-fe and child-ren. At le-ast she se-emed to ta-ke it so. Go-od God, what comp-li-ca-ti-on.

It was lunch to-get-her on the Strip; then, la-ter, din-ner, Owen trus-ting that eno-ugh ho-urs de-vo-ted to Lin-da wo-uld con-vin-ce Co-ra of his lack of in-te-rest. The next night it was din-ner and the Phil-har-mo-nic; two nights la-ter, dan-cing and a dri-ve along the sho-re; the next, a pre-vi-ew in En-ci-no.

At what spe-ci-fic junc-tu-re the plan went wrong Owen ne-ver knew. It ga-ined ir-re-vo-cab-le form the night when, par-ked be-si-de the oce-an, ra-dio mu-sic pla-ying softly, Lin-da slip-ped aga-inst him na-tu-ral-ly, her world-known body pres-sing clo-se, her lips a suc-cu-len-ce at his. "*Dar-ling*."

He lay starkly awa-ke, thin-king of the past we-eks; of Co-ra and Lin-da; of Ca-ro-le who-se re-ality had fa-ded to the te-nu-o-us form of da-ily let-ters and a we-ekly vo-ice emit-ting from the te-lep-ho-ne, a smi-ling pic-tu-re on his desk.

He'd al-most fi-nis-hed with the scre-enp-lay. So-on he'd fly back ho-me. So much ti-me had pas-sed. Whe-re we-re the jo-ints, the se-aling pla-ce? Whe-re was the evi-den-ce ex-cept in cir-cums-tan-ti-al shards of me-mory? It was li-ke one of tho-se ef-fects they'd ta-ught him at the stu-dio; a *mon-ta-ge*, a se-ri-es of qu-ickly pa-ced sce-nes. That's what li-fe se-emed li-ke; a se-ri-es of qu-ickly pa-ced sce-nes that flit-ted ac-ross the scre-en of one's at-ten-ti-on, then we-re go-ne.

Across the ho-tel ro-om, his tra-vel-ling clock buz-zed on-ce. He wo-uld not lo-ok at it.

He ran aga-inst the wind, the snow, but Ca-ro-le wasn't the-re. He sto-od, eyes se-arc-hing, in the wa-iting ro-om, an is-land of man and lug-ga-ge. Was she ill? The-re'd be-en no ack-now-ledg-ment of his te-leg-ram but-

"Carole?" The bo-oth was hot and sta-le.

"Yes," she sa-id.

"My God, dar-ling, did you *for-get*?"

"No," she sa-id.

The ta-xi ri-de to North-port was a jading tra-ve-lo-gue of snow-cot-to-ned tre-es and lawns, im-pe-ding traf-fic lights and ti-re cha-ins rat-tling over slush-gra-vi-ed stre-ets. She'd be-en so de-adly calm on the pho-ne. No, I'm not sick. Lin-da has a lit-tle cold. John is fi-ne. I co-uld'n't get a sit-ter. A chill of pre-mo-ni-ti-ons tro-ub-led at him.

Home at last. He'd dre-amed of it li-ke this, stan-ding si-lently among the ske-le-tal tre-es, a mant-le of snow ac-ross its ro-of, a ro-pe of wo-od smo-ke spi-ral-ling from its chim-ney. He pa-id the dri-ver with a sha-king hand and tur-ned ex-pec-tantly. The do-or sta-yed shut. He wa-ited but the do-or sta-yed shut.

He re-ad the let-ter that she'd fi-nal-ly gi-ven him. *De-ar Mrs. Crow-ley*, it be-gan, *I tho-ught you ought to know*. . . His eyes so-ught out the chil-dish sig-na-tu-re be-low. *Co-ra Ba-iley*.

"Why that dirty, lit-tle-" He co-uld'n't say it; so-met-hing held him back.

"Dear God." She sto-od be-fo-re the win-dow, tremb-ling. "To this very mo-ment I've be-en pra-ying it was a lie. But now..."

She shri-ve-led at his to-uch. "*Don't*."

"You wo-uld'n't go with me," he char-ged. "You *wo-uldn't* go-"

"*Is that yo-ur ex-cu-se?*" she as-ked.

"Wha'm I gon-na do?" he as-ked, fumb-ling at his fo-ur-te-enth Scotch and wa-ter. "*Wha'?* I don' wan-na lo-se 'er, Ar-tie. I don' wan-na lo-se 'er an' the child-ren. Wha'm I gon-na do?"

"I don't know," sa-id Ar-tie.

"That dirty li'l-" Owen mut-te-red. "Hadn't be-en for her..."

"Don't bla-me the silly lit-tle slut for this," sa-id Ar-tie. "She's just the icing. You're the one who ba-ked the ca-ke."

"*Wha'm I gon-na do?*"

"Well, for one thing, start wor-king at li-fe a lit-tle mo-re. It isn't just a play that's ta-king pla-ce in front of you. You're on the sta-ge, you ha-ve a part. Eit-her you play it or you're a pawn. No one's go-ing to fe-ed you di-alo-gue or ac-ti-on, Owen. You're on yo-ur own. Re-mem-ber that."

"*I won-der*," Owen sa-id. Then and la-ter in the si-len-ce of his ho-tel ro-om.

A we-ek, two we-eks. List-less walks thro-ugh a Man-hat-tan that was only no-ise and lo-ne-li-ness. Mo-vi-es sta-red at, din-ners at the Auto-mat, slep-less nights, the al-co-ho-led se-arch for pe-ace. Fi-nal-ly, the des-pe-ra-te pho-ne call. "Ca-ro-le, ta-ke me back, *ple-ase* ta-ke me back."

"Oh, dar-ling. *Co-me ho-me to me*."

Another cab ri-de, this ti-me joyo-us. The porch light bur-ning, the do-or flung open, Ca-ro-le run-ning to him. Arms aro-und each ot-her, wal-king back in-to the-ir ho-me to-get-her.

The Grand To-ur! A diz-zying whirl of pla-ces and events. Mis-ted Eng-land in the spring; the bro-ad, the nar-row stre-ets of Pa-ris; Spree-bi-sec-ted Ber-lin and Rho-ne-bi-sec-ted Ge-ne-va. Mi-lan of Lom-bardy, the hund-red crumb-ling-cast-led is-lands of Ve-ni-ce, the cul-tu-re tro-ve of Flo-ren-ce, Mar-se-il-les bra-ced aga-inst the sea, the Alps-pro-tec-ted Ri-vi-era, Di-j-on the an-ci-ent. A se-cond ho-ney-mo-on; a rush of des-pe-ra-te re-ne-wal, half se-en, half felt li-ke flas-hes of un-cer-ta-in he-at in a gre-at, sur-ro-un-ding dark-ness.

They lay to-get-her on the ri-ver bank. Sun-light scat-te-red glit-te-ring co-ins ac-ross the wa-ter, fish stir-red idly in the ther-mal drift. The con-tents of the-ir pic-nic bas-ket lay in happy de-ci-ma-ti-on. Ca-ro-le res-ted on his sho-ul-der, her bre-ath a war-ming tick-le on his chest.

"*Where has the ti-me all go-ne to?*" Owen as-ked; not of her or an-yo-ne but to the sky.

"Darling, you so-und up-set," she sa-id, ra-ising on an el-bow to lo-ok at him.

"I am," he ans-we-red. "Don't you re-mem-ber the night we saw that pic-tu-re *A Mo-ment or Fo-re-ver?* Don't you re-mem-ber what I sa-id?"

"No."

He told her; of that and of his wish and of the form-less dre-ad that so-me-ti-mes ca-me upon him. "It was just the first part I wan-ted fast, tho-ugh," he sa-id, "*not the who-le thing.*"

"Darling, dar-ling," Ca-ro-le sa-id, trying not to smi-le, "I gu-ess this must be the cur-se of ha-ving an ima-gi-na-ti-on. Owen, it's be-en over se-ven ye-ars. *Se-ven ye-ars.*"

He held his watch up. "Or fifty-se-ven mi-nu-tes," he sa-id.

Home aga-in. Sum-mer, fall, and win-ter. *Wind from the So-uth* sel-ling to the mo-vi-es for \$100,000; Owen tur-ning down the scre-en-p-lay of-fer. The aging man-si-on over-lo-oking the So-und, the hi-ring of Mrs. Hal-sey as the-ir ho-use-ke-eper. John pac-ked off to mi-li-tary aca-demy, Lin-da to pri-va-te scho-ol. As a re-sult of the Euro-pe-an trip, one blus-tery af-ter-no-on in March, the birth of Ge-or-ge.

Another ye-ar. Anot-her. Fi-ve ye-ars, ten. Bo-oks as-su-red and flo-wing from his pen. *Lap of Le-gends Old, Crumb-ling Sa-ti-res, Jig-gery Po-kery, and The Dra-gon Fly.* A de-ca-de go-ne, then mo-re. The Na-ti-onal Bo-ok Award for *No Dying and No Tomb.* The Pu-lit-zer Pri-ze for *Bac-chus Night.*

He sto-od be-fo-re the win-dow of his pa-nel-led of-fi-ce, trying to for-get at le-ast a sing-le item of anot-her pa-nel-led of-fi-ce he'd be-en in, that of his pub-lis-her the day he'd sig-ned his first cont-ract the-re. But he co-uld for-get not-hing; not a sing-le de-tail wo-uld elu-de him. As if, ins-te-ad of twenty-three ye-ars be-fo-re, it had be-en yes-ter-day. How co-uld he re-call it all so vi-vidly un-less, ac-tu-al-ly-

"Dad?" He tur-ned and felt a fro-zen trap jaw clamp ac-ross his he-art. John stro-de ac-ross the ro-om. "I'm go-ing now," he sa-id.

"What? *Go-ing?*" Owen sta-red at him; at this tall stran-ger, at this yo-ung man in mi-li-tary uni-form who cal-led him Dad.

"Old Dad," la-ug-hed John. He clap-ped his fat-her's arm. "Are you dre-aming up anot-her bo-ok?"

Only then, as if ca-use fol-lo-wed ef-fect, Owen knew. Euro-pe ra-ged with war aga-in and John was in the army, or-de-red over-se-as. He sto-od the-re, sta-ring at his son, spe-aking with a vo-ice not his; watc-hing the se-conds rush away. Whe-re had *this* war co-me from? What vast and aw-ful mac-hi-na-ti-ions had bro-ught it in-to be-ing? *And whe-re was his lit-tle boy?* Su-rely he was not this stran-ger sha-king hands with him and sa-ying his go-odb-yes. The trap jaw tigh-te-ned. Owen whim-pe-red.

But the ro-om was empty. He blin-ked. Was it all a dre-am, all flas-hes in an ailing mind? On le-aden fe-et, he stumb-led to the win-dow and watc-hed the ta-xi swal-low up his son and dri-ve away with him. "Go-odb-ye," he whis-pe-red. "God pro-tect you."

No one fe-eds you di-a-lo-gue, he tho-ught; but was that *he* who spo-ke?

* * *

The bell had rung and Ca-ro-le ans-we-red it. Now, the hand-le of his of-fi-ce do-or clic-ked on-ce and she was stan-ding the-re, fa-ce blo-od-less, sta-ring at him, in her hand the te-leg-ram. Owen felt his bre-ath stop.

"No," he mur-mu-red; then, gas-ping, star-ted up as, so-und-les-sly, Ca-ro-le swa-yed and crump-led to the flo-or.

"At le-ast a we-ek in bed," the doc-tor told him. "Qu-i-et; lots of rest. The shock is most se-ve-re."

He shamb-led on the du-nes; num-bed, exp-res-si-on-less. Ra-zo-red winds cut thro-ugh him, whip-ped his clot-hes and las-hed his gray-stre-aked ha-ir to thre-ads. With light-less eyes, he mar-ked the co-ur-se of fo-am flec-ked wa-ves ac-ross the So-und. Only yes-ter-day that John went off to war, he tho-ught; only yes-ter-day he ca-me ho-me pro-udly ri-gid in his aca-demy uni-form; only yes-ter-day he was in shorts and gram-mar scho-ol; only yes-ter-day he thun-de-red thro-ugh the ho-use le-aving his wa-ke of bre-ath-less la-ugh-ter; only yes-ter-day that he was born when winds whip-ped pow-dery snow ac-ross-

"Dear God!" De-ad. *De-ad!* Not twenty-one and *de-ad*; all his li-fe a mo-ment pas-sed, a me-mory

al-re-ady slip-ping from the mind.

"*I ta-ke it back!*" Ter-ri-fi-ed, he scre-amed it to the rus-hing sky. "I ta-ke it back, I ne-ver me-ant it!" He lay the-re, scra-ping at the sand, we-eping for his boy yet won-de-ring if he ever had a boy at all.

"*Attendez, M'si-e-us, M'da-mes! Ni-ce!*"

"Oh my; al-re-ady?" Ca-ro-le sa-id. "That was qu-ick now, child-ren, wasn't it?"

Owen blin-ked. He lo-oked at her; at this portly, gray-ha-ired wo-man ac-ross the ais-le from him. She smi-led. She *knew* him?

"What?" he as-ked.

"Oh, why do I talk to you?" she grumb-led. "You're al-ways in yo-ur tho-ughts, yo-ur tho-ughts." His-sing, she sto-od and drew a wic-ker bas-ket from the rack. *Was this so-me ga-me?*

"Gee, Dad, lo-ok at *that!*"

He ga-ped at the te-ena-ged boy be-si-de him. And who was *he*? Owen Crow-ley sho-ok his he-ad a lit-tle. He lo-oked aro-und him. *Ni-ce?* In Fran-ce aga-in? What abo-ut the war?

The tra-in plun-ged in-to black-ness. "Oh, *damn!*" snap-ped Lin-da. On Owen's ot-her si-de she struck her match aga-in and, in the fla-re, he saw, ref-lec-ted in the win-dow, the fe-atu-res of anot-her mid-dle-aged stran-ger and it was him-self. The pre-sent flo-oded over him. The war over and he and his fa-mily ab-ro-ad: Lin-da, twenty-one, di-vor-ced, bit-ter, slightly al-co-ho-lic; Ge-or-ge, fif-te-en, chubby, fla-iling in the glan-du-lar lim-bo bet-we-en wo-men and erec-tor sets; Ca-ro-le, forty-six, newly ri-sen from the se-pulch-re of me-no-pa-use, pet-tish, so-mew-hat bo-red; and he him-self, forty-ni-ne, suc-ces-sful, coldly hand-so-me, still won-de-ring if li-fe we-re ma-de of ye-ars or se-conds. All this pas-sing thro-ugh his mind be-fo-re Ri-vi-era sun-light flo-oded in-to the-ir com-part-ment aga-in.

Out on the ter-ra-ce it was dar-ker, co-oler. Owen sto-od the-re, smo-king, lo-oking at the spray of di-amond pin-po-ints in the sky. In-si-de, the mur-mu-ring of gamb-lers was li-ke a dis-tant, in-sect hum.

"Hello, Mr. Crow-ley."

She was in the sha-dows, pa-lely gow-ned; a vo-ice, a mo-ve-ment.

"You know my na-me?" he as-ked.

"But you're fa-mo-us," was her ans-wer.

Awareness flut-te-red in him. The stra-ining flat-tery of club wo-men had tur-ned his sto-mach mo-re than on-ce. But then she'd gli-ded from the dark-ness and he saw her fa-ce and all awa-re-ness di-ed. Mo-on-light cre-amed her arms and sho-ul-ders; it was in-can-des-cent in her eyes.

"My na-me is Ali-son," she sa-id. "Are you glad to me-et me?"

The po-lis-hed cru-iser swept a ban-king cur-ve in-to the wind, its bow slas-hing at the wa-ves, flin-ging up a ra-in-bo-wed mist ac-ross them. "You lit-tle idi-ot!" he la-ug-hed. "You'll drown us yet!"

"You and I!" she sho-uted back. "Entwi-ning un-der fat-homs! I'd *lo-ve* that, wo-uldn't you?"

He smi-led at her and to-uc-hed her thrill-flus-hed che-ek. She kis-sed his palm and held him with her eyes. *I lo-ve you*. So-un-d-less; a mo-ve-ment of her lips. He tur-ned his he-ad and lo-oked ac-ross the sun-jewel-led Me-di-ter-ra-ne-an. Just ke-ep go-ing on, he tho-ught. Ne-ver turn. Ke-ep go-ing till the oce-an swal-lows us. *I won't go back*.

Alison put the bo-at on auto-ma-tic dri-ve, then ca-me up be-hind him, sli-ding warm arms aro-und his wa-ist, pres-sing her body to his. "You're off aga-in," she mur-mu-red. "Whe-re are you, dar-ling?"

He lo-oked at her. "How long ha-ve we known each ot-her?" he as-ked.

"A mo-ment, fo-re-ver, it's all the sa-me," she ans-we-red, te-asing at his ear lo-be with her lips.

"A mo-ment or fo-re-ver," he mur-mu-red. "Yes."

"What?" she as-ked.

"Nothing," he sa-id. "Just bro-oding on the tyranny of clocks."

"Since ti-me is so dist-res-sing to you, lo-ve," she sa-id, pus-hing open the ca-bin do-or, "let's not was-te anot-her se-cond of it."

The cru-iser hum-med ac-ross the si-lent sea.

"What, *hi-king?*" Ca-ro-le sa-id. "At *yo-ur* age?"

"Though it may dis-turb you," Owen ans-we-red, ta-utly, "I, at le-ast, am not yet pre-pa-red to

sur-ren-der to the stodgy blan-dish-ments of old age."

"So I'm se-ni-le now!" she cri-ed.

"Please," he sa-id.

"She thinks you're *old*?" sa-id Ali-son. "Go-od God, how lit-tle that wo-man knows you!"

Hikes, ski-ing, bo-at ri-des, swim-ming, hor-se-back ri-ding, dan-cing till sun dis-per-sed the night. Him tel-ling Ca-ro-le he was do-ing re-se-arch for a no-vel; not kno-wing if she be-li-eved him; not, eit-her, ca-ring much. We-eks and we-eks of stal-king the elu-si-ve de-ad.

He sto-od on the sun-drenc-hed bal-cony out-si-de Ali-son's ro-om. In-si-de, ivory-lim-bed, she slept li-ke so-me ga-me-worn child. Owen's body was ex-ha-us-ted, each ina-de-qu-ate musc-le ple-ading for sur-ce-ase; but, for the mo-ment, he was not thin-king abo-ut that. He was won-de-ring abo-ut so-met-hing el-se; a clue that had oc-cur-red to him when he was lying with her.

In all his li-fe, it se-emed as if the-re ne-ver was a cle-ar re-memb-ran-ce of physi-cal lo-ve. Every de-ta-il of the mo-ments le-ading to the act we-re vi-vid but the act it-self was not. Equ-al-ly so, all me-mory of his ever ha-ving cur-sed alo-ud was dim-med, un-cer-ta-in.

And the-se we-re the very things that mo-vi-es cen-so-red.

"Owen?" In-si-de, he he-ard the rust-le of her body on the she-ets. The-re was de-mand in her vo-ice aga-in; ho-ne-yed but aut-ho-ri-ta-ti-ve. He tur-ned. Then let me *re-mem-ber* this, he tho-ught. Let every se-cond of it be with me; every de-ta-il of its fi-ery exac-ti-on, its flesh-born dec-la-ra-ti-ons, its drun-ken, swe-et de-ran-ge-ment. An-xi-o-usly, he step-ped thro-ugh the do-or-way.

Afternoon. He wal-ked along the sho-re, sta-ring at the mir-ror-flat blu-eness of the sea. It was true then. The-re was no dis-tinct re-memb-ran-ce of it. From the se-cond he'd go-ne thro-ugh the do-or-way un-til now, all was a vir-tu-al blank. Yes, *true!* He knew it now. In-te-rims we-re vo-id; ti-me was rus-hing him to his script-appo-in-ted end. He was a pla-yer, yes, as Ar-tie sa-id, but the play had al-re-ady be-en writ-ten.

He sat in the dark tra-in com-part-ment, sta-ring out the win-dow. Far be-low slept mo-on-was-hed Ni-ce and Ali-son; ac-ross the ais-le slept Ge-or-ge and Lin-da, grumb-led Ca-ro-le in a rest-less sle-ep. How angry they had be-en at his an-no-un-ce-ment of the-ir im-me-di-ate de-par-tu-re for ho-me.

And now, he tho-ught, and *now*. He held his watch up and mar-ked the pos-tu-re of its lu-mi-no-us hands. *Se-ven-ty-fo-ur mi-nu-tes.*

How much left?

"You know, Ge-or-ge," he sa-id, "when I was yo-ung and not so yo-ung I nur-sed a fi-ne de-lu-si-on. I tho-ught my li-fe was be-ing run out li-ke a mo-ti-on pic-tu-re. It was ne-ver cer-ta-in, mind you, only nag-ging do-ubt but it dis-ma-yed me; oh, in-de-ed it did. Un-til, one day a lit-tle whi-le ago, it ca-me to me that ever-yo-ne has an un-cont-rol-lab-le aver-si-on to the in-ro-ads of mor-ta-lity. Es-pe-ci-al-ly old ones li-ke myself, Ge-or-ge. How we are inc-li-ned to think that ti-me has, so-me-how, tric-ked us, ma-king us lo-ok the ot-her way a mo-ment whi-le, now un-gu-ar-ded, it rus-hes by us, be-aring on its aw-ful, trac-king sho-ul-ders, our li-ves."

"I can see that," sa-id Ge-or-ge and lit his pi-pe aga-in.

Owen Crow-ley chuck-led: "Ge-or-ge, Ge-or-ge," he sa-id. "Gi-ve full hu-mo-ur to yo-ur nutty si-re. He'll not be with you too much lon-ger."

"Now stop that talk," sa-id Ca-ro-le, knit-ting by the fi-re. "Stop that silly talk."

"Carole?" he cal-led. "My de-ar?" Wind from the So-und obs-cu-red his tremb-ling vo-ice. He lo-ok-ed aro-und. "He-re, *you! He-re!*"

The nur-se prim-ped mec-ha-ni-cal-ly at his pil-low. She chi-ded, "Now, now, Mr. Crow-ley. You mustn't ti-re yo-ur-self."

"Where's my wi-fe? For pity's sa-ke go fetch her. I can't-"

"Hush now, Mr. Crow-ley, don't start in aga-in."

He sta-red at her, at this se-mi-mo-us-tac-hed ga-uc-he-rie in whi-te who fus-sed and whe-ed-led. "What?" he mur-mu-red. "*What?*" Then so-met-hing drew away the ve-il and he knew. Lin-da was get-ting her fo-urth di-vor-ce, shut-ting bet-we-en her law-yer's of-fi-ce and the cock-ta-il lo-un-ges;

Ge-or-ge was a cor-res-pon-dent in Japan, a bra-ce of cri-tic-fe-ted bo-oks to his na-me. And Ca-ro-le, Ca-ro-le?

Dead.

"No," he sa-id, qu-ite calm-ly. "No, no, that's not true. I tell you, fetch her. Oh, the-re's a pretty thing." He re-ac-hed out for the fal-ling le-af.

The black-ness par-ted; it fil-te-red in-to un-mar-ke-d grey-ness. Then his ro-om ap-pe-ared, a tiny fi-re in the gra-te, his doc-tor by the bed con-sul-ting with the nur-se; at the fo-ot of it, Lin-da stan-ding li-ke a so-ur wra-ith.

Now, tho-ught Owen. Now was just abo-ut the ti-me. His li-fe, he tho-ught, had be-en a bri-ef en-ga-ge-ment; a flow of sce-nes ac-ross what cos-mic re-ti-na? He tho-ught of John, of Lin-da Car-son, of Ar-tie, of Mor-ton Zuc-kers-mith and Co-ra; of Ge-or-ge and Lin-da and Ali-son; of Ca-ro-le; of the le-gi-oned pe-op-le who had pas-sed him du-ring his per-for-man-ce. They we-re all go-ne, al-most fa-ce-less now.

"What... ti-me?" he as-ke-d.

The doc-tor drew his watch. "Fo-ur-oh-eight," he sa-id, "a.m."

Of co-ur-se. Owen smi-led. He sho-uld ha-ve known it all along. A dryness in his thro-at thin-ning the la-ugh to a ras-ping whis-per. They sto-od the-re, sta-ning at him.

"Eighty-five mi-nu-tes," he sa-id. "A go-od length. Yes; *a go-od length.*"

Then, just be-fo-re he clo-sed his eyes, he saw them-let-ters flo-ating in the air, im-po-sed ac-ross the-ir fa-ces and the ro-om. And they we-re words but words se-en in a mir-ror, whi-te and still.

THE END

Or was it just ima-gi-na-ti-on? *Fa-de-o-ut.*

6 - ONE FOR THE BOOKS

When he wo-ke up that mor-ning, he co-uld talk French.

There was no war-ning. At six-fif-te-en, the alarm went off as usu-al and he and his wi-fe stir-red. Fred re-ac-hed out a sle-ep-de-ade-ned hand and shut off the bell. The ro-om was still for a mo-ment.

Then Eva pus-hed back the co-vers on her si-de and he pus-hed back the co-vers on his si-de. His ve-in gnar-led legs drop-ped over the si-de of the bed. He sa-id, '*Bon ma-tin*, Eva.'

There was a slight pa-use.

'Wha'?' she as-ke-d.

'*Je dis bon ma-tin*,' he sa-id.

There was a rust-le of night-gown as she twis-ting aro-und to squ-int at him. '*What'd* you say?'

'All I sa-id was go-od -'

Fred El-der-man sta-red back at his wi-fe.

'What *did* I say?' he as-ke-d in a whis-per... 'You sa-id '*bo-ne mat-tin* or -'

'*Jes dis bon ma-tin. C'est un bon ma-tin, n'est ce pas?*'

The so-und of his hand be-ing clap-ped ac-ross his mo-uth was li-ke that of a fast ball thum-ping in a catc-her's mitt. Abo-ve the knuck-le-rid-ged gag, his eyes we-re shoc-ke-d.

'Fred, what IS it?'

Slowly, the hand drew down from his lips.

'I dun-no, Eva,' he sa-id, awed. Un-cons-ci-o-usly, the hand re-ac-hed up, one fin-ger of it rub-bing at his ha-ir-rin-ged bald spot. 'It so-unds li-ke so-me - so-me kind of fo-re-ign talk.'

'But you don't know no fo-re-ign talk, Fred,' she told him.

That's just it.'

They sat the-re lo-oking at each ot-her blankly. Fred glan-ced over at the clock.

'We bet-ter get dres-sed,' he sa-id.

While he was in the bath-ro-om, she he-ard him sin-ging, '*Elle fit un fro-ma-ge, du la-it de ses mo-utons, ron, ron, du la-it de ses mo-utons,*' but she didn't da-re call it to his at-ten-ti-on whi-le he was sha-ving.

Over bre-ak-fast cof-fee, he mut-te-red so-met-hing.

'What?' she as-ked be-fo-re she co-uld stop her-self.

'Je'dis que ve-ut di-re ce-ci?'

He he-ard the cof-fee go down her gul-ping thro-at.

'I me-an,' he sa-id, lo-oking da-zed, 'what do-es this me-an?'

'Yes, what *do-es it?* You ne-ver tal-ked no fo-re-ign lan-gu-age be-fo-re.'

'I *know* it,' he sa-id, to-ast sus-pen-ded half-way to his open mo-uth. 'What - what kind of lan-gu-age is it?'

'S-sounds t'me li-ke French.'

French? I don't know no French?'

She swal-lo-wed mo-re cof-fee. 'You do now,' she sa-id we-akly.

He sta-red at the tab-le cloth.

'Le di-ab-le s'en me-le,' he mut-te-red.

Her vo-ice ro-se. 'Fred, *what?*'

His eyes we-re con-fu-sed. 'I sa-id the de-vil has so-met-hing to do with it.'

'Fred, you're -'

She stra-igh-te-ned up in the cha-ir and to-ok a de-ep bre-ath. 'Now,' she sa-id, let's not pro-fa-ne, Fred. The-re has to be a go-od re-ason for this/ No reply. 'Well, *do-esn't* the-re, Fred?'

'Sure, Eva. *Su-re.* But -'

'No buts abo-ut it,' she dec-la-red, plun-ging ahe-ad as if she we-re af-ra-id to stop. 'Now is the-re any re-ason in this world why you sho-uld know how to talk French' - she snap-ped her thin fin-gers - 'just li-ke that?'

He sho-ok his he-ad va-gu-ely.

'Well,' she went on, won-de-ring what to say next, 'let's see then.' They lo-oked at each ot-her in si-len-ce. 'Say so-met-hing,' she de-ci-ded. 'Let's - ' She gro-ped for words. 'Let's see what we... ha-ve he-re.' Her vo-ice di-ed off.

'Say so-met-hin?'

'Yes,' she sa-id. 'Go on.'

'Un ge-mis-se-ment se fit ent-rend-re. Les do-gu-es se met-tent d abo-yer. Ces gants me vont bi-en. Il va sur les qu-in-ze ans -'

'Fred?'

'Il fit fab-ri-qu-er une exac-te rep-re-sen-ta-ti-on du mon-s-t-re.'

'Fred, hold on!' she cri-ed, lo-oking sca-red.

His vo-ice bro-ke off and he lo-oked at her, blin-king.

'What... what did you say this ti-me, Fred?' she as-ked.

'I sa-id - a mo-an was he-ard. His mas-tif-fs be-gan to bark. The-se glo-ves fit me. He will so-on be fif-te-en ye-ars old and -'

'What?'

'And he has an exact copy of the mons-ter ma-de. *Sans me-me l'enta-mer.'*

'Fred?'

He lo-oked ill. 'Wit-ho-ut even scratc-hin,' he sa-id.

At that ho-ur of the mor-ning, the cam-pus was qu-i-et. The only clas-ses that early we-re the two se-ven-thirty Eco-no-mics lec-tu-res and they we-re held on the Whi-te Cam-pus. He-re on the Red the-re was no so-und. In an ho-ur the walks wo-uld be fil-led with chat-ting, la-ug-hing, lo-afer-clic-king stu-dent hor-des, but for now the-re was pe-ace.

In far less than pe-ace, Fred El-der-man shuf-fled along the east si-de of the cam-pus, he-aded for the ad-mi-nist-ra-ti-on bu-il-ding. Ha-ving left a con-fu-sed Eva at ho-me, he'd be-en trying to fi-gu-re it out as he went to work.

What was it? When had it be-gun? *C'est une he-ure*, sa-id his mind.

He sho-ok his he-ad ang-rily. This was ter-rib-le. He tri-ed des-pe-ra-tely to think of what co-uld ha-ve hap-pe-ned, but he co-uldn't. It just didn't ma-ke sen-se. He was fifty-ni-ne, a jani-tor at the uni-ver-sity with no edu-ca-ti-on to spe-ak of, li-ving a qu-i-et, or-di-nary li-fe. Then he wo-ke up one mor-ning spe-aking ar-ti-cu-la-te French.

French.

He stop-ped a mo-ment and sto-od in the frosty Oc-to-ber wind, sta-ring at the cu-po-la of Jeramy Hall. He's cle-aned out the French of-fi-ce the night be-fo-re. Co-uld that ha-ve any-thing to do with -

'No, that was ri-di-cu-lo-us. He star-ted off aga-in, mut-te-ring un-der his bre-ath - un-cons-ci-o-usly. *'Je su-is, tu es, il est, el-le est, no-us som-mes, vo-us etes -'*

At eight-ten, he en-te-red the His-tory De-part-ment of-fi-ce to re-pa-ir a sink in the wash-ro-om. He wor-ked on it for an ho-ur and se-ven mi-nu-tes, then put the to-ols back in the bag and wal-ked out in-to the of-fi-ce.

'Mornin,' he sa-id to the pro-fes-sor sit-ting at a desk.

'Good mor-ning, Fred,' sa-id the pro-fes-sor.

Fred El-der-man wal-ked out in-to the hall thin-king how re-mar-kab-le it was that the in-co-me of Lo-u-is XVI, from the sa-me type of ta-xes, ex-ce-eded that of Lo-u-is XV by 130 mil-li-on liv-res and that the ex-ports which had be-en 106 mil-li-on in 1720 we-re 192 mil-li-on in 1746 and -

He stop-ped in the hall, a stun-ned lo-ok on his le-an fa-ce.

That mor-ning, he had oc-ca-si-on to be in the of-fi-ces of the Physics, the Che-mistry, the Eng-lish and the Art De-part-ments.

The Wind-mill was a lit-tle ta-vern ne-ar Ma-in Stre-et. Fred went the-re on Mon-day, Wed-nes-day and Fri-day eve-nings to nur-se a co-up-le of dra-ught be-ers and chat with his two fri-ends -Harry Bul-lard, ma-na-ger of Ho-gan's Bow-ling Al-leys, and Lou Pe-acock, pos-tal wor-ker and ama-te-ur gar-de-ner.

Stepping in-to the do-or-way of the dim lit sa-lo-on that eve-ning, Fred was he-ard - by an exi-ting pat-ron - to mur-mur, *'Je con-na-is to-us ces bra-ves gens,'* then lo-ok aro-und with a gu-ilty twitch of che-ek. 'I me-an...' he mut-te-red, but didn't fi-nish.

Harry Bul-lard saw him first in the mir-ror. Twis-ting his he-ad aro-und on its fat co-lumn of neck, he sa-id. 'Cmon in, Fred, the whisky's fi-ne,' then, to the bar-ten-der, 'Draw one for the el-der man,' and chuck-led.

Fred wal-ked to the bar with the first smi-le he'd ma-na-ged to sum-mon that day. Pe-acock and Bul-lard gre-eted him and the bar-ten-der sent down a brim-ming ste-in.

'What's new, Fred?' Harry as-ked.

Fred pres-sed his mo-us-tac-he bet-we-en two fo-am-re-mo-ving fin-gers.

'Not much,' he sa-id, still too un-cer-ta-in to dis-cuss it. Din-ner with Eva had be-en a pa-in-ful me-al du-ring which he'd eaten not only fo-od but an end-less and de-ta-iled run-ning com-men-tary on the Thirty Ye-ars War, the Mag-na Char-ta and bo-udo-ir in-for-ma-ti-on abo-ut Cat-he-ri-ne the Gre-at. He had be-en glad to re-ti-re from the ho-use at se-ven-thirty, mur-mu-ring an un-ma-na-ge-ab-le, *'Bon nu-it, ma che-re.'*

'What's new with you?' he as-ked Harry Bul-lard now.

'Well,' Harry ans-we-red, 'we be-en pa-in-tin' down at the al-leys. You know, re-de-co-ra-tin.'

That right?' Fred sa-id. 'When pa-in-ting with co-lo-ured be-es-wax was in-con-ve-ni-ent, Gre-ek and Ro-man easel pa-in-ters used *tem-pe-ra* - that is, co-lo-urs fi-xed upon a wo-od or stuc-co ba-se by me-ans of such a me-di-um as -'

He stop-ped. The-re was a bul-ging si-len-ce.

'Hanh?' Harry Bullard asked.

Fred swallowed nervously. 'Nothing,' he said hastily. 'I was just - ' He stared down into the tan depths of his beer. 'Nothing,' he repeated.

Bullard glanced at Peacock, who shrugged back.

'How are your hot-house flowers coming, Lou?' Fred inquired, to change the subject.

The small man nodded. 'Fine. They're just fine.'

'Good,' said Fred, nodding, too. '*Vi so-no pui di cin-quan-te bas-ti-men-ti in por-to,*' He gritted his teeth and closed his eyes.

'What's that?' Lou asked, cupping one ear.

Fred coughed on his hastily swallowed beer. 'Nothing,' he said.

'No, what did you say?' Harry persisted, the half-smile on his broad face indicating that he was ready to hear a good joke.

'I - I said there are more than fifty ships in the harbor,' explained Fred morosely.

The smile faded. Harry looked blank.

'What harbor?' he asked.

Fred tried to sound casual. 'I - it's just a joke I heard today. But I forgot the last line.'

'Oh,' Harry stared at Fred, then returned to his drink. 'Ye-ah.'

They were quiet for a moment. Then Lou asked Fred, 'Through for the day?'

'No. I have to clean up the Math office later.'

Lou nodded. 'That's too bad.'

Fred squirmed more foam from his moustache. 'Tell me something,' he said, taking the plunge impulsively. 'What would you think if you woke up one morning talking French?'

'Who did that?' asked Harry, squinting.

'Nobody,' Fred said hurriedly. 'Just... *sup-posing*, I mean. Supposing a man was too - well, to *know* things he never learned. You know what I mean? Just *know* them. As if they were always in his mind and he was seeing them for the first time.'

'What kind of things, Fred?' asked Lou.

'Oh... history. Different... languages. Things about... books and paintings and... atoms and - chemicals.' His shrug was jerky and obvious. 'Things like that.'

'Don't get you, buddy,' Harry said, having given up any hopes that a joke was forthcoming.

'You mean he knows things he never learned?' Lou asked. 'That it?'

There was something in both their voices - a doubting incredulity, a holding back, as if they feared to commit themselves, a suspicious reticence.

Fred shrugged it off. 'I was just supposing. Forget it. It's not worth talking about.'

He had only one beer that night, leaving early with the excuse that he had to clean the Mathematics office. And, all through the silent minutes that he swept and mopped and dusted, he kept trying to figure out what was happening to him.

He walked home in the chill of night to find Eva waiting for him in the kitchen.

'Coffee, Fred?' she offered.

'I'd like that,' he said, nodding. She started to get up. 'No, *s'accomodi, la prego,*' he blurted.

She looked at him, grimaced.

'I mean,' he translated, 'sit down, Eva. I can get it.'

They sat there drinking coffee while he told her about his experiences.

'It's more than I can figure, Eva,' he said. 'It's... scary, in a way. I know so many things I never knew. I have no idea where they come from. Not the least idea.' His lips pressed together. 'But I *know* them,' he said, 'I certainly know them.'

'More than just... French now?' she asked.

He shook his head worriedly. 'Lots more,' he said. 'Like - ' He looked up from his cup. 'Listen to this. Main progress in producing fast particles has been made by using relatively small voltages and repeated acceleration. In most of the instruments used, charged particles

are dri-ven aro-und in cir-cu-lar or spi-ral or-bits with the help of a - You lis-te-nin', Eva?

He saw her Adam's ap-ple mo-ve. 'I'm lis-te-nin',' she sa-id.

' - help of a mag-ne-tic fi-eld. The ac-ce-le-ra-ti-on can be ap-pli-ed in dif-fe-rent ways. *In* the so-cal-led be-tat-ron of Kerst and Ser-ber -'

'What do-es it *me-an*, Fred?' she in-ter-rup-ted.

'I don't know,' he sa-id help-les-sly. 'It's... just words in my he-ad. I know what it me-ans when I say so-met-hing in a fo-re-ign ton-gue, but... this?'

She shi-ve-red, clas-ping at her fo-re-arms ab-ruptly.

'It's not right,' she sa-id.

He frow-ned at her in si-len-ce for a long mo-ment.

'What do you me-an, Eva?' he as-ked then.

'I don't know, Fred,' she sa-id qu-i-etly and sho-ok her he-ad on-ce, slowly. 'I just don't know.'

She wo-ke up abo-ut mid-night and he-ard him mumb-ling in his sle-ep.

The na-tu-ral lo-ga-rithms of who-le num-bers from ten to two hund-red. Num-ber one - *ze-ro* - two po-int three oh two six. *One* - two po-int three ni-ne se-ven ni-ne. *Two* - two po-int -'

'Fred, go t'sle-ep,' she sa-id, frow-ning ner-vo-usly.

' - fo-ur eight fo-ur ni-ne.'

She prod-ded him with an el-bow. 'Go t'sle-ep, Fred.'

Three - two po-int -'

'Fred!'

'Huh?' He mo-aned and swal-lo-wed dryly, tur-ned on his si-de.

In the dark-ness, she he-ard him sha-pe the pil-low with sle-ep-he-avy hands.

'Fred?' she cal-led softly.

He co-ug-hed. 'What?'

'I think you bet-ter go t'Doc-tor Bo-one t'mor-ra mor-nin!'

She he-ard him draw in a long bre-ath, then let it fil-ter out evenly un-til it was all go-ne.

'I think so, too,' he sa-id in a blurry vo-ice.

On Fri-day mor-ning, when he ope-ned the do-or to the wa-iting ro-om of Doc-tor Wil-li-am Bo-one, a draft of wind scat-te-red pa-pers from the nur-se's desk.

'Oh,' he sa-id apo-lo-ge-ti-cal-ly. '*Le chi-eg-go scu-se. Non ne val la pe-na.*'

Miss Ag-nes McCarthy had be-en Doc-tor Bo-one's re-cep-ti-onist-nur-se for se-ven ye-ars and in that ti-me she'd ne-ver he-ard Fred El-der-man spe-ak a sing-le fo-re-ign word.

Thus she gog-gled at him, ama-zed. 'What's that you sa-id?' she as-ked.

Fred's smi-le was a ner-vo-us twitch of the lips.

'Nothing,' he sa-id, 'miss.'

Her re-tur-ned smi-le was for-mal. 'Oh.' She cle-ared her thro-at. 'I'm sorry Doc-tor co-uld'n't see you yes-ter-day.'

'That's all right,' he told her.

'He'll be re-ady in abo-ut ten mi-nu-tes.'

Twenty mi-nu-tes la-ter, Fred sat down be-si-de Bo-one's desk and the he-avy-set doc-tor le-aned back in his cha-ir with an, 'Ailing, Fred?'

Fred exp-la-ined the si-tu-ati-on.

The doc-tor's cor-di-al smi-le be-ca-me, in or-der, amu-sed, fi-xed, stra-ined and fi-nal-ly no-ne-xis-tent.

'This is re-al-ly so?' he de-man-ded.

Fred nod-ded with grim de-li-be-ra-ti-on. '*Je me la-is-se con-se-il-ler.*'

Doctor Bo-one's he-avy eyeb-rows lif-ted a no-ti-ce-ab-le jot. 'French,' he sa-id. 'What'd you say?'

Fred swal-lo-wed. 'I sa-id I'm wil-ling to be ad-vi-sed.'

'Son of a gun,' in-to-ned Doc-tor Bo-one, pluc-king at his lo-wer lip. '*Son* of a gun.' He got up and ran exp-lo-ring hands over Fred's skull. 'You ha-ven't re-ce-ived a he-ad blow la-tely, ha-ve you?'

'No,' sa-id Fred. 'Not-hing.'

'Hmmm.' Doc-tor Bo-one drew away his hands and let them drop to his si-des. 'Well, no ap-pa-rent bumps or cracks,' He buz-zed for Miss McCarthy. Then he sa-id, 'Well, let's ta-ke a try at the X-rays.'

The X-rays re-ve-aled no bre-aks or blots.

The two men sat in the of-fi-ce, dis-cus-sing it.

'Hard to be-li-eve,' sa-id the doc-tor, sha-king his he-ad. Fred 'sig-hed des-pon-dently. 'Well, don't ta-ke on so,' Bo-one sa-id. 'It's not-hing to be dis-tur-bed abo-ut. So you're a qu-iz kid, so what?'

Fred ran ner-vo-us fin-gers over his mo-us-tac-he. 'But the-re's no sen-se to it. Why is it hap-pe-ning? What is it? The fact is, I'm a lit-tle sca-red.'

'Nonsense, Fred. *Non-sen-se*. You're in go-od physi-cal con-di-ti-on. That I gu-aran-tee.'

'But what abo-ut my - ' Fred he-si-ta-ted - 'my bra-in?'

Doctor Bo-one stuck out his lo-wer lip in con-so-ling de-ri-si-on, sha-king his he-ad. I wo-uldn't worry abo-ut that, eit-her.' He slap-ped one palm on the desk top. 'Let me think abo-ut it, Fred. Con-sult a few as-so-ci-ates. You know - *anal-y-se* it. Then I'll let you know. Fa-ir eno-ugh?'

He wal-ked Fred to the do-or.

'In the me-an-ti-me,' he presc-ri-bed, 'no wor-rying abo-ut it. The-re isn't a thing to worry abo-ut.'

His fa-ce as he di-al-led the pho-ne a few mi-nu-tes la-ter was not un-wor-ri-ed, ho-we-ver.

'Fetlock?' he sa-id, get-ting his party. 'Got a po-ser for you.'

Habit mo-re than thirst bro-ught Fred to the Wind-mill that eve-ning. Eva had wan-ted him to stay ho-me and rest, as-su-ming that his sta-te was due to over-work; but Fred had in-sis-ted that it wasn't his he-alth and left the ho-use, just ma-na-ging to muf-fle his '*Au re-vo-ir*.'

He jo-ined Harry Bui lard and Lou Pe-acock at the bar and fi-nis-hed his first be-er in a glum si-len-ce whi-le Harry re-ve-aled why they sho-uld'n't vo-te for Le-gis-la-tor Mil-ford Car-pen-ter.

Tell ya the man's got a pri-va-te li-ne t'Mos-cow,' he sa-id. 'A few men li-ke that in of-fi-ce and we're in for it, ta-ke my word.' He lo-oked over at Fred sta-ning in-to his be-er. 'What's with it, el-der man?' he as-ked, clap-ping Fred on the sho-ul-der.

Fred told them - as if he we-re tel-ling abo-ut a di-se-ase he'd ca-ught.

Lou Pe-acock lo-oked inc-re-du-lo-us. 'So that's what you we-re tal-king abo-ut the ot-her night!'

Fred nod-ded.

'You're not kid-din' us now?' Harry as-ked. 'Y'know *every-thing*'

'Just abo-ut,' Fred ad-mit-ted sadly.

A shrewd lo-ok over-ca-me Harry's fa-ce.

'What if I ask ya so-met-hin' ya *don't* know?'

'I'd be happy,' Fred sa-id in a des-pa-iring vo-ice.

Harry be-amed. 'Okay. I won't ask you abo-ut atoms nor che-mi-cals nor anyt-hin' li-ke that. I'll just ask ya t'tell me abo-ut the co-untry bet-we-en my ho-me town Au Sab-le and Tar-va.' He hit the bar with a con-ten-ted slap.

Fred lo-oked ho-pe-ful bri-efly, but then his fa-ce blan-ked and he sa-id in an un-hap-py vo-ice. 'Bet-we-en Au Sab-le and Tar-va, the ro-ute is thro-ugh typi-cal cut-over land that on-ce was co-ve-red with vir-gin pi-ne (*dan-ger: de-er on the high-way*) and now has only se-cond-growth oak, pi-ne and pop-lar. For ye-ars af-ter the dec-li-ne of the lum-ber in-dustry, pic-king huck-le-ber-ri-es was one of the chi-ef lo-cal oc-cu-pa-ti-ons.'

Harry ga-ped.

'Because the ber-ri-es we-re known to grow in the wa-ke of fi-res,' Fred conc-lu-ded, 're-si-dents de-li-be-ra-tely set many fi-res that ro-ared thro-ugh the co-untry.'

'That's a damn dirty lie!' Harry sa-id, chin tremb-ling bel-li-ge-rently.

Fred lo-oked at him in surp-ri-se.

'You sho-uld'n't ought to go a-ro-und tel-lin' li-es li-ke that,' Harry sa-id. 'You call that kno-win' the co-untry-si-de - tel-ling *li-es* abo-ut it?'

'Take it easy, Harry,' Lou ca-uti-oned.

'Well,' Harry sa-id ang-rily, 'he sho-uld'n't ought to tell li-es li-ke that.'

'I didn't say it,' Fred ans-we-red ho-pe-les-sly. 'It's mo-re as tho-ugh I -I *re-ad it off.*'

'Yeah? Well...' Harry fin-ge-red his glass rest-les-sly.

'You re-al-ly know *ever-y-t-hing?*' Lou as-ked, partly to ease the ten-si-on, partly be-ca-use he was awed.

'I'm af-ra-id so,' Fred rep-li-ed.

'You ain't just... pla-yin' a trick?'

Fred sho-ok his he-ad. 'No trick.'

Lou Pe-acock lo-oked small and in-ten-se. 'What can you tell me,' he as-ked in a back-alley vo-ice, 'abo-ut oran-ge ro-ses?'

The blank lo-ok cros-sed Fred's fa-ce aga-in. Then he re-ci-ted.

'Orange is not a fun-da-men-tal co-lo-ur but a blend of red and pink of va-ri-ed in-ten-sity and yel-low. The-re was very few oran-ge ro-ses pri-or to the Per-na-tia stra-in. All oran-ge, ap-ri-cot, cha-mo-is and co-ral ro-ses fi-nish with pink mo-re or less ac-cen-tu-ated. So-me at-ta-in that lo-vely sha-de - *Cu-is-se de Nymphe emue.*'

Lou Pe-acock was open-mo-ut-hed. 'Ain't that so-met-hing?' Harry Bul-lard blew out he-avy bre-ath. 'What d'ya know abo-ut Car-pen-ter?' he as-ked pug-na-ci-o-usly.

'Carpenter, Mil-ford, born 1898 in Chi-ca-go, Il-li -'

'Never mind,' Harry cut in. 'I ain't in-te-res-ted. He's a Com-mie; that's all I got-ta know abo-ut him.'

'The ele-ments that go in-to a po-li-ti-cal cam-pa-ign,' qu-oth Fred help-les-sly, 'are many - the per-so-na-lity of the can-di-da-tes, the is-su-es - if any - the at-ti-tu-de of the press, eco-no-mic gro-ups, tra-di-ti-ons, the opi-ni-on polls, the -'

'I tell ya he's a Com-mie!' Harry dec-la-red, vo-ice ri-sing.

'You vo-ted for him last elec-ti-on,' Lou sa-id. 'As I re -'

'I did *not!*' snar-led Harry, get-ting red-der in the fa-ce.

The blank lo-ok ap-pe-ared on Fred El-der-man's fa-ce. 'Re-mem-be-ring things that are not so is a kind of me-mory dis-tor-ti-on that go-es by se-ve-ral na-mes as *pat-ho-lo-gi-cal lying* or *mytho-ma-nia.*'

'You cal-lin' me a li-ar, Fred?'

'It dif-fers from or-di-nary lying in that the spe-aker co-mes to be-li-eve his own li-es and -'

'Where did you get that black eye?' a shoc-ked Eva as-ked Fred when he ca-me in-to the kitc-hen la-ter. 'Ha-ve you be-en figh-ting at *yo-ur* age?'

Then she saw the lo-ok on his fa-ce and ran for the ref-ri-ge-ra-tor. She sat him on a cha-ir and held a pi-ecce of be-efs-te-ak aga-inst his swel-ling eye whi-le he re-la-ted what had hap-pe-ned.

'He's a bully,' she sa-id. 'A bully!'

'No, I don't bla-me him,' Fred di-sag-re-ed. 'I in-sul-ted him. I don't even know what I'm sa-ying any mo-re. I'm - I'm all mi-xed up.'

She lo-oked down at his slum-ped form, an alar-med exp-res-si-on on her fa-ce. 'When is Doc-tor Bo-one go-ing to *do* so-met-hing for you?'

'I don't know.'

A half ho-ur la-ter, aga-inst Eva's wis-hes, he went to cle-an up the lib-rary with a fel-low jani-tor; but the mo-ment he en-te-red the hu-ge ro-om, he gas-ped, put his hands to his temp-les and fell down on one knee, gas-ping, 'My he-ad! *My he-ad!*'

It to-ok a long whi-le of sit-ting qu-i-etly in the downs-ta-irs hal-lway be-fo-re the pa-in in his skull stop-ped. He sat the-re sta-ri-ng fi-xedly at the glossy ti-le flo-or, his he-ad fe-eling as if it had just go-ne twenty-ni-ne ro-unds with the he-avy-we-ight cham-pi-on of the world.

Fetlock ca-me in the mor-ning. Art-hur B., forty-two, short and stocky, he-ad of the De-part-ment of Psycho-lo-gi-cal Sci-en-ces, he ca-me bust-ling along the path in pork-pie hat and che-qu-ered

over-co-at, jum-ped up on the porch, step-ped ac-ross its worn bo-ards and stab-bed at the bell but-ton. Whi-le he wa-ited, he clap-ped le-at-her-glo-ved hands to-get-her ener-ge-ti-cal-ly and blew out bre-ath clo-uds.

'Yes?' Eva as-ked when she ope-ned the do-or.

Professor Fet-lock exp-la-ined his mis-si-on, not no-ti-cing how her fa-ce tigh-te-ned with fright when he an-no-un-ced his fi-eld. Re-as-su-red that Doc-tor Bo-one had sent him, she led Fet-lock up the car-pe-ted steps, exp-la-ining, 'He's still in bed. He had an at-tack last night.

'Oh?' sa-id Art-hur Fet-lock.

When int-ro-duc-ti-ons had be-en ma-de and he was alo-ne with the jani-tor, Pro-fes-sor Fet-lock fi-red a ra-pid se-ri-es of qu-es-ti-ons, Fred El-der-man, prop-ped up with pil-lows, ans-we-red them as well as he co-uld.

This at-tack,' sa-id Fet-lock, 'what hap-pe-ned?'

'Don't know, Pro-fes-sor, Wal-ked in the lib-rary and - well, it was as if a ton of ce-ment hit me on the he-ad. No - *in* my he-ad.'

'Amazing. And this know-led-ge you say you've ac-qu-ired -are you cons-ci-o-us of an *in-c-re-ase* in it sin-ce yo-ur ill-fa-ted vi-sit to the lib-rary?'

Fred nod-ded. 'I know mo-re than ever.'

The pro-fes-sor bo-un-ced the fin-ger-tips of both hands aga-inst each ot-her. 'A bo-ok on lan-gu-age by Pei. Sec-ti-on 9-B in the lib-rary, bo-ok num-ber 429.2, if me-mory ser-ves. Can you qu-ote from it?'

Fred lo-oked blank, but words fol-lo-wed al-most im-me-di-ately. 'Le-ib-nitz first ad-van-ced the the-ory that all lan-gu-age ca-me not from a his-to-ri-cal-ly re-cor-ded so-ur-ce but from pro-to-spe-ech. In so-me res-pects he was a pre-cur-sor of -'

'Good, go-od,' sa-id Art-hur Fet-lock. 'Appa-rently a ca-se of spon-ta-ne-o-us te-le-pat-hic ma-ni-fes-ta-ti-ons co-up-led with cla-ir-vo-yan-ce.'

'Meaning?'

'Telepathy, El-der-man. Te-le-pathy! Se-ems every bo-ok or edu-ca-ted mind you co-me ac-ross, you pick cle-an of con-tent. You wor-ked in the French of-fi-ce, you spo-ke French. You wor-ked in the Mat-he-ma-tics of-fi-ce, you qu-oted num-bers, tab-les, axi-oms. Si-mi-larly with all ot-her of-fi-ces, su-bj-ects and in-di-vi-du-als.' He scow-led, pur-se-lip-ped. 'Ah, but why?'

'*Causa qua re,*' mut-te-red Fred.

A bri-ef wry so-und in Pro-fes-sor Fet-lock's thro-at. 'Yes, I wish I knew, too. Ho-we-ver...' He le-aned for-ward. 'What's that?'

'How co-me I can le-arn so much?' Fred as-ked wor-ri-edly, 'I me-an -'

'No dif-fi-culty the-re,' sta-ted the stocky psycho-lo-gist. 'You see, no man ever uti-li-zed the full le-ar-ning ca-pa-city of the bra-in. It still has an im-men-se po-ten-ti-al. Per-haps that's what's hap-pe-ning to you - you're re-ali-sing this po-ten-ti-al.'

'But how?'

'Spontaneously re-ali-sed te-le-pathy and cla-ir-vo-yan-ce plus in-fi-ni-te re-ten-ti-on and un-li-mi-ted po-ten-ti-al.' He whist-led softly. 'Ama-zing. Po-si-ti-vely ama-zing. Well, I must be go-ing.'

'But what'll I do?' Fred beg-ged.

'Why, enj-oy it,' sa-id the pro-fes-sor ex-pan-si-vely. 'It's a per-fectly fan-tas-tic gift. Now lo-ok - if I we-re to gat-her to-get-her a gro-up of fa-culty mem-bers, wo-uld you be wil-ling to spe-ak to them? In-for-mal-ly, of co-ur-se.'

'But -'

'They sho-uld be ent-ran-ced, po-si-ti-vely ent-ran-ced. I must do a pa-per for the *Jo-ur-nal.*'

'But what do-es it me-an, Pro-fes-sor?' Fred El-der-man as-ked, his vo-ice sha-king.

'Oh, we'll lo-ok in-to it, ne-ver fe-ar. Re-al-ly, this is re-vo-lu-ti-onary. An un-pa-ral-le-led phe-no-me-non.' He ma-de a so-und of de-ligh-ted dis-be-li-ef. 'In-cre-dib-le.'

When Pro-fes-sor Fet-lock had go-ne, Fred sat de-fe-atedly in his bed. So the-re was not-hing to be do-ne - not-hing but spo-ut end-less, inexp-li-cab-le words and won-der in-to the nights what ter-rib-le thing was hap-pe-ning to him. May-be the pro-fes-sor was ex-ci-ted; may-be it was ex-ci-ting in-tel-lec-tu-al fa-re for out-si-ders. For him, it was only grim and inc-re-asingly frigh-te-ning bu-si-ness.

'Why? Why? It was the qu-es-ti-on he co-uld ne-it-her ans-wer nor es-ca-pe.

He was thin-king that when Eva ca-me in. He lif-ted his ga-ze as she cros-sed the ro-om and sat down on the bed.

'What did he say?' she as-ked an-xi-o-usly.

When he told her, her re-ac-ti-on was the sa-me as his.

That's all? Enj-oy it?' She pres-sed her lips to-get-her in an-ger. 'What's the mat-ter with him? Why did Doc-tor Bo-one send him?'

He sho-ok his he-ad, wit-ho-ut an ans-wer.

There was such a lo-ok of con-fu-sed fe-ar on his fa-ce that she 're-ac-hed out her hand sud-denly and to-uc-hed his che-ek. 'Do-es yo-ur he-ad hurt, de-ar?'

'It hurts in-si-de,' he sa-id. 'In my... ' The-re was a clic-king in his thro-at. 'If one con-si-ders the bra-in as a tis-sue which is only mo-de-ra-tely comp-res-sib-le, sur-ro-un-ded by two va-ri-ab-le fac-tors - the blo-od it con-tains and the spi-nal flu-id which sur-ro-unds it and fills the vent-ric-les in-si-de the bra-in we ha-ve -'

He bro-ke off spas-mo-di-cal-ly and sat the-re, qu-ive-ring.

'God help us,' she whis-pe-red.

'As Sex-tus Em-pi-ri-cus says in his *Ar-gu-ments Aga-inst Be-li-ef in a God*, tho-se who af-firm, po-si-ti-vely, that God exists can-not avo-id fal-ling in-to an im-pi-ety. For -'

'Fred stop it!'

He sat lo-oking at her da-zedly.

'Fred, you don't... know what you're sa-ying. Do you?'

'No. I ne-ver do. I just - Eva, what's go-ing on!'

She held his hand tightly and stro-ked it. 'It's all right, Fred. Ple-ase don't worry so.'

But he did worry. For be-hind the comp-lex know-led-ge that fil-led his mind, he was still the sa-me man, simp-le, un-comp-re-hen-ding - and af-ra-id.

Why was it hap-pe-ning?

It was as if, in so-me hi-de-o-us way, he we-re a spon-ge fil-ling mo-re and mo-re with know-led-ge and the-re wo-uld co-me a ti-me when the-re was no ro-om left and the spon-ge wo-uld exp-lo-de.

Professor Fet-lock stop-ped him in the hal-lway Mon-day mor-ning. 'Elder-man, I've spo-ken to the mem-bers of the fa-culty and they're all as ex-ci-ted as I. Wo-uld this af-ter-no-on be too so-on? I can get you ex-cu-sed from any work you may be re-qu-ired to do.'

Fred lo-oked ble-akly at the pro-fes-sor's ent-hu-si-as-tic fa-ce. 'It's all right.'

'Splendid! Shall we say fo-ur-thirty then? My of-fi-ces?'

'All right.'

'And may I ma-ke a sug-ges-ti-on?' as-ked the pro-fes-sor. 'I'd li-ke you to to-ur the uni-ver-sity - all of it.'

When they se-pa-ra-ted, Fred went back down to the ba-se-ment to put away his to-ols.

At fo-ur twenty-fi-ve, he pus-hed open the he-avy do-or to the De-part-ment of Psycho-lo-gi-cal Sci-en-ces. He sto-od the-re, wa-iting pa-ti-ently, one hand on the knob, un-til so-me-one in the lar-ge gro-up of fa-culty mem-bers saw him. Pro-fes-sor Fet-lock di-sen-ga-ged him-self from the gro-up and hur-ri-ed over.

'Elderman,' he sa-id, 'co-me in, co-me in.'

'Professor, has Doc-tor Bo-one sa-id anyt-hing mo-re?' Fred in-sis-ted. 'I me-an abo-ut -'

'No, not-hing. Ne-ver fe-ar, we'll get to it. But co-me along. I want you to - La-di-es and gent-le-men, yo-ur at-ten-ti-on, ple-ase!'

Fred was int-ro-du-ced to them, stan-ding in-the-ir midst, trying to lo-ok at ease when his he-art and

ner-ves we-re pul-sing with a ner-vo-us dre-ad.

'And did you fol-low my sug-ges-ti-on,' Fet-lock as-ked lo-udly, 'and to-ur all the de-part-ments in the uni-ver-sity?'

'Yes... sir.'

'Good, go-od.' Pro-fes-sor Fet-lock nod-ded emp-ha-ti-cal-ly. 'That sho-uld comp-le-te the pic-tu-re then. Ima-gi-ne it, la-di-es and gent-le-men - the sum to-tal of know-led-ge in our en-ti-re uni-ver-sity - all in the he-ad of this one man!'

There we-re so-unds of do-ubt from the fa-culty.

'No, no, I'm se-ri-o-us!' cla-imed Fet-lock. The pro-of of the pud-ding is qu-ite amp-le. Ask away.'

Fred El-der-man sto-od the-re in the mo-men-tary si-len-ce, thin-king of what Pro-fes-sor Fet-lock had sa-id. The know-led-ge of an en-ti-re uni-ver-sity in his he-ad. That me-ant the-re was no mo-re to be got-ten he-re then.

What now?

Then the qu-es-ti-ons ca-me - and the ans-wers, de-ad-vo-iced and mo-no-to-no-us.

'What will hap-pen to the sun in fif-te-en mil-li-on ye-ars?'

'If the sun go-es on ra-di-ating at its pre-sent ra-te for fif-te-en mil-li-on ye-ars, its who-le we-ight will be trans-for-med in-to ra-di-ati-on.'

'What is a ro-ot to-ne?'

'In har-mo-nic units, the cons-ti-tu-ent to-nes se-em to ha-ve une-qu-al har-mo-nic va-lu-es. So-me se-em to be mo-re im-por-tant and do-mi-na-te the so-un-ding unity. The-se ro-ots are -'

All the know-led-ge of an en-ti-re uni-ver-sity in his he-ad.

'The fi-ve or-ders of Ro-man arc-hi-tec-tu-re.'

Tuscan, Do-ric, Co-rint-hi-an, Ionic, Com-po-si-te. Tus-can be-ing a simp-li-fi-ed Do-ric, Do-ric re-ta-ining the triglyphs, Co-rint-hi-an cha-rac-te-ri-sed by -'

No mo-re know-led-ge the-re he didn't pos-sess. His bra-in cram-med with it. Why?

'Buffer ca-pa-city?'

The buf-fer ca-pa-city of a so-lu-ti-on may be de-fi-ned as dx/dpH whe-re dx is the small amo-unt of strong acid or -'

Why?

'A mo-ment ago. French.'

'*Il n'y a qu'un in-s-tant.*'

Endless qu-es-ti-ons, inc-re-asingly ex-ci-ted un-til they we-re al-most be-ing sho-uted.

'What is li-te-ra-tu-re in-vol-ved with?'

'Literature is, of its na-tu-re, in-vol-ved with ide-as be-ca-use it de-als with Man in so-ci-ety, which is to say that it de-als with for-mu-la-ti-ons, va-lu-ati-ons and -'

Why?

'Rules for mast-he-ad lights on ste-am ves-sels?' A la-ugh.

'A ste-am ves-sel when un-der way shall carry (a) on or in front of the fo-re-mast or, if a ves-sel wit-ho-ut a fo-re-mast, then in the fo-re-part of the ves-sel, a bright, whi-te light so const-ruc-ted as to -'

No la-ugh-ter. Qu-es-ti-ons.

'How wo-uld a three-sta-ge roc-ket ta-ke off?'

'The three-sta-ge roc-ket wo-uld ta-ke off ver-ti-cal-ly and be gi-ven a slight tilt in an eas-terly di-rec-ti-on, Bren-nsch-luss ta-king pla-ce abo-ut -'

'Who was Co-unt Ber-na-dot-te?'

'What are the by-pro-ducts of oil?'

'Which city is -'

'How can -'

'What is-'

'When did-'

And when it was over and he had ans-we-red every qu-es-ti-on they as-ked, the-re was a gre-at,

he-avy si-len-ce. He sto-od tremb-ling and yet numb, be-gin-ning to get a fi-nal know-led-ge.

The pho-ne rang then and ma-de ever-yo-ne start.

Professor Fet-lock ans-we-red it. 'For you El-der-man.'

Fred wal-ked over to the pho-ne and pic-ked up the re-ce-iver.

'Fred?' he he-ard Eva say.

'*Oui*'

'What?'

He twitc-hed. 'I'm sorry, Eva. I me-an yes, it's I.'

He he-ard her swal-lo-wing on the ot-her end of the li-ne. 'Fred,' I... just won-de-red why you didn't co-me ho-me, so I cal-led yo-ur of-fi-ce and Char-lie sa-id -'

He told her abo-ut the me-eting.

'Oh,' she sa-id. 'Well, will you be - ho-me for sup-per?'

The last know-led-ge was se-eping, ri-sing slowly.

'I'll try, Eva. I think so, yes.'

'I be-en wor-ri-ed, Fred.'

He smi-led sadly. 'Not-hing to worry abo-ut, Eva.'

Then the mes-sa-ge sli-ced ab-ruptly ac-ross his mind and he sa-id, 'Go-od-bye Eva,' and drop-ped the re-ce-iver. 'I ha-ve to go,' he told Fet-lock and the ot-hers.

He didn't exactly he-ar what they sa-id in re-turn. The words, the tran-si-ti-on from ro-om to hall we-re blur-red over by his sud-den, con-cent-ra-ted ne-ed to get out on the cam-pus.

The qu-es-ti-oning fa-ces we-re go-ne and he was hur-rying down the hall on dri-ven fe-et, his ac-ti-on as his spe-ech had be-en - un-mo-ti-va-ted, be-yond un-ders-tan-ding. So-met-hing drew him on. He had spo-ken wit-ho-ut kno-wing why; now he rus-hed down the long hal-lway wit-ho-ut kno-wing why.

He rus-hed ac-ross the lobby, gas-ping for bre-ath. The mes-sa-ge he sa-id. *Co-me. It's ti-me.*

These things, the-se many things - who wo-uld want to know them? The-se end-less facts abo-ut all earthy know-led-ge.

Earthly know-led-ge...

As he ca-me half trip-ping, half run-ning down the bu-il-ding steps in-to the early dark-ness, he saw the flic-ke-ring blu-ish whi-te light in the sky. It was aiming over the tre-es, the bu-il-dings, stra-ight at him.

He sto-od pet-ri-fi-ed, sta-ring at it, and knew exactly why he had ac-qu-ired all the know-led-ge he had.

The blue-whi-te light bo-re di-rectly at him with a pi-er-cing, whi-ning hum. Ac-ross the dark cam-pus, a yo-ung girl scre-amed.

Life on the ot-her pla-nets, the last words cros-sed his mind, *is not only pos-si-bi-lity but high pro-ba-bi-lity.*

Then the light hit him and bo-un-ced stra-ight back up to its so-ur-ce, li-ke light-ning stre-aking in re-ver-se from light-ning rod to storm clo-ud, le-aving him in aw-ful black-ness.

They fo-und the old man wan-de-ring ac-ross the cam-pus grass li-ke a som-nam-bu-lant mu-te. They spo-ke to him, but his ton-gue was still. Fi-nal-ly, they we-re ob-li-ged to lo-ok in his wal-let, whe-re they fo-und his na-me and ad-dress and to-ok him ho-me.

A ye-ar la-ter, af-ter le-ar-ning to talk all over aga-in, he sa-id his first stumb-ling words. He sa-id them one night to his wi-fe when she fo-und him in the bath-ro-om hol-ding a spon-ge in his hand.

'Fred, what are you do-ing?'

I be-en squ-e-ezed, he sa-id.

7 - THE HOLIDAY MAN

"You'll be la-te, " she sa-id.

He le-aned back ti-redly in his cha-ir.

"I know," he ans-we-red.

They we-re in the kitc-hen ha-ving bre-ak-fast. Da-vid hadn't eaten much. Mostly, he'd drunk black cof-fee and sta-red at the tab-lec-loth. The-re we-re thin li-nes run-ning thro-ugh it that lo-ok-ed li-ke in-ter-sec-ting high-ways.

"Well?" she sa-id.

He shi-ve-red and to-ok his eyes from the tab-lec-loth.

"Yes," he sa-id. "All right."

He kept sit-ting the-re.

"*David*," she sa-id.

"I know, I know," he sa-id, "I'll be la-te." He wasn't angry. The-re was no an-ger left in him.

"You cer-ta-inly will," she sa-id, but-te-ring her to-ast. She spre-ad on thick rasp-ber-ry jam, then bit off a pi-ece and che-wed it crack-lingly.

David got up and wal-ked ac-ross the kitc-hen. At the do-or he stop-ped and tur-ned. He sta-red at the back of her he-ad.

"Why co-uldn't I?" he as-ked aga-in.

"Because you can't," she sa-id. "That's all."

"But *why*?"

"Because they ne-ed you," she sa-id. "Be-ca-use they pay you well and you co-uldn't do any-thing el-se. Isn't it ob-vi-o-us?"

"They co-uld find so-me-one el-se."

"Oh, stop it," she sa-id. "You know they co-uldn't."

He clo-sed his hands in-to fists. "Why sho-uld I be the one?" he as-ked.

She didn't ans-wer. She sat eating her to-ast.

"Jean?"

"There's not-hing mo-re to say," she sa-id, che-wing. She tur-ned aro-und. "Now, will you go?" she sa-id. "You sho-uldn't be la-te to-day."

David felt a chill in his flesh.

"No," he sa-id, "not to-day."

He wal-ked out of the kitc-hen and went ups-ta-irs. The-re, he brus-hed his te-eth, po-lis-hed his sho-es and put on a tie. Be-fo-re eight he was down aga-in. He went in-to the kitc-hen.

"Goodbye," he sa-id.

She til-ted up her che-ek for him and he kis-sed it. "Bye, de-ar," she sa-id. "Ha-ve a-" She stop-ped ab-ruptly.

"-nice day?" he fi-nis-hed for her. "Thank you." He tur-ned away. "I'll ha-ve a lo-vely day."

Long ago he had stop-ped dri-ving a car. Mor-nings he wal-ked to the ra-il-ro-ad sta-ti-on. He didn't even li-ke to ri-de with so-me-one el-se or ta-ke a bus.

At the sta-ti-on he sto-od out-si-de on the plat-form wa-iting for the tra-in. He had no news-pa-per. He ne-ver bo-ught them any mo-re. He didn't li-ke to re-ad the pa-pers.

"Mornin', Gar-ret."

He tur-ned and saw Henry Co-ul-ter who al-so wor-ked in the city. Co-ul-ter pat-ted him on the back.

"Good mor-ning," Da-vid sa-id.

"How's it go-in?" Co-ul-ter as-ked.

"Fine. Thank you."

"Good. Lo-okin' for-ward to the Fo-urth?"

David swal-lo-wed. "Well..." he be-gan.

"Myself, I'm ta-kin' the fa-mily to the wo-ods," sa-id Co-ul-ter. "No lo-usy fi-re-works for us. Pi-lin' in-to the old bus and he-adin' out till the fi-re-works are over."

"Driving," sa-id Da-vid.

"Yes, sir," sa-id Co-ul-ter. "Far as we can."

It be-gan by it-self. No, he tho-ught; *not now*. He for-ced it back in-to its dark-ness.

"-tising bu-si-ness," Co-ul-ter fi-nis-hed.

"What?" he as-ked.

"Said I trust things are go-in' well in the ad-ver-ti-sing bu-si-ness."

David cle-ared his thro-at.

"Oh, yes," he sa-id. "Fi-ne." He al-ways for-got abo-ut the lie he'd told Co-ul-ter.

When the tra-in ar-ri-ved he sat in the No Smo-king car, kno-wing that Co-ul-ter al-ways smo-ked a ci-gar en ro-ute. He didn't want to sit with Co-ul-ter. Not now.

All the way to the city he sat lo-oking out the win-dow. Mostly he watc-hed ro-ad and high-way traf-fic; but, on-ce, whi-le the tra-in rat-tled over a brid-ge, he sta-red down at the mir-ror li-ke sur-fa-ce of a la-ke. On-ce he put his he-ad back and lo-oked up at the sun.

He was ac-tu-al-ly to the ele-va-tor when he stop-ped.

"Up?" sa-id the man in the ma-ro-on uni-form. He lo-oked at Da-vid ste-adily. "Up?" he sa-id. Then he clo-sed the rol-ling do-ors.

David sto-od mo-ti-on-less. Pe-op-le be-gan to clus-ter aro-und him. In a mo-ment, he tur-ned and sho-ul-de-red by them, pus-hing thro-ugh the re-vol-ving do-or. As he ca-me out, the oven he-at of July sur-ro-un-ded him. He mo-ved along the si-de-walk li-ke a man as-le-ep. On the next block he en-te-red a bar.

Inside, it was cold and dim. The-re we-re no cus-to-mers. Not even the bar-ten-der was vi-sib-le. Da-vid sank down in the sha-dow of a bo-oth and to-ok his hat off. He le-aned his he-ad back and clo-sed his eyes.

He co-uldn't do it. He simply co-uld not go up to his of-fi-ce. No mat-ter what Je-an sa-id, no mat-ter what an-yo-ne sa-id. He clas-ped his hands on the tab-le ed-ge and squ-e-ezed them un-til the rin-gers we-re pres-sed dry of blo-od. He just *wo-uldn't*.

"Help you?" as-ked a vo-ice.

David ope-ned his eyes. The bar-ten-der was stan-ding by the bo-oth, lo-oking down at him.

"Yes, uh... be-er," he sa-id. He ha-ted be-er but he knew he had to buy so-met-hing for the pri-vi-le-ge of sit-ting in the chilly si-len-ce un-dis-tur-bed. He wo-uldn't drink it.

The bar-ten-der bro-ught the be-er and Da-vid pa-id for it. Then, when the bar-ten-der had go-ne, he be-gan to turn the glass slowly on the tab-le top. Whi-le he was do-ing this it be-gan aga-in. With a gasp, he pus-hed it away. No!, he told it, sa-va-gely.

In a whi-le he got up and left the bar. It was past ten. That didn't mat-ter of co-ur-se. They knew he was al-ways la-te. They knew he al-ways tri-ed to bre-ak away from it and ne-ver co-uld.

His of-fi-ce was at the back of the su-ite, a small cu-bic-le fur-nis-hed only with a rug, so-fa, and a small desk on which lay pen-cils and whi-te pa-per. It was all he ne-eded. On-ce, he'd had a sec-re-tary but he hadn't li-ked the idea of her sit-ting out-si-de the do-or and lis-te-ning to him scre-am.

No one saw him en-ter. He let him-self in from the hall thro-ugh a pri-va-te do-or. In-si-de, he re-loc-ked the do-or, then to-ok off his su-it co-at and la-id it ac-ross the desk. It was stuffy in the of-fi-ce so he wal-ked ac-ross the flo-or and pul-led up the win-dow.

Far be-low, the city mo-ved. He sto-od watc-hing it. How many of them? he tho-ught.

Sighing he-avily, he tur-ned. Well, he was he-re. The-re was no po-int in he-si-ta-ting any lon-ger. He was com-mit-ted now. The best thing was to get it over and cle-ar out.

He drew the blinds, wal-ked over to the co-uch and lay down. He fus-sed a lit-tle with the pil-low, then stretc-hed on-ce and was still. Al-most im-me-di-ately, he felt his limbs go-ing numb.

It be-gan.

He did not stop it now. It trick-led on his bra-in li-ke mel-ted ice. It rus-hed li-ke win-ter wind. It spun li-ke bliz-zard va-por. It le-aped and ran and bil-lo-wed and exp-lo-ded and his mind was fil-led with it. He grew ri-gid and be-gan to gasp, his chest twitc-hing with bre-ath, the be-ating of his he-art a vi-olent

stag-ger. His hands drew in li-ke whi-te ta-lons, clutc-hing and scratc-hing at the co-uch. He shi-ve-red and gro-aned and writ-hed. Fi-nal-ly he scre-amed. He scre-amed for a very long whi-le.

When it was do-ne, he lay limp and mo-ti-on-less on the co-uch, his eyes li-ke balls of fro-zen glass. When he co-uld, he ra-ised his arm and lo-okod at his wrist-watch. It was al-most two.

He strug-gled to his fe-et. His bo-nes felt she-at-hed with le-ad but he ma-na-ged to stumb-le to his desk and sit be-fo-re it.

There he wro-te on a she-et of pa-per and, when he was fi-nis-hed, slum-ped ac-ross the desk and fell in-to ex-ha-us-ted sle-ep.

Later, he wo-ke up and to-ok the she-et of pa-per to his su-pe-ri-or, who, lo-oking it over, nod-ded.

"Four hund-red eighty-six, huh?" the su-pe-ri-or sa-id. "You're su-re of that?"

"I'm su-re," sa-id Da-vid, qu-i-etly. "I watc-hed every one." He didn't men-ti-on that Co-ul-ter and his fa-mily we-re among them.

"All right," sa-id his su-pe-ri-or. "Let's see now. Fo-ur hund-red fifty-two from traf-fic ac-ci-dents, eigh-te-en from drow-ning, se-ven from sun-stro-ke, three from fi-re-works, six from mis-cel-la-ne-o-us ca-uses."

Such as a lit-tle girl be-ing bur-ned to de-ath, Da-vid tho-ught. Such as a baby boy eating ant po-ison. Such as a wo-man be-ing elect-ro-cu-ted; a man dying of sna-ke bi-te.

"Well," his su-pe-ri-or sa-id, "let's ma-ke it-oh, fo-ur hund-red and fifty. It's al-ways imp-res-si-ve when mo-re pe-op-le die than we pre-dict."

"Of co-ur-se," Da-vid sa-id.

The item was on the front pa-ge of all the news-pa-pers that af-ter-no-on. Whi-le Da-vid was ri-ding ho-me the man in front of him tur-ned to his ne-igh-bo-ur and sa-id, "What I'd li-ke to know is *how can they tell?*"

David got up and went back on the plat-form on the end of the car. Un-til he got off, he sto-od the-re lis-te-ning to the tra-in whe-els and thin-king abo-ut La-bor Day.

8 - DANCE OF THE DEAD

I wan-na RI-DE!

with my Ro-ta-Mo-ta ho-ney

by my SI-DE!

As we whiz along the hig-h-way

"We will HUG and SNUG-GLE and we'll ha-ve a lit-tle STRUG-GLE!"

Struggle (strug'l)

Act of pro-mis-cu-o-us lo-vep-lay; usa-ge evol-ved du-ring W.W.III.

Double be-ams spre-ad but-tery lamp-light on the high-way. Ro-tor-Mo-tors Con-ver-tib-le, Mo-del C, 1987, rus-hed af-ter it. Light spur-ted ahe-ad, yel-low glo-wing. The car pur-su-ed with a twel-ve-cylin-de-red snar-ling pur-su-it. Night blot-ted in be-hind, jet and still. The car sped on. ST. LO-U-IS-10.

"I wan-na FLY!" they sang, "with the Ro-ta-Mo-ta ap-ple of my EYE!" they sang. "It's the only way of li-ving..."

The quartet singing

Len, 23.

Bud, 24.

Barbara, 20.
Peggy, 18.

Len with Bar-ba-ra, Bud with Peggy.

Bud at the whe-el, snap-ping aro-und til-ted cur-ves, ro-ar-ing up black-sho-ul-de-red hills, sho-oting the car ac-ross si-lent flat-lands. At the top of the three lungs (the fo-urth gent-ler), com-pe-ting with wind that buf-fe-ted the-ir he-ads, that whip-ped the-ir ha-ir to las-hing thre-ads-sin-ging:

"You can ha-ve yo-ur wal-kin' un-der MO-ON-LIGHT BE-AMS!

At a hund-red mi-les an ho-ur let me DRE-AM my DRE-AMS!"

Needle qu-ive-ring at 130, two 5-m.p.h. notc-hes from ga-uge's end. A sud-den dip! The-ir yo-ung fra-mes jol-ted and the thrown-up la-ugh-ter of three was wind-swept in-to night. Aro-und a cur-ve, dar-ting up and down a hill, flas-hing ac-ross a le-ve-led pla-in-an ebony bul-let skim-ming earth.

"In my *RO-TORY, MO-TORY, FLO-ATERY*, dri-vin' mac-hi-i-i-i-ine!"

YOU'LL BE A FLO-ATER IN YO-UR RO-TOR-MO-TOR.

In the back seat

"Have a jab, Bab."

"Thanks, I had one af-ter sup-per" (pus-hing away ne-ed-le fi-xed to eye-drop-per).

In the front seat

"You me-ana tell me this is the first ti-me you ever be-en t' Sa-int Loo!"

"But I just star-ted scho-ol in Sep-tem-ber."

"Hey, you're a *frosh!*"

Back seat joining front seat

"Hey, *frosh*, ha-ve a mus-sle-tus-sle."

(Needle pas-sed for-ward, eye bulb qu-ive-ring am-ber ju-ice.)

"Live it, girl!"

Mussle-Tussle (mus'l-tus'l)

Slang for the re-sult of inj-ec-ting a drug in-to a musc-le; usa-ge evol-ved du-ring W.W.III.

Peggy's lips fa-iled at smi-ling. Her fin-gers twitc-hed.

"No, thanks, I'm not..."

"Come *on*, frosh!" Len le-aning hard over the se-at, whi-te-bro-wed un-der black blo-wing ha-ir. Pus-hing the ne-ed-le at her fa-ce. "Li-ve it, girl! Grab a li'l mus-sle-tus-sle!"

"I'd rat-her not," sa-id Peggy. "If you don't-"

"What's '*at*, frosh?" yel-led Len and pres-sed his leg aga-inst the pres-sing leg of Bar-ba-ra.

Peggy sho-ok her he-ad and gol-den ha-ir flew ac-ross her che-eks and eyes. Un-der-ne-ath her yel-low dress, un-der-ne-ath her whi-te brassière, un-der-ne-ath her yo-ung bre-ast-a he-art thro-bed he-avily. *Watch yo-ur step, dar-ling, that's all we ask. Re-mem-ber, you're all we ha-ve in the world now.* Mot-her words drum-ming at her; the ne-ed-le ma-king her draw back in-to the se-at.

"Come on, frosh!"

The car groaned its shif-ting we-ight aro-und a cur-ve and cent-ri-fu-gal for-ce pres-sed Peggy in-to Bud's le-an hip. His hand drop-ped down and fin-ge-red at her leg. Un-der-ne-ath her yel-low dress, un-der-ne-ath her she-er stoc-king-flesh craw-led. Lips fa-iled aga-in; the smi-le was a twitch of red.

"Frosh, li-ve it up!"

"Lay off, Len, jab yo-ur own da-tes."

"But we got-ta te-ach frosh how to mus-sle-tus-sle!"

"Lay off, I sa-id! She's my da-te!"

The black car ro-ar-ing, cha-sing its own light. Peggy anc-ho-red down the fe-eling hand with hers. The wind whist-led over them and grab-bed down chilly fin-gers at the-ir ha-ir. She didn't want his hand the-re but she felt gra-te-ful to him.

Her va-gu-ely frigh-te-ned eyes watc-hed the ro-ad lurch be-ne-ath the whe-els. In back, a si-lent strug-gle be-gan, ta-ut hands rub-bing, par-ted mo-uths clin-ging. Se-arch for the swe-et elu-si-ve at 120 mi-les-per-ho-ur.

"*Rota-Mota ho-ney,*" Len mo-aned the mo-an bet-we-en sa-li-vary kis-ses. In the front se-at a yo-ung girl's he-art be-at uns-te-adily. ST. LO-U-IS-6.

"No kid-din', you ne-ver be-en to Sa-int Loo?"

"No, I..."

"Then you ne-ver saw the lo-opy's dan-ce?"

Throat cont-rac-ting sud-denly. "No, I... Is that what... we're go-ing to-"

"Hey, frosh ne-ver saw the lo-opy's dan-ce!" Bud yel-led back.

Lips par-ted, slur-ping; skirt was adj-us-ted with blasé ap-lomb. "No kid-din'!" Len fi-red up the words. "Girl, you ha-ven't *li-ved!*"

"Oh, she's *got* to see *that,*" sa-id Bar-ba-ra, but-to-ning a but-ton.

"Let's go the-re then!" yel-led Len. "Let's gi-ve frosh a thrill!"

"Good eno-ugh," sa-id Bud and squ-e-ezed her leg. "Go-od eno-ugh up he-re, right, Peg?"

Peggy's thro-at mo-ved in the dark and the wind clutc-hed harshly at her ha-ir. She'd he-ard of it, she'd re-ad of it but ne-ver had she tho-ught she'd-

Choose yo-ur scho-ol fri-en-ds ca-re-ful-ly dar-ling. Be very ca-re-ful.

But when no one spo-ke to you for two who-le months? When you we-re lo-nely and wan-ted to talk and la-ugh and be ali-ve? And so-me-one spo-ke to you fi-nal-ly and as-ked you to go out with them?

"I yam Po-pe-ye, the sa-ilor man!" Bud sang.

In back, they cro-wed ar-ti-fi-ci-al de-light. Bud was ta-king a co-ur-se in Pre-War Co-mics and Car-to-ons-2. This we-ek the class was stud-ying Po-pe-ye. Bud had fal-len in lo-ve with the one-eyed se-aman and told Len and Bar-ba-ra all abo-ut him; ta-ught them di-alo-gue and song.

"I yam Po-pe-ye, the sa-ilor man! I li-ke to go swim-min' with bow-leg-ged wo-men! I yam Po-pe-ye, the sa-ilor man!"

Laughter. Peggy smi-led fal-te-ringly. The hand left her leg as the car scre-ec-hed aro-und a cur-ve and she was thrown aga-inst the do-or. Wind das-hed blunt cold-ness in her eyes and for-ced her back, blin-king. 110-115-120 mi-les-per-ho-ur. ST. LO-U-IS-3. *Be very ca-re-ful, de-ar.*

Popeye coc-ked wic-ked eye.

"O, Oli-ve Oyl, you is my swe-et pa-to-otie."

Elbow nud-ging Peggy. "You be Oli-ve Oyl-you."

Peggy smi-led ner-vo-usly. "I can't."

"*Sure!*"

In the back se-at, Wimpy ca-me up for air to an-no-un-ce, "I will gladly pay you Tu-es-day for a ham-bur-ger to-day."

Three fi-er-ce vo-ices and a fa-int fo-urth ra-ged aga-inst the howl of wind. "I fights to the *fin*-ish 'ca-use I eats my *spin*-ach! I yam Po-pe-ye, the sa-ilor man! *To-ot! To-ot!*"

"I yam what I yam," re-ite-ra-ted Po-pe-ye gra-vely and put his hand on the yel-low-skir-ted leg of Oli-ve Oyl. In the back, two mem-bers of the qu-ar-tet re-tur-ned to fe-eling strug-gle.

ST. LO-U-IS-1. The black car ro-ared thro-ugh the dar-ke-ned su-burbs. "On with the no-si-es!"

Bud sang out. They all to-ok out the-ir plas-ti-ca-te no-se-and-mo-uth pi-eces and adj-us-ted them.

*ANCE IN YO-UR PANTS WO-ULD BE A PITY!
WEAR YO-UR NO-SI-ES IN THE CITY!!*

Ance (anse)

Slang for an-ti-ci-vi-li-an germs; usa-ge evol-ved du-ring W.W.III.

"You'll li-ke the lo-opy's dan-ce!" Bud sho-uted to her over the shri-ek of wind. "It's sen-saysh!"

Peggy felt a cold that wasn't of the night or of the wind. *Re-mem-ber, dar-ling, the-re are ter-rib-le things in the world to-day. Things you must avo-id.*

"Couldn't we go so-mew-he-re el-se?" Peggy sa-id but her vo-ice was ina-udib-le. She he-ard Bud sin-ging, "I li-ke to go swim-min' with bow-leg-ged wo-men!" She felt his hand on her leg aga-in whi-le, in the back, was the si-len-ce of grin-ding pas-si-on wit-ho-ut kis-ses.

Dance of the de-ad. The words trick-led ice ac-ross Peggy's bra-in.

ST. LO-U-IS.

The black car sped in-to the ru-ins.

It was a pla-ce of smo-ke and bla-tant joys. Air re-so-un-ded with the ble-ating of re-ve-lers and the-re was a no-ise of so-un-ding brass spin-ning out a clo-ud of mu-sic-1987 mu-sic, a frenzy of twis-ted dis-so-nan-ces. Dan-cers, shoe-hor-ned in-to the tiny squ-are of open flo-or, gro-und pul-sing bo-di-es to-get-her. A net-work of burs-ting so-unds lan-ced thro-ugh the mass of them; dan-cers sin-ging:

"Hurt me! Bru-ise me! Squ-e-eze me TIGHT!
Scorch my blo-od with hot DE-LIGHT!
Please abu-se me every NIGHT!
LOVER, LO-VER, LO-VER, be a *be-ast-to-me!*"

Elements of exp-lo-si-on rest-ra-ined wit-hin the dan-cing bo-unnds-inste-ad of frag-men-ting, qu-ive-ring. "Oh, be a be-ast, be-ast, be-ast, *Be-ast*, BE-AST to me!"

"How is *this*, Oli-ve old go-il?" Po-pe-ye in-qu-ired of the light of his eye as they strug-gled af-ter the wa-iter. "Not-hin' li-ke this in Sykes-vil-le, eh?"

Peggy smi-led but her hand in Bud's felt numb. As they pas-sed by a murky ligh-ted tab-le, a hand she didn't see felt at her leg. She twitc-hed and bum-ped aga-inst a hard knee ac-ross the nar-row ais-le. As she stumb-led and lurc-hed thro-ugh the hot and smoky, thick-aired ro-om, she felt a do-zen eyes dis-ro-bing her, abu-sing her. Bud jer-ked her along and she felt her lips tremb-ling.

"Hey, how abo-ut that!" Bud exul-ted as they sat. "Right by the sta-ge!"

From ci-ga-ret-te mists, the wa-iter plun-ged and ho-ve-red, pen-cil po-ised, be-si-de the-ir tab-le.

"What'll it be!" His qu-es-ti-oning sho-ut cut thro-ugh ca-cop-hony.

"Whiskey-water!" Bud and Len pa-ral-le-led or-ders, then tur-ned to the-ir da-tes. "What'll it be!" the wa-iter's re-qu-est ec-ho-ed from the-ir lips.

"*Green Swamp!*" Bar-ba-ra sa-id and, "*Gre-en Swamp* he-re!" Len pas-sed it along. Gin, In-va-si-on Blo-od (1987 Rum), li-me ju-ice, su-gar, mint spray, splin-te-red ice-a po-pu-lar col-le-ge girl drink.

"What abo-ut you, ho-ney?" Bud as-ked his da-te.

Peggy smi-led. "Just so-me gin-ger ale," she sa-id, her vo-ice a flut-te-ring fra-ilty in the mas-si-ve clash and fog of smo-ke.

"What?" as-ked Bud and, "What's that, didn't he-ar!" the wa-iter sho-uted.

"Ginger ale."

"What?"

"Ginger ale!"

"GINGER ALE!" Len scre-amed it out and the drum-mer, be-hind the ra-ging cur-ta-in of no-ise that was the band's mu-sic, al-most he-ard it. Len ban-ged down his fist. *One-Two-Three!*

CHORUS: *Gin-ger Ale was only twel-ve ye-ars old! Went to church and was as go-od as gold. Till that day when-*

"Come *on*, co-me *on!*" the wa-iter squ-al-led. "Let's ha-ve that or-der, kids! I'm busy!"

"Two whisky-wa-ters and two Gre-en Swamps!" Len sang out and the wa-iter was go-ne in-to the swir-ling ma-ni-ac mist.

Peggy felt her yo-ung he-art flut-ter help-les-sly. *Abo-ve all, don't drink when you're out on a da-te. Pro-mi-se us that, dar-ling, you must pro-mi-se us that.* She tri-ed to push away inst-ruc-ti-ons etc-hed in bra-in.

"How you li-ke this pla-ce, ho-ney? *Lo-opy*, ain't it?" Bud fi-red the qu-es-ti-on at her; a red-fa-ced, hap-py-fa-ced Bud.

Loopy (loo pi)

Common al-ter. of L.U.P. (Li-fe-less Un-de-ath Phe-no-me-non).

She smi-led at Bud, a smi-le of ner-vo-us po-li-te-ness. Her eyes mo-ved aro-und, her fa-ce inc-li-ned and she was lo-oking up at the sta-ge. *Lo-opy*. The word scal-pe-led at her mind. *Lo-opy, lo-opy.*

The sta-ge was fi-ve yards de-ep at the ra-di-us of its wo-oden se-mi-circ-le. A wa-ist-high ra-il gird-led the cir-cum-fe-ren-ce, two pa-le purp-le spot-lights, un-lit, hung at each ra-il end. Purp-le on whi-te-the tho-ught ca-me. *Dar-ling, isn't Sykes-vil-le Bu-si-ness Col-le-ge go-od eno-ugh? No! I don't want to ta-ke a bu-si-ness co-ur-se, I want to ma-j-or in art at the Uni-ver-sity!*

The drinks we-re bro-ught and Peggy watc-hed the di-sem-bo-di-ed wa-iter's arm thud down a high, gre-en-lo-oking glass be-fo-re her. *Pres-to!*-the arm was go-ne. She lo-oked in-to the murky Gre-en Swamp depths and saw chip-ped ice bob-bing.

"A to-ast! Pick up yo-ur glass, Peg!" Bud cla-ri-oned.

They all clin-ked glas-ses:

"To lust pri-mor-di-al!" Bud to-as-ted.

"To beds in-vi-ola-te!" Len ad-ded.

"To flesh in-sen-sa-te!" Bar-ba-ra ad-ded a third link.

Their eyes ze-ro-ed in on Peggy's fa-ce, de-man-ding. She didn't un-ders-tand.

"*Finish* it!" Bud told her, pla-gu-ed by fresh-man slug-gish-ness.

"To... u-us," she fal-te-red.

"How o-*rig*-inal," stab-bed Bar-ba-ra and Peggy felt he-at lic-king up her smo-oth che-eks. It pas-sed un-no-ti-ced as three Yo-uths of Ame-ri-ca with Whom the Fu-tu-re Res-ted gurg-led down the-ir li-qu-or thirs-tily. Peggy fin-ge-red at her glass, a smi-le prin-ted to lips that wo-uld not smi-le una-ided.

"Come on, *drink*, girl!" Bud sho-uted to her ac-ross the vast dis-tan-ce of one fo-ot. "Chug-ga-lug!"

"Live it, girl," Len sug-ges-ted abst-rac-tedly, fin-gers se-arc-hing on-ce mo-re for soft leg. And fin-ding, un-der tab-le, soft leg wa-iting.

Peggy didn't want to drink, she was af-ra-id to drink. Mot-her words kept po-un-ding-*ne-ver on a da-te, ho-ney, ne-ver.* She ra-ised the glass a lit-tle.

"Uncle Buddy will help, will help!"

Uncle Buddy le-aning clo-se, va-por of whisky ha-lo-ing his he-ad. Unc-le Buddy pus-hing cold glass to sha-king yo-ung lips. "Co-me on, Oli-ve Oyl, old go-il! Down the hatch!"

Choking spra-yed the bo-som of her dress with Gre-en Swamp drop-lets. Fla-ming li-qu-id trick-led in-to her sto-mach, sen-ding of-fsho-ots of fi-re in-to her ve-ins.

Bangity bo-om crash smash POW!! The drum-mer ap-pli-ed the co-up de gra-ce to what had be-en, in an-ci-ent ti-mes, a lo-ver's waltz. Lights drop-ped and Peggy sat co-ug-hing and te-ar-eyed in the smoky cel-lar club.

She felt Bud's hand clamp strongly on her sho-ul-der and, in the murk, she felt her-self pul-led off ba-lan-ce and felt Bud's hot wet mo-uth pres-sing at her lips. She jer-ked away and then the purp-le spots went on and a mot-tle-fa-ced Bud drew back, gurg-ling, "I fights to the fi-nish," and re-ac-hing for his drink.

"Hey, the lo-opy now, the lo-opy!" Len sa-id eagerly, re-le-asing exp-lo-ra-tory hands.

Peggy's he-art jol-ted and she tho-ught she was go-ing to cry out and run thras-hing thro-ugh the dark, smo-ke-fil-led ro-om. But a sop-ho-mo-re hand anc-ho-red her to the cha-ir and she lo-oked up in whi-te-fa-ced dre-ad at the man who ca-me out on the sta-ge and fa-ced the mic-rop-ho-ne which, li-ke a me-tal spi-der, had swung down to me-et him.

"May I ha-ve yo-ur at-ten-ti-on, la-di-es and gent-le-men," he sa-id, a grim-fa-ced, se-pulch-ral-vo-iced man who-se eyes mo-ved out over them li-ke flicks of do-om. Peggy's bre-ath was la-bo-red, she felt thin li-nes of Gre-en Swamp wa-ter fil-te-ring hotly thro-ugh her chest and sto-mach. It ma-de her blink diz-zily. *Mot-her*. The word es-ca-ped cells of the mind and tremb-led in-to cons-ci-o-us fre-edom. *Mot-her, ta-ke me ho-me*.

"As you know, the act you are abo-ut to see is not for the fa-int of he-art, the we-ak of will." The man plod-ded thro-ugh the words li-ke a cow en-mi-red. "Let me ca-uti-on tho-se of you who-se ner-ves are not what they ought to be-*le-ave now*. We ma-ke no gu-aran-te-es of res-pon-si-bi-lity. We can't even af-ford to ma-in-ta-in a ho-use doc-tor."

No la-ugh-ter ap-pre-ci-ati-ve. "Cut the crap and get off sta-ge," Len grumb-led to him-self. Peggy felt her fin-gers twitc-hing.

"As you know," the man went on, his vo-ice gil-ded with le-ar-ned so-no-ri-ty, "this is not an of-fe-ring of me-re sen-sa-ti-on but an ho-nest sci-en-ti-fic de-monst-ra-ti-on."

"Loophole for Lo-opy's!" Bud and Len he-aved up the words with the tho-ught-less re-ac-ti-on of hungry dogs sa-li-va-ting at a bell.

It was, in 1987, a co-me-back so ri-gidly stan-dard it had as-su-med the sta-tus of a ca-tec-hism ans-wer. A cre-nel in the post-war law al-lo-wed the L.U.P. per-for-man-ce if it was oral-ly pre-fa-ced as an ex-po-si-ti-on of sci-en-ce. Thro-ugh this le-gal chink had po-ured so much abu-sing of the law that few ca-red any lon-ger. A fe-eb-le go-vern-ment was gra-te-ful to con-ta-in inf-rac-ti-ons of the law at all.

When ho-ots and sho-utings had eva-po-ra-ted in the smo-ke-clog-ged air, the man, his arms up-ra-ised in pa-ti-ent be-ne-dic-ti-on, spo-ke aga-in.

Peggy watc-hed the stu-di-ed mo-ve-ment of his lips, her he-art swel-ling, then cont-rac-ting in slow, spas-mo-dic be-ats. An ici-ness was cre-eping up her legs. She felt it ri-sing to-ward the thre-ad-li-ke fi-res in her body and her fin-gers twitc-hed aro-und the chilly mo-is-tu-re of the glass. *I want to go, ple-ase ta-ke me ho-me*-Will-spent words we-re in her mind aga-in.

"Ladies and gent-le-men," the man conc-lu-ded, "bra-ce yo-ur-sel-ves."

A gong so-un-ded its hol-low, shi-ve-ring re-so-nan-ce, the man's vo-ice thic-ke-ned and slo-wed.

"The L.U. Phe-no-me-non!"

The man was go-ne; the mic-rop-ho-ne had ri-sen and was go-ne. Mu-sic be-gan; a mo-aning bras-si-ness, all mu-ted. A jaz-zman's con-cep-ti-on of *the pal-pab-le ob-s-cu-re* mo-un-ted on a pul-se of thum-ping drum. A do-lor of sa-xop-ho-ne, a me-na-ce of trom-bo-ne, a har-nes-sed ble-ating of trum-pet-they ra-ped the air with stri-dor.

Peggy felt a shud-der pla-iting down her back and her ga-ze drop-ped qu-ickly to the murky

whi-te-ness of the tab-le. Smo-ke and dark-ness, dis-so-nan-ce and he-at sur-ro-un-ded her.

Without me-aning to, but dri-ven by an im-pul-se of ner-vo-us fe-ar, she ra-ised the glass and drank. The gla-ci-al trick-le in her thro-at sent anot-her shud-der rip-pling thro-ugh her. Then furt-her sho-ots of li-qu-ored he-at bud-ded in her ve-ins and a numb-ness set-tled in her temp-les. Thro-ugh par-ted lips, she for-ced out a sha-king bre-ath.

Now a rest-less, mur-mu-ring mo-ve-ment star-ted thro-ugh the ro-om, the so-und of it li-ke wil-lows in a slo-ug-hing wind. Peggy da-red not lift her ga-ze to the purp-led si-len-ce of the sta-ge. She sta-red down at the shif-ting glim-mer of her drink, fe-eling musc-le strands draw tightly in her sto-mach, fe-eling the hol-low thum-ping of her he-art. *I'd li-ke to le-ave, ple-ase let's le-ave.*

The mu-sic la-bo-red to-ward a ras-ping dis-so-nant cli-max, its brass com-po-nents strug-gling, in va-in, for unity.

A hand stro-ked on-ce at Peggy's leg and it was the hand of Po-pe-ye, the sa-ilor man, who mut-te-red ro-upily, "Oli-ve Oyl, you is my go-il." She ba-rely felt or he-ard. Auto-ma-ton-li-ke, she ra-ised the cold and swe-ating glass aga-in and felt the chil-ling in her thro-at and then the fla-ring net-work of warmth in-si-de her.

SWISH!

The cur-ta-in swept open with such a rush, she al-most drop-ped her glass. It thum-ped down he-avily on the tab-le, swamp wa-ter cas-ca-ding up its si-des and ra-ining on her hand. The mu-sic exp-lo-ded shrap-nel of ear-cut-ting ca-cop-hony and her body jer-ked. On the tab-lec-loth, her hands twitc-hed whi-te on whi-te whi-le claws on un-cont-rol-lab-le de-mand pul-led up her frigh-te-ned eyes.

The mu-sic fled, frot-hing be-hind a wa-ke of swel-ling drum rolls.

The nightc-lub was a word-less crypt, all bre-at-hing chec-ked.

Cobwebs of smo-ke drif-ted in the purp-le light ac-ross the sta-ge.

No so-und ex-cept the muf-fled, rol-ling drum.

Peggy's body was a pet-ri-fac-ti-on in its cha-ir, smit-ten to rock aro-und her le-aping he-art, whi-le, thro-ugh the wa-ve-ring ha-ze of smo-ke and li-qu-ored diz-zi-ness, she lo-oked up in hor-ror to whe-re it sto-od.

It had be-en a wo-man.

Her ha-ir was black, a fra-ming of snar-led ebony for the tal-low mask that was her fa-ce. Her sha-dow-rim-med eyes we-re clo-sed be-hind lids as smo-oth and whi-te as ivory. Her mo-uth, a lip-less and un-mo-ving li-ne, sto-od li-ke a clot-ted sword wo-und be-ne-ath her no-se. Her thro-at, her sho-ul-ders and her arms we-re whi-te, we-re mo-ti-on-less. At her si-des, prot-ru-ding from the sle-eve ends of the gre-en trans-pa-rency she wo-re, hung ala-bas-ter hands.

Across this marb-le sta-tue, the spot-lights co-ated purp-le shim-mer.

Still pa-raly-zed, Peggy sta-red up at its mo-ti-on-less fe-atu-res, her fin-gers knit-ted in a blo-od-less tang-le on her lap. The pul-se of drum-be-ats in the air se-emed to fill her body, its rhythm al-te-ring her he-art-be-at.

In the black emp-ti-ness be-hind her, she he-ard Len mut-te-ring, "I lo-ve my wi-fe but, oh, you corp-se," and he-ard the whe-eze of help-less snic-kers that es-ca-ped from Bud and Bar-ba-ra. The cold still ro-se in her, a si-lent ti-dal dre-ad.

Somewhere in the smo-ke-fog-ged dark-ness, a man cle-ared vis-cid ner-vo-us-ness from his thro-at and a mur-mur of ap-pre-ci-ati-ve re-li-ef stra-ined thro-ugh the audi-en-ce.

Still no mo-ti-on on the sta-ge, no so-und but the slug-gish ca-den-ce of the drum, thum-ping at the si-len-ce li-ke so-me-one se-eking ent-ran-ce at a far-off do-or. The thing that was a na-me-less vic-tim of the pla-gue sto-od pa-lely ri-gid whi-le the dis-til-la-ti-on slu-iced thro-ugh its blo-od-clog-ged ve-ins.

Now the drum throbs has-te-ned li-ke the pul-se-be-at of a ri-sing pa-nic. Peggy felt the chill be-gin to swal-low her. Her thro-at star-ted tigh-te-ning, her bre-at-hing was a string of lip-par-ted gasps.

The lo-opy's eye-lid twitc-hed.

Abrupt, black, stra-ining si-len-ce web-bed the ro-om. Even the bre-ath cho-ked off in Peggy's

thro-at when she saw the pa-le eyes flut-ter open. So-met-hing cre-aked in the stil-ness; her body pres-sed back un-cons-ci-o-usly aga-inst the cha-ir. Her eyes we-re wi-de, unb-lin-king circ-les that suc-ked in-to her bra-in the sight of the thing that had be-en a wo-man.

Music aga-in; a brass-thro-ated mo-aning from the dark, li-ke so-me ani-mal ma-de of wel-ded horns mew-ling its de-ran-ge-ment in a mid-night al-ley.

Suddenly, the right arm of the lo-opy jer-ked at its si-de, the ten-dons sud-denly cont-rac-ted. The left arm twitc-hed ali-ke, snap-ped out, then fell back and thud-ded in purp-le-whi-te limp-ness aga-inst the thigh. The right arm out, the left arm out, the right, the left-right-left-right-li-ke ma-ri-onet-te arms twitc-hing from an ama-te-ur's dang-ling strings.

The mu-sic ca-ught the ti-me, drum brus-hes scratc-hing out a rhythm for the con-vul-si-ons of the lo-opy's musc-les. Peggy pres-sed back furt-her, her body num-bed and cold, her fa-ce a li-vid, sta-ning mask in the frin-ges of the sta-ge light.

The lo-opy's right fo-ot mo-ved now, jer-king up inf-le-xibly as the dis-til-la-ti-on const-ric-ted musc-les in its leg. A se-cond and a third cont-rac-ti-on ca-used the leg to twitch, the left leg flung out in a vi-olent spasm and then the wo-man's body lurc-hed stiffly for-ward, fil-ming the trans-pa-rent silk to its light and sha-dow.

Peggy he-ard the sud-den hiss of bre-ath that pas-sed the clen-c-hing te-eth of Bud and Len and a wa-ve of na-usea spra-yed fo-aming sick-ness up her sto-mach walls. Be-fo-re her eyes, the sta-ge ab-ruptly un-du-la-ted with a wa-tery glit-ter and it se-emed as if the fla-iling lo-opy was he-aded stra-ight for her.

Gasping diz-zily, she pres-sed back in hor-ror, unab-le to ta-ke her eyes from its now agi-ta-ted fa-ce.

She watc-hed the mo-uth jerk to a ga-ping ca-vity, then a twis-ted scar that split in-to a wo-und aga-in. She saw the dark nost-rils twitc-hing, saw writ-hing flesh be-ne-ath the ivory che-eks, saw fur-rows dug and un-dug in the purp-le whi-te-ness of the fo-re-he-ad. She saw one li-fe-less eye wink monst-ro-usly and he-ard the gasp of start-led la-ugh-ter in the ro-om.

While mu-sic bla-red in-to a fit of gra-ting no-ise, the wo-man's arms and legs kept jer-king with con-vul-si-ve cramps that threw her body aro-und the purp-led sta-ge li-ke a full-si-zed rag doll gi-ven spas-tic li-fe.

It was night-ma-re in an end-less sle-ep. Peggy shi-ve-red in help-less ter-ror as she watc-hed the lo-opy's twis-ting, le-aping dan-ce. The blo-od in her had tur-ned to ice; the-re was no li-fe in her but the end-less, po-un-ding stag-ger of her he-art. Her eyes we-re fro-zen sphe-res sta-ning at the wo-man's body writ-hing whi-te and flac-cid un-der-ne-ath the clin-ging silk.

Then, so-met-hing went wrong.

Up till then, its mus-cu-lar se-izu-res had bo-und the lo-opy to an area of se-ve-ral yards be-fo-re the am-ber flat which was the backg-ro-und for its pa-roxys-mal dan-ce. Now its er-ra-tic sur-ging dro-ve the lo-opy to-ward the sta-ge-encirc-ling ra-il.

Peggy he-ard the thump and cre-aking sta-in of wo-od as the lo-opy's hip col-li-ded with the ra-il. She crin-ged in-to a shud-de-ring knot, her eyes still ra-ised fi-xedly to the purp-le-splas-hed fa-ce who-se every fe-atu-re was de-for-med by thro-es of war-ping con-vul-si-on.

The lo-opy stag-ge-red back and Peggy saw and he-ard its lep-ro-us hands slap-ping with a fit-ful rhythm at its silk-sca-led thighs.

Again it sprang for-ward li-ke a ma-ni-ac ma-ri-onet-te and the wo-man's sto-mach thud-ded sic-ke-ningly in-to the ra-iling wo-od. The dark mo-uth ga-ped, clam-ped shut and then the lo-opy twis-ted thro-ugh a jer-king re-vo-lu-ti-on and cras-hed back aga-inst the ra-il aga-in, al-most abo-ve the tab-le whe-re Peggy sat.

Peggy co-uld'n't bre-at-he. She sat ro-oted to the cha-ir, her lips a tremb-ling circ-le of stric-ken dre-ad, a po-un-ding of blo-od at her temp-les as she watc-hed the lo-opy spin aga-in, its arms a blur of fla-iling whi-te.

The lu-rid ble-ac-hing of its fa-ce drop-ped to-ward Peggy as the lo-opy cras-hed in-to the wa-ist-high ra-il aga-in and bent ac-ross its top. The mask of la-ven-der-ra-ined whi-te-ness hung

abo-ve her, dark eyes twitc-hing open in-to a hi-de-o-us sta-re.

Peggy felt the flo-or be-gin to mo-ve and the li-vid fa-ce was blur-red with dark-ness, then re-ap-pe-ared in a burst of lu-mi-no-sity. So-und fled on brass-sho-ed fe-et, then plun-ged in-to her bra-in aga-in-a sme-aring dis-cord.

The lo-opy kept on jer-king for-ward, dri-ving it-self aga-inst the ra-il as tho-ugh it me-ant to sca-le it. With every spas-tic lurch, the di-ap-ha-no-us silk flut-te-red li-ke a film abo-ut its body and every sa-va-ge col-li-si-on with the ra-iling ta-ute-ned the gre-en trans-pa-rency ac-ross its swol-len flesh. Peggy lo-ok-ed up in ri-gid mu-te-ness at the lo-opy's fi-er-ce at-tack on the ra-iling, her eyes unab-le to es-ca-pe the wild dis-tor-ti-on of the wo-man's fa-ce with its black fra-me of tang-led, snap-ping ha-ir.

What hap-pe-ned then hap-pe-ned in a blur-ring pas-sa-ge of se-conds.

The grim-fa-ced man ca-me rus-hing ac-ross the purp-le-ligh-ted sta-ge; the thing that had be-en a wo-man went cras-hing, twitc-hing, fla-iling at the ra-il, do-ub-ling over it, the spas-mo-dic hitc-hing flin-ging up its musc-le-knot-ted legs.

A cla-wing fall.

Peggy lurc-hed back in her cha-ir and the scre-am that star-ted in her thro-at was for-ced back in-to a strang-led gag as the lo-opy ca-me cras-hing down on-to the tab-le, its limbs a thrash of na-ked whi-te-ness.

Barbara scre-amed, the audi-en-ce gas-ped and Peggy saw, on the frin-ge of vi-si-on, Bud jum-ping up, his fa-ce a twist of stun-ned surp-ri-se.

The lo-opy flop-ped and twis-ted on the tab-le li-ke a new-ca-ught fish. The mu-sic stop-ped, grin-ding in-to si-len-ce; a rush of agi-ta-ted mur-mur fil-led the ro-om and black-ness swept in bra-in-sub-mer-ging wa-ves ac-ross Peggy's mind.

Then the cold whi-te hand slap-ped ac-ross her mo-uth, the dark eyes sta-red at her in purp-le light and Peggy felt the dark-ness flo-oding.

The hor-ror-smo-ked ro-om went tur-ning on its si-de.

Consciousness. It flic-ke-red in her bra-in li-ke ga-uze-ve-iled cand-le-light. A mur-mu-ring of so-und, a blur of sha-dow be-fo-re her eyes.

Breath drip-ped li-ke syrup from her mo-uth.

"Here, Peg."

She he-ard Bud's vo-ice and felt the chilly me-tal of a flask neck pres-sed aga-inst her lips. She swal-lo-wed, twis-ting slightly at the trick-le of fi-re in her thro-at and sto-mach, then co-ug-hed and pus-hed away the flask with de-ade-ned fin-gers.

Behind her, a rust-ling mo-ve-ment. "Hey, she's *back*," Len sa-id. "Ol' Oli-ve Oyl is back."

"You fe-el all right?" as-ked Bar-ba-ra.

She felt all right. Her he-art was li-ke a drum han-ging from pi-ano wi-re in her chest, slowly, slowly be-aten. Her hands and fe-et we-re numb, not with cold but with a sultry tor-por. Tho-ughts mo-ved with a tran-qu-il let-hargy, her bra-in a le-isu-rely mac-hi-ne im-bed-ded in swaths of wo-ol-ly pac-king.

She felt all right.

Peggy lo-ok-ed ac-ross the night with sle-epy eyes. They we-re on a hil-ltop, the bra-ked con-ver-tib-le cro-uc-hing on a jut-ting ed-ge. Far be-low, the co-untry slept, a car-pet of light and sha-dow be-ne-ath the chalky mo-on.

An arm sna-ke mo-ved aro-und her wa-ist. "Whe-re are we?" she as-ked him in a lan-gu-id vo-ice.

"Few mi-les out-si-de scho-ol," Bud sa-id. "How d'ya fe-el, ho-ney?"

She stretc-hed, her body a de-li-ci-o-us stra-in of musc-les. She sag-ged back, limp, aga-inst his arm.

"*Wonderful*," she mur-mu-red with a dizzy smi-le and scratc-hed the tiny itc-hing bump on her left sho-ul-der. Warmth ra-di-ated thro-ugh her flesh; the night was a sab-led glow. The-re se-emed *so-mew-he-re* to be a me-mory, but it cro-uc-hed in sec-ret be-hind folds of thick con-tent.

"Woman, you we-re *out*," la-ug-hed Bud; and Bar-ba-ra ad-ded and Len ad-ded, "We-re you!" and

"Oli-ve Oyl went *plun-ko!*"

"Out?" Her ca-su-al mur-mur went un-he-ard.

The flask went aro-und and Peggy drank aga-in, re-la-xing furt-her as the li-qu-or ne-ed-led fi-re thro-ugh her ve-ins.

"Man, I ne-ver saw a lo-opy dan-ce li-ke that!" Len sa-id.

A mo-men-tary chill ac-ross her back, then warmth aga-in. "Oh," sa-id Peggy, "that's right. I for-got." She smi-led

"That was what I calls a grand fi-na-le!" Len sa-id, drag-ging back his wil-ling da-te, who mur-mu-red, "*Lenny* boy."

"L.U.P.," Bud mut-te-red, nuz-zling at Peggy's ha-ir. "Son of a gun." He re-ac-hed out idly for the ra-dio knob.

L.U.P. (Lifeless Undead Phenomenon)

This fre-ak of physi-olo-gi-cal ab-nor-ma-lity was dis-co-ve-red du-ring the war when, fol-lo-wing cer-ta-in germ-gas at-tacks, many of the de-ad tro-ops we-re fo-und erect and per-for-ming the spas-mo-dic gyra-ti-ons which, la-ter, be-ca-me known as the "lo-opy's" (L.U.P.'s) dan-ce. The par-ti-cu-lar germ spray res-pon-sib-le was la-ter dis-til-led and is now used in ca-re-ful-ly cont-rol-led ex-pe-ri-ments which are con-duc-ted only un-der the stric-test of le-gal li-cen-se and su-per-vi-si-on.

Music sur-ro-un-ded them, its me-lanc-holy fin-gers to-uc-hing at the-ir he-arts. Peggy le-aned aga-ainst her da-te and felt no ne-ed to curb exp-lo-ring hands. So-mew-he-re, de-ep wit-hin the jel-li-ed la-yers of her mind, the-re was so-met-hing trying to es-ca-pe. It flut-te-red li-ke a fran-tic moth imp-ri-so-ned in con-ge-aling wax, strug-gling wildly but only gro-wing we-aker in at-tempt as the chrysa-lis har-de-ned.

Four vo-ices sang softly in the night.

*"If the world is he-re to-mor-row
I'll be wa-iting, de-ar, for you
If the stars are the-re to-mor-row
I'll be wis-hing on them too."*

Four yo-ung vo-ices sin-ging, a mur-mur in im-men-sity. Fo-ur bo-di-es, two by two, slackly warm and drug-ged. A sin-ging, an emb-ra-cing-a word-less ac-cep-ting.

*"Star light, star bright
Let the-re be anot-her night."*

The sin-ging en-ded but the song went on.

A yo-ung girl sig-hed.

"Isn't it ro-man-tic?" sa-id Oli-ve Oyl.

9 - LEGION OF PLOTTERS

Then the-re was the man who snif-fed in-ter-mi-nably...

He sat next to Mr Jas-per on the bus. Every mor-ning he wo-uld co-me grun-ting up the front step and we-ave along the ais-le to plop him-self down be-si-de Mr Jas-per's slight form.

And - *sniff!* he wo-uld go as he pe-ru-sed his mor-ning pa-per - *sniff, sniff!*

Mr Jas-per wo-uld writ-he. And won-der why the man per-sis-ted in sit-ting next to him. The-re we-re ot-her se-ats ava-ilab-le, yet the man in-va-ri-ably drop-ped his lum-pish fra-me be-si-de Mr

Jas-per and sniff-fed the mi-les away, win-ter and sum-mer.

It wasn't as if it we-re cold out. So-me Los An-ge-les mor-nings we-re col-dish, gran-ted. But they cer-tain-ly did not war-rant this end-less sniff-ling as tho-ugh pne-umo-nia we-re cre-eping thro-ugh the man's system.

And it ga-ve Mr Jas-per the wil-li-es.

He ma-de se-ve-ral at-tempts to re-mo-ve him-self from the man's sphe-re of sniff-ling. First of all, he mo-ved back two se-ats from his usu-al lo-ca-ti-on. The man fol-lo-wed him. I *see*, sur-mi-sed a ne-ar-fu-ming Mr Jas-per, the man is in the ha-bit of sit-ting by me and hasn't no-ti-ced that I've mo-ved back two se-ats.

The fol-lo-wing day Mr Jas-per sat on the ot-her si-de of the ais-le. He sat with iras-cib-le eye watc-hing the man we-ave his bulk up the ais-le. Then his vi-tals pet-ri-fi-ed as the man's twe-eded per-son plum-ped down by him. He gla-red an abo-mi-na-ting gla-re out the win-dow.

Sniff! - went the man - *Sa-niff!* - and Mr Jas-per's den-tal pla-tes gro-und to-get-her in por-ce-la-in fury.

The next day he sat ne-ar the back of the bus. The man sat next to him. The next day he sat ne-ar the front of the bus. The man sat next to him. Mr Jas-per sat amidst his cor-ro-ding pa-ti-en-ce for a mi-le and a third. Then, jaded be-yond en-du-ran-ce, he tur-ned to the man.

'Why are you fol-lo-wing me?' he as-ked, his vo-ice a tremb-ling pla-int.

The man was ca-ught in mid-sniff. He ga-ped at Mr Jas-per with cow li-ke, un-comp-re-hen-ding eyes. Mr Jas-per sto-od and stumb-led the bus length away from the man. The-re he sto-od swa-ying from the over-he-ad bar, his eyes as sto-ne. The way that sniff-ing fo-ol had lo-oked at him, he bro-oded. It was in-suf-fe-rab-le. As if, by he-aven, *he* had do-ne so-met-hing of-fen-si-ve!

Well, at le-ast, he was mo-men-ta-rily free of tho-se di-ur-nal-ly drip-ping nost-rils. Cro-uc-hed musc-les unf-le-xed gra-te-ful-ly. He sig-ned with re-li-ef.

And the boy stan-ding next to him whist-led twenty-three cho-ru-ses of *Di-xie*.

Mr Jas-per sold neck-ti-es.

It was an emp-loy-ment rid-den with ve-xa-ti-ons, an emp-loy-ment gu-aran-te-ed to scra-pe away the li-ning of any but the most im-pas-si-ve sto-machs.

Mr Jas-per's sto-mach walls we-re of the most sus-cep-ti-ve va-ri-ety.

They we-re stor-med da-ily by ag-gra-va-ti-on, by an-no-yan-ce and by wo-men. Wo-men who lin-ge-red and felt the wo-ol and cot-ton and silk and wal-ked away with no purc-ha-se. Wo-men who be-le-agu-ered Mr Jas-per's inf-lam-mab-le mind with in-ter-ro-ga-ti-ons and dec-re-es and left no mo-ney but only a ri-gid Mr Jas-per, one jot ne-ar-er to ine-vi-tab-le de-to-na-ti-on.

With every ta-xing cus-to-mer, a gus-hing host of bril-li-antly nasty re-marks wo-uld ri-se up in Mr Jas-per's mind, each one sur-pas-sing the one be-fo-re. His mind wo-uld po-si-ti-vely ac-he to see them free, to let them po-ur li-ke tor-rents of acid ac-ross his ton-gue and, bur-ning hot, spo-ut di-rectly in-to the wo-men's fa-ces.

But in-va-ri-ably clo-se was the me-na-cing phan-tom of flo-or-wal-ker or sto-re bu-yer. It flit-ted thro-ugh his mind with ghostly do-mi-ni-on, shun-ting asi-de his ye-ar-ning ton-gue, cal-cif-ying his bo-nes with uns-pent wrath.

Then the-re we-re the wo-men in the sto-re ca-fe-te-ria... They tal-ked whi-le they ate and they smo-ked and blew clo-uds of ni-co-ti-ne in-to his lungs at the very mo-ment he was trying to in-gest a bowl of to-ma-to so-up in-to his ul-ce-red sto-mach. *Po-of!* went the la-di-es and wa-ved the-ir pretty hands to dis-pel the un-wan-ted smo-ke.

Mr Jas-per got it all.

Eyes be-gin-ning to em-boss, he wo-uld wa-ve it back. The wo-men re-tur-ned it. Thus did the smo-ke cir-cu-la-te un-til thin-ned out or re-in-for-ced by new, yet mo-re in-ten-se, ex-ha-la-ti-ons. *Po-of!* And bet-we-en wa-ving and lad-ling and swal-lo-wing, Mr Jas-per had spasms. The tan-nic acid of his tea hard-ly ser-ved to stem the co-ur-se of bur-ning in his sto-mach. He wo-uld pay his forty cents with os-cil-la-ting fin-gers and re-tur-n to work, a crac-king man.

To fa-ce a full af-ter-no-on of comp-la-ints and qu-eri-es and thum-bing of merc-han-di-se and the top-ping of all by the girl who sha-red the co-un-ter with him and che-wed gum as tho-ugh she wan-ted the pe-op-le in Ara-bia to he-ar her che-wing. The smac-king and the pop-ping and the grin-ding ma-de Mr Jas-per's in-si-des do fren-zi-ed con-tor-ti-ons, ma-de him stand sta-tue li-ke and di-sor-de-red or el-se burst out with a his-sing:

'Stop that dis-gus-ting so-und!'

Life was full of ir-ri-ta-ti-ons.

Then the-re we-re the ne-igh-bo-urs, the pe-op-le who li-ved ups-ta-irs and on the si-des. The so-ci-ety of *them*, that ubi-qu-ito-us brot-her-ho-od which al-ways li-ved in the apart-ments aro-und Mr Jas-per.

They we-re a unity, tho-se pe-op-le. The-re was a to-u-chs-to-ne of at-ti-tu-de in the-ir be-ha-vi-o-ur, a dis-tinct cri-te-ri-on of met-hod.

It con-sis-ted of wal-king with ext-ra we-ighty tre-ad, of re-as-semb-ling fur-ni-tu-re with sus-ta-ined re-gu-la-rity, of thro-wing wild and no-isy par-ti-es every ot-her night and in-vi-ting only tho-se pe-op-le who pro-mi-sed to we-ar hob-na-iled bo-ots and dan-ce the chic-ken re-el. Of ar-gu-ing abo-ut all su-bj-ects at top vo-ice, of pla-ying only cow-boy and hil-lbil-ly mu-sic on a ra-dio who-se vo-lu-me knob was ir-ret-ri-evably stuck at its fart-hest po-int. Of ow-ning a set of lungs dis-gu-ised as a two to twel-ve months old child, which puf-fed out each mor-ning to emit so-unds re-mi-nis-cent of the la-ment of air ra-id si-rens.

Mr Jas-per's pre-sent ne-me-sis was Al-bert Ra-den-ha-usen, Juni-or, age se-ven months, pos-ses-sor of one set of inc-re-dibly hardy lungs which did the-ir best work bet-we-en fo-ur and fi-ve in the mor-ning.

Mr Jas-per wo-uld find him-self rol-ling on to his thin back in the dark, fur-nis-hed, two-ro-om apart-ment. He wo-uld find him-self sta-ring at the ce-iling and wa-iting for the so-und. It got to a po-int whe-re his bra-in drag-ged him from ne-eded sle-ep exactly ten se-conds be-fo-re fo-ur each mor-ning. If Al-bert Ra-den-ha-usen, Juni-or, cho-se to slum-ber on, it did no go-od to Mr Jas-per. He just kept wa-iting for the cri-es.

He wo-uld try to sle-ep, but jang-ling con-cent-ra-ti-on ma-de him prey, if not to the ex-pec-ted wa-iling, then to the host of ot-her so-unds which be-set his hyper-sen-si-ti-ve ears.

A car co-ug-hing past in the stre-et. A rat-tle of Ve-ne-ti-an blind. A set of lo-ne fo-ots-steps so-mew-he-re in the ho-use. The drip of a fa-ucet, the bar-king of a dog, the rub-bing legs of cric-kets, the cre-aking of wo-od. Mr Jas-per co-uld not cont-rol it all. Tho-se so-und ma-kers he co-uld not stuff, pad, twist off, adj-ust to - kept pla-gu-ing him. He wo-uld shut his eyes un-til they hurt, grip tight fists at his si-des.

Sleep still elu-ded. He wo-uld jolt up, he-aving asi-de the she-ets and blan-kets, and sit the-re sta-ring numbly in-to the black-ness, wa-iting for Al-bert Ra-den-ha-usen, Juni-or, to ma-ke his ut-te-ran-ce so he co-uld lie down aga-in.

Analysing in the black-ness, his mind wo-uld click out prog-res-si-ons of tho-ught. Un-duly sen-si-ti-ve? - he wo-uld com-ment wit-hin. I deny this vo-ci-fe-ro-usly. I am awa-re, Mr Jas-per wo-uld self-cla-im. No mo-re. I ha-ve ears. I can he-ar, can't I?

It was sus-pi-ci-o-us.

What mor-ning in the lit-ter of mor-nings that no-ti-on ca-me, Mr Jas-per co-uld not re-call. But on-ce it had co-me it wo-uld not be dis-mis-sed. Tho-ugh the de-fi-ni-ti-on of it was blun-ted by pas-sing days, the co-re re-ma-ined un-re-mo-vab-le.

Sometimes in a mo-ment of te-eth-grit-ting du-ress, the idea wo-uld re-oc-cur. Ot-her ti-mes it wo-uld be only a va-gue cur-rent of imp-res-si-on flo-wing be-ne-ath the sur-fa-ce.

But it stuck. All the-se things that hap-pe-ned to him. We-re they su-bj-ec-ti-ve or obj-ec-ti-ve, wit-hin or wit-ho-ut? They se-emed to pi-le up so of-ten, each de-ta-il lin-king un-til the sum of pro-vo-ca-ti-ons al-most dro-ve him mad. It al-most se-emed as tho-ugh it we-re do-ne with in-tent. As if...

As if it we-re a plan.

Mr Jas-per ex-pe-ri-men-ted.

Initial equ-ip-ment con-sis-ted of one whi-te pad, li-ned, plus his ball-po-int pen. Pri-mary ap-pro-ach con-sis-ted of jot-ting down va-ri-o-us exas-pe-ra-ti-ons with the ti-me of the-ir oc-cur-ren-ce, the lo-ca-ti-on, the sex of the of-fen-der and the re-la-ti-ve gros-sness of the an-no-yan-ce; this last as-pect gra-da-ted by num-bers ran-ging from one to ten.

Example one, clum-sily no-ta-ted whi-le still half as-le-ep.

Baby crying, 4.52 a.m., next do-or to ro-om, ma-le, 7.

Following this entry, Mr Jas-per set-tled back on his flat-te-ned pil-low with a sigh ap-pro-xi-ma-ting sa-tis-fac-ti-on. The start was ma-de. In a few days he wo-uld know with as-su-ran-ce if his unu-su-al spe-cu-la-ti-on was jus-ti-fi-ed.

Before he left the ho-use at eight-se-ven-te-en a.m., Mr Jas-per had ac-cu-mu-la-ted three mo-re ent-ri-es; viz:

Loud thum-ping on flo-or, 6.33 a.m., ups-ta-irs from ro-om, ma-le (gu-ess), 5.

Traffic no-ise, 7.00 a.m. out-si-de of ro-om, ma-les, 6.

Radio on lo-ud, 7.40 a.m. on, ups-ta-irs from ro-om, fe-ma-le, 7.

One rat-her odd fa-cet of Mr Jas-per's ef-forts ca-me to his at-ten-ti-on as he left his small apart-ment. This was, in short, that he had put down much of his tem-per thro-ugh this simp-le ex-pe-di-ent of writ-ten analy-sis. Not that the va-ri-o-us no-ises had fa-iled, at first, to set his te-eth on ed-ge and ca-use his hands to flex in-vo-lun-ta-rily at his si-des. They had not. Yet the trans-la-ti-on of amorp-ho-us ve-xa-ti-on in-to words, the re-duc-ti-on of an ag-gra-va-ti-on to one suc-cinct me-mo-ran-dum so-me-how hel-ped. It was stran-ge but ple-asing.

The bus trip to work pro-vi-ded furt-her no-ta-ti-ons.

The snif-fing man drew one im-me-di-ate and auto-ma-tic entry. But on-ce that ir-ri-tant was dis-po-sed of, Mr Jas-per was alar-med to no-te the ra-pid ac-cu-mu-la-ti-on of fo-ur mo-re. No mat-ter whe-re he mo-ved on the bus the-re was fresh ca-use for dra-wing pen-po-int from scab-bard and stab-bing out mo-re words.

Garlic bre-ath, 8.27 a.m., bus, ma-le, 7.

Heavy jost-ling, 8.28 a.m., bus, both se-xes, 8.

Feet step-ped on. No apo-logy, 8.29 a.m., bus, wo-man, 9.

Driver tel-ling me to go to back of bus, 8.33 a.m., bus, ma-le, 9-

Then Mr Jas-per fo-und him-self stan-ding aga-in be-si-de the man with the un-com-mon cold. He did not ta-ke the pad from his poc-ket but his eyes clo-sed and his te-eth clam-ped to-get-her bit-terly. La-ter he era-sed the ori-gi-nal gra-ding for the man.

10! he wro-te in a fury.

And at lunch, amidst usu-al an-ta-go-ni-sa-ti-ons, Mr Jas-per, with a fi-er-ce and ja-un-di-ced eye, saw system to it all.

He se-ized on a blank pad pa-ge.

1. At le-ast one ir-ri-ta-ti-on per fi-ve mi-nu-tes. (Twel-ve per ho-ur.) Not per-fectly ti-med. So-me oc-cur-ring two in a mi-nu-te.

Clever. Trying to throw me off the track by bre-aking con-ti-nu-ity.

2. Each of the 12 ho-urly ir-ri-ta-ti-ons is wor-se than the one be-fo-re. The last of the 12 al-most ma-kes me ex-p-lo-de.

THEORY: By pla-cing the ir-ri-ta-ti-ons so that each one tops the pre-ce-ding one the fi-nal ho-urly ad-di-ti-on is thus de-sig-ned to pro-vi-de ma-xi-mum ner-ve im-pact: i.e. - Ste-ering me in-to in-sa-nity!

He sat the-re, his so-up get-ting cold, a wild sci-en-ti-fic lust-re to his eyes, in-ves-ti-ga-tory he-at chur-ning up his system. Yes, by He-aven, yes, yes, yes!

But he must ma-ke su-re.

He fi-nis-hed his lunch, ig-no-ring smo-ke and chat-te-ring and un-pa-la-tab-le fo-od. He slunk back to his co-un-ter. He spent a joyo-us af-ter-no-on scrib-bling down ent-ri-es in his jo-ur-nal of con-vul-si-ons.

The system held.

It sto-od firm be-fo-re un-bi-ased test. One ir-ri-ta-ti-on per fi-ve mi-nu-tes. So-me of them, na-tu-ral-ly, we-re so subt-le that only a man with Mr Jas-per's in-tu-iti-ve grasp, a man with a qu-est, cou-ld no-ti-ce them. The-se ag-gra-va-ti-ons we-re un-derp-la-yed.

And cle-verly so! - re-ali-sed Mr Jas-per. Un-derp-la-yed and in-ten-ded to du-pe.

Well, he wo-uld not be du-ped.

Tie rack knoc-ked over, 1.18 p.m., sto-re, fe-ma-le, 7.

Fly wal-king on hand, 1.43 p.m., sto-re, fe-ma-le (?), 8.

Faucet in wash-ro-om splas-hing clot-hes, 2.19 p.m., sto-re (sex), 9.

Refusal to buy tie be-ca-use torn, 2.38 p.m., sto-re, WO-MAN, 10.

These we-re typi-cal ent-ri-es for the af-ter-no-on.

They we-re jot-ted down with a bel-li-co-se sa-tis-fac-ti-on by a sha-king Mr Jas-per. A Mr Jas-per who-se inc-re-dib-le the-ory was be-ing vin-di-ca-ted.

About three o'clock he de-ci-ded to eli-mi-na-te tho-se num-bers from one to fi-ve sin-ce no pro-vo-ca-ti-ons we-re mild eno-ugh to be jud-ged so le-ni-ently.

By fo-ur he had dis-car-ded every gra-ding but ni-ne and ten.

By fi-ve he was se-ri-ously con-si-de-ring a new system which be-gan at ten and ran-ged up to twenty-fi-ve.

Mr Jas-per had plan-ned to com-pi-le at le-ast a we-ek's an-no-ta-ti-ons be-fo-re pre-pa-ring his ca-se. But, so-me-how, the shocks of the day we-ake-ned him. His ent-ri-es grew mo-re he-ated, his pen-mans-hip less le-gib-le.

And, at ele-ven that night, as the pe-op-le next do-or got the-ir se-cond wind and re-su-med the-ir party with a gre-at sho-ut of la-ugh-ter, Mr Jas-per hur-led his pad aga-inst the wall with a cho-king oath and sto-od the-re tremb-ling vi-olently. It was de-fi-ni-te.

They we-re out to get him.

Suppose, he tho-ught, the-re was a sec-ret le-gi-on in the world. And that the-ir pri-me de-vo-ti-on was to dri-ve him from his sen-ses.

Wouldn't it be pos-sib-le for them to do this in-si-di-o-us thing wit-ho-ut anot-her so-ul kno-wing it? Cou-ldn't they ar-ran-ge the-ir mad-de-ning lit-tle int-ru-si-ons on his sa-nity so cle-verly that it might al-ways se-em as if *he* we-re at fa-ult; that he was only a hyper-sen-si-ti-ve lit-tle man who saw

ma-li-ci-o-us in-tent in every ac-ci-den-tal ir-ri-ta-ti-on? Wasn't that pos-sib-le?

Yes. His mind po-un-ded out the ac-cep-tan-ce over and over.

It was con-ce-ivab-le, fe-asib-le, pos-sib-le and, by he-aven, he be-li-eved it!

Why not? Co-uldn't the-re be a gre-at si-nis-ter le-gi-on of pe-op-le who met in sec-ret cel-lars by gut-te-ring cand-le-light? And sat the-re, be-ady eyes shi-ning with nasty in-tent, as the-ir le-ader spo-ke of mo-re plans for dri-ving Mr Jas-per stra-ight to hell?

Sure! Agent X as-sig-ned to the row be-hind Mr Jas-per at a mo-vie, the-re to talk du-ring parts of the pic-tu-re in which Mr Jas-per was most ab-sor-bed, the-re to rat-tle pa-per bags at re-gu-lar in-ter-vals, the-re to mas-ti-ca-te pop-corn de-afe-ningly un-til Mr Jas-per hunc-hed up, blind-ra-ging, in-to the ais-le and stom-ped back to anot-her se-at.

And he-re, Agent Y wo-uld ta-ke over with candy and crinkly wrap-pers and ext-ra mo-ist sne-ezes.

Possible. Mo-re than pos-sib-le. It co-uld ha-ve be-en go-ing on for ye-ars wit-ho-ut his ever ac-qu-iring the sligh-test ink-ling of its exis-ten-ce. A subt-le, di-abo-li-cal int-ri-gue, ne-ar im-pos-sib-le to de-TECT. But now, at last, strip-ped of its con-ce-aling ro-bes, shown in all its na-ked, aw-ful re-ality.

Mr Jas-per lay abed, co-gi-ta-ting.

No, he tho-ught with a scant re-ma-in-der of ra-ti-ona-lity, it is silly. It is a po-int out-lan-dishly ta-ken.

Why sho-uld the-se pe-op-le do the-se things? That was all one had to ask. What was the-ir mo-ti-ve?

Wasn't it ab-sur-d to think that all the-se pe-op-le we-re out to get him? De-ad, Mr Jas-per was worth not-hing. Cer-ta-inly his two tho-usand dol-lar po-licy sub-di-vi-ded among a vast hid-den le-gi-on wo-uld not amo-unt to mo-re than three or fo-ur cents a plot-ter. Even if he we-re to be co-er-ced in-to na-ming them all as his be-ne-fi-ci-ari-es.

Why, then, did Mr Jas-per find him-self drif-ting help-les-sly in-to the kitch-e-net-te? Why, then, did he stand the-re so long, ba-lan-cing the long car-ving kni-fe in his hand? And why did he sha-ke when he tho-ught of his idea?

Unless it was true.

Before he re-ti-red Mr Jas-per put the car-ving bla-de in-to its card-bo-ard she-ath. Then, al-most auto-ma-ti-cal-ly, he fo-und him-self sli-ding the kni-fe in-to the in-si-de poc-ket of his su-it co-at.

And, ho-ri-zon-tal in the black-ness, eyes open, his flat chest ri-sing and fal-ling with uns-te-ady be-at, he sent out his ble-ak ul-ti-ma-tum to the le-gi-on that might be: 'If you are the-re, I will ta-ke no mo-re.'

Then the-re was Al-bert Ra-den-ha-usen, Juni-or, aga-in at fo-ur in the mor-ning. Jol-ting Mr Jas-per in-to wa-king sta-te, to-uc-hing one mo-re match to his inf-lam-mab-le system. The-re we-re the fo-ots-teps, the car horns, the dogs bar-king, the blinds rat-tling, the fa-ucet drip-ping, the blan-kets bunc-hing, the pil-low flat-te-ning, the pyj-amas twis-ting. And mor-ning with its bur-ning to-ast and bad cof-fee and bro-ken cup and lo-ud ra-dio ups-ta-irs and bro-ken sho-ela-ce.

And Mr Jas-per's body grew ri-gid with uns-pe-akab-le fury and he whi-ned and his-sed and his musc-les pet-ri-fi-ed and his hands sho-ok and he al-most wept. For-got-ten was his pad and list, lost in vi-olent tem-per. Only one thing re-ma-ined. And that... was self-de-fen-ce.

For Mr Jas-per knew then the-re *was* a le-gi-on of plot-ters and he knew al-so that the le-gi-on was re-do-ub-ling its ef-forts be-ca-use he *did* know and wo-uld fight back.

He fled the apart-ment and hur-ri-ed down the stre-et, his mind tor-men-ted. He must get cont-rol, he *must!* It was the cru-ci-al mo-ment, the ti-me of fer-ment. If he let the co-ur-se of things go on unim-pe-ded, the mad-ness *wo-uld* co-me and the le-gi-on wo-uld ha-ve its vic-tim.

Self-defence!

He sto-od, whi-te-jawed and qu-ive-ring, at the bus stop, trying with ut-most vi-go-ur to re-sist. Ne-ver mind that exp-lo-ding ex-ha-ust! For-get that stri-dent gig-gle of pas-sing fe-ma-le agent. Ig-no-re the ri-sing, mo-un-ting cres-cen-do of split ner-ves. They wo-uld not win! His mind a ri-gid, wa-iting spring, Mr Jas-per vo-wed vic-tory.

On the bus, the man's nost-rils drew migh-tily and pe-op-le bum-ped in-to Mr Jas-per and he gas-ped

and knew that any mo-ment he was go-ing to scre-am and it wo-uld hap-pen.

Sniff, sniff! went the man -SNIFF!

Mr Jas-per mo-ved away ten-sely. The man had ne-ver snif-fed that lo-udly be-fo-re. It was in the plan. Mr Jas-per's hand flut-te-red up to to-uch the hard length of kni-fe be-ne-ath his co-at.

He sho-ved thro-ugh pac-ked com-mu-ter. So-me-one step-ped on his fo-ot. He his-sed. His sho-ela-ce bro-ke aga-in. He bent over to fix it, and so-me-one's knee hit the si-de of his he-ad. He stra-igh-te-ned up diz-zily in the lurc-hing bus, a strang-led cur-se al-most prying thro-ugh his pres-sed, whi-te lips.

One last ho-pe re-ma-ining. *Co-uld* he es-ca-pe? The qu-es-ti-on punc-hed away his sen-ses. A new apart-ment? He'd mo-ved be-fo-re. On what he co-uld af-ford the-re was no way of fin-ding anyt-hing bet-ter. He'd al-ways ha-ve the sa-me type of ne-igh-bo-urs.

A car ins-te-ad of bus tra-vel? He co-uldn't af-ford it.

Leave his mi-se-rab-le job? All sa-les jobs we-re just as bad and it was all he knew and he was get-ting ol-der.

And even if he chan-ged everyt-hing - *ever-y-t-hing!* - the le-gi-on wo-uld still pur-sue him, trac-king him down ruth-les-sly from ten-si-on to ten-si-on un-til the ine-vi-tab-le bre-ak-down.

He was trap-ped.

And, sud-denly, stan-ding the-re with all the pe-op-le lo-oking at him, Mr Jas-per saw the ho-urs ahe-ad, the days, the ye-ars -an ago-ni-zing, crus-hing he-ap of an-no-yan-ces and ir-ri-ta-ti-ons and mind-se-ar-ing ag-gra-va-ti-ons. His he-ad snap-ped aro-und as he lo-oked at every-body.

And his ha-ir al-most sto-od on end be-ca-use he re-ali-sed that all the pe-op-le in the bus we-re mem-bers of the le-gi-on too. And he was help-less in the-ir midst, a pawn to be buf-fe-ted abo-ut by the-ir vi-ci-o-us, in-hu-man pre-sen-ce, his rights and in-di-vi-du-al sanc-ti-ti-es end-les-sly su-bj-ect to the-ir ma-le-vo-lent cons-pi-racy.

'No!' He scre-amed it out at them.

And his hand flew in be-ne-ath his co-at li-ke an aven-ging bird. And the bla-de flas-hed and the le-gi-on bac-ked away scre-aming and, with a fren-zi-ed lun-ge, Mr Jas-per fo-ught his war for sa-nity.

MAN STABS SIX IN CROW-DED BUS; IS SHOT BY PO-LI-CE

No Mo-ti-ve Fo-und For Wild At-tack

10 - THE EDGE

It was al-most two be-fo-re the-re was a chan-ce for lunch. Un-til then his desk was snow-ban-ked with de-man-ding pa-pers, his te-lep-ho-ne rang cons-tantly and an army of in-sis-tent vi-si-tors at-tac-ked his walls. By twel-ve, his ner-ves we-re pul-led li-ke vi-olin strings knob-bed to the-ir tigh-test. By one, the strings drew clo-se to she-ar-ing; by one-thirty they be-gan to snap. He had to get away; now, im-me-di-ately; flee to so-me sha-dowy res-ta-urant bo-oth, ha-ve a cock-tail and a le-isu-rely me-al; lis-ten to som-no-lent mu-sic. He had to.

Down on the stre-et, he wal-ked be-yond the zo-ne of eating pla-ces he usu-al-ly fre-qu-en-ted, not wis-hing to risk se-e-ing an-yo-ne he knew. Abo-ut a qu-ar-ter of a mi-le from the of-fi-ce he fo-und a cel-lar res-ta-urant na-med Fran-co's. At his re-qu-est, the hos-tess led him to a re-ar bo-oth whe-re he or-de-red a mar-ti-ni; then, as the wo-man tur-ned away, he stretc-hed out his legs be-ne-ath the tab-le and clo-sed his eyes. A gra-te-ful sigh mur-mu-red from him. This was the tic-ket. Dim-lit com-fort. Mu-zak thrum-ming at the bot-tom frin-ge of audi-bi-lity, a cu-ra-ti-ve drink. He sig-ned aga-in. A few mo-re days li-ke this, he tho-ught, and I'm go-ne.

'Hi, Don.'

He ope-ned his eyes in ti-me to see the man drop down ac-ross from him, 'How go-es it?' as-ked the man.

'What?' Do-nald Mars-hall sta-red at him.

'Gawd,' sa-id the man. 'What a day, what a day.' He grin-ned ti-redly. 'You, too?'

'I don't be-li-eve -' be-gan Mars-hall.

'Ah!' the man sa-id, nod-ding, ple-ased, as a wa-it-ress bro-ught the mar-ti-ni. 'That for me. Anot-her, ple-ase; dryer than dry.'

'Yes, sir,' sa-id the wa-it-ress and was go-ne.

'There,' sa-id the man, stretc-hing. 'No pla-ce li-ke Fran-co's for get-ting away from it all, eh?'

'Look he-re,' sa-id Mars-hall, smi-ling awk-wardly. 'I'm af-ra-id you've ma-de a mis-ta-ke.'

'Hmmm?' The man le-aned for-ward, smi-ling back.

T say I'm af-ra-id you've ma-de a mis-ta-ke.'

'I ha-ve?' The man grun-ted. 'What'd I do, for-get to sha-ve? I'm li-ab-le to. No?' he sa-id as Mars-hall frow-ned. 'Wrong tie?'

'You don't un-ders-tand,' sa-id Mars-hall.

What?'

Marshall cle-ared his thro-at. 'I'm - not who you think I am,' he sa-id.

'Huh?' The man le-aned for-ward aga-in, squ-in-ting. He stra-igh-te-ned up, chuck-ling. 'What's the story, Don?' he as-ked.

Marshall fin-ge-red at the stem of his glass. 'Yes, what is the story?' he sa-id, less po-li-tely now.

'I don't get you,' sa-id the man.

'Who do you think I am?' as-ked Mars-hall, his vo-ice ri-sing a lit-tle.

The man be-gan to spe-ak, ga-ped a trif-le, then be-gan to spe-ak aga-in. 'What do you me-an who do I -?' He bro-ke off as the wa-it-ress bro-ught the se-cond mar-ti-ni. They both sat qu-i-etly un-til she was go-ne.

'Now,' sa-id the man cu-ri-o-usly.

'Look, I'm not go-ing to ac-cu-se you of anyt-hing,' sa-id Mars-hall, 'but you don't know me. You've ne-ver met me in yo-ur who-le li-fe.'

'I don't -!' The man co-uld'n't fi-nish; he lo-oked flab-ber-gas-ted. '*I don't know you?*' he sa-id.

Marshall had to la-ugh. 'Oh this is lu-dic-ro-us,' he sa-id.

The man smi-led ap-pre-ci-ati-vely. 'I knew you we-re rib-bing me,' he ad-mit-ted, 'but - ' He sho-ok his he-ad. 'You had me go-ing the-re for a se-cond.'

Marshall put down his glass, the skin be-gin-ning to tigh-ten ac-ross his che-eks.

Td say this had go-ne abo-ut far eno-ugh,' he sa-id. 'I'm in no mo-od for -'

'Don,' the man bro-ke in. 'What's wrong?'

Marshall drew in a de-ep bre-ath, then let it wa-ver out. 'Oh, well,' he sa-id, 'I sup-po-se it's an ho-nest mis-ta-ke.' He for-ced a smi-le. 'Who *do* you think I am?'

The man didn't ans-wer. He lo-oked at Mars-hall in-tently.

'Well?' as-ked Mars-hall, be-gin-ning to lo-se pa-ti-en-ce.

'This isn't a joke?' sa-id the man,

'Now, lo-ok -'

'No, wa-it, wa-it,' the man sa-id, ra-ising one hand. 'I... sup-po-se it's pos-sib-le the-re co-uld be two men who lo-ok so much ali-ke they -'

He stop-ped ab-ruptly and lo-oked at Mars-hall. 'Don, you're *not* rib-bing me, are you?'

'Now lis-ten to me -!'

'All right, I apo-lo-gi-se,' sa-id the man. He sat ga-zing at Mars-hall for a mo-ment; then he shrug-ged and smi-led perp-le-xedly. 'I co-uld ha-ve sworn you we-re Don Mars-hall,' he sa-id.

Marshall felt so-met-hing cold gat-he-ring aro-und his he-art.

'I am,' he he-ard him-self say.

The only so-und in the res-ta-urant was that of the mu-sic and the de-li-ca-te clink of sil-ver-wa-re.

'What is this?' as-ked the man.

'You tell me,' sa-id Mars-hall in a thin vo-ice.

'You - ' The man lo-oked ca-re-ful-ly at him. 'This is not a joke,' he sa-id.

'Now see he-re!'

'All right, all right, The man ra-ised both his hands in a con-ci-li-atory ges-tu-re. 'It's not a joke. You cla-im I don't know you. All right. Gran-ting that le-aves us with - with *this*: a man who not only lo-oks exactly li-ke my fri-end but has exactly the sa-me na-me. Is this pos-sib-le?'

'Apparently so,' sa-id Mars-hall.

Abruptly, he pic-ked up his glass and to-ok mo-men-tary es-ca-pe in the mar-ti-ni. The man did the sa-me. The wa-it-ress ca-me for the-ir or-ders and Mars-hall told her to co-me back la-ter.

'What's yo-ur na-me?' he as-ked then.

'Arthur No-lan,' sa-id the man.

Marshall ges-tu-red conc-lu-si-vely. 'I don't know you,' he sa-id. The-re was a slight lo-ose-ning of ten-si-on in his sto-mach.

The man le-aned back and sta-red at Mars-hall. This is fan-tas-tic,' he sa-id. He sho-ok his he-ad. 'Utterly fan-tas-tic'

Marshall smi-led and lo-we-red his eyes to the glass.

'Where do you work?' as-ked the man.

'American-Pacific Ste-ams-hip,' Mars-hall ans-we-red, glan-cing up. He felt the be-gin-ning of enj-oy-ment in him-self. This was, cer-ta-in-ly, so-met-hing to ta-ke one's mind off the wrack of the day.

The man lo-oked exa-mi-ningly at him; and Mars-hall sen-sed the enj-oy-ment fa-ding.

Suddenly the man la-ug-hed.

'You must ha-ve had one swe-et hell of a mor-ning, buddy,' he sa-id.

'What?'

'No mo-re,' sa-id the man.

'Listen -'

'I ca-pi-tu-la-te,' sa-id No-lan, grin-ning. 'You're cur-d-ling my gin.'

'Listen to me, damn it!' snap-ped Mars-hall.

The man lo-oked start-led. His mo-uth fell open and he put his drink down. 'Don, what is it?' he as-ked, con-cer-ned now.

'You do not know me,' sa-id Mars-hall, very ca-re-ful-ly. 'I do not know you. Will you kindly ac-cept that?'

The man lo-oked aro-und as if for help. Then he le-aned in clo-se and spo-ke, his vo-ice soft and wor-ri-ed.

'Don, lis-ten. Ho-nest-ly. You don't know me?'

Marshall drew in a de-ep bre-ath, te-eth clen-c-hed aga-inst ri-sing fury. The man drew back. The lo-ok on his fa-ce was, sud-den-ly, frigh-te-ning to Mars-hall.

'One of us is out of his mind,' Mars-hall sa-id. The le-vity he'd in-ten-ded ne-ver ap-pe-ared in his vo-ice.

Nolan swal-lo-wed rag-ged-ly. He lo-oked down at his drink as if unab-le to fa-ce the ot-her man.

Marshall sud-den-ly la-ug-hed. 'De-ar Lord,' he sa-id, 'What a sce-ne. You re-al-ly think you know me, don't you?'

The man gri-ma-ced. 'The Don Mars-hall I know,' he sa-id, 'also works for Ame-ri-can-Pa-ci-fic.'

Marshall shud-de-red. That's im-pos-sib-le,' he sa-id.

'No,' sa-id the man flat-ly.

For a mo-ment Mars-hall got the no-ti-on that this was so-me sort of in-si-di-o-us plot aga-inst him; but the dist-ra-ught exp-res-si-on on the man's fa-ce we-ake-ned the sus-pi-ci-on. He to-ok a sip of his mar-ti-ni, then, ca-re-ful-ly, set down the glass and la-id his palms on the tab-le as if se-eking the re-in-for-ce-ment of its pre-sen-ce.

'American-Pacific Ste-ams-hip Li-nes?' he as-ked.

The man nod-ded on-ce. 'Yes.'

Marshall sho-ok his he-ad ob-du-ra-tely; 'No,' he sa-id. 'The-re's no ot-her Mars-hall in our of-fi-ces. Un-less,' he ad-ded, qu-ick-ly, 'one of our clerks downs-ta-irs -'

'You're an- ' The man bro-ke off ner-vo-usly. 'He's an exe-cu-ti-ve,' he sa-id.

Marshall drew his hands in slowly and put them in his lap. Then I don't un-ders-tand,' he sa-id. He wis-hed, ins-tantly, he hadn't sa-id it.

This... man told you he wor-ked the-re?' he as-ked qu-ickly.

'Yes.'

'Can you pro-ve he works the-re?' Mars-hall chal-len-ged, his vo-ice bre-aking, 'Can you pro-ve his na-me is re-al-ly Don Mars-hall?'

'Don, I -'

'Well, *can* you?'

'Are you mar-ri-ed?' as-ked the man.

Marshall he-si-ta-ted. Then, cle-aring his thro-at, he sa-id, 'I am.'

Nolan le-aned for-ward. To Ruth Fos-ter?' he as-ked.

Marshall co-uldn't hi-de his in-vo-lun-tary gasp.

'Do you li-ve on the Is-land?' No-lan pres-sed.

'Yes,' sa-id Mars-hall we-akly, 'but -'

'In Hun-ting-ton?'

Marshall hadn't even the strength to nod.

'Did you go to Co-lum-bia Uni-ver-sity?'

'Yes, but -' His te-eth we-re on ed-ge now.

'Did you gra-du-ate in June, ni-ne-te-en forty?'

'No!' Mars-hall clutched at this. 'I gra-du-ated in Janu-ary, ni-ne-te-en forty-one. Forty-one!'

'Were you a li-e-ute-nant in the Army?' as-ked No-lan, pa-ying no at-ten-ti-on.

Marshall felt him-self slip-ping. 'Yes,' he mut-te-red, 'but you sa-id -'

'In the Eighty-Se-venth Di-vi-sion?'

'Now wa-it a mi-nu-te!' Mars-hall pus-hed asi-de the ne-arly empty glass as if to ma-ke ro-om for his re-but-tal. 'I can gi-ve you two very go-od exp-la-na-ti-ons for this... this fo-ol con-fu-si-on.

One: a man who lo-oks li-ke me and knows a few things abo-ut me is pre-ten-ding to be me; Lord knows why.

Two: you know abo-ut me and you're trying to sna-re me in-to so-met-hing. No, you can ar-gue all you li-ke!' he per-sis-ted, al-most fran-ti-cal-ly, as the man be-gan to obj-ect. 'You can ask all the qu-es-ti-ons you li-ke; but I know who I am and I know who I know!'

'Do you?' as-ked the man. He lo-oked da-zed.

Marshall felt his legs twitch sharply.

'Well, I ha-ve no in-ten-ti-on of s-sit-ting he-re and ar-gu-ing with you,' he sa-id. 'This en-ti-re thing is ab-sur-d. I ca-me he-re for so-me pe-ace and qu-i-et - a pla-ce I've ne-ver even be-en to be-fo-re and -'

'Don, *we eat he-re all the ti-me.*' No-lan lo-oked sick.

'That's non-sen-se!'

Nolan rub-bed a hand ac-ross his mo-uth. 'You... you ac-tu-al-ly think this is so-me kind of *con ga-me?*' he as-ked.

Marshall sta-red at him. He co-uld fe-el the he-avy pul-sing of his he-art.

'Or that - *my God* - that the-re's a man im-per-so-na-ting you? Don...!' The man lo-we-red his eyes. 'I think - well, if I we-re you/ he sa-id qu-i-etly, 'I'd - go to a doc-tor, a -'

'Let's stop this, shall we?' Mars-hall in-ter-rup-ted coldly. 'I sug-gest one of us le-ave.' He lo-oked aro-und the res-ta-urant. 'The-re's plenty of ro-om in he-re.'

He tur-ned his eyes qu-ickly from the man's stric-ken fa-ce and pic-ked up his mar-ti-ni. 'Well?' he sa-id.

The man sho-ok his he-ad. 'De-ar God,' he mur-mu-red.

'I sa-id let's stop it,' Mars-hall sa-id thro-ugh clenc-hed te-eth.
'That's it?' as-ked No-lan, inc-re-du-lo-usly. 'You're wil-ling to -to let it go at that?'
Marshall star-ted to get up.

'No, no, wa-it,' sa-id No-lan. TU go.' He sta-red at Mars-hall blankly. 'I'll go,' he re-pe-ated.
Abruptly, he pus-hed to his fe-et as if the-re we-re a le-aden mant-le aro-und his sho-ul-ders.
'I don't know what to say,' he sa-id, 'but - for God's sa-ke, Don - see a doc-tor.'

He sto-od by the si-de of the bo-oth a mo-ment lon-ger, lo-oking down at Mars-hall. Then, has-tily, he tur-ned and wal-ked to-wards the front do-or. Mars-hall watc-hed him le-ave.

When the man had go-ne he sank back aga-inst the bo-oth wall and sta-red in-to his drink. He pic-ked up the to-oth-pick and mec-ha-ni-cal-ly stir-red the im-pa-led oni-on aro-und in the glass. When the wa-it-ress ca-me he or-de-red the first item he saw on the me-nu.

While he ate he tho-ught abo-ut how in-sa-ne it had be-en. For, un-less the man No-lan was a con-sum-ma-te ac-tor, he had be-en sin-ce-re-ly up-set by what had hap-pe-ned.

What *had* hap-pe-ned? An out-and-out ca-se of mis-ta-ken iden-tity was one thing. A mis-ta-ken iden-tity which se-emed not qu-ite wholly mis-ta-ken was anot-her. How had the man known the-se things abo-ut him? Abo-ut Ruth, Hun-ting-ton, Ame-ri-can-Pa-ci-fic, even his li-e-ute-nancy in the 87th Di-vi-si-on? *How?*

Suddenly, it struck him.

Years ago he'd be-en a de-vo-tee of fan-tas-tic fic-ti-on - sto-ri-es which de-alt with trips to the mo-on, with tra-vel-ling thro-ugh ti-me, with all of that. And one of the ide-as used re-pe-atedly was that of the al-ter-na-te uni-ver-se: a lu-na-tic the-ory which sta-ted that for every pos-si-bi-li-ty the-re was a se-pa-ra-te uni-ver-se. Fol-lo-wing his the-ory the-re might, con-ce-ivably, be a uni-ver-se in which he knew this No-lan, ate at Fran-co's with him re-gu-larly and had gra-du-ated from Co-lum-bia a se-mes-ter ear-li-er.

It was ab-sur-d, re-al-ly, yet the-re it was. What if, in en-te-ring Fran-co's, he had, ac-ci-den-tal-ly, en-te-red a uni-ver-se one jot re-mo-ved from the one he'd exis-ted in at the of-fi-ce? What if, the tho-ught ex-pan-ded, pe-op-le we-re, wit-ho-ut kno-wing it, con-ti-nu-al-ly en-te-ring the-se uni-ver-ses one jot re-mo-ved? What if he him-self had con-ti-nu-al-ly en-te-red them and ne-ver known un-til to-day - when, in an ac-ci-den-tal entry, he had go-ne one step too far?

He clo-sed his eyes and shud-de-red. De-ar Lord, he tho-ught; de-ar, he-avenly Lord, I *ha-ve* be-en wor-king too hard. He felt as if he we-re stan-ding at the ed-ge of a cliff wa-iting for so-me-one to push him off. He tri-ed hard not to think abo-ut his talk with No-lan. If he tho-ught abo-ut it he'd ha-ve to fit in-to the pat-tern. He wasn't pre-pa-red to do that yet.

After a whi-le he pa-id his check and left the res-ta-urant, the fo-od li-ke cold le-ad in his sto-mach. He cab-bed to Pen-nsyl-va-nia Sta-ti-on and, af-ter a short wa-it, bo-ar-ded a North Sho-re tra-in. All the way to Hun-ting-ton, he sat in the smo-ker car sta-ring out at the pas-sing co-untry-si-de, an un-lit ci-ga-ret-te bet-we-en his fin-gers. The he-avy pres-su-re in his sto-mach wo-uldn't go away.

When Hun-ting-ton was re-ac-hed, he wal-ked ac-ross the sta-ti-on to the cab stand and, de-li-be-ra-tely, got in-to one of them.

'Take me ho-me, will you?' he lo-ok-ed in-tently at the dri-ver.

'Sure thing, Mr Mars-hall,' sa-id the dri-ver, smi-ling.

Marshall sank back with a wa-ve-ring sigh and clo-sed his eyes. The-re was a ting-ling at his fin-ger-tips.

'You're ho-me early,' sa-id the dri-ver. 'Fe-eling po-orly?'

Marshall swal-lo-wed. 'Just a he-adac-he,' he sa-id.

'Oh, I'm sorry.'

As he ro-de ho-me, Mars-hall kept sta-ring at the town, des-pi-te him-self, lo-oking for disc-re-pan-ci-es, for *dif-fe-ren-ces*. But the-re we-re no-ne; every-thing was just the sa-me. He felt the pres-su-re let-ting up.

Ruth was in the li-ving ro-om, se-wing.

'Don.' She sto-od up and hur-ri-ed to him. 'Is so-met-hing wrong?'

'No, no,' he sa-id put-ting down his hat. 'Just a he-adac-he.'

'Oh.' She led him, sympat-he-ti-cal-ly, to a cha-ir and hel-ped him off with his su-it co-at and sho-es. 'I'll get you so-met-hing right away,' she sa-id.

'Fine.' When she was go-ne ups-ta-irs, Mars-hall lo-ok-ed aro-und the fa-mi-li-ar ro-om and smi-led at it. It was all right now.

Ruth was co-ming down the sta-irs when the te-lep-ho-ne rang. He star-ted up, then fell back aga-in as she cal-led, 'I'll get it, dar-ling.'

'All right,' he sa-id.

He watc-hed her in the hal-lway as she pic-ked up the re-ce-iver and sa-id hel-lo. She lis-te-ned. 'Yes, dar-ling,' she sa-id auto-ma-ti-cal-ly. 'You -'

Then she stop-ped and, hol-ding out the re-ce-iver, sta-red at it as if it we-re so-met-hing monst-ro-us in her hand.

She put it back-to her ear. 'You... won't be ho-me un-til la-te?' she as-ked in a fa-int vo-ice.

Marshall sat the-re ga-ping at her, the be-ats of his he-art li-ke so-me-one stri-king at him. Even when she tur-ned to lo-ok at him, the re-ce-iver lo-we-red in her hand, he co-uld'n't turn away. Ple-ase, he tho-ught. Ple-ase don't say it. *Ple-ase.*

'*Who are you?*' she as-ked.

11 - THE CREEPING TERROR

THESIS SUB-MIT-TED AS PAR-TI-AL RE-QU-IRE-MENT FOR MAS-TER OF ARTS DEG-REE

The phe-no-me-non known in sci-en-ti-fic circ-les as the Los An-ge-les Mo-ve-ment ca-me to light in the ye-ar 1972 when Doc-tor Al-bert Grimsby, A.B., B.S., A.M., Ph.D., pro-fes-sor of physics at the Ca-li-for-nia Ins-ti-tu-te of Tech-no-logy, ma-de an unu-su-al dis-co-very.

'I ha-ve ma-de an unu-su-al dis-co-very,' sa-id Doc-tor Grimsby.

'What is that?' as-ked Doc-tor Max-well.

'Los An-ge-les is ali-ve.'

Doctor Max-well blin-ked.

'I beg yo-ur par-don,' he sa-id.

'I can un-der-stand yo-ur inc-re-du-lity,' sa-id Doc-tor Grimsby. 'Ne-ver-t-he-less...'

He drew Doc-tor Max-well to the la-bo-ra-tory bench.

'Look in-to this mic-ros-co-pe,' he sa-id, 'under which I ha-ve iso-la-ted a pi-ece of Los An-ge-les.;

Doctor Max-well lo-ok-ed. He ra-ised his he-ad, a lo-ok of as-to-nish-ment on his fa-ce.'

'it mo-ves,' he sa-id.

Having ma-de this stran-ge dis-co-very, Doc-tor Grimsby, oddly eno-ugh, saw fit to pro-mul-ga-te it only in the smal-lest deg-ree. It ap-pe-ared as a one-pa-rag-raph item in the *Sci-en-ce News Let-ter* of June 2, 1972, un-der the he-ading:

CALTECH PHYSICIST FINDS SIGNS OF LIFE IN L.A.

Perhaps due to un-for-tu-na-te phra-sing, per-haps to nor-mal lack of in-te-rest, the item aro-used ne-it-her at-ten-ti-on nor com-ment. This un-for-tu-na-te neg-li-gen-ce pro-ved ever af-ter a pla-gue to

the man ori-gi-nal-ly res-pon-sib-le for it. In la-ter ye-ars it be-ca-me known as 'Grimsby's Blun-der'.

Thus was int-ro-du-ced to a then un-res-pon-si-ve na-ti-on a phe-no-me-non which was to be-co-me in the fol-lo-wing ye-ars a most shoc-king thre-at to that na-ti-on's very exis-ten-ce.

Of la-te, re-se-arc-hers ha-ve dis-co-ve-red that know-led-ge con-cer-ning the Los An-ge-les Mo-ve-ment pre-da-tes Doc-tor Grimsby's find by ye-ars. In-de-ed, hints of this frigh-te-ning cri-sis are to be fo-und in works pub-lis-hed as much as fif-te-en ye-ars pri-or to the ill-fa-ted 'Cal-tech Disc-lo-su-re'.

Concerning Los An-ge-les, the dis-tin-gu-is-hed jo-ur-na-list, John Gunt-her, wro-te: 'What dis-tin-gu-is-hes it is... it's oc-to-pus li-ke growth.(1)

Yet anot-her re-fe-ren-ce to Los An-ge-les men-ti-ons that: 'In its amo-eba li-ke growth it has spre-ad in all di-rec-ti-ons... '(2)

Thus can be se-en pri-mi-ti-ve ap-pro-ac-hes to the phe-no-me-non which are as per-cep-ti-ve as they are una-wa-re. Alt-ho-ugh the-re is no pre-sent evi-den-ce to in-di-ca-te that any per-son du-ring that early pe-ri-od ac-tu-al-ly knew of the fan-tas-tic pro-cess, the-re can, hardly be any do-ubt that many sen-sed it, if only im-per-fectly.

Active spe-cu-la-ti-on re-gar-ding fre-akish na-tu-re be-ha-vi-o-ur be-gan in July and August of 1972. Du-ring a pe-ri-od of ap-pro-xi-ma-tely forty-se-ven days the sta-tes of Ari-zo-na and Utah in the-ir en-ti-rety and gre-at por-ti-ons of New Me-xi-co and lo-wer Co-lo-ra-do we-re inun-da-ted by ra-ins that fre-qu-ently bet-te-red the fi-ve-inch mark.

Such wa-ter fall in pre-vi-o-usly arid sec-ti-ons aro-used gre-at agi-ta-ti-on and dis-cus-si-on. First the-ori-es pla-ced res-pon-si-bi-lity for this un-com-mon ra-in-fall on pre-vi-o-us so-uth wes-tern ato-mic tests.(8) Go-vern-ment disc-la-iming of this pos-si-bi-lity se-emed to inc-re-ase rat-her than eli-mi-na-te mass cre-du-lity to this la-ter disp-ro-ved sup-po-si-ti-on.

Other 'pre-ci-pi-ta-ti-on pos-tu-la-ti-ons' as they we-re then known in In-ves-ti-ga-ti-ve par-lan-ce can be sa-fely re-le-ga-ted to the ca-te-gory of 'crack-po-tia.'(4) The-se inc-lu-de the-ori-es that ex-cess com-mer-ci-al air flights we-re up-set-ting the na-tu-ral ba-lan-ce of the clo-uds, that de-ran-ged In-di-an ra-in-ma-kers had un-wit-tingly co-me upon so-me let-hal con-den-sa-ti-on fac-tor and we-re ap-plying it be-yond all sa-nity, that stran-ge frost from outer spa-ce was se-eding Earth's over-he-ad and ca-using this inor-di-na-te pre-ci-pi-ta-ti-on.

And, as se-ems an ine-vi-tab-le con-co-mi-tant to all ali-en de-port-ment in na-tu-re, hypot-he-ses we-re pro-po-un-ded that this he-avy ra-in-fall pre-sa-ged *De-lu-ge II*. It is cle-arly re-cor-ded that se-ve-ral mi-nor re-li-gi-o-us gro-ups be-gan hasty const-ruc-ti-on of 'Sal-va-ti-on Arks'. One of the-se arks can still be se-en on the outs-kirts of the small town of Dry Rot, New Me-xi-co, bu-ilt on a small hill, 'still wa-iting for the flo-od'.(5)

Then ca-me that me-mo-rab-le day when the na-me of a far-mer Cyrus Mills be-ca-me a ho-use-hold word.

'Tarnation!' sa-id far-mer Mills.

He ga-ped in rus-tic ama-ze-ment at the obj-ect he had co-me ac-ross in his corn fi-eld. He ap-pro-ac-hed it ca-uti-o-usly. He prod-ded it with a sa-usa-ge fin-ger.

'Tarnation,' he re-pe-ated, less vo-lubly.

Jason Gul-lwhist-le of the Uni-ted Sta-tes Ex-pe-ri-men-tal Farm Sta-ti-on No. 3, Neb-ras-ka, dro-ve his sta-ti-on wa-gon out to far-mer Milk's farm in ans-wer to an ur-gent pho-ne call. Far-mer Mills to-ok Mr Gul-lwhist-le out to the obj-ect.

'That's odd,' sa-id Jason Gul-lwhist-le. 'It lo-oks li-ke an oran-ge tree.(9)

Close in-ves-ti-ga-ti-on re-ve-aled the truth of this re-mark. It was, in-de-ed, an oran-ge tree.

'Incredible,' sa-id Jason Gul-lwhist-le. 'An oran-ge tree in the mid-dle of a Neb-ras-ka corn fi-eld. I ne-ver.'

Later they re-tur-ned to the ho-use for a le-mo-na-de and the-re fo-und Mrs Mills in hal-ter and shorts we-ar-ing sung-las-ses and an old che-wed-up fur jac-ket she had ex-hu-med from her crumb-ling ho-pe chest.

'Think I'll dri-ve in-to Hol-lywo-od/ sa-id Mrs Mills, sixty-fi-ve if she was a day.

By night-fall every wi-re ser-vi-ce had emb-ra-ced the item, every pa-per of any pro-mi-nen-ce wha-te-ver had fe-atu-red it as a hu-mo-ro-us in-ser-ti-on on pa-ge one.

Within a we-ek, ho-we-ver, the hu-mo-ur had va-nis-hed as re-ports ca-me po-uring in from every cor-ner of the sta-te of Neb-ras-ka as well as por-ti-ons of Iowa, Kan-sas and Co-lo-ra-do; re-ports of cit-rus tre-es dis-co-ve-red in corn and whe-at fi-elds as well as mo-re alar-ming re-ports re-la-ti-ve to ec-cent-ric be-ha-vi-o-ur in the ru-ral po-pu-la-ce.

Addiction to the we-aring of scanty ap-pa-rel be-ca-me no-ti-ce-ab-le, an inexp-li-cab-le ri-se in the sa-les of fro-zen oran-ge ju-ice ma-ni-fes-ted it-self and oddly si-mi-lar let-ters we-re re-ce-ived by do-zens of cham-bers of com-mer-ce; let-ters which he-atedly de-man-ded the im-me-di-ate const-ruc-ti-on of mo-tor spe-ed-ways, su-per-mar-kets, ten-nis co-urts, dri-ve-in the-at-res and dri-ve-in res-ta-urants and which comp-la-ined of smog.

But it was not un-til a mar-ked dec-re-ase in da-ily tem-pe-ra-tu-res and an equ-al-ly mar-ked inc-re-ase of un-fat-ho-mab-le cit-rus tree growth be-gan to im-pe-ri-l the corn and whe-at crop that se-ri-o-us ac-ti-on was ta-ken. Lo-cal farm gro-ups or-ga-ni-sed spra-ying ope-ra-ti-ons but to lit-tle or no ava-il. Oran-ge, le-mon and gra-pef-ru-it tre-es con-ti-nu-ed to flo-urish in ge-omet-ric pro-li-fe-ra-ti-on and a na-ti-on, at long last, be-ca-me alar-med.

A se-mi-nar of the co-untry's top sci-en-tists met in Rag-we-ed, Neb-ras-ka, the ge-og-raphi-cal cent-re of this mul-tipl-ying pla-gue, to dis-cuss pos-si-bi-li-ti-es.

'Dynamic tre-mors in the al-lu-vi-al subst-ra-ta,' sa-id Doc-tor Ken-neth Lo-am of the Uni-ver-sity of Den-ver.

'Mass che-mi-cal di-sor-der in so-il com-po-si-ti-on,' sa-id Spen-cer Smith of the Du-pont La-bo-ra-to-ri-es.

'Momentous ge-ne mu-ta-ti-on in the corn se-ed,' sa-id Pro-fes-sor Jeremy Brass of Kan-sas Col-le-ge.

'Violent cont-rac-ti-on of the at-mosp-he-ric do-me,' sa-id Tro-fes-sor Law-son Hink-son of M.I.T.

'Displacement of or-bit,' sa-id Ro-ger Cos-mos of the Hay den Pla-ne-ta-ri-um.

'I'm sca-red,' sa-id a lit-tle man from Tur-due.

What po-si-ti-ve re-sults emer-ged from this body of spe-cu-la-ti-ve ge-ni-us is yet to be ap-pra-ised. His-tory re-cords that a clo-ser la-bel-ling of the ca-use of this unu-su-al be-ha-vi-o-ur in na-tu-re and man oc-cur-red in early Oc-to-ber 1972 when As-so-ci-ate Pro-fes-sor Da-vid Sil-ver, yo-ung re-se-arch physi-cist at the Uni-ver-sity of Mis-so-uri, pub-lis-hed in *The Sci-en-ti-fic Ame-ri-can* an ar-tic-le en-tit-led, 'The Col-lec-ting of Evi-den-ces'.

In this bril-li-ant es-say, Pro-fes-sor Sil-ver first vo-iced the opi-ni-on that all the ap-pa-rently dis-con-nec-ted oc-cur-ren-ces we-re, in ac-tu-ality, su-per-fi-ci-al re-ve-la-ti-ons of one un-der-ly-ing phe-no-me-non. To the mo-ment of this ar-tic-le, scant at-ten-ti-on had be-en pa-id to the er-ra-tic be-ha-vi-o-ur of pe-op-le in the af-fec-ted are-as. Mr Sil-ver at-tri-bu-ted this be-ha-vi-o-ur to the sa-me ca-use which had ef-fec-ted the ali-en growth of cit-rus tre-es.

The fi-nal de-duc-ti-ve link was for-ged, oddly eno-ugh, in a Sun-day sup-ple-ment to the now de-funct He-arst news-pa-per syndi-ca-te.(6) The aut-hor of this pi-ece, a pro-fes-si-onal ar-tic-le wri-ter, in do-ing re-se-arch for an ar-tic-le, stumb-led ac-ross the pa-rag-raph re-co-un-ting Doc-tor Grimsby's dis-co-very. Se-e-ing in this a most sa-lab-le fe-atu-re, he wro-te an ar-tic-le com-bi-ning the the-ses of Doc-tor Grimsby and Pro-fes-sor Sil-ver and emer-ging with his own ama-te-ur con-cept

which, stran-ge to say, was ab-so-lu-tely cor-rect. (This fact was la-ter obs-cu-red in the se-ve-re li-ti-ga-ti-on that aro-se when Pro-fes-sors Grimsby and Sil-ver bro-ught su-it aga-ainst the aut-hor for not con-sul-ting them be-fo-re wri-ting the ar-tic-le.)

Thus did it fi-nal-ly be-co-me known that Los An-ge-les, li-ke so-me gi-gan-tic fun-gus, was overg-ro-wing the land.

A pe-ri-od of ges-ta-ti-on fol-lo-wed du-ring which va-ri-o-us pub-li-ca-ti-ons in the co-untry slowly bu-ilt up the im-port of the Los An-ge-les Mo-ve-ment, un-til it be-ca-me a na-ti-onal by-word. It was du-ring this pe-ri-od that a fer-ti-le-min-ded co-lum-nist dub-bed Los An-ge-les 'Ellie, the me-an-de-ring met-ro-po-lis',(7) a tit-le la-ter re-du-ced me-re-ly to 'Ellie' - a term which be-ca-me as com-mon to the Ame-ri-can mind as 'ham and eggs' or 'World War III.

Now be-gan a cycle of da-ta col-lec-ti-on and an at-tempt by va-ri-o-us of the pro-mi-nent sci-en-ces to an-ly-se the Los An-ge-les Mo-ve-ment with a re-gard to ar-res-ting its stran-ge pilg-ri-ma-ge which had now spre-ad in-to parts of So-uth Da-ko-ta, Mis-so-uri, Ar-kan-sas and as far as the so-ve-re-ign sta-te of Te-xas. (To the mass con-vul-si-on this ca-used in the Lo-ne Star Sta-te a se-pa-ra-te pa-per might be de-vo-ted.)

REPUBLICANS DEMAND FULL INVESTIGATION

Claim L.A. Movement Subversive Camouflage

After a hasty dis-patch of agents to all po-ints in the in-fec-ted area, the Ame-ri-can Me-di-cal As-so-ci-a-ti-on pro-mul-ga-ted thro-ug-ho-ut the na-ti-on a list of symptoms by which all in-ha-bi-tants might be fo-re-war-ned of the ap-pro-ac-hing ter-ror.

SYMPTOMS OF 'ELLIETIS' (7)

1. An un-na-tu-ral cra-ving for any of the cit-rus fru-its whet-her in so-lid or li-qu-id form.
2. Par-ti-al or comp-le-te loss of ge-og-rap-hi-cal dis-tinc-ti-on. (i.e. A per-son in Kan-sas City might spe-ak of dri-ving down to San Di-ego for the we-ek-end.)
3. An un-na-tu-ral de-si-re to pos-sess a mo-tor ve-hic-le.
4. An un-na-tu-ral ap-pe-ti-te for mo-ti-on pic-tu-res and mo-ti-on pic-tu-re pre-vi-ews. (Inclu-ding a sub-si-di-ary symptom, not all-inclu-si-ve but ne-vert-he-less a dis-tinct me-na-ce. This is the in-sa-ti-ab-le hun-ger of yo-ung girls to be-co-me mo-vie stars.)
5. A tas-te for we-ird ap-pa-rel. (Inclu-ding fur jac-kets, shorts, hal-ters, slacks, san-dals, blue je-ans and bath ing su-its - all usu-al-ly of ex-ces-si-ve co-lo-ur.)

This list, un-for-tu-na-tely, pro-ved most ina-de-qu-ate, for its avo-wed pur-po-se. It did not men-ti-on, for one thing, the ad-ver-se ef-fect of ex-cess sun-light on re-si-dents of the nort-her-n sta-tes. With the ex-pec-ted ap-pro-ach to win-ter be-ing fo-res-tal-led in-de-fi-ni-tely, nu-me-ro-us un-for-tu-na-tes, unab-le to adj-ust to this al-te-ra-ti-on, be-ca-me ne-uro-tic and, of-ten, lost the-ir sen-ses comp-le-tely.

The story of Match-box, North Da-ko-ta, a small town in the nort-her-n-most part of that sta-te, is typi-cal of ac-co-unts which flo-uris-hed thro-ug-ho-ut the la-te fall and win-ter of 1972.

The ci-ti-zens of this ill-fa-ted town went ber-serk to a man wa-iting for the snow and, even-tu-al-ly run-ning amuck, bur-ned the-ir vil-la-ge to the gro-und.

The pamph-let al-so fa-iled to men-ti-on the psycho-lo-gi-cal phe-no-me-non known la-ter as 'Be-ach Se-eking',(8) a de-lu-si-on un-der which mas-ses of pe-op-le, we-ar-ing bat-hing su-its and

car-rying to-wels and blan-kets, wan-de-red help-les-sly ac-ross the pla-ins and pra-iri-es se-arc-hing for the Pa-ci-fic Oce-an.

In Oc-to-ber, the Los An-ge-les Mo-ve-ment (the pro-cess was gi-ven this mo-re sta-id tit-le in la-te Sep-tem-ber by Pro-fes-sor Augus-tus Wrench in a pa-per sent to the Na-ti-onal Co-un-cil of Ame-ri-can Sci-en-tists) pic-ked up mo-men-tum and, in a spa-ce of ten days, had en-gul-fed Ar-kan-sas, Mis-so-uri and Min-ne-so-ta and was cre-eping ra-pidly in-to the bor-der-lands of Il-li-no-is, Wis-con-sin, Ten-nes-see, Mis-sis-sip-pi and Lo-u-isi-ana. Smog drif-ted ac-ross the na-ti-on.

Up to this po-int, ci-ti-zens on the east co-ast had be-en in-te-res-ted in the phe-no-me-non but not overly per-tur-bed sin-ce dis-tan-ce from the di-se-ased ter-ri-tory had lent de-tach-ment. Now, ho-we-ver, as the Los An-ge-les city li-mits stal-ked clo-ser and clo-ser to them, the co-as-tal re-gi-on be-ca-me alar-med.

Legisla-tive ac-ti-vity in Was-hing-ton was vir-tu-al-ly ter-mi-na-ted as Cong-res-smen we-re inun-da-ted with let-ters of pro-test and de-mand. A spe-ci-al com-mit-tee, he-re-to-fo-re bur-de-ned by ge-ne-ral pub-lic apathy in the east, now be-ca-me en-lar-ged by the ad-ded mem-bers-hip of se-ve-ral dis-tin-gu-is-hed Cong-res-smen, and a costly pro-be in-to the prob-lem en-su-ed.

It was this com-mit-tee that, du-ring the co-ur-se of its te-le-vi-sed he-ar-ings, une-art-hed a sec-ret gro-up known as the L.A. Firs-ters.

This in-si-di-o-us or-ga-ni-sa-ti-on se-emed to ha-ve sprung al-most spon-ta-ne-o-usly from the ge-ne-ral cha-os of the Los An-ge-les en-ve-lo-pe-ment. Ge-ne-ral cre-den-ce was gi-ven for a short ti-me that it was anot-her symp-tom of 'Elli-e-it-is.'. In-ten-se in-ter-ro-ga-ti-on, ho-we-ver, re-ve-aled the exis-ten-ce of L.A. Firs-ter cells(8) in east co-ast ci-ti-es that co-uld not pos-sibly ha-ve be-en su-bj-ect to the dre-ad vi-rus at that po-int.

This re-ve-la-ti-on struck ter-ror in-to the he-art of a na-ti-on. The pre-sen-ce of such cal-cu-la-ted sub-ver-si-on in this mo-moment of tri-al al-most un-ner-ved the na-ti-onal will. For it was not me-re-ly an or-ga-ni-sa-ti-on lo-osely jo-ined by emo-ti-onal binds. This fac-ti-on pos-ses-sed a ca-re-ful-ly wro-ught hi-erarchy of men and wo-men which was plot-ting the overth-row of the na-ti-onal go-vern-ment. Na-ti-on-wi-de dist-ri-bu-ti-on of li-te-ra-tu-re had be-gun al-most with the ad-vent of the Los An-ge-les Mo-ve-ment. This li-te-ra-tu-re, with the cun-ning of in-sur-gent, ca-su-istry, pa-in-ted a ro-se-ate pic-tu-re of the fu-tu-re of - The Uni-ted Sta-tes of Los An-ge-les!

PEOPLE ARISE! (9)

People ari-se! Cast off the shack-les of re-ac-ti-on! What sen-se is the-re in op-po-sing the march of PROG-RESS! It is ine-vi-tab-le! - and you the pe-op-le of this glo-ri-o-us land - a land de-arly bo-ught with *yo-ur* blo-od and *yo-ur* te-ars -sho-uld re-ali-se that *Na-tu-re her-self* sup-ports the L.A. FIRS-TERS!

How? - you ask. How do-es Na-tu-re sup-port this glo-ri-o-us ad-ven-tu-re? The qu-es-ti-on is simp-le eno-ugh to ans-wer.

NATURE HAS SUP-POR-TED THE L.A. FIRS-TER MO-VE-MENT FOR THE BET-TER-MENT OF YOU! AND *YOU!*

Here are a few facts:

In tho-se sta-tes that ha-ve be-en bles-sed.

1. Rhe-uma-tism has drop-ped 52%
2. Pne-umo-nia has drop-ped 61%
3. Frost-bi-te has *va-nis-hed*;
4. In-ci-den-ce of the COM-MON COLD has drop-ped 73%!

Is this bad news? Are the-se the chan-ges bro-ught abo-ut by an-ti-PROG-RESS? NO!!!

Wherever Los An-ge-les has go-ne, the de-serts ha-ve fled, ad-ding mil-li-ons of new fer-ti-le ac-res to our be-lo-ved land. Whe-re on-ce the-re was only sand and cac-tus and are now plants and tre-es and FLO-WERS!

This pamph-let clo-ses with a co-up-let which aro-used a na-ti-on to fury:

Sing out 0 land, with flag un-fur-led! Los An-ge-les! To-mor-row's World!

The ex-po-su-re of the L.A. Firs-ters ca-used a ti-de of re-ac-ti-on to swe-ep the co-untry. Ra-ge be-ca-me the key-no-te of this co-un-ter-re-vo-lu-ti-on; ra-ge at the subt-lety with which the L.A. Firs-ters had dis-tor-ted truth in the-ir li-te-ra-tu-re; ra-ge at the-ir ar-ro-gant as-sump-ti-on that the co-untry wo-uld ine-vi-tably fall to Los An-ge-les.

Slogans of 'Down with the L.A. Lo-vers!' and 'Send Them Back Whe-re They Ca-me From!' rang thro-ug-ho-ut the land. A me-asu-re was for-ced thro-ugh Cong-ress and pre-si-den-ti-al sig-na-tu-re out-la-wing the gro-up and ma-king mem-bers-hip in it an of-fen-ce of tre-ason. Ra-bid gro-ups at-tac-hed a ri-der to this me-asu-re which wo-uld ha-ve en-for-ced the out-lawry, se-izu-re and dest-ruc-ti-on of all ten-nis and be-ach supply ma-nu-fac-tu-ring. He-re, ho-we-ver, the N.A.M. step-ped in-to the sce-ne and, thro-ugh the judi-ci-o-us use of va-ri-o-us pres-su-re me-ans, de-fe-ated the at-tempt.

Despite this qu-ick re-ta-li-ati-on, the L.A. Firs-ters con-ti-nued un-derg-ro-und and at le-ast one fa-ta-lity of its per-sis-tent agi-ta-ti-on was the sta-te of Mis-so-uri.

In so-me man-ner, as yet un-disc-lo-sed, the L.A. Firs-ters ga-ined cont-rol of the sta-te le-gis-la-tu-re and joc-ke-yed thro-ugh an amend-ment to the cons-ti-tu-ti-on of Mis-so-uri which was has-tily ra-ti-fi-ed and ma-de the Show-Me Sta-te the first area in the co-untry to le-gal-ly ma-ke it-self a part of Los An-ge-les Co-unty.

UTTER MCKINLEY OVENS FIVE NEW PARWURS IN THE SOUTHWEST

In the suc-ce-eding months the-re emer-ged a no-tab-le up-sur-ge in the pro-duc-ti-ons of auto-mo-bi-les, par-ti-cu-larly tho-se of the con-ver-ti-b-le va-ri-ety. In tho-se sta-tes af-fec-ted by the Los An-ge-les Mo-ve-ment, every ci-ti-zen, ap-pa-rently, had ac-qu-ired that symptom of 'Elli-e-itis' known as *auto-ma-nia*. The car in-dustry en-te-red ac-cor-ding-ly upon a pe-ri-od of pe-ak pro-duc-ti-on, its fac-to-ri-es tur-ning out auto-mo-bi-les twenty-fo-ur ho-urs a day, se-ven days a we-ek.

In co-nj-unc-ti-on with this inc-re-ase in auto-mo-ti-ve fab-ri-ca-ti-on, the-re be-gan a ne-ar ma-ni-acal splur-ge in the bu-il-ding of dri-ve-in res-ta-urants and the-at-res. The-se sprang up with mush-ro-om-li-ke ce-le-ri-ty thro-ugh wes-tern and mid-wes-tern Uni-ted Sta-tes, the-ir plan-ning go-ing be-yond all fe-asi-bi-li-ty. Typi-cal of the-se tho-ught-less pro-j-ects was the en-de-avo-ur to hol-low out a mo-un-ta-in and con-vert it in-to a dri-ve-in the-at-re.(10)

As the month of De-cem-ber ap-pro-ac-hed, the Los An-ge-les Mo-ve-ment en-gul-fed Il-li-no-is, Wis-con-sin, Mis-sis-sip-pi, half of Ten-nes-see and was lap-ping at the sho-res of In-di-ana, Ken-tucky and Ala-ba-ma. (No men-ti-on will be ma-de of the pro-fo-und ef-fect this mo-ve-ment had on ra-ci-al seg-re-ga-ti-on in the So-uth, this su-bj-ect de-man-ding a comp-le-te in-ves-ti-ga-ti-on in it-self.)

It was abo-ut this ti-me that a wa-ve of re-li-gi-o-us pas-si-on ob-ses-sed the na-ti-on. As is the na-tu-re of the hu-man mind suf-fe-ring ca-tast-rop-he, mil-li-ons tur-ned to re-li-gi-on. Va-ri-o-us cults had in this ca-la-mity grist for the-ir me-taphy-si-cal mills.

Typical of the-se we-re the San Ber-na-di-no Vi-ne Wors-hip-pers who cla-imed Los An-ge-les to be the re-in-car-na-ti-on of the-ir de-ity Och-sa-lia - The Vi-ne Di-vi-ne. The San Di-ego Sons of the We-ed cla-imed in turn that Los An-ge-les was a sis-ter em-bo-di-ment to the-ir de-ity which they cla-imed had be-en cre-eping for three de-ca-des pri-or to the Los An-ge-les Mo-ve-ment.

Unfortunately for all con-cer-ned, a small fas-cis-tic cli-que be-gan to usurp cont-rol of many of the-se ot-her-wi-se harm-less cults, emp-ha-si-sing do-mi-nan-ce thro-ugh 'po-wer and energy'. As a re-sult, the-se re-li-gi-o-us bo-di-es too of-ten de-ge-ne-ra-ted in-to me-re fronts for po-li-ti-cal cells which

plot-ted the overth-row of the go-vern-ment for pur-po-ses of self-aggran-di-se-ment (Sec-ret do-cu-ments dis-co-ve-red in la-ter ye-ars re-ve-aled the in-ten-ti-on of one per-fi-di-o-us brot-her-ho-od of con-ver-ting the Pen-ta-gon Bu-il-ding in-to an in-do-or ra-ce track.)

During a pe-ri-od be-gin-ning in Sep-tem-ber and ex-ten-ding for ye-ars, the-re al-so en-su-ed a stu-di-ed ex-pan-si-on of the mo-ti-on pic-tu-re in-dustry. Va-ri-o-us of the ma-j-or pro-du-cers ope-ned branch stu-di-os thro-ug-ho-ut the co-untry (for examp-le M.G.M. bu-ilt one in Ter-re Ha-ute, Pa-ra-mo-unt in Cin-cin-na-ti and Twen-ti-eth Cen-tury Fox in Tul-sa). The Scre-en Wri-ter's Gu-ild ini-ti-ated branch of-fi-ces in every lar-ge city and the term 'Hol-lywo-od' be-ca-me even mo-re of a mis-no-mer than it had pre-vi-o-usly be-en.

Motion-picture out-put mo-re than qu-ad-rup-led as the-at-res of all desc-rip-ti-on we-re has-tily erec-ted everyw-he-re west of the Mis-sis-sip-pi, so-me-ti-mes wall to wall for blocks.(11) The-se bu-il-dings we-re ra-rely well const-ruc-ted and of-ten col-lap-sed wit-hin we-eks of the-ir 'grand ope-nings'.

Yet, in spi-te of the inc-re-dib-le num-ber of the-at-res, mo-ti-on pic-tu-res ex-ce-eded them in qu-an-tity (if not qu-ality). It was in com-pen-sa-ti-on for this eco-no-mi-cal-ly dan-ge-ro-us si-tu-ati-on that the stu-di-os ina-ugu-ra-ted the ex-pe-di-ent prac-ti-ce of bur-ning films in or-der to ma-in-ta-in the sta-bi-lity of the pri-ce flo-or. This aro-used gre-at an-ti-pathy among the smal-ler stu-di-os who did not pro-du-ce eno-ugh films to burn any.'

Another li-abi-li-ty in-vol-ved in the pro-duc-ti-on of mo-ti-on pic-tu-res was the ge-omet-ric inc-re-ase in dif-fi-cul-ti-es ra-ised by small but vo-lub-le pres-su-re gro-ups.

One typi-cal co-te-rie was the An-ti-Hor-se Le-ague of Dal-las which put up stre-nu-o-us op-po-si-ti-on to the uti-li-sa-ti-on of hor-ses in films. This, plus the inc-re-asing in-ci-den-ce of car ow-ning which had ma-de hor-se bre-eding unp-ro-fi-tab-le, ma-de the pro-duc-ti-on of Wes-tern films (as they had be-en known) an im-pos-sib-le cho-re. Thus was it that the so-cal-led 'Wes-tern' gra-vi-ta-ted ra-pidly to-wards the 'dra-wing ro-om' dra-ma.

SECTION OF A TYPICAL SCREENPLAY (12)

Tex D'Urber-vil-le co-mes ri-ding in-to Do-om-town on the Co-lo-ra-do, his Jagu-ar ra-ising a clo-ud of dust in the sle-epy wes-tern town. He parks in front of the Gol-den So-ve-re-ign Sa-lo-on and steps out. He is a tall, rangy cow-hand, im-pec-cably at-ti-red in wa-ist-co-at and fawns-kin tro-users with a ten-gal-lon hat, bo-ots and pe-arl-grey spats. A he-avy six-gun is bel-ted at his wa-ist. He car-ri-es a gold-top-ped Ma-lac-ca ca-ne.

He en-ters the sa-lo-on and every man the-re scat-ters from the ro-om, le-aving only Tex and a scow-ling hulk of a man at the ot-her end of the bar. This is Dirty Ned Updy-ke, lo-cal ruf-fi-an and gun-man.

TEX: (Re-mo-ving his whi-te glo-ves and, pre-ten-ding he do-es not see Dirty Ned, ad-dres-sing the bar-ten-der): *To-ur me a whisky and selt-zer will you, Ro-ger, the-re's a go-od fel-low.*

ROGER: *Yes, sir.*

Dirty Ned scowls over his apS-ri-tif but do-es not da-re to re-ach for his Web-ley Auto-ma-tic pis-tol which is con-ce-aled in a hols-ter be-ne-ath his twe-ed jac-ket.

Now Tex D'Urber-vil-le al-lows his icy blue eyes to mo-ve slowly abo-ut the ro-om un-til they rest on the cra-ven fe-atu-res of Dirty Ned.

TEX: *So ... you're the be-astly cad what shot my brot-her.*

Instantly they draw the-ir ca-ne swords and, ap-pro-ac-hing, sa-lu-te each ot-her grimly.

An ad-di-ti-onal re-sult not to be over-lo-oked was the ef-fect of inc-re-ased film pro-duc-ti-on on

po-li-tics. The ne-ed for high-sa-la-ri-ed wor-kers such as wri-ters, ac-tors, di-rec-tors and plum-bers was in-ten-se and this mass of *no-uve-au ric-he*, ha-ving co-me upon go-od ti-mes so re-la-ti-vely ab-ruptly, ac-qu-ired a de-fi-ni-te gu-ilt ne-uro-sis which re-sul-ted in the-ir in-ten-si-ve par-ti-ci-pa-ti-on in the so-cal-led 'li-be-ral' and 'prog-res-si-ve' gro-ups. This swel-ling of ra-di-cal ac-ti-vity did much to al-ter the co-ur-se of Ame-ri-can po-li-ti-cal his-tory. (This su-bj-ect be-ing anot-her which re-qu-ires se-pa-ra-te in-qu-iry for a pro-per eva-lu-ati-on of its many and va-ri-ed ra-mi-fi-ca-ti-ons.)

Two ot-her fac-tors of this pe-ri-od which may be men-ti-oned bri-efly are the inc-re-ase in di-vor-ce due to the re-la-xa-ti-on of di-vor-ce laws in every sta-te af-fec-ted by the Los An-ge-les Mo-ve-ment and the slow but even-tu-al-ly comp-le-te bans pla-ced upon ten-nis and be-ach sup-pli-es by a ra-bid but po-wer-ful gro-up wit-hin the N.A.M. This ban led ine-xo-rably to a bri-ef span of ti-me which pa-ral-le-led the so-cal-led 'Pro-hi-bi-ti-on' pe-ri-od of the 1920s. Du-ring this in-fa-mo-us pe-ri-od, thrill se-ekers at-ten-ded the many bo-ot-leg ten-nis co-urts thro-ug-ho-ut the co-untry, which sprang up whe-re-ver per-ver-se pub-lic de-mand ma-de them pro-fi-tab-le ven-tu-res for unsc-ru-pu-lo-us men.

In the first days of Janu-ary of 1973 the Los An-ge-les Mo-ve-ment re-ac-hed al-most to the At-lan-tic sho-re-li-ne. Pa-nic spre-ad thro-ugh New Eng-land and the so-ut-tern co-as-tal re-gi-on. The co-untry and, ul-ti-ma-tely, Was-hing-ton re-ver-be-ra-ted with cri-es of '*Stop Los An-ge-les!*' and all pro-ces-ses of go-vern-ment gro-und to a vir-tu-al halt in the en-su-ing cha-os. Law en-for-ce-ment at-rop-hi-ed, cri-me wa-ves spil-led ac-ross the na-ti-on and con-di-ti-ons be-ca-me so gra-ve that even the out-la-wed L.A. Firs-ters held re-vi-val me-etings in the stre-ets.

On Feb-ru-ary 11, 1973, the Los An-ge-les Mo-ve-ment for-ded the Hud-son Ri-ver and in-va-ded Man-hat-tan Is-land. Fla-me-thro-wing tanks pro-ved fu-ti-le aga-inst the in-vin-cib-le flux. Wit-hin a we-ek the sub-ways we-re clo-sed and car purc-ha-ses had treb-led.

By March 1973 the only unal-te-red sta-tes in the uni-on we-re Ma-ine, Ver-mont, New Hamps-hi-re and Mas-sac-hu-set-ts. This was la-ter exp-la-ined by the let-har-gic adap-ta-ti-on of the fun-gi to the rocky New Eng-land so-il and to the im-me-di-ate inc-le-ment we-at-her.

These nort-thern sta-tes, cor-ne-red and help-less, re-sor-ted to ext-ra-or-di-nary me-asu-res in a ho-pe-less bid to ward off the aw-ful inc-rus-ta-ti-on. Se-ve-ral of them le-ga-li-sed the mercy kil-ling of any per-son dis-co-ve-red to ha-ve ac-qu-ired the ta-int of 'Elli-e-itis'. News-pa-per re-ports of sho-otings, stab-bings, po-iso-nings and stran-gu-la-ti-ons be-ca-me so com-mon in tho-se days of The Last-Ditch De-fen-ce' that news-pa-pers ina-ugu-ra-ted a da-ily sec-ti-on of the-ir con-tents to such re-ports.

Boston, Mass, Ap-ri-l 13, AP - Last ri-tes we-re held to-day for Mr Ab-ner Scro-un-ge who was shot af-ter be-ing fo-und in his ga-ra-ge at-temp-ting to re-mo-ve the top of his Rolls Roy-ce with a can ope-ner.

The his-tory of the gal-lant bat-tle of Bos-ton to re-ta-in its es-sen-ti-al dig-nity wo-uld, alo-ne, ma-ke up a lar-ge work. The story of how the int-re-pid ci-ti-zens of this ve-ne-rab-le city re-fu-sed to sur-ren-der the-ir rights, cho-osing mass su-ici-de rat-her than sub-mis-si-on is a ta-le of en-du-ring co-ura-ge and ma-j-es-tic strug-gle aga-inst in-sur-mo-un-tab-le odds.

What hap-pe-ned af-ter the mo-ve-ment was con-ta-ined wit-hin the bo-un-da-ri-es of the Uni-ted Sta-tes (a na-me so-on dis-car-ded) is da-ta for anot-her pa-per. A bri-ef men-ti-on, ho-we-ver, may be ma-de of the im-men-se so-ci-al en-de-avo-ur which be-ca-me known as the 'Ba-con and Waf-fles' mo-ve-ment, which so-ught to gu-a-ran-tee \$250 per month for every per-son in Los An-ge-les over forty ye-ars of age.

With this in-cen-ti-ve be-fo-re the pe-op-le, sta-te le-gis-la-tu-res we-re help-less be-fo-re an ava-lanc-he of pub-lic de-mand and, wit-hin three ye-ars, the en-ti-re na-ti-on was a part of Los An-ge-les. The go-vern-ment se-at was in Be-verly Hills and am-bas-sa-dors had be-en has-te-ned to all fo-re-ign co-unt-ri-es wit-hin a short pe-ri-od of ti-me.

Ten ye-ars la-ter the North Ame-ri-can con-ti-nent fell and Los An-ge-les was cre-eping ra-pidly

down the Isth-mus of Pa-na-ma.

Then ca-me that ill-fa-ted day in 1984.

On the is-land of Vin-go Von-go, Ma-ona, da-ugh-ter of Chi-ef Lu-ana, ap-pro-ac-hed her fat-her,

'Omu la go-lu si mon-go,' she sa-id.

(Anyone for ten-nis?)

Whereupon her fat-her, ha-ving re-ad the pa-pers, spe-ared her on the spot and ran scre-aming from the hut.

THE END

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2/ Henry G. Als-berg (ed.), *The Ame-ri-can Gu-ide*, p. 1200.

3/ Symmes Chad-wick, 'Will We Drown the World?' *So-ut-h-wes-tern Re-vi-ew IV* (Sum-mer 1972), p. 698 ff.

4/ Gu-il-la-ume Ga-ule, 'Les The-ori-es de l'Eau de Ci-el Sont Cuc-koo,' *Ju-ane Jo-ur-na-le*, August 1972.

5/ Harry L. Schu-ler, 'Not Long for This World,' *So-uth Oran-ge Li-te-rary Re-vi-ew*, XL (Sept. 1972), p. 214.

6/ H. Bra-ham, 'Is Los An-ge-les Ali-ve?' *Los An-ge-les Sun-day Exa-mi-ner*, Octo-ber 29, 1972.

7/ El-li-etis: Its Symptoms,' *A.M.A. pam-p-h-let*, fall 1972.

8 / Fritz Fe-li-x Der-Katt, 'Das Be-ac-hen Se-eken,' *Ein-z-we-id-rei*, Nov., 1972.

9/ The Los An-ge-les Ma-ni-fes-to, *L.A. Firs-ter Press*, win-ter, 1972, ble-ac-hed bo-nes,

10/ L. Sa-va-ge, 'A Re-port on the Grand Te-ton Dri-ve-In,' *For-tu-ne*, Janu-ary, 1973.

11/ 'Gulls Cre-ek Gets Its Forty-Eighth The-ater,' *The Ar-kan-sas Tost- Jo-ur-nal*, March 12, 1973.

12/ Max-well Bran-de, 'Alter-ca-ti-on at De-ad-wo-od Spa,' *Epig-ram Stu-di-os*, Ap-ril, 1973.

12 - DEATH SHIP

Mason saw it first.

He was sit-ting in front of the la-te-ral vi-ewer ta-king no-tes as the ship cru-ised over the new pla-net. His pen mo-ved qu-ickly over the graph-spa-ced chart he held be-fo-re him. In a lit-tle whi-le they'd land and ta-ke spe-ci-mens. Mi-ne-ral, ve-ge-tab-le, ani-mal-if the-re we-re any. Put them in the sto-ra-ge loc-kers and ta-ke them back to Earth. The-re the tech-ni-ci-ans wo-uld eva-lu-ate, ap-pra-ise, jud-ge. And, if everyt-hing was ac-cep-tab-le, stamp the big, black IN-HA-BI-TAB-LE on the-ir bri-ef and open anot-her pla-net for co-lo-ni-za-ti-on from overc-row-ded Earth.

Mason was jot-ting down items abo-ut ge-ne-ral to-pog-ra-phy when the glit-ter ca-ught his eye.

"I saw so-met-hing," he sa-id.

He flic-ked the vi-ewer to re-ver-se len-sing po-si-ti-on.

"Saw what?" Ross as-ked from the cont-rol bo-ard.

"Didn't you see a flash?"

Ross lo-oked in-to his own scre-en.

"We went over a la-ke, you know," he sa-id.

"No, it wasn't that," Ma-son sa-id. "This was in that cle-aring be-si-de the la-ke."

"I'll lo-ok," sa-id Ross, "but it pro-bably was the la-ke."

His fin-gers typed out a com-mand on the bo-ard and the big ship whe-eled aro-und in a smo-oth arc and he-aded back.

"Keep yo-ur eyes open now," Ross sa-id. "Ma-ke su-re. We ha-ven't got any ti-me to was-te."

"Yes sir."

Mason kept his unb-linking ga-ze on the vi-ewer, watc-hing the earth be-low mo-ve past li-ke a slowly rol-led ta-pestry of wo-ods and fi-elds and ri-vers. He was thin-king, in spi-te of him-self, that may-be the mo-ment had ar-ri-ved at last. The mo-ment in which Earth-men wo-uld co-me upon li-fe be-yond Earth, a ra-ce evol-ved from ot-her cells and ot-her muds. It was an ex-ci-ting tho-ught. 1997 might be the ye-ar. And he and Ross and Car-ter might now be ri-ding a new *San-ta Ma-ria* of dis-co-very, a sil-very, bul-le-ted gal-le-on of spa-ce.

“There!” he sa-id. “The-re it is!”

He lo-oked over at Ross. The cap-ta-in was ga-zing in-to his vi-ewer pla-te. His fa-ce bo-re the exp-res-si-on Ma-son knew well. A lo-ok of smug analy-sis, of im-pen-ding de-ci-si-on.

“What do you think it is?” Ma-son as-ked, pla-ying the strings of va-nity in his cap-ta-in.

“Might be a ship, might not be,” pro-no-un-ced Ross.

Well, for God’s sa-ke, let’s go down and see, Ma-son wan-ted to say, but knew he co-uld’n’t. It wo-uld ha-ve to be Ross’s de-ci-si-on. Ot-her-wi-se they might not even stop.

“I gu-ess it’s not-hing,” he prod-ded.

He watc-hed Ross im-pa-ti-ently, watc-hed the stubby fin-gers flick but-tons for the vi-ewer. “We might stop,” Ross sa-id. “We ha-ve to ta-ke samp-les any-way. Only thing I’m af-ra-id of is... “

He sho-ok his he-ad. Land, man! The words bub-bled up in Ma-son’s thro-at. For God’s sa-ke, let’s go down!

Ross eva-lu-ated. His thic-kish lips pres-sed to-get-her ap-pra-isingly. Ma-son held his bre-ath.

Then Ross’s he-ad bob-bed on-ce in that curt mo-ve-ment which in-di-ca-ted con-sum-ma-ted de-ci-si-on. Ma-son bre-at-hed aga-in. He watc-hed the cap-ta-in spin, push and twist di-als. Felt the ship be-gin its tilt to up-right po-si-ti-on. Felt the ca-bin shud-de-ring slightly as the gyros-co-pe kept it on an even ke-el. The sky did a ni-nety-deg-ree turn, clo-uds ap-pe-ared thro-ugh the thick ports. Then the ship was po-in-ted at the pla-net’s sun and Ross switc-hed off the cru-ising en-gi-nes. The ship he-si-ta-ted, sus-pen-ded a split se-cond, then be-gan drop-ping to-ward the earth.

“Hey, we set-tin’ down al-re-ady?”

Mickey Car-ter lo-oked at them qu-es-ti-oningly from the port do-or that led to the sto-ra-ge loc-kers. He was rub-bing gre-asy hands over his gre-en jum-per legs.

“We saw so-met-hing down the-re,” Ma-son sa-id.

“No kid-din’,” Mic-key sa-id, co-ming over to Ma-son’s vi-ewer. “Let’s see.”

Mason flic-ked on the re-ar lens. The two of them watc-hed the pla-net bil-lo-wing up at them.

“I don’t know whet-her you can... oh, yes, the-re it is,” Ma-son sa-id. He lo-oked over at Ross.

“Two deg-re-es east,” he sa-id.

Ross twis-ted a di-al and the ship then chan-ged its down-ward mo-ve-ment slightly.

“What do you think it is?” Mic-key as-ked.

“Hey!”

Mickey lo-oked in-to the vi-ewer with even gre-ater in-te-rest. His wi-de eyes exa-mi-ned the shiny speck en-lar-ging on the scre-en.

“Could be a ship,” he sa-id. “Co-uld be.”

Then he sto-od the-re si-lently, be-hind Ma-son, watc-hing the earth rus-hing up.

“Reactors,” sa-id Ma-son.

Ross jab-bed ef-fi-ci-ently at the but-ton and the ship’s en-gi-nes spo-uted out the-ir fla-ming ga-ses. Spe-ed dec-re-ased. The roc-ket eased down on its ro-ar-ing fi-re jets. Ross gu-ided.

“What do *you* think it is?” Mic-key as-ked Ma-son.

“I don’t know,” Ma-son ans-we-red. “But if it’s a ship,” he ad-ded, half wish-ful-ly thin-king, “I don’t see how it co-uld pos-sibly be from Earth. We’ve got this run all to our-sel-ves.”

“Maybe they got off co-ur-se,” Mic-key dam-pe-ned wit-ho-ut kno-wing.

Mason shrug-ged. “I do-ubt it,” he sa-id.

“What if it is a ship?” Mic-key sa-id. “And it’s not ours?”

Mason lo-oked at him and Car-ter lic-ked his lips.

“Man,” he sa-id, “that’d be so-met-hin’.”

“Air spring,” Ross or-de-red.

Mason threw the switch that set the air spring in-to ope-ra-ti-on. The unit which ma-de pos-sib-le a lan-ding wit-ho-ut then ha-ving to stretch out on thick-cus-hi-oned co-uc-hes. They co-uld stand on deck and hardly fe-el the im-pact. It was an in-no-va-ti-on on the ne-wer go-vern-ment ships.

The ship hit on its re-ar bra-ces.

There was a sen-sa-ti-on of jar-ring, a sen-se of slight bo-un-cing. Then the ship was still, its po-in-ted no-se stra-ight up, glit-te-ring bril-li-antly in the bright sun-light.

“I want us to stay to-get-her,” Ross was sa-ying. “No one ta-kes any risks. That’s an or-der.”

He got up from his se-at and po-in-ted at the wall switch that let at-mosp-he-re in-to the small cham-ber in the cor-ner of the ca-bin.

“Three to one we ne-ed our hel-mets,” Mic-key sa-id to Ma-son.

“You’re on,” Ma-son sa-id, set-ting in-to play the-ir stan-ding bet abo-ut the air or lack of it in every new pla-net they fo-und. Mic-key al-ways bet on the ne-ed for ap-pa-ra-tus. Ma-son for una-ided lung use. So far, they’d co-me out abo-ut even.

Mason threw the switch, and the-re was a muf-fled so-und of his-sing in the cham-ber. Mic-key got the hel-met from his loc-ker and drop-ped it over his he-ad. Then he went thro-ugh the do-ub-le do-ors. Ma-son lis-te-ned to him clam-ping the do-ors be-hind him. He kept wan-ting to switch on the si-de vi-ewers and see if he co-uld lo-ca-te what they’d spot-ted. But he didn’t. He let him-self enj-oy the de-li-ca-te nib-bling of sus-pen-se.

Through the in-ter-com they he-ard Mic-key’s vo-ice.

“Removing hel-met,” he sa-id.

Silence. They wa-ited. Fi-nal-ly, a so-und of dis-gust.

“I lo-se aga-in,” Mic-key sa-id.

The ot-hers fol-lo-wed him out.

“God, did they hit!”

Mickey’s fa-ce had an exp-res-si-on of dis-ma-yed shock on it. The three of them sto-od the-re on the gre-enish-blue grass and lo-oked.

It *was* a ship. Or what was left of a ship for, ap-pa-rently, it had struck the earth at ter-rib-le ve-lo-city, no-se first. The ma-in struc-tu-re had dri-ven it-self abo-ut fif-te-en fe-et in-to the hard gro-und. Jag-ged pi-eces of su-perst-ruc-tu-re had be-en rip-ped off by the crash and we-re lying strewn over the fi-eld. The he-avy en-gi-nes had be-en torn lo-ose and ne-arly crus-hed the ca-bin. Everyt-hing was de-athly si-lent, and the wrec-ka-ge was so comp-le-te they co-uld hardly ma-ke out what type of ship it was. It was as if so-me enor-mo-us child had lost fancy with the toy mo-del and had das-hed it to earth, stam-ped on it, ban-ged on it in-sa-nely with a rock.

Mason shud-de-red. It had be-en a long ti-me sin-ce he’d se-en a roc-ket crash. He’d al-most for-got-ten the everp-re-sent me-na-ce of lost cont-rol, of whist-ling fall thro-ugh spa-ce, of vi-olent im-pact. Most talk had be-en abo-ut be-ing lost in an or-bit. This re-min-ded him of the ot-her thre-at in his cal-ling. His thro-at mo-ved un-cons-ci-o-usly as he watc-hed.

Ross was scuf-fing at a chunk of me-tal at his fe-et.

“Can’t tell much,” he sa-id. “But I’d say it’s our own.”

Mason was abo-ut to spe-ak, then chan-ged his mind.

“From what I can see of that en-gi-ne up the-re, I’d say it was ours,” Mic-key sa-id.

“Rocket struc-tu-re might be stan-dard,” Ma-son he-ard him-self say, “everyw-he-re.”

“Not a chan-ce,” Ross sa-id. “Things don’t work out li-ke that. It’s ours all right. So-me po-or de-vils from Earth. Well, at le-ast the-ir de-ath was qu-ick.”

“Was it?” Ma-son as-ked the air, vi-su-ali-zing the crew in the-ir ca-bin, ro-oted with fe-ar as the-ir ship spun to-ward earth, may-be stra-ight down li-ke a fi-red can-non shell, may-be end-over-end li-ke a crazy, flut-te-ring top, the gyros-co-pe trying in va-in to ke-ep the ca-bin al-ways le-vel.

The scre-aming, the sho-uted com-mands, the ex-hor-ta-ti-ons to a he-aven they had ne-ver se-en be-fo-re, to a God who might be in anot-her uni-ver-se. And then the pla-net rus-hing up and blas-ting its hard fa-ce aga-inst the-ir ship, crus-hing them, rip-ping the bre-ath from the-ir lungs. He shud-de-red

aga-in, thin-king of it.

“Let’s ta-ke a lo-ok,” Mic-key sa-id.

“Not su-re we’d bet-ter,” Ross sa-id. “We say it’s ours. It might not be.”

“Jeez, you don’t think anyt-hing is still ali-ve in the-re, do you?” Mic-key as-ked the cap-ta-in.

“Can’t say,” Ross sa-id.

But they all knew he co-uld see that mang-led hulk be-fo-re him as well as they. Not-hing co-uld ha-ve sur-vi-ved that.

The lo-ok. The pur-sed lips. As they circ-led the ship. The he-ad mo-ve-ment, un-se-en by them.

“Let’s try that ope-ning the-re,” Ross or-de-red. “And stay to-get-her. We still ha-ve work to do. Only do-ing this so we can let the ba-se know which ship this is.” He had al-re-ady de-ci-ded it was an Earth ship.

They wal-ked up to a spot in the ship’s si-de whe-re the skin had be-en la-id open along the wel-ded se-am. A long, thick pla-te was bent over as easily as a man might bend pa-per.

“Don’t li-ke this,” Ross sa-id. “But I sup-po-se...”

He ges-tu-red with his he-ad and Mic-key pul-led him-self up to the ope-ning. He tes-ted each hand-hold gin-gerly, then slid on his work glo-ves as he fo-und so-me sharp ed-ge. He told the ot-her two and they re-ac-hed in-to the-ir jum-per poc-kets. Then Mic-key to-ok a long step in-to the dark maw of the ship.

“Hold *on*, now!” Ross cal-led up. “Wa-it un-til I get the-re.”

He pul-led him-self up, his he-avy bo-ot to-es scra-ping up the roc-ket skin. He went in-to the ho-le too. Ma-son fol-lo-wed.

It was dark in-si-de the ship. Ma-son clo-sed his eyes for a mo-ment to adj-ust to the chan-ge. When he ope-ned them, he saw two bright be-ams se-arc-hing up thro-ugh the twis-ted tang-le of be-ams and pla-tes. He pul-led out his own flash and flic-ked it on.

“God, is this thing wrec-ked,” Mic-key sa-id, awed by the sight of me-tal and mac-hi-nery in vi-olent de-ath. His vo-ice ec-ho-ed slightly thro-ugh the shell. Then, when the so-und en-ded, an ut-ter stil-ness des-cen-ded on them. They sto-od in the murky light and Ma-son co-uld smell the ac-rid fu-mes of bro-ken en-gi-nes.

“Watch the smell, now,” Ross sa-id to Mic-key who was re-ac-hing up for sup-port. “We don’t want to get our-sel-ves gas-sed.”

“I will,” Mic-key sa-id. He was clim-bing up, using one hand to pull his thick, po-wer-ful body up along the twis-ted lad-der. He pla-yed the be-am stra-ight up.

“Cabin is all out of sha-pe,” he sa-id, sha-king his he-ad.

Ross fol-lo-wed him up. Ma-son was last, his flash mo-ving aro-und end-les-sly over the snap-ped jo-ints, the wild jig-saw of dest-ruc-ti-on that had on-ce be-en a po-wer-ful new ship. He kept his-sing in dis-be-li-ef to him-self as his be-am ca-me ac-ross one vi-olent dis-tor-ti-on of me-tal af-ter anot-her.

“Door’s se-aled,” Mic-key sa-id, stan-ding on a pret-zel-twis-ted cat-walk, bra-cing him-self aga-inst the in-si-de roc-ket wall. He grab-bed the hand-le aga-in and tri-ed to pull it open.

“Give me yo-ur light,” Ross sa-id. He di-rec-ted both be-ams at the do-or and Mic-key tri-ed to drag it open. His fa-ce grew red as he strug-gled. He puf-fed.

“No,” he sa-id, sha-king his he-ad. “It’s stuck.”

Mason ca-me up be-si-de them. “May-be the ca-bin is still pres-su-ri-zed,” he sa-id softly. He didn’t li-ke the ec-ho-ing of his own vo-ice.

“Doubt it,” Ross sa-id, trying to think. “Mo-re than li-kely the jamb is twis-ted.” He ges-tu-red with his he-ad aga-in. “Help Car-ter.”

Mason grab-bed one hand-le and Mic-key the ot-her. Then they bra-ced the-ir fe-et aga-inst the wall and pul-led with all the-ir strength. The do-or held fast. They shif-ted the-ir grip, pul-led har-der.

“Hey, it slip-ped!” Mic-key sa-id. “I think we got it.”

They re-su-med fo-oting on the tang-led cat-walk and pul-led the do-or open. The fra-me was twis-ted, the do-or held in one cor-ner. They co-uld only open it eno-ugh to wed-ge them-sel-ves in si-de-ways.

The ca-bin was dark as Ma-son ed-ged in first. He pla-yed his light be-am to-ward the pi-lot's se-at. It was empty. He he-ard Mic-key squ-e-eze in as he mo-ved the light to the na-vi-ga-tor's se-at.

There was no na-vi-ga-tor's se-at. The bulk-he-ad had be-en sto-ve in the-re, the vi-ewer, the tab-le and the cha-ir all crus-hed be-ne-ath the bent pla-tes. The-re was a clic-king in Ma-son's thro-at as he tho-ught of him-self sit-ting at a tab-le li-ke that, in a cha-ir li-ke that, be-fo-re a bulk-he-ad li-ke that.

Ross was in now. The three be-ams of light se-arc-hed. They all had to stand, legs sprad-dled, be-ca-use the deck slan-ted.

And the way it slan-ted ma-de Ma-son think of so-met-hing. Of shif-ting we-ights, of *things* sli-ding down...

Into the cor-ner whe-re he sud-denly pla-yed his sha-king be-am.

And felt his he-art jolt, felt the skin on him craw-ling, felt his unb-lin-king eyes sta-ning at the sight. Then felt his bo-ots thud him down the inc-li-ne as if he we-re dri-ven.

"Here," he sa-id, his vo-ice ho-ar-se with shock.

He sto-od be-fo-re the bo-di-es. His fo-ot had bum-ped in-to one of them as he held him-self from go-ing down any furt-her, as he shif-ted his we-ight on the inc-li-ne.

Now he he-ard Mic-key's fo-ots-teps, his vo-ice. A whis-per. A ba-ted, hor-ri-fi-ed whis-per.

"Mother of God."

Nothing from Ross. Not-hing from any of them then but sta-res and shud-de-ring bre-aths.

Because the twis-ted bo-di-es on the flo-or we-re the-irs, all three of them.

And all three... de-ad.

Mason didn't know how long they sto-od the-re, word-les-sly, lo-oking down at the still, crump-led fi-gu-res on the deck.

How do-es a man re-act when he is stan-ding over his own corp-se? The qu-es-ti-on pli-ed un-cons-ci-o-usly at his mind. What do-es a man say? What are his first words to be? A po-ser, he se-emed to sen-se, a lo-aded qu-es-ti-on.

But it was hap-pe-ning. He-re he sto-od-and the-re he lay de-ad at his own fe-et. He felt his hands grow numb and he roc-ked uns-te-adily on the til-ted deck.

"God."

Mickey aga-in. He had his flash po-in-ted down at his own fa-ce. His mo-uth twitc-hed as he lo-oked. All three of them had the-ir flash be-ams di-rec-ted at the-ir own fa-ces, and the bright rib-bons of light con-nec-ted the-ir du-al bo-di-es.

Finally Ross to-ok a sha-king bre-ath of the sta-le ca-bin air.

"Carter," he sa-id, "find the auxi-li-ary light switch, see if it works." His vo-ice was husky and tightly rest-ra-ined.

"Sir?"

"The light switch-the light switch!" Ross snap-ped.

Mason and the cap-ta-in sto-od the-re, mo-ti-on-less, as Mic-key shuf-fled up the deck. They he-ard his bo-ots kick me-tal-lic deb-ris over the deck sur-fa-ce. Ma-son clo-sed his eyes, but was unab-le to ta-ke his fo-ot away from whe-re it pres-sed aga-inst the body that was his. He felt bo-und.

"I don't un-ders-tand," he sa-id to him-self.

"Hang on," Ross sa-id.

Mason co-uld'n't tell whet-her it was sa-id to en-co-ura-ge him or the cap-ta-in him-self.

Then they he-ard the emer-gency ge-ne-ra-tor be-gin its ini-ti-al whi-ning spin. The light flic-ke-red, went out. The ge-ne-ra-tor co-ug-hed and be-gan hum-ming and the lights flas-hed on brightly.

They lo-oked down now. Mic-key slip-ped down the slight deck hill and sto-od be-si-de them. He sta-red down at his own body. Its he-ad was crus-hed in. Mic-key drew back, his mo-uth a box of un-be-li-eving ter-ror.

"I don't get it," he sa-id. "I don't get it. What is this?"

“Carter,” Ross sa-id.

“That’s *me!*” Mic-key sa-id. “God, it’s *me!*”

“Hold on!” Ross or-de-red.

“The three of us,” Ma-son sa-id qu-i-etly, “and we’re all de-ad.”

There se-emed not-hing to be sa-id. It was a spe-ech-less night-ma-re. The til-ted ca-bin all bas-hed in and tang-led. The three corp-ses all do-ub-led over and tumb-led in-to one cor-ner, arms and legs flop-ped over each ot-her. All they co-uld do was sta-re.

Then Ross sa-id, “Go get a tarp. Both of you.”

Mason tur-ned. Qu-ickly. Glad to fill his mind with simp-le com-mand. Glad to crowd out ten-se hor-ror with ac-ti-vity. He to-ok long steps up the deck. Mic-key bac-ked up, unab-ble to ta-ke his unb-lin-king ga-ze off the he-avy-set corp-se with the gre-en jum-per and the ca-ved-in, blo-ody he-ad.

Mason drag-ged a he-avy, fol-ded tarp from the sto-ra-ge loc-ker and car-ri-ed it back in-to the ca-bin, legs and arms mo-ving in ro-bot-li-ke se-qu-en-ce. He tri-ed to numb his bra-in, not think at all un-til the first shock had dwind-led.

Mickey and he ope-ned up the he-avy can-vas she-et with wo-oden mo-ti-ons. They tos-sed it out and the thick, shiny ma-te-ri-al flut-te-red down over the bo-di-es. It set-tled, out-li-ning the he-ads, the tor-sos, the one arm that sto-od up stiffly li-ke a spe-ar, bent over wrist and hand li-ke a grisly pen-nant.

Mason tur-ned away with a shud-der. He stumb-led up to the pi-lot’s se-at and slum-ped down. He sta-red at his outst-retc-hed legs, the he-avy bo-ots. He re-ac-hed out and grab-bed his leg and pinc-hed it, fe-eling al-most re-li-ef at the fla-ring pa-in.

“Come away,” he he-ard Ross sa-ying to Mic-key, “I sa-id, *co-me away!*”

He lo-oked down and saw Ross half drag-ging Mic-key up from a cro-uc-hing po-si-ti-on over the bo-di-es. He held Mic-key’s arm and led him up the inc-li-ne.

“We’re de-ad,” Mic-key sa-id hol-lowly. “That’s us on the deck. We’re *de-ad.*”

Ross pus-hed Mic-key up to the crac-ked port and ma-de him lo-ok out.

“There,” he sa-id. “The-re’s our ship over the-re. Just as we left it. This ship isn’t ours. And tho-se bo-di-es. They... can’t be ours.”

He fi-nis-hed we-akly. To a man of his sturdy opi-ni-ona-ti-on, the words so-un-ded flimsy and ext-ra-va-gant. His thro-at mo-ved, his lo-wer lip pus-hed out in de-fi-an-ce of this enig-ma. Ross didn’t li-ke enig-mas. He sto-od for de-ci-si-on and ac-ti-on. He wan-ted ac-ti-on now.

“You saw yo-ur-self down the-re,” Ma-son sa-id to him. “Are you go-ing to say it isn’t you?”

“That’s exactly what I’m sa-ying,” Ross brist-led. “This may se-em crazy, but the-re’s an exp-la-na-ti-on for it. The-re’s an exp-la-na-ti-on for everyt-hing.”

His fa-ce twitc-hed as he punc-hed his bulky arm.

“This is me,” he cla-imed. “I’m so-lid.” He gla-red at them as if da-ring op-po-si-ti-on. “I’m ali-ve,” he sa-id.

They sta-red blankly at him.

“I don’t get it,” Mic-key sa-id we-akly. He sho-ok his he-ad and his lips drew back over his te-eth.

Mason sat limply in the pi-lot’s se-at. He al-most ho-ped that Ross’s dog-ma-tism wo-uld pull them thro-ugh this. That his sta-unch bi-as aga-inst the inexp-li-cab-le wo-uld sa-ve the day. He wan-ted for it to sa-ve the day. He tri-ed to think for him-self, but it was so much easi-er to let the cap-ta-in de-ci-de.

“We’re all de-ad,” Mic-key sa-id.

“Don’t be a fo-ol!” Ross exc-la-imed. “Fe-el yo-ur-self!”

Mason won-de-red how long it wo-uld go on. Ac-tu-al-ly, he be-gan to ex-pect a sud-den awa-ke-ning, him jol-ting to a sit-ting po-si-ti-on on his bunk to see the two of them at the-ir tasks as usu-al, the crazy dre-am over and do-ne with.

But the dre-am went on. He le-aned back in the se-at and it was a so-lid se-at. From whe-re he sat he co-uld run his fin-gers over so-lid di-als and but-tons and switc-hes. All re-al. It was no dre-am. Pinc-hing wasn’t even ne-ces-sary.

“Maybe it’s a vi-si-on,” he tri-ed, va-inly at-temp-ting tho-ught, as an ani-mal mi-red tri-es he-si-tant steps to so-lid earth.

“That’s eno-ugh,” Ross sa-id.

Then his eyes nar-ro-wed. He lo-oked at them sharply. His fa-ce mir-ro-red de-ci-si-on. Ma-son al-most felt an-ti-ci-pa-ti-on. He tri-ed to fi-gu-re out what Ross was wor-king on. Vi-si-on? No, it co-uld’n’t be that. Ross wo-uld hold no truck with vi-si-ons. He no-ti-ced Mic-key sta-ring open-mo-ut-hed at Ross. Mic-key wan-ted the con-so-ling of simp-le exp-la-na-ti-on too.

“Time warp,” sa-id Ross.

They still sta-red at him.

“What?” Ma-son as-ked.

“Listen,” Ross punc-hed out his the-ory. Mo-re than his the-ory, for Ross ne-ver bot-he-red with that link in the cha-in of cal-cu-la-ti-on. His cer-ta-inty.

“Space bends,” Ross sa-id. “Ti-me and spa-ce form a con-ti-nu-um. Right?”

No ans-wer. He didn’t ne-ed one.

“Remember they told us on-ce in tra-ining of the pos-si-bi-lity of cir-cum-na-vi-ga-ting ti-me. They told us we co-uld le-ave Earth at a cer-ta-in ti-me. And when we ca-me back we’d be back a ye-ar ear-li-er than we’d cal-cu-la-ted. Or a ye-ar la-ter.

“Those we-re just the-ori-es to the te-ac-hers. Well, I say it’s hap-pe-ned to us. It’s lo-gi-cal, it co-uld hap-pen. We co-uld ha-ve pas-sed right thro-ugh a ti-me warp. We’re in anot-her ga-laxy, may-be dif-fe-rent spa-ce li-nes, may-be dif-fe-rent ti-me li-nes.”

He pa-used for ef-fect.

“I say we’re in the fu-tu-re,” he sa-id.

Mason lo-oked at him.

“How do-es that help us?” he as-ked. “If you’re right.”

“We’re not de-ad!” Ross se-emed surp-ri-sed that they didn’t get it.

“If it’s in the fu-tu-re,” Ma-son sa-id qu-i-etly, “then we’re go-ing to die.”

Ross ga-ped at him. He hadn’t tho-ught of that. Hadn’t tho-ught that his idea ma-de things even wor-se. Be-ca-use the-re was only one thing wor-se than dying. And that was kno-wing you we-re go-ing to die. And whe-re. And how.

Mickey sho-ok his he-ad. His hands fumb-led at his si-des. He ra-ised one to his lips and che-wed ner-vo-usly on a blac-ke-ned na-il.

“No,” he sa-id we-akly, “I don’t get it.”

Ross sto-od lo-oking at Ma-son with jaded eyes. He bit his lips, fe-eling ner-vo-us with the unk-nown crow-ding him in, hol-ding off the com-fort of so-lid, ra-ti-onal thin-king. He pus-hed, he sho-ved it away. He per-se-ve-red.

“Listen,” he sa-id, “we’re ag-re-ed that tho-se bo-di-es aren’t ours.”

No ans-wer.

“Use yo-ur he-ads!” Ross com-man-ded. “Fe-el yo-ur-self!”

Mason ran num-bed fin-gers over his jum-per, his hel-met, the pen in his poc-ket. He clas-ped so-lid hands of flesh and bo-ne. He lo-oked at the ve-ins in his arms. He pres-sed an an-xi-o-us fin-ger to his pul-se. It’s true, he tho-ught. And the tho-ught dro-ve li-nes of strength back in-to him. Des-pi-te all, des-pi-te Ross’s des-pe-ra-te ad-vo-cacy, he was ali-ve. Flesh and blo-od we-re his evi-den-ce.

His mind swung open then. His brow fur-ro-wed in tho-ught as he stra-igh-te-ned up. He saw a lo-ok al-most of re-li-ef on the fa-ce of a we-ake-ning Ross.

“All right then,” he sa-id, “we’re in the fu-tu-re.”

Mickey sto-od ten-sely by the port. “Whe-re do-es that le-ave us?” he as-ked.

The words threw Ma-son back. It was true, whe-re did it le-ave them?

“How do we know how dis-tant a fu-tu-re?” he sa-id, ad-ding we-ight to the dep-res-si-on of Mic-key’s words. “How do we know it isn’t in the next twenty mi-nu-tes?”

Ross tigh-te-ned. He punc-hed his palm with a re-so-un-ding smack.

“How do we know?” he sa-id strongly. “We don’t go up, we can’t crash. That’s how we know.”

Mason lo-oked at him.

“Maybe if we went up,” he sa-id, “we might bypass our de-ath al-to-get-her and le-ave it in this

spa-ce-ti-me system. We co-uld get back to the spa-ce-ti-me system of our own ga-laxy and... “

His words tra-iled off. His bra-in be-ca-me ab-sor-bed with twis-ting tho-ught.

Ross frow-ned. He stir-red rest-les-sly, lic-ked his lips. What had be-en simp-le was now so-met-hing el-se aga-in. He re-sen-ted the unin-vi-ted int-ru-si-on of comp-le-xity.

“We’re ali-ve now,” he sa-id, get-ting it set in his mind, con-so-li-da-ting as-su-ran-ce with re-aso-nab-le words, “and the-re’s only one way we can stay ali-ve.”

He lo-oked at them, de-ci-si-on re-ac-hed. “We ha-ve to stay he-re,” he sa-id.

They just lo-oked at him. He wis-hed that one of them, at le-ast, wo-uld ag-ree with him, show so-me sign of de-fi-ni-ti-on in the-ir minds.

“But... what abo-ut our or-ders?” Ma-son sa-id va-gu-ely.

“Our or-ders don’t tell us to kill our-sel-ves!” Ross sa-id. “No, it’s the only ans-wer. If we ne-ver go up aga-in, we ne-ver crash. We... we avo-id it, we pre-vent it!”

His he-ad jar-red on-ce in a curt nod. To Ross, the thing was set-tled.

Mason sho-ok his he-ad.

“I don’t know,” he sa-id. “I don’t... “

“I do,” Ross sta-ted. “Now let’s get out of he-re. This ship is get-ting on our ner-ves.”

Mason sto-od up as the cap-ta-in ges-tu-red to-ward the do-or. Mic-key star-ted to mo-ve, then he-si-ta-ted. He lo-oked down at the bo-di-es.

“Shouldn’t we...?” he star-ted to in-qu-ire.

“What, what?” Ross as-ked, im-pa-ti-ent to le-ave.

Mickey sta-red at the bo-di-es. He felt ca-ught up in a gre-at, be-wil-de-ring in-sa-nity.

“Shouldn’t we... bury our-sel-ves?” he sa-id.

Ross swal-lo-wed. He wo-uld he-ar no mo-re. He her-ded them out of the ca-bin. Then, as they star-ted down thro-ugh the wrec-ka-ge, he lo-oked in at the do-or. He lo-oked at the tar-pa-ulin with the jumb-led mo-und of bo-di-es be-ne-ath it. He pres-sed his lips to-get-her un-til they we-re whi-te.

“I’m ali-ve,” he mut-te-red ang-rily.

Then he tur-ned out the ca-bin light with tight, ven-ge-ful fin-gers and left.

They all sat in the ca-bin of the-ir own ship. Ross had or-de-red fo-od bro-ught out from the loc-kers, but he was the only one eating. He ate with a bel-li-ge-rent ro-ta-ti-on of his jaw as tho-ugh he wo-uld grind away all mystery with his te-eth.

Mickey sta-red at the fo-od.

“How long do we ha-ve to stay?” he as-ked, as if he didn’t cle-arly re-ali-ze that they we-re to re-ma-in per-ma-nently.

Mason to-ok it up. He le-aned for-ward in his se-at and lo-oked at Ross.

“How long will our fo-od last?” he sa-id.

“There’s edib-le fo-od out-si-de, I’ve no do-ubt,” Ross sa-id, che-wing.

“How will we know which is edib-le and which is po-iso-no-us?”

“We’ll watch the ani-mals,” Ross per-sis-ted.

“They’re a dif-fe-rent type of li-fe,” Ma-son sa-id. “What they can eat might be po-iso-no-us to us. Be-si-des, we don’t even know if the-re are any ani-mals he-re.”

The words ma-de his lips ra-ise in a bri-ef, bit-ter smi-le. And he’d ac-tu-al-ly be-en ho-ping to con-tact anot-her pe-op-le. It was prac-ti-cal-ly hu-mo-ro-us.

Ross brist-led. “We’ll... cross each ri-ver as we co-me to it,” he blur-ted out as if he ho-ped to smot-her all comp-la-int with this an-ci-ent ho-mily.

Mason sho-ok his he-ad. “I don’t know,” he sa-id.

Ross sto-od up.

“Listen,” he sa-id. “It’s easy to ask qu-es-ti-ons. We’ve all ma-de a de-ci-si-on to stay he-re. Now let’s do so-me conc-re-te thin-king abo-ut it. Don’t tell me what we can’t do. I know that as well as you.

Tell me what we can do.”

Then he tur-ned on his he-el and stal-ked over to the cont-rol bo-ard. He sto-od the-re gla-ring at blank-fa-ced ga-gues and di-als. He sat down and be-gan scrib-bling ra-pidly in his log as if so-met-hing of gre-at no-te had just oc-cur-red to him. La-ter Ma-son lo-ok-ed at what Ross had writ-ten and saw that it was a long pa-rag-raph which exp-la-ined in fa-ulty but un-yi-el-ding lo-gic why they we-re all ali-ve.

Mickey got up and sat down on his bunk. He pres-sed his lar-ge hands aga-inst his temp-les. He lo-ok-ed very much li-ke a lit-tle boy who had eaten too many gre-en ap-ples aga-inst his mot-her’s inj-unc-ti-on and who fe-ared ret-ri-bu-ti-on on both co-unts. Ma-son knew what Mic-key was thin-king. Of that still body with the skull for-ced in. The ima-ge of him-self bru-tal-ly kil-led in col-li-si-on. He, Ma-son, was thin-king of the sa-me thing. And, be-ha-vi-or to the cont-rary, Ross pro-bably was too.

Mason sto-od by the port lo-oking out at the si-lent hulk ac-ross the me-adow. Dark-ness was fal-ling. The last rays of the pla-net’s sun glin-ted off the skin of the cras-hed roc-ket ship. Ma-son tur-ned away. He lo-ok-ed at the out-si-de tem-pe-ra-tu-re ga-u-ge. Al-re-ady it was se-ven deg-re-es and it was still light. Ma-son mo-ved the ther-mos-tat ne-ed-le with his right fo-re-fin-ger.

Heat be-ing used up, he tho-ught. The energy of our gro-un-ded ship be-ing used up fas-ter and fas-ter. The ship drin-king its own blo-od with no pos-si-bi-lity of trans-fu-si-on. Only ope-ra-ti-on wo-uld rec-har-ge the ship’s energy system. And they we-re wit-ho-ut mo-ti-on, trap-ped and sta-ti-onary.

“How long can we last?” he as-ked Ross aga-in, re-fu-sing to ke-ep si-len-ce in the fa-ce of the qu-es-ti-on. “We can’t li-ve in this ship in-de-fi-ni-tely. The fo-od will run out in a co-up-le of months. And a long ti-me be-fo-re that the char-ging system will go. The he-at will stop. We’ll fre-eze to de-ath.”

“How do we know the out-si-de tem-pe-ra-tu-re will fre-eze us?” Ross as-ked, fal-sely pa-ti-ent.

“It’s only sun-down,” Ma-son sa-id, “and al-re-ady it’s... mi-nus thir-te-en deg-re-es.”

Ross lo-ok-ed at him sul-lenly. Then he pus-hed up from his cha-ir and be-gan pa-cing.

“If we go up,” he sa-id, “we risk... *dup-li-ca-ting* that ship over the-re.”

“But wo-uld we?” Ma-son won-de-red. “We can only die on-ce. It se-ems we al-re-ady ha-ve. In this ga-laxy. May-be a per-son can die on-ce in every ga-laxy. May-be that’s af-ter-li-fe. May-be...”

“Are you thro-ugh?” as-ked Ross coldly.

Mickey lo-ok-ed up.

“Let’s go,” he sa-id. “I don’t want to hang aro-und he-re.”

He lo-ok-ed at Ross.

Ross sa-id, “Let’s not stick out our necks be-fo-re we know what we’re do-ing. Let’s think this out.”

“I ha-ve a wi-fe!” Mic-key sa-id ang-rily. “Just be-ca-use you’re not mar-ri-ed-”

“Shut up!” Ross thun-de-red.

Mickey threw him-self on the bunk and tur-ned to fa-ce the cold bulk-he-ad. Bre-ath shud-de-red thro-ugh his he-avy fra-me. He didn’t say anyt-hing. His fin-gers ope-ned and clo-sed on the blan-ket, twis-ting it, pul-ling it out from un-der his body.

Ross pa-ced the deck, abst-rac-tedly punc-hing at his palm with a hard fist. His te-eth clic-ked to-get-her, his he-ad sho-ok as one ar-gu-ment af-ter anot-her fell be-fo-re his bul-lhe-aded de-ter-mi-na-ti-on. He stop-ped, lo-ok-ed at Ma-son, then star-ted pa-cing aga-in. On-ce he tur-ned on the out-si-de spot-light and lo-ok-ed to ma-ke su-re it was not ima-gi-na-ti-on.

The light il-lu-mi-ned the bro-ken ship. It glo-wed stran-gely, li-ke a hu-ge, bro-ken tombs-to-ne. Ross snap-ped off the spot-light with a so-und-less snarl. He tur-ned to fa-ce them. His bro-ad chest ro-se and fell he-avily as he bre-at-hed.

“All right,” he sa-id. “It’s *yo-ur* li-ves too. I can’t de-ci-de for all of us. We’ll hand vo-te on it. That thing out the-re may be so-met-hing en-ti-rely dif-fe-rent from what we think. If you two think it’s worth the risk of our li-ves to go up, we’ll... go up.”

He shrug-ged. “Vo-te,” he sa-id. “I say we stay he-re.”

“I say we go,” Ma-son sa-id.

They lo-oked at Mic-key.

“Carter,” sa-id Ross, “what’s yo-ur vo-te?”

Mickey lo-oked over his sho-ul-der with ble-ak eyes.

“Vote,” Ross sa-id.

“Up,” Mic-key sa-id. “Ta-ke us up. I’d rat-her die than stay he-re.”

Ross’s thro-at mo-ved. Then he to-ok a de-ep bre-ath and squ-ared his sho-ul-ders.

“All right,” he sa-id qu-i-etly. “We’ll go up.”

“God ha-ve mercy on us,” Mic-key mut-te-red as Ross went qu-ickly to the cont-rol bo-ard.

The cap-ta-in he-si-ta-ted a mo-ment. Then he threw switc-hes. The gre-at ship be-gan shud-de-ring as ga-ses ig-ni-ted and be-gan to po-ur li-ke chan-ne-led light-ning from the re-ar vents. The so-und was al-most so-ot-hing to Ma-son. He didn’t ca-re any mo-re; he was wil-ling, li-ke Mic-key, to ta-ke a chan-ce. It had only be-en a few ho-urs. It had se-emed li-ke a ye-ar. Mi-nu-tes had drag-ged, each one we-igh-ted with op-pres-si-ve re-col-lec-ti-ons. Of the bo-di-es they’d se-en, of the shat-te-red roc-ket-even mo-re of the Earth they wo-uld ne-ver see, of pa-rents and wi-ves and swe-et-he-arts and child-ren. Lost to the-ir sight fo-re-ver. No, it was far bet-ter to try to get back. Sit-ting and wa-iting was al-ways the har-dest thing for a man to do. He was no lon-ger con-di-ti-oned for it.

Mason sat down at his bo-ard. He wa-ited ten-sely. He he-ard Mic-key jump up and mo-ve over to the en-gi-ne cont-rol bo-ard.

“I’m go-ing to ta-ke us up easy,” Ross sa-id to them. “The-re’s no re-ason why we sho-uld... ha-ve any tro-ub-le.”

He pa-used. They snap-ped the-ir he-ads over and lo-oked at him with musc-le-tight im-pa-ti-en-ce.

“Are you both re-ady?” Ross as-ked.

“*Take us up,*” Mic-key sa-id.

Ross jam-med his lips to-get-her and sho-ved over the switch that re-ad: *Ver-ti-cal Ri-se.*

They felt the ship tremb-le, he-si-ta-te. Then it mo-ved off the gro-und, he-aded up with inc-re-asing ve-lo-city. Ma-son flic-ked on the re-ar vi-ewer. He watc-hed the dark earth re-ce-de, tri-ed not to lo-ok at the whi-te patch in the cor-ner of the scre-en, the patch that sho-ne me-tal-li-cal-ly un-der the mo-on-light.

“Five hund-red,” he re-ad. “Se-ven-fifty... one tho-usand... fif-te-en hund-red...”

He kept wa-iting. For exp-lo-si-on. For an en-gi-ne to gi-ve out. For the-ir ri-se to stop.

They kept mo-ving up.

“Three tho-usand,” Ma-son sa-id, his vo-ice be-gin-ning to bet-ray the ri-sing sen-se of ela-ti-on he felt. The pla-net was get-ting fart-her and fart-her away. The ot-her ship was only a me-mory now. He lo-oked ac-ross at Mic-key. Mic-key was sta-ring, open-mo-ut-hed, as if he we-re abo-ut re-ady to sho-ut out “*Hurry!*” but was af-ra-id to tempt the fa-tes.

“Six tho-usand... *se-ven tho-usand!*” Ma-son’s vo-ice was jubi-lant. “We’re *out* of it!”

Mickey’s fa-ce bro-ke in-to a gre-at, re-li-ved grin. He ran a hand over his brow and flic-ked gre-at drops of swe-at on the deck.

“God,” he sa-id, gas-ping, “my God.”

Mason mo-ved over to Ross’s se-at. He clap-ped the cap-ta-in on the sho-ul-der.

“We ma-de it,” he sa-id. “Ni-ce flying.”

Ross lo-oked ir-ri-ta-ted.

“We sho-uld’n’t ha-ve left,” he sa-id. “It was not-hing all the ti-me. Now we ha-ve to start lo-oking for anot-her pla-net.” He sho-ok his he-ad. “It wasn’t a go-od idea to le-ave,” he sa-id.

Mason sta-red at him. He tur-ned away sha-king his he-ad, thin-king... you can’t win.

“If I ever see anot-her glit-ter,” he tho-ught alo-ud, “I’ll ke-ep my big mo-uth shut. To hell with ali-en ra-ces any-way.”

Silence. He went back to his se-at and pic-ked up his graph chart. He let out a long sha-king bre-ath. Let Ross comp-la-in, he tho-ught, I can ta-ke anyt-hing now. Things are nor-mal aga-in. He be-gan to fi-gu-re ca-su-al-ly what might ha-ve oc-cur-red down the-re on that pla-net.

Then he hap-pe-ned to glan-ce at Ross.

Ross was thin-king. His lips pres-sed to-get-her. He sa-id so-met-hing to him-self. Ma-son fo-und the cap-ta-in lo-oking at him.

“Mason,” he sa-id.

“What?”

“Alien ra-ce, you sa-id.”

Mason felt a chill flo-od thro-ugh his body. He saw the big he-ad nod on-ce in de-ci-si-on. Unk-nown de-ci-si-on. His hands star-ted to sha-ke. A crazy idea ca-me. No, Ross wo-uldn’t do that, not just to as-su-age va-nity. Wo-uld he?

“I don’t...” he star-ted. Out of the cor-ner of his eye he saw Mic-key watc-hing the cap-ta-in too.

“Listen,” Ross sa-id. “I’ll tell you what hap-pe-ned down the-re. I’ll *show* you what hap-pe-ned!”

They sta-red at him in pa-raly-zing hor-ror as he threw the ship aro-und and he-aded back.

“What are you do-ing!” Mic-key cri-ed.

“Listen,” Ross sa-id. “Didn’t you un-ders-tand me? Don’t you see how we’ve be-en tric-ked?”

They lo-oked at him wit-ho-ut comp-re-hen-si-on. Mic-key to-ok a step to-ward him.

“Alien ra-ce,” Ross sa-id. “That’s the short of it. That ti-me-spa-ce idea is all wet. But I’ll tell you what idea isn’t all wet. So we le-ave the pla-ce. What’s our first ins-tinct as far as re-por-ting it? Sa-ying it’s unin-ha-bi-tab-le? We’d do mo-re than that. We wo-uldn’t re-port it at all.”

“Ross, you’re not ta-king us back!” Ma-son sa-id, stan-ding up sud-denly as the full ter-ror of re-tur-ning struck him.

“You bet I am!” Ross sa-id, fi-er-cely ela-ted.

“You’re crazy!” Mic-key sho-uted at him, his body twitc-hing, his hands clen-c-hed at his si-des me-na-cingly.

“Listen to me!” Ross ro-ared at them. “Who wo-uld be be-ne-fi-ted by us not re-por-ting the exis-ten-ce of that pla-net?”

They didn’t ans-wer. Mic-key mo-ved clo-ser.

“Fools!” he sa-id. “Isn’t it ob-vi-o-us? The-re *is* li-fe down the-re. But li-fe that isn’t strong eno-ugh to kill us or cha-se us away with for-ce. So what can they do? They don’t want us the-re. So what can they do?”

He as-ked them li-ke a te-ac-her who can-not get the right ans-wers from the dolts in his class.

Mickey lo-oked sus-pi-ci-o-us. But he was cu-ri-o-us now, too, and a lit-tle ti-mo-ro-us as he had al-ways be-en with his cap-ta-in, ex-cept in mo-ments of gre-atest physi-cal dan-ger. Ross had al-ways led them, and it was hard to re-bel aga-inst it even when it se-emed he was trying to kill them all. His eyes mo-ved to the vi-ewer scre-en whe-re the pla-net be-gan to lo-om be-ne-ath them li-ke a hu-ge dark ball.

“We’re ali-ve,” Ross sa-id, “and I say the-re ne-ver *was* a ship down the-re. We saw it, su-re. We *to-uc-hed* it. But you can see anyt-hing if you be-li-eve it’s the-re! All yo-ur sen-ses can tell you the-re’s so-met-hing when the-re’s not-hing. All you ha-ve to do is *be-li-eve* it!”

“What are you get-ting at?” Ma-son as-ked hur-ri-edly, too frigh-te-ened to re-ali-ze. His eyes fled to the al-ti-tu-de ga-uge. Se-ven-te-en tho-usand... six-te-en tho-usand... fif-te-en...

“Telepathy,” Ross sa-id, tri-ump-hantly de-ci-si-ve. “I say tho-se men, or wha-te-ver they are, saw us co-ming. And they didn’t want us the-re. So they re-ad our minds and saw the de-ath fe-ar, and they de-ci-ded that the best way to sca-re us away was to show us our ship cras-hed and our-sel-ves de-ad in it. And it wor-ked... un-til now.”

“So it wor-ked!” Ma-son exp-lo-ded. “Are you go-ing to ta-ke a chan-ce on kil-ling us just to pro-ve yo-ur damn the-ory?”

“It’s *mo-re* than a the-ory!” Ross stor-med, as the ship fell, then Ross ad-ded with the dis-tor-ted ar-gu-ment of inj-ured va-nity, “My or-ders say to pick up spe-ci-mens from every pla-net. I’ve al-ways fol-lo-wed or-ders be-fo-re and, by God, I still will!”

“You saw how cold it was!” Ma-son sa-id. “No one can li-ve the-re any-way! Use yo-ur he-ad, Ross!”

“Damn it, *I’m* cap-ta-in of this ship!” Ross yel-led, “and I gi-ve the or-ders!”

“Not when our li-ves are in yo-ur hands!” Mic-key star-ted for the cap-ta-in.

“Get back!” Ross or-de-red.

That was when one of the ship’s en-gi-nes stop-ped and the ship ya-wed wildly.

“You fo-ol!” Mic-key exp-lo-ded, thrown off ba-lan-ce. “You *did* it, you *did* it!”

Outside the black night hurt-led past.

The ship wob-bled vi-olently. *Pre-dic-ti-on true* was the only phra-se Ma-son co-uld think of. His own vi-si-on of the scre-aming, the num-bing hor-ror, the ex-hor-ta-ti-ons to a de-af he-aven-all co-ming true. That hulk wo-uld be this ship in a mat-ter of mi-nu-tes. Tho-se three bo-di-es wo-uld be...

“Oh... *damn!*” He scre-amed it at the top of his lungs, fu-ri-o-us at the en-ra-ging stub-born-ness of Ross in ta-king them back, of ca-using the fu-tu-re to be as they saw-all be-ca-use of in-sa-ne pri-de.

“No, they’re not go-ing to fo-ol us!” Ross sho-uted, still hol-ding fast to his last idea li-ke a dying bul-ldog hol-ding its enemy fast in its te-eth.

He threw switc-hes and tri-ed to turn the ship. But it wo-uldn’t turn. It kept plun-ging down li-ke a flut-te-ring le-af. The gyros-co-pe co-uld’n’t ke-ep up with the ab-rupt va-ri-ati-ons in ca-bin equ-i-lib-ri-um and the three of them fo-und them-sel-ves be-ing thrown off ba-lan-ce on the til-ting deck.

“Auxiliary en-gi-nes!” Ross yel-led.

“It’s no use!” Mic-key cri-ed.

“*Damn it!*” Ross cla-wed his way up the ang-led deck, then cras-hed he-avily aga-inst the en-gi-ne bo-ard as the ca-bin inc-li-ned the ot-her way. He threw switc-hes over with sha-king fin-gers.

Suddenly Ma-son saw an even spo-ut of fla-me thro-ugh the re-ar vi-ewer aga-in. The ship stop-ped shud-de-ring and he-aded stra-ight down. The ca-bin righ-ted it-self.

Ross threw him-self in-to his cha-ir and shot out fu-ri-o-us hands to turn the ship abo-ut. From the flo-or Mic-key lo-oked at him with a blank, whi-te fa-ce. Ma-son lo-oked at him, too, af-ra-id to spe-ak.

“Now shut up!” Ross sa-id dis-gus-tedly, not even lo-oking at them, tal-king li-ke a disg-runt-led fat-her to his sons. “When we get down the-re you’re go-ing to see that it’s true. That ship’ll be go-ne. And we’re go-ing to go lo-oking for tho-se bas-tards who put the idea in our minds!”

They both sta-red at the-ir cap-ta-in humbly as the ship he-aded down back-wards. They watc-hed Ross’s hands mo-ve ef-fi-ci-ently over the cont-rols. Ma-son felt a sen-se of con-fi-den-ce in his cap-ta-in. He sto-od on the deck qu-i-etly, wa-iting for the lan-ding wit-ho-ut fe-ar. Mic-key got up from the flo-or and sto-od be-si-de him, wa-iting.

The ship hit the gro-und. It stop-ped. They had lan-ded aga-in. They we-re still the sa-me. And...

“Turn on the spot-light,” Ross told them.

Mason threw the switch. They all crow-ded to the port. Ma-son won-de-red for a se-cond how Ross co-uld pos-sibly ha-ve lan-ded in the sa-me spot. He hadn’t even ap-pe-ared to be fol-lo-wing the cal-cu-la-ti-ons ma-de on the last lan-ding.

They lo-oked out.

Mickey stop-ped bre-at-hing. And Ross’s mo-uth fell open.

The wrec-ka-ge was still the-re.

They had lan-ded in the sa-me pla-ce and they had fo-und the wrec-ked ship still the-re. Ma-son tur-ned away from the port and stumb-led over the deck. He felt lost, a vic-tim of so-me ter-rib-le uni-ver-sal prank, a man ac-cur-sed.

“You sa-id...” Mic-key sa-id to the cap-ta-in.

Ross just lo-oked out of the port with un-be-li-ving eyes.

“Now we’ll go up aga-in,” Mic-key sa-id, grin-ding his te-eth. “And we’ll *re-al-ly* crash this ti-me. And we’ll be kil-led. Just li-ke tho-se... tho-se...”

Ross didn’t spe-ak. He sta-red out of the port at the re-fu-ta-ti-on of his last clin-ging ho-pe. He felt hol-low, vo-id of all fa-ith in be-li-ef in sen-sib-le things.

Then Ma-son spo-ke.

“We’re not go-ing to crash-” he sa-id som-berly-“ever.”

“What?”

Mickey was lo-oking at him. Ross tur-ned and lo-oked too.

“Why don’t we stop kid-ding our-sel-ves?” Ma-son sa-id. “We all know what it is, don’t we?”

He was thin-king of what Ross had sa-id just a mo-ment be-fo-re. Abo-ut the sen-ses gi-ving evi-den-ce of what was be-li-eved. Even if the-re was not-hing the-re at all...

Then, in a split se-cond, with the know-led-ge, he saw Ross and he saw Car-ter. As they *we-re*. And he to-ok a short shud-de-ring bre-ath, a last bre-ath un-til il-lu-si-on wo-uld bring bre-ath and flesh aga-in.

“Progress,” he sa-id bit-terly, and his vo-ice was an ac-hing whis-per in the phan-tom ship. “The Flying Dutch-man ta-kes to the uni-ver-se.”

13 - THE DISTRIBUTOR

July 20

Time to mo-ve.

He'd fo-und a small, fur-nis-hed ho-use on Sylmar Stre-et. The Sa-tur-day mor-ning he mo-ved in, he went aro-und the ne-igh-bo-ur-ho-od int-ro-du-cing him-self.

"Good mor-ning," he sa-id to the old man pru-ning ivy next do-or. "My na-me is The-odo-re Gor-don. I just mo-ved in."

The old man stra-igh-te-ned up and sho-ok The-odo-re's hand. "How do," he sa-id. His na-me was Joseph Als-ton.

A dog ca-me shuf-fling from the porch to sniff The-odo-re's cuffs. "He's ma-king up his mind abo-ut you," sa-id the old man.

"Isn't that cu-te?" sa-id The-odo-re.

Across the stre-et li-ved Inez Fer-rel. She ans-we-red the do-or in a ho-use-co-at, a thin wo-man in her la-te thir-ti-es. The-odo-re apo-lo-gi-zed for dis-tur-bing her.

"Oh, that's all right," she sa-id. She had lots of ti-me to her-self when her hus-band was sel-ling on the ro-ad.

"I ho-pe we'll be go-od ne-igh-bors," sa-id The-odo-re.

"I'm su-re we will," sa-id Inez Fer-rel. She watc-hed him thro-ugh the win-dow as he left.

Next do-or, di-rectly ac-ross from his own ho-use, he knoc-ked qu-i-etly be-ca-use the-re was a *Nig-h-t-wor-ker Sle-eping* sign. Do-rothy Bac-kus ope-ned the do-or-a tiny, withd-rawn wo-man in her mid-dle thir-ti-es.

"I'm so glad to me-et you," sa-id The-odo-re.

Next do-or li-ved the Wal-ter Mor-tons. As The-odo-re ca-me up the walk, he he-ard Bi-an-ca Mor-ton tal-king lo-udly to her son, Wal-ter, Jr.

"You are not old eno-ugh to stay out till three o'clock in the mor-ning!" she was sa-ying. "Espe-ci-al-ly with a girl as yo-ung as Kat-he-ri-ne McCann!"

Theodore knoc-ked and Mr. Mor-ton, fifty-two and bald, ope-ned the do-or.

"I just mo-ved in ac-ross the stre-et," sa-id The-odo-re, smi-ling at them.

Patty Jef-fer-son let him in next do-or. As he tal-ked to her The-odo-re co-uld see, thro-ugh the back win-dow, her hus-band Art-hur fil-ling a rub-ber po-ol for the-ir son and da-ugh-ter.

"They just lo-ve that po-ol," sa-id Patty, smi-ling.

"I bet they do," sa-id The-odo-re. As he left, he no-ti-ced the va-cant ho-use next do-or.

Across the stre-et from the Jef-fer-sons li-ved the McCanns and the-ir fo-ur-te-en-ye-ar-old da-ugh-ter Kat-he-ri-ne. As The-odo-re ap-pro-ac-hed the do-or he he-ard the vo-ice of James McCann sa-ying, "Aah, he's nuts. Why sho-uld I ta-ke his lawn ed-ger? Just be-ca-use I bor-ro-wed his lo-usy mo-wer a co-up-le of ti-mes."

"Darling, *ple-ase*" sa-id Fa-ye McCann. "I've got to fi-nish the-se no-tes in ti-me for the Co-un-cil's next me-eting."

"Just be-ca-use Kathy go-es out with his lo-usy son..." grumb-led her hus-band.

Theodore knoc-ked on the do-or and int-ro-du-ced him-self. He chat-ted bri-efly with them, in-for-ming Mrs. McCann that he cer-ta-inly wo-uld li-ke to jo-in the Na-ti-onal Co-un-cil for Chris-ti-ans and Jews. It was a worthy or-ga-ni-za-ti-on.

"What's yo-ur bu-si-ness, Gor-don?" as-ked McCann.

"I'm in dist-ri-bu-ti-on," sa-id The-odo-re.

Next do-or, two boys mo-wed and ra-ked whi-le the-ir dog gam-bol-led aro-und them.

"Hello the-re," sa-id The-odo-re. They grun-ted and watc-hed him as he he-aded for the porch. The dog ig-no-red him.

"I just *told* him." Henry Put-nam's vo-ice ca-me thro-ugh the li-ving ro-om win-dow: "Put a co-on in my de-part-ment and I'm thro-ugh. That's all."

"Yes, de-ar," sa-id Mrs. Ir-ma Put-nam.

Theodore's knock was ans-we-red by the un-ders-hir-ted Mr. Put-nam. His wi-fe was lying on the so-fa. Her he-art, exp-la-ined Mr. Put-nam. "Oh, I'm sorry," The-odo-re sa-id.

In the last ho-use li-ved the Gor-ses.

"I just mo-ved in next do-or," sa-id The-odo-re. He sho-ok Ele-anor Gor-se's le-an hand and she told him that her fat-her was at work.

"Is that him?" as-ked The-odo-re, po-in-ting at the port-ra-it of a stony-fa-ced old man that hung abo-ve a man-tel crow-ded with re-li-gi-o-us obj-ects.

"Yes," sa-id Ele-anor, thirty-fo-ur and ugly.

"Well, I ho-pe we'll be go-od ne-igh-bo-urs," The-odo-re sa-id.

That af-ter-no-on, he went to his new of-fi-ce and set up the dark-ro-om.

July 23

That mor-ning, be-fo-re he left for the of-fi-ce, he chec-ked the te-lep-ho-ne di-rec-tory and jot-ted down fo-ur num-bers. He di-al-led the first.

"Would you ple-ase send a cab to 12057 Sylmar Stre-et?" he sa-id. "Thank you."

He di-al-led the se-cond num-ber. "Wo-uld you ple-ase send a re-pa-ir-man to my ho-use," he sa-id. "I don't get any pic-tu-re. I li-ve at 12070 Sylmar Stre-et."

He di-al-led the third num-ber: "I'd li-ke to run this ad in Sun-day's edi-ti-on," he sa-id. "1957 Ford. Per-fect Con-di-ti-on. Se-ven-hund-red eighty-ni-ne dol-lars. That's right, se-ven-hund-red eighty-ni-ne. The num-ber is DA-4-7408."

He ma-de the fo-urth call and set up an af-ter-no-on ap-po-int-ment with Mr. Jere-mi-ah Os-bor-ne. Then he sto-od by the li-ving ro-om win-dow un-til the ta-xi-cab stop-ped in front of the Bac-kus ho-use.

As he was dri-ving off, a te-le-vi-si-on re-pa-ir truck pas-sed him. He lo-ok-ed back and saw it stop in front of Henry Put-nam's ho-use.

Dear sirs, he typed in the of-fi-ce la-ter, *Ple-ase send me ten bo-ok-lets for which I enc-lo-se one hund-red dol-lars in pay-ment.* He put down the na-me and ad-dress.

The en-ve-lo-pe drop-ped in-to the out box.

July 27

When Inez Fer-rel left her ho-use that eve-ning, The-odo-re fol-lo-wed in his car. Down-town, Mrs. Fer-rel got off the bus and went in-to a bar cal-led the Irish Lan-tern. Par-king, The-odo-re en-te-red the bar ca-uti-o-usly and slip-ped in-to a sha-dowy bo-oth.

Inez Fer-rel was at the back of the ro-om perc-hed on a bar sto-ol. She'd ta-ken off her jac-ket to re-ve-al a clin-ging yel-low swe-ater. The-odo-re ran his ga-ze ac-ross the stu-di-ed ex-po-si-ti-on of her bust.

At length, a man ac-cos-ted her and spo-ke and la-ug-hed and spent a mo-di-cum of ti-me with her. The-odo-re watc-hed them exit, arm in arm. Pa-ying for his cof-fee, he fol-lo-wed. It was a short walk; Mrs. Fer-rel and the man en-te-red a ho-tel on the next block.

Theodore dro-ve ho-me, whist-ling.

The next mor-ning, when Ele-anor Gor-se and her fat-her had left with Mrs. Bac-kus, The-odo-re fol-lo-wed.

He met them in the church lobby when the ser-vi-ce was over. Wasn't it a won-der-ful co-in-ci-den-ce, he sa-id, that he, too, was a Bap-tist? And he sho-ok the in-du-ra-te hand of Do-nald Gor-se.

As they wal-ked in-to the suns-hi-ne, The-odo-re as-ked them if they wo-uldn't sha-re his Sun-day din-ner with him. Mrs. Bac-kus smi-led fa-intly and mur-mu-red so-met-hing abo-ut her hus-band. Do-nald Gor-se lo-ok-ed do-ubt-ful.

"Oh, ple-ase," beg-ged The-odo-re. "Ma-ke a lo-nely wi-do-wer happy."

"Widower," tas-ted Mr. Gor-se.

Theodore hung his he-ad. "The-se many ye-ars," he sa-id. "Pne-umo-nia."

"Been a Bap-tist long?" as-ked Mr. Gor-se.

"Since birth," sa-id The-odo-re with fer-vo-ur. "It's be-en my only so-la-ce."

For din-ner he ser-ved lamb chops, pe-as, and ba-ked po-ta-to-es. For des-sert, ap-ple cob-bler and cof-fee.

"I'm so ple-ased you'd sha-re my humb-le fo-od," he sa-id.

"This is, truly, lo-ving thy ne-igh-bo-ur as thyself." He smi-led at Ele-anor who re-tur-ned it stiffly.

That eve-ning, as dark-ness fell, The-odo-re to-ok a stroll. As he pas-sed the McCann ho-use, he he-ard the te-lep-ho-ne rin-ging, then James McCann sho-uting, "It's a *mis-ta-ke*, damn it! Why in the lo-usy hell sho-uld I sell a '57 Ford for se-ven-hund-red eighty-ni-ne bucks!"

The pho-ne slam-med down. "God *damn*!" how-led James McCann.

"Darling, ple-ase be *to-le-rant*!" beg-ged his wi-fe.

The te-lep-ho-ne rang aga-in.

Theodore mo-ved on.

August 1

At exactly two-fif-te-en a.m. The-odo-re slip-ped out-si-de, pul-led up one of Joseph Als-ton's lon-gest ivy plants and left it on the si-de-walk.

In the mor-ning, as he left the ho-use, he saw Wal-ter Mor-ton, Jr., he-ading for the McCann ho-use with a blan-ket, a to-wel and a por-tab-le ra-dio. The old man was pic-king up his ivy.

"Was it pul-led up?" as-ked The-odo-re.

Joseph Als-ton grun-ted.

"So *that* was it," sa-id The-odo-re.

"*What?*" the old man lo-ok-ed up.

"Last night," sa-id The-odo-re, "I he-ard so-me no-ise out he-re. I lo-ok-ed out and saw a co-up-le of boys."

"You se-en the-ir fa-ces?" as-ked Als-ton, his fa-ce har-de-ning.

"No, it was too dark," sa-id The-odo-re. "But I'd say they we-re-oh, abo-ut the age of the Put-nam boys. Not that it was them, of co-ur-se."

Joe Als-ton nod-ded slowly, lo-oking up the stre-et.

Theodore dro-ve up to the bo-ule-vard and par-ked. Twenty mi-nu-tes la-ter, Wal-ter Mor-ton, Jr., and Kat-he-ri-ne McCann bo-ar-ded a bus.

At the be-ach, The-odo-re sat a few yards be-hind them.

"That Mack is a cha-rac-ter," he he-ard Wal-ter Mor-ton say. "He gets the ur-ge, he dri-ves to Ti-j-u-ana, just for kicks."

In a while Morton and the girl ran into the ocean, laughing. Theodore stood and walked to a telephone booth.

"I'd like to have a swimming pool installed in my backyard next week," he said. He gave the details.

Back on the beach he sat patiently until Walter Morton and the girl were lying in each other's arms. Then, at specific moments, he pressed a shutter hidden in his palm. This done, he returned to his car, buttoning his shirt front over the tiny lens. On his way to the office, he stopped at a hardware store to buy a brush and a can of black paint.

He spent the afternoon printing the pictures. He made them appear as if they had been taken at night and as if the young couple had been engaged in something else.

The envelope dropped softly into the out box.

August 5

The street was silent and deserted. Tennis shoes soundless on the paving, Theodore moved across the street.

He found the Morton's lawn mower in the backyard. Lifting it quietly, he carried it back across the street to the McCann garage. After carefully raising the door, he slid the mower behind the work bench. The envelope of photographs he put in a drawer behind a box of nails.

Returning to his house then, he phoned James McCann and, muffledly, asked if the Ford was still for sale.

In the morning, the mailman placed a bulky envelope on the Gorses' porch. Eleanor Gorse emerged and opened it, sliding out one of the booklets. Theodore watched the furious look she cast about, the rising of dark color in her cheeks.

As he was mowing the lawn that evening he saw Walter Morton, Sr., march across the street to where James McCann was trimming bushes. He heard them talking loudly. Finally, they went into McCann's garage from which Morton emerged pushing his lawn mower and making no reply to McCann's angry protests.

Across the street from McCann, Arthur Jefferson was just getting home from work. The two Putnam boys were riding their bicycles, their dog racing around them.

Now, across from where Theodore stood, a door slammed. He turned his head and watched Mr. Backus, in work clothes, storming to his car, muttering disgustedly, "A *swimming pool!*" Theodore looked to the next house and saw Inez Ferrel moving in her living room.

He smiled and mowed along the side of his house, glancing into Eleanor Gorse's bedroom. She was sitting with her back to him, re-reading something. When she heard the clatter of his mower she stood and left the bedroom, pushing the bulky envelope into a bureau drawer.

August 15

Henry Putnam answered the door.

"Good evening," said Theodore. "I hope I'm not intruding."

"Just chatting in the den with Irma's folks," said Putnam. "They're drivin' to New York in the mornin'."

"Oh? Well, I'll only be a moment." Theodore held out a pair of BB guns. "A plant I distribute for was getting rid of these," he said. "I thought your boys might like them."

"Well, *su-re*," said Putnam. He started for the den to get his sons.

While the older man was gone, Theodore picked up a couple of matchbooks whose covers read *Putnam's Wines and Liquors*. He'd slipped them into his pocket before the boys were led in to thank him.

"Mighty nice of you, Gordon," said Putnam at the door. "Su-re appreciate it."

"My ple-asu-re," sa-id The-odo-re.

Walking ho-me, he set the clock-ra-dio for three-fif-te-en and lay down. When the mu-sic be-gan, he mo-ved out-si-de on si-lent fe-et and to-re up forty-se-ven ivy plants, stre-wing them over Als-ton's si-de-walk.

"Oh, No," he sa-id to Als-ton in the mor-ning. He sho-ok his he-ad, ap-pal-led.

Joseph Als-ton didn't spe-ak. He glan-ced down the block with ha-ting eyes.

"Here, let me help you," The-odo-re sa-id. The old man sho-ok his he-ad but The-odo-re in-sis-ted. Dri-ving to the ne-arest nur-sery he bro-ught back two sacks of pe-at moss; then squ-at-ted by Als-ton's si-de to help him rep-lant.

"You he-ar anyt-hing last night?" the old man as-ked.

"You think it was tho-se boys aga-in?" as-ked The-odo-re, open-mo-ut-hed.

"Ain't say in'," Als-ton sa-id.

Later, The-odo-re dro-ve down-town and bo-ught a do-zen post-card pho-tog-raphs. He to-ok them to the of-fi-ce.

Dear Walt, he prin-ted cru-dely on the back of one, *Got the-se he-re in Ti-j-u-ana. Hot eno-ugh for you?* In ad-dres-sing the en-ve-lo-pe, he fa-iled to add *Jr.* to *Mr. Wal-ter Mor-ton*.

Into the out box.

August 23

"Mrs. Fer-rel!"

She shud-de-red on the bar sto-ol. "Why, Mis-ter-"

"Gordon," he pro-vi-ded, smi-ling. "How ni-ce to see you aga-in."

"Yes." She pres-sed to-get-her lips that tremb-led.

"You co-me he-re of-ten?" The-odo-re as-ked.

"Oh, no, *ne-ver*" Inez Fer-rel blur-ted. "I'm-just sup-po-sed to me-et a fri-end he-re to-night. A *girl* fri-end."

"Oh, I see," sa-id The-odo-re. "Well, may a lo-nely wi-do-wer ke-ep you com-pany un-til she co-mes?"

"Why..." Mrs. Fer-rel shrug-ged. "I gu-ess." Her lips we-re pa-in-ted brightly red aga-inst the ala-bas-ter of her skin. The swe-ater clung ad-he-si-vely to the ho-is-ted jut of her bre-asts.

After a whi-le, when Mrs. Fer-rel's fri-end didn't show up, they slid in-to a dar-ke-ned bo-oth. The-re, The-odo-re used Mrs. Fer-rel's pow-der ro-om ret-re-at to slip a pa-le and tas-te-less pow-der in her drink. On her re-turn she swal-lo-wed this and, in mi-nu-tes, grew stu-pe-fi-ed. She smi-led at The-odo-re.

"I li-ke you Mis-ser Gor'n," she con-fes-sed. The words craw-led vis-cidly ac-ross her lol-ling ton-gue.

Shortly the-re-af-ter, he led her, stumb-ling and gig-gling, to his car and dro-ve her to a mo-tel. In-si-de the ro-om, he hel-ped her strip to stoc-kings, gar-ter belt and sho-es and, whi-le she po-sed with drug-ged comp-la-cency, The-odo-re to-ok flash-bulb pic-tu-res.

After she'd col-lap-sed at two a.m. The-odo-re dres-sed her and dro-ve her ho-me. He stretc-hed her fully dres-sed ac-ross her bed. Af-ter that he went out-si-de and po-ured con-cent-ra-ted we-ed kil-ler on Als-ton's rep-lan-ted ivy.

Back in the ho-use he di-al-led the Jef-fer-son's num-ber.

"Yes," sa-id Art-hur Jef-fer-son ir-ri-tably.

"Get out of this ne-igh-bo-ur-ho-od or you'll be sorry," whis-pe-red The-odo-re, then hung up.

In the mor-ning he wal-ked to Mrs. Fer-rel's ho-use and rang the bell.

"Hello," he sa-id po-li-tely. "Are you fe-eling bet-ter?"

She sta-red at him blankly whi-le he exp-la-ined how she'd got-ten vi-olently ill the night be-fo-re and

he'd ta-ken her ho-me from the bar. "I do ho-pe you're fe-eling bet-ter," he conc-lu-ded.

"Yes," she sa-id, con-fu-sedly, "I'm-all right."

As he left her ho-use he saw a red-fa-ced James McCann ap-pro-ac-hing the Mor-ton ho-use, an en-ve-lo-pe in his hand. Be-si-de him wal-ked a dist-ra-ught Mrs. McCann.

"We must be *to-le-rant*, Jim," The-odo-re he-ard her say.

August 31

At two-fif-te-en a.m. The-odo-re to-ok the brush and the can of pa-int and went out-si-de.

Walking to the Jef-fer-son ho-use he set the can down and pa-in-ted, jag-gedly, ac-ross the do-or-nig-ger!

Then he mo-ved ac-ross the stre-et al-lo-wing an oc-ca-si-onal drip of pa-int. He left the can un-der Henry Put-nam's back porch, ac-ci-den-tal-ly up-set-ting the dog's pla-te. For-tu-na-tely, the Put-nams' dog slept in-do-ors.

Later, he put mo-re we-ed kil-ler on Joseph Als-ton's ivy.

In the mor-ning, when Do-nald Gor-se had go-ne to work, he to-ok a he-avy en-ve-lo-pe and went to see Ele-anor Gor-se. "Lo-ok at this," he sa-id, sli-ding a por-nog-rap-hic bo-ok-let from the en-ve-lo-pe. "I re-ce-ived this in the ma-il to-day. *Lo-ok* at it." He thrust it in-to her hands.

She held the bo-ok-let as if it we-re a spi-der.

"Isn't it hi-de-o-us?" he sa-id.

She ma-de a fa-ce. "*Re-vol-ting*," she sa-id.

"I tho-ught I'd check with you and se-ve-ral ot-hers be-fo-re I pho-ned the po-li-ce," sa-id The-odo-re. "Ha-ve you re-ce-ived any of this filth?"

Eleanor Gor-se brist-led. "Why sho-uld I re-ce-ive them?" she de-man-ded.

Outside, The-odo-re fo-und the old man squ-at-ting by his ivy. "How are they co-ming?" he as-ked.

"They're dyin'!"

Theodore lo-ok-ed stric-ken. "How can this be?" he as-ked.

Alston sho-ok his he-ad.

"Oh, this is *hor-rib-le*." The-odo-re tur-ned away, cluc-king. As he wal-ked to his ho-use he saw, up the stre-et, Art-hur Jef-fer-son cle-aning off his do-or and, ac-ross the way, Henry Put-nam watc-hing ca-re-ful-ly.

She was wa-iting on his porch.

"Mrs. McCann," sa-id The-odo-re, surp-ri-sed, "I'm so glad to see you."

"What I ca-me to say may not ma-ke you so glad," she sa-id un-hap-pily.

"Oh?" sa-id The-odo-re. They went in-to his ho-use.

"There ha-ve be-en a lot of... *things* hap-pe-ning in this ne-igh-bo-ur-ho-od sin-ce you mo-ved in," sa-id Mrs. McCann af-ter they we-re se-ated in the li-ving ro-om.

"Things?" as-ked The-odo-re.

"I think you know what I me-an," sa-id Mrs. McCann. "Ho-we-ver, this-this *bi-gotry* on Mr. Jef-fer-son's do-or is too much, Mr. Gor-don, too much."

Theodore ges-tu-red help-les-sly. "I don't un-der-s-tand."

"Please don't ma-ke it dif-fi-cult," she sa-id. "I may ha-ve to call the aut-ho-ri-ti-es if the-se things don't stop, Mr. Gor-don. I ha-te to think of do-ing such a thing but-"

"*Authorities*?" The-odo-re lo-ok-ed ter-ri-fi-ed.

"None of the-se things hap-pe-ned un-til you mo-ved in, Mr. Gor-don," she sa-id. "Be-li-eve me, I ha-te what I'm sa-ying but I simply ha-ve no cho-ice. The fact that no-ne of the-se things has hap-pe-ned to you-"

She bro-ke off start-ledly as a sob wrac-ked The-odo-re's chest. She sta-red at him. "Mr. Gor-don-" she be-gan un-cer-ta-inly.

"I don't know what the-se things are you spe-ak of," sa-id The-odo-re in a sha-king vo-ice, "but I'd

kill myself be-fo-re I har-med anot-her, Mrs. McCann."

He lo-oked aro-und as if to ma-ke su-re they we-re alo-ne.

"I'm go-ing to tell you so-met-hing I've ne-ver told a sing-le so-ul," he sa-id. He wi-ped away a te-ar. "My na-me isn't Gor-don," he sa-id. "It's Got-tli-eb. I'm a Jew. I spent a ye-ar at Dac-hau."

Mrs. McCann's lips mo-ved but she sa-id not-hing. Her fa-ce was get-ting red.

"I ca-me from the-re a bro-ken man," sa-id The-odo-re. "I ha-ven't long to li-ve, Mrs. McCann. My wi-fe is de-ad, my three child-ren are de-ad. I'm all alo-ne. I only want to li-ve in pe-ace-in a lit-tle pla-ce li-ke this-among pe-op-le li-ke you.

"To be a ne-igh-bo-ur, a fri-end..."

"Mr.-*Gottlieb*" she sa-id bro-kenly.

After she was go-ne, The-odo-re sto-od si-lent in the li-ving ro-om, hands clen-c-hed whi-tely at his si-des. Then he went in-to the kitc-hen to dis-cip-li-ne him-self.

"Good mor-ning, Mrs. Bac-kus," he sa-id an ho-ur la-ter when the lit-tle wo-man ans-we-red the do-or, "I won-der if I might ask you so-me qu-es-ti-ons abo-ut our church?"

"Oh. Oh, yes." She step-ped back fe-ebly. "Won't you- co-me in?"

"I'll be very still so as not to wa-ke yo-ur hus-band," The-odo-re whis-pe-red. He saw her lo-oking at his ban-da-ged hand. "I bur-ned myself," he sa-id. "Now, abo-ut the church. Oh, the-re's so-me-one knoc-king at yo-ur back do-or."

"There is?"

When she'd go-ne in-to the kitc-hen, The-odo-re pul-led open the hall clo-set do-or and drop-ped so-me pho-tog-raphs be-hind a pi-le of overs-ho-es and gar-den to-ols. The do-or was shut when she re-tur-ned.

"There wasn't an-yo-ne," she sa-id.

"I co-uld ha-ve sworn..." He smi-led dep-re-ca-tingly. He lo-oked down at a cir-cu-lar bag on the flo-or. "Oh, do-es Mr. Bac-kus bowl?"

"Wednesdays and Fri-days when his shift is over," she sa-id. "The-re's an all-night al-ley over on Wes-tern Ave-nue."

"I lo-ve to bowl," sa-id The-odo-re.

He as-ked his qu-es-ti-ons abo-ut the church, then left. As he star-ted down the path he he-ard lo-ud vo-ices from the Mor-ton ho-use.

"It wasn't bad eno-ugh abo-ut Kat-he-ri-ne McCann and *tho-se* aw-ful pic-tu-res," shri-eked Mrs. Mor-ton. "Now this... *filth!*"

"But, Mom!" cri-ed Wal-ter, Jr.

September 14

Theodore awo-ke and tur-ned the ra-dio off. Stan-ding, he put a small bot-tle of gre-yish pow-der in his poc-ket and slip-ped from the ho-use. Re-ac-hing his des-ti-na-ti-on, he sprink-led pow-der in-to the wa-ter bowl and stir-red it with a fin-ger un-til it dis-sol-ved.

Back in the ho-use he scraw-led fo-ur let-ters re-ading: *Ar-t-hur Jef-fer-son is trying to pass the co-lo-ur li-ne. He is my co-usin and sho-uld ad-mit he is black li-ke the rest of us. I am do-ing this for his own go-od.*

He sig-ned the let-ter *John Tho-mas Jef-fer-son* and ad-dres-sed three of the en-ve-lo-pes to Do-nald Gor-se, the Mor-tons, and Mr. Henry Put-nam.

This comp-le-ted, he saw Mrs. Bac-kus wal-king to-ward the bo-ule-vard and fol-lo-wed. "May I walk you?" he as-ked.

"Oh," she sa-id. "All right."

"I mis-sed yo-ur hus-band last night," he told her.

She glan-ced at him.

"I tho-ught I'd jo-in him bow-ling," The-odo-re sa-id, "but I gu-ess he was sick aga-in."

"Sick?"

"I as-ked the man be-hind the co-un-ter at the al-ley and he sa-id that Mr. Bac-kus hadn't be-en co-ming in be-ca-use he was sick."

"Oh," Mrs. Bac-kus's vo-ice was thinly stric-ken.

"Well, may-be next Fri-day," sa-id The-odo-re.

Later, when he ca-me back, he saw a pa-nel truck in front of Henry Put-nam's ho-use. A man ca-me out of the al-ley car-rying a blan-ket-wrap-ped body which he la-id in the truck. The Put-nam boys we-re crying as they watc-hed.

Arthur Jef-fer-son ans-we-red the do-or. The-odo-re sho-wed the let-ter to Jef-fer-son and his wi-fe. "It ca-me this mor-ning," he sa-id.

"This is *mon-s-t-ro-us!*" sa-id Jef-fer-son, re-ading it.

"Of *co-ur-se* it is," sa-id The-odo-re.

While they we-re tal-king, Jef-fer-son lo-ok-ed thro-ugh the win-dow at the Put-nam ho-use ac-ross the stre-et.

September 15

Pale mor-ning mist en-gul-fed Sylmar Stre-et. The-odo-re mo-ved thro-ugh it si-lently. Un-der the back porch of the Jef-fer-sons' ho-use he set fi-re to a box of damp pa-pers. As it be-gan to smo-ul-der he wal-ked ac-ross the yard and, with a sing-le kni-fe stro-ke, slas-hed apart the rub-ber po-ol. He he-ard it pul-sing wa-ter on the grass as he left. In the al-ley he drop-ped a bo-ok of matc-hes that re-ad *Put-nam's Wi-nes and Li-qu-ors*.

A lit-tle af-ter six that mor-ning he wo-ke to the howl of si-rens and felt the small ho-use tremb-le at the he-avy trucks pas-sing by. Tur-ning on his si-de, he yaw-ned, and mumb-led, "Go-ody."

September 17

It was a pas-te-comp-le-xi-oned Do-rothy Bac-kus who ans-we-red The-odo-re's knock.

"May I dri-ve you to church?" as-ked The-odo-re.

"I-I don't be-li-eve I-I'm not... fe-eling too well," stumb-led Mrs. Bac-kus.

"Oh, I'm sorry," The-odo-re sa-id. He saw the ed-ges of so-me pho-tog-raphs prot-ru-ding from her ap-ron poc-ket.

As he left he saw the Mor-tons get-ting in the-ir car, Bi-an-ca word-less, both Wal-ters ill at ease. Up the stre-et, a po-li-ce car was par-ked in front of Art-hur Jef-fer-son's ho-use.

Theodore went to church with Do-nald Gor-se who sa-id that Ele-anor was fe-eling ill.

"I'm so sorry," The-odo-re sa-id.

That af-ter-no-on, he spent a whi-le at the Jef-fer-son ho-use hel-ping cle-ar away the char-red deb-ris of the-ir back porch. When he saw the slas-hed rub-ber po-ol he dro-ve im-me-di-ately to a drug sto-re and bo-ught anot-her one.

"But they lo-ve that po-ol," sa-id The-odo-re, when Patty Jef-fer-son pro-tes-ted. "You told me so yo-ur-self."

He win-ked at Art-hur Jef-fer-son but Jef-fer-son was not com-mu-ni-ca-ti-ve that af-ter-no-on.

September 23

Early in the eve-ning The-odo-re saw Als-ton's dog wal-king in the stre-et. He got his BB gun and, from the bed-ro-om win-dow, so-und-les-sly, fi-red. The dog nip-ped fi-er-cely at its si-de and spun aro-und. Then, whim-pe-ring, it star-ted ho-me.

Several mi-nu-tes la-ter, The-odo-re went out-si-de and star-ted pul-ling up the do-or to the

ga-ra-ge. He saw the old man hur-rying down his al-ley, the dog in his arms.

"What's wrong?" as-ked The-odo-re.

"Don't know," sa-id Als-ton in a bre-ath-less, frigh-te-nerd vo-ice. "He's hurt."

"Quickly!" sa-id The-odo-re. "Into my car!"

He rus-hed Als-ton and the dog to the ne-arest ve-te-ri-nary, pas-sing three stop signs and gro-aning when the old man held his hand up, pal-si-edly, and whim-pe-red, "*Blo-od!*"

For three ho-urs The-odo-re sat in the ve-te-ri-nary's wa-iting ro-om un-til the old man stag-ge-red forth, his fa-ce a gre-y-ish whi-te.

"No," sa-id The-odo-re, jum-ping to his fe-et.

He led the old man, we-eping, to the car and dro-ve him ho-me. The-re, Als-ton sa-id he'd rat-her be alo-ne so The-odo-re left. Shortly af-ter-ward, the black and whi-te po-li-ce car rol-led to a stop in front of Als-ton's ho-use and the old man led the two of-fi-cers past The-odo-re's ho-use.

In a whi-le, The-odo-re he-ard angry sho-uting up the stre-et. It las-ted qu-ite a long ti-me.

September 27

"Good eve-ning," sa-id The-odo-re. He bo-wed.

Eleanor Gor-se nod-ded stiffly.

"I've bro-ught you and yo-ur fat-her a cas-se-ro-le," sa-id The-odo-re, smi-ling, hol-ding up a to-wel-wrap-ped dish. When she told him that her fat-her was go-ne for the night, The-odo-re cluc-ked and sig-hed as if he hadn't se-en the old man dri-ve away that af-ter-no-on.

"Well then," he sa-id, prof-fe-ring the dish, "for *you*. With my sin-ce-rest comp-li-ments."

Stepping off the porch he saw Art-hur Jef-fer-son and Henry Put-nam stan-ding un-der a stre-et lamp down the block. Whi-le he watc-hed, Art-hur Jef-fer-son struck the ot-her man and, sud-denly, they we-re brow-ling in the gut-ter. The-odo-re bro-ke in-to a hur-ri-ed run.

"But this is *ter-rib-le!*" he gas-ped, pul-ling the men apart.

"Stay out of this!" war-ned Jef-fer-son, then, to Put-nam, chal-len-ged, "You bet-ter tell me how that pa-int can got un-der yo-ur porch! The po-li-ce may be-li-eve it was an ac-ci-dent I fo-und that match-bo-ok in my al-ley but I don't!"

"I'll tell you not-hing," Put-nam sa-id, con-temp-tu-o-usly. "*Co-on.*"

"Coon! Oh, of co-ur-se! You'd be the first to be-li-eve that, you stu-pid-!"

Five ti-mes The-odo-re sto-od bet-we-en them. It wasn't un-til Jef-fer-son had, ac-ci-den-tal-ly, struck him on the no-se that ten-si-on fa-ded. Curtly, Jef-fer-son apo-lo-gi-zed; then, with a mur-de-ro-us lo-ok at Put-nam, left.

"Sorry he hit you," Put-nam sympat-hi-zed. "Dam-ned nig-ger."

"Oh, su-rely you're mis-ta-ken," The-odo-re sa-id, da-ubing at his nost-rils. "Mr. Jef-fer-son told me how af-ra-id he was of pe-op-le be-li-eving this talk. Be-ca-use of the va-lue of his two ho-uses, you know."

"Two?" as-ked Put-nam.

"Yes, he owns the va-cant ho-use next do-or to his," sa-id The-odo-re. "I as-su-med you knew."

"No," sa-id Put-nam wa-rily.

"Well, you see," sa-id The-odo-re, "if pe-op-le think Mr. Jef-fer-son is a Neg-ro, the va-lue of his ho-uses will go down."

"So will the va-lu-es of all of them," sa-id Put-nam, gla-ring ac-ross the stre-et. "That dirty, son-of-a-"

Theodore pat-ted his sho-ul-der. "How are yo-ur wi-fe's pa-rents enj-oying the-ir stay in New York?" he as-ked as if chan-ging the su-bj-ect.

"They're on the-ir way back," sa-id Put-nam.

"Good," sa-id The-odo-re.

He went ho-me and re-ad the funny pa-pers for an ho-ur. Then he went out.

It was a flo-rid fa-ced Ele-anor Gor-se who ope-ned to his knock. Her bath-ro-be was

di-sar-ra-yed, her dark eyes fe-ve-rish.

"May I get my dish?" as-ked The-odo-re po-li-tely.

She grun-ted, step-ping back jer-kily. His hand, in pas-sing, brus-hed on hers. She twitc-hed away as if he'd stab-bed her.

"Ah, you've eaten it all," sa-id The-odo-re, no-ti-cing the tiny re-si-due of pow-der on the bot-tom of the dish. He tur-ned. "When will yo-ur fat-her re-turn?" he as-ked.

Her body se-emed to ten-se. "After mid-night," she mut-te-red.

Theodore step-ped to the wall switch and cut off the light. He he-ard her gasp in the dark-ness. "No," she mut-te-red.

"Is this what you want, Ele-anor?" he as-ked, grab-bing harshly.

Her emb-ra-ce was a mind-less, fi-ery swal-low. The-re was not-hing but ove-ning flesh be-ne-ath her ro-be.

Later, when she lay sno-ring sa-tedly on the kitc-hen flo-or, The-odo-re ret-ri-ved the ca-me-ra he'd left out-si-de the do-or.

Drawing down the sha-des, he ar-ran-ged Ele-anor's limbs and to-ok twel-ve ex-po-su-res. Then he went ho-me and was-hed the dish.

Before re-ti-ring, he di-al-led the pho-ne.

"Western Uni-on," he sa-id. "I ha-ve a mes-sa-ge for Mrs. Ir-ma Put-nam of 12070 Sylmar Stre-et."

"That's me," she sa-id.

"Both pa-rents kil-led in auto col-li-si-on this af-ter-no-on," sa-id The-odo-re. "Awa-it word re-gar-ding dis-po-si-ti-on of bo-di-es. Chi-ef of Po-li-ce, Tul-sa, Ok-la-"

At the ot-her end of the li-ne the-re was a strang-led gasp, a thud; then Henry Put-nam's cry of "Irma!" The-odo-re hung up.

After the am-bu-lan-ce had co-me and go-ne, he went out-si-de and to-re up thirty-fi-ve of Joseph Als-ton's ivy plants. He left, in the deb-ris, anot-her match-bo-ok re-ading *Put-nam's Wi-nes and Li-qu-ors*.

September 28

In the mor-ning, when Do-nald Gor-se had go-ne to work, The-odo-re went over. Ele-anor tri-ed to shut the do-or on him **but** he pus-hed in.

"I want mo-ney," he sa-id. "The-se are my col-la-te-ral." He threw down co-pi-es of the pho-tog-raphs and Ele-anor re-co-iled, gag-ging. "Yo-ur fat-her will re-ce-ive a set of the-se to-night," he sa-id, "unless I get two hund-red dol-lars."

"But I-!"

"Tonight."

He left and dro-ve down-town to the Jere-mi-ah Os-bor-ne Re-alty of-fi-ce whe-re he sig-ned over, to Mr. Ge-or-ge Jack-son, the va-cant ho-use at 12069 Sylmar Stre-et. He sho-ok Mr. Jack-son's hand.

"Don't you worry now," he com-for-ted. "The pe-op-le next do-or are black too."

When he re-tur-ned ho-me, the-re was a po-li-ce car in front of the Bac-kus ho-use.

"What hap-pe-ned?" he as-ked Joseph Als-ton who was sit-ting qu-i-etly on his porch.

"Mrs. Bac-kus," sa-id the old man li-fe-les-sly. "She tri-ed to kill Mrs. Fer-rel."

"Is that right?" sa-id The-odo-re.

That night, in his of-fi-ce, he ma-de his ent-ri-es on pa-ge 700 of the bo-ok.

Mrs. Fer-rel dying of kni-fe wo-unds in lo-cal hos-pi-tal. Mrs. Bac-kus in ja-il; sus-pects hus-band of adul-tery. J. Als-ton ac-cu-sed of dog po-iso-ning, pro-bably mo-re. Put-nam boys ac-cu-sed of sho-oting Als-ton's dog, ru-ining his lawn. Mrs. Put-nam de-ad of he-art at-tack. Mr. Put-nam be-ing su-ed for pro-perty dest-ruc-ti-on. Jef-fer-sons tho-ught to be black. McCanns and

Mor-tons de-adly ene-mi-es. Kat-he-ri-ne McCann be-li-eved to ha-ve had re-la-ti-ons with Wal-ter Mor-ton, Jr. Mor-ton, Jr. be-ing sent to scho-ol in Was-hing-ton. Ele-anor Gor-se has han-ged her-self Job com-p-le-ted.

Time to mo-ve.

THE END