

## CONNECTION COMPLETED

*HELLO, DARLING. I'm glad you waited.*

*I couldn't do anything else. She smiled wryly. I'm glad I waited, too. Hello.*

He saw her through the window, sitting alone in a pool of white light, on a white chair, at a white table, almost exactly centered in the expanse of white-tiled floor. She was wearing the green suit and the gray-green scarf with the narrow border of pink rose on it. Her back was toward him, but he knew beyond doubt it was she: her hair, over the scarf, was the same dark mist that floated in his mind, cool and caressing, tickling the filaments of his imagination.

He stood out there on the sidewalk in the chill city drizzle, staring in through the plate glass window of the cafeteria, waiting for her to make some move, any move that would confirm or deny: to turn around and show her face, looking as he knew it must; or to vanish as suddenly and completely as the elusive fantasy he also knew she had to be. He stood there waiting, mostly, for his own shock to give way to decision. Go in? Go away?

"Move along, Mac!"

Todd jerked his head around, eyes wide and startled, then narrowing in anger at the dough-faced cop.

"Is that a new law?" he sneered. "Something wrong with standing on the street?"

"Not so you just stand there," the policeman said. Then, in a different tone: "Sorry, doc. It was just the way you was looking in the window."

"You mean hungry?" Todd didn't feel like being reasonable. The apology was to his clothes anyhow; not to him. "Well, I am. You know any better reason to look in a restaurant?" If the cop got mad enough, there wouldn't be any impossible decision to make; he'd be in night court, paying a fine instead.

The cop didn't get mad. He shook his head tiredly and wandered off; muttering. Todd turned back to the window, and the girl had moved.

She was getting up. She had her check in her hand, and she was reaching for her raincoat on the next chair. Immediately, urgently, Todd wanted her not to go.

*Sit still, he begged. You waited this long, don't spoil it now. I'm coming, kid. I shouldn't have stalled like that, but I'm coming in now. Just wait a minute.*

He was walking fast up the block toward the door, watching her through the window all the time, and he saw her change her mind and settle back in the chair again. She never turned around. He still hadn't seen her face.

He pushed through the door into warm dry air, struggling with the corners of his mouth, keeping his smile underneath his skin. He couldn't very well walk in on her with a triumphant smirk all over his face. There was no reason to assume that she knew.

She didn't; he was sure of that when he saw the baffled defeat in the set of her shoulders as she leaned back in her chair and picked up the coffee cup again. The cup was empty; he knew that. She realized it a moment later, and set it down again, and looked up straight ahead of her at the big clock on the wall.

*What on earth am I sitting here for?* She made a restless, irritable motion toward her raincoat.

*Hey, wait a minute!* he pleaded. *Don't go now. Just give me time to think of something.*

What did she expect? To have him walk over and say "Pardon me, but aren't you the girl in my dreams?"

She didn't expect anything. She didn't even know who he was. But she turned and looked out the window while he crossed the big room to the counter at the back. It's still raining, she satisfied herself. I might as well sit here. She picked up a folded newspaper, and Todd stared across the perforated metal drip-board of the counter, into a dry, yellow-wrinkled face.

"Coffee—black," he said, and waited while brown liquid flushed slowly out of the urn into a thick tan mug. He tried to find her image in the mirror on the sidewall, but the angle was distorting; all he could tell

was that she was still there, waiting.

For what?

He wasn't even sure who asked the question, let alone whether it had an answer. He couldn't trust the certainty he felt. He hadn't even seen her face yet.

The dry wrinkled face pushed a mug at him across the counter.

"Sugarcream?"

Todd shook his head. "No, thanks." He fumbled in his pocket for change, cursing his clumsy fingers, suddenly sure she would be gone when he turned around. Then:

Didn't I say "black" before? he wondered. He had to watch out. Ever since this thing started, he had been worried about things like that. How could you tell if you were just going off your rocker? How could you know whether you remembered to say things out loud at all?

*You did. I heard you.*

*That's a big help! You heard me! I can hear you too, he snapped at her, and you never said a word out loud! Hell, I don't know if you even thought a word!*

He could just as easily be talking to himself. He was, anyhow. Even if this was all real, actually happening—even if he wasn't just tripping a light fantastic down the path to a padded cell—he was still just talking to himself, effectively, until he was sure that she knew.

*Stop fighting it, man! It's real, all right.*

He had the dime in his hand finally, flung it across the counter, picked up his mug, slopping coffee over the siles, and headed toward her table, with the familiar feeling of her smile lingering in his head after the words began to fade.

The place was almost empty. There was no excuse for sitting at her table—except the obvious one, that he had come in for just that purpose. He sat down directly across from her, took one quick look at her face, and it was all wrong. It wasn't the face that went with the green suit. She wasn't smiling. And she didn't seem to be aware that he was there.

Todd burned his tongue on his coffee, and took another look over the edge of the cup. This time he caught her by surprise and she turned away swiftly when their glances met. She was aware of him, then; and she was frightened!

*Scared stiff!* she assured him. *You're not real. I don't believe in you. Get out of here, will you? God damn it, get out!*

The vehemence of it almost convinced him. He wouldn't be shrieking at himself that way—or would he? What did he know about how a person feels inside when he's slipping his gears? It made sense for her to feel just as scared and mad inside as he did . . . but if the whole thing was originating inside his own mind, it made even more sense for her to sound that way. . . .

He knew just where that train of thought went: round and round and all the way back round again. He put down his coffee cup, made a face over it, and looked straight at her.

"Would you pass the sugar please?" he said, and waited, watching.

She was scared, all right. Scared, or very tired, or both. He noticed, now, that there were long deep lines running down from the inside corners of her eyes, along her nose, outlining tight-bunched muscles; another set of lines striking down from the edges of her mouth; a taut set of defiance to her jaw. And in the same instant, he realized her eyes were gray-green like the scarf, as he knew they ought to be, and her lipstick was soft coral-pink like the roses on the scarf.

She was reaching for the jar of sugar automatically. Her face showed no reaction, no memory of what he thought had happened a few minutes earlier, at the counter. He tried transposing her features, in his mind, setting them in the other expression, the only one he'd "seen" before, relaxing all the tense muscles, turning up the lips into a smile of warm acceptance. . . .

"Here," she said impatiently, holding the jar under his nose. He looked from her face to her hand and back again, wondering how long she'd been holding it there while he stared at her. If she was the wrong girl—if there was no right girl—

There was a very small smile on her face now. Nothing like the look he was used to, but enough so he was certain it was the same face.

*Well, do you want it or don't you?*

She meant the sugar, he realized after an instant's pause. "Thanks. I don't usually use it," he started to explain, and watched the same struggle on her face that he remembered feeling on his own as he walked into the place: the effort to suppress apparently unwarranted laughter.

He let the explanation drift off, and realized he'd done what he'd been worried about all this time: answered aloud what he had heard only inside his ears.

In that case, she could be laughing at him just because of his confusion and insanity. She could . . . she could be anything or anyone, but she also could be the girl who had haunted his waking and sleeping dreams for the last six months.

"Thanks," he said again, and relieved her of the sugar jar.

*You better think of something better than that. I can't keep sitting here much longer.* "You're welcome," she said. *I ... imagined ... I thought about you as a sort of fluent character. Not the tongue-tied kind ...*

*I don't usually have so much trouble. You're not yourself exactly, either ...*

"Pardon me, miss," he asked courteously, "I wonder if you happen to know whether there's a post office open anywhere near here? At this hour, I mean?" *Pretty feeble, I know, babe, but you're rushing me. . . .*

"I don't think . . . there's one that might be open, but I'm not sure. It's just about five blocks. You turn to the left at the corner, and . . ."

He didn't listen to the rest. He didn't need a post office for anything.

*Oh, my God!* her voice screamed inside his head. *What am I doing now? I've never seen this man before. I don't, I don't, I don't, know who he is or anything about him! He looks like . . . he looks like somebody I invented, but that's an accident, it has to be! Daydreaming isn't so bad . . . anybody who's lonely daydreams . . . but when you start having hallucinations ...*

*Yeah, I know! It's time to go look up a good reliable old-fashioned psychiatrist and tell him all your troubles. Don't think you're the only one, babe.*

He watched her eyes flick to the phone booth in the corner, and realized he'd meant in the directory when he thought the words "look up."

There was a way to find out after all!

"I suppose I could call from here and find out if they're open," he said. *Calm yourself, fellow,* he told himself. *You could have thought about the directory after she looked that way. It's hard to be sure about subjective time-sequence.*

The thing to do was set it up ahead of time, make sure she knew what he was doing—or as sure as he could be—and then see what happened.

"That's a good idea," she said flatly ... and began making motions at her handbag and raincoat again. It took swering, of course, his remark about calling the post swering, of course, his remark about calling the post office.

"Nasty weather," he said brightly. "Hate to go wandering around out there for nothing." *Please darling . . . stick it out a little longer . . . I know I'm being dumb, but I don't know much about picking up a girl.*

*Well, I don't usually get picked up!*

"Would you care for some more coffee?" he said desperately, rising before she had a chance to get her things together. "Could I bring it back?" *Listen, listen good, now . . . if you want to try a test of this thing, listen good ...*

She hesitated, holding the bag in her hand, her arm half-extended toward the next chair where her raincoat was draped over the back of the seat.

*Now, listen: if you want to try a test, just to find out, let me know by putting your bag in your other hand, and then putting it down on the table ...*

He watched anxiously.

"Well-l-l ... thank you." She smiled tightly, and transferred her bag from her right hand to the left, then

set it down, carefully, as though jarring might explode it, on the left-hand side of her empty cup.

Todd heard himself saying smoothly, naturally, "Do you take cream and sugar?" It was startling that his voice should behave so well, when every nerve cell and fiber in him was vibrating with incredulous exaltation. He wanted to reach out and grab her, hold her face between his two hands, pull her head to rest on his shoulder, soothe her, explain, reassure, until the sharp-etched lines of fear and tension vanished from her face and he could see her, really her, not in a dream or vision or in some unknown receptive part of his mind, but see her in the flesh, smiling with her whole face as she always had before.

And he couldn't do it.

Not yet.

He'd planned that first request to be a signal, nothing more. It wasn't enough to go on. It could be coincidence, accident; he might even have anticipated from some unconscious memory of an earlier action of hers, that that move was the one she would make, and so have set up the signal to get the answer he wanted.

This time it wouldn't be like that.

"I'll make that phone call, and bring the coffee back with me," he told her slowly and distinctly. She nodded, and then he thought as clearly as he could:

*Only if you hear me, baby, if you understand and want to believe it like I do, don't wait for me to bring it back. You get the coffees while I'm in the booth. You understand? Do you, babe? You get the coffees while I go in the phone booth ... then I'll know for sure. You wouldn't do that for any other reason, see? That way I'll know. You just do that, and you can leave the rest to me . . . Understand?*

She was nodding again. *All right. Go ahead. I understand.* But there was a feeling of irritation—or impatience? He couldn't tell. *Go on. Hurry up.*

Impatience. He turned and walked across the white-tiled floor, his heels sounding loud and hollow all the way. He didn't look around. He was sure she understood. He knew she was somehow irritated. He didn't know what she would do. But what he had to do was walk across the endless rows of tiles to the phone booth, and not give himself any chance to give her a signal of any kind—in case he was wrong.

He didn't trust himself to give her enough time if he faked it, so he looked up the post office in the directory, and stepped into the booth, pulled the door shut, without ever looking around, put his coin into the slot, and let the number ring twenty times before he hung up again and stepped out.

He glanced at the counter, and the wrinkle-faced man was leaning back against the wall next to the coffee urn, turning a racing form over in his hand. He looked toward the table, then, and she was gone.

Handbag, raincoat, green suit, scarf, and all. Gone.

*You little fool!*

The thought was hopeless and tender and the loneliest thought of his life. He was at the door, looking out, up and down the street but she was gone completely, vanished, like ...

Like the illusion she was?

He went back to the table, or tried to. He couldn't find it. He wanted to see her coffee cup there; he thought she might have left the newspaper she was reading. Something, anything, to prove she had been there, flesh and blood, a real girl. Not just an image his own mind had made for him six months ago, to live with and talk to—and love.

Nothing. All the tables in the center of the room were clear and clean. There was a boy dumping cups and clattering silver in the far corner. Todd strode over, stood behind him, and couldn't think what to say.

"Did you take two cups off a table over there?" It sounded ridiculous.

The boy looked around, sleepy, stupid, glazed-eyed. "Huh?"

I said, "Did you take some coffee cups off a table just now?"

"Sure, doc. That's what they pay me for."

Todd shook his head impatiently, like clicking a telephone receiver, trying to clear the line. "Look," he

said slowly. "Right about the middle of the room there's a table I was sitting at. Then I went to the phone booth. When I came back, the dishes were gone. Did you just clear that table off?"

"Listen, Mister, if you wasn't done with your coffee, you shouldn't of left it there. All I know is, a table is empty, I clear it off. How should I know . . ."

"I was done." He made himself relax outwardly, realizing that his stance, his voice, his eyes were all threatening the youngster. "It's all right. I was finished. All I want to know is, were there . . . did you take a newspaper off of there?"

"A paper?" The boy looked doubtfully at the bottom rack of his pushwagon. "Lessee now . . . there was a paper on one of them tables. . . ." He reached and brought forth a folded sheet. Todd gazed at it helplessly. He hadn't noticed which paper she was reading. He couldn't tell if that was the one.

"Did you ... was that on a table with *two* coffee cups?"

"Gee, mister, I don't know. . . ." The boy was really trying to remember, Todd realized, with surprise. Trying hard. "Yeah I guess . . . listen, mister, if it's so important I won't kid you. I don't know, that's all see?"

"Okay kid. Thanks. Thanks a lot." Todd fished a coin out of his pocket, pushed it into the startled boy's hand, and turned and walked out. Where to, he didn't know; but he had to get out of there. The girl wasn't coming back, that much he was sure of. That is, if there was a girl. If ever there had been a girl with a green suit and a mist of dark hair, and a face that smiled for him in memory.

It was cold and wet outside, and that suited him fine. He paced the sidewalk, out of lamplight into shadow, and back into damp reflections of the light. Mica particles in the gray cement flashed like tiny distant stars or signaling fireflies under his eyes. Unseen drops of moisture chilled the back of his neck, damped the edge of his collar. He stepped off the curb, and a car screeched, braking, around the corner avoiding him by inches.

All these things he perceived, but without meaning. Perception was suddenly a frightening thing, to be examined and tested every time before you could trust it. What you saw was not necessarily there at all. What you wanted, you could not see, or else you saw without reality. He felt the cold rain on his skin, but put no faith in it, because it was all a part of the girl and the night and the illusion he had made for himself.

He turned a corner, walking faster. No sense trying to avoid obstacles, or dodge moving objects, if you didn't know for sure that they were there. He crossed another street, and walked faster still. He didn't know where he was going, and if he knew it wouldn't matter, because when he got to the end of the journey, he still wouldn't know where he was.

The city flashed its distractions. Sights and sounds and odors, moisture, temperature, touch assailed him, and could not penetrate his isolation.

A man lives all his life inside the wall of his own skull, making words into sentences, moving muscles to form gestures, so that he can make his existence and purposes known to others; and in the same way, absorbing his perceptions of the people and things around him, trying to interpret as best he can, so as to understand some part of their meaning for himself. But he never gets outside the bony barriers of his own head, or past the hardening defenses of others. For every human being, the word or the gesture has some slightly different meaning.

No two people ever meet completely without some slight or great distortion of intent or understanding, occurring in the jangled complexity of living cells that make up the expressive and interpretive mechanisms of the man.

Todd Harmacher made this discovery, as most men do, when he was very small. Each contact of the thirty-odd years since had served to confirm it. Each contact until, for a few brief minutes this evening, he had let himself believe that he was truly, entirely, in communication with another human being, rather than with some strangely shaped and ill-ported section of his own imagination.

Now he paced the city streets, oblivious to rain and cold, defying noise and light, aware of the potentialities of total loneliness as he had never quite envisioned it before.

He crossed another street and turned a corner, for no reason except the inner urgency that said, *Turn! Here! Now!*

*Stop!*

He stopped.

Perception invaded him. He was standing in front of an old stone building, a relic of the city's first pride in size and strength, gray and massive and dirty. A lamppost down the street threw a flood of light along the rain-soaked sidewalk, but the doorway directly in front of him was dark. And her smiling face was in his head again, framed by the soft scarf, the drifting mist of her hair touching gently against the bitterness and anger in his mind.

*I'm sorry, dear, she told him, but I got so scared! I used to think I made you up, then for a while I thought you were real. Then I told myself that was nonsense, and I learned to live with a dream.*

...

*I know. I know!*

*And then when I saw you, I got frightened. And when I started doing things I didn't mean to do. . . .*

*Poor darling! I shouldn't have ...*

*No! Don't you see? That's when I knew it was real! But then ...?*

*But then I knew you still didn't believe it yourself, and I thought, if I did as you asked each time, you'd never never know which one of us it was, or whether I was really here. So . . . so when you weren't looking, I ran out, and came here and called you and waited. . . .*

He couldn't see her in the darkness of the doorway, but he knew. They both knew now. He knew, too, what her face would look like if he could see it at this moment, but, knowing, he didn't have to see it.

"Hi, babe," he said, stepping forward gladly into the dark doorway. "I'm glad you waited."

"I couldn't do anything else," she said wryly. Then he opened his arms to her, and she said, "I'm glad I waited, too. Hello."