

# **RAT IN THE SKULL & Other Off-trail Science Fiction**

By

**Rog Phillips**

Featuring his Hugo Award Nominee Short Novel

A Futures Past Classic – Selected and Introduced by Jean Marie Stine

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## INTRODUCTION

The editors of the December 1958 issue of the science fiction magazine *If* introduced veteran science fiction writer Rog Phillips' novelette "Rat in the Skull" this way: "Some people will be shocked by this story. Others will be deeply moved. Everyone who reads it will be talking about it. Read the first four pages: then put it down if you can." They were warning readers to beware of something "different" from a writer known for his off-trail approach to science fiction.

Though the blurb might have seemed hyperbole to readers before perusing Phillips' tale, it didn't seem so afterward – for six months later they had nominated it for the prestigious Science Fiction Achievement Award (or "Hugo," named for pioneering 1920s editor-publisher Hugo Gernsback) for best story of the year. Alas it lost out to an equally exceptional story, Avram Davidson's "Or All the Sea with Oysters," from a magazine with twice the circulation of *If*.

Sadly, "Rat in the Skull" was forgotten with Phillip's death, and it, along with the rest of his considerable body of work, fell into undeserved obscurity. As a result, this electronic edition of *Rat in the Skull and Other Off-Trail Science Fiction* is the first-ever collection of Rog Phillips work. As science fiction historian Forrest J. Ackerman says, "Science fiction readers who have never been exposed to Roger Phillips Graham's inimitable brand of prose are in for a real treat."

*Rat in the Skull* rounds up some of the best and strangest of that work, including the title story, unavailable for nearly fifty years, plus his most celebrated science fiction, "The Yellow Pill," which *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* hails as "an ingenious exercise in the paradox of perception," plus such other thought-provoking, off-trail works as the disquieting "The Holes in My Head," "Unto the Nth Generation," which manages to be both chilling and touching, the unforgettable "Pariah," "Love Me, Love My—" a delightful spaceways romp, and the hard-boiled "Executioner No. 43."

Here is how the modest author described himself in a brief biography for William Hamling's lamented 1950s science fiction pulp magazine *Imagination* :

"My usual expression is one of extreme despondency, and it gives me trouble. In cafes where I sometimes go to think up stories, the waitresses think I'm contemplating suicide. When I explain I'm thinking up a new story, I can't go back there to think again. Sometimes even my wife thinks my thoughtful expression means I'm mad at her.

"Policemen are nice to me. Once in a nightclub where I objected to the tab, the bouncer called two assistants from the kitchen, then decided to let me have my way, all without a struggle. I look tough and have a six foot two frame to back up my looks. The last thing I look like is an author.

"And that's the last thing I became – if you concede the point that I am an author. That was seven years ago. I would probably have become one before that, but it didn't occur to me to try it. I had the feeling that most people have who read a lot but have never met a writer; that a writer is a nebulous figure – like a god – somewhere beyond the far horizon where he can't be contacted by mortals. If I thought of it at all, I probably thought I couldn't write. I still think so.

"My birthplace was Spokane, Washington. I went to various schools in such places as Spokane, Los Angeles, Kingfisher, Oklahoma, Milwaukee, and Seattle. I've worked at such things as farm labor, carpentry, plumbing, machine shop, power plant engineering, power plant construction.

"If I'd stayed in that, I would have been at Pearl Harbor when the bombs fell. But I went into the shipyards and became a welder. The draft board and the shipyards fought over who was to have me to the very end, in an automatic type of war where I had no say either way. In my teens I did a lot of hitchhiking, seeing the country and working at anything that would give me couple of bucks to move on. Later I did my traveling in my own car.

"I've lived in so many cities and towns I couldn't list them all.

"And, oh yes, I was in the Spokane juvenile court for a few hours once until my mother could bail me out. I'd been selling papers on the street when I was under twelve years of age. Second offense. And once in a small town in Kansas, I slept in

jail all night because I was broke. I think I was sixteen at the time.

"Which about sums things up."

With a background like that, it is no wonder Rog Phillips' science fiction was so off-trail, so different from that of his sister and brother writers. "Fast moving entertainment," is how *Analog/Astounding* characterized his work. Thanks to the publisher of this electronic collection of his work, modern readers can now judge for themselves. (And don't miss our electronic edition of Rog Phillips' spellbinding classic of science fictional suspense, *The Involuntary Immortals* .)

Jean Marie Stine

9/23/02

*Watch for the next Futures-Past/PageTurner E-Books release, and be sure to visit Future Sagas, our free on-line magazine of classic science fiction to see rare magazine covers and illustrations, plus classic articles and stories, as well as news of forthcoming publications. URL:*

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## I.

DR. JOSEPH MacNare was not the sort of person one would expect him to be in the light of what happened. Indeed, it is safe to say that until the summer of 1955 he was more "normal," better adjusted, than the average college professor. And we have every reason to believe that he remained so, in spite of having stepped out of his chosen field.

At the age of thirty-four, he had to his credit a college textbook on advanced calculus, an introductory physics, and seventy-two papers that had appeared in various journals, copies of which were in neat order in a special section of the bookcase in his office at the university, and duplicate copies of which were in equally neat order in his office at home. None of these were in the field of psychology, the field in which he was shortly to become famous – or infamous. But anyone who studies the published writings of Dr. MacNare must inevitably conclude that he was a competent, responsible scientist, and a firm believer in institutional

research, research by teams, rather than in private research and go-it-alone secrecy, the course he eventually followed.

In fact, there is every reason to believe he followed this course with the greatest of reluctance, aware of its pitfalls, and that he took every precaution that was humanly possible.

Certainly, on that day in late August, 1955, at the little cabin on the Russian River, a hundred miles upstate from the university, when Dr. MacNare completed his paper on *An Experimental Approach to the Psychological Phenomena of Verification*, he had no slightest thought of "going it alone."

It was mid-afternoon. His wife, Alice, was dozing on the small dock that stretched out into the water, her slim figure tanned a smooth brown that was just a shade lighter than her hair. Their eight-year-old son, Paul, was fifty yards upstream playing with some other boys, their shouts the only sound except for the whisper of rushing water and the sound of wind in the trees.

Dr. MacNare, in swim trunks, his lean muscular body hardly tanned at all, emerged from the cabin and came out on the dock.

"Wake up, Alice," he said, nudging her with his foot. "You have a husband again."

"Well, it's about time" Alice said, turning over on her back and looking up at him, smiling in answer to his happy grin.

He stepped over her and went out on the diving board, leaping up and down on it, higher and higher each time, in smooth coordination, then went into a one and a half gainer, his body cutting into the water with a minimum of splash.

His head broke the surface. He looked up at his wife, and laughed in the sheer pleasure of being alive. A few swift strokes brought him to the foot of the ladder. He climbed, dripping water, to the dock, then sat down by his wife.

"Yep, it's done," he said. "How many days of our vacation left? Two? That's time enough for me to get a little tan. Might as well make the most of it. I'm going to be working harder this winter than I ever did in my life."

"But I thought you said your paper was done!"

"It is. But that's only the beginning. Instead of sending it in for publication, I'm going to submit it to the directors, with a request for facilities and personnel to conduct a line of research based on pages twenty-seven to thirty-two of the paper."

"And you think they'll grant your request?"

"There's no question about it," Dr. MacNare said, smiling confidently. "It's the most important line of research ever opened up to experimental psychology. They'll be forced to grant my request. It will put the university on the map!"

Alice laughed, and sat up and kissed him.

"Maybe they won't agree with you," she said. "Is it all right for me to read the paper?"

"I wish you would," he said. "Where's that son of mine? Upstream?" He leaped to his feet and went to the diving board again.

"Better walk along the bank, Joe. The stream is too swift."

"Nonsense!" Dr. MacNare said.

He made a long shallow dive, then began swimming in a powerful crawl that took him upstream slowly. Alice stood on the dock watching him until he was lost to sight around the bend, then went into the cabin. The completed paper lay beside the typewriter.

## II.

Alice had her doubts. "I 'm not so sure the board will approve of this," she said. Dr. MacNare, somewhat exasperated, said, "What makes you think that? Pavlov experimented with his dog, physiological experiments with rats, rabbits, and other animals go on all the time. There's nothing cruel about it."

"Just the same," Alice said. So Dr. MacNare cautiously resisted the impulse to talk about his paper with his fellow professors and his most intelligent students. Instead, he merely turned his paper in to the board at the earliest opportunity and kept silent, waiting for their decision.

He hadn't long to wait. On the last Friday of September he received a note requesting his presence in the boardroom at three o'clock on Monday. He rushed home after his last class and told Alice about it.

"Let's hope their decision is favorable," she said.

"It has to be," Dr. MacNare answered with conviction.

He spent the weekend making plans. "They'll probably assign me a machinist and a couple of electronics experts from the hill," he told Alice. "I can use graduate students for work with the animals. I hope they give me Dr. Munitz; from Psych as a consultant, because I like him much better than Veerhof. By early spring we should have things rolling."

Monday at three o'clock on the dot, Dr. MacNare knocked on the door of the boardroom, and entered. He was not unfamiliar with it, nor with the faces around the

massive walnut conference table. Always before he had known what to expect – a brief commendation for the revisions in his textbook on calculus for its fifth printing, a nice speech from the president about his good work as a prelude to a salary raise – quiet, expected things. Nothing unanticipated had ever happened here.

Now, as he entered, he sensed a difference. All eyes were fixed on him, but not with admiration or friendliness. They were fixed more in the manner of a restaurateur watching the approach of a cockroach along the surface of the counter.

Suddenly the room seemed hot and stuffy. The confidence in Dr. MacNare's expression evaporated. He glanced back toward the door as though wishing to escape.

"So it's you!" the president said, setting the tone of what followed.

"This is *yours*?" the president added, picking up the neatly typed manuscript, glancing at it, and dropping it back on the table as though it were something unclean.

Dr. MacNare nodded, and cleared his throat nervously to say yes, but didn't get the chance.

"We – all of us – are amazed and shocked," the president said. "Of course, we understand that psychology is not your field, and you probably were thinking only from the mathematical viewpoint. We are agreed on that. What you propose, though..." He shook his head slowly. "It's not only out of the question, but I'm afraid I'm going to have to request that you forget the whole thing – put this paper where no one can see it, preferably destroy it. I'm sorry, Dr. MacNare, but the university simply cannot afford to be associated with such a thing even remotely. I'll put it bluntly because I feel strongly about it, as do the other members of the Board. *If this paper is published or in anyway comes to light, we will be forced to request your resignation from the faculty.*"

"But why?" Dr. MacNare asked in complete bewilderment.

"Why?" another board member exploded, slapping the table. "It's the most inhuman thing I ever heard of, strapping a newborn animal onto some kind of frame and tying its legs to control levers, with the intention of never letting it free. The most fiendish and inhuman torture imaginable! If you didn't have such an outstanding record I would be for demanding your resignation at once."

"But that's not true!" Dr. MacNare said. "It's not torture! Not in any way! Didn't you read the paper? Didn't you understand that—"

"I read it," the man said. "We all read it. Every word."

"Then you should have understood—" Dr. MacNare said.

"We read it," the man repeated, "and we discussed some aspects of it with Dr. Veerhof without bringing your paper into it, nor your name."

"Oh," Dr. MacNare said. "Veerhof..."

"He says experiments, very careful experiments, have already been conducted along the lines of getting an animal to understand a symbol system and it can't be done. The nerve paths aren't there. Your line of research, besides being inhumanly cruel, would accomplish nothing."

"Oh," Dr. MacNare said, his eyes flashing. "So you know all about the results of an experiment in an untried field without performing the experiments!"

"According to Dr. Veerhof that field is not untried but rather well explored," the board member said. "Giving an animal the means to make vocal sounds would not enable it to form a symbol system."

"I disagree," Dr. MacNare said, seething. "My studies indicate clearly—"

"I think," the president said with a firmness that demanded the floor, "your position has been made very clear, Dr. MacNare., The matter is now closed. Permanently. I hope you will have the good sense, if I may use such a strong term, to forget the whole thing. For the good of your career and your very nice wife and son. That is all." He held the manuscript toward Dr. MacNare.

### III.

"I can't understand their attitude!" Dr. MacNare said to Alice when he told her about it.

"Possibly I can understand it a little better than you, Joe," Alice said thoughtfully. "I had a little of what I think they feel, when I first read your paper. A-a prejudice against the idea of it, is as closely as I can describe it. Like it would be violating the order of nature, giving an animal a soul, in a way."

"Then you feel as they do?" Dr. MacNare said.

"I didn't say that, Joe." Alice put her arms around her husband and kissed him fiercely. "Maybe I feel just the opposite, that if there is some way to give an animal a soul, we should do it."

Dr. MacNare chuckled. "It wouldn't be quite that cosmic. An animal can't be given something it doesn't have already. All that can be done is to give it the means to fully capitalize on what it has. Animals – man included – can only do by observing the results. When you move a finger, what you really do is send a neural impulse out from the brain along one particular nerve or one particular set of nerves, but you can never learn that, nor just how it is you do. All that you can know is that when you do



a definite *something*, your eyes and sense of touch bring you the information that your finger moved. But if that finger were attached to a voice element that made the sound "ah," and you could never see your finger, all you could ever know is that when you did that particular *something* you made a certain vocal sound. Changing the resultant effect of mental commands to include things normally impossible to you may expand the potential of your mind, but it won't give you a soul if you don't have one to begin with."

"You're using Veerhof's arguments on me," Alice said. "And I think we're arguing from separate definitions of a soul. I'm afraid of it, Joe. It would be a tragedy, I think, to give some animal – a rat, maybe – the soul of a poet, and then have it discover that it is only a rat."

"Oh," Dr. MacNare said. "*That* kind of soul. No, I'm not that optimistic about the results. I think we'd be lucky to get any results at all, a limited vocabulary that the animal would use meaningfully. But I do think we'd get that."

"It would take a lot of time and patience."

"And we'd have to keep the whole thing secret from everyone," Dr. MacNare said. "We couldn't even let Paul have an inkling of it, because he might say something to one of his playmates, and it would get, back to some member of the board. How could we keep it secret from Paul?"

"Paul knows he's not allowed in your study," Alice said. "We could keep everything there – and keep the door locked."

"Then it's settled?"

"Wasn't it, from the very beginning?" Alice put her arms around her husband and her cheek against his ear to hide her worried expression. "I love you, Joe. I'll help you in any way I can. And if we haven't enough in the savings account, there's always what Mother left me."

"I hope we won't have to use any of it, sweetheart," he said.

## IV.

The following day Dr. MacNare was an hour and a half late coming home from the campus. He had been, he announced casually, to a pet store.

"We'll have to hurry," said Alice. "Paul will be home any minute."

She helped him carry the packages from the car to the study. Together they moved

things around to make room for the gleaming new cages with their white rats and hamsters and guinea pigs. When it was done they stood arm in arm viewing their new possession.

To Alice MacNare, just the presence of the animals in her husband's study brought the research project into reality. As the days passed that romantic feeling became fact.

"We're going to have to do together," Joe MacNare told her at the end of the first week, "what a team of a dozen specialists in separate fields should be doing. Our first job, before we can do anything else, is to study the natural movements of each species and translate them into patterns of robot directives."

"Robot directives?"

"I visualize it this way," Dr. MacNare said. "The animal will be strapped comfortably in a frame so that its body can't move but its legs can. Its legs will be attached to four separate, free-moving levers which make a different electrical contact for every position. Each electrical contact, or control switch, will cause the robot body to do one specific thing, such as move a leg, utter some particular sound through its voice box, or move just one finger. Can you visualize that, Alice?"

Alice nodded.

"Okay. Now, one leg has to be used for nothing but voice sounds. That leaves three legs for control of the movements of the robot body. In body movement there will be simultaneous movements and sequences. A simple sequence can be controlled by one leg. All movements of the robot will have to be reduced to not more than three concurrent sequences of movement of the animal's legs. Our problem, then, is to make the unlearned and the most natural movements of the legs of the animal control the robot body's movements in a functional manner."

Endless hours were consumed in this initial study and mapping. Alice worked at it while her husband was at the university and Paul was at school. Dr. MacNare rushed home each day to go over what she had done and continue the work himself.

He grew more and more grudging of the time his classes took. In December he finally wrote to the three technical journals that had been expecting papers from him for publication during the year that he would be too busy to do them.

By January the initial phase of research was well enough along so that Dr. MacNare could begin planning the robot. For this he set up a workshop in the garage.

In early February he finished what he called the "test frame." After Paul had gone to bed, Dr. MacNare brought the test frame into the study from the garage. To Alice it looked very much like the insides of a radio.

She watched while he placed a husky-looking male white rate in the body harness fastened to the framework of aluminum and tied its legs to small metal rods.

Nothing happened except that the rat kept trying to get free, and the small metal rods tied to its feet kept moving in pivot sockets.

"Now!" Dr. MacNare said excitedly, flicking a small toggle switch on the side of the assembly.

Immediately a succession of vocal sounds erupted from the speaker. They followed one another, making no sensible word.

"*He's doing that,*" Dr. MacNare said triumphantly.

"If we left him in that, do you think he'd eventually associate his movements with the sounds?"

"It's possible. But that would be more on the order of what we do when we drive a car. To some extent a car becomes an extension of the body, but you're always aware that your hands are on the steering wheel, your foot on the gas pedal or brake. You extend your awareness consciously. You interpret a slight tremble in the steering wheel as a shimmy in the front wheels. You're oriented primarily to your body and only secondarily to the car as an extension of you."

Alice closed her eyes for a moment. "Mm hm," she said.

"And that's the best we could get, using a rat that knows already it's a rat."

Alice stared at the struggling rat, her eyes round with comprehension, while the loudspeaker in the test frame said, "Ag-pr-ds-raf-os-dg..."

Dr. MacNare shut off the sound and began freeing the rat.

"By starting with a newborn animal and never letting it know what it is," he said, "we can get a complete extension of the animal into the machine, in its orientation. So complete that if you took it out of the machine after it grew up, it would have no more idea of what had happened than – than your brain if it were taken out of your head and put on a table!"

"Now I'm getting that *feeling* again, Joe," Alice said, laughing nervously. "When you said that about my brain I thought, 'Or my soul?'"

Dr. MacNare put the rat back in its cage.

"There might be a valid analogy there," he said slowly. "If we have a soul that survives after death, what is it like? It probably interprets its surroundings in terms of its former orientation in the body."

"That's a little of what I mean," Alice said. "I can't help it, Joe. Sometimes I feel so sorry for whatever baby animal you'll eventually use, that I want to cry. I feel so sorry for it, because *we will never dare let it know what it really is!*"

"That's true. Which brings up another line of research that should be the work of

one expert on the team I ought to have for this. As it is, I'll turn it over to you to do while I build the robot."

"What's that?"

"Opiates," Dr. MacNare said. "What we want is an opiate that can be used on a small animal every few days, so that we can take it out of the robot, bathe it, and put it back again without its knowing about it. There probably is no ideal drug. We'll have to test the more promising ones."

Later that night, as they lay beside each other in the silence and darkness of their bedroom, Dr. MacNare sighed deeply.

"So many problems," he said. "I sometimes wonder if we can solve them all. *See* them all..."

To Alice MacNare, later, that night in early February marked the end of the first phase of research – the point where two alternative futures hung in the balance, and either could have been taken. That night she might have said, there in the darkness, "Let's drop it," and her husband might have agreed.

She thought of saying it. She even opened her mouth to say it. But her husband's soft snores suddenly broke the silence of the night. The moment of return had passed.

## V.

Month followed month. To Alice it was a period of rushing from kitchen to hypodermic injections to vacuum cleaner to hypodermic injections, her key to the study in constant use.

Paul, nine years old now, took to spring baseball and developed an indifference to TV, much to the relief of both his parents.

In the garage workshop Dr. MacNare made parts for the robot, and kept a couple of innocent projects going which he worked on when his son Paul evinced his periodic curiosity about what was going on.

Spring became summer. For six weeks Paul went to Scout camp, and during those six weeks Dr. MacNare reorganized the entire research project in line with what it would be in the fall. A decision was made to use only white rats from then on. The rest of the animals were sold to a pet store, and a system for automatically feeding, watering, and keeping the cases clean was installed in preparation for a much needed two weeks' vacation at the cabin.

When the time came to go, they had to tear themselves away from their work by an effort of will – aided by the realization that they could get little done with Paul underfoot.

September came all too soon. By mid-September both Dr. MacNare and his wife felt they were on the home stretch. Parts of the robot were going together and being tested, the female white rats were being bred at the rate of one a week so that when the robot was completed there would be a supply of newborn rats on hand.

October came, and passed. The robot was finished, but there were minor defects in it that had to be corrected.

"Adam," Dr. MacNare said one day, "will have to wear this robot all his life. It has to be just right."

And with each litter of baby rats Alice said, "I wonder which one is Adam."

They talked of Adam often now, speculating on what he would be like. It was almost, they decided, as though Adam were their second child.

And finally, on November 2, 1956, everything was ready. Adam would be born in the next litter, due in about three days.

The amount of work that had gone into preparation for the great moment is beyond conception. Four file cabinet drawers were filled with notes. By actual measurement seventeen feet of shelf space was filled with books on the thousand and one subjects that had to be mastered. The robot itself was a masterpiece of engineering that would have done credit to the research staff of a watch manufacturer. The vernier adjustments alone, used to compensate daily for the rat's growth, had eight patentable features.

And the skills that had had to be acquired! Alice, who had never before had a hypodermic syringe in her hand, could now inject a precisely measured amount of opiate into the tiny body of a baby rat with calm confidence in her skill.

After such monumental preparation, the great moment itself was anticlimactic. While the mother of Adam was still preoccupied with the birth of the remainder of the brood, Adam, a pink helpless thing about the size of a little finger, was picked up and transferred to the head of the robot.

His tiny feet, which he would never know existed, were fastened with gentle care to the four control rods. His tiny head was thrust into a helmet attached to a pivot-mounted optical system, ending in the lenses that served the robot for eyes. And finally a transparent plastic cover contoured to the shape of the back of a human head was fastened in place. Through it his feeble attempts at movement could be easily observed.

Thus, Dr. MacNare's Adam was born into his body, and the time of the completion of his birth was one-thirty in the afternoon on the fifth day of November, 1956.

In the ensuing half-hour all the cages of rats were removed from the study, the floor was scrubbed, and deodorizers were sprayed, so that no slightest trace of Adam's lowly origins remained. When this was done, Dr. MacNare loaded the cages into his car and drove them to a pet store that had agreed to take them.

When he returned, he joined Alice in the study, and at five minutes before four, with Alice hovering anxiously beside him, he opened the cover on Adam's chest and turned on the master switch that gave Adam complete dominion over his robot body.

Adam was beautiful – and monstrous. Made of metal from the neck down, but shaped to be covered by padding and skin in human semblance. From the neck up the job was done. The face was human, masculine, handsome, much like that of a clothing store dummy except for its mobility of expression, and the incongruity of the rest of the body.

The voice-control lever and contacts had been designed so that the ability to produce most sounds would have to be discovered by Adam as he gained control of his natural right front leg. Now the only sounds being uttered were "oh," "ah," "mm," and in random order. Similarly, the only movements of his arms and legs were feeble, like those of a human baby. The tremendous strength in his limbs was something he would be unable to tap fully until he had learned conscious coordination.

After a while Adam became silent and without movement. Alarmed, Dr. MacNare opened the instrument panel in the abdomen. The instruments showed that Adam's pulse and respiration were normal. He had fallen asleep.

Dr. MacNare and his wife stole softly from the study, and locked the door.

After a few days, with the care and feeding of Adam all that remained of the giant research project, the pace of the days shifted to that of long-range patience.

"It's just like having a baby," Alice said.

"You know something?" Dr. MacNare asked. "I've had to resist passing out cigars. I hate to say it, but I'm prouder of Adam than I was of Paul when he was born."

"So am I, Joe," Alice said quietly. "But I'm getting a little of that scared feeling back again."

"In what way?"

"He watches me. Oh. I know it's natural for him to, but I do wish you had made the eyes so that his own didn't show as little dark dots in the center of the iris."

"It couldn't be helped," Dr. MacNare said. "He has to be able to see, and I had to set up the system of mirrors so that the two axes of vision would be three inches apart as they are in the average human pair of eyes."

"Oh, I know," said Alice. "Probably it's just something I've seized on. But when he watches me, I find myself holding my breath in fear that he can read in my expression the secret we have to' keep from him, that he is a rat."

"Forget it, Alice. That's outside his experience and beyond his comprehension."

"I know." Alice sighed. "When he begins to show some of the signs of intelligence a baby has, I'll be able to think of him as a human being."

"Sure, darling," Dr. MacNare said.

"Do you think he ever will?"

"That," Dr. MacNare said, "is the big question. I think he will. I think so now even more than I did at the start. Aside from eating and sleeping, he has no avenue of expression except his robot body, and *no source of reward except that of making sense – human sense.*"

## VI.

The days passed, and became weeks, then months. During the daytime when her husband was at the university and her son was at school, Alice would spend most of her hours with Adam, forcing herself to smile at him and talk to him as she had to Paul when he was a baby. But when she watched his motions through the transparent back of his head, his leg motions remained those of attempted walking and attempted running.

Then, one day when Adam was four months old, things changed as abruptly as the turning on of a light.

The unrewarding walking and running movements of Adam's little legs ceased. It was evening, and both Dr. MacNare and his wife were there.

For a few seconds there was no sound or movement from the robot body. Then, quite deliberately, Adam said, "Ah."

"Ah," Dr. MacNare echoed. "Mm. Mm, ah. Ma-ma."

"Mm," Adam said,

The silence in the study became absolute. The seconds stretched into eternities. Then—

"Mm, ah," Adam said. "Mm, ah."

Alice began crying with happiness.

"Mm, ah," Adam said. "Mm, ah. Ma-ma. Mamamama."

Then, as though the effort had been too much for Adam, he went to sleep. Having achieved the impossible, Adam seemed to lose interest in it. For two days he uttered nothing more than an occasional involuntary syllable.

"I would call that as much of an achievement as speech itself," Dr. MacNare said to his wife. "His right front leg has asserted its independence. If each of his other three legs can do as well, he can control the robot body."

It became obvious that Adam was trying. Though the movements of his body remained non-purposive, the pauses in those movements became more and more pregnant with what was obviously mental effort.

During that period there was of course room for argument and speculation about it, and even a certain amount of humor. Had Adam's right front leg, at the moment of achieving meaningful speech, suffered a nervous breakdown? What would a psychiatrist have to say about a white rat that had a nervous breakdown in its right front leg?

"The worst part about it," Dr. MacNare said to his wife, "is that if he fails to make it he'll have to be killed. He can't have permanent frustration forced onto him, and, by now, returning him to his natural state would be even worse."

"And he has such a stout little heart," Alice said. "Sometimes when he looks at me I'm sure he knows what is happening and he wants me to know he's trying."

When they went to bed that night they were more discouraged than they had ever been.

Eventually he slept. When the alarm went off, Alice slipped into her robe and went into the study first, as she always did.

A moment later she was back in the bedroom, shaking her husband's shoulder.

"Joe!" she whispered. "Wake up! Come into the study!"

He leaped out of bed and rushed past her. She caught up with him and pulled him to a stop.

"Take it easy, Joe," she said. "Don't alarm him."

"Oh." Dr. MacNare relaxed. "I thought something had happened."

"Something has!"

They stopped in the doorway of the study. Dr. MacNare sucked in his breath sharply, but remained silent.



Adam seemed oblivious of their presence. He was too interested in something else.

He was interested in his hands. He was holding his hands up where he could see them, and he was moving them independently, clenching and unclenching the metal finders with slow deliberation.

Suddenly the movement stopped. He had become aware of them. Then, impossibly, unbelievably, he spoke.

"Ma ma," Adam said. Then, "Pa pa."

"Adam!" Alice sobbed, rushing across the study to him and sinking down beside him. Her arms went around his metal body. "Oh, Adam," she cried happily.

It was the beginning. The date of that beginning is not known. Alice MacNare believes it was early in May, but more probably it was in April. There was no time to keep notes. In fact, there was no longer a research project nor any thought of one. Instead, there was Adam, the person. At least, to Alice he became that, completely. Perhaps, also, to Dr. MacNare.

Dr. MacNare quite often stood behind Adam where he could watch the rat body through the transparent skull case while Alice engaged Adam's attention. Alice did the same, at times, but she finally refused to do so any more. The sight of Adam the rat, his body held in a net attached to the frame, his head covered by the helmet, his four legs moving independently of one another with little semblance of walking or running motion nor even of coordination, but with swift darting motions and pauses pregnant with meaning, brought back to Alice the old feeling of vague fear, and a tremendous surge of pity for Adam that made her want to cry.

Slowly, subtly, Adam's rat body became to Alice a pure brain, and his legs four nerve ganglia. A brain covered with short white fur; and when she took him out of his harness under opiate to bathe him, she bathed him as gently and carefully as any brain surgeon sponging a cortical surface.

## VII.

Once started, Adam's mental development progressed rapidly. Dr. MacNare began making notes again on June 2, 1957, just ten days before the end, and it is to these notes that we go for an insight into Adam's mind.

On June 4th Dr. MacNare wrote, "I am of the opinion that Adam will never develop beyond the level of a moron, in the scale of human standards. He would probably make a good factory worker or chauffeur, in a year or two. But he is consciously aware of himself as Adam, he thinks in words and simple sentences with an accurate

understanding of their meaning, and he is able to do new things from spoken instructions. There is no question, therefore, but that he has an integrated mind, entirely human in every respect."

On June 7th Dr. MacNare wrote, "Something is developing which I hesitate to put down on paper – for a variety of reasons. Creating Adam was a scientific experiment, nothing more than that. Both the premises on which the project was based have been proven: that the principle of verification is the main factor in learned response, and that, given the proper conditions, some animals are capable of abstract symbol systems and therefore of thinking with words to form meaningful concepts.

"Nothing more was contemplated in the experiment. I stress this because Adam is becoming deeply religious – and before any mistaken conclusions are drawn from this I will explain what caused this development. It was an oversight of a type that is bound to happen in any complex project.

"Alice's experimental data on the effects of opiates, and especially the data on increasing the dose to offset growing tolerance, were based on observation of the subject alone, without any knowledge of the mental aspects of increased tolerance – which would of course be impossible except with human subjects.

"Unknown to us, Adam has been becoming partly conscious during his bath. Just conscious enough to be vaguely aware of certain sensations, and to remember them afterward. Few, if any, of these half remembered sensations are such that he can fit them into the pattern of his waking reality.

"The one that has had the most pronounced influence on him is, to quote him, 'Feel clean inside. Feel good.' Quite obviously this sensation is caused by his bath.

"With it is a distinct feeling of disembodiment, of being – and these are his own words – 'outside my body'! This, of course, is an accurate realization, because to him the robot is his body, and he knows nothing of the existence of his actual, living, rat body.

"In addition to these two effects, there is a third one. A feeling of walking, and sometimes of floating, of stumbling over things he can't see, of talking, of being talked to by disembodied voices.

"The explanation of this is also obvious. When he is being bathed his legs are moved about. Any movement of a leg is to him either a spoken sound or a movement of some part of his robot body. Any movement of his right front leg, for example, tells his mind that he is making a sound. But, since his ear is not connected to the sound system of his robot body, his ears bring no physical verification of the sound. The mental anticipation of that verification then becomes a disembodied voice to him.

"The end result of all this is that Adam is becoming convinced that there is a hidden side of things (which there is), and that it is supernatural (which it is, *in the framework*

*of his orientation).*

"What we are going to have to do is make sure he is completely unconscious before taking him out and bathing him. His mental health is far more important than exploring the interesting avenues opened up by this unforeseen development.

"I do intend, however, to make one simple test, while he is fully awake, before dropping this avenue of investigation."

Dr. MacNare does not state in his notes what this test was to be; but his wife says that it probably refers to the time when he pinched Adam's tail and Adam complained of a sudden, violent headache. This transference is the one well known to doctors. Unoriented pain in the human body manifests itself as a "headache," when the source of the pain is actually the stomach, or the liver, or any one of a hundred spots in the body.

The last notes made by Dr. MacNare were those of June 11, 1957, and are unimportant except for the date. We return therefore, to actual events, so far as they can be reconstructed.

## VIII.

We have said little or nothing about Dr. MacNare's life at the university after embarking on the research project, nor of the social life of the MacNares. As conspirators, they had kept up their social life to avoid any possibility of the board getting curious about any radical change in Dr. MacNare's habits; but as time went on both Dr. MacNare and his wife became so engrossed in their project that only with the greatest reluctance did they go anywhere.

The annual faculty party at Professor Long's on June 12th was something they could not evade. Not to have gone would have been almost tantamount to a resignation from the university.

"Besides," Alice had said when they discussed the matter in May, "isn't it about time to do a little hinting that you have something up your sleeve?"

"I don't know, Alice," Dr. MacNare had said. Then a smile quirked his lips and he said, "I wouldn't mind telling off Veerhof. I've never gotten over his deciding something was impossible without enough data to pass judgment." He frowned. "We are going to have to let the world know about Adam pretty soon, aren't we? That's something I haven't thought about. But not yet. Next fall will be time enough."

"Don't forget, Joe," Alice said. "That dinner. Tonight's the party at Professor Long's."

"How can I forget with you reminding me?" Dr. MacNare said, winking at his son.

"And you, Paul," Alice said. "I don't want you leaving the house. You understand? You can watch TV, and I want you in bed by nine thirty."

"Ah, Mom!" Paul protested. "Nine thirty?" He suppressed a grin. He had a party of his own planned.

"And you can wipe the dishes for me. We have to be at Professor Long's by eight o'clock."

"I'll help you," Dr. MacNare said.

"No, you have to get ready. Besides, don't you have to look up something for one of the faculty?"

"I'd forgotten," said Dr. MacNare. "Thanks for reminding me."

After dinner he went directly to the study. Adam was sitting on the floor playing with his wooden blocks. They were alphabet blocks, but he didn't know that yet. The summer project was going to be teaching him the alphabet. Already, though, he preferred placing them in straight rows rather than stacking them up.

At seven o'clock Alice rapped on the door to the study.

"Time to get dressed, Joe," she called.

"You'll be all right while we're gone, Adam?" Dr. MacNare said.

"I'll be all right, papa," Adam said. "I'll sleep."

"That's good," Dr. MacNare said. "I'll turn out the light."

At the door he waited until Adam had sat down in the chair he always slept on, and settled himself. Then he pushed the switch just to the right of the door and went out.

"Hurry, dear," Alice called.

"I'm hurrying," Dr. MacNare protested – and, for the first time, he forgot to lock the study door.

The bathroom was next to the studio – the wall between them soundproofed by a ceiling-high bookshelf in the study filled with thousands of books. On the other side was the master bedroom, with a closet with sliding panels that opened both on the bedroom and the bathroom. These sliding panels were partly open, so that Dr. MacNare and Alice could talk.

"Did you lock the study door?"

"Of course," Dr. MacNare said. "But I'll check before we leave."

"How is Adam taking being alone tonight?" Alice called.

"Okay," Dr. MacNare said. "Damn!"

"What's the matter, Joe?"

"I forgot to get razor blades." The conversation died down. Alice MacNare finished dressing. "Aren't you ready yet, Joe?" she called. "It's almost a quarter to eight."

"Be right with you. I nicked myself shaving with an old blade. The bleeding's almost stopped now."

Alice went into the living room. Paul had turned on the TV and was sprawled out on the rug.

"You be sure and stay home, and be in bed by nine thirty, Paul," she said. "Promise?"

"Ah. Mom," he protested. "Well, all right."

Dr. MacNare came into the room, still working on his tie. A moment later they went out the front door. They had been gone less than five minutes when there was a knock. Paul jumped to his feet and opened the door.

"Hi, Fred, Tony, Bill," he said.

The boys, all nine years old, sprawled on the rug and watched television. It became eight o'clock, eight-thirty, and finally five minutes to nine. The commercial began.

"Where's your bathroom?" Tony asked.

"In there Paul said, pointing vaguely at the doorway to the hall.

Tony got up off the floor and went into the hall. He saw several doors, all looking much alike. He picked one and opened it. It was dark inside. He felt along the wall for a light switch and found it. Light flooded the room. He stared at what he saw for perhaps ten seconds, then turned and ran down the hall to the living room.

"Say, Paul!" he said. "You never said anything about having a real honest to gosh robot!"

"What are you talking about?" Paul said.

"In that room in there!" Tony said. "Come on. I'll show you!"

The TV program forgotten, Paul, Fred, and Bill crowded after him. A moment later they stood in the doorway to the study, staring in awe at the strange figure of metal that sat motionless in a chair across the room.

Adam, it seems certain, was asleep, and had not been wakened by this intrusion or the turning on of the light.

"Gee!" Paul said. "It belongs to Dad. We'd better get out of here."

"Naw," Tony said with a feeling of proprietorship at having been the original discoverer. "Let's take a look. He'll never know about it."

They crossed the room slowly, until they were close up to the robot figure, marveling at it, moving around it.

"Say!" Bill whispered, pointing. "What's that in there? It looks like a white rat with its head stuck into that kind of helmet thing."

They stared at it a moment.

"Maybe it's dead. Let's see."

"How you going to find out?"

"See those hinges on the cover?" Tony said importantly. "Watch." With cautious skill he opened the transparent back half of the dome, and reached in, wrapping his fingers around the white rat.

He was unable to get it loose, but he succeeded in pulling its head free of the helmet.

At the same time Adam awoke.

"Ouch!" Tony cried, jerking his hand away. "He bit me!"

"He's alive all right," Bill said. "Look at him glare!" He prodded the body of the rat and pulled his hand away quickly as the rat lunged.

"Gee, look at its eyes," Paul said nervously. "They're getting bloodshot."

"Dirty old rat!" Tony said vindictively, jabbing at the rat with his finger and evading the snapping teeth.

"Get its head back in there!" Paul said desperately. "I don't want papa to find out we were in here!" He reached in, driven by desperation, pressing the rat's head between his fingers and forcing it back into the tight fitting helmet.

Immediately screaming sounds erupted from the lips of the robot. (It was determined by later examination that only when the rat's body was completely where it should be were the circuits operable.)

"Let's get out of here!" Tony shouted, and dived for the door, thereby saving his life.

"Yeah! Let's get out of here!" Fred shouted as the robot figure rose to its feet. Terror enabled him to escape.

Bill and Paul delayed an instant too long. Metal fingers seized them. Bill's arm snapped halfway between shoulder and elbow. He screamed with pain and struggled

to free himself.

Paul was unable to scream. Metal fingers gripped his shoulder, with a metal thumb thrust deeply against his larynx, paralyzing his vocal cords.

Fred and Tony had run into the front room. There they waited, ready to start running again. They could hear Bill's screams. They could hear a male voice jabbering nonsense, and finally repeating over and over again, "Oh my, oh my, oh my," in a tone all the more horrible because it portrayed no emotion whatever.

Then there was silence.

The silence lasted several minutes. Then Bill began to sniffle, rubbing his knuckles in his, eyes. "I wanta go home," he whimpered.

"Me too."

They took each other's hand and tiptoed to the front door, watching the open doorway to the hall. When they reached the front door Tony opened it, and when it was open they ran, not stopping to close the door behind them.

## IX.

There isn't much more to tell. It is known that Tony and Bill arrived at their respective homes, saving nothing of what had happened.

Only later did they come to admit their share in the night's events.

Joe and Alice MacNare arrived home from the party at Professor Long's at twelve thirty, finding the front door wide open, the lights on in the living room, and the television on.

Sensing that something was wrong, Alice hurried to her son's room and discovered he wasn't there. While she was doing that, Joe shut the front door and turned off the television.

Alice returned to the living room, eyes round with alarm, and said, "Paul's not in his room!"

"Adam!" Joe croaked, and rushed into the hallway, with Alice following more slowly.

She reached the open door of the study in time to see the robot figure pounce on Joe and fasten its metal fingers about his throat, crushing vertebrae and flesh alike.

Oblivious to her own danger, she rushed to rescue her already dead husband, but the metal fingers were inflexible. Belatedly she abandoned the attempt and ran into the hallway to the phone.

When the police arrived, they found her slumped against the wall in the hallway. She pointed toward the open doorway of the study, without speaking.

The police rushed into the study. At once there came the sounds of shots. Dozens of them, it seemed. Later both policemen admitted that they lost their heads and fired until their guns were empty.

But it was not yet the end of Adam.

It would perhaps be impossible to conceive the full horror of his last hours, but we can at least make a guess. Asleep when the boys entered the study, he awakened to a world he had never before perceived except very vaguely and under the soporific veil of opiate.

But it was a world vastly different even than that. There is no way of knowing what he saw – probably blurred ghostly figures, monstrous beyond the ability of his mind to grasp, for his eyes were adjusted only to the series of prisms and lenses that enabled him to see and coordinate the images brought to him through the eyes of the robot.

He saw these impossible figures, he felt pain and torture that were not of the flesh as he knew it, but of the spirit; agony beyond agony administered by what he could only believe were fiends from some nether hell.

And then, abruptly, as ten-year-old Paul shoved his head back into the helmet, the world he had come to believe was reality returned. It was as though he had returned to the body from some awful pit of hell, with the soul sickness still with him.

Before him he saw four humanlike figures of reality, but beings unlike the only two he had ever seen. Smaller, seeming to be a part of the unbelievable nightmare he had been in. Two of them fled, two were within his grasp.

Perhaps he didn't know what he was doing when he killed Paul and Bill. It's doubtful if he had the ability to think at all then, only to tremble and struggle in his pitiful little rat body, with the automatic mechanisms of the robot acting from those frantic motions.

But it is known that there were three hours between the deaths of the two boys and the entry of Dr. MacNare at twelve thirty, and during those three hours he would have had a chance to recover, and to think, and to partially rationalize the nightmare he had experienced in realms outside what to him was the world of reality.

Adam must certainly have been calm enough, rational enough, to recognize Dr. MacNare when he entered the study at twelve thirty. Then why did Adam deliberately kill Joe by breaking his neck? Was it because, in that three hours, he had put together



the evidence of his senses and come to the realization that he was not a man but a rat?

It's not likely. It is much more likely that Adam came to some aberrated conclusion, dictated by the superstitious feelings that had grown so strongly into his strange and unique existence, that dictated he must kill Joseph.

For it would have been impossible for him to have realized that he was only a rat. You see, Joseph MacNare had taken great care that Adam never, in all his life, should see *another* rat.

There remains only the end of Adam to relate.

Physically it can be only anticlimactic. With his metal body out of commission from a dozen or so shots, two of which destroyed the robot extensions of his eyes, he remained helpless until the coroner carefully removed him.

To the coroner he was just a white rat, and a strangely helpless one, unable to walk or stand as rats are supposed to. Also a strangely vicious one, with red little beads of eyes and lips drawn back from sharp teeth the same as some rabid wild animal.

The coroner had no way of knowing that somewhere in that small, menacing form there was a noble but lost mentality that knew itself as Adam, and held thoughts of a strange and wonderful realm of peace and splendor beyond the grasp of the normal physical senses.

The coroner could not know that the erratic motions of that small left front foot, if connected to the proper mechanisms, would have been audible as, perhaps, a prayer, a desperate plea to whatever lay in the Great Beyond to come down and rescue its humble creature.

"Vicious little bastard," the coroner said nervously to the homicide men gathered around Dr. MacNare's desk.

"Let me take care of it," said one of the detectives.

"No," the coroner answered. "I'll do it."

Quickly, so as not to be bitten, he picked Adam up by the tip of the tail and slammed him forcefully against the top of the desk.

## **LOVE ME, LOVE MY—**

"CONGRATULATIONS, MY BOY," Sims said. "You are getting a transfer to tau Ceti III, and I don't mind telling you we have our eye on you as Directorate material,

twenty or thirty years from now."

Lin Braquet tried to conceal his dismay. "But I don't want—" he blurted. "I like it here on Venus." He made a belated attempt at psychology. "I want to stay under you, Mr. Sims."

The president of Interstellar Chemical (Venus branch) frowned. "See here, Braquet," he said. "You know our setup, our tradition. You're an I.C.-sponsored man. We gave you your education, we brought you here. We've spent a terrific sum of money on you already."

"But why can't I remain here?" Lin said.

"Our men have to keep moving up the ladder, my boy," Sims said heartily. "Others are getting their doctorates, ready to climb. More of them than we really need or want, of course. We have to sponsor forty percent more than we need to allow for deaths and failures. Other companies do the same. There is no room here or in any other company for those who won't climb."

"But—" Lin began.

"You know the facts of life as well as I do," Sims said, growing impatient. "You can refuse to take the transfer, of course. If you do you're out. We already have a man slated for your present job. Then what do you do? No company will even consider the failures from another company for career jobs. The only thing that would be open to you is the ranks of unskilled labor. I can't understand why you even hesitate. Do you have a problem?"

"Yes," Lin said weakly.

"What is it?"

"A ... a girl," Lin said.

Sims laughed. "Well good lord marry her and take her with you. I.C. will pay her fare too, and of course you get the automatic differential in pay. Congratulations again." Sims stopped smiling. "There's more?" he asked. .

Lin nodded. "She has a vegy."

"She has a mother and father too, doesn't she?" Sims said. "And maybe brothers and sisters? When a girl marries she leaves all that behind. The facts of life."

"She won't leave her vegy behind," Lin said. "She and Winnie grew up together."

"Bad," Sims said, scowling. "She's an only child? I thought so. Unhealthy to permit a child to cling to a childhood attachment that way. Well, she'll have to give it up. I.C. certainly won't throw twenty thousand galactic dollars away on passage for a vegy."

"I didn't think it would," Lin said hopelessly.

"Especially to tau Ceti III. Good atmosphere there. No vegies needed, though I suppose plenty are there. Take along a seed and grow another. Interesting experience, especially when they get to be two years old and go through the change."

"I'll see if I can convince her." Lin said hopelessly, turning toward the door.

"Do that," Sims said briskly. "And Braquet—"

"Yes?" Lin said, turning back.

"If she won't, put her down as a case of arrested emotional development and forget her. Believe me, it wouldn't be worth it to wreck your life and career for a girl who refuses to give up a vegy."

"Yes Sir," Lin said.

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The girl in the travel agency came to the counter with a smile. "Yes?" she said.

"I'm going to tau Ceti III," Lin explained. "I was wondering if there's some way I could take a vegy with me?"

"Only by paying full fare plus five hundred galactic dollars a pound freight charges on its pot. I'm sorry. In fact, the star lines discourage vegy travel because it creates a problem in atmosphere balance on the ship. Every ship carries a full complement of vegies to balance the human passengers already, trained to be working members of the crew."

"But isn't there any way?" Lin said desperately. "I can't raise twenty thousand galactic dollars, and on the easy payment plan it would..."

The girl was shaking her head quite firmly. She gave Lin a smile of sympathy and turned to the man standing a few feet down the counter. "Yes?" she said.

Lin hesitated, hating to give up.

"Any word on the starship Astra?" The man smiled wolfishly at the girl. He was slightly shorter than Lin, powerfully built, dark hair and complexion.

"I think so," the girl said, turning to a bulletin board. "Yes, it left Earth yesterday on schedule and will berth here in two weeks."

Lin turned away and walked dispiritedly toward the tube to the parking lot. He was unaware that the shrewd eyes of the man followed him, and that the moment he was out of sight the man excused himself and followed.

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"It's perfectly simple!" Lin said, his voice dripping infinite patience tried beyond mortal endurance. "On tau Ceti III you won't need a vegy. The company will pay passage for me and my wife – if I have a wife. But it won't pay passage for Winnie. Do you know how much it would cost? Twenty thousand galactic dollars! More than I'll make in two years!"

"It's perfectly simple!" Leah said, matching Lin's tone of infinite patience. "Where I go, Winnie goes–"

"And I'm sick of Winnie," Lin groaned. "Every time I try to kiss you a big yellow eye on the end of a stalk gets in the way." He glared at the only one of the vegy's eyes that was looking at him, and the eye glared back with yellow defiance. Winnie's other three eyes dropped with injured dignity at the ends of their ten-inch-long, pencil-thin stalks.

"If you love me – as you claim to–" Leah went on as though she had not been interrupted, "your love will find a way."

"If you love me," Lin countered, "you'll give up this – this childhood attachment for a vegy and leave Winnie here with your parents."

"Childhood attachment!" Leah shouted, rising to her full five feet one half inches of auburn-haired fury. "Next you'll be saying I'm a case of arrested development"

"I didn't say that," Lin said stiffly. He took a deep breath and exploded, "Good lord! You'd think I was marrying Winnie!"

"Ha!" Winnie's four bright-blue voice areas vibrated. "You couldn't pollinate a geranium."

Leah blushed and said sternly, "Winnie, don't say things like that."

A sniffing sound came from Winnie's vibration areas. Three of the eyestalks began to droop, the eyes limpid with devotion to Leah and self-pity, while the fourth eye stared accusingly at Lin.

"Oh, my poor Winnie," Leah said, putting her arms around the four-footed vegy's pear-shaped green torso. Turning her head to Lin she said, "You've made Winnie ill. You should be ashamed!"

"Nuts," Lin said disgustedly. "You don't love me, you only love that ... that vegetable!"

"And you don't love me!" Leah said, beginning to cry. "If you did you'd find some way to take Winnie with us. You're selfish, stupid, impossible, a beast, cruel."

And so, in due time, Lin and Leah were married. But not until Lin had met Gregor Samsen for the second time...

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Lin had gone directly from his meeting with Gregor Samsen to Leah's and proudly announced, "I've done it! Winnie is going with us!" To all questions about the details he had said, "Just leave it all to me. There's nothing to worry about."

Winnie had been doubtful, but Leah had been so happy that Winnie's doubts had fallen on deaf ears right up to, and for a short while after the day of the wedding. But at last Winnie got through to Leah, and Leah pinned Lin down.

"It's perfectly simple," Lin said. "I thought there had to be a way, and there is. The ship has its complement of vegies, and Winnie could just walk on board with us and mix with them and never be discovered, except for one thing."

"Sure," Winnie vibrated. "I don't know a thing about ships and the first thing I was told to do I would be found out."

"No," Lin said. "That isn't it. The ship's vegies are branded with the ship emblem."

"Branded?" Winnie ran to her pot and sank down on it, clinging with all four hands to its rim. "I refuse to be branded. I refuse to go. I knew it would be something like this. Leah can get the marriage annulled. It's not too late."

"You won't really be branded," Lin said. "That's where this steward comes in. The minute we get to the stateroom he comes in and paints the ship insignia on you so it looks just like it was burnt on. Actually you wouldn't even need it painted on, except that someone might see you, and even that is unlikely, because you will be hiding in one of the little lifeboats the whole three weeks!"

"Hiding!" Winnie buzzed, geysering slightly. Groping for a glycerin-impregnated wiping pad to clean off the sand sludge, the vegy vibrated in bitter tones, "A common stowaway, having to sneak on board, having to hide, being discovered and tossed off the ship on some deserted asteroid, while you ride in comfort. How will you sneak my pot into my hiding place? I won't stand for its being packed away somewhere in the ship's hold while I'm lurking in my shame."

"It's not going," Lin said.

"My pot?" Winnie geysered all over again, a few drops splattering the ceiling. "I see what you're up to now, Lin Braquet. You're trying to kill me. You know a vegy always goes to the soil from which it sprouted to sleep."

"Calm down," Lin said. "You know very well your ancestors on Ripley didn't have pots. And there are plenty of traveling vegies that sleep in a different pot house every night. It would cost seventy-five hundred galactic dollars to ship your pot. Besides, it would be a dead giveaway to ship your pot and not have a ticket for you."

"I WILL NOT GIVE UP MY POT!" Winnie screamed so loudly the four blue vibration areas vibrated visibly.

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The starship Astra materialized out of the driving, ammonia-saturated rain of a typical Venusian storm, its immense bulk wavering from refraction of the rain that washed against the outside surface of the spaceport observation promenade.

Winnie clung to Leah's hand for courage and watched the hulking symbol of Doom slowly settle out on the field, so gigantic that the rain that fell on it cascaded off its rim in a waterfall curtain that hid the underneath parts of the ship.

Then came the nightmare of the Last Mile, slow jostling movement of the mass of intermixed humans and vegies toward the spaceport subways, huddling in the crowded subway trains, being packed into elevators that shot up into the ship, seeing the first ship vegy and glimpsing the ship insignia branded on it, and envying its belonging as it went about its business of polishing handrails.

The central lounge was where everyone had to go to present tickets and be directed to staterooms. In the center of the central lounge was a roped-off area where several dozen vegies were playing cards, chess, and reading. Each had the brand on its side.

Every few feet around the roped-off area was a metal stand with a printed form under glass which read:

"The vegy is the only intelligent species of a large family of ambulant vegetable types native to Ripley, the second planet in the Polaris System. Movement is produced by change of pressure inside thousands of microscopically fine spiral fibers resulting in change of spring tension of these fibers, the change in pressure being produced by an ionic current from fine tube networks similar to nerves in animals. The vegy grows from a seed.

"For its first two years its roots remain in the soil while its body and appendages reach full growth. Then, all within a thirty-day period, the lower half of its trunk expands to three times its previous size, and slowly turns inward and upward, drawing the root section with it until all the fine roots are inside the hollow inner cavity. During this change the four lower limbs turn downward so that they can serve as legs.

"A hollow tube an inch in diameter runs from the peak of the vegy down into the root hollow, and the vegy 'feeds' by entering fresh sand, dirt, and water into this tube, forming a thick muddy mixture that fills the root hollow, providing mineral nourishment for the vegetable organism. During the sleep period some of this 'stomach' content is evacuated through the lower opening. On waking, the vegy is 'hungry,' and immediately refills the cavity with fresh soil and water.

"The vegy utilizes light as its primary source of energy, converting carbon dioxide and water into oxygen and sugars through a process of photosynthesis carried on by chlorophine, the green pigment that gives the vegy its distinctive color. The oxygen returns to the atmosphere. The sugars enter into the 'muscular' process, where they are broken down into various alcohols. As a result, the more a vegy moves about, the more carbon dioxide it requires and the more oxygen it releases as a waste

product. This ideally makes it man's counterpart in the balanced aquarium life on shipboard and on the many planets whose unsuited atmospheres make a sealed-off existence necessary.

"The vegy generally lives well over forty years, but in the end loses its power of movement due to the deterioration of its 'muscle' fibers into wood fiber. When that happens it is unable to replenish its 'stomach' content, and dies.

"The vegy has forty-eight well defined brain centers but no centralized center similar to the human brain. Notwithstanding this, the vegy is equal to the human in intelligence, creativity, and personality, and is perhaps superior to man in having an integrated consciousness that is unaffected by the destruction of any one of its many 'brains.' It is also superior to man in that whole future populations of vegies can be transported as seeds.

"Reproduction is accomplished by cross-pollination when a vegy is in flower. During cross-pollination two vegies engage in a slow, ritualistic dance, which is always the same and entirely instinctive, and beyond conscious control or interference. This dance is exceedingly beautiful to watch.

"Vegies were first discovered by the Polaris Expedition in AM, 2348. Less than a century after being discovered, vegies had replaced all other oxygen-conversion devices. For short periods and by exercising strenuously one vegy can supply the oxygen requirements of three humans.

"You will find the book, *History of the Vegies* , in your stateroom microfilm library, as well as over fifty novels written by vegies that are recognized classics."

Winnie read this with a feeling of pride that only served to accentuate the humiliation of being about to become a stowaway. A few moments later Lin and Leah finished getting their tickets and accommodations straightened out.

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Winnie did not like the steward that led them to the stateroom. His pointed chin, sharp prominent nose and narrow head made his face wedge-shaped under his uniform cap. His eyes were narrow-set and knowing.

In the stateroom the steward busied himself until Leah's parents and the family vegies had said their tearful farewells and departed.

Then he said, "I'm Antone Brush. You have the rest of the money? We must work fast!"

A throbbing pulsing life flowed through the floor and walls of the stateroom, having nothing to do with vibration or sound, for silence blanketed everything and seemed to snatch up every spoken word and smother it. The pulsing life force was more an aura, a living ghost of the immense distances the ship had traveled and would yet travel, the throb of empty airless spaces between stars where there was no up or

down, overlaid with the flow of the cosmos in its rush from the infinite gulf of the past to the infinite darkness of the future.

Winnie held still while the steward, Antone Brush, fixed the stencil in place with scotch tape and worked the fast drying pigment through its design.

"I think I am going to die," Winnie groaned.

"Nonsense," Antone said.

"My Muscles feel as though they were turning to wood fiber," Winnie said unhappily.

"So you've been reading the bulletin in the lounge," Antone said cheerfully. "I pick up a few diseases myself every time I read the health columns." He winked broadly at Leah and ripped off the stencil, revealing the insignia. He dusted it carefully with a powder puff to dull its glistening newness.

The loudspeaker in the wall said: "We will be taking off in three minutes. There will be no sensation other than a slight increase in weight as we rise through the atmosphere. If this is your first spaceflight there are tranquilizer, pills in your bathroom medicine cabinet. If you become ill press the red button beside the door to the outside corridor and a nurse will come immediately."

"Is there time to get off the ship?" Winnie asked.

"Not a chance," Antone said cheerfully. "The hatches are closed."

Leah sniffed loudly, close to tears. Lin took her in his arms. Winnie glared at Lin. Antone smiled cheerfully.

"We'd better get you to the lifeship you'll hide in," Antone said. "In ten minutes they'll be making the rounds to see if everyone's happy, and they'd better not find you here when they come in, Winnie." He opened the stateroom door and looked out. "Hurry!" he hissed.

The four of them scurried along the low-ceilinged corridor to a hatchway with a red sign over it saying LIFEBOATS. They went through the hatch into another long corridor, and suddenly felt a slight increase in weight. It seemed impossible to believe that they were in a ship that was rising through a violent storm toward outer space.

They came to a wide corridor that curved in the distance. Every hundred and fifty feet was a hatch opening with a number over it. Antone stopped at the one numbered 16, looked both ways to make sure no one was in sight, then hissed, "Inside! Quick!"

They didn't seem to enter a boat. Antone explained this by telling them the lifeboat was encased in its ejection cradle, and that a control stud inside the boat would close



it and throw it free from the starship.

He pointed to a double row of ten dirt-filled pots. "In 'Abandon Ship' ten of the ship's vegies come to this boat. You can take your pick, Winnie, or sleep in a different one almost every night."

Winnie groaned.

"Keep out of sight if you hear anyone coming," Antone warned. "You can hide back in the fuel compartments. Don't worry about lack of carbon dioxide. The boat's designed to give good circulation everywhere. If anyone comes in, Winnie, keep hidden. Those yellow eyes of yours are iridescent enough to be noticeable in the dark, you know."

"Stay with me, Leah," Winnie moaned, two yellow eyes appealing to her limpidly.

Antone shook his head. "She has to be with her husband or they will start looking for her – at least for the next twenty-four hours."

"You'll be all right, Winnie darling," Leah said uncertainly, letting herself be drawn toward the hatchway by Lin.

Winnie turned one of her remaining eyes on Lin, coldly, and grated, "Cheapskate!" The fourth eye fixed Antone Brush suspiciously, and Winnie vibrated, "And you, Antone Brush, are nothing but a cheap grafter. A crook, that's what you are."

"Winnie!" Leah said reproachfully.

Then Winnie was alone with the deadened silence, the sterile geometric emptiness of the lifeship, and the ten pots, none of them more than just a pot...

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"Forget about Winnie and let's go to sleep," Lin groaned.

"Poor Winnie," Leah said in the darkness and the silence. "I almost wish I'd never..."

Lin said nothing, but was tempted to echo her wish aloud. He opened his eyes and groped in his mind for something to divert Leah's thoughts into restful channels.

"You know," he said brightly, "that was interesting, what I read in the microfilm newspaper while you were taking your bath."

He left the conversational gambit dangling in the darkness, and finally, hesitantly, Leah said, "What was that?"

He shifted over onto his side and raised up on his elbow. "Did you know," he said, "that this ship has twenty million dollars worth of large unset diamonds and sixty millions in galactic currency on board? The diamond shipment is for tau Ceti III, so the local government can issue its own currency. All local currencies are based on

the diamond Standard, you know, because anything else costs more to transport than its value." Lin warmed up to his subject. "Why, do you know—"

"I'm going to go see how Winnie is," Leah said abruptly. She sat up and put on the bed lamp.

"Winnie's all right!" Lin said crossly. "We can't risk having someone see us go sneaking into that lifeship and asking questions."

"I'm going to see how Winnie is," Leah said firmly. "You can stay here, if you like."

She started to take off her pajamas, glanced at Lin, and with firmly compressed lips collected her clothing and went into the bathroom, closing the door.

Lin stared at the closed door, then, with a deep sigh, got out of bed and dressed. He was waiting when Leah emerged from the bathroom.

Out in the deserted corridor he took her hand. It was cold and unfriendly, but he kept it.

"We must be well out into space by now," he whispered. "Notice how our weight is just about normal? The newspaper said that we are scheduled to go into hyperdrive at nine o'clock. That's about eight hours from now..."

He gave up. Leah's face was etched in lines of worry for Winnie. It was impossible to divert her thoughts.

They reached the hatchway with the sign LIFEBOATS. Lin looked both ways, then quickly opened it and helped Leah through. When he was through it he peeked back, then suddenly stiffened.

"What is it?" Leah whispered, feeling his tension.

"Shhh," he whispered.

Leah leaned over his shoulder. Down the corridor they had just come, she saw a man, a stranger. Even as she saw him he stopped before a door and placed his ear against it. She wasn't sure, but she thought it was the door to their stateroom.

"That man," Lin whispered. "How did he get on board?"

"Who is he?" Leah whispered. Lin pulled back quickly. Leah had a glimpse of the man straightening and starting toward where they were, before Lin had edged her away. Carefully Lin closed the door. Taking Leah's hand, he hurried swiftly along the corridor. "Hurry!" he hissed. "Who was he?" Leah asked, hurrying beside him.

Lin was frowning. He said, "Gregor Samsen. He's the one who got in touch with me and fixed things so Winnie could come with us. But I thought..."

"What?" Leah said.

"He gave me to understand, not by so many words, of course, that he made his living fixing so people could smuggle their vegies on board without having to pay full price. But I assumed he stayed on Venus all the time. And why would he be listening at our door at this time of the night?"

They reached the turn into the lifeship corridor and looked back. The door they had come through was starting to open. Lin jerked Leah and got around the corner quickly.

"He's coming in here!" he said. "We've got to hide."

"Where?" Leah said. "With Winnie?"

"I don't think so. Let's duck in here." It was the hatchway to lifeboat.

They crouched back in the gloom. A moment later they saw Gregor Samsen pass. They crept forward and peeked out.

Gregor had paused before the opening to lifeboat 16, and was standing in an attitude of listening. Finally he took cautious steps to the opening and went in, moving very slowly.

He was gone less than a minute, then came out and started toward Lin and Leah. They ducked back, as he passed. Then they peeked out and saw him turn the corner, going back the way he had come.

"OK," Lin whispered. They left their hiding place and went to the number 16 lifeboat.

Leah hurried in, whispering, "Winnie!" She brought up short and Lin almost ran over her.

Winnie sat on one of the pots, eyestalks drooping and arms straight out from the pear-shaped torso, unmistakably fast asleep.

Lin chuckled. "That's the vegy that couldn't live without its original pot," he said.

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Lin and Leah stole back softly the way they had come. In the stateroom once again, Leah started for the bathroom to undress. Lin said, "I'm hungry," and she came back.

They called room service and in a few minutes sandwiches and moka rode out of the service tube onto the wall table.

"I wish I knew what Samsen was doing," Lin said.

"Why didn't you ask him?" Leah said.

"I don't know," Lin said slowly. "The way he listened at our door I wonder if he's

outside listening right now?"

"Lin," Leah said. "How much did you pay him and Antone?"

"Fifty galactic dollars each," Lin said.

"Is that all?" Leah frowned at him, puzzled. "How could they make any money at that rate?"

Lin shrugged and said, "That's their business. I would have paid a couple of thousand – all I had to spare. Maybe they smuggle several vegies aboard each trip. Maybe Gregor Samsen has several stewards on each ship working with him."

"But he's on board," Leah pointed out.

"I can't understand that," Lin said.

Leah looked at him and said, "What if Winnie is the only vegy they have stowed away?"

Lin shook his head. "They couldn't make enough for it to be worth while that way." He frowned and added, "Unless... But that's absurd."

"Unless what?" Leah said.

"It would only worry you unnecessarily," Lin said. He saw at once he had made a mistake and gave in, knowing what it meant, "OK. Suppose someone wanted to leave this ship for some reason. A lifeboat would be a coffin without a vegy to provide oxygen, but the ship's vegies aren't stationed in the lifeboats and I doubt if one of them could be forced to enter one against its will, even with a gun, because a dozen bullets wouldn't hurt one much and they're strong as a man. But if that someone could be sure of a vegy already being on one particular lifeboat..."

Leah jumped up from the table. "That's it," she said. "Oh my poor Winnie! Lin, we've got to hide Winnie somewhere else. Right now. Where no one can find her."

"Sit down," a voice sounded from the closet doorway.

Lin and Leah turned. Antone Brush was standing in the closet doorway, a gun pointed at them, his lips pulled back from firm white teeth in a wedge-shaped smile. He stepped into the room.

"Sit down!" he snarled at Leah. Slowly she returned to her seat.

"We hadn't counted on your suspecting anything," Antone said. "Gregor saw you from the corner of his eye when he went by number fourteen lifeboat, and called me from one of the hall phones so I could hide in here and see how much you suspected."

"Suspected of what?" Lin said.

"You'd find out soon enough," Antone said. "The diamonds. You guessed the reason we wanted a vegy in one of the lifeboats. But if you hadn't known Gregor was on board you would have kept your mouths shut and figured the guy that stole the diamonds just happened to take number sixteen lifeboat. And even if you'd spilled everything, they couldn't prove anything on us except making a little graft smuggling a vegy." His lips pulled back wolfishly. "Now we're going to wait. Only one thing can save you. If Gregor gets caught stealing the diamonds. If that happens we can't use a murder rap. If he gets the diamonds and makes it to the lifeboat with them, the minute he touches the button that throws the lifeboat out into space a general alarm will sound through the ship. And that's the signal for you to get it. Understand? So just sit still."

"Oh, my poor Winnie," Leah moaned, almost fainting.

"How long do we have to wait?" Lin asked.

Antone shrugged. "Maybe half an hour. It has to be soon. The Astra goes faster every second. In two more hours it will be too late for Gregor to hope to use the lifeboat's chemical fuel to slow down enough to land at the hideaway. These things have to be timed just right."

"What happens to ... to Winnie?" Lin asked, his face very white.

"What do you care?" Antone said. "At the hideout we've got a chef that makes good vegy minestrone." He threw back his head and laughed.

And in that moment Lin leaped.

He caught Antone completely by surprise, but in a few seconds he realized he didn't stand a chance. His fingers brushed the gun as Antone jerked it out of reach. Belatedly Lin tried to shift his objective and get in a stunning blow, perhaps to the chin. But the chin wasn't there and he sensed a knee driving at his midsection an instant before pain exploded there and he couldn't breathe.

Then something hot grazed his right cheek. The world spun around him. Blindly he thrashed out with his arms, and felt them wrap around something. He held on, knowing that if he lost his hold he would never have another chance at anything.

"You can kill me," he shouted, "but leave Winnie alone. Leave Winnie alone! Leave Winnie alone!"

"I didn't know you cared, dear," a smug voice sounded.

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Lin opened his eyes, startled. An instant before, he had been sinking into a gulf of blackness and screaming.

No, the darkness had been there a long time, but he had just been screaming, "Leave

Winnie alone!"

And now...

He was in a bed. A woman in nurse's uniform was bending over him with a hypodermic syringe, about to plunge it into his bared arm. Next to her was a man who was obviously a doctor. He was in a hospital room.

At the foot of the bed was Leah, her eyes round and large with worry. Beside her was Winnie, three large yellow eyes looking at him, mocking him. It had been Winnie's voice he had heard.

He blushed and snarled, "Shut up and get back in that lifeboat before someone—"

"They already know," Winnie vibrated. "All is Lost!" There was mockery – and a new tenderness in the vegy's voice.

"Hush, Winnie," Leah said. She came around the bed hesitantly toward Lin. "Are you all right now?" she asked.

"What happened?" Lin said. "Did Gregor get away with the diamonds?"

"Unfortunately, yes," the doctor spoke up. "However, thanks to your vegetable friend here, it will be his undoing. They expect to pick him up shortly, but he will probably already be dead from the lack of that waste product of all vegies, oxygen."

"But you were on that lifeboat asleep!" Lin said, staring at Winnie.

"Asleep?" Winnie said indignantly. "Do you think I could sleep on a strange pot that easy?"

"But we saw you!" Lin said.

"I was pretending," Winnie said. "I heard you coming, and I wasn't going to give you the satisfaction of knowing I couldn't sleep."

"Oh," Lin said, suppressing a grin. "And I suppose you saw Gregor peek in on you and instantly knew what was going on."

"Of course," Winnie said. "And I followed you back to your stateroom and stopped that stupid steward from assassinating you."

"Did Winnie really do that?" Lin asked, looking at Leah.

Leah nodded, tears in her eyes, her hands fluttering toward Lin.

"Meanwhile," the doctor said, "the other crook had stolen the shipment of diamonds and was escaping in the lifeboat, thinking that your vegy was hiding on it." He chuckled. "There's an automatic reward system that will pay you Winnie's passage three times over, when this is all straightened out. You have nothing to worry about any more. We've been hearing the whole picture while you were unconscious."

"Him?" Winnie vibrated in a shout. "Who did all the work? Me! That's who." The vegy turned all four eyes on Lin, glaring. "And another thing, Mister Braquet, if enough money is left out of the reward after paying my passage, I want my pot shipped on the very next ship, including every grain of dirt in it. Understand?"

Lin glared back at Winnie, then looked up at Leah, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. He reached up and took Leah's hand in his.

Then he said, softly, "Yes, Winnie, I understand."

## THE YELLOW PILL

DR. CEDRIC ELTON slipped into his office by the back entrance, shucked off his topcoat and hid it in the small, narrow-doored closet, then picked up the neatly piled patient cards his receptionist Helena Fitzroy had placed on the corner of his desk. There were only four, but there could have been a hundred if he accepted everyone who asked to be his patient, because his successes had more than once been spectacular and his reputation as a psychiatrist had become so great because of this that his name had become synonymous with psychiatry in the public mind.

His eyes flicked over the top card. He frowned, then went to the small square of one-way glass in the reception room door and looked through it. There were four police officers and a man in straitjacket.

The card said the man's name was Gerald Bocek, and that he had shot and killed five people in a supermarket, and had killed one officer and wounded two others before being captured.

Except for the straitjacket, Gerald Bocek did not have the appearance of being dangerous. He was about twenty-five, with brown hair and blue eyes. There were faint wrinkles of habitual good nature about his eyes. Right now he was smiling, relaxed, and idly watching Helena, who was pretending to study various cards in her desk file but was obviously conscious of her audience.

Cedric returned to his desk and sat down. The card for Jerry Bocek said more about the killings. When captured, Bocek insisted that the people he had killed were not people at all, but blue-scaled Venusian lizards who had boarded his spaceship, and that he had only been defending himself.

Dr. Cedric Elton shook his head in disapproval. Fantasy fiction was all right in its place, but too many people took it seriously. Of course, it was not the fault of the fiction. The same type of person took other type of fantasy seriously in earlier days, burning women as witches, stoning *men* as devils—

Abruptly Cedric deflected the control on the intercom and spoke into it. "Send Gerald Bocek in, please," he said.

A moment later the door to the reception room opened. Helena flashed Cedric a scared smile and got out of the way quickly. One police officer led the way, followed by Gerald Bocek closely flanked by two officers with the fourth one in the rear, who carefully closed the door. It was impressive, Cedric decided. He nodded toward a chair in front of his desk and the police officers sat the straitjacketed man in it, then hovered nearby, ready for anything.

"You're Jerry Bocek?" Cedric asked.

The straitjacketed man nodded cheerfully.

"I'm Dr. Cedric Elton, a psychiatrist," Cedric said. "Do you have any idea at all why you have been brought to me?"

"Brought to you?" Jerry echoed, chuckling. "Don't kid me. You're my old pal, Gar Castle. Brought to you? How could I *get away* from you in this stinking tub?"

"Stinking tub?" Cedric said.

"Spaceship," Jerry said. "Look, Gar. Untie me, will you? This *non* sense has gone far enough."

"My name is Dr. Cedric Elton," Cedric enunciated. "You are not on a spaceship. You were brought to my office by the four policemen standing in back of you, and—"

Jerry Bocek turned his head and studied each of the four policemen with frank curiosity. "What *policemen*?" he interrupted. "You mean these four gear lockers?" He turned his head back and looked pityingly at Dr. Elton. "You'd better get hold of yourself, Gar," he said. "You're imagining things."

"My name is Dr. Cedric Elton," Cedric said.

Gerald Bocek leaned forward and said with equal firmness, "Your name is Gar Castle. I refuse to call you Dr. Cedric Elton because your name is Gar Castle, and I'm going to keep on calling you Gar Castle because we have to have at least one peg of rationality in all this madness or you will be cut completely adrift in this dream world you've cooked up."

Cedric's eyebrows shot halfway up to his hairline.

"Funny," he mused, smiling. "That's exactly what I was just *going* to say to you!"

Cedric continued to smile. Jerry's serious intensesness slowly faded. Finally an answering smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. When it became a grin Cedric laughed, and Jerry began to laugh with him. The four police officers looked at one another uneasily.



"Well!" Cedric finally gasped. "I guess that puts us on an even footing! You're nuts to me and I'm nuts to you!"

"An equal footing is right!" Jerry shouted in high glee. Then abruptly he sobered. "Except," he said gently, "I'm tied up."

"In a strait jacket," Cedric corrected.

"Ropes," Jerry said firmly.

"You're dangerous," Cedric said. "You killed six people, one of them a police officer, and wounded two other officers."

"I blasted five Venusian lizard pirates who boarded our ship," Jerry said, "and melted the door off of one food locker, and seared the paint on two others. You know as well as I do, Gar, how space madness causes you to personify everything. That's why they drill into you that the minute you think there are more people on board the ship than there were at the beginning of the trip you'd better go to the medicine locker and take a yellow pill. They can't hurt anything but a delusion."

"If that is so," Cedric said, "why *are you* in a strait jacket?"

"I'm tied up with ropes," Jerry said patiently. "You tied me up. Remember?"

"And those four police officers behind you are gear lockers?" Cedric said. "O.K., if one, of those gear lockers comes around in front of you and taps you on the jaw with his fist, would you still believe it's a gear locker?"

Cedric nodded to one of the officers, and the man came around in front of Gerald Bocek and, quite carefully, hit him hard enough to rock his head but not hurt him.

Jerry's eyes blinked with surprise, then he looked at Cedric and smiled.

"Did you feel that?" Cedric said quietly.

"Feel what?" Jerry said. "Oh!" He laughed. "You imagined that one of the gear lockers – a police officer, in your dream world – came around in front of me and hit me?" He shook his head in pity. "Don't you understand, Gar, that it didn't really happen? Untie me and I'll prove it. Before your very eyes I'll open the door on your *Policeman* and take out the pressure suit, or magnetic grapple, or whatever is in it. Or are you afraid to? You've surrounded yourself with all sorts of protective delusions. I'm tied with ropes, but you imagine it to be a straitjacket. You imagine yourself to be a psychiatrist named Dr. Cedric Elton, so that you can convince yourself that you're sane and I'm crazy. Probably you imagine yourself a *very famous psychiatrist* that everyone would like to come to for treatment. World famous, no doubt. Probably you even think you have a beautiful receptionist? What is her name?"

"Helena Fitzroy," Cedric said.

Jerry nodded. "It figures," he said resignedly. "Helena Fitzroy is the Expediter at Mars Port. You try to date her every time we land there, but she won't date you."

"Hit him again," Cedric said to the officer. While Jerry's head was still rocking from the blow, Cedric said, "Now! Is it my imagination that your head is still rocking from the blow?"

"What blow?" Jerry said, smiling serenely. "I felt no blow."

"Do you mean to say," Cedric said incredulously, "that there is no corner of your mind, no slight residue of rationality, that tries to tell you your rationalizations aren't reality?"

Jerry smiled ruefully. "I have to admit," he said, "when you seem so absolutely certain you're right and I'm nuts, it almost makes me doubt. Untie me, Gar, and let's try to work this thing out sensibly." He grinned. "You know, Gar, *one* of us has to be nuttier than a fruit cake."

"If I had the officers take off your strait jacket, what would you do?" Cedric asked. "Try to grab a gun and kill some more people?"

"That's one of the things I'm worried about," Jerry said. "If those pirates came back, with me tied up, you're just space crazy enough to welcome them aboard. That's why you *must* untie me. Our lives may depend on it, Gar."

"Where would you get a gun?" Cedric asked.

"Where they're always kept," Jerry said. "In the gear lockers."

Cedric looked at the four policemen, at their revolvers bolstered at their hip, and sighed. One of them grinned feebly at him.

"I'm afraid we can't take your strait jacket off just yet," Cedric said. "I'm going to have the officers take you back now. I'll talk with you again tomorrow. Meanwhile I want you to think seriously about things. Try to get below this level of rationalization that walls you off from reality. Once you make a dent in it the whole delusion will vanish." He looked up at the officers. "All right, take him away. Bring him back the same time tomorrow."

The officers urged Jerry to his feet. Jerry looked down at Cedric, a gentle expression on his face. "I'll try to do that, Gar," he said. "And I hope you do the same thing. I'm much encouraged. Several times I detected genuine doubt in your eyes. And—" Two of the officers pushed him firmly toward the door. As they opened it Jerry turned his head and looked back. "*Take* one of those yellow pills in the medicine locker, Gar," he pleaded. "It can't hurt you. "

At a little before five thirty Cedric tactfully eased his last patient all the way across the reception room and out, then locked the door and leaned his back against it.

"Today was rough," he sighed.

Helena glanced up at him briefly, then continued typing. "I only have a little more on this last transcript," she said.

A minute later she pulled the paper from the typewriter and placed it on the neat stack beside her.

"I'll sort and file them in the morning," she said. "It was rough, wasn't it, doctor? That Gerald Bocek is the most unusual patient you've had since I've worked for you. And poor Mr. Potts. A brilliant executive, making half a million a year, and he's going to have to give it up. He seems so normal."

"He is normal," Cedric said. "People with above normal blood pressure often have very minor cerebral hemorrhages so small that the affected area is no larger than the head of a pin. All that happens is that they completely forget things that they knew. They can relearn them, but a man whose judgment must always be perfect can't afford to take the chance. He's already made one error in judgment that cost his company a million and a half. That's why I consented to take him on as a – Gerald Bocek really upset me, Helena. I *consented* to take a five hundred thousand dollar a year executive as a patient."

"He was frightening, wasn't he," Helena said. "I don't mean so much because he's a mass murderer as—"

"I know. I know," Cedric said. "Let's prove him wrong. Have dinner with me."

"We agreed—"

"Let's break the agreement this once.

Helena shook her head firmly. "Especially not now," she said. "Besides, it wouldn't prove anything. He's got you boxed in on that point. *If* I went to dinner with you, it would only show that a wish fulfillment entered your dream world."

"Ouch," Cedric said, wincing. "That's a dirty word. I wonder how he knew about the yellow pills? I can't get out of my mind the fact that if we had spaceships and *if* there was a type of space madness in which you began to personify objects, a yellow pill would be the right thing to stop that."

"How?" Helena said.

"They almost triple the strength of nerve currents from end organs. What results is that reality practically shouts down any fantasy insertions. It's quite startling. I took one three years ago when they first became available. You'd be surprised how little you actually see of what you look at, especially of people. You look at symbol inserts instead. I had to cancel my appointments for a week. I found I couldn't work without my professionally built symbol inserts about people that enable me to see them – not as they really are – but as a complex of normal and abnormal

symptoms."

"I'd like to take one sometime," Helena said.

"That's a twist," Cedric said, laughing. "One of the characters in a dream world takes a yellow pill and discovers it doesn't exist at all except as a fantasy."

"Why don't we both take one," Helena said.

"Uh uh," Cedric said firmly. "I couldn't do my work."

"You're afraid you might wake up on a spaceship?" Helena said, grinning.

"Maybe I am," Cedric said. "Crazy, isn't it? But there is one thing today that stands out as a serious flaw in my reality. It's so glaring that I actually am afraid to ask you about it."

"Are you serious?" Helena said.

"I am." Cedric nodded. "How does it happen that the police brought Gerald Bocek here to my office instead of holding him in the psychiatric ward at City Hospital and having me go there to see him? How does it happen the D.A. didn't get in touch with me beforehand and discuss the case with me?"

"I... I don't know!" Helena said. "I received no call. They just showed up, and I assumed they wouldn't have without your knowing about it and telling them to. Mrs. Fortesque was your first patient and I called her at once and caught her just as she was leaving the house, and told her an emergency case had come up." She looked at Cedric with round, startled eyes.

"Now we know how the patient must feel," Cedric said, crossing the reception room to his office door. "Terrifying, isn't it, to think that if I took a yellow pill all this might *vanish* – my years of college, my internship, *my fame as the world's best known psychiatrist*, and you. Tell me, Helena, are you sure you aren't an Expediter at Marsport?"

He leered at her mockingly as he slowly closed the door, cutting off his view of her...

Cedric put his coat away and went directly to the small square of one-way glass in the reception room door. Gerald Bocek, still in straitjacket, was there, and so were the same four police officers.

Cedric went to his desk and, without sitting down, deflected the control on the intercom.

"Helena," he said, "before you send in Gerald Bocek get me the D.A. on the phone."

He glanced over the four patient cards while waiting. Once he rubbed his eyes gently. He had had a restless night.

When the phone rang he reached for it. "Hello? Dave?" he said. "About this patient, Gerald Bocek—"

"I was going to call you today," the District Attorney's voice sounded. "I called you yesterday morning at ten, but no one answered, and I haven't had time since. Our police psychiatrist, Walters, says you might be able to snap Bocek out of it in a couple of days – at least long enough so that we can get some sensible answers out of him. Down underneath his delusion of killing lizard pirates from Venus there has to be some reason for that mass killing, and the press is after us on this."

"But why bring him to my office?" Cedric said. "It's O.K., of course, but ... that is ... I didn't think you could! Take a patient out of the ward at City Hospital and transport him around town."

"I thought that would be less of an imposition on you," the D.A. said. "I'm in a hurry on it."

"Oh," Cedric said. "Well, O.K., Dave. He's out in the waiting room. I'll do my best to snap him back to reality for you."

He hung up slowly, frowning, "*Less of an imposition!*" His whispered words floated into his ears as he snapped into the intercom, "Send Gerald Bocek in, please."

The door from the reception room opened, and once again the procession of patient and police officers entered.

"Well, well, good morning, Gar," Jerry said. "Did you sleep well? I could hear you talking to yourself most of the night."

"I am Dr. Cedric Elton," Cedric said firmly.

"Oh, yes," Jerry said. "I promised to try to see things your way, didn't I? I'll try to cooperate with you, Dr. Elton." Jerry turned to the four officers. "Let's see now, these gear lockers are policemen, aren't they. How do you do, Officers." He bowed to them, then looked around him. "And," he said, "this is your office, Dr. Elton. A very impressive office. That thing you're sitting behind is not the chart table but your desk, I gather." He studied the desk intently. "All metal, with a gray finish, isn't t?"

"All wood," Cedric said. "Walnut."

"Yes, of course," Jerry murmured. "How stupid of me. I really want to get into your reality, Gar ... I mean Dr. Elton. Or get you into mine. I'm the one who's at a disadvantage, though. Tied up, I can't get into the medicine locker and take a yellow pill like you can. Did you take one yet?"

Not yet," Cedric said.

"Uh, why don't you describe your office to me, Dr. Elton?" Jerry said. "Let's make a game of it. Describe parts of things and then let me see if I can fill in the rest. Start

with your desk. It's genuine walnut? An executive style desk. Go on from there."

"All right," Cedric said. "Over here to my right is the intercom, made of gray plastic. And directly in front of me is the telephone."

"Stop," Jerry said. "Let me see if I can tell you your telephone number." He leaned over the desk and looked at the telephone, trying to keep his balance in spite of his arms being encased in the straitjacket. "Hm-m-m," he said, frowning. "Is the number Mulberry five dash nine oh three seven?"

"No," Cedric said. "It's Cedar sev—"

"Stop!" Jerry said. "Let me say it. It's Cedar seven dash four three nine nine."

"So you did read it and were just having your fun," Cedric snorted.

"If you say so," Jerry said.

"What other explanation can you have for the fact that it is my number, if you're unable to actually see reality?" Cedric said.

"You're absolutely right, Dr. Elton," Jerry said. "I think I understand the tricks my mind is playing on me now. I read the number on your phone, but it didn't enter my conscious awareness. Instead, it cloaked itself with the pattern of my delusion, so that consciously I pretended to look at a phone that I couldn't see, and I thought, 'His phone number will obviously be one he's familiar with.' The most probable is the home phone of Helena Fitzroy in Marsport, so I gave you that, but it wasn't it. When you said Cedar I knew right away it was your own apartment phone number."

Cedric sat perfectly still. Mulberry 5-9037 was actually Helena's apartment phone number. He hadn't recognized it until Gerald Bocek told him.

"Now you're beginning to understand," Cedric said after a moment. "Once you realize that your mind has walled off your consciousness from reality, and is substituting a rationalized pattern of symbology in its place, it shouldn't be long until you break through. Once you manage to see one thing as it really is, the rest of the delusion will disappear."

"I understand now," Jerry said gravely. "Let's have some more of it. Maybe I'll catch on."

They spent an hour at it. Toward the end Jerry was able to finish the descriptions of things with very little error.

"You are definitely beginning to get through," Cedric said with enthusiasm.

Jerry hesitated. "I suppose so," he said. "I must. But on the conscious level I have the idea – a rationalization, of course – that I am beginning to catch on to the pattern of your imagination so that when you give me one or two key elements I can fill in the rest. But I'm going to try, really try Dr. Elton."

"Fine," Cedric said heartily. "I'll see you tomorrow, same time. We should make the breakthrough then."

When the four Officers had taken Gerald Bocek away, Cedric went into the outer office.

"Cancel the rest of my appointments," he said.

"But why?" Helena protested.

"Because I'm upset!" Cedric said.

"How did a madman whom I never knew until yesterday know your phone number?"

"He could have looked it up in the phone book," Helena said.

"Locked in a room in the psychiatric ward at City Hospital?" Cedric said. "How did he know your name yesterday?"

"Why," Helena said, "all he had to do was read it on my desk here."

Cedric looked down at the brass nameplate.

"Yes," he grunted. "Of course. I'd forgotten about that. I'm so accustomed to it being there that I never see it."

He turned, abruptly and went back into his office.

He sat down at his desk, then got up and went into the sterile whiteness of his compact laboratory. Ignoring the impressive battery of electronic instruments he went to the medicine cabinet. Inside, on the top shelf, was the glass-stoppered bottle he wanted. Inside it were a hundred vivid yellow pills. He shook out one and put the bottle away, then went back into his office. He sat down, placing the yellow pill in the center of the white note pad.

There was a brief knock on the door to the reception room and the door opened. Helena came in.

"I've canceled all your other appointments for today," she said. "Why don't you go out to the golf course? A change will do you—" She saw the yellow pill in the center of the white note pad and stopped.

"Why do you look so frightened?" Cedric said. "Is it because, if I take this little yellow pill, you'll cease to exist?"

"Don't joke," Helena said.

"I'm not joking," Cedric said. "Out there, when you mentioned about your brass name plate on your desk, when I looked down it was blurred for just a second, then became sharply distinct and solid. And into my head popped the memory that the first thing I do when I have to get a new receptionist is get a brass name plate for

her, and when she quits I make her a present of it."

"But that's the truth," Helena said. "You told me all about it when I started working for you. You also told me that while you still had your reason about you I was to solemnly promise that I would never accept an invitation from you for dinner or anything else, because business could not mix with pleasure. Do you remember that?"

"I remember," Cedric said. "A nice pat rationalization in any man's reality to make the rejection be my own before you could have time *to* reject me yourself. Preserving the ego is the first principle of madness."

"But it isn't!" Helena said. "Oh, darling, I'm *here!* This is *real!* I don't care if you fire me or not. I've loved you forever, and you mustn't let that mass murderer get you down. I actually think he isn't insane at all, but has just figured out a way to seem insane so he won't have to pay for his crime."

"You think so?" Cedric said, interested. "It's a possibility. But he would have to be as good a psychiatrist as I am. You see? Delusions of grandeur."

"Sure," Helena said, laughing thinly. "Napoleon was obviously insane because he thought he was Napoleon."

"Perhaps," Cedric said. "But you must admit that if you are real, my taking this yellow pill isn't going to change that, but only confirm the fact."

"And make it impossible for you to do your work for a week," Helena said.

"A small price to pay for sanity," Cedric said. "No, *I'm* going to take it."

"You aren't!" Helena said, reaching for it.

Cedric picked it up an instant before she could get it. As she tried to get it away from him he evaded her and put it in his mouth. A loud gulp showed he had swallowed it.

He sat back and looked up at Helena curiously.

"Tell me, Helena," he said gently. "Did you know all the time that you were only a creature of my imagination? The reason I want to know is—"

He closed his eyes and clutched his head in his hands.

"God!" he groaned. "I feel like I'm dying! I didn't feel like this the other time I took one."

Suddenly his mind steadied, and his thoughts cleared. He opened his eyes.

On the chart table in front of him the bottle of yellow pills lay on its side, pills scattered all over the table. On the other side of the control room lay Jerry Bocek,



his back propped against one of the four gear lockers, sound asleep, with so many ropes wrapped around him that it would probably be impossible for him to stand up.

Against the far wall were three other gear lockers, two of them with their paint badly scorched the third with *its door half melted off*.

And in various positions about the control room were the half charred bodies of five blue scaled Venusian lizards,

A dull ache rose in Gar's chest. Helena Fitzroy was gone. Gone – when she had just confessed she loved him.

Unbidden, a memory came into Gar's mind. Dr. Cedric Elton was the psychiatrist who had examined him when he got his pilot's license for third-class freighters–

"God!" Gar groaned again. And suddenly he was sick. He made a dash for the washroom, and after a while he felt better.

When he straightened up from the wash basin he looked at his reflection in the mirror for a long time, clinging to his hollow cheeks and sunken eyes. He must have been out of his head for two or three days.

The first time. Awful! Somehow, he had never quite believed in space madness.

Suddenly he remembered Jerry, Poor Jerry!

Gar lurched from the washroom back into the control room. Jerry was awake. He looked up at Gar, forcing a smile to his lips,

"Hello, Dr. Elton," Jerry said.

Gar stopped – as though shot.

"It's happened, Dr. Elton, just as you said it would," Jerry said, his smile widening.

"Forget that," Gar growled. "I took a yellow pill. I'm back to normal, again."

*Jerry's smile* vanished abruptly. "I know what I did now," he said. "It's *terrible*. I killed six people. But *I'm* sane now. I'm willing to take what's coming to me."

"Forget that!" Gar snarled. "You don't have to humor me now. Just a minute I'll untie you."

"Thanks," doctor," Jerry said. "It will sure be a relief to get out of this strait jacket."

Gar knelt beside Jerry and untied the knots in the ropes and unwound them from around Jerry's chest and legs.

"You'll be all right in a minute," Gar said, massaging Jerry's limp arms. The physical and *nervous* strain of sitting there immobilized had been rugged.

Slowly he worked circulation back into Jerry, then helped him to his feet.

"You don't need to worry, Dr. Elton," Jerry said. "I don't know why I killed those people, but I know I would never do such a thing again, I must have been insane."

"Can you stand now?" Gar said, letting go of him. .

Jerry took a few steps back and forth, unsteadily at first, then with better coordination. His resemblance to a robot decreased with exercise.

Gar was beginning to feel sick again. He fought it.

"You O.K. now, Jerry boy?" he asked worriedly.

"I'm fine now, Dr. Elton," Jerry said. "And thanks for everything you've done for me."

Abruptly Jerry turned and went over to the airlock door and opened it.

"Good-bye now, Dr. Elton," he said.

"Wait!" Gar screamed, leaping toward Jerry.

But Jerry had stepped into the air lock and closed the door. Gar tried to open it, but already Jerry had turned on the pump that would evacuate the air from the lock.

Screaming Jerry's name senselessly in horror, Gar watched through the small square of thick glass in the door as Jerry's chest quickly expanded, then collapsed as a mixture of phlegm and blood dribbled from his nostrils and lips, and his eyes enlarged and glazed over, then one of them ripped open and collapsed, its fluid draining down his cheek.

He watched as Jerry glanced to the side of the air lock and spun the wheel that opened the airlock to the vacuum of space, and stepped out—

And when Gar finally stopped screaming and sank to the deck, sobbing, his knuckles were broken and bloody from pounding on barren metal.

## **EXECUTIONER No. 43**

THE PADDED SWINGING DOOR was twenty feet high and seven feet wide. I pushed it open and stepped inside, and looked down the length of the bar, seeing nothing but backs. Huge, hostile, shoulder to shoulder. Human backs, yes but over two times human size.

I felt the hostility. An instinctive fear of the menace in the sheer tonnage of those

backs constricted my throat, but at once a protective, compensating hatred flowed in. These were Endronians. They were human in ancestry, but the planet Endron had changed them.

I strode down the length of the bar, the backs looming above me to my right, a living cliff. Size twenty-two shoes were hooked over the rungs of the stools. The top of the bar was at my eye-level.

Though no one turned to look at me, they knew I was there, and they knew why. The silence was absolute as they waited – and hated.

I reached the only empty stool in the place. I lifted my foot to the rail, and pulled myself up. The giant to my right turned his head and looked down at me with curiously flat eyes, got off his stool, and walked away toward the back. I watched him go, and suddenly I knew he was afraid.

The herd noises gradually resumed, and from the front sounded a sudden deep rumble of protest as someone tried to leave and was turned back by the native Endronian police, who now had this building sealed off and would permit no one to enter or leave until I had finished. The bartender was a dwarf, seven feet tall with shoulders four and a half feet wide and coffee brown eyes in a massive face that seemed molded from bread dough. He moved toward me. "Want something?" he breathed.

"Bourbon with seltzer on the side," I said, conscious that my baritone voice sounded high pitched to his ears.

If he felt any fear, he concealed it well. He reached upward, and two objects seemed to materialize in his elephantine fingers, one a half-pint shot glass of Bourbon, the other a two-quart glass partly filled with sparkling liquid and three-inch ice cubes. He put both gently on the bar in front of me. I fished out a coin and laid it down with equal gentleness. He touched it with a finger whose tip covered it completely, flicked it deftly off the bar into his palm.

Someone slipped onto the stool to my right.

It was a blonde with a husky voice, who said, "Buy me a drink, handsome?"

She had smooth white shoulders with nothing on them, a goddess-like face that looked down at me with dreamy blue eyes, satin smooth complexion, nostrils, and lips that were oversize perfection. I saw dreams lurking in her eyes, and sick fear.

I thought of Nalda. My wife who had gone after I lost two fingers on my left hand. The same sick fear had looked out of Nalda's eyes...

I glanced at the dwarf, and returned to my study of the fear in the girl's eyes.

The lazy smile on her lips congealed. She made an imperceptible motion to slide off the stool, caught the dwarf's equally imperceptible shake of the head, and remained

where she was.

"Sure," I said finally.

She blinked. The smile connected to her face again. The dwarf materialized a shot glass containing a half-pint of zero-proof cold tea.

Five repetitions and fifteen minutes later I'd finished half my drink, her hand was on my knee and I was suggesting a booth.

"Can't," she said. "I have to do my dance in a minute, but I'll be back."

She slid off the stool, brushing her breast against my face. I caught the faint scent of her perfume. Then she was walking away, eight and a half feet of female, beautifully proportioned, hips swaying slightly as she moved, blonde hair draped around her shoulders like something out of Heaven. Like Nalda.

Would I choose her? I turned back to my drink.

Through the curtain behind the bar and next to the stage a well-groomed giant appeared. The pads under the smoothly tailored sport coat he wore pushed his shoulders out to an artificial width of fully six feet, which his thirteen feet of height could carry easily.

He sat down on the table-size piano bench, pulled his trouser legs up to preserve the razor crease. His enormous hands played over the two-inch-wide piano keys in an experimental melody with a swift and casual expertness.

I watched him. I had played the piano once myself, a long time ago...

His sleek head, huge as a hippo's, turned slowly as he surveyed the semidarkness of the crowded bar, pausing only briefly as his eyes rested on me. His left hand reached inside his coat and extracted a cigarette half-an-inch thick and ten-inches long, while his right hand carried the swift melody and his eyes went on searching the line-up along the bar.

A mammoth lighter appeared in his left hand. A small brush fire burst into life, moved up to the end of the cigarette. Clouds of thick smoke billowed from the huge nostrils, the big lips. The rhythm of the melody being carried by the right hand changed subtly, the left hand joined in... I gripped the edge of the bar to still the ache in my fingers, my soul.

And the girl who had left me swept onto the stage on five-inch heels, trailing yard upon yard of evening dress, put on only so that it could be taken off during her strip.

"She's good," a voice to my left breathed at me, so low pitched I could feel the individual vibrations.

I glanced up at the man's face, the worry in his saucer-like eyes. He wore an unpressed suit that did not hide his beer paunch. His nose was big as my fist, his

chin and cheeks were covered by a forest of stubble thick as wire and the color of rusted iron.

His voice had been anxious, fawning. When I didn't reply he said, "She's little. Not too big for you, really." His fat lips leered with intimate meaning. "She could be a lot of fun for you."

I turned my head and looked up at him. I saw the color of his face change from an unhealthy red to pasty gray, the blue lacework in the whites of his eyes become more pronounced. His mouth dropped slackly open, but he said nothing more.

I turned my attention back to the girl and her dance, the piano player with the giant cigarette dangling from his lips, the ash on it long enough to break off at any moment. After a moment I glanced to my left and saw that the stool was now vacant. I felt a vague disappointment. The music from the piano became slow, voluptuous. The girl matched its mood with her suggestive rhythm, her dreamy mask of a smile. Every few minutes she took off something else and poised in mock daring, waiting for the loud clapping of the dwarf bartender and anyone else in an appreciative mood. Not many customers were.

Now and then she directed her dance toward me, and I sensed the eyes of the piano player on me, studying me.

From the slight dilation of his pupils I was sure he was slightly hopped – enough to be a fatalist, not enough to convince himself he was God. I could sympathize with his mood. I caught his eye and smiled slowly.

His fingers stumbled briefly. The ash on his cigarette broke loose, dropping onto the piano keys, immediately to be trampled by his fingers in a sequence of off-beat cover-up chords.

The girl was down to her G string and net bra, toying with both as though she might take them off. She was built well – no doubt about that. Here and there a desultory clap coaxed her, exploding into the underlying tenseness, dying abruptly as though sound itself were something to fear.

Suddenly I became aware of someone towering behind me. An alcoholic breath engulfed me. The girl had seen whoever it was. She stood halfway through the curtain, her net bra dangling from her hand, her eyes round and terrified, staring over my head.

The piano had stopped in mid note. The sounds of slow breathing, of ponderous movement – the herd noises – were suspended, and there was only the hot animal breath of the man who towered behind me.

I could feel his mood. Hatred of me and what I represented. Contemptuous dismissal of the cost to his race if he touched me. A growing urge to crush me, feel my bones snap under his probing fingers.

An enormous hand clamped onto the edge of the bar, a wrist thick as my waist extending upward into a sleeve that could have fit over my shoulders. The veins stood out on the hand like water hose, the fingernails were ugly slabs. A gigantic bulk brushed against me. Weak with relief, I realized the man was sitting down on the stool to my left.

I looked up past the enormous shoulder to the face. The lips were leering. The bloodshot eyes focused on me.

An almost subaudible voice roared from the lips. "Who you gonna kill, Earthman? Who you gonna kill?" It was followed by a gust of gale-force laughter, accompanied by a stench that was bad breath magnified a thousand times.

I stared up into his eyes. His laughter ended abruptly. He licked his lips with a soft, plopping sound that seemed abnormally loud.

"I haven't made up my mind yet," I said finally, my voice seeming to echo shrilly in the silence.

Abruptly the piano jarred to staccato life, the herd sounds resumed their normal tempo. The giant licked his lips, his tongue a huge slab of jaundiced meat.

I turned away. A new stripper had moved onto the stage. At least eleven feet high. And wide... Wide? I had never seen anything as wide. Each of her breasts must have weighed fifty pounds, her buttocks were pachydermic. I noticed just before I stopped watching her that her feet were relatively small and there was a certain grace to her dance.

After that I watched the piano player's hands move over the keyboard. And in my mind the memory of long forgotten audiences, my own piano, rose – and died. And in my ear the husky voice of the girl who was not Nalda whispered, "Hello again, honey."

I dropped off the stool to the floor and as we moved toward the booths in the back she took my hand. I felt its softness, its warmth. It wasn't much larger than mine. She was, I began to realize, very small for a giant, and very beautiful.

The music of the piano player followed us, and when we reached a booth she slid in without releasing my hand, and pulled me in beside her. Under the table she placed my hand against her thigh, holding it there. Her eyes were very bright. She slumped down until she seemed little taller than I, and said, "Kiss me, darling. Please. Please kiss me."

"Sure," I murmured. "Sure."

Her lips were hot, feverish, hungry: Her body trembled under my touch. Her eyes remained open, too bright in the darkness. Her hands reached around me, dug into my back, pulling me closer. Fear clothed her – fear, and something else. She moaned softly.

I pulled away from the kiss and her lips remained formed, her too bright eyes staring without seeing. Glistening tears had formed in them and as I watched they spilled out, forming rivulets on her cheeks.

With sudden irritation I pulled all the way away from her. Her eyes focused on her surroundings, then on my face, bewildered.

"You feel it too," I said harshly.

"I can't help it," she said. Her lips quivered. "I tried..." And then in a flat voice, "I suppose you will choose me to kill?"

Instead of answering I brought out my cigarettes, king size. She accepted one. It was small between her lips but not as small as it would have been between the lips of the piano player.

My lighter flared in the gloom. I lit our cigarettes, then held the flame near to the face of my wristwatch. It was ten forty-five. An hour and fifteen minutes to twelve,

"I don't want to die," she said, not looking at me.

"Few of us do," I said.

"I know it should be someone like me," she rushed on, unable to stop. "I'm no good. *I* want to die, sometimes. Sometimes ... when I go to my room at the hotel, alone. My stinking room at the hotel—" Her voice was ragged.

She gripped my arm. "Look," she breathed. "You have how long? An hour? Maybe a little longer? Let's go to my room. I'll make you happy. I promise. We can set the alarm for five minutes of twelve so we don't forget. Then, when it's over..."

"Sure," I said tonelessly. "Then I could kill you."

"But then I would be willing—" She brought her hand up and clamped her teeth on her finger, her eyes wide.

"Sure you would," I said. "But do you think it's easy to kill someone? Let me tell you, sometimes it's easier to die. Let me tell you something. Remember when you were finishing your dance and that drunk stood behind me? I hoped he would kill me."

"But that would have meant a whole city!" she said. "The price for the death of an Executioner!"

"I know," I said. "Selfish of me. So instead I'll kill someone before midnight and I'll live to remember it for a long time."

"Wouldn't it be better to have some – pleasant – memories with it?" she stumbled. "Please. We can slip out of here."

"No!" I said.

"Please!" She tried to pull me against her. "Please! And then you can kill me!"

"No!" I said, and shoved her away. She hung on, and I said, "God damn you, no!" I lifted my hand to hit her, to beat her ... to strangle her.

Then, suddenly, she was in focus, and she was not Nalda. I pulled out a cigarette and my hand shook.

"Who is it?" I said. "Who are you trying to protect? The dwarf?"

Alarm, relief, then cunning played over her face.

"Yes," she whispered, "It was Shorty. I-I love him." She gripped my arm suddenly, words rushing out. "Please don't kill him. I-I'm going to have a baby and Shorty – he's going to marry me—"

"Nuts!" I said, and got up from the booth and walked stiffly back to the bar. My drink was still there. The bourbon burned my throat.

The fat girl had been replaced on the stage by a willowy redhead about eleven and a half feet tall who was down to her G-string. I watched her a moment, and saw fear grow in her, her dance begin to fall apart.

I turned my eyes away toward the piano player, watched the fluid movement of his fingers.

Gradually I became aware of a change in the noises around me. There was a new note in the rumble of subdued talk. Here and there a voice rose above the sound of the piano. The piano player played louder.

"Hey, Earthman!" someone shouted, and immediately someone else shouted, "Shut up, Joe!"

An argument began. Another.

I looked at my watch. It was eleven twenty. I wished I knew who I was going to kill.

The talking grew louder. Mob panic might make someone forget that killing me would result in a whole city being destroyed by a bomb from space. That was the Code and the Code had to stand or civilization would fall. Without the principal of impersonal, inflexible retaliation, the race hatreds of the thousands of diverging species of Man would flare up, eventually isolating the planet.

The willowy redhead danced uncertainly, disconcerted by the growing noise and shouting.

The music stopped in a crescendo of sound. The piano player sat looking down at the keys. He was probably thinking, "Should I get up and walk out casually, and



hope the Earthman won't notice me?" He remained still for long moments. Then, without moving his body, he let his hands move over the keys. Lightly.

A sudden focus of motion halfway toward the front attracted my attention. I saw a huge figure of a man surge up over the bar, landing behind it. The dwarf on his short thick legs trotted toward the man, his face angry. The man stepped up onto the stage, the ceiling clearing his head by inches,

"Quiet everybody!" he shouted, lifting his hands. "I've got something to say." The noise died down to a sporadic voice here and there. The dwarf came to a stop halfway up over the edge of the stage, then thoughtfully dropped back to the floor.

"My name is Joe," the man on the stage said, his voice deep and thunderous. "Listen to me. We all know the Code. Put yourself in the Earthman's position. He has a job to do. Somebody on this planet killed a little yellow-haired man from Ceti Three. For that, one of us here tonight must die, just as forty-nine other Endronians must die in other towns tonight. I'm asking for volunteers. I'm volunteering myself. There must be a few of you who don't care whether you live or die. Let the Earthman kill one of us who volunteers. What can be fairer than that?" He sought me out with his eyes and grinned at me sardonically.

A thick silence settled over the place. I saw his line of reasoning. He knew the Code better than most people, and thought he could defeat me. But his plan depended upon everyone in the place knowing what he was thinking, what he couldn't say. To compensate for that weakness there might be true volunteers and a final rush of stragglers to remain with the herd.

At a spot near where Joe had climbed over the bar four men stood up together and used their stools as steps to get onto the bar. They leaped from the bar to the stage, their combined tonnage causing the bar to shudder. These were the skills upon which the scheme hinged.

The piano player, in player-piano style, began the slow dirge of "Almost Persuaded." He got a few nervous laughs.

Toward the back end of the bar another gigantic figure went over the bar and moved toward the stage. Here was the first true volunteer. His eyes held fear and determination. His coarse skin glistened with nervous perspiration. His sobbing was the muted rumbling of subway trains. In his own mind he was going to certain death – but he was going.

Others were joining those on the stage. It kept on until there were over twenty volunteers for death. Then, abruptly, there were no more. The one called Joe pleaded with them, appealed to their nobler sentiments, even hinted at safety in numbers, repeating over and over that only one could die.

As I watched him, the minutes growing shorter, the backstage curtains parted. The blonde, diminutive among the giants around her, pushed to the front of the stage.

"All right!" she said brassily. "It can be me too, and if it is I want to die doing my strip." She turned to the volunteers with a too bright smile and said, "Stand back, suckers, and give a girl some room."

"Almost Persuaded" altered its cadence under the shifting touch of the piano player's thick long fingers, developed a dance rhythm, lost its melody in transitional arpeggios, and became one of the standard dance numbers. The volunteers were jostling one another for position along the back of the stage. The girl's hand twined upward. Her hips began to sway. Her feet went into the first steps of her dance routine. I lifted my arm and glanced at my wristwatch.

It was ten minutes to twelve.

I glanced along the bar, at the many empty stools and the scattering of eighteen or twenty holdouts. It looked like a Monday night when most of the regulars are home eating aspirin. I sat in the center of a twelve-stool vacancy. Those still at the bar mostly avoided looking in my direction.

How many of those who had not volunteered knew the Code well enough to know that it was preferred that no volunteers be killed – and had deliberately chosen the dangerous course? Those were the really brave ones... I was glad I could not tell which were the brave ones.

One of those at the bar, a well dressed kid with glasses and white hands, had his eyes on me, watching me with excitement, knowing that time was short, not wanting to miss the first motion of my hand toward the proton gun at my belt. Not wanting to miss the fun.

"All right!" the giant called Joe shouted suddenly. "It's almost midnight! What are you waiting for, Earthman? Take your pick!"

The girl lost step for a second, then continued her dance, a smile frozen on her face.

I stood up on a rung of my stool, so that my elbow cleared the bar. Steadying myself – with my left hand, I turned my face toward those on the stage as I slowly drew the gun from its holster.

Finally I stared at Shorty, the dwarf bartender, until I sensed from the corner of my eye a flash of hope on the girl's face. I'd been right about that, then – it wasn't Shorty she worried about.

I swung around, looked down the room at the piano player, holding the gun loosely. I heard the girl gasp, just barely. I gave her credit – she went on dancing.

I kept my eyes on the piano player, who seemed unaware of me. Kill him, and I'd hurt the girl more than if I killed *her*. Shoot off a finger, hurt him as much as she had hurt me ... shoot off her ears, make her ugly, make him scorn her ... kill Shorty, let her think she'd won – then shoot her too ... kill Nalda, get it over with ... kill ...

I swung to Nalda ... to the blonde who was not Nalda but was as close to her as anyone I'd been able to find in this town. She was the one to kill. Killing the real Nalda had not been enough – I had to go on killing her wherever I could find her. That's why I was an Executioner.

I opened my mouth to call her and tell her what I was going to do, make her die just a little before I fired. My hand shook...

I closed my mouth and sat back on the stool for a moment. Then I stepped down to the floor, lifted the gun, aimed quickly, pressed the trigger. The proton charge, moving at two-thirds the speed of light, left the sterile scent of ozone.

The piano stopped in mid-chord, the blonde screamed. Down the bar, the sick, excitement-hungry kid with white hands toppled from his stool, a black hole in his chest. His glasses smashed when he hit the floor.

There was a growing rumble of sound behind me as I walked to the great swinging door. I didn't listen – I was trying to think why I'd done it.

It had suddenly come to me back there that you can't kill anybody more than once – that one girl is just one girl, with just one life.

And the stupid, unimportant little thing that made me know that was the fact that when I opened my mouth to talk to the blonde, I realized I didn't even know her name...

## **THE HOLES IN MY HEAD**

I PULLED the letter out of my pocket, looked at it, and then looked at the number on the mailbox. They were the same. I looked across the stretch of weed patch at the front of the house, taking in the broken window patched with cardboard, and the lap siding which looked like it had never been painted. I shifted my gaze to the roof which had one whole corner of shingles stripped spottily, resembling a man's balding head.

I tried to associate this run down place with the Paul Fairness I had known in college – and couldn't.

A possible explanation occurred to me. Paul must live in the neat cabin off in the woods that I noticed about a quarter of a mile in back of the shanty. This was the nearest mailbox, so he used it for an address. That would be it.

I drove my car down the dirt driveway. From the weeds growing there, it was obvious the driveway hadn't been used for a long time.

As my car neared the house I was able to get a partial view of the back yard. It was fenced in with chicken wire six feet high, which was tightly held to straight two-by-four frames. The section I could see was tied to the corner of the house. Whoever had built that fence had done a professional job that was completely out of keeping with the house.

Something came into view in that fenced – in back yard. At first I thought it was some species of monkey or baboon, then I recognized it as an Afghan Hound.

The dog walked with slow deliberation to the fence where it could look in my direction. It was not using its right front leg. He dragged the leg as though it were paralyzed, rather than holding it up like a dog usually does when its leg is injured.

What particularly attracted my attention was a white covering that hugged the dog's cranium with small metal studs forming a dotted circle around the top of the skull, to which the white covering was fastened.

I stopped the car beside the house and climbed out. The Afghan Hound wagged his tail in a friendly greeting, panting as if to say hello.

There was still no one in sight and the windows were too dusty to see inside. I went over to the fence, squatted down, and stuck my fingers through the chicken wire mesh. The dog licked them, shaking his body happily.

I studied the paralyzed front leg.

The paw was worn raw from dragging. It glistened with fresh blood, yet it seemed to give the creature no discomfort.

I worked my fingers in a caressing manner along the dog's jaw, and got him to turn his head enough so that I could touch the small screw heads.

I seemed to be imbedded right into the head.

By using my other hand to scratch the dog's shoulder, I was able to push the white cloth covering up far enough to see under it.

Instead of flesh or bone, there was a transparent dome through which I could see the convolutions of the creature's brain.

Things clicked in my mind. I had read of a similar thing in Life Magazine years before. It described studies on apes with their craniums removed and plastic ones substituted so that the brain could be observed at all times. As much as I hated to admit it, this pointed conclusively to the run-down shack being Paul's place, because he had studied to be a surgeon, and had dreamed of a life of pure research in surgery and anatomy.

Suddenly, I became aware of someone standing behind me. I turned my head and looked up. It was Paul Fairness – or at least I was sure it was until I saw the light in

his eyes and the expression on his face.

Instead of a friendly smile of welcome, or even some indication of recognition, there was instead a look of hostility that one might express toward a perfect stranger who had invaded the premises without being invited. Or was the hostility due to recognition?

"Who are you?" he said, his voice filled with ill-concealed anger.

"Have I changed that much in ten years, Paul?" I asked with a smile I intended to be disarming.

"My name isn't Paul," he answered. 'You've got the wrong address.'

"But I haven't," I said, wondering if it were a joke dictated by a crudely distorted sense of humor. Suddenly, on impulse, I decided to play along. "Aren't you Paul Fairness? Of course, I don't remember him too well. It's been ten years since I saw him last. I came because of this letter."

I took out the letter and extended it toward him. He made no effort to take it, but continued to stare at me in an unfriendly manner. I shrugged my shoulders and put the letter back in my pocket. It was getting me down a little now. Maybe this was a game – Paul was playing the hostile stranger with deadpan seriousness in an attempt to get under my skin, and when I blew up he'd break down and have a good laugh.

Well, there was one way to beat him at his own game and make him break down. I'd play a similar game, and sooner or later he wouldn't be able to resist trying to make me out a liar.

Abruptly I changed my entire manner and became brusquely businesslike.

"Since you aren't Paul Fairness," I said, "I'll be frank with you. I'm a private investigator from a Chicago detective bureau. We want him for absconding with several thousand dollars from a relief fund eight years ago. We don't have any picture of him, or much information to go by but, we got a tip that he was living at this address, and I came down to check on it. Since we don't know what he looks like, the only way to trap him would be to pretend to be an old friend and get him to make a slip that would let me know for sure it was him."

"Who gave you the tip?" he asked suspiciously – so genuinely that for a moment I was almost sure it couldn't be Paul.

"The mailman," I said glibly. "We send out wanted notices to all the postoffices, you know."

"Well," he said with his first sign of waning hostility, "I guess Paul Fairness lived here before I did. I sort of guessed he might be an escaped criminal, because he left this dog behind, and a lot of his stuff. I've been keeping the dog because I hated to kill it, and the clothes he left behind fit me. I've been here just a couple of weeks

now."

"It's been a long drive down here," I said. "Mind if I come in and rest while?"

He hesitated for an instant, then turned without a word and walked toward the front of the house. I took this to mean acquiescence and followed him. The Afghan Hound whined softly as I left, seemingly asking me to stay with him a little longer.

"Sit there," my guest said, jabbing his finger toward a worn chair near the door. "I'll fix you some coffee. There's no room here for you to stay, but I don't think you want to since you didn't find who you came after."

Slightly indignant, I sat down.

He was back in less than two minutes with a cup of hot coffee, a can of milk that had a dried crust around the holes, and a bowl of sugar with a caked spoon in it.

He stood over me silently while I put cream and sugar in the coffee and stirred it with the crusted spoon. I did not indicate with the slightest sign that it nauseated me. When I lifted the cup to take the first swallow of the stuff he turned and went back into the kitchen, and returned at once to sit down in a chair across the room.

"It isn't too hot," he said shortly, "you can drink it faster if you want."

Resentment flared inside of me again. I took a couple of deep gulps and set the cup down on the arm of the chair, then stood up.

"Hope you find him," he said, taking his cue quickly. "Good-bye."

I stared at him a brief second, almost tempted to blow up and let him win his little, malicious game. Then I turned abruptly and went out to the car.

I climbed in and started the motor, expecting him to run out momentarily with a big grin on his face and call the whole thing off. But as I backed slowly out to the road there was no sign of movement from the house.

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Once on the road to Blake I let my motor idle for a minute or two, looking toward the house, not sure of myself. Then I slipped into gear and as I started back toward town my thoughts were very confused.

My thoughts were confused for a very good reason. I knew that in this world everyone has a double or two – who can be mistaken for him even by close friends.

Paul had been my roommate for two years of college, and even ten years hadn't obliterated from my memory the exact contour of a little half-moon scar on his neck, the peculiarities of a scar on the back of his right hand where a wart had been removed with nitric acid, and the narrow, inch long bald line on the nape of his neck.

Those things, impossible of accidental duplication, told me beyond shadow of doubt that the man who had treated me in such an unwelcome manner was Paul Fairness.

Why I hadn't confronted him with this and broken him down, I didn't know. Perhaps it was the dead seriousness of his manner and his insistence that he was not Paul – in direct contradiction to his urgent insistence that I come, in his letter,

My impulse for the first mile back to town was to forget the whole thing and go back to Chicago, but as my car drew closer to the town ahead, a reluctance to let this thing hang in the air grew on me. I decided to rent a room in the hotel and stick around until I could make some sense out of the situation.

The Blake Hotel was a three-story frame affair, with a grocery store, drug store, and cafe occupying the street front. I parked my car in front of the cafe and climbed the narrow stairs, which were sandwiched between the cafe and the drugstore. They led to the second floor lobby which was little more than a wide place in the hall with a counter, behind which sat an old woman.

She eyed me suspiciously and asked if I were alone, then sneered doubtfully when I said I was. I got a room in the back, with a window which was obscured by steam from a laundry in the next building. The three dollars I had been required to pay in advance for one day's rent would have bought the furniture and the rug. If there had been a sign on the wall saying Washington slept there I would have believed it.

I went down to my car to get my bags. While getting them out of the trunk compartment I glanced through the window of the cafe and noticed a pretty waitress. My room was depressing, so I decided to put off unpacking and get something to eat.

The waitress was even prettier than she had appeared through the window. In a city she would have had a better job, but in Blake the cafe job was probably the best to be had.

She smiled and handed me a menu. I didn't bother to read it, but ordered a small steak with coffee, and smiled back at her.

By the time my steak was ready I knew that the waitress' name was Norma Williams, and that she liked me. By the time I had eaten, I knew that she had always wanted to visit Chicago sometime, because she had an aunt living there.

I was on my third cup of coffee when I brought up the subject of Paul.

"Do you know a fellow living on the outskirts of town by the name of Paul Fairness?" I asked.

"Paul?" she asked. Her smile clouded into a troubled frown. "Yes, I know him. He used to come in and eat once in a while."

"Used to?" I mocked good-naturedly.

She turned away and filled a coffee cup at the urn, carried it around the end of the counter, then sat down beside me. It gave me a strange thrill to have her sitting so close. When she turned to look at me her eyes were troubled.

"Paul used to go with my older sister Mary," Norma said. "About ten days ago they had a date. He didn't call for her, so she took Dad's car and drove out to his place, thinking he might be sick. He, or someone just like him, pretended not to know her, and as much as told her to get out and stay out. Mary insists it was Paul, but it doesn't sound like him. I'd stake my bottom dollar that if he were to give her the brush-off he'd be decent about it – and besides I'm sure he was deeply in love with her."

So Paul had been in love with Norma's sister, Mary. Had been? Why was I thinking of him in the past tense – as though he were dead? The thought so disturbed me that for a moment I forgot about Norma.

"Paul was my best friend in college," I said. She had twisted a little on the stool she was sitting on, so that her knee rested against mine. It was hard to think of anything other than her.

"Then you came here to see him?" she said hopefully. At my nod of agreement she hurried on. "Then maybe you can find out what's come over him when you go out to see him."

"I've been out to see him," I said. "He gave me the same kind of brush-off – and he had written me a letter inviting me to come down."

I took the letter out of my pocket and gave it to her. She read it thoughtfully, a frown of concentration on her face. I watched her, thinking how pretty she would look in a trim kitchen of her own with airy windows and bright colors.

"This is Paul, all right," she said, laying the letter on the counter absently. "It was written two weeks ago, from the date. He didn't say anything about writing you though."

Her lips quivered, and her eyes were suddenly bright with tears.

"Here now," I said soothingly, putting my arm around her shoulders.

She regained her composure and apologized for the outbreak, then picked up her cup and sipped slowly.

"You must think it's me that's in love with Paul," she said suddenly, turning her eyes on me again.

"Heaven forbid!" I said in alarm. I grinned when I caught the twinkle in the corner of her eye. Then she became serious.



"I suppose you'll be going back to Chicago," she said, "now that Paul won't let you visit him."

"Hm-mm," I shook my head emphatically. "I've rented a room in the hotel. I'm going to stick around until I find out what's wrong with him."

Another customer came in, so I drank some more coffee while she waited on him. I was grateful for the fact that he was in a hurry. He drank his coffee and ate his cheese sandwich in less than ten minutes, and left.

"Look," I said when he was gone, "what time do you get through work, Norma?"

"Seven o'clock," she said hesitantly.

"I'd like to go home with you and talk to your sister," I said. "I think something's wrong with Paul, and she'd probably be in a better position to lay finger on it than you, or even I, as it's been ten years since I last saw him."

"All right," she said eagerly.

"I'll be down to eat dinner about six thirty," I said, "that way we'll be ready to go at the same time."

Norma glanced toward the kitchen.

"Why don't you wait?" she said softly so her voice wouldn't carry. "I don't eat until I get home, and you could have dinner with us."

"Swell," I said.

The Williams' house was just as I expected it would be. It was a well built, nice appearing house in a neat residential section, with a generous lawn and large tree. Mr. Williams was the typical small town businessman, the solid citizen type. Mrs. Williams was more beautiful than the average small town housewife, which justified Norma's looks and figure.

Mary Williams, I could see at once, was taking her brush-off from Paul rather badly. There were dark blotches under her burning eyes that gave evidence of sleepless nights. At dinner she ate very little.

Norma had said nothing about my being a friend of Paul's. Mrs. Williams had set a huge piece of apple pie in front of me with orders to eat every crumb. When I finished the last bite, I looked across the table questioningly at Norma, who was more beautiful than ever in the nice dress she had hastily changed to as soon as we had arrived. She nodded imperceptibly. I folded my linen napkin carefully, lighted a cigarette, and sat back.

"I'm a friend of Paul Fairness," I said quietly.

An electric silence fell on the room at this announcement. Slowly, Mary turned her

head until her eyes burned into mine.

"I just came down from Chicago this noon," I went on casually, as though nothing were amiss. "I went out to his place to see him – and received a very strange reception." I returned Mary's stare with a sympathetic smile. "In my opinion something's definitely wrong with him."

"Do you think so?" Mary asked breathlessly. "But—" she stopped, trying to choose her words. "What can it be? He isn't like an insane person. It's more like he was—" She stooped, confused.

"It's more like he wasn't Paul?" I supplied the words.

"That's it," she said gratefully.

"It definitely isn't Paul," I said slowly. "By that, as you probably know, Mary, I don't mean it isn't a different person. It's Paul's body beyond any shadow of doubt, but Paul himself is cut off from expression in some way. Maybe he's developed a split personality and the new personality has completely superseded the old. I'm not enough of a psychologist to know if that's possible. But—" I twisted in my chair and leaned toward her. "You probably know him much better than I do. That dog – was he engaged in some sort of research in brain surgery?"

"Yes, he was," she replied without hesitation. "It was fascinating. He let me see how he did some of it."

"Now, Mary," Mrs. Williams said warningly. "Not at the table."

I suggested that we go into the living room. There was a question raised about the dishes. Almost in less time than it takes to tell it Mr. and Mrs. Williams were out of the way, and I was perched on the edge of the kitchen table while Norma and Mary did the dishes.

"Did you see the dog up close?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. "It came to the wire and I managed to see that it had a plastic cranium, before Paul came out to see what I was doing."

"Did you lift the cloth cover and see the whole thing?" Mary asked. I shook my head. "I've seen it," she continued. "It's dotted with small openings with plugs in them that can be taken out. He was introducing some sort of anesthetic through these holes to freeze small areas of the brain to see what the effect would be."

"Did he try that on himself?" I asked sharply, sensing that this would explain the change in him.

"N-not that I know of," Mary said doubtfully.

"Hmm," I said thoughtfully, "it would seem to me that any deadening stuff he introduced that way would seep to the whole brain and act as a general anesthetic."

"It did, at first," Mary said, now absorbed in telling me all she knew about it. "He was working hard toward something in a medium almost insoluble in the brain fluids, so that its effect would be confined to one place, and the amount carried to other parts of the brain would be well below effective strength."

"That would mean that the area deadened would remain deadened for a long time," I suggested.

She nodded.

"That's what he said," she agreed. "But that's what he wanted, so that he could study the effects of some particular part being cut off from the rest over a long period. It was fascinating. He showed me once. He had all the areas of the brain, and what they controlled, all mapped on a chart. He said his technique was the only one that could narrow things down to the finest pinpoint of the brain's surface."

"He used to talk for hours about what he hoped his research would do," she was saying. "One thing he hoped for was that it would be possible eventually to cure all forms of insanity in a few minutes by boring a hole at the right spot and lancing the cortex with a fine wire. Prefrontal lobotomy works by cutting a large section of the front part of the brain, when the insanity probably stems from one small spot that could be killed without damage to the other parts if there was some way of locating it."

"That would be something!" I said. "Instead of every state in the union having acres of buildings to house the insane, they could all be cured and set home in a matter of days."

"Not all," Mary corrected. "Paul said that it would probably be better just to anesthetize at first and watch the result, and if it was satisfactory, then cut. So it wouldn't be quite as simple as getting a tooth filled – but almost! "

"How long have you known him, Mary?" I asked.

"Oh," she sighed happily, "almost two years now. We were going to get married just as soon as he finished his experiment, sometime this summer, he expected."

"Do you know what I think?" I asked, lighting another cigarette.

Both Norma and Mary turned to hear my reply.

"I think," I said, "that Paul has done some experimenting he hasn't said anything about – and finally did it to himself to see what would happen."

"No!" Mary said. "He couldn't! That would mean—"

I nodded.

"It would mean boring holes in his own head," I said.

"But actually," I went on hastily, "it wouldn't be as difficult as it seems. He probably has a special kind of drill setup, and can deaden the scalp and the bone, to a certain extent. He'd have to have a block around the drill to stop it from going too deep. If he did it at all, he would have everything down to the last decimal point before starting."

"If that's it," Mary said, her face tight with horror, "then something went wrong."

"Maybe not so wrong," I objected. "He would use the deadener rather than permanent cutting. When the stuff wears off he'll be himself again. How long did he say it takes for the stuff to wear off?"

"He once said twenty-four hours, more or less," Mary replied, "but he was trying to find something that would last longer in its effects."

"Then there's no way of telling how long it would be," I said. "The dog still had a paralyzed leg. Probably he used the stuff on the dog just in the spot that would paralyze that front leg, so he could see if it would last longer than a day. When it did, he used the stuff on himself." I shook my head in awe. "Imagine – paralyzing just one leg by deadening a spot in the brain itself!"

"But then he didn't wait," said Norma who had been listening without comment up to now.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I mean," she said, "shouldn't he have waited until the effects wore off, so he'd know how long they would last – and be sure it wasn't permanent?"

"Of course he would," I said. "Or would he be so sure it would wear off that he just waited to be sure it would last longer than twenty-four hours? Whichever it is, we've got to do something about it. What, I don't know, but we can't just leave him out there to his own devices."

The vision of Paul's capable frame and hostile attitude weren't inviting. I didn't like the idea of forcing myself on whatever psyche had flowered inside that punctured skull of his. However, with two young ladies looking up to me to take things in hand, I couldn't very well take any other course.

"What I've got to do," I said, determined to talk myself into it, "is go out there and force him to let me stay and look out for him. If he refuses, then I'll have to tie him up and keep him under control until he unfreezes."

"I'm going with you," Norma said.

"Uh-uh," I shook my head. "There might be trouble. You girls had better stay out of it."

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It was difficult to concentrate on driving, with Norma sitting so close beside me. I suspected she was sitting closer than Mary's width made necessary.

I drove as slowly as possible to prolong the agony, the agony of worrying about what lay ahead before the night was over.

"You know," I said, as we left the town, "I keep thinking of analogous things that make this look less serious than it did at first. Take getting drunk, for instance. Some people are the same drunk as they are sober. There are people, though, that have a mental black out when they get drunk. They go on their merry way, having a good time, and when they sober up they can't remember anything after the third drink or so. Sometimes when they black out I've heard that they are totally different personalities than when they're sober. That's probably what has happened to Paul, I don't mean the drunkenness, but what has happened to his mind and personality. Maybe alcohol acts as a sort of spotty anesthetic and puts the ego center to sleep while a large part of the brain keeps on functioning, making the person seem the same – or at least awake."

"That could be," Mary said, a new interest in her tones. "Then Paul's driving me away would be nothing more serious than if he did it while drunk." She nodded to herself. "I think you're right."

"I can't remember him ever getting drunk in college," I said. "I don't know how he would behave, maybe just like he's behaving now."

"He doesn't drink," Mary said. "Maybe he did once and blacked out, but if he did, he's never said anything about it to me."

"How about you?" Norma asked, her eyes twinkling at me.

"I've never gotten that drunk," I said. Her lips were mere inches away from me.

"Look out!" Mary screamed.

I straightened up just in time to avoid a head-on collision. Norma's lipstick had a velvety feel where it was left on my lips.

Mary was looking from one to the other of us, trying to place the blame for the near collision.

"–but if I ever get that drunk," I continued, "I'll probably behave the same."

Norma dipped her head in a nod. I laughed, and the two girls were quickly laughing with me.

We sobered when the headlights revealed Paul's mailbox. I felt a tight constriction in my throat as I headed the car off the road into the overgrown driveway.

There was a light in the front room window. It glowed like an inverted, fat letter L, due to the patch of square cardboard in the lower left-hand section where the glass

had been broken out.

I had a vision of Paul Fairness sitting in there all by himself, a glowering scowl on his face, itching for trouble like some drunks do, but without the inebriated lack of coordination that makes them so easy to manage. He would be dangerous, and all I had with me was two beautiful females to watch me fly through the air and land on my running board if I stuck my chin out too far.

I stopped the car a few feet from the front porch and shut off the motor.

"You girls had better wait here," I whispered, opening the door on my side. Before I had finished my statement the girls were out the other door.

The car doors closed with a soft click under their own impetus. Then I was at the door. I knocked. The girls' footsteps sounded on the porch as the door opened. From the rear of the house came a lonely, mournful howl.

Paul's features were in the dark as the door opened, but his shoulders were very broad and solid. Something glinted just below sight. I lowered my eyes and saw a blunt automatic in his fist.

"I was expecting you to come back after dark," he sneered. "Come on in. I've been waiting for you."

"Don't do anything foolish, Paul," I soothed, "Mary and her sister are with me." I regretted my words even as I spoke them. Mary or Norma might have had presence of mind enough to stay out of his line of vision and escape, to bring back the cops.

"I'm, not Paul," Paul said. "You aren't going to frame me for any stealing Paul did, either. Step inside, all three of you."

"If you aren't Paul Fairness," I said stepping forward slowly, "who are you?"

He backed into the center of the room as the girls followed me in.

"Close the door," Paul said. I heard it slam at my back. Norma and Mary came into my range of vision, their faces were pale and frightened looking. Paul was waving his gun slowly in a way that kept us all covered.

"Who are you?" I asked again. When he didn't answer I went on. "I'll tell you," I said. "You don't know. You can't remember anything farther back than a week or ten days ago. You don't know who you are or where you came from."

From the look in his eyes I sensed that I had told the truth and he knew it, but had no intention of letting me know it.

"Of course I know who I am," he said defiantly, "but it's none of your business, you nosy private detective."

"You didn't tell me you were a detective!" Norma said, surprised.

"I'm not," I said. "When Paul didn't know me this noon, I thought he was kidding me, so I kidded right back. He didn't even know he had written me inviting me down here. Do you know why you don't remember, Paul?" I shot at him. "It's because your ego center has been put to sleep by those experiments you were conducting. You're like a drunk that has a different personality functioning in him when he's drunk. That's why I came back, and why the girl who loves you came along with me. We came to make you let us take care of you until that anesthetic wears off and you're yourself again."

His lips were working queerly. I sensed vaguely that I had said something better left unsaid, but I didn't know what.

"I know what you mean – now," Paul said. "I've been reading some of the notes lying around. You're right. I was Paul, but I'm not any more, and I don't intend to be."

"What do you mean?" Mary asked, her voice sounding strange.

"I mean that I'm me," Paul said, stubborn petulance in his tones. "If Paul comes back I'm not me, I'm dead. I don't want to die, and I don't have to."

"Of course you don't," I said soothingly. "Now that you exist, you won't die. When Paul wakes up you'll still be there. You're strong enough to keep from dying."

"Don't give me any of that," Paul said angrily. "I can't remember anything that happened before two weeks ago, but I know everything technical that he knew. Also I've read his notes. He knows just where to cut to destroy me so I'll never come back. The minute he wakes up and realizes I don't want to die, he'll get me. That's why I'm going to keep dropping the anesthetic where he is in the cortex and keep him asleep permanently. Maybe I'll even run the wire in and kill him. I haven't decided yet."

"No! No!" Mary said. She started to cry, miserably.

I stared at Paul, realizing now the full extent of what we had gotten into. This new personality in Paul's body was fully aware it was fighting for its very existence, and it had no more intention of giving in peacefully than I would have of committing suicide.

It knew all the answers. From its viewpoint I was a threat to its life, and it would shoot me to save itself. My throat was suddenly dry, the palms of my hands damp.

"Lie down on the floor on your stomach," he said, looking at me.

"What are you planning to do?" I asked.

"The girls are going to tie your hands and legs together," he said. "I'm staying back where I can get a good shot if you try anything."

I measured the distance separating us. It was too far to try anything. He could shoot me several times before I could get to him, and there was nothing within reach that I could use to throw at him.

I got down and laid flat on my stomach.

"There's rope on the table," Paul said. "You girls tie his wrists and ankles together, and be sure you do a good job or you'll wish you had."

A few minutes later I was tied. I tried to keep the ropes loose enough so that I could slip out of them later. He examined them after the girls finished, and tightened them too securely for that.

When he stepped away from me, I rolled over and sat up. In that position I watched as Norma tied Mary, then Paul laid down his gun and tied Norma. I groaned in sympathy when she made a desperate try to fight back, and he slapped her viciously on the side of the face, leaving the prints of his fingers on her face.

Now that all three of us were securely bound, Paul sat down and looked at us broodingly.

"What will this get you?" I asked abruptly. "You can't keep us tied forever, you know."

"No," he said tiredly, "but I can put you to sleep – all three of you and deal with three persons like myself, who haven't any memory and will believe what I tell them to believe." He said no more, but his eyes told us there was no hope.

He got up out of his chair, and crossed the room to a closed door. When he opened it and went in I caught a glimpse of white walls and gleaming cases. It was Paul's laboratory. The light flashed on.

He came out and crossed over to where I lay. He grabbed me by the feet and dragged me across the floor. My thoughts searched frantically for some way out.

I was dragged through the door onto the smooth rubber tiled floor of the laboratory. Paul closed the door, shutting off my last glimpse of Norma.

"Look, Paul," I said in a low voice, "you don't have to do this. I know how you feel. I give you my word I'll cooperate with you. I'll see to it that the girls agree to it too. Mary will be difficult, but between Norma and me we can manage her."

It was as if I hadn't said a word.

He dragged me to a sitting position so that my back was against a leg of an operating table, which was bolted to the floor. He took off his trouser belt, and ran it around my waist, then around the table leg. When he buckled the belt I was effectively secured.

My head, I found with growing horror and nausea, was even with the table surface.



I followed Paul's movements with my eyes as he went to a drawer and took out several wide roles of adhesive tape and laid them on the table.

His face expressionless and calm, he unrolled a yard of two-inch tape, held my head upright by grasping my hair, and wrapped the tape so that my neck was held against the table leg, but not tight enough to choke me.

I stretched my stomach muscles cautiously, in an attempt to snap the belt, but I couldn't.

For what seemed an interminable length of time I heard Paul's feet scuffing around the room, breaking the long periods of deadly silence. Norma started to scream in the other room. With an indecipherable mutter Paul left the room, slamming the door. Mary's voice came, pleading. After a while there was nothing but silence.

It was horrible. Then, suddenly, like a bright light in the darkness, I thought of something. It was something I had read somewhere. What was it? I stilled my thoughts so as to bring out the memory.

Somewhere I had read that when a man blanks out while he is drunk, his subconscious takes over. The man who has little need of suppressing impulses while sober doesn't build up a sharp split between conscious and subconscious ego centers, and consequently behaves normally while dead drunk, even though he might not recall what went on afterwards.

Paul had repressed most of his natural urges during most of his lifetime, subordinating them to the pursuit of his researches in medicine and surgery.

I, on the other hand, had developed a sort of working camaraderie between my conscious and subconscious selves. A friend of mine had once said that he liked me, but thoroughly disliked my subconscious. Another friend had once jokingly remarked that I had a conscious I. Q. of around a hundred and fifty, and a subconscious I. Q. of six hundred. The point was that Paul's subconscious mind, raised to the conscious level by the anesthetizing of the conscious center, was fulfilling a driving urge to stay there. My own subconscious mind in the same position, would not feel that selfish urge, since it thoroughly enjoyed its own hidden position and ability to remain withdrawn from whatever it wasn't interested in.

Paul might think he was, gaining an ally by putting my conscious mind to sleep, but he would merely be dealing with a more dangerous adversary, one who could fool him and gain the upper hand quickly.

Paul returned and closed the door. He came toward me, then over to a cabinet, where he opened some metal doors.

My heart was pounding painfully against my ribs. I felt weak and limp, and would have slumped except for the fact that I was bound so securely I couldn't.

Heavy fingers touched my scalp, slid around, and caused my heart to race painfully.

The moving fingers came to rest. There was a quick, sharp pain, and I knew that a needle had been jabbed into my scalp.

The fingers lifted away. I became short of breath and felt a moment of suffocating panic. I had stopped breathing for a moment.

My shoulders ached. They were tense with strain and wouldn't relax. The surge of optimism I had felt a brief moment before was fading.

I could detect a numbness starting to grow just inside the hairline above my forehead on the left side. The local was beginning to take effect.

A long moment later I felt the heavy fingers return, steady and unwavering. My heart was pounding again.

There was a sudden whirring noise that quickly rose to a shrill motor whine. Immediately after I felt an awful pressure that was followed by a sensation of bone grinding on bone and it vibrated to the core of my soul. A disembodied thought told me it was the drill going through my skullcap to the brain. I was sicker than I had ever been in my life, and finally I gave way to unashamed sobbing. The grief of the hopeless settled into me like swirling eddies in the depths of some cosmic ocean.

The whining vibration stopped. Time stopped with it for an eternity. Then heavy fingers were moving in my scalp once more. They rested. Their pressure increased to the point of painfulness.

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I became aware that I was sleepily rubbing my eyes. The sensation clashed with the memory that arms had been bound to my sides and it brought me to full consciousness. I smiled inwardly at the realization that I had never known when the needle went into the fine hole drilled in my scalp and injected the deadening drug that put me to sleep.

Without opening my eyes I let my arm fall back. I was in a bed. I let that realization soak in, then I opened my eyes. A soft blue ceiling met my gaze. I turned my head idly and saw that I was in a strange bedroom.

A gray-haired woman, dressed only in bra and panties, had her back to me. I gasped audibly in surprise. She turned her head. It was Norma's mother.

Seemingly unaware of my surprised stare and unconscious of her undress, she smiled at me.

"So you're awake finally, Rog," she said. "Better get up."

"Y-y-yeah," I stuttered. Then frantically I said, "Where's Norma?"

"Out in the kitchen," Mrs. Williams said. She flashed me a smile and slipped a dress over her head, shaking her body to get it to come down. When it was in place she

zipped it, then fixed me with a frowning, glance. "Well," she said with half humorous sharpness. "Get up!"

I continued to stare at her while she stepped into some slippers, left the bedroom without a backward glance.

I took a deep, shuddering breath, and wondered what kind of household I'd gotten into, then I slid out of bed. There were some bedroom slippers. I slid my feet into them. I had on a pair of slick pajamas.

A red bathrobe was slung over the back of a chair. I put it on, and looked around for the bathroom door. There were only two doors, the one Mrs. Williams had gone through to the kitchen, and a partly opened closet door.

I stepped toward the door to the kitchen. As it cracked open, a bedlam of voices erupted on my ears. I pulled the door wide open and I was in a short hallway without end doors. To my right a few feet away the kitchen began.

In what I could see of it there were several young people of all ages, from a ten-year-old boy to a twenty-year-old girl.

I caught sight of Norma. She was wearing a cheery red checked housedress that set off her figure to perfection.

"Norma!" I exclaimed in relief, stepping into the kitchen, and discovered more of the young people. At the sound of my voice, she looked up from a bowl that contained something she was stirring.

The thoughtful frown that had creased her smooth forehead vanished, to be replaced by a bright smile.

"Morning Pop," she said.

Her words, and the way she immediately started stirring whatever was in the mixing bowl again, brought me to a halt as abruptly as if I had run into a wall.

I looked about the kitchen dazedly while other voices echoed Norma's, "Morning Pop." There were at least a dozen, the youngest about eight-years-old.

My eyes finally came to rest on Mrs. Williams back, where she stood by the electric range frying hotcakes. I looked around until I saw a mirror fastened to a cabinet door.

I went over and looked in the mirror, knowing before I looked what I would see. It was the serious, dazed face of an old man that stared back at me.

I turned away, and glanced back at the middle-aged woman by the stove, and my thoughts recalled how she had dressed in front of me in the bedroom. No wonder she had. She was the Norma Williams I had last seen tied hand and foot in that old house when Paul dragged me into the laboratory.

So it had taken all this time for the deadening drug to wear off, and no one had suspected my conscious mind was asleep all the time. They probably hadn't seen any difference in me.

I leaned weakly against the counter at my back and slowly counted the roomful of kids. There were fourteen of them. My eyes dimmed with tears as I realized all I had missed.

Somewhere in the deep reaches of my mind I heard something chuckling.

My subconscious amid!

"I'm going over to Uncle Paul and Aunt Mary's after school today," a twelve-year-old girl said, slipping her hand in mine.

I closed my eyes for a minute, then opened them and smiled ruefully down at her upturned, trusting face.

"O. K., honey chile," I said cheerfully, stooping down to pick her up. I squeezed her little body against my chest and kissed her. Her little arms went around my neck, and sent a thrill down my spine.

## **UNTO THE Nth GENERATION**

THE nurse came in, pushing the breakfast cart ahead of her. Her hair was blonde, her complexion flawless and fairly radiating the pinkness of good health. Her uniform, made of one of the inorganic plastics, was spotless: white.

"Good morning, Great grandpa John," she said cheerfully. "How are you today." It was not a question. It was a ritual she had been, carefully trained in.

"Eh?" John said. He watched her come toward the bed. "You're a new one," he said. His eyes took on a sly look. "Purty, too. What's your name?"

"Ada." She began transferring the dishes to the bed stand.

"Ada what?"

"Ada Blake." She smiled affectionately and unfolded the napkin to spread under his chin.

"Blake?" he echoed, frowning. "Say, maybe you aren't a great-granddaughter of mine ay tal. What was your mother's maiden name?"

"Ada White." The nurse dipped a spoon into the synthetic cereal and brought it

towards John's mouth.

He pushed it away and scooted himself up to a sitting position. "I can feed myself," he said curtly.

Smiling, she relinquished the spoon.

"White?" he said, "Your mother's name was White. That don't help. Blake and White." He chewed thoughtfully. "What were your grandmothers' maiden names?"

Ada's face dimpled in a smile. "Joan Winstead, and—" She touched the tip of a finger to her chin and gazed ceilingward while John watched her with impatience. "And Shirl Daven—"

"Shirl Davenport!" John said. "That's the one. Daughter of mine." He looked at the nurse with a twinkle in his eyes. "So you're a great-granddaughter of mine. Thought so. What did you say your name was again?"

"Ada. Ada Blake."

"Ada." John said the name as though sampling its flavor. Then he nodded his head in approval.

Ada waited. Every morning the ritual was exactly the same, down to the last intonation, the lengths of the individual pauses in conversation – even to the way Great grandpa John got cereal on his chin with the third spoonful.

"Guess all of your generation are great-grandchildren of mine," John said absently.

"Yes, Great grandpa John," Ada said, softly, reverently.

Then she smiled, and her smile was a mask for her inner feelings. It took tremendous will power to keep to the ritual at this point, rather than follow her own natural impulses and drop to her knees in worship.

No words could ever describe the simple wonder of being in Great grandpa John's presence, of seeing Him portray fresh surprise, curiosity, pride, and other mortal traits, always the same way, each day, in his simple lesson of living, just as though he were not the Captain...

"Yup," Great grandpa John said quietly. He looked thoughtful for a moment, then frowned at a recollection.

He was going to have to kill all of them. He mustn't forget that! Somehow, some way, he was going to have to kill them all, down to the last great-great-grandchild.

He had made up his mind about it last night.

The logic of it, the necessity of it, had hit him with numbing clarity, followed by a wave of anger toward the whole human race for not having seen something so

obvious and so inevitable and taken steps to avoid it – avoid all *this*.

Some things are obvious to everyone. If you take a loaded gun and point it at someone and pull the trigger you will kill or wound him. If you are a good shot and you take careful aim the outcome is certain.

In the same way, with the same inevitability, a lot of human situations that can happen out among the stars are just as predictably fatal. And what can happen will happen sooner or later, unless steps are taken to avoid it.

It would have been so simple for the human race to have thought of that before going out into space, for it to have explored the hypothetical situations for their potential dangers, and to have thought out ahead of time what should be done and condensed it all into a book that would be required reading for anyone going into space.

If there had been such a book, John Davenport reflected grimly, then when the *Polaris Explorer* crashed, he and the others would all have known that the one thing they must NOT do was have children, start a colony cut off from the rest of humanity. Not without seeds from which to grow vegetation. Not without some other form of animal life, even if it were only some insect species.

The trouble had been that other forms of life were taken for granted and their influence on the human mind was too subtle to be consciously understood. The *fact* of other forms of life was a vital element in shaping human orientation toward reality. Without it –

Yesterday John Davenport had finally seen what would result. A grandson of his, Paul Winstead, now in his early fifties, had paid him a social visit. That is, he had always considered such visits to be social visits, but now he wasn't so sure. For a long time now he hadn't felt up to having anyone but a nurse around, but every so often he felt lonesome, and there was always a waiting list of those who wanted to call on him.

He hadn't seen Paul for two years, Paul had said, but the last time he could remember seeing Paul was at least thirty years ago. The boy hadn't changed much. He'd always been respectful. The thing is, he was someone to talk to.

"Yup," John had said, reminiscing, "every kid should have a pet or two. When I was a kid I had a dog. A dog is – well, instead of hands and feet it has four feet, but they're very small. The dog is all covered with hair, and it has a tail. A tail is an extension of the spinal cord."

And John had gone on and on, describing the dog. Paul Winstead had been a good listener, nodding and smiling and seeming to get a mental picture of what a dog was like. But he had to use extra imagination.

Then, in a pause, while John was trying to choose a word that would describe what

he wanted to say, Paul Winstead had said, very quietly, "You need have no fear, Grandfather John, we have passed the test."

"Test?" John had said. "What test?"

Paul Winstead had chuckled. "We knew that there must be a hidden lesson in your stories," he had said. "Just as your seeming to forget all the time is a living lesson for us to always be alert and meet life every day with renewed interest and excitement, even though nothing new may happen, so also your stories of impossible forms of life are a great lesson to make us see the wonder of our being the only possible life form."

"But that isn't so!" John had said. Was Paul insane?"

Paul had smiled. "We knew it was the greatest test of all, because you made it so difficult to penetrate it to the Truth. Yet you cunningly wove into your stories the clue to their being a test. All these animals are deformed people."

John shook his head in protest.

"No, no," Paul had said. "Let me finish. Let me show you we have found the whole Truth. We know that you have always existed. The proof of that is that the only way we can come into existence is by being born of parents like us. We in turn become parents of children like us. There is no other way possible. Therefore the First Parent must always have existed from the beginning of time. But when was the beginning of time? There we have penetrated the secret too! Time, the universe itself, began a little over seventy years ago! You, Grandfather John, are the Absolute, the First, and you created the universe for us, your descendants, to live in and to control. The very atoms obey the rules you laid down for them!"

"Just a minute," John had said firmly. "Some day you or your descendants will meet up with other people, and with other forms of life, like dogs, and trees. What then?"

"We have seen the great lesson in that too," Paul had said, his face shining with an inner light of vision. "As your descendants it is our responsibility to keep your Creation pure. Any imperfection that develops must be corrected. The great message you have shown us is that we are not your First Creation. Somewhere your First Creation exists. But it failed to pass the test, and for that reason we came into being. It failed, and is imperfect, with deformed people of the type you have described. Our destiny, when we have grown strong, is to cleanse the universe of all such deformity."

There had been more of that. John had tried to show it wasn't so, but he had realized how hopeless it was. It was impossible for anyone who has not seen other forms of life to imagine them really existing.

And suddenly it had come to John with blinding insight that if it were impossible while he was still alive to influence them, how much more certain the trend would

develop when he was gone!

*People simply did not believe something outside their experience.*

And with that insight had come an insight into the future. When contact was eventually made with the main branch of humanity, or with any form of life, his descendants would consider it their Divine Mission to destroy it. If, meanwhile, they had become strong enough, it would mean a devastating holy war with no possible compromise. If contact came within a century or so, it would mean only that his descendants would go down to destruction themselves.

But the basic insight John had gained was that the whole mess could have been easily predicted. It was just one of many similarly predictable things that could happen in space. Given, an aquarium condition...

So, what should never have happened now had to be destroyed. It had to be, John decided grimly. There were no two ways about it.

But good Lord! Why couldn't mankind have foreseen the possibility of this arising? It was inevitable that over the centuries there would be shipwrecks on out of the way worlds under conditions where the survivors would be able to start a colony that would continue after they died. If the danger had been known ahead of time they would have known better than to have children.

His frown was a deviation. Ada Blake was quick to notice it, and to realize that today was to be different. In what way it would be different she didn't know, nor did it matter. To grant Greatgrandpa John's slightest whim or wish was her greatest desire in life.

Aside from the joy it would bring her, it would mean that her name would go down in history.

She was too wise to let on that she had noticed the frown. Though her heart pounded furiously, not a flicker of changed expression showed on her face.

"Um," John said.

"Yes?" Ada said mildly.

"Take this synthetic pabulum away and bring me some clothes."

"Yes, Great grandpa John," Ada said serenely.

She returned what was left of the breakfast to the cart and pushed it ahead of her out of the room. In the corridor she doubled her pace, arriving at the desk breathless and flushed.

"He wants his clothes!" she gasped. "I think Great grandpa John is going out. I could feel it. Oh!" She clasped her hands together. "To think it would happen to me!"



"Well, get some clothes for him!" the head nurse said, unable to completely conceal her envy. "Don't keep him waiting! Hurry up!"

Ada was all thumbs and unable to concentrate. It took the combined efforts of the head nurse and two other nurses to get the clothes secured in Ada's hands and steer her in the right direction.

Great grandpa John permitted her to dress him. He would rather have dressed himself, but he knew he would have to conserve every ounce of his strength. It was not going to be easy to destroy them all. But there was a way – or there had been a way.

Panic touched his mind. Maybe there was no longer a way. But there had to be a way. There had to. If that way was gone, then he would just have to find another.

Ada dressed him, looking on his withered frame with the sense of privilege uppermost in her mind. Great grandpa's body, she felt quite convinced, could have remained youthful forever if he had wished it. Its aging was another of his great lessons to his children, just as were his daily rituals which might have been considered senile forgetfulness in anyone else. Great grandpa John knew, she was sure, that everything he did would go down in history, and its lessons would be pondered by the best scholars of each generation, forever.

When he was completely dressed she got to her knees and bowed, covering her secret worship by pretended concern over the bowknots of his shoelaces. She was flushed when she stood up, too conscious of her audience of untold future generations, who would watch the tapes of this historic moment. She had not knelt at Great grandpa John's feet for effect, but because she worshipped him.

When she straightened, she stopped breathing for a moment in awe. It had been impossible for her to realize how compelling a figure he was. His blue dress uniform concealed the leanness of his body. He stood a foot taller than the tallest of other men, his shoulders were wide – wide. His white hair was covered by the cap, and the visor of the cap concealed his forehead so that only his face, his deeply sunken, fiery eyes, his sharply bridged nose, his square chin and firm mouth, could be seen.

"Well?" he said, his lips quirking in amusement.

She tried to speak, and couldn't. The strength of his spirit was beyond her understanding. She could only sense it and tremble.

"Come with me," he said, going past her to the door. "I may need you to lean on, at times." *And I want you with me at the last, he thought, because I am afraid.*

And so, side by side, she in her spotless white nurse's uniform, and he, taller than she by fourteen inches and in his blue uniform of Space Command, they walked the length of the corridor, not deigning to notice the head nurse who huddled fearfully behind her desk, and pushed through the double doors to emerge onto the street.

There, John looked up with silent satisfaction at the flat ceiling of yard square panels of glass set in a steel latticework, fifty feet above, and the dozens of widely distributed large balloons resting against their under surface, ready to be caught up in any draft of escaping air caused by a broken panel and seal the opening until repairs could be made.

Outside, just beyond that flat ceiling above, lay the vacuum of space.

A lot had happened, John Davenport reflected grimly, since that day, almost seventy years ago, when the ship he commanded crashed. It was a shame it was going to have to be destroyed – but it should never have been brought into existence.

The worst part of it was that there was no way to let the government back on Earth know. But if there were, he would not have to do what he knew he must.

Beyond the ceiling of glass, some sixty million miles away, floated a brilliant blue-white sun, much smaller than Sol. But which sun, out of all the millions? The hyperdrive relays had jammed and God knows how many parsecs or thousands of parsecs the ship had gone before repairs could be made. Nine men had given their lives, willingly, each stepping into the fatal area surrounding those relays the instant the one before them dropped, until, after ninety minutes, the last one cut the relays and the ship slipped back into space. Ninety minutes at a theoretically infinite velocity. But that had been ninety minutes ship time, and whether the ship had entered space again a hundred or a million or ninety billion parsecs from the Earth, no one knew. The pattern of the stars had had no point of positive identification to the ship's instruments.

Ill luck had been present from the start on that "routine" trip' from the Sol System to Polaris, and it had stayed to the end. Attempting a simple landing on this eight hundred mile diameter ball of rock for the purpose of setting up instruments capable of probing farther than the ship's instruments, something had again gone wrong, and the ship had been damaged beyond repair.

Stuck here permanently, unless they were eventually rescued, they had built a standard pressurized colony along the lines first used on Mars, of a heavy glass ceiling whose weight was exactly balanced by the air pressure underneath.

Like the castaways on desert islands of pre space travel literature, they had made the most of the materials at hand. A plentiful supply of oxygen lay in the rocks at their feet, as well as the raw material for an inexhaustible supply of glass and steel.

The starship's lifeboats were excellent craft for searching nearby space and the entire surface of their desert asteroid, and a rich supply of carbon salts had been located and mined for the raw materials of synthetic foods.

When at last they knew that man could live indefinitely on this ball of stone, they had been happy. If not they, then their children, or their children's children, or their descendants in the nth generation would be rescued.

In their naiveté they had been happy. Like the early peoples of Earth they had lived together, man and woman, and begot child, and child had begot child.

More ceiling and more walls and more atmosphere had expanded the living room until now, after seventy years, there were three square miles of surface where man could live normally.

Fools, they had been. Naive fools, to have brought all this into existence. It had to be stopped. It had to be destroyed.

"Beautiful, isn't it, Great grandpa John," Ada said, misinterpreting the reason for his silent survey of his surroundings.

John Davenport nodded, and, for a moment felt a little confused. *Was he right?* He knew he was right. But what if his reasoning was a product – not of logic – but of senility?

The thought disturbed him.

How many were there now? How many would he have to murder?

"What's the population now?" he asked.

"Four hundred and thirty-one," Ada said proudly. "Our birth rate is close to fifty a year and our death rate only three a year, at present."

"Three in the past year?" John Davenport said. "What killed them?"

If only something showed promise of wiping them all out! That would absolve him.

"One was murdered," Ada said grimly. "The second was his murderer, who was hanged. The third one was my grandmother, Shirl."

"Shirl?" John said, pain cramping his heart. "Why wasn't I told?"

Ada looked up at him serenely, not answering. After a moment he turned away. He felt a vague sense of relief, and it came to him why. He would not be murdering Shirl, nor any of the others who had already died. And these others, even though they were his own descendants, were strangers to him.

"Do you want to see the Elders?" Ada asked. They had been just standing there now for almost ten minutes.

"No!" John said curtly. "No. I don't want to see anybody just yet. I just want to—" He looked vaguely around, trying to organize his thoughts into a plan. "I just want to walk around. That's it. Kind of look things over."

He began walking slowly. He would have to go slow, not get too tired – sort of feel his way into things, not go too directly to the power plant.

If he played it right, casual like, they would think it just a sentimental whim when he

asked to be left alone in the reactor control room.

If he played it right. Casual like.

He walked slowly, and paused now and then to pat the heads of children in a secret regretful farewell to them, ignoring the grownups who hovered in the background. And he didn't doubt that if he should fail, a special medal would be run off for the children whose heads he patted to wear all their life to set them off as a class above all those whose heads he had not patted.

Fifty babies in the past year? Let's see, John Davenport mused. There were the four girls, and they had chosen him and Winstead and Blake and White, with the understanding that any of the girls who decided she didn't want the one she chose permanently could pick another of the fifty some odd men. But they stuck, and altogether there had been twenty-three children that lived and grew up, ten of them girls.

That had been the first generation. And Winstead had worked out some system of pairing off the girls with boys so that there would be a minimum of inbreeding in each generation indefinitely, and it had been made into law – not that it would matter much for a couple of generations, but those problems had to be solved and settled by those who knew about such things while they were still alive.

The ten couples of the first generation had begotten – a good word – seventy-two children. An even number of boys and girls, and they had paired off into thirty-six couples. And Ada, the nurse, was one of their offspring, and no doubt plenty of her generation was producing now. Four hundred and thirty-one was about right, with maybe seventy-five couples in the third generation producing about one child a week. That's what Winstead had figured it would be by now.

John Davenport mentally kicked himself for not keeping up on things, forgetting that he kept up on things daily with avid interest – and forgot them as quickly as he listened to them.

He came back to an awareness of his surroundings.

The streets were laid out nicely. Most of the houses were new... and there were a lot more of them than he would have thought.

Although they had individuality and an attempt at architectural originality, they were all basically designed for The Emergency – loss of atmosphere from a major rupture of the dome. Entrances were potential airlocks. A large meteor could crash through the ceiling of the colony and let all the air escape, and probably no one would die except those directly struck by the meteor.

And there had been recent damage from a meteor. Ada tried to distract his attention away from it, but he saw the half dozen wrecked houses and the start of reconstruction. Looking overhead he found the place where the three-foot square

glass panels glinted with newness and the steel framework was newly painted.

The whole repair job was being expertly handled.

"Was anyone hurt, Ada?" John asked.

"Fortunately, no, Great grandpa John," Ada said.

He worried for a moment about whether she was fibbing, then remembered that it didn't matter.

A lump rose in his throat. *What a terrible tyrant the future is!* he thought bitterly. *The future is molded more by what is not, than by what is.* .

He walked slowly, frowning at the pavement ahead of him.

Not a blade of grass. Not a flower. Not even a useless weed. Any one of the crew of the, *Polaris Explorer*, as a mere whim, could have carried a million years of plant evolution on board in his coat pocket. A half dozen seeds of each of a thousand plant species.

Or even a few weed seeds trapped in the trouser cuff of some member of the crew. Winstead had looked. Even one seed, or one sliver of wood that could come to life and grow.

Or a fly. Or, a louse. Or a family of mice hidden in the cargo.

Or even a spider. No one had had such a whim.

Why should anyone have had such a foolish whim?

And because no one did, John Davenport was forced to destroy all these descendants of his.

Suddenly a new thought struck him, with such devastating impact that he stumbled, and Ada had to support him. He moaned audibly, not from any physical pain but from the thought.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Ada asked.

"Of course I'm all right," he said, forcing himself to smile calmly. "It's just that – it occurred to me that perhaps this is the last time I will walk through the colony."

"You plan to leave us soon?" Ada asked sadly.

"Perhaps," John Davenport said. Then he saw in this trend of thought the opportunity he had been searching for. He straightened up and squared his shoulders. "For that reason, I would like to pay a last visit to the power plant."

"As you wish," Ada said. "Do you plan to leave us there, Great grandpa John?" she asked humbly.

"Perhaps," John Davenport said.

But now a doubt had settled in his mind. Would what he planned to do be any good even if he succeeded? There would be other ships, to other stars, and inevitably another would crash somewhere, and the survivors build a pressurized colony.

Somewhere, sometime, there would be another Great grandpa John and he might not think things through. And if he did, there would be another, and another, until somewhere, sometime, a Great grandpa John would die without having destroyed the colony of his descendants.

So what was the use?

The future was inevitable. It flowed from the past like an engulfing flood, and if he plugged the hole here, on this speck of dust in the Cosmos, it would only pile up and burst through somewhere else.

But, if he could stop the flood here, at least he could die knowing that he had succeeded....

The power plant had not changed one iota. At least, not on the outside. It was exactly the same as when it had first been built, seventy years ago.

There was no need for it to change. The nuclear power plant of the ship had been moved out piecemeal and put together again here. Barring accidents, it could produce almost unlimited power forever, if a crew with the know-how to keep it replenished and functioning properly were trained in each generation. Or it could be transformed into a planet buster by manual manipulation of the automatic controls.

Word had gone ahead of them, but that was to be expected. John Davenport had been aware of the many people that hovered in the background, watching his every step. Probably everyone who could get away from his job was somewhere near, but keeping a respectful distance.

As John approached the power plant entrance four men came out. One of them gave him quite a start, because he looked exactly like Jerry Blake, seventy years ago. For a brief moment, seeing the man there, it seemed to John that time actually had turned back.

Then the illusion was gone. The man who looked like Jerry stepped forward and introduced himself as Mel Davenport, chief engineer.

"Your youngest grandson, sir," Mel Davenport explained.

"How old are you, Mel?" John asked.

"Thirty-five, sir," Mel said. "Would you like to inspect the plant, sir?"

"I think I would, Mel," John said casually.

"We have tried to do everything as you would want us to do it, sir," Mel said as he led the way inside. "For one thing, during the past ten years we've accumulated a stockpile of the alloy blocks and gotten enough of them started on their nuclear cycle to get a duplicate power plant started. We're setting it up a hundred miles from here. In ten years it will have built up to maximum potential and we will be able to build a second colony."

Mel Davenport was talkative, and obviously proud of the accomplishments of the colony. John only half listened as his youngest grandson talked on and on about the various projects.

The food factories had been expanded again and again, and standby food factories had been built. Exploration of mineral and salt deposits to a depth of five miles had been completed all over the planet. Chemical stockpiling was a hundred years ahead of population growth already.

Mel was quite anxious to prove to him that when he left them he could rest assured that the colony would expand on schedule without a hitch. In two centuries population and industrial development would reach the stage where starships could be manufactured.

John Davenport listened to this bright picture with grim absentmindedness while he walked here and there, refreshing his memory on the layout of the power plant.

Around him, pressing in on him, was the vibrant aura of living, eternal, atomic power, so simplified in principles that a crew of uneducated savages could be taught to keep it going.

But there were no uneducated savages, these descendants of his. They were highly intelligent men, dedicated to their work, and convinced that the know-how given to them was on the order of divine revelation.

Their respect for him was a respect for Deity, rather than for an ancestor. To themselves they were high priests rather than engineers.

And nothing he could say could change that.

The alternative to his being God was a nightmare of insecurity they could not possibly accept. He had watched it grow, helpless to prevent it. They had built up a framework of rationalization that had a perfect defense against all logical attack.

Being God, he could not grow old and feeble, but he could *choose* to appear to grow old and feeble as a lesson to them to honor their old ones as they loved Him. Being God, he could not forget, from one minute to the next, but he could pretend to, as a lesson to them to be eternally alive to the eternal newness of each moment.

Yes, his deification in their philosophy had been inevitable from the start, and he had not bothered to set them straight because in the long run it would be a good thing. It would give them security, dedication to the welfare of the community.

Nor would it ever have become a bad thing – if there had been so much as cockroaches in the store of crackers aboard the *Polaris Explorer*.

But there had been nothing. Winstead had searched. They had all searched. God how they had searched! Just one seed that could sprout, or one insect that could be made to reproduce. Any form of life at all that could be made to survive and be a fellow life form, a companion to man, in this far off place.

"You've seen it all now, sir."

John Davenport returned to reality with a feeling of alarm. He looked desperately at the control panels.

"Nothing has been changed here?" he asked sharply.

"Of course not, sir!" Mel said, shocked at the thought.

Of course not. John breathed easier. His eyes went to the damper rod control panel. Behind that panel lay the foolproof computer bank, the brains of the power plant. Foolproof – but there was a way to fool it and that way still existed. And it would turn the pile into a five hundred megaton bomb.

"Do you have any wish, sir?" Mel asked.

"Yes," John Davenport said. "I want to be alone for a few moments. Please wait outside. All of you."

They moved toward the exit. John Davenport stood erect, broad shouldered, every inch the Captain, in his blue uniform, in the center of the power plant floor.

At last he was alone.

It would take only a moment to reverse the connections from zero and maximum load.

John Davenport took a step toward the control panel, then hesitated. Was he right? Was the thought that had come to him last night the product of logic – or senility?

He lifted it into consciousness again and examined it dispassionately.

The human mind is utterly incapable of conceiving of anything totally outside its experience. In an environment where there is only one life form – man himself – and no other, man must inevitably become an Absolute to himself, and even the idea of a life form other than his own must become impossible to conceive.

Oh, they had tried to tell their children about trees and flowers and dogs and birds, but it had been obvious the children's conception of other life forms had been much like anyone's conception of hyperspace – an extrapolation from the known, the experienced. How could a generation pass on to succeeding generations something which it could not grasp itself? Even now, to Ada and the others of the third



generation, a conception of a dog, or a blade of grass, was impossible. What then of the nth generation, millions or billions strong?

Logic would tell them the human form is an Absolute of nature. By the same token the technology and the knowledge they had inherited would be divine revelation, and he, John Davenport, would be their God.

Confronted with the parent civilization, as they would be eventually, their instinct would be to destroy, in a holy war of extermination. They could never accept and embrace something that was an affront to the basic Absolutes of their philosophy.

A planet such as the Earth would be the unimaginable extreme of unclean horror, where the stench of rotting and fermenting vegetation would cause them to faint, and a dog walking down the street would be to them a blasphemy against the purity of the universe itself! And man, living by devouring the dead remains of such abominations, would be more horrible to them than medieval mans conception of the fiends in hell.

That was the realization that had come to him last night, in the quiet of his room.

The nth generation of his descendants would become a destroying behemoth, cleansing the universe in a holy crusade, and totally incapable of compromise. Compromise? It would be easier for a civilized man on Earth to abandon his own Absolutes and wallow in the mire with his hogs and consider them his equal.

Yes, that would happen, unless he, right now, destroyed the potential destroying monster he had let come into existence.

John Davenport took another step toward the control panel. It would be only the work of a moment. He knew exactly what to do. He wouldn't even need any tools. He could lift out the right panel and break the fine wires with his fingers and reconnect them. Then the computer, in seeking for stability of the pile, would have all its directives reversed.

But again he hesitated. He was right. He knew beyond doubt that he was right. But was he? Was it possible he was wrong?

And even if he were right, even if he did this thing, and destroyed his children, what of the next starship that became wrecked on some sterile world too far from home for hope of rescue?

And the next? And the next?

If what he believed must happen would become inevitable if he didn't cross those two fine wires under the panel, *was it not just as inevitable if he did?*

*Somewhere, sometime...*

And suddenly he knew he couldn't go through with it.

The same psychological principles that made his logic about what must eventually happen valid made it impossible for him to stop it here and now. He had never killed anything in his life; he could not force himself to kill now. Not, at least, for an abstract idea.

He reached out and touched the panel, but he did not lift it out. Regretfully he let his hand drop away from it.

Turning away from the control panel, he went with faltering, weary step toward the door beyond which his children's children awaited him with an absolute trust such as they could have given only to their God.

Of course he was wrong; he was already beginning to tell himself in the process of rationalization. He was getting senile. Why, he might have done that foolish thing! He wasn't to be trusted any more.

He reached out to the door to open it. For a moment he hesitated, and in his mind's eye rose the conviction of certainty. If he opened the door now, it would then be too late, and it would happen and his chance to stop it would be gone forever.

*But even if he stopped it here and now, somewhere, sometime, insome other far off place, it would still happen....*

Or maybe it wouldn't.

He pushed open the door, and suddenly all of his years settled down over his shoulders.

## **PARIAH**

"Let's try that place up ahead," Mary said. "That was a church we just passed. Anyone living that near a church..." Her voice drifted off on a tired note.

"I hope you're right, Mary," John said with forced cheerfulness.

"It's still dark enough so they can't see us too well until we get to the door."

They came to the dirt road leading into the fenced-in yard. John figured out how to unlatch the gate. Every farmer, it seems, has his own patented way of making gates.

A couple of dogs came toward them, barking loudly. One of them stopped barking and came forward to sniff cautiously, then wag its tail; the other kept on barking.

The light on the back porch went on. John and Mary skirted it in the shadows until they came to the board steps. They went up, their shoes making loud noises.

The back door opened as they reached the top step. A man stuck his head out. "Howdy, fo—" His greeting snapped off like a light. His face did things. He swam backward through the air, leaped backward, stumbled backward – all in the same movement. He bumped the door, which then banged the kitchen wall so hard the glass window in it broke.

"Get out or I'll shoot!" his hysterical voice came from the kitchen. He was already on his way to the bedroom to get his rifle.

"We'd better go," Mary said sadly.

"I-I guess so," John said.

They hurried back toward the road. They had gone scarcely fifty feet when the rifle barked. They broke into a fast trot – all they could manage just then. The rifle barked again.

They didn't bother with the gate this time. John lifted Mary over, then leaped to her side, using one hand. They ran down the road until they were sure they were out of range. They looked back often, in case the farmer got his car and came after them.

The rifle continued to bark, as though its owner was frenzied.

"Maybe he thinks we're still hiding in the yard and is shooting into bushes," John said.

"I don't think so." Mary put an arm around John's shoulders. They walked close together. "He – I think he's just terribly afraid. He's shooting wild. He'll stop when he calms down. We startled him."

"Are you hungry?" John said, changing the subject. "I am. I think I smell carrots up ahead." He slipped through the barbed wire fence, and returned in a few moments with a large bunch of them. They walked slowly, their teeth crunching hungrily into the sweet yellow roots. "Think we should try again tonight?" he asked casually.

"No, John. I'm too tired. Maybe we can find a barn."

"Yes. We ought to get off the road. That farmer may have thought to call the—"

Headlights turned sharply into the road less than a quarter of a mile ahead. With the smoothness of long practice John and Mary melted into the bushes and weeds alongside the road. They watched when the car went by. It was a highway patrol sedan. They watched its taillights wink into the distance. They became bright suddenly, then dim again as the car slowed to turn in to the farmhouse where they had been run off.

"We ought to catch a freight or something," John said. "They'll start looking for us."

At dawn they came to a railroad track. A freight was on the siding.

A train whistled in the distance. It came into view, a streamliner, blurring past them with faces in windows. Then it was gone. The freight started to move slowly.

"I know what line this is," Mary said. "I think that freight will go through the town where I was born."

"You're hungry," John said.

"I'm used to being hungry by now," Mary said. She smiled pleadingly. "Please?"

A string of empty boxcars was passing. They went down the bank and onto the track the passenger train had gone over. The freight was moving at a fast walk now.

John helped Mary into the open door of a boxcar. When she was safely on, he caught the edge of the door and pulled himself up.

"Made it," he said lightly. Then he saw what Mary was looking at; a man, badly in need of a shave, wearing a dirty faded blue work shirt and Levis. "Hello," John said.

The man leaped to his feet and ran past them. His feet slid in straw that covered the floor of the car. They went out from under him. He got up and went to the open door, took his eyes off them long enough to see what was outside, then jumped.

Mary looked at John and shrugged cheerfully.

"Well, we have the car to ourselves," John said.

The freight gathered speed until it was going fifty or sixty miles an hour. John and Mary stood at either edge of the open doors and watched fields and towns go past. Then they grew tired of that, sat down side by side, their backs to the wall, where they could still watch.

"I've made up my mind," John said.

"Well," Mary said lightly. "So that was the cause of the long silence."

The cars went over a crossing. John waited until the clatter of the wheels died down.

"Yes," he said. "I've made up my mind. We've had enough for a day or two. Tonight I'm going to steal."

"What do you call what we've been doing?" Mary said.

"That's different, swiping out of farmers' fields. We can't keep it up. We'll get – worms or something. We need a hot meal. Several hot meals. We can get off the freight outside the city in the suburbs and watch until we see a family drive away from home like they're going to a show or something. Then we'll break in and cook us a nice square meal."

"I'd like to say no," Mary said.

"You're outvoted," John chuckled. "You – against me and your stomach."

"It might be just our luck that they were the family that would have taken us in," Mary said, but she didn't sound as though she thought it much of an argument.

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"Shut up, Flo," the man said.

"You've been drinking too much again."

"I have not been drinking too much, my darling sweet husband," the tall blonde said. "Did you get that? Sweet husband." She laughed hollowly, then added, "And what if I have? What'll you do about it?"

"Maybe I'll do something about this 'sweet husband' business," Harry said. "I'm getting sick of you."

He opened the car door and got out. Flo watched him become a vague shadow on the porch. A screen door slammed. A light went on in the house. She opened the door and slid to the concrete, and went toward the house, staggering a little. She was tall in the moonlight, tall and with a shape. She looked away from the house at the long stretch of lawn and trees as though she didn't like what she saw. She didn't. The nearest neighbor was a city block away – only it wasn't city blocks out here just beyond the edge of town. Just highway.

She went up on the porch and pushed open the screen door. She came to a stop in the doorway, waiting until the screen slammed behind her. Harry was standing near a window. He was looking at the window.

"Go ahead and do something about it then," Flo said. "I'll like it better that way. A cash settlement and alimony. And a city apartment."

"We've had burglars," Harry said.

"Don't try to change the subject. Huh? Burglars? You're kidding."

The window was open. The glass splinters lay on the rug.

"We'd better see what's missing," Harry said.

Flo went to the little bar and opened it. "Not our stock, thank God," she said, pouring half a water glass of Haig and Haig.

Harry looked around the room, then went into the kitchen. When he came out he looked at Flo and chuckled knowingly but said nothing. She could find the stack of dirty dishes herself.

He went into the bedroom. When he came out he flashed her a malicious grin. "Some of your dresses gone," he said. "You won't miss them. They're those 'old

rags' you always talk about. One of my suits is gone too. Why didn't they steal the whole lot?" He turned toward a door at the end of the living room. Over his shoulder he added, "Oh yes – your mink coat is gone, too!"

"So what?" Flo said. "It's insured. Anyway, maybe I wore it tonight and left it someplace. I don't remember!"

Harry changed his mind in midstep and went to the fireplace. He lifted one of the tiles and inspected the floor safe revealed. "Guess they missed this," he said. "Not a scratch on it."

He covered it again with the tile square and went to the door and opened it. It was his office – at home. Flo watched the light go on inside. She sipped her drink with lady-like daintiness. Harry came out holding an envelope. He looked across the room at her.

"It's a hell of a note," he said. "It makes me mad."

Flo finished the half glass of Haig and Haig in a gulp.

"You make me sick," she said in reference to something unrelated.

"They stole the tickets to the masquerade," Harry said. "Fifty bucks apiece. Now what would they want with tickets to the masquerade?"

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"Send the cab to one fifty-six twenty-two Orange Grove Avenue. Tell the driver not to be startled by our appearance. We're dressed for the Masquerade. That's where we're going. We'll be waiting in front. Too uncomfortable to sit down... That's right. Women and their ideas." John hung up and smiled at the phone. He turned to Mary. "We'll have to hurry so we're waiting when the cab comes. That mink looks lovely on you, Mary."

"Thanks, John. Your business suit looks very well on you too."

"Lucky its owner wasn't the slim type," John said.

They had slipped from the woods where they had been hiding for the past three days, living sparingly on the remains of the meal they had cooked. The woods came right to the edge of the service station. The phone booth was on the border between station driveway and woods. Ideal. They slipped back into the trees and emerged onto the sidewalk well away from the lights. They met no one.

"You have the tickets, John?" Mary said in sudden panic.

"Of course." He felt in his pocket, nodded.

Headlights turned into the street. The light at the top of the car advertised it as a taxi.

"Think he'll be scared off?" John said.

"Of course not. The Masquerade is an annual affair here. I get the hometown papers and know all about it from way back. Half the cabs in town will be taking fares more unusual in appearance than us!"

To prove it, the cab drew to the side of the road. The driver grinned broadly as he opened the door for them.

"It's wonderful," Mary murmured as the cab sped along a well-lighted arterial. "I'd give my soul to be able to walk into one of those shops." She stared at each window filled with female mannequins dressed in the latest fashions. She caught John watching her. She darted him a quick smile. "Do you think we'll be happy tonight, John?" she asked. Her smile quirked playfully. "Would you mind awfully if I – flirted a little with someone else? Maybe even let him make love to me?" There was a wistful note in her voice.

"The sky's the limit," John said. "I think I'll pick a blonde. After all, you're a brunette. A man should have something different on his night out."

The cab came to a stop. Other cabs were ahead of it. They formed a line that disgorged couples, few of them looking human. And those that were, consorted with the unhuman – like the lovely near-nude girl with the life-like rubber snake ... and the man with the demon's head.

John tipped the driver when it was their turn. "Hope you win first prize," the driver said.

"Thanks," John said. Mary smiled at the driver and looked lingeringly at his face. She wanted to remember everything that happened tonight. Every detail.

Spectators formed a wide lane maintained by four policemen. John and Mary crossed the sidewalk nervously. They skipped up the flat marble steps into the building and took their place at the end of the line.

A man in dress suit and a nose that was supposed to look like an elephant's trunk but which looked more like a rope was taking the tickets as the couples went through the door. Each time he took the tickets he turned and handed them to another man behind him. This man had broad shoulders and a square chin. There was a bulge under his left armpit. He would hold the tickets up and squint at them, glance briefly at the couples, nod, and they would go through the door.

Mary leaned close to John's ear. "He looks like a policeman. I was afraid it was too good to be true. Those numbers."

"Can't be helped now," John said regretfully. "We can't run for it, either. Right in the heart of the city. Keep your chin up, no matter what. And keep your hypnotic barrier up full – even if it tires you excessively. We might still fool them."

"Tickets please," elephant nose said, his lips emerging on either side of the rope in a smile of welcome.

John fished out the tickets and gave them to him.

Elephant nose handed the tickets to the other man and put his hand on the door handle in a gesture that implied he would open it for them, but which held the door closed.

Mary and John watched the detective squint at the numbers, then nod. Unbelievably elephant nose was opening the door for them.

Inside, another man pointed toward dressing rooms. "You can check your coats in there," he said.

"I'll meet you over by that statue," John said. "Keep them hypnotized!"

They looked into each other's eyes briefly, drawing courage. Ten minutes later they were together again. "Go all right?" John asked. Mary crossed her fingers and held them up.

A loud voice made them turn.

"What's the matter with you halfwits?" a man at the entrance was shouting. His face was livid with rage.

"It's all right!" the doorman elephant nose said loudly. "We've just trapped a pair of famous cat burglars."

"Cats disguised as a bird and a dog?" another voice said loudly. "How appropriate!"

"He was waiting for those people?" Mary said. "I wonder if—"

"Never mind," John said, guiding her toward the wide arch leading into the ballroom. "We're in, and safe for now. We'll have all the fun we can while it—" he took a deep breath "—lasts."

"I wonder who will be my prince charming," Mary sighed.

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Thick tapering black whiskers were glued individually to Harry's cheeks. A black piece of molded plastic bridged the space between nose and upper lip skillfully. Continuations of his lips reached to his ears, which were covered with pointed extensions. A tail animated by an internal spring construction swept from under his coat gracefully backward. He achieved the effect of a somewhat jaded wolf imperfectly turned into the form of a man. It was a skillful, an expensive job.

He was pacing with wolfish impatience up and down the office off the ballroom.

No less than the chief of police sat behind the desk, drumming his fingers



impatiently.

The door burst open. Squarejaw came in, dragging a squirming peacock and a loose-bodied bird dog. "Here they are, Chief," Squarejaw said.

"Them?" Harry said, his wolf whiskers quivering with nervous mirth. "Don't make me laugh. We were with them in half a dozen cocktail lounges while it was happening.

"They had the right tickets," Squarejaw said indignantly.

"And the city is going to be sued for false arrest," the limp bird dog snarled.

"Get that damned secretary again," Harry snarled. "She must have made a mistake in the numbers."

Ten minutes later the nervous female was there with the books and discovered to her horror that she had let her eyes drop down a line from the name to the numbers.

Another five minutes uncovered the proper tickets. And Squarejaw naturally couldn't remember who had given them to the ticket taker. It did prove, however, that the stolen tickets came.

"They'll have the stubs on them," Harry said, attempting a wolfish smile. "Why not announce a door prize? Maybe five hundred dollars. Pretend to draw a number? They might fall for it."

"I'll suggest it to the committee," the chief said.

Harry left the room. At the entrance to the ballroom he paused, his finger touching the black wolf whiskers gently. He surveyed the room, his eyes pausing at each female. His wife Flo, in a Siamese cat outfit, was too prominent. She had a drink in her cat paw, and already there were several men around her. She looked his way. He snarled with his whiskers.

There was Margie with her Peacock outfit that showed her cute fanny. But that would be a waste of a good evening. Besides ... Harry forgot Margie as his eyes went to the girl.

It wasn't the way she was made up that arrested his attention. It was the way she was standing, alone, the look in her eyes, the expression on what he could see of her face. The wolf in him recognized what it had been searching for.

A damn cute idea in make-up, too. Original and sexy. He touched his wolf whiskers with a gesture, waited until he caught the girl's eyes on him, nodded at her and smiled. He walked toward her. She looked doubtful, then returned his smile with just a shade of nervousness.

"Hello, my dear little girl," he said, leering with over-exaggeration to cover his actual leering. "I'm the Big Bad Wolf."

"Help!" the girl screamed in a whisper. "I would have sworn you were my grandma."

"That was most unkind," Harry said with great dignity.

They looked into each other's eyes. Suddenly they laughed.

"I'm Harry."

"I'm Mary."

He took her slim cool hand and didn't release it. "Want a drink?"

"I'd love one."

The dance band began to play a soft number as they left the floor. Mary paused. "I should dance this one with my – escort."

"Why?" Harry said. "Forget it Remember, you can tell him the wolf dragged you away into the forest."

They had three drinks. Harry debated in his mind the anatomical problems of dancing with her. Then he decided that, since she had dressed that way deliberately, she wouldn't resent an accidental familiarity or two.

They danced the first number when the lights were turned low. Mary stumbled a little. "I'm not used to drinking," she explained.

"Go to your head a little?" he asked slyly.

Her "mm hm" was a whisper in his ear. He caught her lips with his. They tried to escape, then surrendered.

"Sorry," he said gruffly. "I'm not used to drinking either."

She was looking at him with stars in her eyes. He kissed her again.

"No. I'm not sorry," he said.

"Neither am I, Harry." She rested her cheek against his shoulder. The dance ended on that note.

They went back to the bar. Their conversation was now casual with an intimate casualness. They sat with their backs to the bar, watching other people and commenting on their make-ups.

"I like you, Harry," Mary said suddenly, impulsively.

"Me too," he said. "This is too public. Think we could find some corner?"

"Not just yet," Mary said. "The people. They are so wonderful this night of the year. I want to watch them. Just a little bit more. Do you mind?"

"I heard they're having something new this year," Harry said quickly. "A door prize. I think it's going to be five hundred dollars."

"Oh?" It was disinterested. Five hundred dollars didn't seem to interest her. Harry sighed with relief. He had to try it a step further though. "You know, you've got quite a stunning make-up. You may win the first prize."

Her laugh was embarrassed. "I certainly hope not, Harry. I would sink through the floor."

"The door prize wouldn't be bad," he said. "What's the number on your ticket stub?"

Her eyes were fixed on something out in the ballroom. She reached into the pocket in her trunks and brought out a scrap of cardboard, handing it to him.

He read the number and stopped breathing. It was the number.

"I'll remember it for you," he said with studied casualness, handing the stub back to her. "Another drink?"

"Huh?" she blinked her eyes and looked at him. "Oh. Yes, another drink, Harry."

He ordered them. He handed her her drink. "Be back in a minute, darling," he said with the right implication. "You won't go away?"

"No, Harry. Hurry back. Please. The evening will be so short."

The little thief, he thought as he hurried away. The dirty little thief. Whatta ya know, a female burglar. And stupid enough not to know that fifty-dollar tickets would be registered.

He hurried toward the office to get the police chief.

And she hadn't seemed the type. Not the way he would have imagined a female burglar. She was more like a girl student in a convent, dreaming for years of an escapade she could hide in her secret memories. But you couldn't tell about women. Take Flo. If he'd only known what he was getting into with her when he got married...

He could hear Flo's voice now when she found out. "Ha ha! You picked yourself a mouse and she turned out to be the rat type. And so you wasted the whole evening. What a laugh!" She would say that.

He came to an abrupt stop with his hand on the knob to the door to the office.

There was another way. Flo wouldn't have the laugh at his expense.

He turned and made his way back to the bar. Mary was where he had left her.

"Back so soon?" she asked, smiling up at him.

"No line waiting," he said, sitting down beside her and taking his drink. "Want to dance again? Or should we...?"

"Let's," Mary said.

"Let's what?" He grinned wolfishly.

"You know... Dance."

The music was loud, but the voices around them were a soft murmur. In the first shadows he swung her around and kissed her brutally. He pulled his head away, still holding her pressed tightly against him.

"You hurt me, Harry," she said softly.

"You liked it?"

"I like this better." She crushed her lips against his, held them there. After a long moment she pulled away with a soft laugh.

"You little vixen!" he said. "You know the score!"

"Not that way," she said. "I've dreamed of tonight. You'll never know how I've dreamed. Am I desirable to you, Harry?"

"You want the truth?"

"Yes."

"I'll give it to you. I don't know you! You could be a-a gun moll. You could be a fugitive from a convent. You could be the most wonderful woman in the world – or the worst."

"Would it make a difference?"

"No. I want you. No use lying about it. I want every inch of you."

"Then I'm desirable in your eyes?"

"Damn it – yes."

Her voice was husky, dreamy. "I wanted to hear you say it, Harry."

"Why shouldn't I say it?"

The dance ended after a while. Harry caught the eyes of the Siamese cat on him. He smirked. Flo had seen him and Mary kiss. He had wanted her to see. And when he told her he had known Mary was the burglar all along it would be perfect.

He looked Mary over covertly. Her masquerade make-up was still intact. She looked okay. Something in the back of his mind disturbed him. He shrugged it off.

"One of your whiskers is missing," Mary said. "The glue where it was looks like a pimple." She chuckled.

"Dropped at the scene of the crime," Harry said darkly. "That should make the detective mystified. One wolf whisker. Even the great Holmes would have a hard time finding the criminal from that slim clue."

Mary's hand reached into the pocket of her trunks. "Oh dear," she said. "There's another clue. I've lost my ticket stub." She smiled. "But could Mr. Holmes find us from that?"

"He could," Harry said. "You see, the number of that ticket is on the books after my name. I bought it just like that."

"Oh!" It was a gasp.

"There's a way out, Mary," Harry said, "The police are here—"

"I know. How did they miss us? That detective looking at the numbers on the stubs. And then he got the wrong people."

"He got the numbers mixed but he has them right now. I've got a proposition for you. I don't give a damn about your accomplice. We can slip away right now, go to your apartment or room or wherever you live. I'm not a fool. I don't want a phony address. I want to know. Play along with me. We've had too good a time to drop it! Maybe I'm a fool. Maybe I'm not. I'm crazy about you. I make plenty of money. I can pay your rent and buy your clothes."

"Your wife—"

"To hell with her. We stopped loving each other long ago. She's got a meal ticket. The courts would give her better than that if I tried to get rid of her. She's a mistake. You won't be."

"No, Harry."

"Why not?" he said, surprised.

People were looking at them, so they began dancing. She rested her head on his shoulder. "Oh, Harry," she said. "I-I wish tonight were forever. But it can't be."

"Then it's the police, Mary."

"Blackmail?"

His voice was husky. "Call it that. I want you."

"I think you do. I really think you do. But what if —"

"Nothing can change that. A man knows. I'll do everything I can, take every advantage I can. If you think I'm bluffing find out. If I can't have you, I'll turn you

over to the police. I want you that bad. Look. I'm quite well off. Tomorrow I'll buy you a car. You can drive out in the country, pick out a home you'd like. I'll buy it for you. Or I'll find one for you and take you there. I can buy off your accomplice or you can ditch him. We can be together a while every day."

"You want me that much? My body?" Her voice was wistful.

"You're a funny kid," Harry growled. "Most girls make a pretense of wanting the man to love them for their mind. You seem to want me to be crazy about your body."

He felt her shiver against him. "I'm afraid," she whispered.

He chuckled. "You're going to give in," he said.

Her shivering increased. Then suddenly it stopped. She took his hand. "Let's go up to the balcony, darling." Her eyes were bright with tears. She smiled through them. "I – almost – have hope," she said brightly.

They went up the steps to the balcony. Harry was conscious of Flo's eyes following them. Maybe she'd follow them, but what the hell. Maybe a settlement and alimony was the best solution. To hell with Flo.

They reached the first shadows. Harry tried to keep on, but Mary stopped him.

"Stand where you are," she said. "No, don't kiss me – or yes, just once now." She yielded her lips. Her arms went around his neck. Then she pushed gently away from him. "Stand there!" she said. "I want to stand a little way from you. I want you to look at me. I want you to see me – but just in the shadows, for now."

"Okay!" He was a man humoring the whims of a woman. And it was easy to humor this one. He could look at her forever. He could –

She abandoned her hypnotic aura.

He turned a livid shade of green. "Oh God!" he moaned. He thought of the moments he had had with her in his arms dancing. He knew now what had been troubling him at the back of his mind. He doubled over and gagged, his stomach doing the erasing his mind couldn't accomplish.

Mary stood quietly, her arms still held out toward him. Her lips trembled. Tears streamed down her cheeks but she didn't cry. She couldn't cry.

"I'm sorry, Harry," she said with infinite regret. "I'd hoped. You gave me hope."

He didn't hear her. Still retching, he stumbled toward the stairs, half stumbled down them.

"Police!" he gasped. The band drowned out his voice. "Police!" he repeated. It was coincidental with a pause in the music. His voice carried through the ballroom.

All eyes went toward him, then past him to the head of the stairs.

Mary was coming down. She felt relieved from the terrific strain of holding a hypnotic mental image for so many. Her head was held high. Tears still streaked her cheeks. The band had played a few more notes, then stopped of itself to watch her. The bandleader turned to see what they were staring at.

A gasp of horror rose through the ballroom.

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John detached himself from the shadows at the far side of the room and pushed gently through the crowd toward the foot of the stairs. People saw him now, too, as he actually was.

Harry staggered away from the stairs toward the office. Squarejaw, his complexion green, had brought a gun out from underneath his dress suit. He was headed determinedly toward the stairs.

John held out his hand to Mary. A shudder went through the crowd as Mary took his hand.

"I'm sorry, John," Mary said. "I had to spoil it. I knew, but I had to spoil it. I thought maybe..."

"It's okay, Mary," John said.

"We can go back now."

Mary smiled through her tears. "You didn't dance, John. Didn't you want to?" When he didn't answer she said, "You did this – you escaped with me – just for me?"

"Just for you."

They went ahead of Squarejaw. The door to the office was open. They could hear Harry's voice.

"She's an escaped ATOMY!" Harry's voice came, shaken and gasping. "God! Can't they keep them out of sight? Can't they catch them when they get out? Why do they want to get out? It was like holding a cancer in my hands. She put her arms around me—"

"I don't see how they could have gotten this far from the Atomy Colony," the police chief's voice sounded. "The female was born here. That's probably why."

John held back. "We'd better wait out here," he said. "You won't want to see him again."

"I won't mind," Mary said quietly. "I feel sorry for him now. I think that's what I wanted to find. I found it. I feel sorry for all of them, but especially for Harry. I was

beautiful and attractive to him. It's more than just how we look. It's a genetic pattern gone haywire like cancerous tissue, only we are the visible manifestation of cancer of the human race, cropping out now a hundred years after the first Bomb. The race pattern is infected and they're the race. They never know when their children will look like us – or worse. That's what makes them react so. I feel so sorry for them." She smiled apologetically at John. "I guess that's what I had to see and feel. I-I don't feel sorry for myself. Not any more. Not ever again." Her hand rested on his shoulder. She said. "We can go home now, John, and wait. Some day we'll be the race. Some day we'll be the accepted ones. I know that now!"

***THE END***