

THE PI MAN

Alfred Bester

How to say? How to write? When sometimes I can be fluent, even polished, and then, *reculer pour mieux sauter*, patterns take hold of me. Push. Compel.

| | | |
|----------------|-----------|-------|
| Sometimes | | |
| I | I | I |
| | am | am |
| | am | am |
| | 3.14159 + | |
| from | from | from |
| this | other | that |
| space | space | space |
| Othertimes not | | |

I have no control, but I try anyways.

I wake up wondering who, what, when, where, why?

Confusion result of biological compensator born into my body which I hate. Yes, birds and beasts have biological clock built in, and so navigate home from a thousand miles away. I have biological compensator, equalizer, responder to unknown stresses and strains. I relate, compensate, make and shape patterns, adjust rhythms, like a gridiron pendulum in a clock, but this is an unknown clock, and I do not know what time it keeps. Nevertheless I must. I am force. Have no control over self, speech, love, fate. Only to compensate.

Quae nocent docent. Translation follows: Things that injure teach. I am injured and have hurt many. What have we learned? However. I wake up the morning of the biggest hurt of all wondering which house. Wealth, you understand. Damme! Mews cottage in London, villa in Rome, penthouse in New York, rancho in California. I awake. I look. Ah! Layout familiar. Thus:

Foyer

Bedroom

Bath

T

Bath

e

Living Room

r

Kitchen

r

Dressing Room

a

Bedroom

c

T e r r a c e

So. I am in penthouse in New York, but that bath-bath-back-to-back. Pfui! All rhythm wrong. Pattern painful. Why have I never noticed before? Or is this sudden awareness result of phenomenon elsewhere? I telephone to janitor-mans downstairs. At that moment I lose my American-English. Damn nuisance. I'm compelled to speak a compost of tongues, and I never know which will be forced on me next.

“Pronto. Ecco mi. Signore Marco. Miscusi tanto—”

Pfui! Hang up. Hate the garbage I must sometimes speak and write. This I now write during period of AmerEng lucidity, otherwise would look like goulash. While I wait for return of communication, I shower body, teeth, hairs, shave face, dry

everything, and try again. *Voilà!* Ye Englishe, she come. Back to invention of Mr. A.G. Bell and call janitor again.

“Good morning, Mr. Lundgren. This is Peter Marko. Guy in the penthouse. Right. Mr. Lundgren, be my personal rabbi and get some workmen up here this morning. I want those two baths converted into one. No, I mean it. I’ll leave five thousand dollars on top of the icebox. Yes? Thanks, Mr. Lundgren.”

Wanted to wear grey flannel this morning but compelled to put on sharkskin. Damnation! Black Power has peculiar side effects. Went to spare bedroom (see diagram) and unlocked door which was installed by the Eagle Safe Company—Since 1904—Bank Vault Equipment—Fireproof Files & Ledger Trays—Combinations changed. I went in.

Everything broadcasting beautifully, up and down the electromagnetic spectrum. Radio waves down to 1,000 meters, ultraviolet up into the hard X-rays and the 100 Kev (one hundred thousand electron volts) gamma radiation. All interrupters innn-tt-errrr-up-ppp-t-ingggg at random. I’m jamming the voice of the universe at least within this home, and I’m at peace. Dear God! To know even a moment of peace!

So. I take subway to office in Wall Street. Limousine more convenient but chauffeur too dangerous. Might become friendly, and I don’t dare have friends anymore. Best of all, the morning subway is jam-packed, mass-packed, no patterns to adjust, no shiftings and compensations required. Peace.

In subway car I catch a glimpse of an eye, narrow, bleak, grey, the property of an anonymous man who conveys the conviction that you’ve never seen him before and will never see him again. But I picked up that glance and it tripped an alarm in the back of my mind. He knew it. He saw the flash in my eyes before I could turn away. So I was being tailed again. Who, this time? U.S.A.? U.S.S.R.? Interpol? Skip-Tracers, Inc.?

I drifted out of the subway with the crowd at City Hall and gave them a false trail to the Woolworth Building in case they were operating double-tails. The whole theory of the hunters and the hunted is not to avoid being tailed, no one can escape that; the thing to do is give them so many false leads to follow up that they become overextended. Then they may be forced to abandon you. They have a man-hour budget; just so many men for just so many operations.

City Hall traffic was out of sync, as it generally is, so I had to limp to compensate. Took elevator up to tenth floor of bldg. As I was starting down the stairs, I was suddenly seized by something from out there, something bad. I began to cry, but no help. An elderly clerk emerge from office wearing alpaca coat, gold spectacles, badge on lapel identify: *N.N. Chapin*.

“Not him,” I plead with nowhere. “Nice mans. Not N.N. Chapin, please.”

But I am force. Approach. Two blows, neck and gut. Down he go, writhing. I trample spectacles and smash watch. Then I’m permitted to go downstairs again. It was ten-thirty. I was late. Damn! Took taxi to 99 Wall Street. Drivers pattern smelled honest; big black man, quiet and assured. Tipped him fifty dollars. He raise eyebrows. Sealed one thousand in envelope (secretly) and sent driver back to bldg. to find and give to N.N. Chapin on tenth floor. Did not enclose note: “From your unknown admirer.”

Routine morning’s work in office. I am in arbitrage, which is simultaneous buying and selling of moneys in different markets to profit from unequal price. Try to follow simple example: Pound sterling is selling for \$2.79H in London. Rupee is selling for \$2.79 in New York. One rupee buys one pound in Burma. See where the arbitrage lies? I buy one rupee for \$2.79 in New York, buy one pound for rupee in Burma, sell pound for \$2.79H in London, and I have made H cent on the transaction. Multiply by \$100,000, and I have made \$250 on the transaction. Enormous capital required.

But this is only crude example of arbitrage; actually the buying and selling must follow intricate patterns and have perfect timing. Money markets are jumpy today. Big Boards are hectic. Gold fluctuating. I am behind at eleven-thirty, but the patterns put me ahead \$57,075.94 by half-past noon, Daylight Saving Time.

57075 makes a nice pattern but that 94¢! Iych! Ugly. Symmetry above all else. Alas, only 24¢ hard money in my pockets. Called secretary, borrowed 70¢ from her, and threw sum total out window. Felt better as I watched it scatter in space, but then I caught her looking at me with delight. Very dangerous. Fired girl on the spot.

“But why, Mr. Marko? Why?” she asked, trying not to cry. Darling little thing. Pale-faced and saucy, but not so saucy now.

“Because you’re beginning to like me.”

“What’s the harm in that?”

“When I hired you, I warned you not to like me.”

“I thought you were putting me on.”

“I wasn’t. Out you go.”

“But why?”

“Because I’m beginning to like you.”

“Is this some new kind of pass?”

“God forbid!”

“Well you don’t have to worry,” she flared. “I despise you.”

“Good. Then I can go to bed with you.”

She turned crimson and opened her mouth to denounce me, the while her eyes twinkled at the corners. A darling girl, whatever her name was. I could not endanger her. I gave her three weeks’ salary for a bonus and threw her out. *Punkt*. Next secretary would be a man, married, misanthropic, murderous; a man who could

hate me.

So, lunch. Went to nicely balanced restaurant. All chairs filled by patrons. Even pattern. No need for me to compensate and adjust. Also, they give me usual single corner table which does not need guest to balance. Ordered nicely patterned luncheon:

Martini Martini

Croque M'sieur

Roquefort

Salad

Coffee

But so much cream being consumed in restaurant that I had to compensate by drinking my coffee black, which I dislike. However, still a soothing pattern.

$x^2 - 1 = (x - 1)(x + 1)$ 41 5 prime number. Excuse, please. Sometimes I'm in control and see what compensating must be done... tick-tock-tick-tock, good old gridiron pendulum... other times is force on me from God knows where or why or how or even if there is a God. Then I must do what I'm compelled to do, blindly, without motivation, speaking the gibberish I speak and think, sometimes hating it like what I do to poor mans Mr. Chapin. Anyway, the equation breaks down when $x = 540$.

The afternoon was quiet. For a moment I thought I might be forced to leave for Rome (Italy) but whatever it was adjusted without needing my two (\$0,02) cents. ASPCA finally caught up with me for beating my dog to death, but I'd contributed \$5,000.00 to their shelter. Got off with a shaking of heads. Wrote a few graffiti on posters, saved a small boy from a clobbering in a street rumble at a cost of sharkskin jacket. Drat! Slugged a maladroit

driver who was subjecting his lovely Aston-Martin to cruel and unusual punishment. He was, how they say, “grabbing a handful of second.”

In the evening to ballet to relax with all the beautiful Balanchine patterns; balanced, peaceful, soothing. Then I take a deep breath, quash my nausea, and force myself to go to *The Raunch*, the West Village creepsville. I hate *The Raunch*, but I need a woman and I must go where I hate. That fair-haired girl I fired, so full of mischief and making eyes at me. So, *poisson d’avril*, I advance myself to *The Raunch*.

Chaos. Blackness. Cacophony. My vibes shriek. 25 Watt bulbs. Ballads of Protest. Against L. wall sit young men, with pubic beards, playing chess. Badly. *Exempli gratia*:

| | |
|---------|---------|
| 1 P—Q4 | Kt—KB 3 |
| 2 Kt—Q2 | P—K4 |
| 3 PXP | Kt—Kt5 |
| 4 P—KR3 | Kt—K6 |

If White takes the knight, Black forces mate with Q—R5ch. I didn’t wait to see what the road-company Capablancas would do next.

Against R. wall is bar, serving beer and cheap wine mostly. There are girls with brown paper bags containing toilet articles. They are looking for a pad for the night. All wear tight jeans and are naked under loose sweaters. I think of Herrick (1591–1674):
Next, when I lift mine eyes and see / That brave vibration each way free / Oh, how that glittering taketh me!

I pick out the one who glitters the most. I talk. She insult. I

insult back and buy hard drinks. She drink my drinks and snarl and hate, but helpless. Her name is Bunny and she has no pad for tonight. I do not let myself sympathize. She is a dyke; she does not bathe, her thinking patterns are jangles. I hate her and she's safe; no harm can come to her. So I maneuvered her out of Sink City and took her home to seduce by mutual contempt, and in the living room sat the slender little paleface secretary, recently fired for her own good.

She sat there in my penthouse, now minus one (1) bathroom, and with \$1,997.00 change on top of the refrigerator. Oi! Throw \$6.00 into kitchen Dispos-All (a Federal offense) and am soothed by the lovely 1991 remaining. She sat there, wearing a pastel thing, her skin gleaming rose-red from embarrassment, also red for danger. Her saucy face was very tight from the daring thing she thought she was doing. *Gott bewahre!* I like that.

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Address: 49bis Avenue Hoche, Paris, 8eme, France

Forced to go there by what happened in the U.N., you understand. It needed extreme compensation and adjustment. Almost, for a moment, I thought I would have to attack the conductor of the *Opéra Comique*, but fate was kind and let me off with nothing worse than indecent exposure, and I was able to square it by founding a scholarship at the Sorbonne. Didn't someone suggest that fate was the square root of minus one?

Anyway, back in New York it is my turn to denounce the paleface but suddenly my AmerEng is replaced by a dialect out of a B-picture about a white remittance man and a blind native girl on a South Sea island who find redemption together while she plays the ukulele and sings gems from Lawrence Welk's Greatest Hits.

"Oh-so," I say. "Me-fella be ve'y happy ask why you-fella

invade ‘long my apa’tment, ‘cept me’ now speak pidgin. Ve’y emba’ss ‘long me.”

“I bribed Mr. Lundgren,” she blurted. “I told him you needed important papers from the office.”

The dyke turned on her heel and bounced out, her brave vibration each way free. I caught up with her in front of the elevator, put \$101 into her hand, and tried to apologize. She hated me more so I did a naughty thing to her vibration and returned to the living room.

“What’s she got?” the paleface asked.

My English returned. “What’s your name?”

“Good Lord! I’ve been working in your office for two months and you don’t know my name? You really don’t?”

“No.”

“I’m Jemmy Thomas.”

“Beat it, Jemmy Thomas.”

“So that’s why you always called me ‘Miss Uh.’ You’re Russian?”

“Half.”

“What’s the other half?”

“None of your business. What are you doing here? When I fire them they stay fired. What d’you want from me?”

“You,” she said, blushing fiery.

“Will you for God’s sake get the hell out of here.”

“What did she have that I don’t?” paleface demanded. Then her face crinkled. “Don’t? Doesn’t? I’m going to Bennington. They’re strong on aggression but weak on grammar.”

“What d’you mean, you’re going to Bennington?”

“Why, it’s a college. I thought everybody knew.”

“But *going?*”

“Oh. I’m in my junior year. They drive you out with whips to acquire practical experience in your field. You ought to know that. Your office manager—I suppose you don’t know her name, either.”

“Ethel M. Blatt.”

“Yes. Miss Blatt took it all down before you interviewed me.”

“What’s your field?”

“It used to be economics. Now it’s you. How old are you?”

“One hundred and one.”

“Oh, come on. Thirty? They say at Bennington that ten years is the right difference between men and women because we mature quicker. Are you married?”

“I have wives in London, Paris, and Rome. What is this catechism?”

“Well, I’m trying to get something going.”

“I can see that, but does it have to be me?”

“I know it sounds like a notion.” She lowered her eyes, and without the highlight of their blue, her pale face was almost invisible. “And I suppose women are always throwing themselves at you.”

“It’s my untold wealth.”

“What are you, blasé or something? I mean, I know I’m not staggering, but I’m not exactly repulsive.”

“You’re lovely.”

“They why don’t you come near me?”

“I’m trying to protect you.”

“I can protect me when the time comes. I’m a Black Belt.”

“The time is now, Jemmy Thompson.”

“Thomas.”

“Walk, not run, to the nearest exit, Jemmy Thomas.”

“The least you could do is offend me the way you did that hustler in front of the elevator.”

“You snooped?”

“Sure I snooped. You didn’t expect me to sit here on my hands, did you? I’ve got my man to protect.”

I had to laugh. This spunky little thing march in, roll up her sleeves and set to work on me. A wonder she didn’t have a pot roast waiting in the oven and herself waiting in the bed.

“Your man?” I ask.

“It happens,” she said in a low voice. “I never believed it, but it happens. You fall in and out of love and affairs, and each time you think it’s real and forever. And then you meet somebody and it isn’t a question of love anymore. You just know that he’s your man, and you’re stuck with him, whether you like it or not.” She burst out angrily. “I’m stuck, dammit! Stuck! D’you think I’m enjoying this?”

She looked at me through the storm; violet eyes full of youth and determination and tenderness and fear. I could see she, too, was being forced and was angry and afraid. And I knew how lonely I was, never daring to make friends, to love, to share. I could fall into those violet eyes and never come up. I looked at the clock. 2:30 A.M. Sometimes quiet at this hour. Perhaps my AmerEng would stay with me a while longer.

“You’re being compelled, Jemmy,” I said. “I know all about that. Something inside you, something you don’t understand, made

you take your dignity in both hands and come after me. You don't like it, you don't want to, you've never begged in your life, but you had to. Yes?"

She nodded.

"Then you can understand a little about me. I'm compelled, too."

"Who is she?"

"No, no. Not forced to beg from a woman; compelled to hurt people."

"What people?"

"Any people; sometimes strangers, and that's bad, other times people I love, and that's not to be endured. So now I no longer dare love. I must protect people from myself."

"I don't know what you're talking about. Are you some kind of psychotic monster?"

"Yes, played by Lon Chaney, Jr."

"If you can joke about it, you can't be all that sick. Have you seen a shrink?"

"No. I don't have to. I know what's compelling me." I looked at the clock again. Still a quiet time. Please God the English would stay with me a while longer. I took off my jacket and shirt. "I'm going to shock you," I said, and showed her my back, crosshatched with scars. She gasped.

"Self-inflicted," I told her. "Because I permitted myself to like a man and become friendly with him. This is the price I paid, and I was lucky that he didn't have to. Now wait here."

I went into the master bedroom where my heart's shame was embalmed in a silver case hidden in the right-hand drawer of my desk. I brought it to the living room. Jemmy watched me with great eyes.

“Five years ago a girl fell in love with me,” I told her. “A girl like you. I was lonely then, as always, so instead of protecting her from me, I indulged myself and tried to love her back. Now I want to show you the price *she* paid. You’ll loathe me for this, but I must show you. Maybe it’ll save you from—”

I broke off. A flash had caught my eye—the flash of lights going on in a building down the street; not just a few windows, a lot. I put on my jacket, went out on the terrace, and watched. All the illuminated windows in the building three down from me went out. Five-second eclipse. On again. It happened in the building two down and then the one next door. The girl came to my side and took my arm. She trembled slightly.

“What is it?” she asked. “What’s the matter? You look so grim.”

“It’s the Geneva caper,” I said. “Wait.”

The lights in my apartment went out for five seconds and then came on again.

“They’ve located me the way I was nailed in Geneva,” I told her.

“They? Located?”

“They’ve spotted my jamming by d/f.”

“What jamming?”

“The full electromagnetic spectrum.”

“What’s dee eff?”

“Radio direction-finder. They used it to get the bearing of my jamming. Then they turned off the current in each building in the area, building by building, until the broadcast stopped. Now they’ve pinpointed me. They know I’m in this house, but they don’t know which apartment yet. I’ve still got time. So. Good night, Jemmy. You’re hired again. Tell Ethel Blatt I won’t be in for a while. I wish

I could kiss you good-bye, but safer not.”

She clamped her arms around my neck and gave me an honest kiss. I tried to push her away.

She clung like The Old Man of the Sea. “You’re a spy,” she said. “I’ll go to the chair with you.”

“I wish to heaven I only was a spy. Good-bye, my love. Remember me.”

A great mistake letting that slip. It happen, I think, because my speech slip, too. Suddenly forced to talk jumble again. As I run out, the little paleface kick off her sandals so she can run, too. She is alongside me going down the fire stairs to the garage in the basement. I hit her to stop, and swear Swahili at her. She hit back and swear gutter, all the time laughing and crying. I love her for it, so she is doomed. I will ruin her like all the rest.

We get into car and drive fast. I am making for 59th Street bridge to get off Manhattan Island and head east. I own plane in Babylon, Long Island, which is kept ready for this sort of awkwardness.

“*J’y suis, J’y reste* is not my motto,” I tell Jemmy Thomas, whose French is as uncertain as her grammar, an endearing weakness. “Once Scotland Yard trapped me with a letter. I was receiving special mail care of General Delivery. They mailed me a red envelope, spotted me when I picked it up, and followed me to No. 13 Mayfair Mews, London W.1., Telephone, Mayfair 7711. Red for danger. Is the rest of you as invisible as your face?”

“I’m not invisible,” she said, indignant, running hands through her streaky fair hair. “I tan in the summer. What is all this chase and escape? Why do you talk so funny and act so peculiar? In the office I thought it was because you’re a crazy Russian. Half crazy Russian. Are you sure you’re not a spy?”

“Only positive.”

“It’s too bad. A Commie 007 would be utter blissikins.”

“Yes, I know. You see yourself being seduced with vodka and caviar.”

“Are you a being from another world who came here on a UFO?”

“Would that scare you?”

“Only if it meant we couldn’t make the scene.”

“We couldn’t anyway. All the serious side of me is concentrated on my career. I want to conquer the earth for my robot masters.”

“I’m only interested in conquering you.”

“I am not and have never been a creature from another world. I can show you my passport to prove it.”

“Then what are you?”

“A compensator.”

“A what?”

“A compensator. Like a clock pendulum. Do you know dictionary of Messrs Funk & Wagnalls? Edited by Frank H. Vizetelly, Litt.D, LL.D.? I quote: One who or that which compensates, as a device for neutralizing the influence of local attraction upon a compass needle, or an automatic apparatus for equalizing— Damn!”

Litt.D. Frank H. Vizetelly does not use that word. It is my own because roadblock now faces me on 59th Street bridge. I should have anticipated. Should have sensed patterns, but too swept up with this inviting girl. Probably there are roadblocks on all exits leading out of this \$24 island. Could drive off bridge, but maybe Bennington College has also neglected to teach Jemmy Thomas how to swim. So. Stop car. Surrender.

“*Kamerad*,” I pronounce. “Who you? John Birch?”

Gentlemans say no.

“White Supremes of the World, Inc.?”

No again. I feel better. Always nasty when captured by lunatic fringers.

“U.S.S.R.?”

He stare, then speak. “Special Agent Hildebrand. FBI,” and flash his identification which no one can read in this light. I take his word and embrace him in gratitude. FBI is safe. He recoil and wonder if I am fag. I don’t care. I kiss Jemmy Thomas, and she open mouth under mine to mutter, “Admit nothing. Deny everything. I’ve got a lawyer.”

I own thirteen lawyers, and two of them can make any court tremble, but no need to call them. This will be standard cross-examination; I know from past experience. So let them haul me off to Foley Square with Jemmy. They separate us. I am taken to Inquisition Room.

Brilliant lights; the shadows arranged just so; the chairs placed just so; mirror on wall probably one-way window with observers outside; I’ve been through this so often before. The anonymous man from the subway this morning is questioning me. We exchange glances of recognition. His name is R. Sawyer. The questions come.

“Name?”

“Peter Marko.”

“Born?”

“Lee’s Hill, Virginia.”

“Never heard of it.”

“It’s a very small town, about thirty miles north of Roanoke.

Most maps ignore it.”

“You’re Russian?”

“Half, by descent.”

“Father Russian?”

“Yes. Eugene Alexis Markolevsky.”

“Changed his name legally?”

“Shortened it when he became a citizen.”

“Mother?”

“Vera Broadhurst. English.”

“You were raised in Lee’s Hill?”

“Until ten. Then Chicago.”

“Father’s occupation?”

“Teacher.”

“Yours, financier?”

“Arbitrageur. Buying and selling money on the open market.”

“Known assets from identified bank deposits, three million dollars.”

“Only in the States. Counting overseas deposits and investments, closer to seventeen million.”

R. Sawyer shook his head, bewildered. “Marko, what the hell are you up to? I’ll level with you. At first we thought espionage, but with your kind of money— What are you broadcasting from your apartment? We can’t break the code.”

“There is no code, only randomness so I can get a little peace and some sleep.”

“Only what?”

“Random jamming. I do it in all my homes. Listen, I’ve been through this so often before, and it’s difficult for people to understand unless I explain it my own way. Will you let me try?”

“Go ahead.” Sawyer was grim. “You better make it good. We can check everything you give us.”

I take a breath. Always the same problem. The reality is so strange that I have to use simile and metaphor. But it was 4:00 A.M. and maybe the jumble wouldn’t interrupt my speech for a while. “Do you like to dance?”

“What the hell...”

“Be patient. I’m trying to explain. You like to dance?”

“I used to.”

“What’s the pleasure of dancing? It’s people making rhythms together; patterns, designs, balances. Yes?”

“So?”

“And parades. Masses of men and music making patterns. Team sports, also. Action patterns. Yes?”

“Marko, if you think I’m going to—”

“Just listen, Sawyer. Here’s the point. I’m sensitive to patterns on a big scale; bigger than dancing or parades, more than the rhythms of day and night, the seasons, the glacial epochs.”

Sawyer stared. I nodded. “Oh yes, people respond to the 2/2 of the diurnal-nocturnal rhythms, the 4/4 of the seasons, the great terra-epochs. They don’t know it, but they do. That’s why they have sleep-problems, moon-madness, sun-hunger, weather-sensitivity. I respond to these local things, too, but also to gigantic patterns, influences from infinity.”

“Are you some kind of nut?”

“Certainly. Of course. I respond to the patterns of the entire

galaxy, maybe universe; sight and sound; and the unseen and unheard. I'm moved by the patterns of people, individually and demographically: hostility, generosity, selfishness, charity, cruelties and kindnesses, groupings and whole cultures. And I'm compelled to respond and compensate."

"How a nut like you ever made seventeen mill— How do you compensate?"

"If a child hurts itself, the mother responds with a kiss. That's compensation. Agreed? If a man beats a horse you beat *him*. You boo a bad fight. You cheer a good game. You're a cop. Sawyer. Don't the victim and murderer seek each other to fulfill their pattern?"

"Maybe in the past; not today. What's this got to do with your broadcasts?"

"Multiply that compensation by infinity and you have me. I must kiss and kick. I'm driven. I must compensate in a pattern I can't see or understand. Sometimes I'm compelled to do extravagant things, other times I'm forced to do insane things: talk gibberish, go to strange places, perform abominable acts, behave like a lunatic."

"What abominable acts?"

"Fifth amendment."

"But what about those broadcasts?"

"We're flooded with wave emissions and particles, sometimes in patterns, sometimes garbled. I feel them all and respond to them the way a marionette jerks on strings. I try to neutralize them by jamming, so I broadcast at random to get a little peace."

"Marko, I swear you're crazy."

"Yes, I am, but you won't be able to get me committed. It's been tried before. I've even tried myself. It never works. The big design won't permit it. I don't know why, but the big design wants

me to go on as a Pi Man.”

“What the hell are you talking about? What kind of pie?”

“Not pee-eye-ee-man. Pee-eye-man. Pi. Sixteenth letter in the Greek alphabet. It’s the relation of the circumference of a circle to its diameter. 3.14159+. The series goes on into infinity. It’s transcendental and can never be resolved into a finite pattern. They call extrasensory perception Psi. I call extrapattern perception Pi. All right?”

He glared at me, threw my dossier down, sighed, and slumped into a chair. That made the grouping wrong, so I had to shift. He cocked an eye at me.

“Pi Man,” I apologized.

“All right,” he said at last. “We can’t hold you.”

“They all try but they never can.”

“Who try?”

“Governments, police, counterintelligence, politicals, lunatic fringe, religious sects... They track me down, hoping they can nail me or use me. They can’t. I’m part of something much bigger. I think we all are, only I’m the first to be aware of it.”

“Are you claiming you’re a superman?”

“Good God! No! I’m a damned man... a tortured man, because some of the patterns I must adjust to are outworld rhythms like nothing we ever experience on earth... 29/51... 108/303... tempi like that, alien, terrifying, agony to live with.”

He took another deep breath. “Off the record, what’s this about abominable acts?”

“That’s why I can’t have friends or let myself fall in love. Sometimes the patterns turn so ugly that I have to make frightful sacrifices to restore the design. I must destroy something I love.”

“This is sacrifice?”

“Isn’t it the only meaning of sacrifice, Sawyer? You give up what’s dearest to you.”

“Who to?”

“The Gods, The Fates, The Big Pattern that’s controlling me. From where? I don’t know. It’s too big a universe to comprehend, but I have to beat its tempo with my actions and reactions, emotions and senses, to make the patterns come out even, balanced in some way that I don’t understand. The pressures that

whipsaw
me
back and
and turn
forth me
and into
back the
and transcendental
forth 3.141591

and maybe I talk too much to R. Sawyer and the
patterns pronounce: PI MAN, IT IS NOT PERMITTED.

So. There is darkness and silence.

“The other arm now,” Jemmy said firmly. “Lift.”

I am on my bed, me. Thinking upheaved again. Half (H) into pyjamas; other half (H) being wrestled by paleface girl. I lift. She

yank. Pyjamas now on, and it's my turn to blush. They raise me prudish in Lee's Hill.

"Pot roast done?" I ask.

"What?"

"What happened?"

"You pooped out. Keeled over. You're not so cool."

"How much do you know?"

"Everything. I was on the other side of that mirror thing. Mr. Sawyer had to let you go. Mr. Lundgren helped lug you up to the apartment. He thinks you're stoned. How much should I give him?"

"Cinque lire. No. Parla Italiano, gentile signorina?"

"Are you asking me do I speak Italian? No."

"Entschuldigen, Sie, bitte. Sprechen Sie Deutsch?"

"Is this your patterns again?"

I nod.

"Can't you stop?"

After stopovers in Greece and Portugal, Ye Englische finally returns to me. "Can you stop breathing, Jemmy?"

"Is it like that, Peter? Truly?"

"Yes."

"When you do something... something bad... do you know why? Do you know exactly what it is somewhere that makes you do it?"

"Sometimes yes. Other times no. All I know is that I'm compelled to respond."

"Then you're just the tool of the universe."

“I think we all are. Continuum creatures. The only difference is, I’m more sensitive to the galactic patterns and respond violently. So why don’t you get the hell out of here, Jemmy Thomas?”

“I’m still stuck,” she said.

“You can’t be. Not after what you heard.”

“Yes, I am. You don’t have to marry me.”

Now the biggest hurt of all. I have to be honest. I have to ask, “Where’s the silver case?”

A long pause. “Down the incinerator.”

“Do you... Do you know what was in it?”

“I know what was in it.”

“And you’re still here?”

“It was monstrous what you did. Monstrous!” Her face suddenly streaked with mascara. She was crying. “Where is she now?”

“I don’t know. The checks go out every quarter to a numbered account in Switzerland. I don’t want to know. How much can the heart endure?”

“I think I’m going to find out, Peter.”

“Please don’t find out.” I make one last effort to save her. “I love you, paleface, and you know what that can mean. When the patterns turn cruel, you may be the sacrifice.”

“Love creates patterns, too.” She kissed me. Her lips were parched, her skin was icy, she was afraid and hurting, but her heart beat strong with love and hope. “Nothing can crunch us now. Believe me.”

“I don’t know what to believe anymore. We’re part of a world that’s beyond knowing. What if it turns out to be too big for love?”

“All right,” she said composedly. “We won’t be dogs in the manger. If love is a little thing and has to end, then let it end. Let all little things like love and honor and mercy and laughter end, if there’s a bigger design beyond.”

“But what’s bigger? What’s beyond? I’ve asked that for years. Never an answer. Never a clue.”

“Of course. If we’re too small to survive, how can we know? Move over.”

Then she is in bed with me, the tips of her body like frost while the rest of her is hot and evoking, and there is such a consuming burst of passion that for the first time I can forget myself, forget everything, abandon everything, and the last thing I think is: God damn the world. God damn the universe. God damn GGG-o-ddddddd