RELATIVES
by GEORGE ALEC EFFINGER (1973)

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For Victoria Schochet,
the St. Mother Cabrini of the publishing world.
Or maybe the Ma Barker.

We are all hunting for rational reasons for believing in the absurd.
--LAWRENCE DURRELL
Justine

We are digging our own graves.
--JOHN A. STORMER
None Dare Call It Treason

-=*=-

CHAPTER 1

The radio said that the quality of the air had been judged acceptable for the first time in two years. Ernest Weinraub couldn't see any difference, through his modular apartment's single window the skies over Brooklyn still looked yellow, a sick color that tempted him to get back into bed. But, as every morning, he prodded himself with thoughts of job and money. He closed the steel shutters so the light wouldn't disturb Gretchen in her sleep. Then he went into the tiny, curtained bathroom area to shave.

Ernest wondered if the air outside would smell better than usual. He could almost recall the summertime fragrances of his childhood. Lord, there were probably plenty of kids on the streets now who had never gotten that first fresh smell. They were probably down there this morning, bouncing spaldeens against the building, trying to figure out why the air was so funny. Life in the city had changed rapidly; not many trees grew leaves these days, just a few in Prospect Park. That didn't make Ernest feel sad. It made him feel *old*.

It was dark in the small apartment with the louvers shut. Ernest dressed quickly; he always felt lonely in the morning, with his wife asleep across the room. He tended to think cheerless thoughts, unpleasant things, and he often had to shake his head to break the melancholy train. On television he heard the popular sociologists talking about the reasons. Too many people living too closely together. A person needed a certain territory that he felt he could master. The regulated apartment modules seemed more and more like tin boxes, the kind they packed dead fish in....

Ernest pulled the hinged bench down from its place on the wall and swung open one of the seats. He made himself a bowl of cereal, permitting himself a large teaspoon of sugar and a cup of milk substitute. The sugar was a luxury; he didn't miss real milk very much, but sugar substitutes always left a horrible

taste in his mouth. The filtered light was too dim to read by. The cereal box's messages would remain a mystery. That wasn't such a great loss, particularly the side panel that listed the ingredients. Ernest wondered how his stomach would react if it were ever again confronted with real food.

The radio was still on, playing softly, distracting him with the familiar commercials and themes, lulling him with the tinny, muffled voices. He finished his breakfast and took the empty bowl to the sink, leaving it for Gretchen to wash. He stood by the sink for a moment, looking around the small apartment. "This is my domain," he thought bitterly. "This is the little area I'm supposed to feel secure about." No, not even the old module was his completely. The small sink was plugged into the invisible skeleton of the building; carefully metered dollops of water drizzled out when the correct combination was dialed on the tap. How could he think that he was his own master when he was dependent on the city's crumbling systems to keep him alive?

Ernest sighed and switched off the radio. He had to get to work. He walked quietly across the room, not even glancing at Gretchen. He didn't want to think about her yet.

"You going?" she said, yawning.

He stopped by the door, still not turning. "Yeah. See you later."

"What do you want for supper?"

Ernest opened the door, ready to duck out quickly. He looked at his wife. "How do *I* know?" he said. "Lord, it's only eight-thirty. How do I know what I'll want for supper? Anything you want. I got to go."

"All right, honey. I love you." Ernest nodded and shut the door behind him. He was halfway downstairs before he remembered that he hadn't checked the baby.

Outside, the day was warm and pleasant. The sun shone in a diffuse ball behind the grayish yellow haze and, though it was not yet hot, Ernest removed his light jacket. The ride in the subway was going to be very unpleasant. The entrance to the subway was at the end of a tiresome bus ride; although it was still early, a long line of commuters stretched up the stairs and down the sidewalk. These were the foolish or unlucky people who had not bought enough subway tokens at a more convenient time. Ernest always got his late at night, during the week-end.

He dug in his pocket and found the dull metal coin. It gave him a strange pleasure to be able to bypass the slowly moving line. Once through the turnstile, he pushed through the rush-hour mob to the front of the platform. All through its administration the current city government had wrestled with the problems of mass transit: the equipment was deteriorating, many of the subway cars were over thirty years old and in terrible condition. There were ever more people to move, as the population and labor force grew year by year. The Representative of Europe had adopted the *Gleitzeit* plan, which had been popular in Germany and certain other areas of Europe for almost twenty years. Under the system, workers were permitted to arrive at their jobs at any time before ten o'clock. They worked as long as they liked, going home any time after two o'clock. As long as they put in the necessary hours every week, the management was pleased. The system seemed to encourage initiative while cutting down on the great masses of employees clogging the public transportation systems at the same hours each day.

Negative effects soon became apparent when the plan was put into continent-wide use. The lack of discipline led to shoddy work and a lessening of personal interest in the traditional values of the mercantile and free-enterprise systems. The Representatives abolished the *Gleitzeit* plan wherever it was in practice and returned to the old nine-to-five scheme. Other ideas were tested; the Representative of North America required corporations to pay bonuses to employees who lived within walking distance of their jobs. In New York City, workers were forbidden to take jobs outside their borough of residence. There were complaints of governmental meddling but, as usual, the Representatives had a long list of mitigating explanations.

Ernest's job bored him to the point of insanity. He worked in a factory, making electronic testing equipment. He sat at a long table with a dozen women; everyone at the table had a box of tools and a high stool with an uncomfortable back. Ernest was a fourth-class subassembler, which meant that he was not rated for soldering work; his toolbox held fewer and less specialized tools than those of the women,

who were for the most part third- and second-class assemblers. Maybe his feelings of inferiority were imaginary. He didn't know for sure, and he wasn't worried enough to test the situation further. But Ernest noticed how rarely the women included him in their conversation.

Some days Ernest worked only on front panels. He would take the plates of sheet metal from their tissue wrappings very carefully, because if he nicked the light green paint on the front the slightest bit, the panel was ruined. His panels had odd-sized holes punched in them, some with calibration markings stenciled around their circumferences. In some of the holes Ernest installed control knobs, in some he merely pushed rubber gaskets or fuses, and in one he put an on-off toggle, which was difficult to tighten without chipping the paint on the front. Sokol, the nervous foreman, walked around the section checking how much was wasted by each employee. He carried a blue plastic notebook; several times a day he'd stand behind each worker and scribble his idea of the person's worth.

When Ernest took his seat at the table, Sokol was already making his rounds, apparently taking an early attendance check. Sokol stopped by Ernest's stool and made a notation.

"Why are you checking up, Sokol?" asked Ernest. "That's what the timeclocks are for, aren't they?"

"Just making sure, Weinraub. It's my job. Just leave me alone."

Ernest shrugged. "Are they that worried?"

"No, they don't even care," said Sokol. "It's very hard to understand, Weinraub. *I* can understand it fine. That's why I'm a foreman."

"Is *that* why you're a foreman?"

"Yeah. And because I never wised off, either. Once you get real good at that work, *if* you get real good, you may get to be a foreman, too. And then you'll find out it's not such a terrific thing."

Ernest snorted skeptically. "What do you do all day? Just walk around and scribble in that notebook, right?"

"Yeah, that's all. And then I write up reports on everything, and I turn them into the front office, and the secretaries throw them away."

"I feel real sorry for you."

Sokol slapped his notebook shut and turned away. Ernest stared after him. "Anybody check up on *you*, Sokol?" he called.

Sokol stopped and turned again. "Yeah. Kibling does."

"Anybody check up on him?"

"I guess the Assembly Supervisor."

"Where does it end? Old Man Jennings?"

Sokol shook his head sadly. "You won't listen, Weinraub; that's your trouble. It doesn't end. I told you. It doesn't even *begin*. Now get to work." The foreman stalked off down the narrow aisle toward his cubicle of an office.

Before him on the bench Ernest arranged the color-coded socket wrenches to his left, and the corresponding screwdrivers to his right. He seated the toggle switch in the proper hole, held it with a wrench, and tightened a hexagonal nut on the back. As the morning passed, he paid less attention to his work, completing one panel after another efficiently, mechanically. His hands were cut and his fingernails torn. His day was measured out from clocking-in to coffee break, from break to lunch, from lunch to afternoon break to clocking-out. Those were the only goals he had; if he worked quickly it was only to minimize the awful tedium. But the company knew perfectly well that his boredom would begin to work against that productivity. All that it could devise to alleviate the monotony was piped-in music.

Ernest found that even worse. He sat huddled over his work, protecting his tiny area from the innocent glances of the women and the omniscient gaze of the foreman. Ernest defined the others by their functions -- not even limiting them to as human a thing as a name on a timecard. There was the heavy black woman who picked up the stack of front panels he completed. There was the old lady next to him who soldered complex balls of electronic components, turning out those delicate webs with mindless precision. And Sokol, the foreman. He was *the boss*. He prowled with more freedom, and Ernest envied him. But Sokol wasn't a real person to Ernest, either. Sokol was only the man who watched him.

It was as if everyone were like a rough crystal, with dozens of different facets. Here in the factory Ernest saw only one facet of each person, the same facet every day. And in return he didn't want these strangers to have access to more than one of his own facets. There were thirty million people in the New York metropolitan area, and he could feel the presence of every individual of those masses. There wasn't any way to escape it. The only privacy available was *inside*; to defend it there could be no hints of one's feelings, no tentative gestures of friendship or loneliness. And there was a terrible loneliness.

Ernest enforced his own alienation; he ignored the multiple facets of the millions of others. Each person had to work out his own salvation; idealism to the contrary, there was no way for Ernest to submerge himself in the incessant dramas of his neighbors and maintain his own mind. So he held himself apart from the shopping-bag ladies who lived their meager lives on the subway, and the kids who shaved a round area on their skulls where three wires poked out, and the others who could so easily upset him. He concentrated on those friendships he wished to endure; and when those people ignored him, he found only a deeper depression. There was only trouble when one person presented the wrong facet to another.

There was no one to whom a person like Ernest could turn for help. He was certain that thousands of other people were making the same depressing realizations every day; the environment was becoming less attractive, and more and more people were turning inward, only to discover there a growing madness. Coping with the mere physical presence of thirty million people was an exhausting occupation. The Representatives had long ago made a declaration which had effectively crippled the psychiatric industry; they had decided that relying on psychic crutches could only weaken the popular mind. Nevertheless, Ernest often felt the need to lessen the emotional burden he carried.

The only person he could address legally was the fuser assigned to the modapt building. The fuser had no special training in psychology; in fact, the idea of public fusers in each modapt building originally came from the office of the Representative of Asia, so they had the government's blessing. But, unskilled as they were, the fusers were vital to the new, highly mobile culture. They were given authority to decide disputes among tenants and, by extension, to make many other decisions which in earlier times had been concluded between neighbors and friends. Few people stayed in one place long enough to form those kinds of relationships, and their places had to be taken by professional strangers. But while minor domestic hassles could be solved by arbitration, there were unfortunately no such solutions beyond the limits of the private residence.

Ernest's job provoked him more as the day went on, and his thoughts moved from simple to abstract. When they became too frightening, usually just before lunch, he thought about Gretchen. She no longer had any facets of her own that he could respond to. Gretchen was the cement that filled the gaps among his other relationships. She was a bland, even unattractive, substitute, but she was dependable. From there he thought about the lack of depth in their marriage; the even shallower relationship he had with almost everyone else; how such a willingness to ignore people guaranteed his freedom to do as he pleased (how, after all, misanthropy was the surest safeguard of liberty); how such an attitude led to community apathy; and then, just as the lunch bell rang, he realized that apathy was what had deluded them all into accepting the world they lived in.

As he walked toward the plant's cafeteria, he met Sokol by the tool cage. "You going to lunch now, Sokol?" he asked.

"In a little while."

"Do you foreman types get longer lunch breaks?" Sokol only glared. "I was thinking," said Ernest. "If you look at the way we're watched in here, you wonder if maybe we're being watched outside, too. I mean, like at home."

Sokol leaned against the iron mesh of the tool cage and yawned. "Maybe we are. But if we're watched by people like plant foremen, then we don't have anything to worry about. They're probably just people who got put into the job just to get them off the streets. They do their work and nobody pays any attention at all."

Ernest looked at Sokol curiously. "You were serious about what you said? About the secretaries

throwing your reports away?"

The foreman nodded slowly. "You ever wonder why we got old ladies soldering the insides of these units, when they got printed circuits and magnetics that would be a whole lot cheaper and better? Because our Representative figures the ladies need jobs. I mean, for God's sake, *you* need a job, right? And what would you be doing if some damn machine was turning out two thousand chassis an hour while you did twelve?"

"It's lunchtime, Sokol. I got to go eat lunch."

Sokol sighed and gestured Ernest away impatiently. Ernest shrugged and followed the crowd of employees to the cafeteria.

The ten-minute coffee break earlier in the morning only began to soothe him; lunch was the only real chance to relax during the long day. But even here the company could order his private life with its rules. It required him to take a full hour for lunch every day; and so, working from nine to four, in order to make up a thirty-five-hour week, he had to come in for almost a whole day on Saturdays. Every day at noon the employees lined up to punch out at the time-clocks, then filed into the large, cold cafeteria. The lunch tables were staked out by the various cliques, none of which seemed interested in including Ernest. Often he ate alone, but lately he had been speaking to one of the secretaries from the front office.

A fundamental disregard for people in general allowed the masses a kind of new, frantic liberty; this disregard was not abusive in nature, but merely a defensive reaction to the crowded and disturbing environment. One of the most unfortunate aspects of this freedom was the utter transience of human relationships. Not only were neighbors nothing more than temporary and accidental affiliations, but the very idea of fellowship was disappearing. Whenever a person transported his modapt to a new building, his relations with his old neighbors were abruptly cut. Consequently, he had to find a whole new crew of local friends to replace those he had left behind. This happened with such frequency that long-term friendships were maintained only by the very few people who cared to remain in the same locality and who coincidentally had friends who did the same. In the majority of cases, however, one did not bother to create lasting ties, but instead looked for new people to fill old roles from place to place. With the North American national average residency down to 2.8 years, the roles were kept rather simple, and a person could not be overly critical of the new people he met. At the moment, Ernest was looking for someone to play the role of sexual partner. He had good hopes for his noontime conversations with the secretary turning in that direction.

"Hello, Eileen," he said, sitting in the seat that she had saved for him. "How's it going?"

"Hi, Ernie. Terrible. I'm just getting so sick of that Mr. Di Liberto. I mean, no matter *what* I do, he knows better. I've been a secretary for three years now, you know. For crying out loud, there *are* some things I can do by myself. I'm not as stupid as he thinks I am."

"Don't mind him. It's just a job. Just do what you're told and take your money."

Eileen took a sip of her orange drink. "Easy enough for you to say," she said. They talked a while longer, until they were interrupted by the chime signal that prefaced an announcement on the public address system.

"Your attention please." The amplified voice spoke out from several locations in the lunch room. "We have a message of special importance from the president of the Jennings Manufacturing Corporation, Mr. Robert L. Jennings."

"Thank you, Bob. My fellow employees, as my son has told you, I have unusual and particularly important news. For that reason, I would appreciate it if you all would stop what you're doing, whether you are working or on the lunch break, and listen closely.

"We have received word of a grave situation, the details of which unfortunately have not been released. But the government has ordered that all normal daily employment be suspended, so that you may all go home to be with your families when an official statement is made later this afternoon. Only essential police and transportation facilities will remain operative after one o'clock this afternoon.

"Therefore, in compliance with the governmental order, you are all hereby dismissed to return to your homes. We are given to understand that normal activity will resume as soon as circumstances permit.

Please do not attempt to call our offices for details for, as I have said, I am as ignorant of the exact situation as you. But whatever the emergency, I wish you all the best of luck, and may God bless."

There was the chime signal indicating the end of the announcement, and then there was a silence. A second later, someone laughed nervously; Ernest guessed that a few people wanted to pretend it was all a joke. "A grave situation." It had to be, if Old Man Jennings was giving them the rest of the day off. That ought to convince the skeptics. A moment later they all came to the same conclusion, for the cafeteria was a scene of confusion. Ernest smiled to himself as he calmly began packing up his lunch. He always enjoyed watching the herd instincts begin to take possession.

"What?" asked Eileen. "They're sending us home?"

"That's fine with me," said Ernest.

"But what do you think is the matter?" she asked.

"I don't really care." Eileen stared at him, and he smiled back. "We'll find out soon enough, won't we? I mean, what *could* it be? Maybe a Representative died, or something. I don't know. I'm just glad to go home. Can you give me a ride to the subway? I want to beat this rush."

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Meantime A

Jermany, 1918.

Like a great reef sunk treacherously in the depths of the ocean, the Jerman nation ripped gaping holes in the Allied war machine. While the greedy Jerman industrialists cried out for the opening of a new front in the east, the Jerman War Ministry fought doggedly on to the west, still keeping an eye on Russia, hoping desperately to keep her out of the war. At least until the rest of Europe was secure. And that, admitted even the top-level spokesmen, might be a long time in coming.

But the Allies were exhausted. Wave after wave of weary soldiers hurled themselves against the stubborn defenses of the Jerman Reich. Time after time they were thrown back, crushed and dismayed. With no satisfactory staging area on the continent proper, the British and American forces were unable to gain a foothold; counting on a recaptured Europe to supply the necessary outposts and provisions, the failure to mount a successful invasion was doubly disastrous to the Allied High Command. Patience and attention to detail gained the Jerman leaders time to deploy their forces to best advantage. Discipline and a shrewd appraisal of its strengths enabled the Jerman nation to wear down its enemies.

But it was not unperceived by the General Staff that the Jerman people themselves were growing dangerously fatigued. The best hope was in keeping Russia out of the struggle while avoiding a decisive battle in the west. Time would tell whether the Allies or the Jerman Empire would prevail; time, and the strength of the combatants' national will.

The summer passed, and the Allied threats grew fewer and weaker; that news was good, but the Jerman population was starving. Angry mobs demonstrated in Berlin, Hamburg, Munich, demanding an end to the war and a restoration of a stable economy. As autumn deepened into winter, the situation became desperate. The army, unable to win a clear victory on its own, was discredited and bitter. The General Staff was blamed for both its alleged military failures and the resulting social ruin throughout the empire. The pressure increased until the War Ministry had only one course left in its defense; on the morning of October 20, 1918, the General Staff declared that the great corporate and banking trusts of Jermany were secretly working against the interests of the empire, and that all industry would henceforth be nationalized.

The announcement caused a wrathful and outraged reaction. It was commonly rumored that the Allies had assembled nearly three-quarters of a million fresh troops in Great Britain in preparation for the spring

offensive. Jermany could not continue much longer. The General Staff informed Kaiser Wilhelm that the war was certainly lost unless something was done soon about the domestic situation. At first the Kaiser did not take the obvious hint; instead, food rations were cut once more. Munitions workers in Berlin began a series of violent strikes. The Jerman battleships in the North Sea refused to follow an order to attack the British Navy. In a matter of days, the mutiny had spread to all the northern ports, and then to Berlin. Still the Kaiser chose to ignore the gravity of the situation.

At that time, the Kaiser left the capital for a rest at a Belgian resort. In his absence, a republic was proclaimed; the old Kaiser was forced to abdicate and flee to Sweden. Under the banner of a shaky coalition government, the Jerman people settled down. Order was slowly restored, and the business of the war was taken up with renewed vigor. The Allies, who in truth had been largely responsible for the instigation of the internal upheavals, were as good as defeated -- the 750,000 troops waiting in England never existed.

Ernst Weintraub, Jugendleiter of the Frachtdorf Red Front, threw the newspaper into the air. "Do we celebrate now, boys?" he said.

"Yes, sir, Herr Kamerad Weintraub."

Weintraub, at the age of eighteen, was the leader of the tiny cell of the Jerman Communist party. He had enjoyed little prestige, though, partially because of the underground nature of their organization, and also because his command consisted of the more insolent of the neighborhood's delinquents. But now, according to the Berlin edition of *Pravda*, recognition was at last only a few gunshots away. The World War was nearing its end.

"Now, boys, our work shall begin indeed. Soon we will see that day we've been struggling so long to bring about." Weintraub indicated the headline of the paper: the world revolution has begun!

"Wine, Herr Weintraub?"

"No, not for me. Beer, I think. Good Jerman beer."

"The *dunkel*?"

"Yes, of course," said Weintraub distractedly. Though his adolescent henchmen seemed more interested in the festivities than the occasion, he couldn't help thinking about the future's task with pleasant anticipation. Despite its victory, the Jerman Reich had collapsed; its economy had been strained by the World War and would finally be ruined by the disillusionment of peace. The Jerman people had no leadership in this crucial time. They had no sense of national destiny, no direction among the ashes of the old, false values. All this Weintraub viewed with great satisfaction; as a minor worker for the cause of international Communism, he could easily see that such a state of economic anarchy was fertile ground for the cultivation of his party's beliefs.

"Mein Lehrer," said Staefler, a tall, athletic youth, "is it true, now that the revolution is approaching, that we can break our sworn secrecy?"

Staefler was the most enthusiastic member of the small town's cell, though Weintraub realized that the boy was unfortunately too slow of mind to accept much authority. The Youth Leader thought for a few seconds, chewing his lip while Staefler regarded him eagerly. "No," said Weintraub at last, "I think not. Until we get directives from Berlin along those lines, I feel it best to continue as we have. I know that makes it hard on you," he said, slapping Staefler's shoulder in a comradely fashion, "but the Party expects certain sacrifices. We must all put personal conveniences aside for the benefit of our great cause."

"Certainly, mein Lehrer," said Staefler, a little disappointed.

"It will not be much longer. The Bolsheviks are ready. The Russian and the Jerman Revolutions will merge, joining forces and facing westward together. Then how can the rest of Europe stand against us?"

"Jermany," said Staefler brightly, "and then the world!"

"Go drink," said Weintraub with a proud smile. "These preliminary worries are not for you. The celebration is your only concern this afternoon." While his young charges laughed drunkenly around him, Weintraub studied his day's concerns. There was a small sheaf of dispatches from Party headquarters in Berlin. He stared at the top sheet of paper -- a copy of a two-week-old handbill printed by the Slasniev Loyal Soviet Red Sports Club congratulating the Jerman folk for throwing off the chains of the corporate

bosses. The handbill made Weintraub feel a little sad; what did the soccer players in Slasniev know about Jerman conditions? What did the Berlin Party leaders know or care about Slasniev? Suddenly the idea of a true revolution seemed too big, too remote, too unrealistic. He shook his head to stop those thoughts. Berlin was coordinating everything, after all. Here in Frachtdorf he couldn't be expected to have an objective view. That's what all the handbills and clippings were for, to give him a better glimpse of the international implications of his work.

"Some more beer, Kamerad Weintraub?" asked another of the boys. He was grinning crookedly, already beyond Weintraub's slight authority. His tunic was unbuttoned and his hair mussed; one leg of his trousers showed a large wet stain, and the youth reeked of cheap wine. Weintraub wondered how the Party expected to seize power through the agency of such as these inept scoundrels.

"No, no, Kleib. Just let me work. You go back to your fellows now. Let them know that I don't wish to be disturbed."

Kleib tottered in his place. He laughed as he realized how drunk he was. "You got something interesting today?" he asked.

Weintraub waved the papers. "Nothing," he said irritably. "It's far too early. There's nothing here but the usual garbage." Kleib nodded, still grinning, and staggered back to the party. Weintraub riffled through the remainder of the day's dispatches: greetings from workers' organizations in the Soviet Union, music and art associations, political theory groups. Transcriptions of radio broadcasts pledging the support of the Russian people. Newspaper clippings from all over the Russian nation in praise of the courageous Jermans and their imminent revolution.

One printed notice excited Weintraub more than the others. It said simply, without the use of large banner type or crude, inflammatory illustrations, that an All-Jerman Workers' and Soldiers' Council was set to convene in Berlin. This was ostensibly a meeting of the discontented army and trade union members, most of whom had been all but destroyed by the war; Weintraub could see the hand of the radical left behind it. The trade unions had always demonstrated a certain receptivity to socialist thought; it would not be difficult at all to lead their unsophisticated minds to accept the attractive promises of Communism. The soldiers were the angriest segment of the population, having seen their fellows killed daily during the needlessly drawnout war, simply because of the greed of the industrialist and the ambition of the politicians. They, too, would be eager to embrace the Party's ideas. The groundwork had been well prepared.

It was suggested by the Party leaders in Berlin that all Jugendleiters produce handbills of their own, which would then be distributed around the neighborhoods by the younger cell members. In this way, the union of Jerman peasants and proletariat might be hastened. Some helpful guidelines were supplied, with quotations from the writings of Marxist theorists. Weintraub studied the excerpts for several minutes. He decided to base his handbill on something that Lenin had written in 1917: "An essential condition for the victory of the socialist revolution is the closest alliance between the toiling and exploited peasantry and the working class -- the proletariat -- in all advanced countries." Here in the rural town of Frachtdorf, the mighty struggles of government seemed remote and insignificant. But it was Weintraub's duty to educate the citizens of the village. He must make it clear that if they joined together they could have an unprecedented influence on the affairs of state; if they then cooperated in a serious and uncompromising effort with the oppressed urban workers, nothing in Jermany could stand against them.

Weintraub made a few notes for the handbill. "We have won the war against the capitalist 'Allies,'" he said to himself. "But at what cost? How much of Jermany is left? How much less will remain after we rise to demand our fair shares? The old leadership has failed us, and seeks to placate our righteous anger with speeches about international prestige. Will that prestige feed us through the winter?" He paused and rehearsed these lines, wondering if they had a proper revolutionary ring to them. "Sentiment is out of place," he said. "It is a luxury we will never again be able to afford. Government by emotion is identified with rule by tyranny."

"Eh, Herr Lehrer Weintraub?"

Weintraub was startled from his concentration. "Nothing, Staefler," he said. "I'm just a bit tired."

A week passed. The reluctant Friedrich Ebert was made the Chancellor of the new Republic; trying to make the best of the confused, somewhat illegitimate situation, Ebert issued several declarations aimed at uniting the Jerman people behind him. Prisoners taken during the weeks of open rebellion were freed. Guarantees were made for freedom of expression. Promises were made for the eventual improvement of the economy and in the areas of social justice and reform. Ebert was not a strongly willed leader, but he was shrewd enough to see that, the stuttering revolution notwithstanding, the Jerman people as a whole still clung to the old conservative ideals.

Ebert had not wanted a republic at all. He was working for a constitutional monarchy, modeled after that of Great Britain, with one of Wilhelm's sons at the head of the government. But when Ebert himself was thrust into the role of Chancellor, he found the courage to deal with the unpleasant circumstances. He knew that he could count on little support in any sort of showdown with the radical elements, which were still agitating throughout the nation; however, a secret pact with the remnants of the army bolstered his uncertain authority. The government promised to crush the Bolshevik influence, and the army pledged its strength in carrying out Ebert's programs.

Little of these semi-official dealings were reported in the official news services. Weintraub learned bits of news through the Party's angry bulletins and in the secondhand reports that were forwarded from the Soviet Union. "We must redouble our efforts, Staefler," said Weintraub, after reading of the new Chancellor's program. "If we're not careful, our chance for power will slip right through our fingers."

"They're betraying us in Berlin," said Staefler resentfully. "They've betrayed the Jerman people. Why have our enemies not been disarmed? Must we appease the Allies?"

"I pray that's not true," said Weintraub. But the evidence accumulated; Ebert would not let the Communists claim their proportional share of legislative control. He feared another Bolshevik Revolution.

In December, Weintraub was invited to attend the first Soviet Council in Berlin, a mass meeting of local Party leaders and representatives of the various Workers' and Soldiers' Councils which had sprung up throughout the nation. He did not attend, however, because of his mother's illness. He sent Staefler instead; the youth returned several days later, his report colored by his infatuation with the capital metropolis. At last Weintraub managed to obtain an objective list of the Council's activities: it had demanded that Hindenburg resign as Field Marshall of the armed forces, that the army be disbanded and replaced by a civil guard, and that the Jerman Republic accept the gift of two trainloads of grain offered by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

"Perhaps those demands are a bit too aggressive," said Weintraub thoughtfully. "We cannot afford to compromise, and Ebert will surely not concede. If we back down now, we'll lose everything."

"We'll have to wait and see," said Staefler.

"That's the hard part," said Weintraub. "We have to sit here in our secret den in Frachtdorf, while hundreds of miles away our destinies are being decided." At that moment in Berlin, the Communist forces, flushed with their initial success, sought to consolidate their gains. The bands of militant Communists seized buildings and blockaded streets. The army fought back, and demanded that Ebert make a strong denunciation of the Party, as he had promised. Ebert vacillated. In the meantime, the Communists gained support. Strikes closed Jermany's industries once more. Demonstrators numbering in the hundreds of thousands took control of transportation facilities and newspapers. The army, at last grown impatient with Ebert, took the matter into its own hands. Machine guns, grenades, and armored vehicles were used against the Communist bands. It was a case of an organized military force against a disordered mob of unemployed men, widows of soldiers killed in the war, and fanatical students. In three days the Communists were crushed.

The bad news reached Frachtdorf slowly. With it came the announcement of an election for the National Assembly, which would draw up a new constitution and elect a President. The official Party directive stated that all Communists should boycott the elections, and strive to reform their shattered organization. At the polls, the Jerman people vindicated Ebert's policies. He was chosen the first president of the Jerman Republic by the Constituent Assembly in Weimar. His first act as president was

to decline the offer of grain from the Soviet Union, in favor of what he termed "reparations" from the United States. There was shocked silence from the east, angry replies from Jerman Ostamerika.

"We're dead," said Kleib.

"No, not yet. But we've been forced underground again," said Weintraub. "We can't give up. We can't get discouraged. The Party will not die. It just means more work for us, more dedication, a greater willingness to sacrifice ourselves to convince the Jerman people of the swindle they've accepted."

"Oh, hell," said Kleib. Weintraub's cell was falling apart. Even Staefler had grown weary of the Communist game. The boys found other entertainments; in a few days, Weintraub was all alone in the Party's Frachtdorf headquarters. His superior, Herr Schneck, in the nearby city of Gelnhausen, learned of the situation and ordered Weintraub to report in person.

The following afternoon, Weintraub was escorted into a darkened room where the old man lay, tucked up to his chin with an old army blanket. He was dying, Weintraub knew, but he worked steadily during his intermittent periods of consciousness. Schneck gestured, and Weintraub moved quietly to the bedside. The old man spoke, his voice dry and soft in the darkness.

"Wilhelm, my grandson," he said, mistaking Weintraub in his delirium, "stay in touch with the Russians. It will serve no purpose to cause conflict. But now you must go. Go to America. Good luck, and may God bless."

Weintraub bowed to the old man. Schneck smiled, and made a gurgling sound deep in his throat. He let his head fall one last time to the pillow. As Weintraub backed away, an aide handed him a thick folder.

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CHAPTER 2

The trains were already crowded. Apparently everyone in the city had been given the same message, and they all rode home together with the same worried expression. Ernest wondered if he were the only one without that paralyzing feeling of apprehension. No matter what had happened, its effects would probably never trickle far enough down the ladder of fortune to alter his life. Or, he thought, the lives of any of these people. But here they all were.

Their lives continued without thought, without concern. There was a peculiar insectlike quality to them, Ernest reflected. It wasn't a complimentary comparison. A few days before, he had talked to Sokol the foreman about that sad fact. "Jennings must get pretty burned," Ernest had said. "I mean, I do my work all right. Not as good as I would if I gave a damn about these idiot machines. But, after all, the old man can't expect me to jump for joy the way he does."

"Nah," said Sokol, "he won't expect that. He's running the red queen's race himself, trying to hold his employees back so they won't advance themselves right into unemployment."

"We're like a bunch of bees," said Ernest. "You and me and everybody's working like crazy at jobs we don't care anything about, and only Old Man Jennings gets to suck the royal jelly."

"He's just a drone himself," said Sokol with a cynical expression. "You ever see him? He's seventy years old, running around the secretary pool pinching bottoms. He don't fool *me*, though. What's even sadder, he don't fool the secretaries. And anyway, he's not the big boss. He can't understand what we're doing, either. Only the Representatives can."

"I hope they *do*."

Sokol sighed. "Yeah, me too." The two men lapsed into silence; the discussion was edging nearer a "meaning of existence" argument, and that was a pointless business before lunch.

The Representatives had learned to move softly while pursuing their enigmatic ends. Each of the

Representatives had at least a billion constituents; in such concentrations, even such simple matters as minor urban renewals or revised agricultural quotas could bring about a general depression in the population. The citizenry reacted with symptoms of extreme distress and, sometimes, fury. Starving for symbols of stability in their lives, people began to resent the tearing down of familiar buildings and landmarks, the encroachment of highways on what small open areas remained. The Representatives exercised their wills to the fullest degree, but with a shrewd eye on the temper of the witless mob.

On the short ride from the factory to the subway, Eileen, the girl from the front office, speculated about the announcement that had sent them all home. "I really hope it isn't too bad," she said, shaking her head. Ernest looked at her closely, and saw that her eyes were bright with tears.

"It isn't worth it, baby," he said. "It really isn't."

"I don't know what I'd do," she said. "I remember once, when the son of the Representative of Africa was shot. I couldn't go to work or anything. For a long time I didn't think we could keep going."

"Well, we did. And no matter what happened today, we will. The Representatives are only people, you know. Like us."

Eileen glanced away from the street. "They're *Representatives*," she said, in the tone of voice she would reserve for angels or devils.

"Yeah," said Ernest, sighing. He slouched in his seat. Eileen might make a lunch-hour mistress, but she'd never fit into his life any other way. He nodded to her without a word when she left him at the subway station. Before he had gone down the stairs to the turnstiles, he had forgotten everything she had said.

The crush in the subway car was terrible, for the time spoiling Ernest's holiday. In a perverse way he wished that the emergency was, in fact, as serious as the commuters feared, to reward all their sullen, graceless behavior. It was so damned easy for people to lose perspective. When they got home, their televisions would tell them nothing more than that the Asian Representative's daughter-in-law had had another miscarriage. The world would be due for a planet-wide Day of Prayer. Or something equally as unshattering; hardly worth all the anxiety.

In any event, he would have to find ways of killing the additional time at home. The prospect of spending the extra hours with his wife was not at all attractive. Whatever the seriousness of the situation demanded, Gretchen would react with panic and hysteria. He hoped the announcement would be made early; the sooner it came, the quicker he could dope her up and put her away.

Ernest recalled the night before. He had come home and found his wife watching television. He sat on the couch next to her. Neither of them said a word. Finally, during a commercial break, Ernest spoke. "You know," he said, "Old Man Jennings made a speech today. He said that with all the spare time we have now, we all ought to try to improve our education."

"That's right," said Gretchen, her eyes fastened on the animated ad.

"Maybe we could do that. I might get a better job. Lots of guys do it. By going to the library, I mean. It's free, you know. Or go back to school."

"Sssh," said Gretchen. The program was resuming.

Ernest said nothing more until the next commercial.

"Stuff like this turns my stomach," he said.

"Don't watch it," said Gretchen.

"What am I supposed to do? There's only one room in this lousy module."

"So go to the library."

"Yeah, right. Does somebody think that show's supposed to be entertaining? That guy singing? Who is it?"

"Phil Gatelin. He's great," said Gretchen. "Now, shut up."

Ernest went over and stretched out on the bed. The noise of the television wouldn't let him nap. Finally he got up, put on his coat, and went out to a bar for a few hours. He would never mention the idea of further education to her again.

The memory irritated Ernest. He cut it off with a quick shake of his head.

The press on the subway had been so unpleasant that he decided to walk the mile and a half to his apartment rather than take a bus. The pedestrians had the same concerned look as the passengers on the train. Ernest shouldered his way through the people, forcing his own path among the currents of traffic.

The buildings that he passed were all condominium dormitories, every one of them filled to capacity with various-colored modular apartments. The government claimed that housing was being built at an even faster rate than necessary, but Ernest didn't believe it. Everyone knew someone who was having a difficult time finding a place for his modapt.

Sokol had been trying to find a new slot for his apartment, closer to the Jennings plant. He hadn't had any luck in the three weeks he'd been looking. "Do you know anyone ready to move out of your neighborhood?" he'd asked Ernest.

"No, not offhand," said Ernest. "If I hear anything..."

"Yeah, thanks. You live right on the edge of the walking-distance limit. You don't walk, though, do you?"

Ernest shook his head. "It's a rotten part of town these days. I want to get out, myself. If I could find a place, I'd sublet my old one to you." Sokol just nodded his head sadly.

"It used to be that people from the same backgrounds settled together," said the foremen. "My wife, now. She's Italian. I met her in Gallisi five years ago, and brought her back with me. You'd think she'd want to live near the rest of the Italians. No, in five years, she can't understand them any more. They've changed so fast. And the ones who came here before then, well, they won't understand *her*. She feels better away from them. I kind of miss the old neighborhoods. Now everything's the same."

"That's the Representatives," said Ernest. "That's equality."

"That's rigor mortis," said Sokol.

Ernest hated his own module. It was a Kurasu; it had been given to him new by his parents as a wedding gift. It was as small and as inexpensive as possible -- Gretchen thought it was "snug." Ernest rented a place for it in a privately owned building, a third-floor slot. They didn't have the money yet to rent a higher slot, up away from the noise and filth of the city. But at least they were well in the interior of the building, with only a single window to the outside. Although Ernest complained that it was like living in a shoe box, still they were never troubled by the racket from the street. The economy modapt came equipped with only the merest essentials; it was old now, without the standard equipment of the Fords, the Chevrolets, the Peugeots Ernest dreamed of. It could not take advantage of even those piped-in luxuries which the skeleton frame of the building offered. Rather than moving, as Gretchen hoped to do, Ernest planned eventually to trade in the modapt and buy another and better fitted model.

Gretchen was always eager to move. She hadn't learned yet that, as Sokol had pointed out, every neighborhood in the city was taking on a dismally similar appearance. There weren't any more enclaves of Spanish- or Czech- or Chinese-speaking immigrants, slowly being assimilated into the American culture. There were only individuals, already alienated from the countrymen they had left behind, unable to identify with their predecessors in North America, trying to make out as best they could on their own. Customs, language, points of view altered so frequently that a person had much less in common with his ethnic fellows than with a stranger living across the hall, who at least shared the same spatial, temporal, and social locus.

"Why don't we try to find a nice little neighborhood?" Gretchen had often asked. "You know, with shops and strange holidays. Don't you remember how there used to be strings of light across the streets sometimes? They were always celebrating some holy day or somebody's birthday. When I was a little girl, those were the best times. It was like a big party right on the street, with hot dogs and soda and everything. This part of town is too modern."

"They don't do that any more," said Ernest patiently. "The Representatives decided that, don't you remember? We're all citizens of North America, and we can't go around excluding people by having private minority holidays."

Gretchen looked disgusted. "Well, they still have little shops, don't they?"

"I don't know," said Ernest. "I'm not sure." He had ended that fruitless discussion in the usual manner,

by shaking his head and walking away.

All these thoughts surged through Ernest's mind, triggered perhaps by the unusual circumstance, the mysterious "emergency." He walked past the modapt buildings on his block, thinking about the thousands of individuals locked in each, all staring anxiously at their television sets. Gretchen would be staring anxionsly at hers. In a few minutes, against his will, so would Ernest.

As he unlocked the door to his apartment, Gretchen called to him. "Is that you?" she asked. When he didn't reply, she came out of the partitioned nursery. "I was expecting you to come home," she said. "Mom called to tell me about the announcement."

"That's good," said Ernest. "I'm glad she called. That was a very wise thing for her to do. Now you've had all morning to worry about it." He shut the door with his foot and hung his jacket on a hook on the wall.

"Don't be sarcastic," said Gretchen. "I noticed that *you* didn't think to call me."

"I wanted to trap you," said Ernest. "I wanted to come home early and surprise you in the arms of a neighbor."

Gretchen stared at him. "Are you serious? What a lousy thing to say! Is that what you think I do all day?"

Ernest sat on the couch, rubbing his aching temples. "It's hot in here, you know that? You like it like this, or what? Why don't you get me a can of beer?" While she crossed the room to the kitchen area he said, "How come you didn't know about it yourself? All you do is watch television anyway."

She gave him the cold beer, and he held it against the side of his head for a few seconds. "Our set's broken again," she said. "I don't know, it just faded flat, and then it went out all the way. I haven't seen a thing all day. Maybe we'll have to get a new one. Ours is so old, anyway."

"Never mind. I'll run it down to the building superintendent. That's what he's for, you know. Sometimes I wonder if you know where money comes from."

"But what are we going to watch the bulletin on? That Hispanic guy they have here to fix things takes weeks to get a job done. I don't trust him, anyhow."

"There's the flat set in the kid's room. Did you forget about that?"

"I can't stand watching shows on that old set. It seems so dumb, looking at everything flat like a postcard. It makes my head hurt, now that I'm used to the stereo," said Gretchen.

"It's good enough for the announcement. I'll get it out."

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Meanwhile 1

In Europe, there were only memories of the great cultures. Spain, Portugal, Italy, France, England, Carbba, and Germany had all seized control of the world's course and the imagination of the human race at one time or another. But now these great powers of the past were drifting into a cynical old age, where decadence and momentary pleasures replaced the drive for dominance and national pride. The Russians struggled pettily among themselves, expending the last energies of a once-glorious nation in puerile bickerings. China showed signs of total degeneration, having lost its immensely rich heritage of art and philosophy, while clinging to a ruthless creed which crushed its hopeless people beneath a burden of mock patriotism. Breulandy was the only vibrant force east of the Caucasus Mountains; still, no observer could tell what that guarded land might do. Perhaps a Breulen storm would spill out across the continent, at least instilling a new life force in the decaying states. But from Breulandy itself came no word, no hint, as though the country had bypassed its time of ascendancy to settle for a weary and bitter mediocrity.

Of the rest of the world there was nothing to be said. The Americas still rested as they had in the few

centuries since their discovery: huge, parklike land masses, populated by savages, too distant, too worthless, too impractical to bother about. None of the crumbling European governments could summon either the leadership or the financial support to exploit the New World. The Scandinavian lands were inhabited by skin-clad brutes scarcely more civilized than the American cannibals. Further east, beyond the teeming Chinese shores, between Asia and the unexplored western reaches of the Americas, no one was quite certain just what existed and what was only myth. Perhaps the island continent of Lemarry waited with its untold riches and beautiful copper spires.

And then, lastly, there was Africa. One city sat alone on its fiery sands. One city, filled with refugees and a strange mongrel population, guarded that massive continent. Beyond that single city, built in some forgotten age by an unknown people for unimaginable purposes, beyond the high wooden gates that shut in the crazy heat and locked in the broken citizens, there was only death. Without water, the continent was death. Without shade, the parching *sharaq* winds were death. Without human habitation, the vast three thousand miles of whispering sands were death for anyone mad enough to venture across them. Only in the city was there a hollow travesty of life.

Ernst Weinraub sat at a table on the patio of the *Café de la Fée Blanche*. A light rain fell on him, but he did not seem to notice. He sipped his anisette, regretting that the proprietor had served it to him in such an ugly tumbler. The liqueur suffered. M. Gargotier often made such disconcerting lapses, but today especially Ernst needed all the delicacy, all the refinement that he could buy to hold off his growing melancholy. Perhaps the *Fée Blanche* had been a mistake. It was early, lacking some thirty minutes of noon, and if it seemed to him that his flood of tears was rising too quickly, he could move on. To the *Respirette* or the *Cecil*. But as yet there was no need to hurry.

The raindrops fell heavily, spatting on the small metal table. Ernst turned in his chair, looking for M. Gargotier. Was the man going to let his customer get drenched? The proprietor had disappeared into the black interior of his establishment; Ernst thought of lowering the striped canopy himself, but the shopkeeper image of himself that the idea brought to mind was too absurd. Instead, he closed his eyes and listened to the water. There was music when the drops hit the furnishings on the patio. There was a duller sound when the rain struck the pavement. Then, more frequently, there was the irritating noise of the drops hitting his forehead. Ernst opened his eyes; his newspaper was a sodden mess and the puddle on his table was about to overflow into his lap.

Ernst considered the best way to deal with the accumulating water. He could merely cup his hand and swipe the puddle sideways. He dismissed that plan, knowing that his hand would be soaked; then he'd sit, frustrated, without anything on which to dry it. He'd end up having to seek out M. Gargotier. The confrontation then, with the proprietor standing bored, perhaps annoyed, would be too unpleasant. Anyway, the round metal top of the table was easily removed. Ernst tipped it, revealing the edges of the white metal legs which were sharp with crystal rust. The water splashed to the paved floor of the patio, loudly, inelegantly. Ernst sighed; he had made another compromise with his manner. He had sacrificed style for comfort. In *the* city, it was an easy bargain.

"It is a matter of bodies," he said to himself, as though rehearsing *bons mots* for a cocktail party. "We have grown too aware of bodies. Because we must carry them always from place to place, is that any reason to accord our bodies a special honor or affection? No, they are sacks only. Rather large, unpleasant, undisciplined containers for meager charges of emotion. We should all stop paying attention to our bodies' demands. I don't know how." He paused. The idea was stupid. He sipped the anisette.

There were not more than twenty small tables on the *Fée Blanche's* patio. Ernst was the only patron, as he was every day until lunchtime. He and M. Gargotier had become close friends. At least, so Ernst believed. It was so comforting to have a place where one could sit and watch, where the management didn't eternally trouble about another drink or more coffee.

Bien sûr, the old man never sat with Ernst to observe the city's idlers, or offered to test Ernst's skill at chess. In fact, to be truthful, M. Gargotier had rarely addressed a full sentence to him. But Ernst was an habitué, M. Gargotier's only regular customer, and for quite different reasons they both hoped the *Fée Blanche* might become a favorite meeting place for the city's literate and wealthy few. Ernst had invested

too many months of sitting at that same table to move elsewhere now.

"A good way to remove a measure of the body's influence is to concentrate on the mind," he said. He gazed at the table top, which already was refilling with rainwater. "When I review my own psychological history, I must admit to a distressing lack of moral sense. I have standards gleaned from romantic novels and magistral decree, standards which stick out awkwardly among my intellectual baggage like the frantic wings of a tethered pigeon. I can examine those flashes of morality whenever I choose, though I rarely bother. They are all so familiar. But all around them in my mind are the heavy, dense shadows of events and petty crimes."

With a quick motion, Ernst emptied the table top once more. He sighed. "There was Eugenie. I loved her for a time, I believe. A perfect name, a lesser woman. When the romance began, I was well aware of my moral sense. Indeed, I cherished it, worshipped it with an adolescent lover's fervor. I knew and needed the constraints of society, of law and honor. I could only prove my worth and value within their severe limits. Our love would grow, fed by the bitter springs of righteousness. Ah, Eugenie! You taught me much. I loved you for it then, while my notion of purity changed, bit by bit, hour by hour. Then, when I fell at long last to my ardent ruin, I hated you. For so many years I hated you for your joy in my dismay, for the ease of your robbery and betrayal, for the entertainment I provided in my youthful terror. Now, Eugenie, I have my reward. I would not have understood, in those days. But I am revenged upon you: I have achieved indifference.

"How sad, I think, for poor Marie, who came after. I loved her from a distance, not wishing ever again to be wounded on the treacherous point of my own affection. I was still foolish." Ernst leaned back in his chair, turning his head to stare across the small expanse of vacant tables. He glanced around; no one else had entered the café. "What could I have learned from Eugenie? Pain? No. Discomfort, then? Yes, but so? These evaluations, I hasten to add, I make from the safety of my greater experience and sophistication. Nevertheless, even in my yearling days I recognized that *la belle E.* had prepared me well to deal not only with her successors but with all people in general. I had learned to pray for another's bad fortune. This was the first great stain on the bright emblems of virtue that, at the time, still resided in my imagination.

"Marie, I loved you from whatever distance seemed appropriate. I was still not skillful in these matters, and it appears now that I judged those distances poorly. You gave your heart and all to another, one whose management of proximity was far cleverer than mine. And I prayed fervently for the destruction of your happiness. I could not rejoice in your good fortune. I wished you and him the most total of all disasters, and I was denied. You left my life as you entered it -- a cold, distant dream; but before you left, you rehearsed me in the exercise of spite."

He took a sip of the liqueur and swirled it against his palate. "I've grown since then, of course," he said. "I've grown and changed, but you're still there, an ugly spatter against the cleanness of what I wanted to be." With a sad expression he set the tumbler on the small table. Rain fell into the anisette, but Ernst was not concerned.

This morning he was playing the bored expatriate. He smoked only imported cigarettes, his boxed filters conspicuous among the *Impers* and *Les Bourdes* of the natives. He studied the strollers closely, staring with affected weariness into the eyes of the younger women, refusing to look away. He scribbled on the backs of envelopes that he found in his coat pockets, or on scraps of paper from the ground. He waited for someone to show some interest and ask him what he did. "I am just jotting notes for the novel," he would say, or "Merely a sketch, a small poem. Nothing important. A transient joy mingled with regret." He watched the hotel across the square with a carefully sensitive expression, as if the view were really from the windswept cliffs of the English shore, or the history-burdened martial plains of France. Anyone could see that he was a visionary. Ernst promised fascinating stories, secret romantic insights; but, somehow, the passersby missed it all.

Only thoughts of the rewards for success kept him at M. Gargotier's table. Several months previously a poet named Courane had been discovered while sitting at the wicker bar of the *Café en Esquintand*. Since then, Courane had become the favorite of the city's indolent elite. Already he had purchased his

own café and held court in its several dank rooms. Stories circulated about Courane and his admirers; exciting, licentious rumors grew up around the young man, and Ernst was envious. Ernst had lived in the city much longer than Courane. He had even read some of Courane's alleged poetry, and he thought it was terrible. But Courane's excesses were notorious; it was this that no doubt had recommended him to the city's weary nobility.

Something about the city attracted the failed poets of the world. Like the excavation of Troy, which discovered layer upon layer, settlement built upon settlement, the recent history of the civilized world might be read in the eyes of the lonely men waiting in the city's countless cafés. Only rarely could Ernst spare the time to visit with his fellows, and then the men just stared silently past each other. They all understood; it was a horrible thing for Ernst to realize that they all knew everything about him. So he sat in the *Fée Blanche*, hiding from them, hoping for luck.

Ernst's city sat like a blister on the fringe of a great equatorial desert. The metropolitan centers of the more sophisticated nations were much too far away to allow Ernst to feel proud of his cultivated tastes. He built for himself a life in exile, pretending that it made no difference. But the provinciality of these people! The mountains and the narrow, fertile plain that separated the city from the northern sea effectively divided him from every familiar landmark of his past. He could only think and remember. And who was there to decide if his recollections might have blurred and altered with repetition?

"Now, Eugenie. You had red hair. You had hair like the embers of a dying fire. How easy it was to kindle the blaze afresh. In the morning, how easy. The fuel was there, the embers burned hotly within; all that was needed was a little wind, a little stirring. Eugenie, you had red hair. I've always been weakened by red hair.

"Marie, poor Marie, your hair was black, and I loved it, too, for a time. And I'll never know what deftnesses and craft were necessary to fire your blood. Eugenie, the creature of flame, and Marie, the gem of ice. I confuse your faces. I can't recall your voices. Good luck to you, my lost loves, and may God bless."

The city was an oven, a prison, an asylum, a dismal zoo of human aberration. Perhaps this worked in Ernst's favor; those people who did not have to hire themselves and their children for food spent their empty hours searching for diversion. The laws of probability suggested that it was likely that someday one of the patricians would offer a word to Ernst. That was all that he would need. He had the scene carefully rehearsed; Ernst, too, had nothing else to do.

The rain was falling harder. Through the drops, which made a dense curtain that obscured the buildings across the square, Ernst saw outlines of people hurrying. Sometimes he pretended that the men and, especially, the women were familiar, remnants of his abandoned life come coincidentally to call on him in his banishment. Today, though, his head hurt and he had no patience with the game, particularly the disappointment at its inevitable conclusion.

He finished the last of the anisette. Ernst rapped on the table and held the tumbler above his head. He did not look around; he supported his aching head with his other hand and waited. M. Gargotier came and took the tumbler from him. The rain fell harder. Ernst's hair was soaked and tiny rivulets ran down his forehead and into his eyes. The proprietor returned with the tumbler filled. Ernst wanted to think seriously, but his head hurt too much. The day before, he had devised a neat argument against the traditional contrast of city and arcadian life in literature. Shakespeare had used that antithesis to great effect: the regulated behavior of characters in town opposed to their irrational, comedic entanglements in the forest world beyond the city's gates. Somehow, the present circumstances destroyed those myths; somehow, Ernst knew that he didn't *want* them destroyed, and he had his headache and the everlasting morning rain to preserve them another day.

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CHAPTER 3

It was a quarter past three. Ignoring Gretchen's objections, Ernest had brought out the portable flat set and put it on the floor, plugging it into a socket in the kitchen area. He had watched a progression of three fifteen-minute programs; between them had come commercials and the special news bulletin. He had learned little more. It was now evident that the news media had been given no more details than Jennings had revealed at the factory. The formal announcement had been scheduled for eight o'clock that evening. Beyond that, Ernest was as uninformed and as annoyed as ever.

"Why don't they tell us anything?" asked Gretchen.

"They're building suspense," said Ernest sourly. "Save the best for last. Always leave 'em laughing. It's good theater."

"But don't we have a right to know?"

Ernest couldn't stand another minute, either of the television's daytime programming or his wife's nerves. "I'm going to go out for a while," he said.

"Go where?"

"I might learn something," he said, smiling at his own ingenuity. Gretchen nodded, staring at the flat set. It didn't seem to be giving her a headache.

Ernest took his jacket from the hook on the wall and left. He walked quickly down the narrow, foul-smelling hall. He punched the button for the elevator; a naked white bulb lit where the plastic "Down" arrow had been. Sounds from the other modapts startled him. He waited for the elevator; he put on his jacket and searched his pockets for money.

The faint green light of the elevator car slid up behind the round porthole of the door. Ernest opened the door. Inside, in a far corner, he saw a puddle of urine, now running toward him, two long muddy arms reaching for him. "Goddamn it," he muttered. He let the elevator door go. Before it wheezed shut he had started down the stairway.

Out on the sidewalk once more, Ernest paused to consider. It was now about half past four. The Representatives' announcement was due at eight. That gave him a good amount of time to kill, with a very limited amount of money to spend. He sat for a few moments on the modapt building's stoop, watching the few pedestrians. They all seemed so ugly. Those few people who still forlornly claimed the brotherhood of men had never visited New York. Or Cleveland. Or Washington. Or Los Angeles. A romantic notion had died, it was true, but it was unmourned. No one had the energy to climb up out of the immense crowd and throw flowers. Or love his neighbor, thought Ernest, as he watched an incredibly obese man make his slow progress down the block.

Ernest put his hand in his pocket and jingled the loose change. He had enough to get himself mildly drunk. It was Gretchen's fault; if it hadn't been for her, he would have taken his time and found more money. Ah, well, it was good enough to make a start. He could finish the job with a few cans of beer while he watched his government on television.

He encountered few people between the modapt building and the bar. Almost everyone had been sent home from work, and were now waiting anxiously for the news. The streets were deserted, giving the usually choked neighborhood of Brooklyn a hot, grimy, ghost-town atmosphere. It was frightening. Ernest tried to turn his thoughts away, but he kept returning to the same notion: like it or not, he was involved in a peculiarly unpleasant situation, one that he was entirely helpless to solve.

"I wish Sokol were here," thought Ernest, trying again to ignore the empty streets, the solitary stragglers. "Sokol. The Man Who Knows What's Going On. The Man Who Knows What To Do. Somewhere in that blue plastic notebook he must have the rules written down. Sokol, or somebody, has been briefed. There *is* a right thing to do, a proper response, that will protect me and my family. All that I have to do is learn what it is. That is the fallacy of education. 'There are things to be done, and ways to do them, and books to teach you how. All you have to do is choose wisely.' No, it just doesn't work in real life."

From a distance of half a block, Ernest could see that the bar, like all the other businesses, had been

closed for the day. He didn't want to accept that disturbing fact. He continued walking. "Sokol could be in there now," he thought. "The lights are turned off, so most of the common people will think the bar's closed. They'll just walk on by. But the genuine thinkers will investigate. They'll try the door. Sokol will let them in; after a while, he'll have collected a small gang of sharp people, men and women who passed the simple test. We'll all sit around on the bar stools. Sokol will look around, nod at us all, take out his notebook, and begin reading. Then we'll find out what all this nonsense is about. And we'll know how to cope with it. Let all the other idiots worry themselves to death." The bar's door was locked. Ernest rattled it angrily. It was too dark inside to see anything. Mike, the owner, was gone. Suzy, the "waitress," was gone. Sokol had never set foot inside the place. Ernest kicked a bent beer can, bouncing it off the door. He turned around, his hand jingling the coins in his pocket again. The bar was closed, the lunch counters would be closed, the bowling alleys would be closed, the magazine stands would be closed. Ernest muttered and walked slowly home.

"You're back," said Gretchen when Ernest opened the door to the modapt.

"I'm back," he said wearily.

"Did you learn anything?"

"Yeah," he said. "We wait for the announcement, like everybody else. But I figure, how bad could it be, if they didn't tell us right off?"

Gretchen thought about that for a moment. "Maybe you're right," she said. "I hope so."

"Get me a beer. And turn off that set."

The time passed slowly. Gretchen chattered, talking about the things she had seen on the television, the even more boring things her mother had told her, and all the unimaginative things she expected the Representatives to say. There was no way for Ernest to escape. He felt sorry for himself, and the beer was a poor consolation. Soon, though, it was seven forty-five: one more tedious program until the big news. Ernest sat with bleary eyes, staring at the strange flat figures on the television screen. They were engaged in some moronic activity, which he had little desire to understand. Ernest was pleased with himself; he was fairly drunk, nearly isolated from the irritating influences around him. He had accomplished that on his own, too. The bar had been closed. He was resourceful. Sokol would be proud.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, concerned citizens of North America. The regularly scheduled programs and their sponsors have graciously relinquished their time so that we may bring you this special message of national importance. Ladies and gentlemen, the Representative of North America."

"My fellow Americans," said the Representative, "this morning I met with the other members of our government -- with the Representatives of South America, of Europe, Asia, Africa, and of the Pacific -- and it was our decision to inform you of an impending state of emergency in this way. We sincerely felt that under the circumstances this is the fairest procedure, not only for you, my colleagues and neighbors of North America, but for each and every person in the world, each of whom, I hope, is right now listening to his Representative in whatever distant land he calls home."

"We're in for it, now," said Ernest, a drunken smile expressing his true feelings. "War. An economic crisis."

"Listen," said Gretchen angrily, "it sounds like trouble. I just wish he'd get on with it."

"Maybe they've devalued the orgasm," said Ernest. He sat still for a few seconds, repeating his joke to himself. Then he started laughing, so hard that tears slid down his face. Gretchen pushed him off the low hassock they were sharing.

Ernest stopped laughing, but got up and went to the refrigerator for another beer. He shook his head, amazed at how totally involved his wife was. She sat close to the set, leaning toward it, staring at the Representative's tepid smile, as if she could glean more sense from his words by following them visually from their source.

She hadn't always been that simpleminded, Ernest admitted. When he first met her, she had been a remarkable summation of all he had wanted in female beauty. He had come to realize that his early ideas of female beauty meant little; they meant less and less as the years passed. What he had seen in those

days had been an attitude of careless sexuality. He had observed merely her celebration of "freedom," and had given it another name. Now, of course, her ideas of sexual behavior were becoming fuzzy, indistinct, and rather impersonal. They were slowly becoming nonexistent.

"When is the next election?" asked Ernest, returning to his seat. "Fifteen years? Remind me not to vote for this guy, whatever his name is. He sure likes to hear himself talk."

"Quiet," said Gretchen. "I'm sure he's doing it for a reason. Maybe he doesn't want to start a panic."

"Panic!" said Ernest scornfully.

"Now, let me describe the situation calmly," said the Representative. "The most serious hazard at this moment is the possibility of causing an unfortunate and emotional reaction among you. But, nevertheless, the case is simply that the world, and thus the entire population of our planet, is in grave danger of sudden and violent destruction." The face of the North American Representative, flat on the screen of the old television set, smiled but displayed no emotion. His expression was adopted to foster confidence and composure, even while he reported such alarming news.

"Precisely what the doom is that threatens us, and how it will wreak its terrible havoc, is not to be disclosed. The particulars of this information are known only to your six Representatives, and to the team of specialists who prepared the original papers. It is our decision here that the details could not benefit the average citizen, and only serve to interfere with our plans for orderly and impartial evacuation."

The Representative paused, allowing his audience to accept the harsh facts. Ernest watched in amazement; the Representative was still holding his tight little smile, as though he were speaking of something as trivial as a Canadian cold front. "Well," thought Ernest, "I got my wish. I apologize to all the people on the subway." He wondered what Sokol was thinking then, what sexy Suzy from the bar was thinking, what the shopping-bag ladies would say when they were told. This was a new role, that of "the condemned." He had studied at an early age how to be generous, how to be angry, how to be sincere. He had never learned what to do just before death.

He would miss getting drunk at Mike's. He would miss making whispered suggestions to Suzy, seeing her slow smiles or impatient frowns. He would miss people like Eileen, the secretary from work; he would miss her kind, though he would not miss her. He wished that he could have had the time to scramble into a better life. He was suddenly sorry that he had let his relationship with Gretchen go so wrong. Finally, with a sigh, he imagined that it was his responsibility to be strong for her now. That was his role. It would be difficult.

"We're all going to die?" asked Gretchen, her voice rising in pitch and volume with each syllable.

"No, aren't you listening? He just said 'evacuation.' Trust him. That's what he's for; he knows what he's doing."

"Although we are faced with a catastrophe on a scale previously unknown on earth, there is no cause for uncontrolled hysteria. Our teams of engineers have been at work since the first hint of the circumstances was interpreted several months ago. We are pleased to report that protective bunkers have been built, with the assurance that they are completely and perfectly able to withstand the harshest blows the situation will deal. Following the actual period of disruption, we will emerge into a somewhat disordered and damaged world, but we, ourselves, will be none the worse for the experience. We will then be able to resume our lives with only the most moderate and reasonable of adjustments.

"However, we have not had adequate time to build *enough* protective shelters for each and every one of you. Indeed, the most generous estimates indicate that there is room for only one out of each two hundred and fifty persons. Consequently, we have devised this scheme for insuring that those fortunate individuals who do survive will be chosen by means of an unbiased system."

"We *are* going to die!" said Gretchen, sobbing.

"No, we won't," said Ernest flatly. As he listened to the Representative's speech, he had formed odd and horrible visions in his mind, taken chiefly from old movies of fantastic disasters: the skyline of New York City toppling in flaming obliteration; Washington, London, Tokyo crushed beneath the feet of unconvincing monsters; great walls of water toppling down to bury coastal metropolises; fiery cracks splitting the earth, men and lizards plunging in to their destruction. And through them all walked a

particular sort of man -- the male lead -- holding the female lead by the hand. Ernest's hasty resolve to follow that example began to fade. He trembled at the thought of the smallest smoking fissure, the most inconsequential of colliding planets. And Gretchen was the excuse that he chose to mask his own growing fear. Certainly, with a little mental preparation, Ernest could fit into the hero part, but what sort of scientist's lovely daughter was Gretchen? She would not do at all. She provided not the slightest motivation toward heroism. She would not be able to draw out that final, vital measure of courage in the critical moment. He would be lost, and no one could say that he was to blame. He sighed again. "I'll see us through," he said softly, sadly.

"Admittance to the bunkers will be granted only to those persons who present one of these tokens." The Representative held up a shiny brass coin, about the size of a quarter dollar. "Each person must have one; therefore, make sure that each member of your family obtains his own. All persons without a token will be turned away on the day of evacuation. Family groups will receive no special treatment. We will have no compunction at all about splitting up such groups. This is the only way we have of enforcing fair conduct.

"Furthermore, each person must obtain his token by himself. Only one token will be given to each individual. In the case of children under the age of five years, they will receive their tokens only if they are brought to the dispensing station by a parent. The aged and the infirm must obtain their tokens in similar fashion. This may seem heartless at first glance, but proper reflection will prove it to be the only reliable course. Names will be taken at the dispensing stations, and positive proof of identification will be required. Later, these lists will be checked with lists of those persons admitted to the shelters. Any person who thus appears to have obtained entrance through fraudulent means will be immediately executed, and his entire party with him.

"Finally, beginning tomorrow the dispensing stations will be located at random spots around the globe. Their positions have been chosen with especial care to safeguard the equitable distribution of tokens. But the exact locations are also a secret, so that a further element of chance may work to the democratic effect.

"And now, I and my colleagues wish you all the best of luck, and may God bless."

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Meantime B

Weintraub received orders from Berlin, delivered through the Red Front district headquarters in Gelnhausen. After the sudden dissolution of his local cell, and with Herr Schneck's personal recommendation, Weintraub had become the prime candidate for a complex and subtle mission.

"This assignment will make you a hero," said Zeborian, the late Herr Schneck's successor.

"I'm not interested in that," said Weintraub. "I can't help thinking that I failed in Frachtdorf. I owe the Party something. I put myself at the disposal of our leaders in Berlin; whatever role they choose for me, I will try to fill to their satisfaction."

"Excellent, Herr Weintraub," said Zeborian, smiling. "I will admit that your orders require great sacrifices from you. It will be a most dangerous, difficult time, but the rewards for success will be beyond your imagining."

"I will do my best."

"I know that, and Berlin realizes that, too. A project of this scope would hardly be entrusted to someone of lesser talents and enthusiasm. Now, listen." Zeborian outlined the plan to Weintraub. The youth would soon leave his homeland, journeying to the recently subjugated United States. The necessary emigration papers had been obtained through Communist agents planted among the bureaucratic workers

in Berlin. Weintraub would begin a new life in New York; he would establish himself slowly. After a period of time, he would make contact with a high-ranking Party member there who would guide the second phase of the operation. Weintraub nodded. He felt both confident and proud.

"Well, then, Herr Weintraub," said Zeborian, reaching across his desk to clasp Weintraub's hand, "though we must continue our struggle on this distasteful confidential level, at least we're still fighting. It won't be long before the world will again thrill to the voices of liberated masses, joyously raised in comradely song."

"Not long, I hope," said Weintraub.

"So. Here. Your new papers. Your instructions for the next month, and those to be opened after your arrival in Ostamerika. Expense money for your remaining days here, a bank draft for your stay in New York. The Party is with you, Kamerad Weintraub. Good luck, and may God bless."

"Long live the shining victory of the people's revolution," said Weintraub solemnly.

"Yes. Quite." Zeborian stood and escorted Weintraub to the door.

Weintraub led a quiet, lonely life. It was fairly simple for him to tie up the loose ends of his business and personal matters. He made half-muttered excuses to Frau Gansser, the owner of the bookshop in which Weintraub had worked for four years. His landlady was rather pleased, for when Weintraub moved out, she would be able to raise the rent on the musty attic apartment. And Weintraub's stammered explanation brought his girlfriend, Nati, to tears. She had begun talking frequently about marriage, and the Party's orders provided Weintraub with a welcome excuse. He didn't tell her the details, of course; merely that something had happened which would make her proud if he could explain. He said that after the mysterious thing was over, he would return and marry her. They both knew perfectly well that was a lie; Weintraub soothed Nati's disappointment for a while, and then said goodbye. He was relieved, but still full of sadness. He had a genuine affection for her, but he could never have married her and still be as useful to the Party.

He left Frachtdorf late in February 1919. He was to rent a cheap room in Hamburg, and do whatever he pleased until the first of May. Then he was to meet a Party operative who would take him to the boat which would get Weintraub out of the country. The months passed uneventfully, pleasantly. On the first of May, he was contacted by an elderly man, dressed in expensive clothing, who led Weintraub through the dirty streets of Hamburg to the waterfront. They boarded a large, battered fishing boat. The captain of the craft glanced once at the Party agent, once at Weintraub, and nodded. No one had said a word. The elderly man turned silently and left. The captain pointed to a small cot in the cabin, and went out to supervise the preparations for their departure. Weintraub yawned, went to the cot, and was soon asleep.

Hours later, Weintraub went above to get the fresh air. It was a dark and cold spring night, a few hours before dawn. The stars shone hard and bright; there were no dark smears of land to be seen. The fishing boat cut through the low seas, northward across the Skagerrak. Weintraub ran a hand through his hair and rubbed his stiff neck, then climbed up to the pilot house. The captain was sitting at a small table drinking coffee, while a young crewman held the wheel. "Hello," said Weintraub. The captain nodded and indicated the coffee. Weintraub poured himself a cup. There was no sugar or milk. "Can you tell me where we're going?"

The captain stood and stretched. "Norway," he said. "I'll leave you in a small village on the southern cape. You'll be met. I don't have any idea where you'll go after that."

"How long before we get there?"

The captain shrugged. "A while," he said. "Go below and get some sleep. There ain't anything else to do." It was very cold on deck; the wet wind off the North Sea chilled Weintraub, and he decided that the captain was right. He spent the rest of the night and the following day in the cabin. Much later, they arrived in the shallow harbor of the village.

Weintraub swung his small bundle of belongings over his shoulder. When he started across the gangplank, the captain was nowhere in sight. There was a man waiting on the small pier. As soon as Weintraub stepped onto the dock, the captain's voice called out to the crew to make ready to shove off. There was no sense of conspiracy or comradeship, no good luck backslaps or gruff words of advice.

Before the Party agent introduced himself, the fishing boat was already putting out to sea. Weintraub had left Jermany for the first time in his life. He was afraid.

"Herr Weintraub, follow me please. I have a car. We have a long journey, and I know you must already be tired. Let us go." Weintraub sighed. The agent took the bundle and led the way to the car. Weintraub climbed into the rear seat and dozed.

They drove through the twilight for many miles, along narrow, rutted dirt roads. Occasionally, they passed small settlements, and Weintraub could catch glimpses of snug log houses, warm-looking, with bright yellow lights shining through the windows and thick billows of smoke streaming from the chimneys. He wondered how long it would be before he could retire to a home of his own, with a comfortable, loving wife, a few sons, some simple occupation. These people, though innocent and lovely in a rustic way, had to be protected; it was folk like these who could be so easily and secretly enslaved. It was happening now, as the corrupt, victorious Jerman Empire spread its influence throughout Europe and the Baltic. And it was up to Weintraub and others with awakened consciences to fight on behalf of the simple citizens. That was why, after all, these workers were eating their hard-earned dinners in their ancient homes, and he was driving by, cold, hungry, weary, not even knowing his destination. That was why, after all, he was glad to make the sacrifice.

They stopped at last, once again well before sunrise. Weintraub got out of the car and stretched sleepily. His driver remained inside, but handed the bundle out through the window. Yet another agent waited in the darkness, and the car rolled away down the rough Norwegian road as Weintraub presented his identification. The agent handed the papers back. "Come along, please," he said.

"Where is this?" asked Weintraub, noticing lights shining through a stand of trees.

"We are near the sea," said the agent. "The Party established a secret submarine base here five years ago. You will leave for America at dawn."

Weintraub felt a nervous tingle. The very idea of submarines had always frightened him, but he had at least thought it unlikely that he'd ever see one, let alone ride in one. Now it seemed that he was going to cross the Atlantic in an iron box, sunk many meters below the surface. He shook his head. The Party could ask a lot of a man.

Weintraub boarded the submarine a short time later. He was introduced to the commanding officer, Kapitänleutnant Ditmars Kaufmann, and was shown to his quarters. These were merely a partitioned area of the narrow gangway. A folding cot had been set up; there was room for little else. Weintraub undressed and resumed his night's sleep. The submarine was under weigh when he awoke.

It was an old ship, built before the war began. It was one of the prototype U-boats, equipped with kerosene-fueled engines for running on the surface rather than the more efficient and safer diesel engines that became standard by 1914. When submerged, the submarine was powered by electric batteries, much the same as those used by all submarine fleets in the world. The early Jerman submarines had certain structural problems, many of which were solved during the course of the war. This craft, now operated by the Jerman Communist Party, would be sadly outclassed in any surface naval combat situation; but that was not its purpose.

Weintraub sat in his little compartment, screened off by a makeshift door from the bustling traffic of the submarine's single passageway. He had little desire to stir from his cabin while the sub made its way from the concealed pen on the southern tip of Norway through the Jerman coastal defenses. Later that day, when Kaufmann ordered the tanks blown and the vessel surfaced, Weintraub went out to stretch his cramped legs. He climbed the ladder on the inside of the conning tower, and joined the captain on the bridge.

"Good day, Herr Weintraub," said Kaufmann. "I hope you're comfortable."

"Very," said Weintraub. It was damp and cold, but the clean air refreshed him. The day was ending; the sun was setting, a perfect circle of red bleeding its color onto the western sea. "I must admit that I felt a little nervous, traveling submerged."

"We don't carry many passengers," said Kaufmann with a shrug. "They all have to learn to get used to it. It won't take long. You should be well adjusted by the time we put in at the supply station in

Greenland."

Weintraub nodded, but he didn't feel as confident as the captain. "This is a very old submarine, isn't it?" he said.

"Yes," said Kaufmann. While he spoke, he and two other crewmen scanned the horizon through field glasses. "This was one of the first submarines built by Krupp, around 1913. It was reported lost at sea with all hands on its first trial cruise. As you can see, it wasn't."

Weintraub was silent for a moment. "What happened to the original crew?" he said at last.

The captain made an elaborate show of searching the night for danger. He shrugged again, in reply to the question.

"Dead?" asked Weintraub. "Brave Jerman sailors?"

"The end, the means, they justify."

"Do you know the end?"

"If you would rather swim..." The captain was interrupted by the arrival of Porski and Gaffner, sailors ordered to relieve the other officers of the watch. Kaufmann took the opportunity to call down to his first officer. "Take over, will you, Number One? I'm coming below for a while; let me know if you see anything unusual. And answer any questions our passenger may ask. He is our guest." The captain disappeared down the hatch. After several minutes of cold silence on the bridge, Weintraub went below also.

The next morning, Weintraub felt a good deal better. Of course, the captain had been right. The Party, being better able to see and understand the nature of its future difficulties, had taken steps which might be impossible for an uninformed individual such as Weintraub to interpret. The loss of the Jerman crew of the submarine had been regrettable but, apparently, necessary. The Communist Party was always unpopular. Now, it was illegal as well. So all of its activities had to be carried out under the strictest of security routines. And, of course, he knew what the ends were that they all worked for; he had looked foolish, and would have to apologize to Kaufmann.

It was another fine clear day. The submarine moved along the surface at a speed of fourteen knots, issuing a thick plume of black smoke from the kerosene engines' exhaust. Weintraub was greeted by a low grunt from the captain, and annoyed looks from the other two men on watch. He knew that he was just in their way, no matter where he went in the ship.

"How many other submarines does the Party own?" he asked.

"One," said Kaufmann. "It's still back at Kaeresnat, being refitted."

"Oh. Was it sabotaged also?" There was no reply. Weintraub frowned and stared out over the bright rolling waves.

Suddenly, one of the crewmen shouted and pointed out to starboard. Kaufmann swung his glasses in that direction, muttered something, and bent to the speaking tube. "Dive, dive, dive!" he shouted. The crewmen were already scrambling down the hatch; Weintraub stood frozen, fearful. "Go on!" cried Kaufmann. "Get below!" Weintraub hurried down the ladder, the captain following him. Kaufmann's foot crushed the slow-moving youth's fingers; Weintraub leg go of the ladder and dropped the rest of the way into the submarine. He heard the sailors around him cursing, and he heard the captain securing the hatches in the conning tower. Already the submarine was dropping at a sharp angle. Kaufmann came down the ladder and hurried to the periscope. "Level off at ten meters," he said.

"Ten meters," came the report.

"Up," said Kaufmann. The first officer stood at his post, and at the order operated the lever that ran the periscope up. Kaufmann searched the surface of the sea around them for a long while. "Down," he said finally. The periscope slid noiselessly to it original position. "Steer to course two-five-zero. Engines all ahead full." He turned to his first officer. "A convoy," he said. "Three large freighters, one destroyer. Range three-o-double-o."

"British?" asked Weintraub.

"The freighters are," said Kaufmann. "The destroyer is Jerman."

"Food ships," said the first officer.

"Yes," said the captain. "Make ready all torpedo tubes."

"All tubes clear, Herr Kapitänleutnant."

"Stand by, first bow tube," said the captain. "Up scope." He checked the range again, calling out figures as the distance decreased. "Fire first tube!" he said, when the range got to a thousand meters. There was a rushing, hissing sound, and the first torpedo was on its way. Kaufmann ordered the periscope down. He didn't wait to see whether the torpedo hit its mark; he ordered the submarine to forty meters. Nearly a minute later, there was a muffled concussion; the torpedo had found its target. The crew began to cheer.

"They'll probably be pretty confused," said the first officer.

"Those that aren't dead," said Weintraub. The others glared.

"Those ships of food and medical supplies are the symbols of our surrender," said Kaufmann. "I have orders to sink them on sight, if possible. I would do so without the orders."

"This isn't wartime," said Weintraub.

"It isn't wartime for them," said the captain, jerking his thumb upward. "It still is for us, and it will be until the Party has won its eventual total victory. Perhaps our superiors have chosen unwisely in sending you on whatever mission you have."

"No," said Weintraub slowly. "I understand your meaning. I'm just unused to this sort of tactic. I believe in a political revolution, without the aid of the military. I would rather win a man's mind then compel his obedience."

"Stand by, stern tube. Come about to course zero-seven-o. We'll go back under them and hit them going away."

"It's easy to understand how we won the war," said Weintraub. "There is no defense against a submarine. That convoy is as helpless as a baby, and we are in no danger at all."

"Unless the destroyer hits us with a depth bomb," said the first officer. "Or if the weight of the water damages our pressure hull. Or if a rivet becomes just a bit loose, and seawater leaks in. If enough spills into the acid of the storage batteries, we'll have a tin can full of chlorine gas and dead bodies. And these waters are still cluttered with mines. Or the ballast tanks..."

"Take her up to ten meters," said Kaufmann.

The sub glided back to periscope depth. Kaufmann ordered the scope up and took a long look. He stepped away and let his first officer examine the scene above. The first officer went back to his post grinning. Kaufmann generously allowed Weintraub a turn. He went to the periscope nervously; in it he saw the reflected horrors of submarine warfare. The freighter, marked with a huge red cross amidships, was heeling over. He could see tiny figures running across the hull. Some boats had been lowered, but there hadn't been enough time to rescue the majority of the crew and the passengers. Even as Weintraub watched, the freighter rocked and slowly settled beneath the water.

"The destroyer and the other two have changed course and are heading away at full steam," said the first officer.

Kaufmann replaced Weintraub at the scope. "We'll have to pass up the second freighter, but the third is just now coming into my sights. Stand by on stern tube, Number One. Ready... fire stern tube!" This time, Kaufmann watched the path of the torpedo through the periscope. Weintraub waited anxiously, feeling disturbed and somewhat sickened. At last he felt the shock of the explosion. He did not join in the celebration.

"Right behind the bridge," cried Kaufmann. "It's gone under already!"

"A lot of good Jerman folk will starve, certainly," said Weintraub. No one answered him.

"Come about to course one-seven-five," said Kaufmann.

"Ready second bow tube."

Weintraub wanted to go back to his quarters, but he knew he couldn't stand the humiliation that would follow. He closed his eyes and tried to wait out the terrible moments.

"The destroyer is coming after us," said the captain softly. "All right, we'll take it on."

Now Weintraub was more horrified than ever. "Captain," he said, "the freighters I can understand.

They were British ships, our nation's degradation. But the destroyer *is* our nation. It is a part of the Jerman Navy. Its sailors joined in the rebellion that drove out the Kaiser. You can't attack our own people."

"If the destroyer is sunk," said the first officer, "then Jermany will suspect Italy, France, even the United States. The Jerman folk will grow stronger in their resolve to stand against them."

"Come to bearing one-six-o," said Kaufmann, ignoring the debate. "Ready, Number One. Fire second bow tube! Down scope, stand by to dive. Open main vents. Clutches out. Take her down to sixty meters. Come about to course two-eight-five. Take over, Number One." A short time later came the shock wave of an explosion. Kaufmann wanted to leave the area as soon as possible, in case the destroyer had not been sunk. The submarine had used its last torpedo, and was now defenseless except for the single 37mm gun. Kaufmann had no intention of surfacing to use it, however.

"You've murdered them!" cried Weintraub. "Our own countrymen!"

Kaufmann gestured to the first officer. "Sig," he said, "come with me. I want to talk to you." The first officer sighed gratefully and followed the captain to the ward room. Weintraub was left standing alone; the other sailors pointedly ignored him. At last, still trembling with anger and dismay, he returned to his quarters, where he remained for the rest of the voyage.

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CHAPTER 4

Gretchen was screaming. She had stopped even trying to make sense. Her shrieks were growing louder and stronger, rather than subsiding. Ernest himself was shaken; he wanted time to understand the situation. He needed to be alone, somewhere quiet, where he could take out the few ideas that had any value for him, where he could set up those constructs in a rational order. He could examine himself: his meanness, his endurance, his dissatisfaction, his meager hopes. He could examine Gretchen, who provided the unvarying stimulus for his responses. He could put the two of them together, at one end of some mental scale. Then he could figure in the baby someplace -- he didn't know where, exactly. And the unborn baby, that Gretchen carried so resentfully. That would go between them. Then he could start relating the external influences: Sokol. The Representatives. Suzy? No, and also not Eileen. What else? Nothing else. There should be more, but there wasn't.

"All right," said Ernest loudly, "I'm going to give you three of these pills. You're only supposed to take one at a time. Don't take any more after I leave, O.K.?"

Gretchen looked at him wildly. She clutched his arm so tightly that it hurt him. "Where are you going now?" she cried.

Ernest shook his head. "Just swallow the pills. I don't want to waste any more time. If they're going to open those token stations in the morning, they must be setting them up now. Everybody else is going to be sitting around swearing and crying tonight. I'm going out to check and see if I can find anything out."

That made Gretchen cry even more. "Don't leave me here," she said. "Don't leave Stevie."

"Nothing will happen," he said. "Everything will be fine tonight. Just get some rest. We'll have a tough day tomorrow."

"Don't leave me, Ernie."

He led her to the small bed. The pills were already beginning to calm her down a little. He said nothing more to her, but left the modapt as quietly as he could. He shut the door softly behind him. In the hallway, he heard more shouting from his neighbors' modapts. The elevator wouldn't respond when he pushed the button.

Suddenly, the door of the modapt across the hall from the Weinraubs' swung open. Ernest glanced

idly back in that direction. The modapt belonged to a strange old man, a midget who lived in neurotic seclusion. Ernest and Gretchen had seen him only a few times in the many months they'd lived in the building. The old man had his groceries delivered and went out only rarely, for what reasons Ernest did not know.

"Ah, Mr. Weinblum!" said the midget, walking down the corridor with a peculiar, painful waddle.

"Weinraub," said Ernest.

"Yes, of course. It's so kind of you to visit me in my loneliness. How is your wonderful bride?"

"Fine," said Ernest, wishing the elevator would arrive. "I'm sorry, I was just going out."

"Is it important?" asked the little man. "I must apologize, but I'm sure you heard the Representative tonight, didn't you?"

Ernest nodded. There wasn't a hum or a rattle from the elevator to promise rescue.

"Well, then, you can't deny that you're curious about it."

"And you can't say that you know any more than the rest of us."

The tiny old man laughed. "Delightful, I'm sure," he said. "Come, we both need to talk about this. I have wine." He took Ernest's hand. Ernest flinched; the old man's fingers were rough and cold. The hand was like a child's, small and delicately boned, but the skin was too abrasive, too brittle.

"I'm really sorry, Mr. Vladieki. I was just on my way out." The midget pretended not to hear.

"You call me Lance," he said, peering up into Ernest's face. Vladieki's expression became very serious. "We've lived as neighbors for more than a year, and you've never visited with my friends and me. My real name is Leonard, you see, but I used the name Lance in motion pictures." He led Ernest by the hand to his apartment.

They stopped at the threshold. Vladieki was obviously proud of his modapt, and waited for Ernest's reaction. For a moment, Ernest just stared. "My God," he said finally.

"Look!" said Vladieki. "Emerald City is closer and prettier than ever!" They entered, and the little man shut the door. "There's no place like home," he said. The four walls of the modapt were covered with gigantic blown-up photographs. On the wall directly opposite the front door, dominating the small room, was the face of a young girl. "That's Dorothy, of course," said Vladieki.

"Judy Garland?"

The old man smiled. "Yes. Dorothy." She filled the entire space of the wall, a close-up of her head; her eyes were shining, her expression awe-struck, lovely, her lips parted. A narrow dresser stood in the corner of the room, obscuring some of her hair and her left ear. An electrical outlet intruded into her throat. Adjacent to that wall was one on which another enlarged picture showed Dorothy, the Tin Woodman, the Straw Man, and the Cowardly Lion on the Yellow Brick Road. Vladieki's kitchen area was against this wall, and the appliances and furniture covered the bottom half of the photograph. Across from this wall was a picture of Munchkinland, with several beehive-shaped, thatched houses, scores of oddly dressed Munchkins, and Billie Burke as Glinda the Good Witch. The Yellow Brick Road led from Glinda's feet right down to Vladieki's battered bed. Ernest turned, somewhat amazed, somewhat repelled. Behind him, around the door, was the countryside, the Road, and a distant view of the Emerald City of Oz.

"A place where there isn't any trouble," said Vladieki. "That's what Dorothy called it."

"I saw the movie a couple of times. Not for a long while, though," said Ernest. He didn't quite know how to react.

"I was *in* it," said Vladieki, his wrinkled, ancient face showing great satisfaction. He walked over to the picture of the Munchkins. He stood on his bed and pointed to a figure half-hidden in the background. "That's me," he said. "I was a Munchkin. I was in the Munchkin Militia. We used to get together, years ago, all the old Munchkins. Those of us that were in the militia, we all had ranks. I was Sergeant-Major. I'm one of the last ones left."

"That movie was made in the early or middle Sixties, wasn't it? That would make you pretty old." Vladieki didn't correct Ernest.

Ernest walked about the modapt; it was even smaller and more poorly equipped than his own.

Vladieki's was an African make, one that had gone out of business nearly twenty years before. On top of the dresser was a tape player and a framed photograph. The picture was brown and crumbling. It was obviously a publicity still, of a beautiful woman. She wore very old-fashioned clothing and makeup. It was inscribed: *To Lance: If only your --- was as big as your heart! Love, Bobbie.* Ernest studied it for a moment.

"That's Roberta Quentini," said the old man. He came over to Ernest and reached up for the picture. Ernest looked down, feeling strange to have such an aged person bumbling about near him. He handed the framed photo to Vladieki. "She was one of the best of the silent stars," said the midget. "Until she killed herself. We had a lot of good times." Ernest didn't know whether to believe him; if Vladieki had been only twenty years old during the silent film days, he would have to be over a hundred and thirty years old now.

Vladieki gave the picture back to Ernest. "If I ever go looking for my heart's desire again," he said, "I won't look any further than my own back yard."

"We don't have back yards," said Ernest, irritated by the senile old man.

"Dorothy said that, too. About the heart's desire. There's a lot of wisdom in *Oz*."

"That's it," said Ernest. "A big house will come crunching down from outer space and smash us all."

"Ah," said the midget. "The Representative."

"You remember, I'm sure. We're all going to die."

"All in good time, my little pretty. All in good time. Unquote. The Wicked Witch of the West." Ernest decided to leave. Vladieki interpreted his guest's mood, and replied with another of the Witch's lines. "Going so soon?" he said. "Why, I wouldn't hear of it!" His dry, forced cackle made Ernest shudder.

"I do have things to do," said Ernest. "My last will and testament, you know. One last night out with the boys."

"Just a moment, please," said Vladieki, in a pitiable tone of voice. "Come back! Don't go without me! Please, come back!"

Ernest stopped, his hand on the doorknob. He didn't turn around. The two men waited, each involved in his own particular anxiety. If Ernest could have separated himself from the evening, from the sour news, from the loveless world that made everyone so uniquely insane, he might have hated the ancient midget. And, similarly, if the old man could have looked beyond his own fortress of dreams, he might have had a stranger's contempt for Ernest and his petty, unoriginal problems. But it was not the case for either man; they cared for different things, they lived for different goals. It was as though they existed in mutually invisible worlds: it is not only parallel lines that never meet. Lines skewed in space have neither intersection nor the minimal interest of equidistance. As with Ernest and Leonard Vladieki, so it was with everyone. No points in common, no relationships to share.

Ernest looked up at the Emerald City. Under close inspection it was blurry and indistinct, a barely comprehensible hexagonal pattern of dots -- white, gray, and black, red, yellow, green, blue. He turned slowly to face Vladieki. "You know," he said, "it's a little unhealthy, this attachment you have."

"Unhealthy?" asked the old man, his voice strained, pitched too high. "You can listen to that television and tell me *I'm* unhealthy? With all that's going on in the world? You call me sick for building a little room of peace, where I can rest from the depravity around me?"

"You're not resting," said Ernest. "You're hiding."

Vladieki laughed again. "Since when have you been the prince of the activists, Mister, uh..."

"Weinraub. Never mind. At least I don't have my whole life centered around one single moment. At least I haven't shut off my input like you have. Have you experienced anything at all in the last fifty years, for God's sake?"

The tiny man just stared. His hands hung at his sides, quivering with a palsy of age. His head shook in slight, involuntary jerks. He indicated a chair for Ernest, and took another himself. "Tell me, then," he said, "what *you* have at the center of your life. Is there *anything* there?"

"Yes," said Ernest angrily, "a perfectly good set of genitals that haven't been getting as much exercise as they should, and now probably won't get much more, if the Representative doesn't come through for

me."

"Ah," said Vladieki, relaxing. "The Representative again. How often he intrudes on your thoughts."

Ernest was a little amazed. The old midget had indicated that he had listened to the Representative's broadcast; yet, Vladieki didn't appear to have digested the importance of the announcement. "Sometimes," said Ernest, "rarely, I admit, I get to thinking about this grand old world of ours. I think about what the Representative said tonight, and I imagine what a sorry place it would be without me. And, then, how sorry I'll be without it. That's all."

"Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain," said Vladieki, with his unnerving rustling cackle.

"What?"

"That's what the Wizard said to Dorothy and the others when he was revealed pulling the levers and things."

"You're not afraid of the Representative's news?"

"Once, right after we finished *Oz*, this guy called Reverend Slight was going to organize us Munchkins and take us on a tour of the United States. We were going to clean up. Twenty-six cities. One concert in each town, packed audiences, enough money for everybody for years. So we all signed contracts. I mean, none of us had agents or business managers or anything. We weren't actors, just midgets. We had all been rounded up at the last minute to be in the movie. We didn't know any better. We didn't stop to think that MGM owned all the costumes and the sets. Hell, they probably could have gotten a court order to keep us from appearing anyway, exploiting their movie. And, anyhow, we couldn't sing. All the Munchkin songs in the picture were dubbed later. A lot of the midgets couldn't even speak English. We all invested in Reverend Slight's enterprise, he vanished, and I've lived here ever since. Nobody's ever done that to me again, because I haven't given them the chance. Except the bastard kids that deliver my groceries. But even that's been a kind of game. Look." He opened a drawer of the bureau and brought a heavy object wrapped in white linen. He unfolded the yellowing material; inside was a large gold frame. He handed it to Ernest. It was a photograph of Judy Garland as Dorothy, asleep in the field of poppies. She was absolutely beautiful. The inscription read: *Lance -- there is a magic land of Oz, if we know where to look for it... Your love and friendship have shown me the way... con amore, Judy.* The handwriting was cramped and almost illegible. Ernest noticed that it was the same as that on the portrait of Roberta Quentini. They were both obviously forged.

"I think this trouble will be a good thing for you," said Ernest. "Something like this, to shock you out of your numbness. It's almost like doing you a favor."

"'Come, soothing death.'"

Ernest put the framed picture of Judy Garland on the floor. "That's not what I meant," he said. "If the threat of extinction doesn't drive you out, back into the world, nothing will. And of course, if nothing will, then, well, I hate to say it, but it seems that might be the best thing. My boss Sokol would love to have your modapt slot."

"Was he a Munchkin, too?" asked Vladieki sarcastically. "I seem to remember a Sokol. He wasn't in the militia, I think. But there were others. We had a whole drunken revel scene, too. That was cut out very early. I'm glad. It wasn't thematically sound."

Ernest waved at the wrinkled midget impatiently. "If nothing means anything to you, why did you bother even listening to the announcement?"

"I love the Representative," said Vladieki. "Because of the wonderful things he does. Because of the wonderful things he does."

"I will leave you now," said Ernest, standing, moving again toward the door. "I don't have anything else to say. I don't want to listen to anything else you have to say. But thanks, anyway, for taking away the bad taste of my wife's hysteria. Now I have to go out and get ready all over again."

"I'll see you to the door," said Vladieki, walking slowly across the room. "I'm really sorry you have to go. I have a tape here of all of the songs from *Oz*, and a lot of the dialogue. I know it all, of course. Every word, every sigh."

"A harmless hobby," said Ernest. "Good night."

"I'll never see you again, you know," said the very old man. "I'll be dead soon. And either you will be, too, or you won't. But Dorothy will live on. That's what you don't realize."

"Good night, good night," said Ernest wearily, stepping out into the hallway, back into the dim world, into the night of tangible woe. It smelled like garlic and urine.

"I'd give anything to get out of *Oz* altogether," said Vladieki sadly. "That's what Dorothy said, at the end."

"Good night."

-=*=-

Meanwhile 2

As the clock moved on toward midday, the rain stopped. Ernst leaned back in his chair and waited for the sun to draw pedestrians from their shelters. He signaled to M. Gargotier, and the proprietor brought a rag from the bar to mop the table. Ernst left his seat to check his appearance in the *Fée Blanche's* huge, cracked mirror. His clothes were still soaked, of course, and in the growing afternoon heat they clung to him unpleasantly. He ran his hand through his hair, trying to give it a more raffish, rumpled look, but it was far too wet. M. Gargotier returned to his place behind the bar, ignoring Ernst. There were voices from the patio; Ernst sighed and gave up the bar's muggy darkness.

Outside, the sun made Ernst squint. His headache began to throb angrily. He went back to his usual table, noticing that a crowd had collected beyond the café's rusty iron railing. A few people had come into the *Fée Blanche*, preferring no doubt to witness the unknown affair from a more comfortable vantage. It was nearly time for Ernst to change to *mashroub ra-why*, his afternoon refreshment, but M. Gargotier was busily serving the newcomers. Ernst waited impatiently, his tumbler of anisette once again empty. He stared at the people lining the sidewalk, unable for the moment to guess what had attracted them.

"Now," thought Ernst, "if I look closely enough, I will be able to recognize the backsides of every person I've ever known. How tedious the world becomes, once one realizes that everyone in it can be divided into a dozen or so groups. That young woman there, ah, a fairly interesting knot of black hair, attractive legs, a thick waist. If she were to turn around, her face would be no surprise. Heavy eyebrows, no doubt, full lips, her upper front teeth protruding just a little. Large breasts hanging, her shirt cut to expose them, but it is ten years too late for that. It is too boring. I have no interest even in seeing if I'm correct."

Ernst smiled, realizing that he was deliberately avoiding any real observation. It was nonsense, of course, to think that twelve physical types might be enough to catalogue the shabby mass of people that filled the city. He had exhausted that particular entertainment, and rather quickly; what remained was the more tiresome prospect of actually describing the crowd. Perhaps M. Gargotier would arrive soon, interrupting the intellectual effort, scattering the energy, mercifully introducing a tiny but vital novelty.

"An interesting point," said Ernst aloud, imagining himself a lecturer before dozing students in some stifling European hall, "a genuine philosophical point that we can all grasp and taste for truth, is that there is nothing in the world quite like the opportunity of seeing someone make an ass of himself. Free entertainment is, after all, the Great Leveler, not death, as we have often been told. In the case of death, the rich are often able to regulate its moment of victory, staving off the final instant for months, even years, with purchased miracles of medicine. The poor take what they are given. But free entertainment is democratic!

"No one may say when a spectacle may arise, may explode, may stumble. And then, when that moment comes, every man, rich or poor, must take advantage as best he can, elbowing aside the crowds

all together at the same time. So, by sitting here, I have conquered them all, diversion and audience alike. And I can delude myself with my own analogies, considering death a lesser antagonist, and applaud my own immortality."

In a while Ernst heard a ragged ruffle of drums, and a high-pitched voice shouting orders. Only the *Gaish*, thought Ernst with disappointment. It was only the new Citizens' Army; there would be little chance here to advance his position. He did not care for the local folk and their sudden and silly politics; his own sort of people would not be long entertained by the fools' parade. He called M. Gargotier in a loud, rude voice. "Bring me some of that ugly Arab drink," he said. "It's noon, isn't it?" There was not a word from the proprietor, not a smile or a nod.

The people on the sidewalk, however, were having a wonderful time. Ernst could hear the beating of the snare drums, playing a syncopated, unmilitary cadence. The several drummers had evidently not had much practice together; the strokes rarely fell together, and with a little attention one could identify the different styles of each man. The slapping of the marching feet against the rough stones of the pavement was likewise without precision. Ernst frowned, looking at his own frayed, stained suit. If things could be arranged according to merit, then certainly he would be granted a better situation than this. He remembered the white linen suit he had owned when he first came to the city. He had worn it proudly, contemptuous of the city's natives and their hanging, shapeless garments, all darkly sweat-marked, torn, and foul. That suit had not lasted long. It, along with the white wide-brimmed hat and his new boots, had been stolen within a week, while he indulged himself at the *Sourour* baths. He had never returned to that establishment, nor any other in the Arab quarter. Now he looked much like those he had disdained on his arrival, and, strangely, that brought him a certain pleasure as well. At least he didn't seem to be a mere tourist. He had been initiated. He belonged, as all the cityful of mongrels belonged.

So the time passed with Ernst trying mightily to ignore the exhibition in the street. Often the movements of the crowd opened spaces and he could see the garishly outfitted militia. The workmen and slaves of the city cheered them, and this annoyed Ernst even more. He swallowed some of the local liquor in a gulp, holding the small wooden bowl on the flat of one palm. What good is that army? he wondered. The *Gaish* had no weapons. An army of no threats. And, beyond that, thought Ernst as he waved once more to M. Gargotier, they have no enemies. There was nothing on all the sand but the single city. "Just bread and circuses," muttered Ernst, observing the crowd's excitement. "Just an entertainment for the groundlings." He had other things to consider.

"Eugenie," he thought, "magnificent horror of my youth, I would trade my eternal portion to have you with me now. How old you must be! How like these cheap dorsal identities I see before me, without personality, without more than the instantaneous appetites, without the barest knowledge of me. They, who have drifted here from the living world, have been charred slowly to that condition. They have greedily accepted their lot, their badge of grime, their aristo suppuration, their plebeian filth. They left Europe as I did, to change slowly and by degrees of privation, like a slow sunset of amnesia, into this life of utter exhaustion. Never again will my eyes, my nose and mouth, the wet hairs of my body be free of grit and sand. The wealthy and I have had to labor to attain such an existence. But you, Eugenie, you had it with you all the time. You would be queen here, Eugenie, but you would be as ugly as the rest."

Ernst sipped more of the liqueur. He dipped three fingertips into it, and flicked the dark fluid at the backs of the people crowding against the railing. Spots formed on the clothing of a man and a girl. Ernst laughed; the too-loud noise sobered him for a moment. "You'd be ugly, Eugenie," he said, "and I'd be drunk." The heat of the African noon enveloped him, and the stillness made it difficult to breath. Ernst struggled out of his old worn jacket, throwing it onto the chair across the small metal table from him.

"Marie, you don't matter. Not now. Not here. Africa would be perfect for Eugenie, but you, Marie, I picture your destruction among the million mirror shards of Paris or Vienna. So forget it; I'm talking to Eugenie. She would come right across that square, scattering the pigeons, the pedestrians, the damned army just the same, marching right across the square, right up to this café, to my table, and stare down at me as if she had walked the Mediterranean knowing where I was all the time. But it won't work again. She wouldn't have thought that I could catch up to her laughing crime, that I'd still be the same rhyming

idiot I always was. And she'd be old, older than I, lined and wrinkled, leaning, tucked in, shaking just a bit in the limbs, aching just a bit in the joints, showing patches and patterns of incorrect color, purples on the legs, brown maculae on the arms, swirls and masses on the face beneath the surgery and appliances. Then what would I do? I would buy her a drink and introduce her to everyone I know. That would destroy her surely enough, speedily enough, satisfyingly enough, permanently enough. Oh, the hell with indifference. I really can't maintain it." Ernst laughed again and hoped some patrician in the *Gaish's* audience would turn around, bored by the mock-military show, and ask Ernst what amused him. No one did. Ernst sat in glum silence and drank.

He had been in the *Fée Blanche* all morning and no one, not even the most casual early strollers, had paused to wish him a good day. Should he move on? Gather "material" in another café, have a sordid experience in a disorderly house, get beaten up by a jealous *gavroche*?

"So, *akkei* Weinraub! You sit out under all skies, eh?"

Ernst started, blinking and rapidly trying to recover his tattered image. "Yes, Ieneth, you must if you want to be successful. What is climate, to interfere with the creative process?"

The girl was young, perhaps not as old as seventeen. She was one of the city's very poor, gaunt with years of hunger and dressed in foul old clothes. But she was not a slave -- if she had been, she would have looked better. She earned a trivial living as a lens grinder. Behind her she pulled a two-wheeled cart, dilapidated and peeling, filled with pieces of equipment and tools. "How does it go?" she asked.

"Badly," admitted Ernst, smiling sadly and pulling a soggy bit of scrap paper from his pocket. "My poem of yesterday lies still unfinished."

The girl laughed. *"Chi ama assai, parla poco,"* she said. "You spend too much time chasing the pretty ones, no? You do not fool me, *akkei*, sitting there with your solemn long face. Your poem will have to be finished while you catch your breath, and then off after another of my city's sweet daughters."

"You've seen right through me, Ieneth," said Ernst, with a tired shrug. "You're right, of course. One can't spend one's entire life chasing the Muse. Wooing the Muse, I mean. If you chase the Muse, you gain nothing. Wooing becomes a chief business. It's like anything else -- you get better with practice." He smiled, though he was dreadfully weary of the conversation already. The necessity of keeping up the pretense of sexual metaphor annoyed him.

"You are lucky, in a way," said the girl. "Pity the poor butcher. What has he in his employment to aid him in the wooing? You must understand your advantage."

"Is there then a Muse of butchery?" asked Ernst with a solemn expression.

"You are very clever, *akkei*. I meant, of course, in the wooing of a lovely *imraa*. Were a butcher to approach me, a blood sausage in his hands, I would only laugh. That is not technique, *akkei*. That is uninspired. But these poems of yours are the product, as you say, of one kind of wooing, and moreover the weaponry of a more secular sort."

"Do poems still work their magic?" asked Ernst, wondering if this meeting were, after all, better than simple monotony.

"For some young girls, I suppose. Do you favor many young girls with them?"

A sudden cry from the crowd on the sidewalk prevented Ernst's reply. He shook his head in disgust, Ieneth interpreted his expression correctly, looking over her shoulder for a few seconds. She turned back to him, leaning on the railing near his table. He, of course, could not invite her to join him. There were only two classes of people in the city, besides the slaves: the wealthy and those like Ieneth. She was forbidden by custom to intrude socially on her betters, and Ernst was certainly not the crusading sort to sweep aside the laws of delicacy. Anyway, he thought, her people had their own dives and he surely wouldn't be made welcome in them.

"Ah, I see you disapprove of the *Gaish*," said Ieneth. "At least, your expression shows contempt, and its object must be either our army or myself."

"No, no, don't worry, I have nothing but affection for you," said Ernst. He was amazed by his facile speech; generally he would have been reduced to unpleasant sarcasm long before this. Indeed, he felt even less than mere affection for the girl. He felt only recognition; he knew her as another resident of the

city, with little to recommend her in any way. He didn't even feel lust for her. He rather wished that she'd go away.

"Then it's the *Gaish*. That's a shame, really. There are several very nice gentlemen involved with it." She smiled broadly. Ernst felt certain that she would wink, slowly; she did. Ernst smiled briefly.

"I'm sure there are," he said. "It's just that I'm not one of them, and I have no interest at all in making the acquaintance of any, and I wish they'd stop spoiling my afternoons with their juvenile tin soldiery."

"You should see the larger story," said Ieneth. "As long as they spend their time marching and carrying broom-rifles, you will have no competition for the company of their wives and daughters."

"You mistake me," said Ernst, "though you flatter me unduly. Surely it is hopeless for such a one as I, with such, ah, cosmopolitan tastes."

"I would not agree," she whispered. Ernst became aware that he had been staring at her. She reached across the railing and touched him confidentially on the shoulder. The motion exposed her wonderful breasts completely.

Ernst took a deep breath, forcing himself to look into her eyes as he spoke. "Do you know what I mean, then?"

"Certainly," she said, with an amused smile. She indicated her little wagon. "There are other sorts of grinders about, and anyone may have a lucrative avocation, no?"

"When I was young, there was an old man who ground scissors and sharpened knives. He had a cart very much like your own."

"There, you see? I am of the acquaintance of a... what shall I say?... an organ-grinder."

"I don't understand."

Ieneth shook her head, laughing at his obtuseness. She motioned for him to come closer. He slid his chair nearer to the railing. She touched his arm at the elbow, trailing her fingers down his sleeve, across his hip, and, most lightly of all, over the bunched material at his crotch. "I will meet you here in an hour?" she asked softly.

Ernst's throat was suddenly dry. "I will be here," he said.

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CHAPTER 5

It was people like Leonard Vladieki, who had consciously chosen not to live in the real world, who felt the greatest pressures from those they abandoned. Ernest, while thoroughly disgusted by the old man's way of life, couldn't help wondering how Vladieki dealt with the many unavoidable intrusions; the midget had lived in the same place for a matter of decades, while around him people packed up their modular apartments and plugged them in somewhere else every couple of years. The mobile citizens stayed only long enough to save the money for another move; they affected their neighborhood temporarily, making their voices heard in local elections. They left the area before the tangible results could be felt. Vladieki, on the other hand, had the details of his life, his taxes, the services available to him, his community's very appearance, dictated by transients. He had abdicated from such activity, though, and by doing so had retreated even further into his own world.

Whatever emotion Ernest could summon for Vladieki scarcely had any importance. There was very little room for feeling this evening, not against the ponderous weight of the Representative's announcement, not even against Ernest's real concern for his own life with Gretchen. As he circled down the stairs, Ernest's pity changed to pure contempt, then to anger. His frustrations had a focus at last, and not a difficult one at that. Ernest paused on the first floor before going out into the cooler evening air. He knocked on the fuser's door.

Ernest's building had gotten a new fuser only a couple of weeks before. The old one, as mobile as the other tenants, had unplugged his modapt and moved it to a government-owned building in Boston. With him he had taken a detailed knowledge of the uncountable unwritten treaties among his neighbors, half-settled disputes, low-level political actions. The new fuser, a young girl just out of high school, had been appointed by the Representative of North America's Brooklyn office. She had yet to learn her fellow tenants' names, let alone their myriad subjective agreements. Nevertheless, Ernest saw her as the only authority in their small community.

Her door opened slowly. "Yes?" she asked.

"Hello," said Ernest. "My name's Weinraub. I live upstairs. I was wondering if I could see you for a minute."

The fuser studied his face for a few seconds. She was short, somewhat heavy, with short brown hair and a mottled complexion. Her eyes were red, now; she had been crying. "I guess so, Mr. Weinraub. Come in."

Ernest nodded and went past her into the modapt. "You can call me Ernie. This is an official visit, I suppose, but you're still a neighbor. I want to talk to you about this guy Vladieki. He lives across the hall from me."

"Sit down, Mr. Weinraub. You live in 5G?"

"Right. He lives across the hall. Still, I never see him much, because he stays in most of the time. But he cornered me tonight. I tried telling him off, but he just wouldn't listen. You know how people like him are. Anyway, I'd appreciate it if you'd give him the word. It isn't much of a problem, but I think if you just spoke to him, it would catch the thing early. I'd really appreciate it."

He looked at her. She said nothing. She opened her mouth as if to speak, then began crying. She couldn't stop. "Oh, my God," thought Ernest. "We got a real winner this time." He stood up and went to her chair, making a halfhearted attempt to calm her. He looked around helplessly, sorry that he had knocked on her door in the first place. He couldn't do anything now but wait until she got control of herself.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Weinraub," she said, sobbing. "I don't know, I'm just so scared. I've never been a fuser before. I just got out of school, you know. I've only been here for a little while, and everything's been going along all right, and then tonight, the Representative..." She started crying loudly again. Ernest went back to his seat.

"That's O.K.," he said. "I can understand. I suppose I came at the wrong time. Look, I never got your name."

"Vaurigny," she said, in a low voice. "Brenda Vaurigny." She looked up and took a gulp of air. "How can you worry about that old man? The whole world's coming to an end."

Ernest was suddenly restless. He didn't want to get into a long discussion with this plain, stupid girl. "That might not happen for years yet. Nobody's said anything for certain. I think people are panicking without any cause. When I was a kid, we used to have tornado warnings all the time. I remember hiding in the corner in the basement. I always wanted to see a tornado, but we never had one. In eighteen years we never had a single tornado. But we had so many alerts that we built little recreation rooms in the tornado corners wherever we lived."

"That's different," she said. "That doesn't have anything to do with it. How many times has the Representative announced the end of the world?"

"What do you want?" asked Ernest. "Do you want us all to go crazy? The only way we're going to get through this is to keep our heads. Look at my wife. She's upstairs now being hysterical. It's fine with me if everybody spends the next few days hollering and carrying on, because it'll make it just that much easier for me to save my own neck."

"But what about Mr. Vladieki? Who will take care of *him*?"

"Judy Garland, I suppose. I mean, the Representative said that two hundred and forty-nine people out of every two hundred and fifty are going to be left outside the shelters, hammering on the doors when the time comes. Now, the way I see it, and it may sound cruel, is that with the odds two-fifty to one against

you, you can't afford to be gracious. I can see some poor guy politely holding the door for some girl, and she takes the last place and he's left dead but with a sense of moral superiority."

"You can't decide which people should die. You can't say that Mr. Vladieki ought to be killed, and you ought to be saved."

Ernest smiled. "Show me where it says I can't say that. Anyway, I'm not saying Mr. Vladieki ought to be killed. *He's* saying that. And why shouldn't I say that I ought to be saved? Don't you think you ought to be saved?"

She ran a hand through her tangled hair. "No, I never thought I *ought* to be. I want to, of course, but the Representatives are right in making it a random chance."

"It's not as random as it seems," said Ernest. "The people who end up in the shelters will be the people who worked to get a token. One way or another, they got one. They'll all be survivor types, even though some of their methods may not have been strictly legal. But in the world we're going to end up in, we're going to have to adjust our ways of thinking."

"I'm just scared," she said. "I'm really scared."

"It's all right to be scared. You're supposed to be. But you have to stay on top of it all, at the same time. Think how much easier it will be. You'll have a terrific advantage tomorrow over all the other people. That's what I'm trying to do. I'm just trying to stay cool."

"But you can't," said Brenda.

"We'll see," he said.

She stood up and began pacing about her modapt, nervously moving things around, straightening pictures on the wall. As she walked, she gestured and shook her head, as though illustrating some secret internal monologue, though she said nothing. Ernest turned in his seat, watching her. Seeing her, a fuser, in such a condition of anxiety made him hopeful that the contest for the tokens would be less of a brawl than he had imagined. He felt sad, of course, a little regretful that so many people would be left helpless at the time of the disaster. That was something each survivor would have to live with for the rest of his life. But that was a foolish reason to stop working to get the token; if Ernest didn't get one, then someone else would. There wasn't time for ethical deliberations.

"So, tell me," he said. "What's it like being a fuser?"

Brenda stopped and turned. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"I don't know. I wonder what it's like, hearing everybody's problems all the time, knowing all the gossip, having to put up with all those stupid bastards."

"For God's sake, we're not going to *have* fusers any more! What difference does it make?"

"Stop thinking about it," said Ernest quietly. "We'll always have people like Vladieki. But you're right. We won't have fusers any more. We're going to have to go back to handling all that nonsense ourselves. I didn't think of that before. Hell, it's back to the Stone Age."

"I don't have any place in anything like that," said Brenda.

"You'll make one. You're not any less equipped than the rest of us. You're even better, because you're used to dealing with small problems, details, necessary jobs the rest of us ignore."

"How is that going to get a token for me?" she was getting near hysteria again. Ernest went to her, hoping to avoid another long crying episode. He touched her short, stringy hair. She looked at him questioningly. She started to say something and stopped. He smiled.

"You have to learn to stop worrying," he said. "You're an awfully intelligent woman." His own glib lies shocked him. He hadn't realized how frustrated he was.

"That won't count for much tomorrow. I won't impress anybody enough to get a token. I need to be cruel. I need to learn how to lie and cheat. I have to become those things very quickly, or I'm going to die along with the rest. That's the only way you can win. That's what this world's all about, only it's taken this long for us to get concrete proof."

"You'll be all right, Brenda," said Ernest. "Maybe if you had somebody help you. I mean, somebody you could depend on. When you got tired, he could take over. You ought to ask your boyfriend. You see what I mean? Use your head. Work this out, like it was a problem in school. You have a regular

boyfriend?"

She closed her eyes. A small tear slipped down between her lashes, making a bright, narrow path beside her rather fleshy nose. Ernest smiled to himself; he put his arms around her, meanwhile making small soothing sounds. She held him, tightly in the excess of her fear. When she relaxed a little, he kissed her. She pressed herself against him; he was dismayed by the savagery of her response.

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Meantime C

It can be very difficult living among a conquered people. For Ernst Weintraub, alone in New York City, it was a sobering experience. He knew little English. He knew nothing about the American manner -- what little he had surmised from rumors and popular gossip in Jermany proved to be nothing but impractical exaggeration. He quickly learned to say "frankfurter" and "hamburger," words which carried a weight of ironic amusement; the foods connected with them in no way resembled anything to be found in either of the namesake cities. For many weeks, he was depressed by the arrogant attitude of the people of New York. He was, after all, a representative of the victorious Jerman nation, even though he hated its government more than did the American people themselves. But his mission on behalf of the international Communist establishment was too highly confidential for him to share his secret with even a single person; he remembered that here he was still "the enemy," and he could find no friends.

In order to lose himself among the masses of the city, Weintraub threw away most of his possessions shortly after his midnight landing on the shores of the United States. He wandered the dim streets of New York for several days, his forged papers protection against the newly installed Jerman authorities. He was not questioned, however; his evident Jerman nationality brought him grudging service, for which he was grateful, as he did not wish to draw on his bank account as yet. He became an imitation vagrant. He gave his extra clothing and personal effects to a whiskery old man he saw lying half-conscious in a littered alley. The old man drooled and muttered some uninterpretable phrases. Weintraub merely waved and walked away, unencumbered, independent (in a way), and curious.

Rather than renting an apartment immediately, thereby putting his name on record with the Jerman-Ostamerikan Occupation Authority for Housing and Public Welfare, Weintraub decided to move from one cheap rooming house to another, observing the bottom strata of American life, the classes of people the Communist Party would have to mobilize if the worldwide revolution would have any hope of success. His orders made it clear that he could not contact his superior in America before the first of January, 1920. Until that date, he was supposed to familiarize himself with his new home. He knew that his decision to forego the luxuries his Party's funds could afford would be noted with interest.

One day, Weintraub was walking aimlessly about Greenwich Village. He enjoyed the neighborhood; he knew that it was a focal point for the artists and writers of the city, and for the students as well. The former, in their bohemian decadence, would present a problem of discipline to the Party eventually, though at the moment their unsophisticated enthusiasm helped the Communist workers in their underground programs. The students, of course, were still infected with youthful idealism, a quality which lent itself perfectly to the dissemination of Party precepts. The late adolescents of Ostamerika could be counted on to volunteer the energies of their political artlessness for the benefit of an international brotherhood of workers and intellectuals.

These thoughts comforted Weintraub, even as the objects of his musing avoided him on the sidewalk. He had lived for several weeks in the same grubby suit of clothes. He badly needed a bath and a shave, and his hair was greasy and growing long over his ears. He looked like many other degenerates of the New York streets, a disguise which allowed him surprising liberty in observing the various classes of

American citizens. On this particular morning in the Village, Weintraub was heading across town after spending an uncomfortable night in a filthy hotel on the Lower East Side. As he strolled across Waverly Place, he saw an elderly woman stumble. She had been walking toward him, and then suddenly she just fell. Now she rested on the ground, her legs still on the sidewalk, bent at awkward angles, her upper torso and head over the curb in the street. A brown stream of water running in the gutter formed a broad puddle where it was blocked by her chest and face, then ran swiftly by her hair and along one outstretched arm, to continue toward the sewer. She did not move.

Weintraub was frightened. He knelt by her, not knowing at all what to do. Her face was mottled red, her eyes still open, staring, her mouth contorted in a rather slack, unnatural expression. He lifted her hand; the skin was dry and old. The thought that the old woman might be dead made Weintraub uneasy, and he quickly dropped the arm. It fell limply, making a dull smacking sound as it hit the pavement.

By now, several other pedestrians had gathered nearby. A man bent down and asked Weintraub something, but of course the Jerman youth couldn't understand. The man gave him a suspicious look and reached for the woman's purse. Another man ran down the street, calling for the police. Weintraub stood up slowly, somewhat embarrassed. He wondered if he would be in any sort of trouble. Could he be held in any way responsible? Was there something he should have done for the old woman? Perhaps it looked as if he had tried to rob her. Not understanding English, he didn't know if there had been any other witnesses. Before he could move away from the small crowd, a policeman arrived. Again, Weintraub couldn't understand the questions. *"Ist sie gestorben?"* he asked. The policeman shook his head uncomprehendingly. After a few moments, an ambulance stopped a few yards from the woman's body. The police officer indicated that everyone should move on. Weintraub gratefully took the opportunity to hurry away from the scene. It was the first time he had ever seen a dead person.

The incident gave Weintraub much to think about. He knew that sometimes his own idealism, his own energy could be a hindrance to his aims. He had to be able to do anything the Party demanded, at any time, no matter what his own esthetic or moral promptings might be. Certainly the people of Ostamerika were in no great way different than his own folk in Frachtdorf. This discovery, naive as it seems, caused no little anxiety for him. He had come across the ocean, fully expecting to meet a nation of strange, barbaric people, among whom he could work in a subversive manner with no thoughts for their nature, either as a political state or masses of individuals. But living among them he had to realize that they were only people, and could not in any way be dismissed with rhetorical abstractions. No doubt the Party, in its wisdom, had ordered him not to contact his superior immediately for just this reason; he was supposed to walk the streets of New York, and thereby learn whether or not he could carry out his mission.

The very humanity of the American people decided him. Rather then flee back to Jermany, disillusioned and shattered, he resolved that he must carry out the Party's program. He loved the Americans. He had to help them find their own salvation.

The spring passed, and the summer. Weintraub decided that it was about time to begin establishing his proper identity. He went to the Ostamerikanische Bank Deutschlands, presented his identification to a rather skeptical official, and withdrew enough money to set himself up. He went first to a barber and had himself groomed in the conservative style of the day. Then he purchased two fine suits and the necessary effects. The salesman in the clothing store took Weintraub's old, reeking garments reluctantly, removing them to a trash can on the sidewalk as though they carried plague. Now Weintraub looked and felt like a respectable member of the Jerman community. Using his influence, real and implied, he soon found himself an excellent apartment at a much reduced monthly rent. Another meeting with his banker resulted in a satisfactory temporary job, working as a civilian typist for the administrative staff of the Jerman military forces in Ostamerika.

In these few months, Weintraub had learned enough English so that he could make himself understood in most common daily situations. He had studied the Americans' habits and customs, and for the most part found them intriguing. There was a childlike preoccupation with entertainment -- books, plays, films, sports -- that was entirely foreign to him, and, after his rather strict upbringing, very attractive. He found

that of all the exotic influences he experienced in New York, nothing delighted him more than the purely American game of baseball. There was a luxury to it -- an unhurried, relaxed, yet thoroughly strenuous and dramatic tension quite unlike European soccer football. Weintraub spent several Saturday and Sunday afternoons watching the New York Yankees play. He learned the general rules of the game slowly, through observation. He marveled at the delicate control of the pitchers, the skill and cunning of the batters, the amazing reflexive abilities of the fielders. With the sun warm, the sky blue overhead, the grass of the outfield an unflawed green, and the lazy, infrequent motions of the men on the playing field, Weintraub felt closer to the spirit of the nation he had come to study.

Weintraub couldn't help but make some friends, both at his new job and in the neighborhood where he lived. But he was always careful not to become too closely involved with any one person; he knew that his orders might cause future disappointments, and, also, it was always possible that someone he met casually could turn out to be a dangerous enemy of his work and that of the Party. For these reasons, Weintraub was cautious in his public activities and his private affairs; he joined no political organizations, no local community service groups, made no religious affiliations -- which, as a loyal Communist, he had renounced years ago -- that might attract notice.

Still, there were a few people whose company he enjoyed often. There was a young secretary in Weintraub's office whom he escorted out several times, once to a production of *Up in Mabel's Room* (of which Weintraub understood little, his English not being strong enough to follow the witty lines of the farce; but the point was clear, and both he and the girl enjoyed themselves despite the language problem), to a concert of the Chambermusic Society of Cologne (which bored them both), and to various lectures sponsored by the Jerman-American Mutual Cultural Exchange (from which they escaped during the intermission). And, after a time, Weintraub found another Jerman expatriate who enjoyed baseball as much as he, and the two young men made a regular ritual of attending all the remaining Yankee home games.

After the baseball season ended, Weintraub's life and the year itself took a somber tone. A few months remained before he could take up his serious activity. He began to feel abandoned and useless, living in an alien environment, alone, directionless, and forgotten. The autumn came in cold and rainy, and for the first time Weintraub experienced attacks of pure regret. He thought about how lovely October was near Gelnhausen; the towering buildings of New York were beginning to lose their fascination, becoming mere grimy testaments to his isolation. The newly founded newspaper, the New York *Daily News*, reported that the Yankees had purchased the contract of Babe Ruth, the young pitching and hitting star of the Boston Red Sox. This piece of news thrilled Weintraub for a short time, until he recalled how long it would be until he could see that famous athlete in a New York uniform; by that time, only the Party chiefs could say where Weintraub might be.

January 1, 1920, began gray and cold. Weintraub awoke feeling the effects of a prolonged anxiety attack. At last he would learn just what the Party expected of him. His period of adjustment was over, whether he was prepared or not. He felt that he had adequately assimilated much of what the American attitude had to offer. He knew that he understood the people of that proud though defeated land much better than the political theorists of the Jerman colonial staff. It was time to be of service to his Party and, through it, to all oppressed peoples in all nations. That seemed like more of an assignment than he was capable of fulfilling, at least on this morning.

The trip to the New York headquarters of the Party was unpleasant. The weather was bad -- a damp, chilly day that spoiled much of the New Year's celebration. He arrived at Herr Elsenbach's office depressed and worried. His field director greeted him gruffly.

"Please be seated," said Elsenbach after shaking hands with Weintraub. "I must get to know you, eh? You are from Jermany recently?"

"Yes, sir. Frachtdorf, near Gelnhausen. Several months ago."

"So. And you worked there for the Party?"

"Yes, I was a Youth Leader in the underground cell."

"Very good. Herr Schneck spoke very highly of you. I will expect much. The Party will expect even

more."

Weintraub only smiled and stared past Elsenbach's shoulder, out the window overlooking the great park. There was silence in the room for a moment or two, and then Elsenbach stood up from behind his desk and went to a large map on the wall. "So," he said, "let us begin. Listen well. This is perhaps all of the briefing and indoctrination you can expect.

"Here we have Jermany. After the war ended, and the treaty terms ratified, our boundaries were extended thusly, the red line here. Our armies, you will recall, were exhausted. From all fronts they were pulled back within the borders of Jermany herself. *Except* for the divisions of General von der Goltz in these areas of the Baltic. Ebert and his republican henchmen feared Russia, and feared even more the very real possibility of a wave of Bolshevism sweeping out of Russia and carrying away the weakened Jerman nation."

"It might well have happened," said Weintraub. "With any kind of fortune."

Elsenbach paused briefly, disturbed by the interruption. "Of course," he said at last, "of course, Russia demanded that von der Goltz be withdrawn from her territory. Russia realized that he was drawing a force from Jerman colonists in the Baltic and certain anti-Communist Russian generals to overthrow the new Soviet regime. This revolutionary army, unofficially backed by the Jerman government, intended to restore the imperial czarist rule. Berlin felt that von der Goltz was an effective buffer between Jermany and the Bolsheviks, and might stave off the Communist threat until Jermany recovered her economic and political head. Therefore, he was not recalled for some time. We in the Party believed that von der Goltz actually wasn't a serious threat to the Communist government of Russia; what could he do that Napoleon and all his armies could not?

"We felt that he was actually building a bridge between Jermany and Russia, that while originally he was planning for the downfall of Communism in both countries, after his removal his machinery and organization could be retreaded and used for the greater benefit of the Party. Russia had two revolutions: in February, to depose the czar, and in October, the final victory of the Party. Our 'February' revolution had already occurred, when the Kaiser was compelled to abdicate. But, somehow, we have missed our chance. The final stroke was never made, and the democratic government in Berlin has held itself together long enough to dissipate our threat and disenchant our membership. We are no longer a potential power in Jermany. We are underground again."

"It is the only way that I understand," said Weintraub.

Elsenbach looked at him closely. "That is not necessarily a positive recommendation. Why are you doing this? You would undermine your own homeland?"

Weintraub was silent for a few seconds. "Yes."

"You may eventually be found out. Then your only fate is to be hanged as a traitor."

"This I recognize and accept."

Elsenbach turned away from him and looked out the window at the heavy rain which had begun to fall. "You are very much a fool," he said.

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CHAPTER 6

It had begun to rain by the time Ernest left the mod-apt building. It was about half past eleven; the warmth and freshness of the morning had been replaced by a chill, depressing drizzle. The sky seemed very close overhead, as drifts of cloud and smog tumbled toward Long Island. There were still very few people out. Ernest was surprised by the quiet of the night. The buses had not returned to a normal schedule, and there was little passenger car traffic. The usual parade of delivery trucks had been

canceled by the Representative. "That disaster of his better happen soon," thought Ernest. "If it doesn't, we're going to starve here waiting for it." He walked along Flatbush Avenue, listening to the lonely sound of pebbles and grit crunching beneath his shoes.

Most of the small stores and offices along Flatbush were now burned-out buildings, their fronts boarded up, old metal signs now hanging loosely, swinging out over the sidewalk with sudden creaks. There were a few *grocerias*, a few liquor shops, and a strange number of travel agencies still alive, although all of them had closed early on this special day. They may as well have been burned-out, too; pretty soon Flatbush Avenue would join the Roman Forum and the Cambodian jungle temples as a place to come and stare at, to pretend some kind of sad nostalgia, to abandon again after a brief visit.

Ernest wasn't really afraid. He was rather proud of himself for that. It was obvious from the deserted streets that everyone else was home being afraid, just like Gretchen, just like the fuser (Brenda something, her name was. He wondered what she'd be like under normal circumstances. She wasn't too bad when she was just about to die). Ernest had a wary regard for the situation, an honest anxiety, perhaps. But he wouldn't go as far as to say it was fear. After all, here he was, walking around, right out in it all, trying to come to terms with it. *He* wasn't home cowering.

Could it be like this all over the world? It was quite likely that each Representative had made the same speech, had given the same executive order, and created the same helpless, apprehensive response. Ernest began to understand why so few people were with him, walking the stinking, littered sidewalks, searching for the very clue that would save their lives. It was because they didn't have enough imagination. It was Ernest's creative fancy that would rescue him, he knew.

"All right," thought Ernest, "to give her the benefit of the doubt, let's try to figure out what precisely is making Gretchen act the way she is. Well, she sees herself dead. That's a reasonable thing to be afraid of. But I see the same possibility for myself. We all have, ever since childhood. So she sees herself dead *soon*. O.K., I understand that; and again, so do I. I may not get a token, after all. I'll worry about that when the time comes. But the difference between her and me is in the details of what we imagine. Gretchen sees herself dead, and nothing else. Lying all twisted up on the ground. She doesn't even know how it'll happen, and she has no curiosity. The worst thing about the situation for her is that she won't get a proper funeral. And the real sinker is that there won't be anybody crying over her coffin. She's probably been looking forward to that for years. That's how she was going to make everybody feel sorry, at last. And now the Representatives have robbed her of her single moment of attention; the grand climax of her worthless life, lost now among ten billion identically mere droppings dead."

It seemed a petty response to the situation, but the more he considered it, the more perfectly it fit his wife. He knew Gretchen very well, after all; he knew her reactions to stress. If she had had a livelier imagination, she wouldn't have stopped at paralysis; like himself, he thought, she would have visualized so many of the possible outcomes that each would have negated the other, until there was nothing left to fear, no real problem greater than anything one faced each day, anyway....

Ernest stooped to pick up a chunk of brick. It was small, rough, slimy with mud. He bounced it in his hand a couple of times as he walked. He made a pitching motion, pretending to throw the brick through a storefront window. A metal gate was drawn protectively over the window, but Ernest didn't really want to smash it, anyway. He saw a car abandoned on the sidewalk, its four wheels missing, its doors hanging open. The car had a particularly violated appearance, a deeply personal and ugly look. It made Ernest think of the fuser. The windshield and rear windows had been shattered already. He would have liked to have thrown something through them.

He stopped beneath a tall streetlamp. Most of the old yellow globes on Flatbush had long since died, but a few still glowed, providing the neighborhood with an uncomfortable, sickly light. Ernest stared up at the flickering lamp. He weighed the brick in his hand, judged the proper trajectory, stepped back a few feet, and threw. The brick sailed high above the target and landed several yards away. Ernest grinned and spat. He retrieved the brick, or one like it, and tossed it again. Once more he missed.

"O.K., you," called a voice from across the street. "Come on over here." Ernest turned around, startled. A police officer was yelling at him from a cruiser. Ernest shrugged and obeyed.

"Look," said the cop, "you was throwing a rock at that lamp, weren't you?"

Ernest was surprisingly relaxed; in situations like this, he generally felt giddy and dreamlike, nervously separated from the threats of trouble. "Yeah," he said, "I was. I didn't hit nothing, though."

"No," said the officer slowly. "That isn't the point, you know."

"I know that. You can still get me for attempted light breaking or something. But you wouldn't want to put me in jail tonight."

The second cop in the cruiser leaned across the seat. He was young, and he looked crazy to Ernest. "So why wouldn't we?" he asked.

"The Representative," said Ernest. "You heard the announcement, didn't you?" The first policeman nodded. "I wonder if maybe you cops are getting special treatment. Are they slipping you heroes free shelter tokens in your paycheck?"

"Not that I've heard," said the first cop quietly.

"I want to know why we can't break the guy's ass," said the second officer.

Ernest smiled. "I figured it out before, while I was walking. See, you take me in and book me. Then you have to keep me overnight, right? But in the morning, everybody's going to be out scrounging for tokens. Except me, because I'm locked up. So I don't get one, and come the big bang, I die screaming and clutching my throat. And afterward, when you come out of the bunkers and the birds are singing again and the rainbow pops through the clouds, they'll get you for cruel and unusual punishment. So you can't take me in."

"I wouldn't be bothered, anyhow," said the first policeman.

"I would," said his partner.

"On your own time," said the first man. He nodded to Ernest. "Lots of luck," he said. "See you inside, maybe." Then the cruiser drove slowly away.

"In that case," said Ernest to himself, "I'll have to watch out for myself tonight. Suddenly everybody is faced with questions of deep moral significance. Right now we're staring into the face of death and darkness, and you can't expect people to lie easy after that. There should be a lot of brick throwing tonight. And a lot of cops with the safeties off."

It was getting even colder; low smog hung in swatches, hiding the flicker-lit skyline of Manhattan. Ernest shoved his hands into his pockets, walking hunched over against the gusty wind. He kicked chunks of brick and broken bottles out of his path, imagining the sound of each one crashing through the windshield of a police car or the great, green window in the front office of Jennings' factory. Ernest laughed, thinking of what poor old Jennings was doing now, his meager empire made no smaller by events, merely pointless.

"He's just a harmless old guy," Sokol had said once. "He can't help it if he's the apex of a considerable industrial pyramid. You can't pick your parents, you know. And his family had lots of money, that's all. Once you get a certain amount of money in this world, it's nearly impossible for you to avoid making more." Sokol had smiled, and Ernest had laughed skeptically.

"Jennings, the voltmeter king," said Ernest. "Jennings, the breakfast food king. Jennings, the toasted metal plate king. God only knows what else he does."

"Jennings?" said Sokol, surprised. "You ought to know better than that. He doesn't do anything. I doubt if he's done anything at all in the last fifty years. That includes normal bodily functions, too. You never saw a sourer face on anybody in your life. But he's got money."

"Yeah," said Ernest. "He's got money."

The two men were silent for a few seconds, waiting for the hands on the timeclock to mark quitting time so they could punch out. "Wouldn't you think that somebody with his money would do something with it?" asked Ernest. "You know, build parks or something?"

"Where you going to build a park? Tear down some apartment buildings, huh? We could just pave over all of Brooklyn and make it a parking lot for Manhattan."

"That's not what I mean, wise-ass. Okay, forget the park. But rich guys always used to give money for public things. They used to get libraries named after them and stuff."

Sokol nodded. "All right, Weinraub, you political baby, let me tell you why they don't give away their millions any more. Because it doesn't get them anything. There weren't ever many people who donated their fortunes because they loved humanity, you know. We haven't changed *that* much. It's just that we working-class types used to be operated by the tycoons as a tax loss. But the Representatives, in their omnipotent mystery, have taken that kind of advantage away from the rich."

"The Representatives get it all. They get all mine, anyway."

"They get mine, too," said Sokol. "And they get Jennings'. There just isn't any way for anyone to score points. Not big business, not labor, not even the military. The Representatives have made us all equal."

"That's terrific," said Ernest. "Let's go home."

Now, hours after the Representative had gone on television, solemnly to announce his regret at their coming annihilation, Ernest wished that he had listened to Sokol. For months the foreman had tried to teach him how things stood, how the Representative ran everything down to the lowest level, to the extent that even someone as invisible as Sokol had actually not the slightest room for initiative. North America had become a nation of redundants; the world, the entire population of continents was basically meaningless now. In more cynical moods, Ernest realized that humanity was always meaningless; all that the Representatives had done was put that condition in a more efficient frame. Today, everyone wasted his time and resources to the same ends; only the Representatives and their anonymous associates made decisions, and they made them all. And only the Representatives shared the rewards.

"Maybe Sokol was right after all," said Ernest. He walked back toward his modapt building. It was getting late. He wouldn't have said that he was especially worried, but then he was rarely objective about his own moods; he knew that he would have to get a good night's sleep. There would be a real battle in the morning. He couldn't afford to get a late start; everything might well be over within a half hour after the token stations opened. "Maybe Sokol was right after all," said Ernest. "Maybe we are only toys in the hands of the Representatives. Not even rich old Jennings could buy himself a token now. That's a nice thought. Maybe Sokol was right."

A bright neon sign caught his attention: *Bar's Mike and Grill*. Ernest stopped and looked in; Mike was behind the bar and Suzy was leaning against its nearer end. The place was dimly lit, but Ernest could see a couple of the regulars sitting on the stools. The scene cheered him immediately. It was good to know that, no matter what kind of catastrophe threatened, there was something unconquerable about the human spirit and the need for beer. He pushed open the heavy door and went in.

"Hey, Mike," he said.

"Say, Ernie," said the bartender. "Nice to see you. Come join the wake. We're ringing out the old, ringing in the nothing."

"Hey, Ernie," said one old whiskery man, very drunk, very shabby.

"Hey, Eagle," said Ernest. He took a stool next to the old drunk.

"Ah, wine. There's the rub," said the Eagle. It was his inevitable pun on Ernest's name. Ernest laughed shortly, dutifully. "We're making up a team, to get them slugs."

"It was his idea," said the bartender. "To all work together tomorrow. We'd stand a better chance that way."

"And we could all wear *Bar's Mike and Grill* bowling shirts, too," said one of the other patrons. "And every time we didn't get a token, we'd chip in a quarter, and at the end of the day we could have an awards banquet."

"Very funny," said Eagle bitterly. "Some people still think this is all an advertising gimmick or something."

"I hear they're going to have breath tests at the shelters," said the same regular. "They don't want no winos getting in."

"All right, Moran, that's enough," said Mike. The owner turned to Ernest. "So how are you tonight? Want something to stun the butterflies? I'll bet Gretchen is really giving it to you tonight."

"You don't know," said Ernest. "Let me just have a beer, O.K.? And some change. I want to call my father." He took the beer and the money and went to the public telephone in the back of the room. He

noticed that Suzy followed him. He dropped a quarter into the phone and punched his father's number. An operator interrupted and demanded another seventy-five cents. Ernest put the rest of the dollar into the coin slots and waited. He heard a lot of static, some distant voices having their own anxious conversation, and then a raucous busy signal.

"I'm sorry," said a woman's tinny voice, "the long-distance lines are all busy. Please hang up and try again later. This is a recording. Two-one-two-four-three. I'm sorry, the..."

"Aw, hell," said Ernest, "she ain't sorry."

"Who ain't?" asked Suzy.

"Nothing. Let me buy you a drink." She smiled; their whole relationship had lost its commercial and historical basis, but they still went through the motions. Perhaps they couldn't help it, plugged into the roles with no time for developing alternatives. There certainly wasn't any place in the world for unambitious b-girls, not since early that afternoon. Ernest realized suddenly why Mike had given him the beer on the house: the bartender expected that the bank would be closed in the morning, to phrase it euphemistically. Nevertheless, the telephone company was still collecting its rates. That was a sign of confidence that Ernest found peculiarly unpleasant, more so than the black humor and irony of the bar's resident souls.

"You don't have to do that," said Suzy. "You may never have to buy me a drink again."

"I hope I do," said Ernest. "I intend to get through it all unscratched. And you will, too. Somebody with your talents will be valuable after all this is over. I'd rather have you around than the six best dentists in the world." She laughed.

They went back to the stools and sat down. Eagle muttered to himself, and then went to sleep, his head resting in a sparkling smear of beer on the countertop. "Reality is the spice of life," said one of the others. Ernest got a free beer for himself and one for Suzy. Mike joined them. They drank and they talked for a while.

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Meanwhile 3

"A poem," thought Ernst. "I need a poem. Nothing impresses the uneducated mind quite like rhymes. But it must be the right sort, or it will bring nothing but ruin and humiliation. How they used to laugh at my romantic verses! How dismayed I was, left alone on the darkened balcony, holding the flimsy product of my innocent wit. The sonnet on the arch of her brow. Good God, how could I have done it? I wish I could return, go back to those iron moments, stand behind a curtain and listen to myself. I wonder if I would be amused. I cannot understand why those brainless princesses so easily dismissed me; they couldn't have been so plagued with clowns. I ought to have been kept as a refreshing antidote to dawning maturity."

He took out a pen and began to compose on the back of a soiled napkin. The atmosphere of the *Fée Blanche* was not the best for the generation of poetry, he realized. But he also understood that the unknown recipient of his craft would be more awed by the fact of the poem than by any singular verbal charm. Surely no friend of Ieneth's could be sophisticated enough to appreciate anything but the grossest of street chants. In that case, all that was required was a quick, simple collection of lines, without attention to musical values, arranged visually in a recognizably poetic way. The ink from the fountain pen blotted on the napkin, spreading quickly and obscuring each letter, obliterating all sense and intention. Ernst cursed and crushed the paper into a ball, tossing it to the floor.

"My life would have been greatly different, Eugenie, if this had happened while I loved you. If I had only known enough to keep my mouth closed, to express myself only in abstract looks and gestures, so

that it all might be disowned quickly as worldly nonsense. Wisdom does not necessarily come with age, only silence. And that is the greatest treasure of all." He returned his pen to his pocket and called for M. Gargotier.

In the time it took for Ernst to drink two more bowls of the warm dark Arabic beer, the parade had ended. The crowd broke up, shouting new slogans which Ernst could not understand. The other patrons finished their drinks and departed, and the café was again empty except for its single poet. The sun had marked noon and now, hotter still, moved down the sky just enough to hurt his eyes as he looked westward across the street.

"West," thought Ernst, rocking restlessly in his chair. "What absurd, boring thoughts can I think about that to help pass this hour? One day after another. It gets to be so tedious. I should begin walking through this rancid city, through the wealthy sections clustered here about this square, through the more populated tradesmen's quarter, through the filthy paupers' streets, past the noisy, dangerous rim of utter human refuse just within the walls, out the western gate and across the dunes. Then what? Then I'd die in about twelve hours, crisped by the sun of noon, chiseled by the windborne sand, frozen by *Barid*, the cold wind of night. Westward, toward the Atlantic, toward England and her debauched civilities. West, the direction of death, decay, finality, and poetic conclusions. Into Avalon. Perhaps if it weren't for Ieneth and her sly, snickering hints, I would wander off that way. Pack a picnic lunch, perhaps, and bake myself dead upon a hill of sand. I always dreamed of a heroic death, defending Eugenie's recurring honor, or fighting for Marie's bemused favor. Gasping, I'd lie upon the specified lap and she'd weep; her tears would restore my fleeing mortality. Then I'd smile, as would Eugenie or Marie in her proper turn, amazed and joyful. A signal that would be for me to begin the dream anew. Another way of getting through the hours, though much too unfulfilling for my present needs."

Ernst watched the clock on the hotel impatiently. The pedestrians moved by in their aimless courses, and each ticked off a few seconds on the yellow clockface. But the traffic could not beguile Ernst's furious expectation, and was too sluggish to move the clock's rigid hands quickly enough.

It was while Ernst was silent in thought, staring at the damned clock, lost in his own strange anticipatory horror that someone moved a chair to his table and joined him. He looked up, startled. The stranger was a tall, thin Polish man named Czerny, a wealthy man who had come to the city a political refugee, and who had made his fortune by teaching the city's hungry inhabitants to require the luxuries of Europe. Ernst had been introduced to Czerny a few times, but neither had been overly taken with the other's company.

"Good afternoon, Monsieur Weintraub," said Czerny. "Although there are a number of tables free, I have preferred to join you. I hope you will forgive my rather forward behavior."

Ernst waved away the apology, more curious about Czerny's motives. He did realize that the blond man was the founder of the *Gaish*, the Citizens' Army, and its principal financial support. His appearance after the parade was not mere happy chance.

"I'd like to speak with you for a moment, if I may, M. Weintraub," said Czerny.

"That's Weinraub, without the 't'. Certainly. Would you care for a drink?"

Czerny smiled his commercial smile. "No, thank you. This new religion of mine doesn't allow it. But look, M. Weinraub, I wonder if you realize the service you could render, in the time you spend idly here?"

Ernst was slightly annoyed. Surely Czerny wanted something, and his patronizing attitude wasn't going to help him get it. "What service do you mean, Monsieur Czerny? I doubt if I have anything that you might envy?"

"It is your talent. As you know, the *Gaish* is still small in numbers, even smaller in resources. I have been doing my limited best to help, but for our purposes even all my savings would be too little."

Ernst finished half a bowl of liquor in one swallow. He raised his hand for M. Gargotier. "What are those purposes?" he asked.

"Why, liberty for all, of course," said Czerny, disappointed that Ernst had need to ask. "We distribute leaflets at all parades. Surely you've seen them."

"Yes," said Ernst, "but not read them."

"Ah. Well, then. Perhaps if they were composed in better style...."

"Might I ask who has the task now?"

"A young man of great promise," said Czerny proudly. "Sandor Courane."

Ernst leaned back, lifting the front legs of his chair off the pavement. "M. Czerny," he said slowly, "that is very interesting, but I must embarrassedly admit that you have chosen an inopportune time for this interview. This afternoon I have something of an assignation, and so..." Ernst settled his chair, smiled drunkenly, and shrugged.

Czerny looked angry. He rose from his seat. "M. Weintraub, I will return later. I believe it is time that you considered such matters as duty and honor. Perhaps this evening you will be more of a mind to discuss this thing. Good day, and have a gratifying... assignation."

"Weinraub," whispered Ernst, as Czerny strode away down the sidewalk. "Without the 't'."

Czerny walked swiftly along the eastern edge of the square until he came to a parked limousine. It was one of the very few automobiles in the city; Ernst did not doubt that it was Czerny's private car. The driver got out and handed Czerny a gray uniform coat, taking the wealthy man's more expensively cut jacket in return. "Ah," thought Ernst, "at least I rated a change of clothing. We shall see whether or not the same thing happens this evening. It is sad that the scheme of great men may be deciphered by such paltry tokens." Czerny put on his uniform coat and waited until the driver opened the rear door of the limousine for him. Then he entered; the driver walked around the car and disappeared inside. In a moment the vehicle moved slowly away from the curb, its siren crying shrilly and the pennants of the *Gaish* whipping in the breeze. The car drove down the length of the square, turned along the north side, and went on for a short distance. Then it stopped again, while Czerny spoke with two figures on the sidewalk. From that distance Ernst could not recognize them.

"If I were you, Czerny," he thought, "I would not involve myself too deeply with the people of this city. There is always the danger that you may find people to like or, most deadly of all, to love. What should you do, having fallen in love with some rare lady, and then find yourself betrayed? Ah, I anticipate your outraged answer. We are both too far along to have that happen to us again. Perhaps you are right, though one can never be too careful. But what if you are not betrayed, eh, Czerny? What then? No final demarcations, however painful. You have forgotten that. Nothing to chop it off before weariness sets in. Lifetimes go by that way, Czerny. Boredom and angry frustration are only the first symptoms. No mistresses for you, no wives, no playful daughters of police commissioners. We find that we need them, sooner or later. And that is the first of the body's spasms of death. Years, years, years in this city, with the same faces, yours and hers. Years, years, years. Do not stop for them, Czerny. Tend to your army." Czerny's car drove on, and after a few moments Ernst saw that one of the two people walking toward him was the girl Ieneth.

With her was another girl, taller and darker. When they approached, Ernst rose from his chair by the railing, and the two girls joined him at his table. M. Gargotier, evidently expecting that Ernst would soon depart, did not come to take an order; he stood glaring in the bar's doorway, obviously resenting the presence of the two lower-class women. Ernst made a flamboyant gesture to summon' the proprietor. He switched his drinking to absinthe, and the girls ordered wine.

"What is her name, Ieneth?" he asked, staring at the new girl. She looked shyly at the table.

"She is called Ua," said Ieneth. "In her language, it means 'flower.' She does not understand our speech."

"How lovely her name, and how charming she is. Truly a flower. Convey to her my sincerest compliments." Ieneth did so. "What language is that?" asked Ernst.

"It is a strange dialect, spoken by the black people beyond the desert and the mountains. It is called Swahili."

"Black people?" asked Ernst. "How interesting. I have only heard stories. They actually exist?"

"Yes, *akkei*," said Ieneth.

"And how did she learn the tongue? And you, also, for that matter?" Ieneth closed her eyes, fluttering

her painted lashes, and smiled.

Ernst turned to Ua. "What is this called in your language?" he said, pointing to her foot. Ieneth translated, and Ua replied.

"*Mguu*," she said.

"And this?" said Ernst, pointing to her ankle.

"*Kifundo cha mguu*,"

"What is this?"

"*Jicho*." Eye.

"How do you say 'mouth'?"

"*Kinywa*."

Ernst sipped his drink nervously, although he labored to seem casual and urbane. "This?" he asked.

"*Mkono*." Arm.

"This?" Ernst's fingers lingered on her breast, feeling the rough material of the brassiere beneath the cotton blouse.

Ua blushed. "*Kifua*," she whispered.

"She is indeed very lovely," Ernst said.

"And worthy of reward for her, ah, agent?" asked Ieneth.

"Certainly," said Ernst absently, as he moved his hand down past Ua's stomach, stopping at the seductive curve of her pudendum. "Now, my love, what could this be?"

Ua said nothing, staring at the table. She blushed fiercely while she played with the base of her wineglass.

"Ask her what the word for this is," he said. Ieneth did so.

"*Mkunga*" Ua said at last, removing Ernst's hand.

Ieneth laughed stridently, clapping her hands. Tears ran down her cheeks as she rose from her seat. "Ah, the 'cosmopolitan tastes!'" she said.

"What is so amusing?" asked Ernst.

"*'Mkunga'!*" said Ieneth. "*'Mkunga'* is the word for 'eel.' Oh, enjoy your hour, *akkei*! You and 'she' will have much to discuss!'" And she went out of the café, laughing as she walked away from Ernst's disconcerted and savage glare.

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CHAPTER 7

"Maybe you ought to stop, now," said Mike the bartender. "I think I want to close up soon. We're all going to have to be up early."

"One more," said Ernest. "One more beer won't hurt me. Anyway, what's going to happen to all that beer? The building will cave in on it tomorrow night. It won't be any good to anybody. We might as well drink it up."

"If I have to go," said Suzy, "I might as well go with a hangover."

"All right," said Mike. "One more. But it's almost two o'clock."

There were only the three of them left in the bar. They sat together, drinking the beer, thinking, not saying very much. Everyone else had gone home, hoping a few hours of rest would prepare them for the morning.

"Why don't I open up some of the good stuff, then?" asked Mike. "I hate to see all that private stock go to waste."

"We can't drink everything," said Ernest.

"I don't want to get sick or pass out," said Suzy. "Or maybe I do."

"You could sleep through the whole thing that way," said Ernest.

"A pleasant way to meet your Maker," said Mike.

They were silent once again. Suzy seemed particularly nervous; Ernest wondered where she would spend the night. He wished that she could come home with him. More than likely she would break a longstanding custom and go with Mike. She certainly wasn't worried about losing a paying customer tonight, and she looked in need of a sympathetic friend.

"Well, that's about it," said Mike.

"What did you have in mind?" asked Ernest.

"Oh, just about everything," said Mike.

"You know what I wish?" asked Suzy. "I wish they'd tell me what's going to happen and when. Maybe they will tomorrow night. It makes me think it'll be messy and ugly, instead of a nice, clean wipe-out."

"Doctors do that," said Ernest. "Right before they do something that hurts. They won't ever say where or when, though."

"It's humane," said Mike.

"No, it's not," said Suzy.

"I want to go home," said Mike. "Come on. Let me turn off the lights and lock up." He laughed. "I don't know why. In case, maybe." He followed Ernest and Suzy out of the bar and closed the front door. They said good-bye to each other; Ernest turned and walked toward his building. He didn't look back to see whether Suzy went home with Mike.

"This may well be the last night of my life," thought Ernest. He looked upward; the sky was still covered by low-hanging clouds. "I ought to be bidding everything farewell. Say good-bye to the stars. Say good-bye to the moon. Say good-bye to the beer."

There were few lights shining. The modapt buildings were all dark, locked, closed up for the remaining hours of life. No cars passed him on the street. He heard nothing but his own noise and the dead, abandoned sounds of wind, broken glass, aluminum cans rattling along the sidewalk, newspaper sheets gusting and rustling. There was nowhere to go now but back home, back home to Gretchen, back to bed and sleep and a bad awakening. It had taken him several hours, but at last he admitted that he was terrified. He was even more frightened than Gretchen; as usual, he had tried to push the trouble out of his mind, but this particular problem wouldn't be pushed. Now, after his few desperate encounters, there wasn't the smallest shred of anything to disguise his fear. He stopped suddenly on the sidewalk. There was *no one* to help him through this crisis. He leaned against a building and vomited.

He walked on, awkwardly, with his hands folded in front of him. "God," he thought, "I suppose you're getting a lot of people praying all of a sudden. A lot of people like me, who haven't been praying very much. I'm not going to tell you what I want. You know what. And I'm not going to promise that I'll be any better, because you know what I'm like. But I'm sorry. I'm real sorry." He was crying. He felt a tear dangling on the tip of his nose. The tickle irritated him; he swiped it off angrily. "This is goddamn stupid," he said aloud. "Yeah, if I get out of this alive, I'll build a goddamn cathedral right here on this spot."

He remembered Eileen, the secretary from the Jennings Corporation. He wondered what she was doing, how she was reacting to the situation. "She's probably home now," thought Ernest, "asleep in bed, dressed in a long flannel nightgown with blue flowers on it. She probably set her alarm for seven-thirty, giving herself half an hour to get up, brush her teeth, eat a bowl of cereal, and get out. She'll hunt for her token like she was getting a new floor lamp at Abraham & Straus. If she finds a token booth, she'll probably think it's too crowded, and go off to look for another one.

"Eileen, it just wasn't right, thank God. The whole time I was trying to get your skirt off, I knew doggone well it was a bad idea. You would have started coming by the sub-assembly area on strange, make-believe errands. You would have touched me on the arm or the neck all the time. You would have given me horrible secret smiles. You would have called me at home every day, hanging up quickly if Gretchen answered. And you would always, always be on the verge of laughing or crying, and I can't

stand it when you do either. You see, Eileen, there are two sides to every story. At least a disaster can save you from your own crazy genitals." That was the farewell to Eileen.

"If I had only spent the time better. If I had only listened, I might not be in this lousy thing. Instead of messing around with that secretary, I should have been working on Sokol's notebook. The blue plastic key to the universe. Damned Sokol probably has the location of every New York token station written down in scribbly red ink. Probably knew it all weeks ago. But he wouldn't tell me. I never listened to him, and he knew it. I never believed him; who would? It sounded stupid, to tell the truth. But now both me and Old Man Jennings are in the same boat, and Sokol's standing on the windswept shore, safe and sound, waving to us with a big secure grin on his face, the bastard. I could have invited him over for a beer. I could have helped him find a slot for his modapt. No, I had to be the company idiot. All right, Sokol, you bastard. You and that Italian wife of yours can sit out the fires and the winds, playing canasta, mixed doubles, with the other nice couples in the bunker. You earned it. I wish I could figure out why." That was the farewell to Sokol.

Ernest stood outside the front door to his building. He tottered there, looking up drunkenly at the rows of small, louvered windows. There were no lights, no sounds, only a familiar smell of old garbage. "Welcome home," he muttered. He opened the front door and went through the small foyer. He paused outside the door to Brenda Vaurigny's modapt. He raised his fist to knock, hesitated, then let his hand fall.

"Good night, fuser, whatever your name is," he thought. "We had a good time, didn't we? I brightened your day. I brought a tiny ray of sunshine into your otherwise drab life. I showed you that, even at your worst, with your outside as disheveled and confused as your inside, somebody can want you, as long as he's got a wife like mine and all the cheap lays are home worrying about what to wear tomorrow. It's people like you, whatever your name was, that saved my sanity. I owe you a lot. And I hope, while we're all doing our dying trick tomorrow, that you'll remember me and smile. I wonder what it's like to think that I'm the last person you'll ever do it with. It's weird enough that you're the last for me." That was the farewell to Brenda the fuser.

Ernest staggered to the elevator; it was waiting on the ground floor. "Hooray," he said. It shuddered on its way up to his floor. "Terrific," he thought. "The cable will snap right now. I won't even have to wait until the morning. I wonder how old this thing is." The door slid open slowly, and he stepped out. He stared for a moment at Leonard Vladieki's door.

"You know something, Lance, old buddy?" he thought. "You're probably sleeping better than anybody in this city. In the world. We're all going out tomorrow, just the way we came into this life. Crying. Screaming. With red, twisted-up faces and confused expressions. And we won't know a damn thing more than we did then. You were right, Lance, old pal. So was everybody else. Everybody was right all along about everything. The hell with it." And that was the farewell to Vladieki.

It was dark in Ernest's modapt. It was well after three o'clock. Ernest closed the door quietly. He sat wearily in a chair, his head lolling back, his mouth open, his eyes closed. He had a terrible headache and he was still nauseous. He stood up and looked around. Nothing had changed. He sighed and went to the telephone.

He punched his father's number and got the same recorded message as before. He kept trying; after about fifteen minutes, he heard the preliminary clicks and pops that meant he was getting through to the town in western Pennsylvania where Steve Weinraub, his father, still lived. "Hello?" said Mr. Weinraub, at last.

"Hello, Dad?" said Ernest. "Sorry to call you so late. The lines have been busy all night."

"I can imagine. How are you?"

"All right." There was a long, uncomfortable silence. "You heard the news, I guess," said Ernest.

"Yes, that's all that's been on the television today. I don't suppose they'll have one of those token stations here in this dumb town."

"I don't know," said Ernest. "From what they said, it sounded like they're spreading them out pretty well. There might be one fairly close by. You'll have a better shot at a token than I will. I have to

compete with thirty million people."

"You'll do all right," said Mr. Weinraub. "Look, though, if you have any trouble, and if I manage to get one, I could send..."

"That's silly, Dad. Don't worry about that. I mean, there may not even be time."

"Yes, of course."

"What about Grandpa Ernst?"

"I'm worried about him, Ernie. He's -- what? -- seventy-five, now. I don't know if he can get around any more. He might not even be aware of the situation."

"Maybe that's a good thing."

"Yes. Well, look, when this is all over, give me a call and let me know that you and Gretchen and the baby are all right. If you can make a call. I don't know if the phones will work."

"Everything will be O.K., Dad. Don't worry."

"You're probably right. Well, thanks for thinking about me. All the best of luck to you, and may God bless."

Ernest said good-bye and hung up. That was the farewell to his father.

"Ernie?" It was Gretchen's sleepy, drugged voice.

"Yeah, it's me. Go to sleep."

"Is everything all right?"

"Fine. I'm coming to bed now."

"Ernie, what are we going to do?"

"Simple," said Ernest. "Tomorrow morning I'll get up, and you'll take the baby, and we'll find one of those booths. There's bound to be crowds around them. They can't stay hidden long, can they? There's nothing we can do now."

"Ernie," said Gretchen, "I can't go. You *know I* can't go. I'm pregnant."

"Yeah," he said, staring at her in the dark room. "Yeah, among other things."

"No, really. I can't go out and fight those crowds tomorrow. You do it. You can tell them. Tell them I'm in no shape to go out of the house. And we have a baby, too. They can't expect me to go out like this, and with a baby, yet. They're not that cruel."

"Weren't you listening? I can't get your token for you. Didn't you hear what the Representative said? You have to get your own. They won't let me bring you one. You have to come with me tomorrow."

"Oh, Ernie," said Gretchen, crying. "Ernie, I can't! I just can't! I don't want this! I..."

"Here," said Ernest, "take this. Go back to sleep."

"Will you ask them to give you three?"

"No. You're coming with me."

"No, Ernie, no!"

"You just want to wake up tomorrow, and have everything taken care of for you, right? But it won't be. You have to go out there and get you own damn token. Because I'm getting *mine*, and if you don't want to bother, well, I'm sorry."

"But you'll try? Ask them for three?"

"All right, I'll ask them. For two. I'll take the baby with me."

"Ernie, no! You can't take Stevie out there with all those people. Leave him home with me tomorrow, please? You can't take my baby!"

"Go back to sleep. We'll talk about it in the morning."

That was the farewell to Gretchen. It was the farewell to everyone, and Ernest was grateful.

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Meantime D

A note had been left in Weintraub's mailbox requiring him to meet with his field director, Herr Elsenbach, at his earliest convenience. For Weintraub, this was good news. The early part of 1920 had been very much like the previous months of his stay in Ostamerika. To a certain degree, he was happy; he was glad that he had the opportunity to live a somewhat relaxed life, without any of the onerous political responsibilities he had been prepared to accept. Evidently the Party was content to move slowly, to lay out the ground work of his still-secret mission in a meticulous manner. Nevertheless, Weintraub was growing impatient; he hurried uptown to the Party's headquarters.

"Good day," said Elsenbach warmly when Weintraub arrived. "You received the message, eh? Sit down. Your time of liberty is coming shortly to an end. Does that disappoint you? No?"

"Not at all," said Weintraub. "I feel a little guilty, as a matter of fact. I don't feel that I've adequately repaid the Party's trust."

Elsenbach grunted. "There is no purpose in hurrying things. Always the young want to speed. It is a reason the Jerman nation did so poorly while its defenses held off the Allies."

"It is by no means the only reason," thought Weintraub. But he said nothing.

"So," said Elsenbach. "We have a good file on your activities, of course. I'm sure you will not be surprised to learn that. You may be interested in certain of our findings, naturally."

Weintraub was curious, but still he kept his silence.

"You are frequently in the company of a Herr Rudolf Ketteler, *nicht wahr?*" Weintraub nodded. "It is with him that you attended several sports matches last year, and again this spring. He is a member of the Party, although he has kept his affiliation secret from you at my orders. He is our chief informant concerning your behavior. No, no," said Elsenbach with a laugh, "do not be worried. We are very pleased with what he has reported. Another of your associates has been Fräulein Gretchen Kämmer. She, likewise, is one of our senior operatives in Ostamerika. You have escorted her on many occasions, and your relationship has grown into a very romantic and satisfying attachment. This is no doubt against your original intentions, but quite what the Party had hoped. You will see that your friends have not been chosen by you with precisely the accidental fortune you might have believed."

"I do not question anything," said Weintraub, although he felt a bit resentful of the Party's manipulation.

"I am not sure that I believe that statement completely," said Elsenbach. "But, as it is without importance, we shall move on. Here, at last, are your orders, an outline of your future here in Ostamerika, a scenario of your role within the Party. Study it well. You will work closely with Fräulein Kämmer. She has had much experience along these lines, and will act as your guide and supervisor in my absence."

"I understand."

"Have you any questions, then?" asked Elsenbach.

Weintraub wondered whether Gretchen had meant the things she had said to him in their more private moments, or if everything had been planned by the Party. "I have no questions," he said.

"Then I will merely say that Fräulein Kämmer has confided in me the great love she feels for you. This will make your entire operation a good deal simpler. She shall pose as your wife. I wish you both the best of luck, and may God bless."

"God?" asked Weintraub, with a smile.

"I apologize," said Elsenbach shaking his head sadly. "The habits of a lifetime."

Several hours later, Weintraub had read his orders and tried to comprehend their grand scope. He waited in a dimly lit corner of an expensive Jerman restaurant, sipping imported Pilsner and looking for his new partner. At last he saw her enter. He set down his glass of beer and rose from his seat. "Fräulein Kämmer, how nice you look this evening."

"Gretchen. We will be working together and, under the circumstances, the 'Fräulein' can only waste the Party's time." She smiled.

"It is difficult, speaking to you not as the woman I love, but as a fellow Party member."

"And, in addition, I am now your wife. Have you eaten?"

"Yes," said Weintraub. "A late lunch."

"And I have no hunger at all."

"Well, then!" said Weintraub. "Let us leave this restaurant for a place more suitable. *Mein schönes Fräulein, darf ich wagen / Meinen Arm und Geleit Ihr anzutragen?*"

"Goethe?"

"Yes."

"And Margarete's reply? 'I'm not your maid, nor am I fair / And for your arm I do not care.'"

"But the Party insists!" said Weintraub.

"Yes," said Gretchen, laughing, "for the Party!"

An hour later, while sipping wine, they discussed their related missions. They talked about the danger of being uncovered as Communist agents. As such, they would not be safe anywhere within Jerman Ostamerika, or in California which, though independent, was on strong economic and political terms with Jermany. Safety was possible only in the huge and sparsely settled Western Territories, which began abruptly on the farther bank of the Mississippi.

"So," said Gretchen, "we two are the conspiracy."

"Yes," said Weintraub. "A great responsibility. What faith the Party must have in us."

"I am certain that Herr Elsenbach knows what he is doing."

"Perhaps. But organizing such a widespread and pervasive operation is much more complex than, say, running weekly meetings for the hoodlums of Frachtdorf."

"*Naja*, you undervalue yourself."

"I don't know. The job is so large. And so is yours."

"I must corrode the moral fiber of the American youth."

"By yourself, Gretchen? How will you do it?"

She laughed. "I have a notebook," she said brightly. "I have been thinking for months, making little notes to myself. I will get the young people to believe that sexual freedom is a natural and God-given right. The youth of these States will listen less and less to the advice of their elders, preferring instead the promptings of their own baser selves."

"Surely that will not be difficult. Young people think along those lines every generation. That will not be enough in itself to corrode their moral fiber."

"No. But I will cause to be published articles encouraging the American youth to be shallow. That was Herr Elsenbach's inspiration. He has been a great help. You know that he studied in various universities in the Soviet Union."

Weintraub nodded. "He has been a tireless counsel," he said.

"Well," said Gretchen, "having thus succeeded with the articles, I will replace the American youths' natural interest in religion with lustful desires for sex, drugs, alcohol, crime, and rebellion against authority."

"That sounds like a good beginning, Gretchen."

"Thank you," she said softly.

"You are a good Party member."

"I have had good instructors. These ideas are well-established practices, of course. We rely on the young people's lack of discipline to be our ally. I have been thinking this through rather thoroughly. First, I will attempt to isolate a few frustrated and warped youths and teach them the skills of revolution. Then, by tricky means I will fool the non-Communist sympathizers to support what are in reality Communist movements. Those that cannot be so deluded I shall weaken with access to drugs and 'free love,' so they will be helpless to defend themselves."

"Yes, of course. That is much the same idea that I was required to follow in Frachtdorf."

"I will need time, for this is a much larger operation. I will have Bible readings banned in public and governmental conclaves, under the guise of protection of religious freedom. I will encourage sexual

liberties, including homosexuality, at the same time flooding the book stalls with pornography."

"I can feel the fiber going already," said Weintraub, laughing.

"Most importantly, I will attempt to have the penalties removed for exercising these new 'freedoms.' When the attitude becomes one of 'Why not?' my mission will have been accomplished."

"You have an excellent schedule, Gretchen. I only wish that my own orders gave me such detailed plans."

"What exactly is your assignment?"

Weintraub frowned. "My work is in aid of yours, a necessary complement to your task. I am to infiltrate and render helpless the spiritual defenses of Ostamerika."

"A difficult job, indeed. I will be unsuccessful if you do not manage it."

"Yes, in many respects our work overlaps." He illustrated on the tablecloth, drawing circles with his fingertip. He accidentally touched her hand, and pulled his own back quickly. He could hear her sharply indrawn breath.

"Our relationship has not changed," she said in a low voice. "The context of our affection has been greatly altered. Rather than friend and companion, I am now your Party chief. Nevertheless, though it goes against Party principles, I will always love you."

Weintraub smiled, and the fear that he felt toward his duties was submerged in a warm rush of happiness.

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CHAPTER 8

Ernest awoke slowly. He felt sick. He hadn't had nearly enough sleep, and his body hadn't quite finished the chore of flushing the alcohol from his system. He got out of bed and went to the louvered window. It was a dark, drizzly day; the air smelled bad, again. He went over to the radio and switched it on, but there was nothing but static. Naturally; no one was going to sacrifice his token in order to provide early morning music and chatter. Ernest turned off the radio and rubbed his bleary eyes. It was a rotten day already.

He went into the bathroom and relieved himself. He glanced at his reflection in the mirror. He looked as terrible as he felt. "Might as well never mind," he muttered. "Anybody that looks as lousy as that, doesn't deserve a token." He went back into the kitchen area and made himself a small breakfast. He ate it slowly and then got dressed. He was in no hurry to go downstairs.

"Gretchen?" he called. He hadn't seen her yet.

"What?"

"Where are you?"

"What do you mean, where am I? I'm in the nursery with Stevie. If it was up to you, the baby'd starve to death or something. You never even think about him. I know you hate me, but I can't understand why you hate Stevie. He's never done anything to you."

Ernest frowned. "That point is debatable," he thought. "And I don't hate him. You can't hate your own son, can you?"

"Are you ready to go?" she asked.

"Yeah, put your clothes on."

"Ernie, I'm not coming."

"If you don't come with me, you're going to die."

"No, I won't. Tell them at the station. Tell them I'm pregnant. They'll give you a token for me. They have to."

"All right. See you."

That was that, Ernest knew. Their relationship, the marriage, the baby, everything. Gretchen had locked herself and little Stevie in the nursery area, and nothing that he had said had shaken her wall of fear. Well, then, he'd get *his* token. Maybe this was the best way.

His own fear was lessened by a confusion of other emotions. He knew that he was not going to die: he'd get a token one way or another. But his wife, and his son.... There was just too much to accept all at once, and he shunted the uncomfortable thoughts away for a while, preferring to deal with the here-and-now problem of getting his token.

He slammed the modapt's door loudly, but he didn't hurry down the dim hall to the elevator. He just stood there for a few seconds, listening. There were none of the usual noises from the other modapts on the floor. Everyone was already out, scrambling in his own best interests. He put his ear against his own door; he heard Stevie begin to cry, no doubt because Gretchen was picking him up and "soothing" him again. Well, he wouldn't have to put up with that much longer. It was hardly a consolation. He went over to Vladieki's door. Ernest could hear taped music being played. He listened carefully and heard a high-pitched woman's voice singing. "Kansas she says is the name of the star." The idea of the old man sitting so calmly in his modapt angered Ernest. He spat at the door and walked toward the elevator.

"Well," he thought as he rode down in the creaking car, "it's time to put aside all the childish feelings. It's time to face the situation like an adult. It's very simple, really. It's just me against them. And I've always been good at getting what I want, especially when I don't have to worry about courtesy."

It didn't work. He was still afraid. He wanted to hide, like Gretchen. He wanted to pretend that it might all go away. The only reason that he managed to motivate himself was that, deep inside, he really hadn't accepted the enormity of the situation.

He was still trying to figure the best search method when he reached the street. In a city the size of New York, there must be dozens of stations. Where? Follow the mob. Just find an angry crowd and get to the head of the line. No problem there, thought Ernest, nodding to himself. Just find a station.

And now, of course, the same thought occupied every one of the other thirty million residents of the city. His own street, normally a mildly busy thoroughfare, was jammed with shouting, milling people. "Well," thought Ernest, "that's service. There must be a station set up on the corner."

He watched the thick mass of people surging by him. "I wonder," he thought, "is it worth getting myself crushed in that crowd just to save my life? Is it worth getting all frustrated and angry, lowering myself to their level, pushing and shoving with all the rest, fighting like a common animal, just to stay alive?" He smiled ruefully. "It always comes to the simple question: what is more important, life or self-respect? Well, here goes." He left the shelter of the building and plunged into the crowd.

For a few moments, he had no idea of what was happening; he was lost in a shifting maze of people, like a single pea in a bag of beans. His half-formed plans were proven pointless immediately; Ernest could move only in the direction and at the speed of the current. He was entirely in the crowd's grasp, and that suited him, for the time being. He had no better idea of what to do, and it was vaguely possible that the people around him did.

"How easily this could be a carnival," he thought. "Instead of a great big funeral. All I can see are the backs of about five people. My world has been reduced to this. Who knows what's up ahead? It may be Mardi Gras, for all I know. There may be a funny parade on Fulton Street, with floats and marching bands and costumed riders. And maybe they're throwing tokens from the floats, along with strings of plastic beads, and only our innate ideas of honor, our mature sense of fair play, prevent everyone from rushing the Representative's masked subordinates. The population of the world is waiting patiently on the curb for some henchman to toss a few tokens into the crowd. How much more fun that would be. They never run these things right."

It took him about half an hour to shove his way through the people to the corner, a distance of sixty yards. He had to fight all the way, and every foot he gained was at the expense of a great deal of pounding and cursing from the others. He began to hit back, slapping and throwing people out of the way, ignoring them as individuals. Ernest cleared a path for himself with a spirit of the community of all

men: now, even more than usual, none of them were his brothers; the sense and humor of the mob treated him and all the rest impartially.

Perhaps he could organize everyone. He could stand up on something and shout slogans until he had attracted enough attention. Then he could begin some rambling speech, hoping that the people around him would be so desperate for leadership they wouldn't notice the absurdity of what he said. Once he had their support, he could march with them, moving the millions of other individuals aside with the strength of their union. Then Ernest and his followers would have an overwhelming advantage. But, of course, once his army realized its power, it would have little use for him. He might find himself quickly bloodied, lying beneath the aimless feet of friends and enemies alike. He would be a target, and soon these frantic people would begin looking for targets. Better to go on alone. He didn't know what he'd say, in the first place.

He had a quick image of his father, struggling in a similar crowd, a few hundred miles away in Pennsylvania. It was easy to accept that he, Ernest, had to contend with the problem; he was young enough, still strong enough. But suddenly the Representatives' scheme took on a particular though unpleasant wisdom. Ernest's father was not old, still a couple of years short of sixty. But he would find himself at a terrible loss in a furious mob like this. The very old, the sick or injured, the very young would have no hope at all.

"Anyway," thought Ernest, "those towns have populations numbering in the thousands, not millions. And if there isn't a token station right in town, word of where there is one will spread fast. He ought to do all right."

When he got to the corner of the street there was no sign of a token station. He looked up and down Fulton Street; it was filled, as packed with people as his street had been. There was no hope for public transportation; even cars and motorcycles were useless. And, most likely, there was no one to operate the subways. Where were these people going?

"There has to be a better way," he thought. He realized that, under the circumstances, there was nothing to prevent him from indulging all his hostile instincts. He could simply kill everyone who stood in front of him; he would feel little remorse, and society itself would have nothing to say. He could just murder a swath for himself, until he met someone who, for the same reasons or in self-defense, killed Ernest first. The only real consideration stopping Ernest was that he didn't know where he was going. "Maybe later," he thought, trying to laugh.

While he stood staring down the street, he was hit sharply in the ribs and pushed. Only the density of the crowd itself prevented him from falling to his knees, where he easily might have been crushed or suffocated. He struck back angrily with his fist, and hit a young girl in the face. Ernest could not tell if she had been the one who had struck him; she seemed to collapse in her place, and Ernest caught her, supporting her while she recovered.

"Thanks," she said, "I could have been trampled."

"I'm sorry I hit you in the first place. I don't know. This whole thing is starting to get to me."

"Did *you* hit me? Oh, never mind; it doesn't make any difference." She felt her swollen lip and tried to smile. "We're not getting anywhere," she said.

"Doesn't look like it. Which way are we headed?"

"I don't know," she said. "I've been out since five this morning and I haven't seen a hint of a token booth."

"Maybe that's their plan. Maybe they have them hidden where only the smart people would think to look. They don't want a bunch of idiots coming out of those bunkers."

"Maybe."

Ernest looked at her closely. "The male sexual drive is supposed to fall off during moments of stress," he thought. "It is comforting sometimes to know that I must be abnormal. Especially in a situation like this. Perpetual lust has got to be good for the human race." She was just a bit shorter than Ernest, and very thin. She had very small hands, the first thing that he noticed about her. Her fingers looked like a child's, though the nails were painted with a cracked, silvery polish. Her hair was long and very black, though her

eyebrows were a reddish brown. She had a bright red blush applied to her cheeks, and her lipstick was a dark wine color. Ernest wondered why she had gone to the trouble of dressing up for the disaster. "You're very pretty, you know," he said.

She laughed bitterly. "Thanks," she said.

"I know it doesn't seem very important. It just made me feel good to say it."

"Where are you from?"

"Here," said Ernest. "Brooklyn."

"No, I mean where were you born," she said. "I'm sure you haven't lived here your whole life."

"I'm from a little town in Pennsylvania, near Oil City."

"Ah," she said with a mocking smile. "Oil City."

"Yeah. It's a nice place to be *from*."

"I talked to my brother last night," she said. "He's a fuser over in Queens. You know, people in his building were actually coming to him, expecting that he had tokens to give them. Some people are really dumb, or else they just don't listen very well. I guess they're in for a real surprise today. How much time do we have?"

"What?"

"I said, how much time do we have? Will the stations close tonight? Do we have a week? How long before the disaster?"

"I don't think they ever told us," he said. Ernest pushed his way downtown, and the girl followed closely in his wake. They had to shout to make themselves understood.

"That figures. Have you seen anybody with a token?"

"No," said Ernest. "But I don't imagine that the people who get them will tell. They'll try to hold the lines down for their own families and friends. Cut out the competition by playing cool. We're just going to have to keep looking."

"We could be passing the damn thing by and not even know it. It might be right across the street."

Ernest shook his head. "No, probably not. There's going to be a tremendous uproar around the token booths. I think you'll have to be ready to fight your way to the front."

"I still get the feeling that there could be a station on the other side of the street, and there's so many people going by that news of it just doesn't make it through."

"You underestimate the ability of people to act like idiots," he said. "Believe me, we'd know."

"All right," she said, so quietly that Ernest almost didn't hear her. "You're the boss. Just tell me what to do."

There was a promise implicit in her tone, one that made Ernest feel a subdued excitement. "It's nice to have additional incentive," he thought. He turned around and looked at her. She smiled, without the cynicism she had shown earlier.

Ernest thought about the women he had been close to in his life. He wasn't proud of all the relationships he had formed; he knew that he often used women, manipulated their emotions as he had done with the fuser. But it always seemed to him that while he was doing that, the woman was using him for something as well. He had never exploited anyone, at least without getting the feeling that the process had been mutual. Of course, relationships like that were based on far different qualities than love or respect. But why should that make them less worthwhile? They fulfilled certain needs -- needs that, healthy or not, had to be fulfilled. He knew that this girl, whom he had met under such evil circumstances, would likely provide that oddly businesslike sort of affair. But, given the chance, it could always change into something more emotional. So far, the people in charge of giving away the chances were being somewhat less than cooperative.

"We won't get ten blocks by nightfall at this rate," said the girl.

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Meanwhile 4

It was late afternoon, and already the sun was melting behind the hotel across the square. Ernst sipped wine now, for he appreciated the effect of the slanting sun's rays on the rich, dark liquid. He had discovered this by accident when he had first come to the city, strolling along the single, huge avenue. He had seen the red shimmers reflecting on the impassive face of a shopworn *gourgandine*. How much better, he had thought then, how much better it would be to have that singular fortunate play of light grace a genuine poet.

"It may be a bit naive of me, nonetheless," he thought. "After all, if these loiterers of the city lack the verbal sophistication to appreciate the verses themselves, how can I expect them to have any greater regard for the wielder of the pen? But I must defeat that argument, by ignoring it if by no more rigorous means. I cannot allow myself to be pulled down into the intellectual miasma of these Afric prisoners. The sun must burn out all wonder and delight at an early age; it is only we unlucky travelers who can deplore their sand-worn ignorance." He took some more of the wine and held it in his mouth until he began to feel foolish. He swallowed it and pushed the glass away.

While Ernst sat there, sucking the taste of the wine from his teeth, a young boy walked by on the sidewalk. He was small, nearly hairless, and quite obviously strayed from the neighborhood of his parents. He stopped when he saw Ernst. "Ayah, are you not Weinraub the wanderer, from Europe?"

"I am," said Ernst. "I have been, for some time. Has my fame then spread as far as your unwashed ears?"

"I have heard much about you, *akkei*," said the boy. "I never believed that I'd really see you."

"And are your dreams confirmed?"

"Not yet," said the boy, shaking his head. "Do you really kiss men?"

Ernst spat at the boy, and the dark boy laughed, dancing into the street, hopping back on the sidewalk. "Come here," said Ernst, "and I'll wrap this chair around your skinny neck."

"It was only a joke, *akkei*," said the boy, not the least afraid.

"A joke. How old are you?"

"I am nine, *akkei*."

"Then you should know the danger in mocking such as I. I will draw a picture of you. I will touch you with my left hand. Your mother will beat you dead when she hears."

"You are wrong," said the boy, laughing again. "You are a Nazarene, yes, or a Jew. But I am no rug-squatter. Touch me with your left hand, *akkei*, and I will gnaw it off. Do you wish me to fetch your supper? I will not charge you this time."

"I tend to doubt your offer. In any event, I have a regular boy who brings my food. What is your name, you young criminal?"

"I am Kebap," said the boy. "It means 'roast beef' in the language of Turkey."

"I can see why," said Ernst dryly. "You will have to work hard to take the place of my regular boy, if you want his job."

"I am sorry," said Kebap. "I have no wish to perform *that* kind of service." Then he ran away, shouting insults over his shoulder. Ernst stared after him, his hands clenching.

"Ieneth will pay for her sport," he thought. "If only I could find a vulnerable spot in these people. Without possessions, inured against discomfort, hoping for nothing, they are difficult indeed to injure. Perhaps that is the reason I have stayed in this capital of lice so long. No other reason comes quickly to mind."

He sipped his wine again, and stared at the smudged handwriting on a scrap of paper: an ébauche of his trilogy of novels. He had done the rough outline so long ago that he had forgotten its point. But he was certain that the wine waves shifted to good effect on the yellowed paper, too.

"This was the trilogy that was going to make my name," thought Ernst sadly. "I remember how I had

planned to dedicate the first volume to Eugenie, the second to Marie, and the third...? I can't remember, after all. It has been a long time. I cannot even recall the characters. Ah, yes, here. I had stolen that outstanding, virtuous fool, d'Aubont, put a chevalier's outfit on him, taken off his moustache, and renamed him Gerhardt Friedlos. How the ladies' fluttering hearts of Germany, Carbba, France, and England were to embrace him, if hearts are capable of such a dexterous feat. Friedlos. Now I remember. And there is no further mystery as to why I can't recall the plot. It was nothing. Mere slicings of rapier, mere wooings of maid, mere tauntings of coward. One thousand pages of adolescent dreams, just to restore my manly figure. Beyond the dedications, did I not also represent Eugenie and Marie with characters? I cannot read this scrawl. Ah, yes. Eugenie is disguised in Volume One as the red-haired Marchioness Fajra. She is consumed in a horrible holocaust as her outraged tenants wreak their just revenge. Friedlos observes the distressing scene with mixed emotions. In Volume Two, he consoles himself with the contrasting charms of Marie, known in my fiction as the maid Malvarma, who pitiably froze to death on the great plain of Breulandy rather than acknowledge her secret love. Friedlos comes upon her blue and twisted corpse and grieves. I am happy, I am very, very happy that I never wrote that trash."

Ernst took a short, fat pencil and wrote in the narrow spaces left to him on the scrap. "My scalp itches," he wrote. "When I scratch it, I break open half-healed sores. I have a headache; behind my right eye, my brain throbs. My ears are blocked, and the canals are swollen deep inside, as though large pegs had been hammered into them. My nostrils drip constantly, and the front of my face feels like it is filled with sand. My gums bleed, and my teeth communicate with stabbing pains. My tongue is still burned from the morning tea. My throat is dry and sore." This catalogue continued down the margins of the paper, and down his body, to end with, "My arches cramp up at regular intervals, whenever I think about them. My toes are cut and painful on the bottom, and fungused and itching between. And now I believe that it pains me to piss. But this last symptom bears watching; it is not confirmed."

On a napkin stained with rings of chocolate and coffee, Ernst began another list, parallel to the first. "The very continents shudder with the fever-chills of war. Europe, my first home so far away, cringes in the dark sickroom between the sea and the Urals. Asia teeters toward the false adolescence of senility, and is the more dangerous for it. Breulandy rises in the north and east, and who can tell of her goals and motives? South of the city Africa slumbers, unpopulated and sterile, under the cauterizing sun. The Americas? Far too large to colonize, to control, to aid us now.

"Oh, and whom do I mean by 'us'? The world is fractured so that we no longer know anything but self. My self finds symptoms everywhere, a political hypochondriac in exile. Perhaps if I were still in the numbing academic life of old, I would see none of this: *Otio sepoltura del l'uomo vivo* -- 'inactivity is the tomb of the vital man.' I have time to make lists, now."

Of course, he found sad significance in the two inventories when they were completed. He shook his head sorrowfully, and stared meditatively at his wineglass, but no one noticed.

Ernst folded the paper with his trilogy synopsis and the first list, and put it back into his pocket. He skimmed through the second list again, though. "'I have time to make lists, now,'" he read. "What does that mean? Who am I trying to distress?" Just beyond the railing, on the sidewalk bordering the *Fée Blanche*, sat Kebap, the little boy named "roast beef." The boy was grinning.

"'Allo, *akkei* Weinraub. I'm back. I've come to haunt you, you know."

"You're doing a fine job," said Ernst. "Do you know anything of poetry?"

"I know poetry," said the boy. "I know what *akkei* Courane writes. That's poetry. That's what everyone says. Do you write poetry, too?"

"In my youth," said Ernst.

"It is lucky, then, that I cannot read," said Kebap. He grinned again at Ernst, evilly. "I see that your usual boy hasn't yet brought your supper."

"Why are you called 'roast beef'? I doubt if you've ever seen any in your whole life."

"One of my uncles called me that," said the boy. "He said that's what I looked like when I was born."

"Do you have a lot of uncles?" asked Ernst maliciously.

Kebap's eyes opened very wide. "Oh, certainly," he said solemnly. "Sometimes a new one every day.

My mother is very beautiful, very wise, and often very silent. Would you like to meet her, *akkei*?"

"Not today, you little thief." Ernst held up the annotated napkin. "I'm very busy."

Kebap snorted. "Certainly, *akkei*," he said. "Of course." Then he ran away again.

"Good evening, M. Weinraub." It was Czerny, still dressed in his gray uniform of the Citizens' Army. Ernst saw that the tunic was without decoration or indication of rank. Perhaps the *Gaish* was still so small that the men had only two or three officers in the whole organization. And here was the man again, to convince him that the situation was not foolish after all.

"You are a man of your word, M. Czerny," said Ernst. "Will you join me again? Have a drink?"

"No, I'll have to pass that up," said Czerny as he seated himself at Ernst's table. "I trust your appointment concluded satisfactorily?"

Ernst grunted. It became evident that he would say nothing more. Czerny cursed softly. "Look," he said, "I don't want to have to go through all these stupid contests of yours. This isn't a kind of amusement any longer. You're going to have to choose sides. If you're not with us, you're against us."

Ernst was amused by the man's grave talk. He couldn't understand the urgency at all. "Whom are you going to fight? I don't see it. Maybe if you paid them enough, you could hire some Arabs. But it's still a good distance to ask them to ride just for a battle. Or maybe if you split your tiny bunch in half, one part could start a civil uprising and the other part could put it down. But I really just want to watch."

Perhaps it was the heat of the afternoon, or the amount of liquor he had already taken, or the annoying events of the day, but Ernst refused to allow Czerny the pleasure of making a single argumentative point. It was not often that someone came to Ernst with a request, and he was certainly going to take the opportunity to enjoy it fully. That in doing so he would have to disappoint and even antagonize Czerny made little difference. If Czerny wanted Ernst's help badly enough, Czerny would return again. And if Czerny didn't mean what he said, then, well, he deserved everything Ernst could devise.

"We will get nowhere, Monsieur," said Czerny in a tight, controlled voice, "until you cease treating my army as a toy and our cause as a tilting at windmills."

"My good Czerny," said Ernst slowly, "you reveal quite a lot when you say 'my army.' You reveal yourself, if you understand me. You divulge yourself. You display yourself, do you see? You expose yourself. There, I see that I must say it plainly. You expose yourself, but in this locality, at this time, that seems to be a most commendable form of expression."

"Damn it, you *are* an idiot! I'm not asking you to be a dirty *goundi*. We can get plenty of infantry by just putting up notices. If we could afford to pay them. If we could afford the notices. But intelligence is at a premium in this city. We need you and the others like you. I promise you, you'll never have to carry a rifle or face one. But you have to be man enough to cast your lot with us, or we'll sweep you aside with the rest of the old ways."

"Rhetoric, Czerny, rhetoric!" said Ernst, giggling drunkenly. "I came here to get away from all that. Leave me alone will you? I sit here and drink. I don't interfere with you while you play soldiers. I'm not any more useful than you, but at least I don't bother anybody."

Ernst looked around him, hoping that some diversion might arise to rescue him. There was nothing. Perhaps he might cause enough of a row with Czerny that M. Gargotier would ask that they both leave; the danger with that plan was that Czerny would be sure to invite Ernst somewhere, some place where Czerny and his *Gaish* held an edge. Well, then, something simpler was necessary. Perhaps the young nuisance would return. With any luck, the boy would change his target; Czerny would be in no mood to ignore Kebap. But that didn't seem likely, either.

Czerny banged the little table with his fist. The table's metal top flipped off its three legs, dumping Ernst's wineglass to the ground. Czerny didn't appear to notice. He talked on through the crashing of the table and the breaking of the glass. "Useful! You want to talk about useful? Have you ever read anything about politics? Economics? You know what keeps a culture alive?"

"Yes," said Ernst sullenly, while M. Gargotier cleaned up the mess. "People not bothering other people."

"A good war every generation or so," said Czerny, ignoring Ernst, seeing him now as an enemy. "We've got authorities. Machiavelli said that the first cause of unrest in a nation is idleness and peace. That's all this city has ever known, and you can see the results out there." Czerny waved in the direction of the street. All that Ernst could see was a young woman in a short leather skirt, naked from the waist up. She met his glance and waved.

"Ah," thought Ernst, "it has been a long time since I have been able just to sit and watch those lovely girls. It seems that one should have the right to do that, without fear of interruption. But there is always war, disease, jealousies, business, always hunger. I have asked for little in my life. Indeed, all that I would have now is a quiet place in the Faubourg St.-Honoré to watch the Parisian girls. Instead, here I am. But that single distant brown woman is infinitely preferable to listening to Czerny's ranting." Ernst smiled at the half-naked woman; she turned away for a moment. A small boy had been standing behind her. The woman whispered in the boy's ear. Ernst recognized the boy, of course; he laughed. It would not be long before Kebap learned that even industry and enterprise would avail him nothing in that damned city.

"You cannot afford silence," said Czerny loudly.

"Ah," said Ernst unhappily, "I hadn't realized your thing had gotten this involved. I really thought you fellows were just showing off. But it's a whole lot worse than that. Well, I won't disturb you, if that's what you're worried about. I still don't see why you're so anxious to have me. I haven't held a rifle since my partridge-shooting days in Madrid."

"You aren't even listening," said Czerny, his voice low and outraged.

"No, I guess I'm not. What is it again that you want?"

"We want you to join us."

Ernst smiled sadly, looking down at his new glass of wine. "I'm sorry," he said. "I don't make decisions any more."

Czerny stood up. He kicked a shard of the broken wineglass into the street. "You're wrong," he said. "You've just made a very bad one."

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CHAPTER 9

Ernest shaded his eyes with his hand and looked through the crack between the boards. "I don't even know why they bothered putting up these planks," he said to Darlaine, his new partner. "If they thought they'd help protect the windows, that's pretty stupid. These windows aren't going to be much good against the Representative's disaster. Hell, no matter what happens, everybody tries to hang on to what they have."

"That figures," said Darlaine, tossing her long hair over her shoulder. "I can understand it. Sometimes you're just too critical. I mean, this is a weird situation. You can't knock people for acting strange."

"Sure I can," said Ernest. "I see somebody moving around in there. Hand me that chunk of rock." Darlaine bent to pick up the rock he pointed to; Ernest turned around and watched the slowly moving river of people in the street. "They're going to wear themselves out like that," he thought. "If I can hold on until they start dropping, I'll have the city to myself."

"Here, is this O.K.?"

"Fine," he said, taking the rock. "Move back a little. Don't get caught in the crowd. It's like an undertow; I'll never see you again."

Darlaine smiled, then chewed her lip. "Would that bother you?" she said at last.

"A little. Yeah." Ernest picked a place where the gap between the boards was at its widest, about three inches. He held the rock in both hands and began pounding. Slivers of wood split from the boards,

but they held fast. He raised the rock above his head and hit the wood as hard as he could. He repeated the blow several times; the planks didn't move, but he heard the musical cracking of glass. "I think I got the window. That ought to get them out." He continued to strike at the wooden barrier.

In a moment, Ernest heard a rattling at the door, next to the boarded-up window. He stopped his pounding and waited. The door opened up a little; it was dark inside, and Ernest couldn't see anything, but an angry voice began yelling at him.

"What do you think you're trying to do?" screamed the voice from the building. "Why don't you just leave us alone?"

Ernest dropped the rock and nodded to Darlaine. He went to the door, which closed again quickly. Before the person on the inside could get it locked, however, Ernest threw his shoulder against it and forced it open. He stumbled into the dim room, and Darlaine followed nervously.

"I was right," said Ernest, as he dusted off his clothing. "This place was a grocery a couple of days ago. I figured the old lady might still be here, but I didn't count on the whole family."

A thin middle-aged man with a trim gray beard faced Ernest. He held a heavy iron bar in his hands. "All right," he said. "What do you want?"

"Are you figuring to hit me with that crowbar?" asked Ernest. "You know, to do anything mean with it, you're going to have to heft it and whip it around, like a baseball bat. It's got a lot of weight to it, doesn't it? Well, by the time you got the thing moving, I'd duck under it and lay you out on the ground for the rest of the day. Look." And Ernest took a few steps toward the other man, who raised the bar threateningly. Ernest shook his head, reached out, and grabbed the crowbar away easily. The bearded man didn't even protest.

"So," said the man dismally, "you and everybody else are happy being crooks today. It's like a devil's Christmas. What do you want?"

"We don't want to bother you or anything," said Darlaine. "We just thought you might give us something to eat."

"You have enough stuff in this place, that's for sure," said Ernest.

"This is a store," said the man. "This is our business, it's what supports my family. I can't just give everything away. If I give you food, then everybody else in that filthy mob will come in here and grab things. We'd be ruined in an hour. You'd cause a riot. The store would be wrecked. My family would be beaten, maybe killed."

"You don't have a clear idea of what's happening," said Ernest, tossing the iron bar in his hands. "In the first place, *I* have your crummy weapon now. And, as you could see from the demonstration a minute ago, I won't mind using it. But let that go. I want you to understand that Darlaine and I are quite a bit different from the others out there."

"Sure," said the old woman, sitting in the shadowed rear of the store. "The others out there are leaving us alone."

"That's not what I mean, exactly," said Ernest, smiling unpleasantly. "Everyone else has only one thought: 'Get the token.' Of course, that thought is uppermost in my mind, too. But there are other considerations. I have to eat. I have to rest. Otherwise, I won't be able to keep up the search. Those other fools will kill themselves, the way they're going. A little foresight here will give us an advantage in the long run, I think."

"Very wise," said the owner of the store. "I'll be happy to sell you anything you want."

"But you just won't understand, will you?" said Ernest. "This token business just shot down free enterprise. The profit motive has lost its attraction -- at least for normal, sane people. Where do you plan to spend your money? Going to the Catskills isn't going to save you from the disaster."

"You don't even know what kind of trouble is coming," said the old woman. "Don't talk to me about disasters."

"When is this disaster?" asked the bearded man. "Tonight? Tomorrow morning? Next week? Next year? If you get your token, how will you live until then?"

"I have a feeling that normal life will be hard to find after today," said Darlaine.

"We will try," said the man.

"What about your tokens?" asked Ernest. "You're all sitting in here because you've got tokens? Where did you get them?"

"We have no tokens," said the old woman. "We would never find them. We are too old or too weak. If it was meant for us to survive, we will. Meanwhile, we will protect what is ours."

Ernest sighed. "The more I think about it, the better I like this thing of the Representatives. Whatever happened to plain old guts, for God's sake? You're just going to wait here for death to come flooding up under your door?"

"We're happy," said the old woman. "Just as we've always been. Are you?"

"Not yet," said Ernest.

"Not until we get our tokens," said Darlaine.

These people were just like Gretchen, hiding from the terrible reality only a few yards away in the street. Like her, they had found justification for their behavior -- reasons that sounded to them like perfect logic. It was an insanity of some kind, an inability to face a crisis, even when such evasion meant certain death. It might have been amusing under different circumstances; here was this poor idiot, thought Ernest, defending his canned goods with much more vigor than he was protecting his life!

People's values were quickly crumbling. What did this man care about his store? Nearly everyone was going to be dead soon. And what did Gretchen think that she was doing for Stevie? Shielding him in the nursery? She had only condemned him to die with her, when the big bang came.

"What's your name?" asked Ernest.

"Capataz," said the bearded man. "John-Peter Capataz. This is my store."

"I know," said Ernest. "I come in here sometimes."

"'Capataz,'" said Darlaine. "*El Capataz*, the boss."

"The boss, eh?" said Ernest. "I'm sorry, boss, but I'm going to have to take over some of your authority. It's time people like you realized that times are changing. You just can't hoard things in a store like this while people like me are going hungry. That kind of thing just doesn't work any more, boss." He turned his back on Capataz and the old woman and began browsing among the shelves of food.

"All right," said Capataz. "Take what you want. Take whatever I have. Just take it and go. Leave us alone."

"You always have simple answers for things, don't you, boss?" asked Ernest. "Just leave you in peace, huh? I don't know how long I worked for you, never having a minute's rest because you were sneaking around with that damned notebook of yours. Every time I stopped to take a breath, there you were, writing it down, spying on me. You tell me that Old Man Jennings never saw those reports. You expect me to believe that, to treat you like an old pal now. All of a sudden, without your magic notebook, you're afraid, aren't you?" he walked around the corner of an aisle, holding the iron bar in one hand and two cans of vegetable hash in the other. He slammed the cans down on the counter angrily and tried to grab Capataz. Darlaine cried out; Capataz hid behind a food freezer.

"Okay, Sokol," said Ernest, laughing. "All right. I won't have to do a thing. The Representative will take care of it all for me." Darlaine was pulling on Ernest's arm; he was still laughing. She led him out of the store, carrying the cans of food.

"Good-bye," called the old woman. Her laughter was a dry cackle. "Good luck to you, and may God bless."

"Are you all right, Ernest?" asked Darlaine.

"Sure," he said. "I guess so. I think I'm just tired."

They paused outside the Capatazes' store, pressed against the side of the building, away from the still furiously moving crowd on Fulton Street. Each of them took a can of the vegetable hash and opened it, pressing the three plastic perforations and twisting the top of the can. They said nothing as they ate, scooping the bland brown stuff up with their fingers. When they finished, they tossed the cans to the ground. Ernest looked down Fulton in the direction of Flatbush. He wiped his fingers on his trousers as he thought.

"I don't suppose it makes much difference," he said.

"We were headed that way before," said Darlaine. "It took us long enough to get this far. We might as well keep going."

"There sure isn't anything back the way we came. All right. Keep close."

They moved back into the crowd. At once, Ernest had a feeling of disgust, both for the mob itself and for what it had so quickly forced him to do. He shrugged. He just had to get through the day one way or another, and then it would all be over. If he could only stop paying attention, it wouldn't be so bad. He could do it. He knew he could; he just had to draw on a reserve of strength and will. He turned back to Darlaine.

"Listen," he said. "I'm going to bash some people out of the way. Don't get too close to me, or you'll get hurt, too. And don't drop back or I'll lose you. Stay about where you are now, maybe a step and a half behind." She nodded and waved. Curiously, Ernest wondered what Eileen was doing at that moment. Or the fuser, whatever her name was.

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Meantime E

In 1920, Babe Ruth hit an astounding total of fifty-four home runs. Weintraub saw none of them, though he followed the Yankees' season in the newspaper. His duties with the Communist Party never gave Weintraub the opportunity to see his baseball hero in person. With Gretchen as his companion and tutor, he traveled around the eastern states of America. New York City had amazed him, as it fascinates everyone who visits it for the first time, but there was far more to the country than merely that single giant city. Weintraub began to realize how large his assignment was: to sap the spiritual strength of such a nation seemed more than any person or any cause could hope to accomplish. He saw none of the festering decadence of Jermany, not even in the hearts of Ostamerika's great cities. Gretchen, more experienced, was less chagrined. "We will have to proceed in small stages," she said one day in late November. "You had the mistaken idea that we could move into a lower-class neighborhood, print up a few handbills and posters, give a speech in a local park, and thereby win over the capitalist minds of these people. You are still in Frachtdorf, dear Ernst. This is the wide world."

She was right, of course. If their mission were to get anywhere, Weintraub would have to overcome both his affection for the American people and his awe at their creations. He had to begin thinking in terms of concrete details; the Party chiefs in Berlin and, before them, in the Soviet Union had often published guidelines for study groups and discussion meetings. Pamphlets entitled "The Communist Strategy" or "Conversion, Not Conquest" were common enough, even in Frachtdorf. Yet, when it came to actual methods, these tracts were sketchy and abstract. It was all well and good to program "a lessening of respect for traditional values." But how does one actually put that into effect?

As the year waned, Weintraub and Gretchen decided on a base of operations, a small town called Springfield. They arrived shortly before the American holiday of Thanksgiving and rented a large, airy house near the center of the village. It did not take long for the residents of the town to spread the news that a young Jerman couple had moved in; soon, Weintraub and Gretchen were receiving visits from many new neighbors and curious strangers, wishing them luck and asking frequently impolite questions. The two Jermans bore it all patiently and with good humor, for the process of assimilation, unpleasant though it was, was the first step toward eventual victory.

"In these initial stages, at least," said Gretchen, "you will observe how the uneducated masses give us their aid unknowingly. We may learn to depend on their innate honesty and generosity, the same qualities which have caused their unfortunate enslavement to their upper-class masters. When these same working

people have become informed of our background and our aims, they will turn resentful, distrustful, and hostile. This period will last only as long as their education in our policies remains incomplete. As soon as they fully understand us, they will once again return to our sides as friends, neighbors, and political allies."

"Have you experienced this pattern before, then, Gretchen?" asked Weintraub.

"You still have doubts, eh?" she said, smiling. "Your own education is unfinished, I would say. Then just wait and see if I am not accurate."

"I do not doubt your estimate of the temper of these folk," he said. "And I do not doubt the Party's proven methods. I lack faith only in my own aptitude."

"That is what I am for," said Gretchen. "To improve your morale."

"Is that what you're doing here? I've been wondering."

Gretchen kissed Weintraub on the cheek. "Do not speak to your Party boss in those tones," she said softly. Then, for an hour, the two young Jermans forgot the urgency of their venture.

In February of 1921, Weintraub joined the Springfield Literary Association, a local book review club which met twice monthly at the small village library. This activity had been planned by Gretchen as the very first blow in the toppling of the American philosophy. Weintraub was unconvinced, but he withheld his opinion. At the first meeting, he was greeted warmly but somewhat nervously by the other members of the club.

"We have a new reader with us this month," said Mrs. Royal Abcock Smith, the presiding officer of the club. "I'm sure you've all had the opportunity of meeting him, in the few months in which he and his lovely wife have resided in our community. I know that Mr. Weintraub will bring fresh insights with him, a distinctly European outlook from which we all may learn. I hope you will all help him along, as his English is not perfect as yet. It is my pleasure to welcome such a charming and educated representative of the Jerman nation. He can surely reassure us that Jermany is, after all, a country quite like our own, with its own vast heritage of art, music, and literature, and that it is time to forget our differences and build a life together in a true global community of peace and brotherhood."

Weintraub was ill at ease, being suddenly the focus of the group's attention. He smiled but declined to speak. Mrs. Smith faltered in her presentation for a moment, having planned to have Weintraub address the club and thereby carry the meeting at least another three-quarters of an hour. Instead, she turned to the first novel under consideration for that evening.

Later that night, at home, Weintraub described the course of the meeting for Gretchen's benefit. "I do not know, dear," he said wearily, "whether I can do that again. Even for the Party, even for the good of oppressed workers in all the world. That is asking too much of me. I am not a hero of the Party. I am only a small functionary from a southern province."

"You are my hero," said Gretchen. "And if you do not do just as I say, you will end up spitted on an ice ax, like the counter-revolutionary villain in a grade-school pageant. The Party wastes nothing, and leaves no loose ends. If Berlin decrees that you socialize with the Springfield grandmothers, well, you had the opportunity to resign your duties several times. It is now too late. I have you trapped."

"Then I must read this book before two weeks," he said. He held up a volume entitled *This Side of Paradise*, by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

"Don't tell me how it ends," said Gretchen.

On the first Thursday of March, 1921, Weintraub returned to the Springfield library, having read the Fitzgerald book and planned his strategy with Gretchen. He waited until the business portion of the meeting was completed; then, while the other members of the club were arguing the merits of the book, he introduced a controversial point. "I wonder," he said, "if literature might not indicate alternatives which mankind seeks in the arena of politics and human relations."

The literary association members turned to look at him blankly. For a moment he had the great fear that not only would he fail in planting the seeds of Communist thought, but he would succeed only in branding himself a total fool.

"Ah, Herr Weintraub," said Mrs. Smith pleasantly. "I am glad that you are taking an active part in our discussion this week. I'm sure our fellow lovers of good books will be as interested as I am in hearing

your thoughts. Would you care to elaborate?"

Weintraub took a deep breath. "In reading this excellent fiction," he said slowly, "I was troubled by one or two ideas. These things are not confined to the writing of Mr. Fitzgerald, you must understand. These are concepts which have been growing in my mind since the beginning of the recent conflict. I wonder if it is ever good to use force to further moral ends. This is the sort of topic which is avoided in most literature. Certainly, these goals which we all desire are achieved by violence in some books, or are not achieved in others. But the use or nonuse of violence is not called into question. It is employed or not as the situation demands, without critical evaluation. I think we, as civilized beings, must take the time to make just that decision."

There was silence in the room. Finally, one elderly man spoke up. "I wonder what connection that has with Mr. Camberley's remark about the smut in Fitzgerald's writings," he said.

"I think Mr. Weintraub is entirely correct," said another voice. "I believe we ought to explore this in detail, and develop some sort of ethical program. Perhaps we could even send a copy of our conclusions to Washington."

"Well, then," said Mrs. Smith, "would Herr Weintraub wish to suggest any particular questions we might discuss?"

"Certainly," he said. "Is it *ever* permissible to kill? Is it ever right to steal, to lie, to commit adultery under any imaginable circumstance?"

"No, of course not," said a matronly woman in the front of the room.

"How about war?" asked the first elderly man. "Surely in wartime it is right to kill."

"It may only be necessary to kill, or expected of one to kill," said Weintraub. "It may not be right to kill."

The discussion became more complex. Weintraub carefully changed from side to side, never taking an inflexible position, leading the arguments both pro and con, making each member of the group less certain of the absolutes of right and wrong. By the end of the evening, he had succeeded in confusing these concepts in the minds of everyone who listened to him. The achievement was a great deal simpler than he would have thought possible.

Again, that night, he discussed his progress with Gretchen. She was very pleased. "There," she said proudly, "you see how easy it is to use these simple people in our work? Is it not rewarding? How foolish they are, and how grateful they seem for our first tentative offers of guidance."

"But where do I lead them?" asked Weintraub.

"They will need little direction, now," she said. "They will follow the obvious path. That is much the better, for they have not the slightest idea that they have been subverted. It is all voluntary. It will seem like recreation to them."

Gretchen's prediction came true. The small literary group channeled its collective energies into debating the traditional standards of conduct; their discussions soon grew away from the definite cases into abstract realms of pure speculation. This is where Weintraub felt the most secure, for nothing that was said could be pinned down and proven in practical terms. Generally he sat quietly and listened, putting in a word only now and then, to keep the flow of argument following along acceptable Party lines. At last, after several weeks of talk, some of the members began to write short essays and articles. A few were published in the Springfield weekly newspaper. Others were merely read aloud at the meetings of the Literary Association and criticized by the assembled members. Weintraub volunteered to draft a long presentation, summarizing the main points of these statements, which could then be submitted under the authorship of the Springfield Literary Association.

Using this as a first stepping-stone, Weintraub began making appointments to meet with various civic and cultural leaders in the area. He spoke at meetings of parents and teachers organizations. He lectured to library groups in nearby towns. As a Jerman citizen, his ideas received serious attention, although Weintraub never lost the feeling that he was resented on a barely hidden level. One day in early summer, he received an invitation from an important religious leader in the state. Gretchen was excited; it was the first tangible proof of their success and she was proud and happy, although it meant that Weintraub

would have to be away for several days.

Thus, a week later Weintraub visited another of America's crowded cities. He had arrived half an hour early for his appointment, and now stood nervously outside the office. The sign on the door read: JERMAN-AMERICAN COUNCIL OF PROTESTANT CLERGY, DR. HERBERT S. TIEFLANDER, PRESIDENT. Weintraub knocked on the door and entered.

Dr. Tieflander sat behind a large, bare desk. "Good afternoon," he said, "Herr...?"

"Weintraub. Ernst Weintraub. Good afternoon. It was very kind of you to take time out of your busy schedule to see me today."

"Not at all. What can I do for you, Herr Weintraub?"

"I have come to discuss with you certain aspects of Christian behavior which concern me and my associates."

"Really?"

"Yes, sir. It seems to us that the church is sadly behind the times, as far as social consciousness is concerned. Surely situations have changed since medieval days. People and circumstances are never simply black and white, as they have always been pictured in church literature. These are the nineteen twenties. Why does the church differ so radically from modern psychology, sociology, and even common sense?"

"I had no idea that such a discrepancy existed," said Dr. Tieflander, looking sincerely and earnestly across the polished desk top.

"Ah, but it does. Do you, personally, interpret the Bible literally?"

"Why, not precisely. The use of symbolism and metaphor is quite obvious."

"But the extent to which an individual considers Scripture as 'metaphor' varies, does it not?"

"Yes, of course."

"And who is to say what is correct? It follows, then, that behavior must be judged similarly, depending upon the circumstances. Things are relative. What is definitely wrong in one situation is sanctioned in another."

"Is this some sort of faddish new morality? Are you demanding a permissive society to replace the present ethical order?"

"I demand nothing," said Weintraub, steepling his forefingers and smiling. "I am only suggesting that the church might benefit from a more humanistic and socially aware perspective."

"I see. But we have neither the time nor the funds to become involved with secular matters."

"Your congregations would be anxious to help. That is where the church is needed most, remember. I think it is time for you to make a sally from your ivory towers."

"Perhaps you are right, after all."

"It would help to unite our troubled nations if the church discovered its role anew. The social restrictions of ancient times which necessitated clerical prohibitions are long since extinct. A Christian should be freed from outdated canons, and made to act responsibly and maturely, answerable only to the higher law within the individual."

"Do you have some printed material that presents these views?"

Weintraub opened his briefcase. "Certainly. You may keep these if you like."

"Thank you. I am very interested, and I would like to show them to some of my colleagues."

Weintraub shook hands with Dr. Tieflander and bid him good day. Outside the man's office, on the long marble staircase, Weintraub saw his own reflection in the mirrored panels of the wall. He grinned at himself, and held up his right thumb for victory.

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CHAPTER 10

Ernest and Darlaine made slow headway down Fulton Street, toward the intersection of Flatbush Avenue. The crowd was getting thicker, the pace slower. Ernest found himself muttering, and the sign of mental strain worried him. He took Darlaine's hand and pulled her behind him, out of the channel of the traffic, into Carlton Avenue. "I want to get out of that horde," he said. "Let's cut across town here. We can probably make better time going down De Kalb."

"Whatever you think, Ernie," said Darlaine.

Even the side streets were jammed now. It was the middle of the afternoon, and people were beginning to get upset. If they hadn't found the token booths by now, they must be hidden too well. The stations might all be too far away to do any good. It might be too late. It might really be too late. Ernest kept repeating that to himself, then realized what he was saying and shook his head angrily to clear the thoughts. But it always came back: it might already be too late.

They moved past a row of identical modapt buildings between Fulton and Greene Avenue, another row of modapt buildings between Greene and Lafayette. There was a school building on the next block, and Ernest led Darlaine through a gap in the wire fence around the playground. "Let's figure this out," he said to her.

"I don't see anything to figure," she said, panting.

"I don't either, but it isn't kind to mention it. We haven't seen the slightest flicker of excitement yet. That means there can't be a token station anywhere near where we've been. By now, people are going to be so worked up, there'll be a ring of brawling idiots ten blocks thick around every booth. Let's get up somewhere and look."

"You won't see anything in this city," she said. "The way these rows of buildings are, all you'll see is into the neighboring street. You'd have to be right on top of a station to see anything, and then you wouldn't have to get on the roof of a building, anyway."

"I know and I'm goin' get one," said a low, thick voice behind them. Ernest turned; there was a ragged derelict walking toward them across the playground. He was dressed in torn, stained black trousers and jacket, with a battered gray hat. He wasn't very old -- not much older than Ernest himself -- but his face and hands were in worse condition than his clothing. Ernest took Darlaine's hand and began to lead her away. The man waved at them drunkenly. "Wait a minute," he said. "I know them tokens."

"You know how to get a token?" asked Ernest. "Tell me, how do you get a token?"

"My sister works on the City Planning somethin'. They had to plan this, you know. Couldn't just do it right off, had to plan the whole thing, and my sister takes care of me, this time. Told me they was just going to use subway stations. Nobody's thinking about subways. Just go up to them and ask for your token. Nobody at all down there."

Darlaine stared at Ernest. "I wonder," she said. "Maybe that's why we haven't seen anything so far."

"I don't know," said Ernest. "You want to trust this guy?"

"You have anybody else to trust?" she asked.

"You have a dollar, maybe?" asked the drunk. "I need a dollar more for a place to sleep. I got my wine."

"Sorry," said Ernest. They hurried out of the playground toward the nearest subway entrance a few blocks away on De Kalb Avenue. They pushed harder than ever through the crowds, having a destination for the first time that day. Darlaine had a difficult time keeping up with Ernest. He was cursing loudly now, viciously fighting his way down the street. Almost an hour later, they had nearly reached the subway entrance.

"I hope that wino knew what he was talking about," he said.

"Sometimes they do," said Darlaine hopefully. "They have to, part of the time. It's just being able to sort it all out. Anyway, it made sense, sort of. Nothing else even makes that kind of sense."

"I'm hungry again."

"I'm thirsty," she said.

"I'm pretty damn tired, too. And I'm scared. And I'm fed up with people kicking my legs."

"When this is all over, maybe we ought to sue the Representatives. It would have been a whole lot better if we had just sent in post cards with our names and telephone numbers. They could have put them all in a big hopper and made drawings. Then they could call the lucky contestants during some television movie and ask simple questions. If you didn't win a token, you might at least end up with a dozen blouses or a waffle iron."

Ernest didn't laugh. "Remind me to tell you about my Mardi Gras idea," he said

"All right," said Darlaine, "but I think I can guess. It's still a better way to handle it than this. Somehow this situation is in awful taste. That's what it is. I'll bet they're a whole lot more orderly in London. I'll bet you can't hear a sound, over there. They know how to behave."

"You know what?" said Ernest.

"What?" she said. Darlaine pushed herself through the people who closed in behind Ernest's back. They rested at their goal, a sheltered doorway only a few yards from the subway.

"We got to get one of those tokens."

The girl laughed. "Yeah. Two. Where?"

Ernest wiped his upper lip with his wrist. "I don't know. Down there, I hope. You know what else?"

Darlaine sighed. "No." She looked out over the swarms of people. If they had, in fact, been in some sort of movement toward an unknown objective, their short rest had already lost the couple what advantage they had won in the last half hour.

"This crowd is really getting to me."

"Me, too," she said.

Ernest started to push back into the crowd, but the girl held his arm. "How many tokens do you need?" she asked.

"Huh? You have some? All this time?"

"No," she said, looking past his shoulder. "I just wondered."

Ernest hesitated. "One. Just one. Why?"

"I only need one, too, I guess."

Ernest laughed. "That makes things much simpler, doesn't it?"

A couple of trash cans had been shoved down the stairway into the subway, and garbage and litter was piling up on them. Among the cans and bags Ernest could see a motionless arm. While he stared down into the dark, cavernous stairwell, the crowd behind him shifted and threw Darlaine against him, knocking both of them off their feet. They tumbled heavily down the flight of stairs, landing painfully in the mass of garbage.

"I needed that," said Darlaine. "I really needed that."

"At least we got here," said Ernest. He stood up and helped the girl to her feet. He kicked some of the trash aside and uncovered the corpse of a small girl, about twelve years old.

"She got here, too," said Darlaine, looking at the body with disgust.

"I wonder if she was trying to get out of the station," said Ernest. "I just wonder if she has a token."

"You're not going to look through her clothes," said Darlaine. "There's an easy way of finding out." She pointed past the girl's body into the dimly lit subway station. Ernest nodded and stepped over the corpse. Darlaine cursed and followed.

There was no one else in the station. Ernest's steps echoed from the moist walls as he hurried to the token booth. It was closed, dark, empty. He wouldn't admit how much he had counted on the drunk's being right. He didn't want to acknowledge how much the disappointment weakened him. He turned to Darlaine.

"Well, that's that. It's another rumor we can cross off our list."

"Maybe not," she said. "I don't suppose they'd be passing out shelter tokens in every subway station in New York City. That's a lot of stations."

"Well, how the hell are we going to find out which stations are the right ones?" She wouldn't answer. Silently they retraced their steps, through the abandoned underground passage, past the morbid hint of

what would soon happen to all of them.

They cut across Fort Greene Park, where the open spaces were not as thickly jammed with people. There was little likelihood that a token station would be anywhere in the area, but Darlaine thought the government might set one up for the benefit of the CAS forces billeted near the East River. Ernest had no objection to her idea. They stopped to rest twice, for a few minutes each time.

As they merged with the street-molded streams of people on the far side of the park, Ernest succumbed to his real fear once more. He viewed everything from a frightening distance; the scene flickered like a bad splice in a reel of film. The world was sliding away, out of control, and he couldn't tell himself anything that eased the panic. It meant nothing that the real world was never in his control to begin with. He wanted to cry, but that passed into a sick nightmare feeling. He wanted to scream, or hurt himself, or somehow do anything to regain his sense of vitality. But the teeming streets and the shouting, brawling people scared him again and again.

"Gretchen," he thought, "I'm with you now. For the first time in many, many months we're together. I know what you feel, I understand what you're afraid of, and it can't do either me or you any good. It's a sick joke, Gretchen, and I hate you for it. And you're sitting around that rotten tin room, staring at the flat set, watching the gray snow falling on every station, hating me because I forced you to admit that there was something to be afraid of. Hold Stevie for me, Gretchen. It's too late for me, now. It's too late for everybody. I think it's even too late for those sons of bitches who found the token stations."

He looked around. They were in a neighborhood completely unfamiliar to him. He wanted to weep, but instead he began punching a woman in front of him. Darlaine caught his arm and he whirled, ready to attack her. He saw the contempt in her expression and calmed himself.

"You know what?" asked Darlaine.

"Yeah."

"We're not getting anywhere here, either."

"Well, goddamn it, what do you want to do about it? Wherever those stations are, if they aren't pretty damn near here, they're not going to do us one bit of good."

"You know the bench in the park where we stopped?"

"Yeah," said Ernest suspiciously.

"I'll meet you there tonight."

"What?"

"If we split up, we'll stand a better chance. Two of us looking. Right now I'm duplicating your effort. And I'm slowing you down. If I find one, I'll tell you. Or you'll tell me."

"You running off to meet somebody now? How many times you done this before? How many other guys are you working with?"

"Three," said Darlaine quietly.

"Am I supposed to trust you? I mean, if one of those guys tells you where you can get a token, are you planning on telling the other three of us?"

Darlaine looked hurt. "Of course I would. You should know me by now."

"Yeah, I do. And when we all get tokens, who are you going off with? You're lucky, you know that? You got more to bargain with."

Suddenly, everything he had ever said to a woman took on a new dimension. Every word that had passed from a woman to him became a kind of emotional merchandise. His own feelings, products of his finer motives or, more frequently, merely abstractions of his physical urgings, became nothing more than a debased currency. No one, male or female, had ever dealt with him on more than a simple level of trade; he had provided something -- security, emotional gratification, money -- and the other had provided simulations of friendship or love. Gretchen stood out as an exception. Gretchen was too simple, too unskilled to compete in that kind of market. It was too futile a thing to cheat her. One could deal with Gretchen only on her own dull but basic plane. And for that reason, Ernest regretted the time he had spent -- wasted, gambled, refunded -- in return for approximations of her shrill, honest feelings.

"I'll stick with you," said Darlaine.

"Right," said Ernest. "You want me to believe that. Well, I'll be there at ten tonight."
"I love you, Ernest."
"I'll see you."

-=*=-

Meanwhile 5

Night crept westward, sweeping more of Africa under her trailing cloak. The poor of the city happily gave up their occupations and hurried to their homes to join their families for the evening meal. The wealthy few considered the entertainments and casually made their choices. Along the city's central avenue, shops closed up and iron shutters were locked over display windows. The marketing noises stilled, until Ernst could hear the bugle calls and shouted orders of the *Gaish* as they drilled on the sand before the city's northern gate. The day's liquor had had its desired effect, and so the noises failed to remind Ernst even of Czerny's anger.

"There seem to be no birds in this city," thought Ernst. "That is reasonable. For them to abide in this vat of cultural horrors, they must first fly over that great, empty, dead world beyond the gates. Sand. What a perfect device to excise us from all hope of reentering the world. We are shut up like lepers, in a colony across the sand, and easily, gratefully forgotten. The process of forgetting is readily learned. First we are forgotten by our families, our nations. Then we are forgotten by those we've hated, our enemies in contiguous countries. At last, when we have alighted here in our final condition, we forget ourselves. Children must be hired to walk the streets of this city, reminding us of our names and our natures, otherwise we should disappear entirely, as we have dreamed and prayed for so many years. But that, after all, is not the reason we have been sent here. We have come not to die, but to exist painfully apart. Death would be a cleansing for us, a discourtesy to our former friends." Ernst looked around him. The twilight made pleasant shadows on the stone-paved street around the square. Some of the shadows moved. "Hey!" shouted Ernst experimentally. The shadows burst, flew up, flapped away in many directions. "Pigeons," thought Ernst. "I forgot pigeons. But that hardly ruins my thesis. Pigeons are a necessity in a city. They were sitting here, asleep on the sand, when the first parched exiles arrived on this spot. The abundantly foolish idea of building a town must have occurred to those unwanted knaves only after seeing the pigeons."

The city was certainly one of immigrants, thought Ernst. As he had escaped from a crazy Europe, so had Czerny. So had Sandor Courane. Ieneth and her false flower, Ua, had fled from some mysterious wild empire. Could it be that every person sheltered within the city's granite walls had been born elsewhere? No, of course not; there must be a large native population. These must be the ones most stirred by the absurd wrath of the *Gaish*, for who else had enough interest? Ernst lived in the city only because he had nowhere else to go. He had stopped briefly in Gelnhausen and the nearby village of Frachtdorf. From Bremen he had sailed to the primitive Scandinavian settlements that bordered the northern sea. He had resided for short terms in England and France, but those nations' murderous nationalism made him run once more. Each time he settled down, it was in a less comfortable situation. Here on the very lip of Africa, the city was the final hope of those who truly needed to hide.

A small voice whispered behind Ernst. It was Kebap, the young fraud. "I knew of another city like this one," said the boy. "It was in Armenia. Of course, there wasn't sand all around to keep us in. This town was imprisoned by its own lack of identity. There were perhaps fifty thousand Turks living there, of which several may have been my true father. Indeed, 'several' hardly does justice to the whiteness of my mother's eyes, or the perfection of her skin, at least in those days of a decade past. But I must be modest in all accounts, so that later claims may be made with greater hope of acceptance."

"You are wise beyond your years, Kebap," said Ernst sadly.

"That is not difficult at the age of nine," said the boy. "Nevertheless, I continue. There were perhaps a tenth again as many Armenians, and some Greeks. Persians passed through often, bearing objects which they could not sell. These men rode on the backs of bad-smelling horses and camels of a worse reputation, and we always deviled them continuously until they departed again.

"The houses in this Armenian wonder had flat roofs above stone walls, and it was the custom to grow grass upon the roofs. Naturally, with the best fodder in the neighborhood up there, our sheep and calves grazed above our heads. When we stood on the hillsides not far from this town, the houses were invisible against the surrounding plain. I forget what the name of this city was. One day my mother and several of my uncles took me on a long walk; we packed a lunch of cold meat and water, for the Persians had arrived early that morning and we wanted to escape their presence. We climbed far into the hills, so that it was almost time for evening *wagib* when we stopped. I was asleep, carried by an uncle, on the return journey. I was told the next day that our city could not be found. Every time a herd of sheep was investigated, it was discovered to be firmly on the ground, not upon our familiar rooftops. We wandered the hills and the nearby country for weeks, searching for that disguised city. At last, we arrived here."

"Your tactics were shrewd, Kebap," said Ernst. "That *is* very difficult to believe."

"It is fully documented."

"I shall have to examine your records someday." Ernst turned to see the boy, but there was no one there. "He is a quick monster indeed," thought Ernst.

The city held many sorts of wonderful things, objects rare in Europe and prized by the slaves and the poor. There was a large colony of artists, and their pottery and sculpture was famous all over the world, though not so much so that it attracted either tourists or trade. At this time of day, the craftsmen of the city would be heading for the bars with their day's earnings, eager for the less tangible beauties of wine and poetry. Ernst was bored by clay pots, and he had little enough of his own art to trade.

He had often tried to write poems or short, terse essays about the city, but each time he had given up in failure. He couldn't seem to capture the true emotions he experienced, feelings different in subtle, unpoetic ways from the vaguely similar emotions he had known while living in Europe. The poems could not reflect the pervasive sense of isolation, of eternal un-cleanness, of a soul-deep loss of personality; these things descended upon a European only hours after arriving at the dune-guarded gates of the city.

He had early on made the mistake of showing some of these frustrated scribblings to M. Gargotier. The proprietor had read them politely, muttering the words under his breath as he traced his progress down the page with a grimy finger. When he finished, he had handed the paper back to Ernst without a word, and stood silently, evidently uncomfortable but unwilling to make a final judgment. Soon Ernest stopped asking M. Gargotier to read the things, and both men seemed happier for it.

Dusk settled in on the shoulders of the city. Ernst sat at his table with his bits of paper and his little supper of cheese and apples. Around him the city prepared for night, but he didn't care. Customarily each evening after supper, he declared the day productive; reaching this point, he ordered bourbon and water.

"It is time to relax, now," thought Ernst. "It is time to pack away for the day the tedious, essential hatreds and hopes. It is time to sit back and bring out my informal thoughts. How I am growing to despise these memories, even more than their subjects. The very issue of my thoughts is soiled by this city, so that had I known the dearest saint of Rome in my youth, I could not think on her now with anything but scorn and malice. I am not intrigued by my musings, and their temper is becoming too acid for my unpassionate self.

"Eugenie, you seem to be suffering the most, though even now, at this unofficial time of day, I can still summon up nothing but a tepid dislike. You must hold a special position of disfavor in my heart; that is your fate, grow used to it. Marie, you look lovely tonight. A constellation of false memories enriches you. If I do not look at them too closely, I can successfully pretend a few moments of joy. Permit me this indulgence, Marie. I will do the same for you, if ever I'm given the opportunity."

The people on the sidewalk were rushing by now, their faces marked by an intensity of purpose that

was never apparent during the day's business hours. In the city, one pursued amusement relentlessly, as a plague victim might follow a hapless doctor in hope of miracles. At night, with only the cold cosmetic of darkness, the city slipped on a shabby mask of gaiety, but no one criticized. Ernst smiled to himself, nodded to the grim-faced celebrants, observed in a clinical fashion the desperate snatchings after diversion.

It was a dangerous thing to pray that a lasting release might be had from the day's troubles. Each day was so like every previous day that the pleasures pilfered during the night cheapened with the sun's rising. It was as hopeless a thing as the Bridge of the Crazy Berber, who cried for many years to the people of the city that a bridge should be built -- a gigantic bridge, the world's largest suspension bridge, an engineering marvel to catch the imagination of all civilized people. It would rise from the north gate of the city, span the immense waste of sand, cross the distant range of mountains, the short strip of barren plain, the rolling leagues of the Mediterranean Sea, to end at last, abruptly, curiously, on the island of Malta. Of course, the bridge would not be built directly northward, in the shortest line possible; to reach Malta, the bridge would have to stretch diagonally across many hundreds of miles of Africa's dead face. It would be a hardship, indeed, for anyone traveling along that bridge. The Crazy Berber chose Malta as the terminus evidently only because that island had been the birthplace of his mother.

Many of the people hurried along the avenue to the south, toward the Chinee quarter, where another eccentric resident of the city, a weary, stranded Breulen duke, had long ago built a fantastic parody of various memorable sections of Singapore. Like many things in the city, this dollop of Asia seemed romantic at first, but soon distressed the observer with a richness of unwholesome detail. The Breulen nobleman had loved Singapore, the story went, or at least, according to other accounts, had been fascinated by written descriptions and never actually visited the island at all. In any event, he, like so many others of his class, at last took up residence in the lonely African city. His project to reproduce the more spectacular attributes of Singapore was no less mad than the Crazy Berber's bridge, but in this case the duke had the wealth to accomplish his goal.

Now, the new Singapore wore the decaying garments that clothed all the city. The imitation Tiger Balm Gardens were uncared-for -- a tangle of brittle growths perverted from their natural forms by the arid climate, the heat, and the genius of the city itself. There was a tumbling-down replica of the Raffles Hotel, but there was no mystery there -- merely the scorpions scuttling across the littered parquet. Street dining stalls after the Singapore fashion once dominated a narrow alley, which was now used as a public open-air toilet. The Breulen duke died during the construction of a likeness of Singapore's Happy World; he was to have been buried beneath the *joget* platform, all of the park which was finished at the time of his death, but his corpse was never located.

Following the avenue to the north, the strollers would reach the amusement quarter, where models of more familiar scenes from other lands dug at their buried homesickness. Ernst could see the brightly colored strings of lights go on, shining through the gaps between trees and buildings, diffused by mist and distance.

A canal ran parallel to the avenue beyond the affluent section. On its farther bank were restaurants, bars, and casinos. Women danced naked in all of them, though they attracted few patrons. Diamonds were sold by old men in tents, and every building had a few young whores in the front window. There were areas set aside for dozens of different sports: bocci, tennis, and miniature golf facilities were the most popular. Everything prohibited from sale within the central city was available here: fine leather goods, lace, gold and silverware, expensive woods made into furniture -- alone or in combination with steel or plastic -- perfumes, silks, rugs, every sort of luxury.

Floodlights went on, illuminating models of the ruins of Rome, Staeca, and of Athens. The replica of the Schloss Brühl opened its gates, complete with exact representations of the ceiling painting by Nicholas Stüber, and the furnishings in white and gold of the Dining Room, Music Room, and State Bedroom upstairs. The large beggars' marketplace of the city was lit by torches. Though containing little merchandise of value, it was famed for its bouillabaisse.

Ernst had never seen any of this, but he had heard stories. He preferred to spend his evenings

dedicated to serious drinking.

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CHAPTER 11

Ernest was alone. In the midst of a crowd of thirty million people -- a crowd that extended from him and ran down Myrtle Avenue to Flatbush in an unbroken stream, across the Manhattan Bridge to that island borough, up to the Bronx, back down through Queens to meet the same crowd again in Brooklyn -- squeezed down among all those people, Ernest was more alone than he had ever dreamed he could be.

"This is a terrific way to spend an afternoon," he said aloud. He was moving along the edge of the mob, only a few feet from the apartment buildings across the sidewalk. These were not the modern modapt containers, but the pre-modular, fixed-site tenement houses of the middle twentieth century, built for and still rented to low-income families. While these projects had been acceptable dwelling units three quarters of a century before, they had since deteriorated into the worst sort of slum. Ernest had never seen so much decay and poverty concentrated into so small an area. He would never have come into the neighborhood but for the pressures of the crowd and his own growing madness.

"You could always go home," said a man who had walked next to Ernest for some time.

"I doubt that," said Ernest. "I'd have to fight this crowd about thirty blocks."

"I think this is a fitting way to close out our earthly reign," said the man. "When the age of reptiles came to an end, it was like the final episode after eighteen seasons of *Crime Nurse*. We're doing it all in one flashy stereo spectacular."

"God knows I didn't do anything to deserve this."

"Of course not," said the man, laughing. "The idea of sin and retribution is just an attempt to hide behind the shield of superstition. You are trying to find rational causes where there aren't any. If you or I do not get tokens, it won't be because we are more evil than those who do get tokens. My wife, here, had some thoughts on that subject a few hours ago. Honey, I'd like you to meet Mr., uh, Mr.,..."

"Smith," said Ernest.

"Hello," said the man's wife. She looked completely exhausted. She was staggering beside her husband, leaning on him now and then, staring from side to side dazedly. "Let us speak today of goodness," she said. She spoke in a dull, toneless voice, as if she were giving a recitation. Ernest wondered how often during the day her husband had urged her to repeat her speech. "Does anyone still believe in it? Can anyone cite me an example of goodness?" Here, she trailed off into an unintelligible mutter. Just as suddenly her voice rose again, startling Ernest. "God has given over the rule of the world to his subordinate angels, and they have proven to be traitors. The very seat of goodness has been overthrown. We must make the best of what we have. Order has gone. Morality is irrelevant. All that is left is *us*." Again, for a few uncomfortable seconds, Ernest couldn't make out what she was saying. After a while she continued, this time nearly shouting her words. No one nearby in the multitude seemed to notice, though. "There is *only* teleology. [Muttered phrase.] Life without further goals beyond selfish pleasures. [Muttered phrase.] All that we do, all work, all play, all cultural, organizational, intellectual, bestial activity represents nothing more than an effort to rid ourselves temporarily of that oppressive fact. [Long muttered passage.] Hope. And hope is an illusion, a romance. The universe is emptier than we are, my friends. There is no universal Good waiting for you to pass your scabby human trials. There is no Good at all." She dropped her clenched fists to her sides. She began to weep, and her husband stroked her hair, light blonde hair worn in tight curls.

"Your wife looks pretty beat," said Ernest. "My wife wouldn't even come with me. She'd rather sit

home and pretend she wasn't ever going to die. I kind of admire your wife's courage."

"Courage sometimes isn't enough," said the man angrily. "Some people just aren't born with the right defense mechanisms. Like my wife. She never learned that there are always jokers like you around, trying to take advantage of her. She's a good person, but she never learned to say no. Look at her. She's almost hysterical, because people like you keep sniping at her. Isn't this lousy farce bad enough, without your petty, malicious tricks?"

"Mister, you're crazy," said Ernest. "I don't even know what you're talking about."

The other man didn't answer. He glared furiously at Ernest, and began flailing at him with both fists. Ernest tried to step back, but the people around him wouldn't move. There wasn't enough room either to fight or retreat. The stranger was making small, odd noises in this throat; Ernest was sickened, but he had to defend himself. He caught one of the man's wrists, and with his other hand punched the man's throat. The stranger doubled over, choking. His wife cried out and collapsed on her husband's struggling body.

"What did you do that for?" shouted a woman walking behind them.

"He's a psycho," said somebody else. "There's bound to be a bunch of them around today."

"He damn well better keep away from me." The voices around Ernest were rising -- louder, angrier, full of contempt and loathing. He had become, after all, a target. He was shoved and beaten; he bent over, trying to protect himself. He fought to stay on his feet, knowing that only death would result if he fell to the ground beneath the uncountable feet of the crowd. The mob was taking out its day's worth of frustration on him, and all that Ernest could do was try to get away. But the crowd was too big; there was no getting away, nowhere to go. Instinct drove him to the edge of the sidewalk, where the fringe of the rabble was thinner. Already those who had been involved in beating him were making their way down the street, passing him by in their aimless, massive search.

Ernest was hurt and bleeding. He rested against the side of one of the tenement buildings, huddled up to the wall in order not to be swept along with the slowly moving masses. He took a couple of deep breaths, trying to clear his head. He looked up; the sky was still dark and overcast, though the storm that threatened had never happened. Above and behind him was a broad picture window, the sort of luxury that had disappeared with the coming of the more mobile apartment modules. The first floor window was just a few inches above his eye level; standing behind the glass was a young black woman, naked, pressed against the window. Her arms were spread out wide, and her head was turned and pushed tightly to the glass. Cloudy smudges obscured parts of her face. Ernest moved back toward the street a little. He stared up at her and smiled.

She looked at him, twisting her head an inch or two, pivoting on her cheek, crushing her nose to the glass. She moved slowly, as if she were in a trance. "She's as crazy as the rest of us," thought Ernest. "Just because she's inside and we're out here, that doesn't make her any better off."

The woman drew her hands slowly to her sides, then moved them up her belly and cupped her small breasts. She offered them to Ernest. "I wonder if she thinks this is real," he thought. "We're all on the other side of the glass. Maybe she thinks she's watching television. If anything unusual happens in our lives, it happens on television."

He smiled; she did not. He pointed to his torn jacket, to his bruised face, to the thin line of blood drying on his chin. She nodded, very slowly. She let go of one breast and pointed to her own mouth. She opened her lips in a horrible grimace; her teeth were broken and bloody. A dark trickle spilled down past her lower lip. Her free hand slid slowly down her body, her fingers at last twisting in the dark hairs. Her hips moved slowly against the window.

"She's really crazy," muttered Ernest. "She's not too bad looking, but she's out of her tree." Ernest waved good-bye. She didn't seem to notice. He picked up a handful of pebbles and tossed them lightly to the window. She didn't react. He shrugged and turned back to the crowd. The man who had caused the riot a few minutes before was waiting for him.

"Are you quite finished?" asked the man.

"What's your trouble?" asked Ernest warily.

"My wife wasn't enough for you, eh? She's dead, now, you know. You killed my wife. I can't even

find her body." The man turned to the street. "This guy's a sex killer," he shouted. "He raped my wife, right here in the street. He killed her." Then he attacked Ernest again; others in the crowd joined him eagerly. Ernest had no time to be horrified. He drew his body together and closed his mind to the assault. After a while, he heard the man's raving voice, though he couldn't make out the words. Ernest felt several people pick him up and start to swing him back and forth. He opened his eyes. He saw the naked woman staring at him. Details of her face dug into his consciousness: the blood flowing freely from her mouth; her eyes, opened impossibly wide; her head rising and dipping rhythmically. He heard a scream; the hands holding him threw him, flung him at the woman. He was suddenly free, for only a partial second relieved of all responsibility, all weight, all pain of living. Then he heard the splintering of glass, though he felt no shock of impact. He heard his own crying and the shrill laughter of the woman.

He looked up. It was Gretchen. "How did you get here?" he said in a stunned voice. "Is this what you do during the day?"

She looked down at him sadly. "Ernie," she said, "every time you yell at me like that, it makes me feel sorry for you. I don't take it personally. I can't, not after these last few years. It stops hurting after I think about why you do it."

"Why *do* I do it?"

"You're afraid of me, aren't you, Ernie? Or you're afraid of yourself. You're afraid that you'll do something too wrong one of these days, and then you won't have somebody to come home to. You don't have to worry, Ernie. I'm not as small as that."

He said nothing for a moment. She stood a few feet away from him, her head cocked to one side; he knew she was only a couple of seconds away from making her pitiful clucking noises. He stood up and brushed himself off. "You mean you're not as small as I am," he said. "That's what you were going to say, wasn't it?"

"Ernie, you're forever putting words in my mouth, giving me rotten motives for doing things. It doesn't make me look any worse. But the trouble is, it makes you look terrible to yourself. And you take it out on me. And the whole thing starts all over again. If you were only a little more sure of yourself, we could have a great life. Just like in the beginning."

"We never had a great life," he said bitterly. "It took me all this time to realize it. It was never so terrific. You just had me swindled for a while. With sex, with going out to eat, and going to movies. It was like being in high school all over again. But you can't do that forever. I don't think you'll ever learn that. After a while, it began to sink in just what kind of a nonperson you are."

She smiled. "I could still swindle you if I had to, Ernie." She started unbuttoning her shirt. "You used to like these." She touched her breasts, looking at her husband in amusement. She began moving her hips in a slow, suggestive motion. Then, suddenly, she stopped. "But I won't. No more. That's not the answer at all; at least you're right, there. But I can't do anything else until you straighten yourself out. I wish you'd hurry. Stevie's getting too old."

Ernest woke up painfully. "What is that supposed to mean?" he said hoarsely. He was lying just as he had fallen, in a clutter of broken glass. The wetness he felt on the floor beneath his face was blood. He got to his hands and knees. His chest, his arms, his legs were bruised and swollen. His face had been badly beaten, and his eyes were nearly closed.

It was very dark. The apartment was deserted; Ernest idly wondered what had happened to the naked black woman. Already his dream of Gretchen was fading. He could remember little of what had gone on in it, or what it could have meant. He sighed heavily and stood up.

The window was broken in a jagged silhouette. Beyond it, the avenue was still filled with people, all moving restlessly toward the downtown shopping area. They wouldn't give up, although Ernest was sure that during the day many individuals had simply quit, unable to stand the pressures and the disappointment. He felt his jaw; it did not seem that any bones had been broken and, in a way, he wasn't sorry about what had occurred. Now he could go back out there with a justified attitude of ruthlessness. The last tatters of humanity had been ripped from him by the mob's angry hands. He was sorry about it, but the decision had been made for him. At this time of night, in this situation, that was the way things

stood.

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Meantime F
March 1922.

Gretchen's timetable was strict, allowing no margin either for error or personal comfort. Weintraub knew virtually nothing about the precise methods she contemplated, but he had a good general knowledge of the steps they would both follow in infiltrating and weakening the spiritual, economic, and political framework of America. As time passed, the Americans lost their resentment of the Jermans, and that fact made Weintraub's chores simpler. He found that the Americans were surprisingly eager to listen to his ideas, even though he often contradicted his audience's cherished Constitution. He had lived in the country more than two years, but he was still amazed that Americans actually upheld and defended the freedoms they were guaranteed; in Europe, it had often been the custom to disregard casually the fine print in ancient governmental documents.

The Springfield Literary Association then became too small an arena for Weintraub's activities. Using the influence of Dr. Tieflander, Weintraub was soon addressing interested gatherings of religious leaders from all over Ostamerika. As the result of one of these lectures, he was invited to deliver a guest sermon in a church in Rhode Island. This was just the opportunity he and Gretchen had been hoping for. When Weintraub arrived on that Sunday morning, he learned that in the congregation were nearly a dozen ministers from neighboring communities who had come to hear him speak.

"It used to arouse my curiosity," said Weintraub, gazing out nervously over the assembled worshipers, "that I am so often sought out by members of the clerical world. I found this puzzling because, after all, my ideas are rather obviously political in nature. I use the past tense for the reason that, a short time ago, my lovely wife stumbled upon the meaning of the riddle. It is, simply, that all of our political thoughts, our political theories which we attempt in typically imperfect, human fashion to put into practice in our various governments, are based directly on our religious teachings. It is not merely that political theory is a kind of highly refined theological study; no, politics *is* religion, made secular and substantive. Our governments order themselves according to prevailing senses of right and wrong, according to moral principles derived from the religious beliefs of the constituency. Therefore, changes in political thinking reflect changes in religious temperament."

Weintraub paused; he saw Gretchen sitting several pews from the front. "I am, as I said, an agitator for social reforms. We are all aware of certain injustices built into governmental systems. We have all thought that these faults, being historically rooted, were immune to change. I do not believe that any longer, not since my stay in this most blessed of all nations. I have seen and experienced what is sometimes mockingly called 'the American way of life,' and I have chosen to spend the rest of my own life pursuing it rather than return to the land of my heritage. I offer no new complete social system. I am not crying out for the tearing down of one form of government in favor of another equally infirm order. I merely hope to awaken you to the existence of great possibilities, and it is my good fortune to be able to use the church to further my ends." There was a crackle of applause in the congregation. Weintraub took the opportunity to catch Gretchen's eye; she had her hand over her mouth, trying desperately to keep from laughing out loud.

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August 1923.

"I don't believe that eliminating deterrents can possibly lead to a decline in criminal behavior," said an attorney with whom Weintraub was having lunch.

"You persist in misunderstanding me, Mr. Davidsohn," said Weintraub. The luncheon, in honor of the ten recipients of the 1922 Springfield Civic Awards -- including Weintraub -- had ended nearly an hour before, but still a large number of the Springfield Bar Association's members remained to debate. "I'm not saying that we ought to remove categorically all penalties for statutory infractions. No, what I suggest is that we take a closer look at those very statutes themselves. I believe that it is possible to overlegislate ourselves into a highly restrictive form of government."

"Where, then, would you begin?" asked Davidsohn.

Weintraub shook his head. "I am not a lawyer," he said. "I am only a philosopher. But I truly think that what was thought to be socially wrong a century ago may not be so today. I think we ought to review our legal structure critically, and remove the penalties for those offenses which the people, in their changing attitudes, have come to accept."

"That is a very dangerous course," said another attorney. "Merely because our young people are indulging themselves in immoral pursuits, activities which we were wisely forbidden at their age, and because we haven't the strength of character similarly to enforce restrictions, that does not mean that we ought to *legalize* that behavior. That would only have the effect of increasing the amount of this scandal."

"We are entering a highly subjective area," said Weintraub, smiling. "Soon we'll be arguing our respective definitions of right and wrong. And, after all, our laws only reflect the definitions of the majority. When those ideas change, the laws change. That is what I've always said. I say now that we must prepare for a revolution in thinking, and a revolution in legal interpretation."

"I pray to God it won't happen while I'm still around to watch," said Davidsohn.

"We shall see," said Weintraub quietly.

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Weintraub sat in his sunny living room, reading aloud an editorial he had written for the Springfield *Morning Call*. "'It has been several years now since the end of the World War. We who were born in Jermany have no feeling left of 'victory,' although our troops and our governmental assistants remain in Ostamerika to complete this nation's reconstruction. Similarly, the people of this, my adopted home, no longer carry the psychological stain of defeat. We have all grown beyond such trivial distinctions.'"

"That is very good," said Gretchen. "You have an inborn talent for this. I have told you so since the beginning, but you never listen to me."

"I am naturally modest," said Weintraub. "'Perhaps, therefore, it is time that we join together in the grand project of all mankind: eliminating the failures and prejudices entombed within our ancient attitudes. With the collapse of National Socialism in Jermany, after the supremely foolish attempted *Putsch* of Herr Hitler and his henchmen, we have had demonstrated to us that hate and racial falsehoods can never be used to found a social order. Human beings will not stand for it.

"'But let us show our charity. Let us not fall into the Nazis' own trap. Our world is changing; patterns of behavior crumble, to be replaced by new ones. The role of women grows each day; our feelings about marriage, family, and morality alter, even as we watch; the right of the individual to choose his own life is now universally accepted. Let us extend these freedoms. Let us put our faith in the judgment of our fellow citizens. Socialism, Communism, even Fascism all have loyal adherents. It cannot be our stand in a free

nation to deny these men the right to preach their foreign creeds. It cannot be our stand to deny our fellows the right to listen. We have proven our maturity as a people; we have nothing to fear from the moral exercise of tolerance.

"'The Golden Age of Man is at hand. We have only to quench forever our obsolete doubts to enter it together.'"

"That's more than sufficient," said Gretchen with a mocking laugh. "If anything, it ought to make everyone turn to Fascism in disgust."

"Then we'd just have to start over," he said.

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September 1926.

Weintraub paced the narrow stage in the auditorium of the Springfield Senior High School. He was addressing a meeting of the school's Council on World Affairs. "Now, it seems to me," he said, "that as soon as a person falls back on simple name-calling, he's lost the force of his argument." He was referring to a charge by a reader of the Springfield newspaper that Weintraub was an "avowed Communist."

"This is not a large town," he said. "I'm sure that many of you know me personally; if not, then you may know me by reputation, at least. I shop in your fathers' stores. I come to your fathers for medical help, dental care, legal advice. I'm not some kind of strange political creature. The one thing that sets me apart from most other people is that I'm vocal about my political and ethical ideals.

"Now, being a Communist, which I'm not, used to be a horrible thing. Nowadays, thanks to the activities of our more enlightened citizens, a person has more opportunity for self-determination. Before I start an epidemic of letter writing condemning me for preaching Communism, let me just make my point and get off this stage. I suppose you're as bored as I am nervous. Anyway, it's your generation that will soon inherit the duty of maintaining the liberty that has always been America's greatest possession. Let there be no doubt that I believe utterly in guarding our freedom. If making sure anyone has the right to speak his mind, no matter what minority opinion he represents, is the hallmark of 'Communism,' well, you young people will be the ones who have to redefine things."

Weintraub finished his speech and waved. As he started down the steps of the stage, the students jumped to their feet and began applauding wildly.

Gretchen met him at the exit and gave him a warm hug.

"We are several months ahead of schedule, I estimate," she said. "We have now successfully enlisted the aid of many groups of theoretically anti-Communist people, all supporting those very causes which lead directly to victory for the Party. These students will be of great value in creating political upheaval here in the next few years. Though they may not vote themselves, they will do a great part of the work for the candidates we shall endorse."

"I think it was the vague promise of sexual freedom that did it," said Weintraub wryly. "That seems to work on everybody. Even the clergy."

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June 1927.

Gretchen finished drying the dinner dishes and tossed the dish towel to Weintraub. "Sometimes, dear,"

she said, "I wish I could figure a way to liberate everyone from everything."

"That's simple," he said. "You've mentioned the ice ax to me many times."

"That isn't what I mean, and you know very well that it isn't. The one fallacy which tempers our Party's reasoning is that not everyone will fulfill his duties when left unattended. Without certain tangible inducements, or the dreams of extravagant profit, many people will stop working. I fear that I, myself, am of that kind. I hate doing the dishes."

"That is why I do them for you as often as you wish."

"Only because you're a good Communist, not because you're a good husband."

Weintraub smiled affectionately. "We've never been married. How could I be a good husband? Anyway, you're the most industrious person I've ever known."

"I am lazy. I work hard only so that eventually someone else may be duped into doing my labors. Do you know that Women's Study Group?"

"Yes, of course," said Weintraub. "The one you started last autumn."

"Mrs. Murray organized it. I only gave the idea to her. Nevertheless, they passed a resolution today. They're going to support that young man, Spencyr."

Weintraub thought for a moment. "The one who was arrested for selling obscene literature?"

"Yes," said Gretchen, "that Irish book. One of my protegees in the study group gave a little speech about freedom of expression. While they don't approve of what Spencyr was doing, they object to the infringement of his rights. That's the official position. And I didn't need to make use of the usual preliminary hints. See, my students are beginning to take care of me in my old age."

"Wait a minute," said Weintraub in mock outrage. "I won't be purged! It's the ice ax or nothing!"

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October 1928.

"We have the various churches in Springfield working for us," said Weintraub. "They regularly encourage liberal thinking and loose interpretation of formerly rigid moral standards. Without our inducement, several local clergymen have preached tolerance and even respect for Communism. Even better for our purposes, they have permitted the youth of the community to engage in just those activities which you have been introducing. Premarital sex, liquor, and even opiates receive less attention from the authorities, for the churches remind them of the imminent flowering of human perfection. Given an atmosphere of freedom, our youth are supposed to choose the path of wisdom. I doubt whether the path I envision is the same one our friends in the clergy foresee."

"Things are beginning to come together," said Gretchen. "The seeds we've so carefully planted already have sprouted. Soon, the fruit will be ready for the picking."

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CHAPTER 12

As the hours passed, and as the night deepened, the crowds became hysterical. No one knew for sure how long they might have left. Was the disaster natural, on a cosmic scale, coming one year, five years in the future? Or was it man-made? Could it come this very night, at midnight? No one still on the streets seemed to have heard of anyone who had managed to obtain a token. Those fortunate persons

who had stumbled onto the locations of the token stations kept their secrets. Soon, everyone learned to ignore the sudden, excited news: *Under the bridge! No one would think to look there. The dugout at Shea Stadium! A perfect place!* Everyone listened skeptically but, as the situation was *that* desperate, and as everyone was *that* unnerved, the rumors were passed...

The tremendous pressure of the crowd disappeared. It was no longer straining in one direction, toward Brooklyn's deteriorating commercial center. Now Ernest was caught in sudden flurries of movement, spontaneous currents whipping out from the main channel, leading him at oblique angles to his path, down dark residential streets, across brick-strewn empty lots. Sometimes these split-off pocket mobs, tiny reservoirs of desperate power, would reach their goals, only to find another failure. Everyone would stand about for a few moments, sapped of all energy, unable to gather the will to begin another patrol. Then, as though the group were some unthinking collective organism, they would all assemble and push through the main crowd again. Ernest followed dumbly, painfully, unwilling to shoulder the responsibility for his misfortune any longer.

"This is kind of fun," said a young girl near Ernest.

"Yeah," he said. "I ain't never done this before."

"Me neither," said the girl. They walked along in silence for a few seconds. "How long have you been out?"

"Since about noon, I guess," said Ernest.

"I've only been looking for a couple of hours. I'm getting real tired. Have you found a token yet?"

Ernest didn't answer.

"My mother didn't want me to come at all," said the child. "She said this wasn't any place for a twelve-year-old girl. But I'm going to be thirteen in about a month. I've been looking forward to that. Being a teenager. Then I won't be just a baby any more."

"Thirteen's an unlucky number," said Ernest slowly.

"No, not really," said the girl. "I waited until my mother took her nap, and then I snuck out."

"I saw another girl about your age," said Ernest. "She was dead, though. Lying in a lot of garbage."

The girl frowned at him. "I've never seen a dead person," she said.

"Wait," said Ernest. "Wait a couple of hours."

A crosscurrent of traffic took hold of Ernest and bore him away from his young companion. He tried to fight free, but he could make little progress against the wide-eyed, maniacal members of the crowd. "Hey," he called to her, "get a token for me, will you?"

The girl smiled and waved. "Good luck," she shouted. "And may God..." Her voice and her face were hidden among the people between them. Ernest tried to spot her again. In a few seconds, he gave up.

"May God what?" he said.

"I've wondered about that," said a woman near him. She was older than most people still in the crowd; that fact alone proved that she had a great store of strength. She looked haggard. Her clothing was torn and filthy. There was a bad cut over one eye, and the blood had dripped down the bridge of her nose and dried, giving her the appearance of a prizefighter after a few tough rounds. She didn't seem to notice her injury. "I just thought what a job He'll have, when we all die together."

"You just thought that?"

"Yes," said the woman. "When that lovely child was saying good-bye to you."

"You just now thought that? What have you been doing all day?"

The woman ignored Ernest. "Heaven will be filled to bursting. We'll probably have to spend half of eternity standing on line, being processed. We'll be cheated out of our paradise."

"Nothing new," said Ernest.

"Do you mind me talking to you?" she asked. "It makes me feel a whole lot better, if I have somebody to talk to while I'm waiting. If it bothers you, I can go away. I don't want to make a nuisance out of myself. It's just that it calms my nerves. God only knows how bad they are now."

"No," said Ernest, "it's all right. I'm not going anywhere."

"Have you noticed that, too?"

"I started to get the picture about eight hours ago," he said sourly.

"That was a very nice young lady you were speaking to," said the woman. "Forgive me. My name is Mrs. Elizabeth Costanza. I'm pleased to meet you."

"You really haven't, yet," said Ernest. "My name is Smith. Bill Smith. I used to be a used-car expert. They had me mounting rocker panel cotter pins on old Triumphs. Then they started to bring out these Triumphs, these new ones, they don't need rocker panel cotter pins. I thought about going into the used-modapt line. A friend of mine told me that changing the hinge plate shield bearings on a modapt is very much like changing the cotter pins on an old Triumph. It turns out this friend of mine didn't know what he was talking about. Anyway, the Representative found me a job. Nothing terrific; I'm really pretty useless, just something the government made up to lower the unemployment figures. I do old license plate rubbings."

"I see," said Mrs. Costanza, somewhat dismayed by Ernest's monologue. "They wanted to keep you in the automotive field."

"Sort of. It's like the rubbings they make of old tombstones. There must be some kind of market for what I do. I haven't ever heard of it, though. Would you want a license plate rubbing in your modapt?"

"No," said the old woman, "not really. Of course, I've never seen one. But I suppose that sort of thing is for the younger folk. My decorations tend to be more... traditional."

"Right," said Ernest. "It's a shame. I could get you one, cheap."

"Perhaps. When all this is over."

"When all this is over." Ernest glowered at her, amazed by her stupidity. He purposely hung back a little, letting the crowd around him swirl in and separate him from the woman. In only a few seconds he had lost her. "Cotter pins," said Ernest derisively. "Right up hers, too, man."

It was impossible to tell where the violence began. The frantic movements of the crowd threw some of its weaker members to the side, off the street, through storefront windows. The crashing drama of the broken glass promised release; the crowd wanted more -- bricks, litter baskets, bodies thrown through more windows. Signposts were rocked loose from the pavement. Wires were pulled down to hang like mortified, failed servants of processes no longer of value. Thirty million members of the mindless rabble in the city alone, and diffused among them were the off-duty uniformed services, the usual containing forces of order, themselves given over to anger checked only by lack of operating space.

"Let's all rip down the cardboard buildings, now," thought Ernest. "It's time to go home. This bunch of us is getting restless. Time to stop this thing before we really take a beating. Pull off the crummy disguises, get a good laugh, a round of applause for the magicians behind the scenes, and time for a couple of beers at Mike's."

He shuffled along the street, paying no attention to where he was going. He imagined the face of the young girl in front of him, filling the sky with her ignorant, happy smile. The face changed slowly into Judy Garland's, still wide-eyed and astounded. "What a rotten way to die," thought Ernest. "I have to go, stared at all the way by Judy Garland, for God's sake." Judy Garland's face faded a little and modified again, into the roughed and painted face of Darlaine. "Yeah," he thought, "I almost forgot. Darlaine, right? The bench. My token." He began pushing through the people with more force; few other people were moving with any determination now, and he learned that he could make surprisingly good speed on the side streets. It took him a couple of minutes to orient himself, and then he headed straight for Fort Greene Park.

Ernest was still caught up occasionally in the confusion as he tried to force his way toward the park. Even in the night-shaded patches of the grounds there was little peace. Ernest avoided the noisy fighting as he headed for the meeting place; he had not given up. Somehow, he had found the tenacity to keep looking. Giving up now, handing himself over to the pointless disorder would be, effectively, suicide. "Good," he thought, as he warily observed the brawlers in the park, "it keeps them off the streets."

Ernest stayed in the heavier shadows, shunning the paved walk. Beneath the occasional pole lamp, tiny individual dramas were running; the furtive but unfamiliar urban violences of previous nights had all come together, jammed into the usual dangerous places and spilling out brashly into plain view. Men who

had been victims now relished the attacker's role. Women who had lived in fear of rape clubbed strangers senseless with jagged chunks of concrete. Among the children's swings, knots of people fought wordlessly, with all identifications of friendship and hostility dimming in their fury.

At ten o'clock, he was at the bench, alone. At ten-thirty. At eleven, he began to panic. At eleven-fifteen, he left. According to reports, the destruction would begin at midnight; half an hour to find a token, *if any were left*.

"Darlaine," he thought, "I would have been a little disappointed if you *had* come. Then I would have had to do a lot of thinking. What if you had found a token, after all? What if you had been telling the truth, and laid down the challenge once and for all? Would I have gone with you? Would I really have tried to build up a new life, with you in Gretchen's place? Darlaine, it must have sounded as stupid to you as it did to me. Thanks a lot, you bitch."

Ernest had a few ideas, all incomplete, all sad, hopeless details to take care of in the half hour before he died. He wanted Mike to be in the bar, and Suzy, and Eagle, and the others. If Gretchen were any kind of rational person, she would know enough to meet him there. If not, well, if he had the time, he would try to get home.

"I'm as good as dead," he told himself. "I'm as good as dead. It's all over. I'm dead." After a while, he stopped thinking even this. He was whimpering softly when he thought he saw Darlaine.

He was certain that it was she, fighting through the crowd just a little way in front of him. Maybe she had gotten the token after all. Maybe she just couldn't get through the throng to meet him.

"That's the way!" he thought. "Good old Darlaine. It just goes to show who you can depend on when it counts. Your own wife, you've known her since the days when you grabbed her tits behind the water tower in high school, *she* can't do a thing for you. Some dumb-ass girl you pick up on the street comes through, though. You just never know."

There were hundreds of dead souls between him and her. Ernest cut them aside with his fists and elbows. "I don't have time to fool around, woman," he muttered. "It's fifteen minutes. Let's get that token and find the shelter. Come on, let's not play games. I only got fifteen minutes, you stupid broad!"

"Hey!" he screamed, knowing that she probably wouldn't hear or pay attention. "Darlaine, wait a minute! It's me, Ernest Weinraub." The girl did hear, and turned back to look at him. Her expression was terrified, and instead of attempting to make her way back to join him, she pushed on, trying to lose herself among the people.

"What the hell," said Ernest. "She has one."

He struggled against the crowd, trying to overtake the girl. He caught up with her, thanks to the vicious tactics he used in pursuit. He forced her to one side of the street and into a doorway.

"Let me go," she screamed.

"Why didn't you show up? Where'd you get the token?"

"What do you mean? I don't have one! Who are you?" She was sobbing now.

"Let me have your purse," said Ernest.

She stared at him, horrified. "No!" she cried.

He tried to take it from her and she kicked his knee. He smashed his fists into her face, and she collapsed in the doorway. Ernest searched the purse carefully, hopefully. There was no token. Meanwhile, the scene had been watched by the members of the crowd nearby. They quickly interpreted its meaning.

"She had one!" someone yelled.

"He's got it now..."

Ernest turned and fled through the lobby of the modapt building. He hurried down the arcadelike hallway, followed by scores of shouting people. He left the building at the other end of the hall, hiding himself in the crowded street.

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Meanwhile 6

"'Allo, again, *akkei* Weinraub, man of mysterious desires," whispered a thin voice.

"'Allo to you, youngest scoundrel, apprentice felon. My desires are not so hidden, after all. It is only that you will not open your eyes to them. My most supreme desire, at this particular unpleasant moment, is to have you sunken to your lice-ridden ears in that vast ocean of sand."

"That will happen to me, no doubt," said Kebap. "That is the sort of thing that occurs to such as me, who has chosen the life of the shadow, the way of the murmured delights. I shall probably pass a good portion of my life bound to creaking wooden racks; or with right wrist chained to left ankle I shall languish forgotten in damp cells, throughout this municipal fantasy; or perhaps someone such as yourself will capture me on an aristocratic whim and compel me to violate my principles."

Ernst laughed. "You are doubtless in error," he said loudly, drunkenly. "You shall not be the violator of those principles. You will be the violatee."

"Ah, *akkei*, I must take exception. One cannot make such forthright statements as that. One cannot foresee the odd pleasures of the leisured class. You, yourself, are an example of that."

"I was merely deceived," said Ernst angrily.

"Of course, *akkei*."

"And if you do not cease exaggerating the incident, I shall grab you by your scruffy neck and imprison you on a rooftop of grass, where you can munch your life away like the mythical sheep of your babyhood."

Kebap sighed. "Were you then so impressed by my tale?"

"No," said Ernst. "But it gave me some interesting glimpses of the shiny new cogwheels of your intellect."

"Then I will tell you of another town," said the young boy. "This village will wipe all memory of the Armenian town from your thoughts."

"A not overly difficult feat."

"There is a town in nearer Hindoostan," said Kebap in a low, monotonous voice, "which has only one remarkable feature. The area around the city is infested with wild beasts of all kinds. Tigers roam the plains, fearing neither animal rivals nor human guile. Huge beasts somewhat like elephants browse the lower branches of the slender dey trees. There are other curious things about that plain, but my story does not concern it other than to say it has caused the citizens of the village to erect a large gray wall. This mud-brick barrier is supposed to be for protection. It does serve to keep out the beasts at night, of course. But it also reminds the townspeople of the dangers beyond, and jails them in their city as surely as if the gates were permanently locked."

"How curious," said Ernst scornfully. "Do you know, I don't care at all?"

"The principal occupation of the people of this city, in light of their self-imposed imprisonment, is to build and change their town, to provide entertainment both in the labor and in the enjoyment thereafter. And the model they have chosen to follow is our city, here. It was the wall that inspired them. You must know that the major's office here receives a letter from this village perhaps eight times yearly, asking for instructions on how they may reproduce the newest alterations in our city. I have seen their version, and it is so exact a rendition that it would give you the nervous ailment peculiar to white Europeans. You would lose all sense of reality and orientation. This café has been built, table by table, tile by tile, bottle by bottle. The very crack in the mirror inside is reconstructed perfectly, attention having been paid to angularity, width, depth, and character. A man owns the café, from whom Monsieur Gargotier could not be differentiated, even by M. Gargotier himself. And, do you think, there is a dejected drunkard sitting at this table, many thousands of miles away, whose eyes have the same expression as yours, whose hands flutter just as yours, whose parts smell as foul as yours. What do you think he is doing?"

"He is wishing that you would go away."

"That is mildly put," said Kebap. "I wish I could know what you really thought to say."

"You may find out easily enough," said Ernst. "Ask that solitary winesop in Hindoostan." Ernst had been observing a dimly lit tower across the square. He turned to look at Kebap, to fix the teasing boy with a venomous stare, perhaps to frighten him away at last. But Kebap was not there. Ernst sighed; he would ask the proprietor to do something about the annoyance.

Every quarter hour a clock tower chimed more of the night away. Sitting alone in the *Café de la Fée Blanche*, he could hear the distant carnival noises: sirens, the flat clanging of cheap metal bells, the music of small silver bells, shrill organ melodies, gunshots, voices singing, voices laughing. In the immediate area of the café, however, there were few people about -- only those who had exhausted their money or their interest and were returning home. Occasionally, the wind brought tenuous hints of strange smells and noises. Still, Ernst had no desire to discover what they might be. Over the years, his route to the city had been long, and these days he was tired.

"I have returned," said Kebap. Ernst regarded him with some boredom. Kebap leaned casually over the iron rail of the café; Ernst realized that this was the first time in quite a while that he had actually seen the boy, though their conversations had been growing increasingly bizarre for several hours.

"There is no such town in Hindoostan," said Ernst. "There is no such perfect imitation of this corrupted city. The Lord of Heaven would not allow two pits of damnation in one world."

"Of course not," said Kebap, with a wink. "Wherever did you get the idea that there might be another?"

"From the pigeons, of course," said Ernst, greatly irritated. "The pigeons have to come from somewhere."

"Why?"

"Have you ever seen a baby pigeon?" asked Ernst. "I don't believe I ever have. I always wondered where the fledgling pigeons were. We easily view the number of adult birds around; there must be a proportionate mass of immature young. It is a great mystery. And one never sees a dead or dying bird, unless it has been the victim of some accident, generally caused by cruel or careless human agency. I theorize that pigeons are immortal, and the actual carriers and disseminators of all human knowledge. This town of yours in Hindoostan is the product of unimaginative pigeons."

"You ask dangerous questions, *akkei*," said Kebap, his expression fearful. "We had wrens in Armenia, I recall. There were many newly hatched chicks, chirping pleasantly before dusk. But here, about the pigeons, you must learn to keep silent."

"I believe I know who your mother might be," said Ernst. "At least, if she is not, Eugenie would be proud to call you her son."

"My mother stands over there," said Kebap. "She has not clothed her breasts, as she should in the evening, only because she hopes to intrigue you. She is a very energetic person, *akkei*, and even though the hour grows late, she still reserves a place in her heart for you."

Ernst shook his head. The liquor had made him sick. "No, I am sorry. I have ceased hunting after hearts. Indeed, I thought no one followed that fruitless sport any longer."

"Then there is my older sister. That is her, on the far side of the square, pretending that she is an armless beggar."

"No, tactless procurer. You have much to learn."

"I am sorry again," said Kebap with a cruel grin. "My own body will not be available for perhaps another three years. These are the days of my carefree childhood."

Ernst stood up and screamed at the child. Kebap laughed and ran toward his mother.

There were few customers in the *Fée Blanche* after dark. Ernst did not mind; his nights were entrusted to solitude. He actually looked forward to night, when he ceased performing for the benefit of the passersby. Now, his only audience was himself. His thoughts grew confused, and he mistook that quality for complexity. By this time, he was taking his bourbon straight.

There had been a woman, Ernst thought, later in his life than either of his juvenescent calamities; this

woman had brought a great settling of his rampant doubts, a satisfaction of his many needs. There had been a time of happiness, he thought. The idea seemed to fit, though the entire memory was clouded in the haze of years and of deliberate forgetfulness. There was a large open space, an asphalt field with painted lines running in all directions. Ernst was dressed differently, was speaking another language, was frantically trying to hide something. He couldn't see the picture any more clearly. He couldn't decide whether or not he was alone.

Somehow, it seemed now as if it hadn't even been his own experience, as though he were recalling the past of another person. He had forgotten very well indeed.

"Your passport, sir?" he whispered, remembering more.

"Yes, here it is," he answered himself. "I'm sure you'll find it all in order." He spoke aloud in German, and the words sounded odd in the hot African night.

"You are Ernst Weinraub?"

"With a T. My name is Weintraub. A rather commonplace German name."

"Yes. So. Herr Weintraub. Please step over here. Have a seat."

"Is something wrong?"

"No, this is purely formality. It won't take a moment to clear it up."

Ernst recalled how he had taken a chair against the gray and green wall. The official disappeared for a short time. When he returned, he was accompanied by another man. The two spoke quietly in their own language, and quickly enough so that Ernst understood little. He heard his name mentioned several times, each time mispronounced as "Weinraub".

Ernst stared at the hotel across the avenue. He took a long swallow of bourbon. Now the *Fée Blanche* was empty again except for himself and M. Gargotier, who sat listening to a large radio inside the dark cave of the bar. Ernst shook his head sadly. He had never gone through such a scene with administrative officials. He had never spelled his name with a "t". Unless, perhaps, in his youth, when he...

"Monsieur Weinraub! You're certainly dependable. Always here, eh? What an outpost you'd make." It was Czerny, his gray uniform soiled, his tunic hanging unbuttoned on his thin frame. He staggered drunkenly; he supported a drunken woman with the aid of another uniformed man. Ernst's own eyes were not clear, but he recognized Ieneth. He did not answer.

"Don't be so moody," said the woman. "You don't have any more secrets, do you, *akkei* Weinraub?" Czerny and the other man laughed.

Ernst looked at her as she swayed on the sidewalk. "No," he said. He took some more of his liquor and waved her away. She paid no attention.

"Here," said Czerny, "try some of this. From the amusement quarter. A little stand by the Pantheon. The man makes the best stuffed crab I've ever had. Do you know Lisbon? The *Tavares* has a name for stuffed crab. Our local man should steal that honor."

"Alfama," said Ernst.

"What is that?" asked Ieneth.

"Alfama," said Ernst. "Lisbon. The old quarter."

"Yes," said Czerny, They were all silent for a few seconds. "Oh, I'm sorry, M. Weinraub. You have the acquaintance of my companion, do you not?"

Ernst shook his head and raised his hand for M. Gargotier, forgetting that the proprietor had retired inside his bar and could not see.

"We have met before," said the stranger in the uniform of the *Gaish*. "Perhaps M. Weinraub does not recall the occasion. It was at a party at the home of Safety Director Chanzir."

Ernst smiled politely but said nothing. "Then may I present my friend?" said Czerny. "M. Weinraub, I am honored to introduce Colonel Sandor Courane."

Czerny grinned, waiting to see how Ernst would react. Courane reached over the railing to shake hands, but Ernst pretended not to see. "Ah, yes," he said. "Forgive me for not recognizing you. You write verses, do you not?"

Czerny's grin vanished. "Do not be more of a fool, M. Weinraub. You see very little from your seat here, you know. You cannot understand what we have done. Tonight the city is ours!"

Ernst drained the last drop of bourbon from his glass. "To whom did it belong previously?" he said softly.

"M. Weinraub," said Ieneth, "we've had some pleasant talks. I like you, you know. I don't want you to be hurt."

"How can I be hurt?" asked Ernst. "I'm carefully not taking sides. I'm not going to offend anyone."

"You offend *me*," said Czerny, beckoning to Ieneth and Courane. The woman and the two uniformed men tottered away down the sidewalk. Ernst got up and took his glass into the bar for more bourbon.

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CHAPTER 13

Ernest wandered spiritlessly now, with only a few minutes left to all their lives. So many had already died, victims of the energies of the crowd, or of their own fatal dread. There was no hope. If he could find a token station now, would there be any more tokens? Certain that the disaster was only minutes away, he doubted that he could get to a bunker before midnight.

Where would the death come from? Why wouldn't they tell him? As he walked, his earlier fantasies returned; his panic grew and spread from him to touch the whole surrounding world. He could not look into the sky, for his fear told him that he would see a blazing comet come screaming down to consume him, explode his ashes, vaporize the last traces of his life. He could not look down, either, for fear of seeing the street begin to break up, right beneath his feet, the pavement crack and thrust and fissure, and he would fall into the earth and burn. The air might suddenly turn poison, or hang in space while the Earth turned out from under it, leaving him to choke in the instant of space. He had lost, but so had all these other millions, and nothing that anyone said could make him feel sad for them.

"It's not so bad," said a quiet voice. Ernest looked around, searching through the shrieking crowd for the single calm person. He would have to impress on that man how futile the conditions were. "All you need is the proper attitude. You've just been too self-centered."

Ernest squinted; he saw his father standing on the sidewalk, ignoring the furious riot around him. "Dad?" asked Ernest.

"It's all right, Ernie," said his father. "I have Grandpa Ernst with me." The old man was standing behind Ernest's father, bent over, coughing and spitting on the ground.

"I'm sorry about how this all turned out," said Ernest. "I wish I could have been more help."

"You never thought about us much before," said his father, smiling sadly. "Anyway, we're doing all right. Look." He held up a pair of shiny tokens.

"We were lucky," said Grandpa Ernst. Before Ernest could grab a token away, his father and grandfather looked different.

"That's no way to act," said Old Man Jennings with a hoarse cackle. "Grab 'em from behind. It always gives 'em a thrill."

"That's my dad," said Robert L. Jennings, Jr. "The girls in the secretary pool have a nickname for him."

"I know," said Ernest. "Leave me alone."

"They call me the Old Man," said the elder Jennings. "But I show 'em who's old. There's a lot of life in the old geezer yet."

"Not for long," said Ernest. "Anyway, I wanted to talk to you about the Assurance deduction last month. I think somebody in the front office got carried away."

"It's really the wrong time to make trouble," said Sokol.

"I'm not making trouble," said Ernest. "You guys are ganging up on me. It's like you're taking the last chance to throw a little dirt. I don't think that's such a terrific thing to do. I'm going to be dead in a few minutes. The least you could do, I'd think, is try to help us all through it."

"I heard what you said to your father, you cruddy hypocrite," said Sokol. "You tried to snatch his token, didn't you? And you're yelling at me. Well, forget it. I'll see you soon enough, in Hell."

"Wait a minute, Sokol," shouted Ernest, tears stinging his eyes. "Hey, wait. You're the only person who ever made any sense to me."

"Listen, Weinraub," said Sokol as he turned away, walking back into the mob, "*sense* doesn't make any sense anymore."

"Sure," said Ernest, weeping, "I didn't like that job. But that's no reason to leave me alone."

"You're not alone," said the old black woman who gathered Ernest's finished front panels. "I don't see how you can stand here in this damn street and say you're alone. We're all together, here. You got to open up your eyes, boy."

"We old women are sticking together, eh?" said Mrs. Capataz, the grocery store owner's mother. "Old women. The world would have ended a million years ago if it hadn't been for old women. Young man, you're a filthy hoodlum. Your face is scarred and bloated. Somebody gave you what you deserved, eh? How do you feel about that? But look at me. I'm an old woman. I'm healthy, thank God, and I'm not beaten. You laugh at old women, but we go on. Our voices are heard."

"Until you die," screamed Ernest. A few in the crowd turned to look at him, but he didn't really appear very different than most of the other people. The city was filled with them now; it was a carnival of lunatics.

"Certainly, she'll die," said the old woman's son. "But so will you. So will all of us. You young jackals are always taunting old women with death. But let me tell you something." Capataz reached forward boldly; Ernest hoped the man would grab an arm, just so Ernest could feel the truth of physical contact again. But Capataz withdrew, sneering. "Let me tell you something," he said. "Old women are less afraid of death than you are of life."

Another woman pushed through the crowd, stopped, and looked startled when she recognized Ernest. "Ah," she said pleasantly, "it's Bill, isn't it? Bill Smith? The young man who caresses automobile licenses?" It was the crazy lady Ernest had met in the crowd a short while before.

"Not any more, I don't," he said.

"It's Elizabeth Costanza. You remember, I was saying that I thought God was going to be run ragged trying to get us all fitted into Heaven."

"Of course I remember," said Ernest, waving at her impatiently. "I was just a little amused by your idea of a 'ragged God.' These friends of mine don't want to let me play with thoughts like those, now."

"I suppose not, considering," said Mrs. Costanza. "Never mind, then. Would you rather talk about automobiles?"

"Lady," said Ernest, "I just want to go home." His breath was raw in his chest; he felt like he had just run a great distance for no purpose.

A clock in the window of a dry cleaning store told Ernest that it was six minutes to twelve. He stood against the iron bars before the window and tried to touch the clock. He wanted to drag the hands back, move the day back to morning, give himself another chance. He slumped against the bars and closed his eyes. He felt a soft, cold touch on his neck. The young naked black woman was standing very near him, still moving in a slow coital rhythm, her eyes shut, smiling, lost in a certain dream of her own. She was shaking her head, saying no to whatever words Ernest might utter.

"She just isn't your type," said Eileen. Ernest turned to face her.

"When you get to a certain age," he said, "you stop having 'types.'"

"Well, I like *that*, I suppose I was just another warm chance for you?"

"You know you were. When women get to a certain age, they know what they are."

Eileen nodded. "What a pair we are," she said, sighing.

"We're not a pair. We never were, for God's sake. But if it will make you feel better for the next four minutes, pretend that we had one of the great lost loves of western civilization. It's all right. Just don't bother me with it."

"Nothing bothers you, Ernie," she said. "You're just not there."

"He's just not there," said Brenda Vaurigny, the fuser. "You didn't miss a thing. It was like being alone with a corpse that smelled like beer. It was definitely not the kind of thing I would have chosen to top off my lifetime."

"All right, you morons," said Ernest angrily. "You don't have anything better to do than stand around and makes jokes, huh? And you," he said to Brenda, "as I recall, you didn't say a single word. You didn't make a sound. I've had better time lying on my stomach getting a suntan."

"It's not my job to entertain you," said Brenda sarcastically. "I'm just around to help you through these rough times. When you don't have anyone else to turn to. And if you're such a resourceful individual, why is it that in these last three and a half minutes you *don't* have anyone else to turn to?"

"I like it that way," he said, weeping again.

"No, you don't," said Eileen.

"No, I don't," he whispered.

"Be careful," said Vladieki's voice. "It's very dangerous getting around in crowds like this. Especially tonight. I think it's going to clear up, don't you?"

Ernest looked up into the sky and winced. A tremor of fear shook him. "Things ought to be settled soon," he said.

"That's good," said the small old man. "Things haven't been settled for such a long while. Now, don't you wish you'd stayed last night? We could have had such a good time. I could have played my tapes for you. I have a whole drawer filled with priceless mementos. You would have loved to have seen them. But, instead, you had to go. And now you've spent a thoroughly unprofitable day out here. No rainbows, no blue birds, no ruby slippers to get you out of this vision."

"Do you have anything planned for yourself?" asked Ernest.

"It's too late to try to seduce me now," said Vladieki with a smile. "I think you're a nice fellow, but your methods are very obvious."

"You can drop dead, too," said Ernest.

"Most assuredly. In about, ah, two minutes and forty seconds." Vladieki shrugged and made his way among the people nearby. Ernest watched him for a few seconds, then waited nervously. The crowd thinned and gradually disappeared. He glanced around, and found that everyone but himself had moved back against the sides of the buildings, leaving the street and sidewalks free. Their expressions were eager; a few people began clapping in slow cadence. Ernest saw three figures approaching. He recognized the youthful Judy Garland, dressed like Dorothy, Phil Gatelin, Gretchen's singing idol, and the ancient Roberta Quentini, Vladieki's spurious lover. The three entertainers marched down the middle of the avenue, waving to the people. Ernest spat in disgust. He wondered if there would be a float with Santa following them.

"You shouldn't be so critical," said Mike the bartender. "Some people like this kind of thing, you know."

"The kind of person who gets excited over that, I don't care about," said Ernest.

"*I've* always wanted to meet Phil Gatelin," said Suzy. Ernest just spat again.

"I wish we had time to go over to the bar," said Mike. "I feel bad about leaving all that good Drambuie to rot. But we don't have time. In, let me see, less than a minute and fifty-five seconds, we'll all be dead."

"It'll take some getting used to," said Eagle.

"I don't want to get used to it," said Ernest. He felt lightheaded, maybe a little delirious. He wasn't going to be able to stand it much longer, he knew.

"That's one of the good points about being a drunk," said Eagle.

"There aren't many others," said the derelict from the schoolyard.

"You dumb idiot," said Ernest stridently. "You told me there would be tokens in the subway station."

"I'm only a drunk," said the shabby man. "How many other times in the rest of your life have you ever listened to a drunk?"

"You know," said one of the policemen in the cruiser, "there's a standard procedure we employ against perpetrators and individuals. That's why when you're questioned, it's usually by two officers."

"Right," said the other cop. "See, what happens is one of the interrogators starts off being a tough guy, threatening the suspect, slapping him a little maybe. And then the other officer steps in and says, 'Hey, take it easy.' So, naturally, the perpetrator is so relieved he trusts the second officer. Then we get the confession. But it doesn't make any difference which policeman is which. Sometimes I'm the tough guy, and sometimes I'm the nice one."

"And you're in a lot of trouble right now," said the first cop. "But you only have, oh, about a minute and ten seconds to figure out which of us you can trust."

"That's him, all right," said the man who had twice attacked Ernest. "My wife is dead on account of him. Look."

Ernest glanced in the direction the man was pointing. He saw the rigid body of the man's wife. He saw the ugly, discolored corpse of a twelve-year-old girl, lying in a pile of garbage.

"That's the other one," said the girl who had had such a good time wandering through the crowd. "I'm still alive. That's the one you told me about, though. She's really dead."

Ernest laughed loudly, bellowing, crying. "Have I forgotten anyone?" he asked the girl.

"I'm what you want, you know," she said with a sly expression. "I'm really everything you've ever wanted. I'm clean and young. I don't know anything at all about men. You could teach me to do whatever you wanted. But you wouldn't dare, because I'm so clean. That's why you want me so much."

"This isn't what I want," said Ernest, sobbing. He sank to his knees as the seconds, one by one, cracked away. He was crying helplessly, his head bowed to touch the pavement, his fingers contorting. "This isn't what I want!"

Twelve o'clock.

The only sound came from the loudspeakers, the MIU boxes on the rooftops. "Attention, all citizens. You are in no immediate danger. Please return to your homes and await further reports from your Representative. We repeat, you are in no further immediate danger. You can only risk doing yourself serious injury by remaining in the streets. Return to your homes. A special bulletin from the Representative Council will be broadcast tomorrow at noon...."

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Meantime G

It was early in February 1933. The village of Springfield slumbered in the peace, if not the prosperity, of the times. The news from Europe was of only meager interest to the townspeople; the Nazi Party, once so thoroughly discredited, had risen anew, but the Jerman politicians seemed united in their efforts to keep Hitler from seizing any meaningful power. The Nazi used as their chief propaganda weapon the idea that, rather than having won the World War, Jermany had gone down to economic defeat. Ostamerika, an unofficial colony of sorts, appeared to be the master in most trade agreements; cries of conspiracy and treachery arose in Jermany, but the fever of Jerman-American hostility was unfelt in Weintraub's adopted land.

"I do not like these coming Jerman national elections," said Weintraub.

"Of course not," said Gretchen. She was a few years older now, a little more harried, a little heavier, but still the sharp-witted Party director. "Hitler may be Chancellor, but without a National Socialist

majority in the Reichstag, he will have won nothing."

"I have worked for the Communist Party for more than fifteen years," said Weintraub. "Never, in all that time, have things looked as black as they do now."

"Yes, they look black," said Gretchen. "Black, red, and white. With a bent-up cross in the middle."

"That is a very bad joke," said Weintraub, crossing the room to hug her.

"I was not chosen for this role because of my humor," she said. "I was merely trying to point out to you that our job cannot slacken now, even though our worst enemy enjoys his moment of authority. Indeed, we can serve our Party best by increasing our efforts. Imagine, then, how much better off we shall be, after the Nazis are put down forever. We will have been laboring all during their days of leisure, and nothing shall stand in our way."

Weintraub only smiled; he had heard that same vain hope expressed many times over the years. He had watched several governments come and go in Jermany, but never did the Communist Party seem able to use the political chaos for final victory.

"Our work here seems to be finished," said Gretchen sometime later. "What happens as a result is out of our hands."

Weintraub sighed. "This has been a busy few years, eh?"

"Yes and, I might say, quite successful. The Party is pleased."

"It was just a matter of careful planning. The execution was simple; our victims were so willing!"

"Now, elsewhere," said Gretchen seriously. "We must start all over again, from the beginning, in a new location. It won't be so difficult this next time. Here are your tickets, Ernst, your papers, and your orders. Be careful, my dear. When we finish this, we may retire. Go to the Western States, or even back to Jermany."

"Is it so necessary that we travel separately?" he asked.

"Of course," said Gretchen. "Remember that it must seem as though you have gone away on one of your usual speaking engagements. The Party has arranged for news releases to be issued concerning a false accident. We have workers among various police and emergency groups, so that the information will become official history. We will say that you have been killed."

"That effectively gets me out of Springfield," said Weintraub doubtfully. "But what about you? And how will we arrive in our new assignment?"

"I told you once that the Party never wastes anything, or leaves loose ends. Though our stay in Springfield is over, there are still benefits that we may gain from our departure. A simple train-station farewell would hardly be adequate after the years of notable citizenship we have given to this community. But, on the other hand, if you were tragically killed in a terrible mishap, all public sorrow would be focused. You would become a great civic leader in retrospect, and your cleverly disguised Party propaganda will not be forgotten. It will find a new home in newspaper editorials all over this state. There will be books donated to libraries in your memory, scholarships in your name begun for college-bound radicals, who knows what else?"

"Then I am 'dead,' in a few days. Will you be the grieving widow?"

Gretchen smiled warmly. "Of course, Ernst. I shall have the comfort of my friends in Springfield, though. It shall not be so difficult a time, and I will find amazing ease from pain in my activities. In a week or so, I will announce that a hypothetical sister has invited me to live with her, and I will take a train to meet you in our new home. Then, under new names, we will repeat precisely our methods of the last thirteen years. At the end, we shall be an aging and respected couple, and our term of active undercover service to the Party will be completed."

These were the instructions from the Communist leaders in Berlin. Weintraub was saddened to leave Springfield, where he had come to love his neighbors and the slow, comfortable life which he had built to mask his true purposes. But such sadness and reluctance were not the marks of a good Party worker, he knew. He repressed those emotions, and three weeks later prepared to take his final leave of the village.

"Don't forget me, Gretchen," he said at the train station.

She laughed and kissed him on the cheek. He grasped her hand, and they both smiled. Then she

turned back to her taxi and climbed in.

Weintraub went into the waiting room. Within an hour his train arrived and he boarded it alone, taking a coach seat by a window so that he could watch the Ostamerikan coastline roll past. Some time later, after midnight, he stepped out in a strange station in a distant part of the country.

"Now," he thought as he looked around him at the dim, deserted station, "I must find this Herr Liebknecht. Or better, I suppose, he will find me. That is the way of the Party." He took a new hold on his suitcase, and carried it to the hard wooden benches. The other people from the train hurried through the station as quickly as possible, as though some nocturnal evil lingered in the drafty spaces; Weintraub didn't see anyone who looked like he might be a Party contact. Of course, Weintraub himself didn't look much like the American idea of a skulking Communist. That was part of what made him so valuable. He waited alone in the cold railway station.

"Herr Weintraub? Ernst Weintraub?" said a man dressed in a tan overcoat.

"Yes," said Weintraub.

"Excuse me. Have you read the late papers? There is a story from the foreign news services which I think you might find of particular interest."

"How do you know me?"

"You are modest, Herr Weintraub," said the man. "You have given many speeches and written many essays. I have been following your career for more than ten years, now. At home I have a scrapbook with every single article you've ever published. I've heard you lecture simply dozens of times."

"I don't recall your face," said Weintraub, studying the small man closely. "I'm terribly sorry, but I meet so many people on my various tours that I can't keep everyone firmly in mind."

"No, no, you probably wouldn't remember me," said the man with a quick gesture. "This is only the first time I've ever approached you in person. And I do so now only to show you this." He handed Weintraub a torn, crumpled copy of the New Aulis *Press*. The headline read: TERROR IN BERLIN! Beneath that was a story of the burning of the Reichstag building, a malignant and symbolic act of arson directed against all the people of Jermany.

"Who would do such a treacherous thing?" asked Weintraub, genuinely upset.

"We believe it was the Communists," said the man, his voice suddenly hard. "Would you please come with me?"

"Are you from Herr Liebknecht?"

"No," said the man. "I'm afraid Herr Liebknecht is too busy right now to meet you. I have come in his place."

"I'm sorry, sir. I don't believe that I want to go with anyone other than the gentleman who was supposed to meet me here. I'll ring him up, if you will excuse me."

The man in the overcoat took Weintraub's arm roughly. "You will come with me, eh? And do not try to attract attention. I, at least, am not alone."

"What does this mean?" asked Weintraub, beginning to panic.

"You will guess, shortly. But now, if I may, I would like to ask you a question. Are you of, ah, Jewish extraction?"

"What? Jewish? Why, no."

The other man smiled grimly and led him away. Three other men fell in behind them. They marched out of the train station to a large black sedan parked along the curb. One of the men got in the back seat, and Weintraub was pushed in next to him.

"Make yourself comfortable, Weintraub. You're going to need your strength."

They drove for several minutes. Weintraub was in a strange city, lost, alone, and increasingly frightened. "Listen to me," he said nervously. "If I'm in some sort of legal trouble, I have the right to notify counsel."

"Weintraub, Weintraub," said the man in the overcoat, evidently enjoying the situation. "You've lived in this sewer of weaklings too long. Perhaps, a few years ago, you might have been cured, if you had stayed in the fatherland. But you deserted Jermany when our nation needed every one of its children to

fight off the insidious rot of the Jewish Communist gangsters. Now, I'm afraid, you're going to have to face some difficult questions." The car stopped, and the men escorted Weintraub into a dark building in the business center of the city. Even though it was well past midnight, workmen were busily hanging National Socialist banners on the outside of the building.

"A little pre-election celebration," said one of the men.

"In here," said the man in the overcoat. He opened the door to an office and stepped through. A man in a black uniform rose from behind a cluttered desk and walked toward them. Weintraub looked around the room: several telephones; racks of rifles; boxes of ammunition; flags of red, white, and black; a framed photograph of Adolf Hitler. This was the Nazi Party headquarters of New Aulis.

"I am sorry," said the black-uniformed man. "I regret that we in the SS have yet to acquire more appropriate quarters. But with the flames of the Reichstag still unquenched, at least in the hearts of the Jerman people, it will not be long. Sit down, Herr Weintraub. Tell me what you know of that fire."

Weintraub was astonished. "I know nothing," he said. "I am here in Ostamerika. I have been here for thirteen years. How could I know?"

"You are a Communist," said the SS man. "We have observed you for quite a long time. There is such a thick file on you in the office of Obergruppenführer Heydrich, I'd hate to have to carry it from room to room. Your name may even be on a memo or two on the very desk of Reichsführer Himmler, himself."

"I had no idea," said Weintraub faintly.

"Come now, Weintraub," said the SS man. "*Of course* you had no idea. Do not be foolish. Now, you shall tell us everything you know about the operations of the Communist Party, both in Jermany and here in Ostamerika. I am not *suggesting* that you do this. I am merely allowing you to understand the next few hours."

"I know nothing," said Weintraub. "I am only a tool."

"Here," said the SS man. He handed Weintraub a sheet of stationery. The words on the paper at first meant little to Weintraub; he stared at them through tear-filled eyes. But the typed letters looked familiar: the broken-off "Z," the extra curl on the capital "C." It was a letter to HSSPF Starkwitz, Ostamerikanischer Wehrkreis, written on Weintraub's own typewriter, informing the SS of Weintraub's intended arrival in New Aulis, his future plans, and the necessity to delay no longer in apprehending him. Weintraub read the note again, then looked up into the smiling face of the SS man.

"Come," said the officer, "let us talk before they come for you."

Was this the way Weintraub's comrades operated? The years of his service, followed by betrayal when he was needed no longer. He could not imagine how Gretchen could have done the thing, unless she had only pretended for thirteen years that she loved him; he didn't want to consider that. But the Party had demanded this; Weintraub was to be a scapegoat, the local conspirator in the Reichstag tragedy. "I suppose I can't doubt them," he thought, as his heart pounded, as his mouth grew dry, as he felt his head become airy and his thoughts giddy. "After all, the Party has the broadest perspective. I don't have any real sense of this worldwide operation. It's all for the greater good, I guess. They know what they're doing."

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CHAPTER 14

Ernest's eyes felt like they had been sealed shut with glue. A hand was on his shoulder, shaking him. He wanted to roll over and smash whoever was doing it, but he couldn't find the energy.

"Ernie?" said Gretchen. "Are you awake? Come on, already, wake up."

"I'm awake, for God's sake. And get your hands off me. I feel like I'm ready to die."

She gasped. Ernest wasn't prepared to face her yet. He stayed in bed, turned to the wall. She shook him some more. "Hey, Ernie, get up. And don't talk like that."

"It's goddamn true," he said, at last turning around. "My body hurts so much I don't think I'll ever walk again."

"You can take a bath later," she said. "But hurry up. They're going to make the broadcast in a couple of minutes."

"I don't know what you're so excited about," he said, looking at her with cloudy eyes. "You couldn't even get yourself going yesterday. You don't even have the tiniest idea of what I went through. You never saw any of the riots, or anybody going nuts right next to you, or had your head nearly torn off by a couple of thousand stupid people. You spent the whole day in here mumbling to yourself. So let me rest. If I want to stay in bed today, I'm going to. I didn't get so much sleep the night before last, and you know doggone well I wore my ass off trying to find us tokens."

"Did you really ask them for three?" she said hopefully. "Like I wanted you to? Oh, Ernie, I knew you wouldn't let me down. And little Stevie. I'm sorry, Ernie."

"I didn't ask them for three," he said angrily. "I didn't ask them for any, for the very good reason that I never in the whole damn day saw anybody to ask."

"You really didn't?" she said. "You're not just saying that? Maybe you got one token for yourself, and you don't want to tell me?"

Ernest glared at her. "I dreamed about you yesterday," he said. "I don't know exactly when. But you said some ugly things about me, and afterward I thought about them. I got to feeling maybe I haven't been keeping up my end of this as well as I should be. I thought maybe I should give you and me another chance. But you know something? After that last crack, I wouldn't care if you were the only person in the whole world that *didn't* get a token. You're a whole lot better as a dream."

At noon that day, Ernest turned on the flat set. Gretchen sat with him on the couch, still a little groggy from the drugs that had gotten her through the previous day's crises. "I'm glad I didn't go out there yesterday, then," she said. "If it did this to you, I'm glad I stayed here. You turned into some kind of absolute animal. I don't believe it could have been as bad as you make it sound. The Representatives wouldn't let it. But people like you took the chance to act out your childish aggressions. What did you do? Hit people? Throw rocks through windows? Scream dirty words?"

"No," said Ernest slowly. "Mostly I learned a lot about the way people really are. I didn't learn as much about myself as I did about, oh, you and other people. I acted pretty much like I thought I would. I was scared, and I acted scared. But I didn't act mean."

"I'll bet you did," said Gretchen. "You were so busy slamming old men and women against the sides of buildings, you didn't have the time to get your tokens. You were gone for nearly twelve hours yesterday. Do you realize that? Twelve hours! I could have gone door to door in all of Fort Greene in that much time."

He looked at her for several seconds. "The point is," he said finally, "you didn't. You were reverting to the womb up here, while I was out getting my face beat in. In the second place, everybody else in the city was out in the streets with me. And to top it all off, what makes you so sure there was a token booth in Fort Greene? They might not have had one anywhere in Brooklyn."

"I think we're going to die because of you," she said quietly.

"Are there any more beers?"

"No. We're going to die, and you want a beer."

"Shut up about it already," he said. "They're going to tell us something now. All I want to know is when it's going to happen. If we have time, there'll be ways of getting tokens. Just let me listen."

The network was running a pre-recorded tape of a morning quiz show. The contestants looked vapid, the announcer cheerfully bored, the questions pointless, and the prizes undesirable. "Look at this stuff," said Ernest. "Is this the kind of thing you watch when I'm at work?"

"I don't watch this one," said Gretchen sullenly. "I watch *Orient Express Challenge*. Sometimes they have good people on."

"That's what I mean. When I'm at work, you sit here in front of the television and do nothing."

"I learn things from the questions."

"You learn things," said Ernest with contempt. "How much did it help you yesterday? Do you think your terrific knowledge is going to help you stay alive now?"

"You couldn't do any better," she said.

Ernest turned back to the set. He saw the contestants waving good-bye, gleefully smiling into the camera. He wondered if they were so overwhelmingly happy with their fates, or just glad that the stupid show was over. "I wonder how they did yesterday in the streets," he thought. "Maybe they were too busy admiring their newly won service for eight to go out. I wonder what they're doing right now."

There were no commercials; instead, a network announcer appeared and smiled at the audience. "As you probably know," he said, "the Representatives have scheduled a major policy statement for twelve o'clock. Unlike most press conferences, no printed summary of what the Representatives will say has been distributed. The reason for this is open to conjecture, but the management of this network feels the responsibility to warn its viewers not to leap to unfortunate conclusions. There will be an analysis of the Representatives' words following their broadcast, which will be aired live from the Representative Council Building in the Caribbean."

The screen went blank for a few seconds. Then a voice announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, Their Democratic Dignities, the Representatives of the peoples of Earth."

The scene was the library of the Council building. The six men sat in a semicircle of captain's chairs before a mantled fireplace. Some of them held partially filled glasses, others smoked. They seemed relaxed and, of course, confident.

"That's the first time in a long time I've seen all six of them together," said Ernest.

"You know, they look a lot alike," said Gretchen.

The six men chatted among themselves, apparently unaware that the television cameras were sending their images around the planet. It was possible that almost every person in the world was watching now; they were all waiting to hear the final details of the great disaster, which would either certainly kill them or, in the case of the lucky few, estrange them from every particle of familiar life.

One of the Representatives rose from his chair. The cameramen immediately swung around to him; he didn't notice them, but casually took his glass to a bar and refilled it with liquor. Another Representative was whispering in the ear of a third, and when he finished, both men laughed loudly. The third Representative turned to pass the joke along to a fourth. The second Representative said something that wasn't picked up by the microphones, got up, and left the room. The first Representative looked at the cameras and nodded. "We'll get started as soon as Bill gets back," he said. Then he resumed his conversation. After a while, the missing Representative returned and took his seat.

The camera closed in on the Representative of North America. He smiled pleasantly. "As you are no doubt aware," he said, "a bulletin issued by our offices reported that the entire world was endangered by an unspecified though total form of annihilation. I believe that Ed, here, would like to say a few words about the current status of that situation."

"Thank you, Tom. The circumstances have simplified somewhat. I'm sure that our viewers will be gratified to learn that there is no longer any danger of any sort of worldwide cataclysm." He paused to sip from his glass.

"At least, as far as we can tell now," said one of the others, laughing. "We don't want to affect the insurance companies."

"Right, Chuck," said Ed. "But what I meant was rather that the entire story of the disaster was untrue, that it was total fabrication from the very beginning."

Ernest was bewildered. He said nothing. He couldn't tell if Gretchen said anything.

"I hope that our constituents don't believe that we went to such lengths merely for our own amusement," said Tom.

"Our reasons are our own," said one of the others, "and we don't think it wise to explain them fully just now."

"Whatever they are, they must be pretty important to cause all this," said Gretchen.

"Shut up," said Ernest.

"At least it sounds like we're not all going to die," she said.

"Shut up!"

"...felt that this would present a convenient and relatively painless way to thin out the population, for one thing," the Representative continued.

"Sort of enforced natural selection," said Chuck.

"Right," said Tom. "As the years go by, and as our civilization learns more and more about the problems involved with maintaining a fair and just society, it is possible that we may lose sight of some of the very qualities which have brought us to this level. Some well-known sociologists have hinted that this is happening already. We have become a world of complacent idlers, in an environment that is becoming ever more crowded and unable to sustain our desire for relaxation."

"Look at them, why don't you?" said Ernest. "*I* work six days a week." He felt very much like he had the day before, unable to sort the essential details from the overlay of grotesque fancy. Could he still be out on the street somewhere, enveloped in a cold, awful idea? He stared at the flat set, for the moment incapable of assimilating their words. He recalled flashes of yesterday's terror, and he heard what the Representatives were saying; he just couldn't reconcile them.

"And that reminds me," said another Representative. "We're still counting on you people being upset enough about this to riot tonight. That was part of the original scenario."

The six Representatives talked for nearly half an hour more. Ernest watched in stunned and outraged silence. He didn't want to believe it; it must be their insane idea of a joke. His wife sat with him, and for the most part was thankful that she was not, after all, going to die. At last, Ernest got up and turned off the flat set.

"It still seems ridiculous," Gretchen said. "I mean, isn't that going a little too far?"

Ernest searched around in a drawer, finally finding his small revolver. "I don't know," he said. "You can't really have an opinion."

Gretchen noticed the gun. "What are you going to do?" she asked nervously. "Just because they expect you to go out..."

Ernest shot her three times. "You're certainly not in any position to criticize the government," he said. He went into the nursery and looked down at Stevie, his infant son. He took out his wallet and found a twenty-dollar bill. He folded it and tucked it into Stevie's little fist. Then he went back out into the room and locked and chained the front door.

"You don't have the right to that kind of talk. They're the only ones who have all the facts." He stared back at the darkened television. "They know what they're doing," he said, just before he shot himself.

-=*=-

Meanwhile 7

The short night passed. Ernst drank; his thoughts became more incoherent and his voice more strident, but there was no one at all to observe him. He sang to himself, and thought sadly about the past, and, though he gestured energetically to M. Gargotier, even that patient audience remained silent. Finally, driven further into his own solitude, he drew out his dangerous thoughts. He reviewed his life, as he did every night; he took each incident in order, or at least in the special order that this particular night demanded. The events of the day, considered with his customary drunken objectivity. A trivial today, he thought, a handful of smoke.

It was late. Only the bright, lonely lights of the amusement quarter still pierced the darkness. The

evening's celebrants had straggled back up the avenue, past the *Café de la Fée Blanche*; now there was only Ernst and the nervous, sleepy proprietor. When was the last time Ernst had seen Gretchen? He recalled the characteristic thrill he got whenever he saw his wife's familiar shape, recognized her comfortable pace. What crime had he committed, that he was left to decay alone? Had he grown old? He examined the backs of his hands, the rough, yellowed skin where the brown spots merged into a fog. He tried to focus on the knife ridges of tendon and vein. No, he decided, he wasn't old. It wasn't *that*.

Ernst listened. It had been a while since Kebap had last sauntered past with his vicious words and his degenerate notions. It was so like the city, that one as young as the boy could already possess the moral character of a Danish chieftain. There were no sounds now. The festivals in the other quarters of the city had long ago come to an end. The pigeons did not stir; there wasn't even the amazed flutter of their sluggish wings, lifting the birds away from some imagined danger, settling them back asleep before their mottled claws touched the ground again. Ernst sighed. No pigeons. They wouldn't move even if he threw his table among their sculpted flock.

There was no Kebap, no Czerny, no Ieneth. There was only Ernst, and the darkness.

"This is the time for art," said Ernst. "There can't be such silence anywhere else in the world, except perhaps at the frozen ends. And even there, why, you have whales and bears splashing into the black water. The sun never sinks, does it? There's always some daylight; or else I have it wrong, and it is dark all the time. In any event, there will be creatures of one sort or another to disturb the stillness. Here I am, the one creature. And I have decided that it is a grand misuse of silence to sit here and drink only. The night is this city's single resource. Well, that and disease."

He tried to stand, to gesture broadly and include the entire city in a momentary act of drama, but he lost his balance and sat heavily again in his chair. "This is the time for art," he muttered. "I shall make of the city either a living statue or a very boring play. But nevertheless, whichever, I shall present it before the restless audiences of my former home. Then won't I be welcomed back! I'll let the others worry about what to do with these meanest of people, these most malodorous of buildings, and all this sand. I'll drop it all down in the middle of Lausanne, I think, and let the proper officials attempt to deal with it. I shall get my praise, they shall get another city. And then there won't be a single person on the entire breast of Africa. We should always, I believe, hold one continent in reserve. Oh, I don't care *what* I think."

He fretted with his clothing for a few moments, fumbling in drunken incompetence with the buttons of his shirt. He gave up at last. "It is the time for art, as I said. Now I must make good on that claim, or else these gentle folk will be right in calling me an idiot. The concept of presenting this city as a work of art, a serious offering, had a certain amusement, but not enough of enchantment to carry the idea beyond whimsy. So, instead, I shall recite the final chapter of my fine trilogy of novels. The third volume, you may recall, is entitled, *The Suprina of the Maze*. It concerns the Suprine of Carbba, Wreylan III, who lived about the time of the Protestant Reformation, and his wife, the mysterious Queen Without A Name. The Suprina has been identified on many occasions by students of political history, but each such 'authoritative account' differs, and it is unlikely that we shall ever know her true background."

Ernst looked up suddenly, as if he had heard a woman calling his name. He closed his eyes tightly and continued. "This enigmatic Suprina," he said, "is a very important character in the trilogy. At least I shall make her so, even though she does not appear until the final book. She has certain powers, almost supernatural. And at the same time, she is possessed of an evil nature that battles with her conscience. Frequently, the reader will stop his progress through the volume to wonder at the complications of her personality. She is to be loved and hated; I do not wish the reader to form but a single attitude toward her. That is for Friedlos, my protagonist. He will come riding across the vast wooded miles, leaving behind in the second volume the bleak, gelid corpse of Marie, lying stiff upon the westward marches of Breulandy. Friedlos will pass through Poland, I suppose, in order to hear from the president there a tale of the Queen Without A Name. I must consider how best to get Friedlos from Breulandy to Poland. Perhaps a rapid transition: 'A few weeks later, still aggrieved by the death of his second love, Friedlos crossed the somber limits of Poland.' *Bien.* Then, off he starts for Carbba, intrigued by the president's

second-hand information. Ah, Friedlos, you are so much like your creator that I may blush to put my name on the book's spine."

Ernst dug in his pockets, looking for his outline again. He could not find it, and shrugged carelessly. "Gretchen, will you ever learn that it is *you* he seeks? I have put you on a throne, Gretchen. I have made you Suprina of all Carbba, but I have given you the tortured understanding that drove me from my own life."

He longed to see Steven, his son. It had been years; that, too, wasn't fair. Governments and powers must have their way; but certainly it wouldn't upset their dynastic realms to allow the fulfilling of one man's sentiments. How old was the boy now? Old enough to have children of his own? Perhaps, amazingly, grandchildren for Ernst? Steven might have a son; he might be named Ernest, after his funny (old) grandfather.

"How unusual it would be, to bounce a grandchild upon this palsied knee," he thought. "I doubt if ever a grandchild has been fondled in all the history of this city. Surely Kebap could not, in the first place, accurately identify his own grandparents. And would they be anxious to claim him? He is, after all, somewhat of an objectionable person. And he has had only nine years to develop so remarkably offensive a manner. It is an accomplishment and, all emotional considerations aside, one must give the wretch his due.

"There is something about him, though, that obsesses me. If there were not, I should without hesitation perform some kind of permanent injury to him, to induce him to leave my peace unspoiled. I detect an affinity; I cannot dispute the possibility that I, myself, may be the lad's own father. What a droll entertainment that would be. I shall have to explore the thing with him tomorrow. Indeed, the more I consider it, the better the idea becomes. I hope I can remember it."

He heard the rattling of M. Gargotier drawing the steel gate across the door and windows of the small café. The sound was loud and harsh, and it made Ernst feel peculiarly abandoned, as it did every night. Suddenly, he was aware that he sat alone in a neglected city, a colony despised by the rest of the world, alone on the insane edge of Africa, and no one cared. He heard the click of a switch, and knew that the *Fée Blanche's* own sad strings of lights had been extinguished. He heard M. Gargotier's slow, heavy steps.

"M. Weinraub?" said the proprietor softly. "I will go now. It is nearly dawn. Everything is locked now. Maybe you should go, too, eh?" Ernst nodded, staring across the avenue. The proprietor made some meaningless grunt and hurried home, down the street.

The last of the bourbon went down Ernst's throat. Its abrupt end shocked him. So soon? He remembered M. Gargotier's last words, and tears formed in the corners of his eyes. He struggled to order his thoughts.

"Is that the bourbon? I need some more bourbon," he said aloud. There was an unnatural cracked quality to his voice that worried him. Perhaps he was contracting some disgusting rot of the city. "There had better be some more bourbon," he thought. "It isn't a matter of courtesy any longer. I require a certain quantity of the stuff to proceed through this. Gretchen would get it for me. I seem to be lost, of course. I cannot find Gretchen anywhere. Steven would get it for me, but I haven't seen Steven in years. One would think that someone in my position would command a bit more discipline."

He wondered about his sanity for a moment. Perhaps the day's excitement, perhaps the liquor, had introduced a painful madness to his recollections. He realized that he had *never* been married. Gretchen, again? Sometimes he thought of this unknown woman. Steven? Ernst's father's name had been Stefan. Gretchen? Married? He called to M. Gargotier. "More bourbon, straight, no water," he said. There was still some darkness left. But he could already make out the lines of the hotel across the street, just beginning to edge clearly into view from the mask of nighttime.

"I have never gone *anywhere*," he whispered. "I have never come from anywhere." He sat silently for a few seconds, his admission hanging in the hot morning air, echoing in his sorrowing mind. Will that do? he wondered. He looked in vain for M. Gargotier.

He could almost read the face of the clock across the street. He picked up his glass, but it was still

empty. Angrily, he threw it at the clock. It crashed into pieces in the middle of the avenue, among the small group of pigeons. So, it was morning; perhaps now he could go home. He rose from his cheap latticed chair. He could not move. He stood, wavering drunkenly. Wherever he turned it seemed to him that an invisible wall held him. His eyes grew misty. The wardens had locked his doors.

"No escape," he said, sobbing. "It's Courane that's done this. Courane and Czerny. He *said* they'd get me, the bastards, but not *now*. Please." He could not move.

He sat again at the table. "It is because they're the only ones with all the facts," he said, searching tiredly for M. Gargotier. He held his head in his hands. "It is for my own good. They know what they're doing."

His head bowed over the table. Soon, he would be able to hear the morning sounds of the city's earliest risers. Soon, the day's business would begin. Not so very long from now, M. Gargotier would arrive, greet him cheerfully as he did every morning, roll back the steel shutters and bring out two fingers of anisette. Now, though, tears dropped from Ernst's eyes onto the table's rusting circular surface. They formed little convex puddles, and in the center of each reflected the last of the new morning's stars.