

by
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"He fell out of the sky, you say? Literally?"
"Damn right. Splat into the middle of a field."

It was a fine Friday morning. His mother was away for a few days, so the house was quiet. Perhaps a little too quiet for 7.00 am. Still half asleep, George Harold Kalewiski stretched luxuriously and wriggled his toes. The morning sun penetrated the small gap above the closed blinds, forming thousands of tiny elongated shadows from the raised bumps of the stippled ceiling.

It was like a landscape.

Correction. It was a landscape. An endless, monotonous desert whose dunes were side-illuminated by the rising glare of an alien sun. Casting its own looming shadow (in shape, remarkably similar to the ceiling light-fixture in another life), was a two-hundred meter dome which had once been a ship; a mighty interstellar ark which brought the last remnant of humanity to this fourth planet of Epsilon Eridani. The terraforming was a slow process; it would be at least another couple of generations before people could venture outside without protection. But the oxygen level was already up to six percent, and the current mean daily temperature of forty-five degrees celsius was certainly not the hellish sixty-three degrees of a quarter of a century ago.

George touched the controls of his lift belt and drifted downward toward the lock on the Ark's north side. It had been a tough fourteen hour grind to get Air Plant M-6 up to spec, but finally the monster was happily chewing up rocks as it belched its life-giving residue into the atmosphere.

He drifted lower, the antigrav bearing him smoothly over those silly, regularly spaced dunes.

His stomach growled.

A dog barked.

A couple of kids screamed at each other, and the morning newspaper arrived at the front door with a thud.

George sighed. Although his mind games were getting better, and were certainly more entertaining than the slop served up on the idiot box, he never seemed to be able to maintain his concentration long enough. Just when things would start to get interesting, so-called reality always intruded and dragged him back to the mundane. Even his mother; that dear, fussing, aggravating nuisance of a parent who still treated her thirty-five year old offspring as an adolescent; even when she was not around, there was always something to prick his romantic bubble.

Now he had three days to change that--and he would use every precious moment. By the day after tomorrow, or perhaps even sooner, what he already thought of as his mindtwist, would be transformed into an ability as much beyond daydreaming as speech is beyond the grunts of apes.

It was too bad he was so misunderstood, especially by

his mother. When she was in a bad mood (which was often), she called him lazy. Other times, usually when one of her garrulous friends was present, she would soften the criticism to one which labeled her only child as introspective. Sure, he was no prize. George had been painfully aware of that fact since his lonely, pimply adolescence. And his job as assistant manager of a mens clothing store barely covered expenses, including the modest rent he paid the old lady. He had never had a steady girl, although he supposed it would be nice to have such a relationship--that is, if it did not involve so much time, money and effort. So beyond the occasional fleeting affair, usually with someone as colorless as he was, and which more often than not broke up because of George's lack of interest rather than from anything else, his happiest moments remained with his books and the worlds they contained.

He had hundreds of books. Perhaps thousands, counting those boxed in the basement--he had lost count years ago. Mostly fantasy and science-fiction, they lined two walls of his room, floor to ceiling, two deep. They were in no particular order because he preferred it that way. It was an adventure in itself, to half close his eyes and wander his fingers along the paper spines as he imagined each as a door into a different universe. When he took one, whether it was a dog-eared copy of something he picked up for a dollar in a flea market, or a new release he bought only days before, it made no difference. George would drop into the comfortable leather of the old chair he had inherited from his father (who never in his life read anything more significant than the sports pages), turn on the reading lamp, and shed his ordinariness like the proverbial frog who turns into a prince.

Mindtwist had first occurred to George when he read one of those science fact articles which occasionally make an unexpected appearance in a usually all-fiction magazine. In this case, the magazine was a fly-by-night which blossomed amid a blizzard of advertising, lasted for three issues, and then faded away when its backers realized they have lost their lower garments as well as their shirts. But because the article was written by a physics Ph.D who happened to be (in George's humble opinion) one the most underrated talents in the science fiction firmament, George happily absorbed what was pompously proclaimed in the title as THE ILLUSION OF REALITY.

After explaining that reality is literally a 'creature of the mind', the writer went on to claim that the potential exists for as many alternate realities as there are minds to conceive them. Only because human beings are brainwashed from birth to believe in a single indivisible reality, does the universe appear to be structured that way--when, in fact, we exist within an infinitely flexible multiverse, which needs only the touch of an untrammelled imagination to become modified into whatever a person chooses.

It was heady stuff, and perhaps if George was not so desperate to believe (he had already flirted with Dianetics), he would have spotted the exploitative nature of the piece, not to mention its obvious contradictions. But, George reasoned, if he could almost turn a stippled ceiling into the fourth planet of Epsilon Eridani, then perhaps--

Start small, he told himself. Start small.

Practice!

Determination!

He had taken three days of his vacation so he could have that much uninterrupted time until his mother returned home. It was an opportunity which would probably not be repeated until she dropped dead, or was dragged kicking and screaming into a nursing home. Considering her current state of rude good health, neither alternative seemed likely for at least another decade or two. His mother hated to leave her house for more than a few hours, and she had only done so this time because her younger sister was getting married again. So after a hurried breakfast, George launched himself into his project.

The process was, on the face of it, extremely simple.

On and off, all that day, through the night and into the next day, he forced his reluctant brain to work on nothing else. Part of him, the unambitious easy-going part, stood aside and watched with astonishment at the exhausting regimen this new, almost messianic George Kalewiski imposed on himself. Certainly, his purpose was not as grandiose as mentally shifting himself to the alien world of an alternate reality. Instead, George decided he would use his mindtwist to start small.

His only intent was to walk on the ceiling.

"He must have fallen out of a plane."

"You'd think so, wouldn't you? But there was nothing up there. Not even clouds. Just a few birds and the wild blue yonder."

Although he was an avid reader of science fiction, George was not scientifically inclined. So he did not bother to set the experiment down on paper, or even counted the number of times he repeated it.

Each time, clad only in his shorts and with the room temperature set at a comfortable level (he did not want the distraction of clothing, or of feeling too warm or too cool), he lay on top of his bed and stared at the ceiling.

Except, he repeatedly told himself, that is not necessarily the ceiling. There is nothing in the multiverse which insists one direction must always be up and the other down. What he was looking at could just as easily be 'down'. And when one is looking down at a horizontal surface, logic dictates it is a floor.

Admittedly it was a peculiar floor, looking almost like stippled plaster. But that was a trick of the light, transforming what was likely a rough pour of concrete. A mysterious force, presumably a runaway antigrav, was pressing George upward against a soft surface. It was embarrassing, but what the hell. He had been in tougher situations.

There was, for instance, that time he successfully jury-rigged the Constellation Andromeda only seconds before the space liner and her thousands of passengers would have disappeared forever below the event horizon of a black hole. And it was only last week he received the Star and Cluster

for his work during the Capella Negotiations--bringing permanent peace to a sector which had been at war for hundreds of generations.

Alternately mindtwisting, alternately rationalizing, forcing his tired brain out of the rut into which it had been forced over a lifetime, George Kalewiski persisted. Down was up, the ceiling was the floor, everything which told him otherwise was illusion. Matter, gravity, energy, electromagnetism, grass and onions, quarks and airplanes, poached eggs, a rainy day, even the insufferable pipsqueak who managed the clothing store where he worked--all dreamstuff, the creation of his mind. So what his mind could do, his mind and determination could undo.

It only needed practice.
Determination.

"There were witnesses?"

"A dozen or so, including a priest. Our boy apparently dropped in on a church picnic."

"Good god."

"Exactly what the priest said."

Saturday. 11.33 pm.

It was dark, and George was sprawled face down on something hard and rough. His head and body ached, his nose hurt. He sniffed and tasted blood. George moaned, struggled to his knees and rose unsteadily to his feet. He wanted something to wipe his nose, but his shorts had no pockets. Again he sniffed.

"Whad happerd? Where ab I--?"

As his eyes adjusted, he saw a pale, horizontal sliver of light low to his right. Closer, was something shiny on the floor. He knelt down and ran his hand over a round, smooth object which had a small knurled projection at the top. He stood again. There was a wall, and what he thought was a picture hung very low on the wall. He shuffled toward the picture, stooped, and made out the faint grid of a calendar. But why was the picture below the calendar instead of above it, as it should be? He peered closer. Of course. Some idiot had hung it upside down.

Upside--?

George whimpered as he turned around and then forced himself to look up. Unmistakable, even in the faint light, his bed clung incongruously to the ceiling.

"No," he said. "Can't be--"

He fell.

He was lucky. He tucked his head down as he fell, or he would probably have broken his neck as he landed on the edge of the mattress and bounced to the floor.

"Can't be," he muttered, numbly repeating himself like a broken record as he pulled himself to his feet, staggered across the room and thumbed the light switch. Above him, a crack which extended across half the ceiling. It started near the light fixture above his bed and ended just above the window. There was an ugly dark spot where the crack started. George grabbed a tissue from the bedside table and

dabbed it against his nose. It came away touched with scarlet.

Now he remembered.

He did it.

He had walked on the ceiling!

"He was already dead when he hit? So if it wasn't the sudden stop at the end, what the hell did kill him?"

"Asphyxiation. Lack of oxygen. He was also frost bitten."

"Oh come on! It was ninety degrees out there!"

"Only at ground level. But if he was high enough when he began to fall--"

Despite his hurts, George flung his arms wide and flopped backward onto the bed. Still sniffing back the blood, he stared with streaming eyes at the dark spot and the crack. It was his evidence, the indisputable proof of his awesome accomplishment.

Yet he could not remember the exact moment when it happened. Presumably he fell (If 'fell' was the correct term. Or would a whole new lexicon have to be invented to accommodate alternate realities?) and landed badly. He was knocked unconscious by the impact, which explained the amnesia. He hoped he would never remember that part of it. It could hardly have been a pleasant experience falling six feet to a face-down landing on hard plaster.

He giggled. "I fell up!"

It would not do to have Ma see blood on the ceiling. Not only would she not understand, she might even get around to wondering if her wayward son had done something kinky during her absence. George's giggle became hysterical laughter; a paroxysm of mirth leaving him gasping. If walking on the ceiling isn't kinky, what is?

He shrieked helplessly.

Later, after he took a flash photograph of the damaged plaster, George found a small can of white paint and carefully dabbed out the red smear. There was not much he could do about the crack, except perhaps to explain it as the result of vibration caused by a passing truck (She probably wouldn't believe that either). Then he went into the bathroom and cleaned up his damaged face. The bleeding had stopped, although his nose still looked as if it had been the destination of a hostile fist.

Nevertheless it felt good to be a pioneer. Perhaps the pioneer. George imagined the future his mindtwist had just initiated; a strange, ever shifting but never dull world of infinite realities in which the name of Kalewiski would be up there along with the other giants; Newton, Einstein, Hawking and the rest. Is this how Edison felt when the first primitive light bulb glowed into life? Was Henry Ford as proud when the first Model T rolled off the assembly line?

I doubt it, George told himself comfortably. Those men were merely talented reflections of their times. After all, for them the basic technologies already existed to turn night into day, or transform the continent into a

neighborhood. In his own case, history would record that George Kalewiski's contribution was as much beyond light and movement as the Concorde is beyond the stagecoach.

But that would be tomorrow.

Well, not exactly tomorrow. It was when his mother was coming home.

Anyway, right now he was tired and needed to go to bed. Remarkably, George's sleep was dreamless.

"What are you saying? That he fell from the stratosphere or something?"

"Maybe even higher than that."

"Jesus!"

She phoned just before lunch on Sunday. Her bus would arrive at four fifteen, so would he please pick her up at the bus station.

"Yes Ma." For a fleeting moment George was tempted to blurt out everything, but restrained himself with the knowledge of how she felt about unnecessary expense on long distance phone calls. What could he tell her anyway? That he walked on the ceiling last night?

"Yes dear," she would say before she prattled on about who wore what at the wedding, or gushed about another achievement of his cousin Clarence, the lawyer. George had an intense dislike for that insufferable offspring of his aunt's first marriage.

Of course, things were different now. He would show them!

But at 3.45 pm, George's cockiness evaporated while he was putting on his coat. The Plymouth was at the curb, less than fifty feet from the house. But what if, during that fifty feet, his subconscious decided to repeat what he achieved the night before? What if he fell up toward a floor that wasn't there? Could he reverse himself before it was too late? And if he did, would he fall back to a sickening termination on the hard pavement? A hard knot at the pit of his stomach, George crept to the window and looked out--and up. The sky was an empty blue. Yet the emptiness was not without expression. In a mocking, malevolent way, it seemed to beckon.

"No!" Horrified, George whipped the blinds closed and backed into the room. "I am not going out there. I can't!"

He clenched his fists until nails dug cruelly into flesh, forced himself to consider what would happen to his job if he locked himself indoors like a hermit. He thought of the vituperative tongue-lashing he would have to endure when his mother discovered there was no more rental income. There has to be a way, he thought desperately. There has to be--

Yes. Yes!

He ran to the basement, grabbed a coil of rope which had been a clothes line before his mother acquired a dryer, hurried back upstairs. He attached one end around his waist, opened the front door and carefully threaded the other end through a space in the decorative ironwork framing the steps

leading up to the door. Then, after closing the door behind him, he paid out the rope as he backed down the walk to the curb.

"Young man, are you alright?"

It was the irritating nasal of the skinny widow next door. Although Ada Grierson was only about George's age, her widowhood apparently gave her the right to call him 'young man'. In his more uncharitable moments, George wondered if her late husband had been hagged to death.

He waved his hand. "No problem, Mrs Grierson. Just a small experiment I am working on."

The reaction to his explanation was a disapproving sniff, as the widow withdrew into the darkness of her parlor.

He unlocked the Plymouth, slid inside, pulled the rope after him and then firmly attached the seat belt. "There!", he told himself triumphantly. If it had happened, the worst would have been trying to explain to the bitch why he was floating in the air like a balloon on a tether. George was sure she would express strong disapproval.

He was slightly late at the bus station. Bag at her side, lips in a thin impatient line, his mother waited at the curb. He leaned over and rolled down the passenger window. "You are late," she said unnecessarily.

"Sorry Ma. The traffic was bad." He started to get out on the driver's side, changed his mind, slid across the seat and got out on the passenger side. Holding on to the car door with one hand, he picked up the bag and slung it onto the back seat. Then, taking his mother's hand, he backed into the car and pulled her after him. She said nothing until he started the motor and turned into traffic.

"George."

"Yes Ma?"

"What was that rigmarole about?"

"What rigmarole?"

"A gentleman is supposed to help a lady into a car before he gets in himself. You used to do it that way, George."

"Sorry Ma. I read an article about auto safety. It said you should never open a car door into traffic."

Her eyebrows rose. "Are you alright, George?"

"Of course. Why?"

"Since when have you read anything other than that trash you have been collecting?"

George sighed. "Speculative fiction is not trash, Ma."

"Speculative fiction, is it? In that case, my house is a mansion." Emmaline Kalewiski changed the subject. "And why is that rope wrapped around your waist?"

He glanced down, licked his lips. "It's ah--" He swallowed. "Ma, can it wait until later?"

She sniffed, and the thin line of her lips became even thinner. Her silent disapproval was almost a shout.

When they pulled up outside the house, George had barely set the brake before his mother was out of the car and marching up the walk to the front door. Although he knew she had a key in her purse, she stood tapping a foot impatiently while he eased himself out of the Plymouth, threaded the rope through the door handle, removed her bag from the back seat, closed the door, and then paid out the rope as he backed up the walk.

Ada Grierson's window opened. "Hello Emmaline. Was it a nice wedding?"

"Very nice, Ada. Did my son behave himself while I was gone?"

"If he did not, Emmaline, then I must say he was very quiet about it. Although I do wonder about--" A pair of pale eyes gleamed maliciously. "--that mysterious business with the rope."

"I am also wondering about that, Ada."

"Why don't you drop over tomorrow morning? About ten? We will have a cup of tea and a chat."

'We'll swig beer and swap the latest dirt', George translated sourly.

"Thank you, Ada, I will."

"Good. See you tomorrow then."

"See you tomorrow, Ada."

Meanwhile George retrieved the rope, used his own key to open the door, picked up the bag and entered the house. Stern faced, his mother followed. "You are not very nice to Ada, George."

"I am not nasty to her either, Ma. I just don't have much to say to the lady."

"Perhaps you should. It is unhealthy for young people to be so much on their own. Ada needs human companionship too, you know."

George tried to imagine himself sharing a bed with that bag of bones, and found it as impossible as it was horrible. "Yes Ma," he said wearily.

His mother pointed. "Now tell me about the rope."

He decided the best way to shut her up was to tell the truth. "It is to prevent me from floating off the ground, Ma."

Plucked eyebrows rose slightly. "Oh?"

"You see, last night I did something wonderful--and scary. I walked on the ceiling of my room."

The eyebrows rose slightly higher. "You walked on the ceiling."

"Yes Ma. But because I am not sure if I can fully control the ability, I figure it is best to take precautions each time I go outside."

She considered, her angular face forbidding. "This happened last night, you say?"

"Yes Ma."

"Show me."

He led the way up the narrow stairs to his room. He showed her the crack in the ceiling, and pointed to the spot where he had painted over the blood smear.

"I never noticed that crack before," his mother said. "What caused it, I wonder?"

"Ma, I just told you. Before I walked on the ceiling, I fell on it. That is what caused the crack."

"Yes, dear."

"You don't believe me, do you? How do you think that spot of blood got up there?"

"All I see is a patch of fresh paint."

George was angry. "Ma, what if you saw me walk on the ceiling?"

"Very unlikely, dear."

That was twice she called him 'dear'. The last time was when he almost died from meningitis. He had been thirteen

years old.

George took a deep breath. "Ma, why don't you unpack and make yourself a cup of tea. Then, in exactly one hour, come back here."

"Why?"

"Will you, please?"

His mother glanced at her watch. "It is almost five-fifteen and I have not eaten since noon. Therefore I will make supper, which will be ready at precisely six o'clock. If you choose not to join me at that time, I will eat alone. Afterward, it is possible I may come up for whatever it is you wish to show me. I do hope, however, it has nothing to do with that nonsense about walking on the ceiling."

"Yes, Ma."

As soon as she left, George kicked off his shoes, removed his jacket and tie, loosened his belt, closed the blinds and lay on the bed. He'd show the old bat!

"George, you are on the ceiling," she will say. "Come down this instant." She was, after all, the supreme unflappable. But even if she denied the evidence of her own eyes, it could not change what he had done. And that--

Was just the beginning.

"So what am I supposed to put in my report?"

"What you always do. The truth."

"Oh sure. An adult male casually attired in T-shirt and rugby pants, created a small crater within my jurisdiction when he fell from the edge of space this afternoon. Just routine."

At exactly five fifty, George's mother heard a muffled thump upstairs.

What is wrong with that boy?, she wondered unsympathetically as she set the table for two.

At ten after six, while she was in the middle of her meal, there was another thump. It was followed almost instantly by a crash which shook the house.

It was too much, even for the tolerance of this long-suffering parent. Emmaline Kalewiski carefully patted her thin lips with a napkin, got up from the table and marched upstairs to George's darkened room. After turning on the light, she found her son lying prone between the bed and the wall. The bedside table had fallen. His radio, a bedside lamp, glass from a broken drinking glass, and several paperbacks were scattered across the floor.

She touched his shoulder. "George?" He did not stir.

"George, that is enough!" She stooped, turned him over and saw the large gash across his forehead. Blood oozed profusely. "George dear!"

He did not recover consciousness until next day, in the local hospital. When she was finally satisfied her son was on the mend, Emmaline went home and tidied the mess in his room. It was then she found a second crack in the ceiling.

And a small smear of blood.

"Has he been identified?"
"We're working on it."
"What about missing persons?"
"Not yet. It's a big country. Hundreds of people turn up missing every day."
"Perhaps he's not from this country."
"Oh sure. Perhaps he is not even from this planet."
"That is not funny."
"Who's laughing?"

"Amnesia is not unusual in these cases," the doctor assured Emmaline. "In any case, even if he never gets back his memory of those few days, there is no reason why he cannot resume a normal life. He impressed me as a reasonably intelligent young man, if somewhat melancholy. And his reflexes do appear to be normal."

She pursed her thin lips doubtfully. She could not get out of her mind the second crack in the ceiling.

--the spot of crimson.

"Doctor."

"Yes, Mrs Kalewiski?"

"How do you think he got his injury?"

"I was not there of course. But I see no reason to quarrel with the police report that he probably lost his balance while he was trying to stand on his bed."

"Why would he be doing that?"

The doctor shrugged. "Perhaps he was changing a light bulb. You will have to ask him."

She said forcefully, "I intend to!"

"Surely you do not suspect foul play?"

She waved her hand. "Of course not."

"Then what is bothering you, Mrs Kalewiski?"

"It is his--" She hesitated. "He doesn't want his books anymore."

"I beg your pardon?"

"He has been collecting and reading them for years. It was all he ever did. Fantasy. Science fiction. Thousands of them. It was more than just a hobby." She gestured helplessly. "Oh, a lot more."

"An obsession?", the doctor prompted gently.

She glared at him. "Yes! An obsession!"

Quite unexpectedly, Emmaline Kalewiski burst into tears. For the first time since she was widowed, she was completely unsure of herself. Until now she had always tolerated her son because it was easier that way; he did not interfere with her life style and friends, and because she needed his rental money to supplement her meager pension anyway.

But events had forced her to the realization there was more to their relationship than indifference or economics; that she had an intense motherly desire to protect him from further harm. To be worried, in fact, for his sake rather than for her own. As far as George's story about walking on the ceiling was concerned, she wished she could forget that just as thoroughly as he had. Unfortunately, every time she went into that room, she could not help looking up at the re-plastered ceiling and wondering how that spot of blood

got there.

The doctor was saying, "--I wouldn't worry too much. If that bump on the head has also cured a pattern of obsessive behavior, I suggest you accept it as a bonus. Just in case however, don't get rid of the books. Put them in storage somewhere. Now is there anything else I should know about my patient?"

She bit her lip. "There is one thing."

"Oh?"

"My neighbor, Ada Grierson. She's a widow like myself, although younger. She's about George's age."

"There is some kind of romantic involvement between this widow and your son?"

"Well, there was certainly not one before George's accident. He never liked her. Ada is not the best looking girl in the world, and there are times when she does tend to be a bit impatient with people."

Having already noted Mrs Kalewiski's tendency to underdramatize, the doctor suspected Ada Grierson was one woman he would prefer not to meet. "And--?"

"They have started going out together."

"Have you checked the name tag on his shirt? It was pretty illegible when your people dumped that mess of mud and blood on my table."

"It was not much help I am afraid. Just one name on it."

"What name?"

"George."

Two years and six months later.

It was a hot, sticky July afternoon. Undeterred by the heat, Ada and his mother were away on one of their interminable and usually expensive shopping expeditions. George dragged the lounge onto the minuscule patch of lawn in the back yard, lay back and stretched luxuriously. The sky--the patch of it visible between the big elm, the power line and the house--was blue and perfect, and all was well with the world (although it could be cooler). OK, so next week was his and Ada's second anniversary, which meant he should be taking advantage of his wife's absence to get her a present. Although she was a bit of a nag sometimes, she really wasn't such a bad sort once you got below that abrasive exterior. And there were times, especially in bed--

George chuckled. It was comforting to know Ada's good side was reserved for her husband. As far as other people were concerned, especially other men, she remained an unattractive, excessively prickly cactus good only to stay away from. No one could possibly suspect that beneath that forbidding exterior beat the heart of a true child of erotica, not to mention a culinary genius who could turn even a simple poached egg into ambrosia.

He held up the envelope he had picked up from the drug store. When he found his old camera tucked away in a box in his mother's basement next door, he was intrigued to find it contained a half-exposed film. George tried to remember

where he last used the camera (as much as three years ago?), and could only come up with a vague memory of a bewildering weekend at a local science fiction convention. Among the assorted eccentrics, he remembered a large girl who turned up at the masquerade in a screaming wisp of nothing--which she claimed was borrowed from an inhabitant of the sex planet Amrithron.

George wondered if he took a picture of that all too generous exposure of imperfect flesh, or if he prudently turned the lens toward less ample subjects. For the life of him, he could not remember. And he still wondered about those few days of his life taken from him when he had the accident, which was less than a month after the convention. So it was entirely possible he had recorded a few images during the blank period. His mother still insisted that beyond the accident itself, there was nothing to remember--although in the same breath, she admitted she had been away part of the time at aunt Jennifer's nuptials.

Again he looked at the envelope. Was there something in here marking a watershed in his life? George was certain Ma had not told him everything, and he was starting to suspect Ada knew more than she let on. The only certainty was that the George Kalewiski of that time had been a different person with different interests and a different life. In that former life, George remembered, he even disliked Ada!

Are we the same?

George raised that point with the doctor only a few days ago. The doctor, an old-timer with not much time for fancy theories, was brusque.

"Don't bother your head about it. Just think of the human personality as a diamond with an enormous number of facets. If events cause you to turn a different facet to the sun once in a while, does that make it a different diamond? Hmm?"

Open the damn envelope!

George chuckled to himself as he ripped open the flap. God knows why he had been procrastinating. The worst he was likely to find was either a picture of a lot of bulging female, or a self portrait of himself surrounded by those stupid books. In either case, it was nothing to get in a tizzy about, even if his wife should see them.

And what if she did? Ada would uncork some sarcasm, tell him to stop wasting her time, and then forget it. She was like that.

George removed the prints from the envelope. The first half dozen pictures were, as he suspected, of the convention. There were a couple of the head table during the final banquet--was that bearded fellow Niven or Harrison? There were other exposures of people he did not recognize, plus an artfully posed group photo of the participants in the masquerade. He recognized assorted BEM's, Trekies, a Merlin, a Robin Hood, a couple of Doctor Whos, and a horned and hooped demon. All were fully if outlandishly clad, with very little exposed flesh among the lot.

Despite himself, George sighed with relief.

The next print was puzzling. It was a photograph of what looked like some kind of rough textured, light-colored surface with a crack running across it. The crack terminated at an irregular patch of dark red.

No. Please no--

George Kalewiski's universe shattered like overstressed crystal, as with awful clarity he remembered what he did during those missing days.

What he could not now avoid doing.

The patch of empty sky was a magnet, cool, blue, an irresistible eternity. As George felt himself drawn into the new reality, he also sensed the lounge dropping below him. He thought he heard someone shout, but it was unimportant. At first the blueness only slowly expanded, then abruptly exploded beyond the periphery of his vision. He felt the coolness of air rushing past his heated skin, the tears streaming down his cheeks as he squinted into the light. Other unimportant sounds; street traffic, the call of a news vendor, the wail of a freight train as it approached the crossing, gradually faded to nothing. The angry buzz of a light aircraft increased to a vague annoyance, then also receded into the lower distance. The minutes passed and the blueness became deeper. It became colder. Breathing was difficult.

But it did not matter. The entity who had been George Kalewiski was already apart from the poor thing of flesh and bone falling into the sky. That entity watched dispassionately as the dying brain stubbornly maintained its reverse-gravity reference. Still they rose together, the material and the non-material, into the stratosphere and beyond. Finally the last spark of life sputtered and was extinguished, and the physical universe reclaimed its own. The body began to fall.

"His name was George Kalewiski."

"That's nice. What else can you tell me?"

"Officially? Only that he was home when his wife and mother went out shopping that afternoon, and was missing when they returned."

"You mean there is an 'unofficially'?"

"You won't believe it."

"Try me."

"Two small boys claimed they saw a man rise into the air from behind Kalewiski's house."

"Oh sure."

"T'aint all, son. The pilot of a light plane had to dive to get out of the way of what looked like a man floating upward--at a couple of thousand feet."

"Someone must have filled one of those inflatable sex dolls with hydrogen or something."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"So how do you explain the fact of Kalewiski falling out of an empty sky?"

"I don't. And I have a nasty feeling I never will."

"But you can't help wondering. Right?"

"Wrong. I am going to put it right out of my mind. Because, you see, I intend to sleep tonight."

Meanwhile, the entity continued into the light--