SCIFICTION ORIGINALS 2

edited by Ellen Datlow

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Nancy Kress

WETLANDS PRESERVE

The duck hunter waded through the marsh, breathing deeply of the sweet dawn air mixed with wet decay. Each lift of his high boots sucked up mud with a soft splurgling sound. Cattails rustled in conspiratorial whispers. The dog beside him flicked its tail at a dragonfly.

"Soft, girl, we're not supposed to be here," the man said, grinning. "But listen to them ducks!"

Abruptly the flock of mallards, until now out of sight, flew up. The man raised his gun, fired once, twice. A bird fell and the dog took off.

Grinning, the hunter waited. She was the best dog he'd ever had. Never missed. A beauty.

"Hey, girl, what you got, let's see it there, oh you beauty..." The man's wife complained that he talked more affectionately to the dog than to her. The dog dropped the duck. The man bent to pick it up from the shallow water, and the snake swam past him.

Not a snake. Green, long, but with fins. Three eyes. *Three.* Before he stopped to think, the man had grabbed the thing behind its head, the way you grabbed a copperhead if you had to grab it at all, and lifted it out of the water. On its underside were four short legs.

And the thing went on staring at him from two of its eyes, the two facing sideways, while the third eye stared straight up to the empty gray sky. It didn't thrash or try to bite. It just gazed steadily, interestedly.

The dog barked to draw attention to its duck. The man ignored her. He went on staring at the thing gazing so tranquilly back at him. "What... what are you?"

Then he saw the blackened craft half submerged in the mud and water.

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Lisa still wasn't used to the guards. Security guards, yes, Kenton had always had those, although not because anyone expected trouble. The John C. Kenton Memorial Wetlands Preserve and Research Foundation in upstate New York wasn't exactly a hotbed of contentious activity. Until now, the greatest excitement at Kenton had been the struggle to keep *Lythrum salicaria,* purple loosestrife, from displacing native waterfowl food plants.

However, like all research labs, Kenton contained expensive equipment that no one wanted stolen, so there had always been one guard, seldom the same one for very long because the work was so boring. But now they had Army soldiers, two at the door and two in back and God-knew-how-many on patrol around the unfenced perimeter of the wetlands. None of them knew what they were guarding, although it seemed to Lisa that if they had any intelligence whatsoever they would pick on the intense, badly suppressed excitement pervading Kenton like a glittering mist.

"Identification, please," the soldier said, and Lisa handed over her new government pass. The soldier ran it through a slot on a computer and handed it back. Then he smiled. "Okay, Lisa Susan Jackson. You sure you're old enough to be in there?"

You don't look any older than I do, Lisa wanted to snap back, but didn't. She'd already learned that silent disdain was the only thing that worked, and not always that. It made no difference that she was a graduate student in fresh-water ecosystems, that she had been selected over three hundred other applicants for this prestigious and unusually well-funded internship, that she made a valuable contribution to Kenton's ongoing work. She was a small blonde woman who looked about fourteen years old, and so even this cretin in camouflage felt entitled to patronize her.

She walked past him with freezing dignity and went to the main lab. Early as it was, Paul and Stephanie were already there, and through the window she could see Hal pushing off from the dock on the flat-bottomed boat accompanied by yet another visitor. The staff always tried to arrive earlier than the visiting scientists and Washington types, even if it meant getting to Kenton at four in the morning. Lisa couldn't do that, not with Carlo.

"Lisa, the latest test results are in," said Dr. Paul Lambeth, Kenton's chief scientist. The scientists were all very considerate of her, keeping her fully informed even though she was only an intern. Even though the project was, of course, now heavily classified. Dr. Stephanie Hansen had insisted that Lisa stay on even after the Department of Defense had questioned the presence of a mere graduate student in this unprecedented situation. Hal—Dr. Harold Schaeffer—had fought to get Lisa the necessary clearances, which probably hadn't been easy because of Danilo. Never mind that she hadn't seen Danilo in over a year, or that membership in Greenpeace was not exactly tantamount to membership in China First or the neo-Nazis. The DOD was not known for its tolerance of extremist organizations, no matter how non-violent.

Of course, Lisa knew, Stephanie and Hal had been thinking mostly of protecting the whole internship program

rather than her specifically. Lisa was still grateful. She just wished that gratitude didn't make her feel so constrained.

"The latest results," Stephanie repeated after Paul, and an alert shiver ran over Lisa. Stephanie, decisive and taciturn, never repeated others' words, said anything unnecessary. And Stephanie's eyes gleamed in her weather-burned face that had spent thirty years in the outdoors studying how the environment and everything in it worked together to sustain life.

Paul was always more flamboyant than Stephanie. It was Paul, of course, who would eventually announce to the media, standing side by side with the president in the Oval Office. "Do you want to sit down, Lisa? It's big."

"What is it?" she said, wishing he wouldn't play games, knowing she was reacting to his game with the strangled breathlessness he expected.

"The genetic structure is not DNA-based."

She felt her mouth open, her eyes widen, even though the statement wasn't unexpected. Ever since she'd seen the animal brought in by a man illegally duck-hunting in the Preserve, she'd wondered. They all had. It was the spacecraft that made them take the animal so seriously, rather than writing it off as just one more deformity caused by pollution. NASA had come up from Washington, run tests on the blackened outside and mysterious inside of the half-submerged object, and verified the structure as a spacecraft. Immediately it had been carted off to somewhere classified.

But Paul Lambeth had fought to keep research into the animal, and the other animals soon found exactly like it, as a joint project between Kenton and Washington's hand-picked labs. Paul had won, but not because Kenton was such a well-equipped research lab (although it was; John C. Kenton had left an endowment so generous it was the envy of even places like Harvard). Kenton had kept primary research responsibility because that's where the wetlands were, and who knew what else had come off that spacecraft? The Kenton Preserve, immediately quarantined, had become the mountain toward which the eminent scientific Mohammeds went, since the entire wetlands ecosystem could not go to them. So Kenton did the *in situ* research, and the CDC, Harvard, and Cold Harbor did the genetics and zoological work.

Non–DNA-based. *Alien.*

"What..." Lisa was annoyed to find her voice coming out too high. "...what will they do with it?"

"Nothing, yet," Paul said, and even in his slick media-loving voice she heard the hidden awe. "We're not done searching the ecosystem, even. Did you finish those water sample tests?"

"Not yet," Lisa said. Yes, work, that's what she needed, routine methodical work. To ground her. But she couldn't do it. "Can I see the report?"

"Sure," Paul said, smiling, and there was that condescension again, that egotistical pleasure in his own generosity at sharing this historic moment with such a very junior colleague. Lisa pushed the perception away. She darted for the report and began to read hungrily, wanting to know everything, to gulp it down all at once.

Non–DNA-based. Alien.

From the stars.

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After the initial elation came the questions. The animal was not DNA-based, yet it was eating DNA-based plants. Lisa could see one of the snakers (the catchy name was Paul's) in the oversized cage, munching contentedly on sedges. How was it metabolizing plant food it had not evolved to metabolize? And how had such fully developed animals—warm-blooded, multi-stomached, large if unfathomable brain tissue—survived the trip through space? They might have been in some sort of cold sleep; Lisa had not seen the inside of their small craft. So small! How many had made the journey?

They couldn't have been here more than a few years, at the most. Someone would have seen them before now. The twenty-square-mile Kenton Preserve was supposedly off-limits to hunters and bird watchers, but in fact both seeped in all the time, at least on the vast wetland's edges.

The CDC/Harvard report said the genetic material seemed to be concentrated not in the cell nucleus but rather scattered throughout the cell. That was characteristic of very simple organisms like prokaryotes, but not of complex ones. The cells themselves were full of structures. Some had already been catalogued, at least in a preliminary survey, as analogous to ribosomes or mitochondria or receptors. They broke down molecules for energy, they utilized oxygen, they received chemical signals from other cells. Some were total mysteries.

Lisa read the report once, twice. Then she went to stare at the snakers' cage, which was a mini-ecology twelve feet by five, equipped with marsh areas, a pool, a dry hummock, stands of cattails and bulrushes, aquatic plants and rocks and insects. Two of the three captive snakers had disappeared into the foliage. The third one raised its head and looked back at her from a side-facing eye. Lisa stood gazing for a long time.

"Lisa?" Stephanie said. "We're going out this afternoon on the boat to survey another sector. Want to come?"

"Yes!" The Preserve had not been so thoroughly surveyed in years, now that everyone wanted to know exactly how many of the alien creatures existed. A lot, it seemed. They bred quickly. Lisa went to finish her water sample runs as quickly as possible so she would be able to go out on the boat.

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When she finally got home, muddy and exhausted and smelling of swamp, Danilo was there.

"How did you get in? The door was locked."

"Jimmied a window," he said in his liquid Filipino accent. "Not hard. God, Lissy, you look like a drowned rat."

Lissy. His pet name for her. Which he goddamn well had no right to use. He lounged at the table in her kitchen, which was also her living room and dining room, having helped himself to Raisin Bran and English muffins. She said sourly, "You better be careful. That food probably has genetically modified foodstuffs in it. You could sully your ideological purity."

"Same old Lissy." He sat up straighter, and the gleam of white teeth disappeared from his sunbrowned face. Despite the heat, he wore jeans and heavy boots, the old uniform. A knapsack rested on the floor. His trim body looked fit and rested, which only irritated her more. It had been so long since she'd had a good night's sleep. Too much to do, always.

Danilo said quietly, "I want to see him."

"You don't have the right."

"I know. But I want to anyway. Carlo is my son."

"Only biologically. A hyena is a better father than you've been," Lisa said, and they were off again, the same old track, sickening her even before they really got rolling.

"Only because I had a more urgent job," Danilo said, apparently willing to go over it all yet once more. Lisa wasn't. He'd made his choices, and at the time Lisa had even seen why he'd made them, or thought she had. The fate of the planet over the fate of a single child, the human race itself at stake, global warming, depleted oceans, dangerous genetically engineered organisms released into the environment, deforestation, pollution, nuclear radiation, blah blah blah. Or, rather, not blah blah blah; she was preparing herself to work for the same ends, through scientific ecology. But it all looked different somehow when you had that actual single child with you day and night, dependent on you, needing your care and interrupting your sleep and clamoring for your love. You realized that there *was* no more urgent job.

There was no way to tell that to Danilo, no way that he would hear. Lisa said only, "I'll get Carlo. The woman next door takes care of him while I'm at work."

"Is she... can she..."

"She's had experience with disabled children." And then, cruelly, "She costs most of my grant and all of my scholarship, of course, between daycare and physical therapy. Nothing left to donate to good causes."

Danilo didn't answer. Lisa went next door to get Carlo.

It was one of his good days. He laughed and reached up for her, and she knelt by the wheelchair and hugged him. Undoing all the harnesses that kept him comfortable was a major undertaking. "Mommy! I drawed a picture!"

"He did, Lisa. Look," Mrs. Belling said, and held up a childish picture of a blue tree, green sun, and red structure that might have been a house or a car. "He's getting really good with his right foot, aren't you, Carlo?"

"I'm good," Carlo said, with such innocent grandiosity that Lisa wanted to weep. He was almost five. Next year he would start school. How long would he keep that pride around other people, people less kind than Mrs. Belling or Lisa's colleagues? Carlo was intelligent, happy, severely deformed. Both arms hung truncated at his sides, devoid of any nerves to transmit muscle impulses. His head lolled to one side. He would never walk. His radiant smile nightly filled her with fear for his future.

Danilo had left her, joined first Students Against Toxins and later Greenpeace, the day Carlo had been born. Carlo's father blamed the baby's condition on contaminated groundwater in the factory town where Lisa had grown up. Perhaps he was right. Lisa had gone into shock that Danilo could leave her now, leave her with a deformed infant, leave her unmarried and about to start graduate school and all but broke. Selfish! She had screamed at him. Necessary, he had replied, so more Carlos aren't born like this, and more, and more. She was the selfish one not to see that. It was no different than going off to war. He was disappointed in her that she couldn't see that.

The horrible thing was, she could. But she was still the one left with Carlo. Whom, now, she wouldn't trade for anything on Earth.

"Carlo," she said, after lavishing praise on his picture, "Uncle Danilo's here." Her one condition for letting Danilo see him at all: unclehood, not fatherhood. Fatherhood was something you did, and Danilo never had.

"Uncle Danilo?" The child frowned, trying to remember. It had been over a year since Danilo's last will-o'-the-wisp appearance.

"Yes, your Uncle Danilo. You'll remember him when you see him. Let's go, sweetie."

"Bye, Mrs. Belling!" Carlo called. "See you tomorrow!"

Lisa watched Danilo flinch when she wheeled in Carlo. Revulsion, or guilt? She hoped it was guilt. "Carlo, this is Uncle Danilo."

"Hi, Carlo."

"Hi! Mommy, he gots a bord!"

"A 'beard,' sweetie. He has a beard."

"Can I touch the beard?"

Danilo knelt by Carlo's chair. Lisa moved away, unwilling to stand that close to Danilo. But on the warm air she caught the scent of him anyway, bringing such a rush of visceral memory that she turned abruptly away. God, how long had it been for her... and never like with Danilo.

Lisa Jackson and Danilo Aglipay. Salty working-class American and wealthy cultured Filipino. Ideological purists, committed activists, the sexual envy of an entire campus, with her blonde small-boned beauty and his exotic dark intensity. Except that the working-class salt-of-the-earth parents shoved Lisa out of the family when she took up with a "gook," and the wealthy Filipino swore he would never go home to the father who made his money exploiting the

planet, and the blonde beauty swelled with pregnancy that ruined the activist plans so much that Danilo left, spouting speeches.

And out of that wreck I made a life, Lisa reminded herself fiercely. Graduate school, Carlo, the internship at Kenton. The alien animals. Talk about world-changing events! If Danilo knew about the aliens... but he wouldn't. It was her knowledge, her life, and no whiff of masculine pheromones would ruin it for her. Not now, not ever.

"The beard feels strangey," Carlo said. It was his latest pet word.

"Oh, it's strangey, all right," Lisa said, and Danilo looked at her.

She fed Carlo and Danilo too (inescapable), read Carlo a story, put him to bed. Danilo watched silently from his chair at the table. After Lisa closed the bedroom door, she said, "Now go. I have work to do."

"Work? Now?"

"All the time, Danilo."

"And you think it does anybody any good, this work? This studying minute details of ecosystems even as the exploiters destroy them out from under you?"

"Probably as much actual good as your 'non-violent confrontations' at Greenpeace."

"I'm not with Greenpeace any more," he said, and something grim in his tone, coming through despite the soft accent, made Lisa look directly at him.

"You're not?"

"No. You're right—non-violent confrontations accomplish nothing substantial. I am with EarthAction now."

"Never heard of them."

"You will," he said, and that tone was there again. "Lissy, I don't have anyplace to stay."

"You're not staying here. See that sofa? That unfolds to create my bedroom, and in another few hours I'll be using it. Bye, Danilo."

He didn't argue. Picking up the knapsack, he moved with his fluid gait toward the door. Watching him, Lisa suddenly remembered that she still had dried mud in her hair from the boat survey, still smelled of swamp and lab. Well, she'd shower later; the reports in her briefcase were too exciting too wait.

She'd already started to work by the time Danilo closed the apartment door.

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“Washington wants even tighter security," Paul said to the assembled Kenton staff, plus the visiting scientists, Washington representatives, and whoever those others were that Lisa couldn't identify. "That's why we have an increased guard. I know all the checkpoints are inconvenient, people, but consider the benefits. We're getting another month of study before any announcement is made and we're overrun with outsiders."

Hal said bluntly, "Could have fooled me. There are already far too many outsiders in the Preserve. It's starting to look like O'Hare Airport out there. At this rate we're going to irreparably damage the ecosystem."

Paul looked embarrassed. People shifted on their chairs, crowded uncomfortably into the too-small break room. Nobody looked directly at the visiting scientists.

"Hal, we appreciate your concerns, but we have to be practical here as well. This is perhaps the single most important event in the history of humankind. You can't really expect it to stay confined to a bunch of academic swamp rats like us."

People laughed obligingly, but the tension wasn't broken.

Paul continued, "We have a full agenda this morning, and a very exciting one, so let's—"

"If you're really trying for tight security," Hal persisted doggedly, "then all these soldiers and checkpoints and cars going in and out isn't exactly the best way to get it. Don't you think the locals, including the local journalists, are going to notice?"

Lisa had to agree with him. Just last night she'd heard two women at the grocery store speculating about what could be going on "down to the Preserve, with all them crazy tree-huggers." And the off-duty soldiers went in and out of Flaherty's, the town's most popular bar. She'd seen them.

"I think we can leave security to the professionals whose job it is," Paul said smoothly, "and get on with our own job. First, a really exciting report from Dr. Mary Clark of Harvard."

"Thanks, Paul," Dr. Clark said. "Hang onto your hats, guys. We've finished the water analyses. Our alien footed snakes are *not* the only extraterrestrials in the Preserve."

Gasps, chatter, shouted questions. Dr. Clark held up her hand, eyes gleaming at the sensation she'd produced. "There are one-celled organisms with the same non-DNA genetic structure out there in the swamp water. There are also multi-celled organisms and some primitive worms."

Over the fresh buzz, someone called out, "Nothing in between? In evolutionary terms?"

"No," Dr. Clark said, "and of course we still don't understand that."

No one did. It was the central mystery about the alien snakers—how had whoever sent them known what environment they would find when the craft landed? Had the snakers been chosen because, miraculously, they were perfectly adapted to a swamp environment at this latitude? That could be true only if their planet of origin were very similar to Earth, which seemed too much of an unlikely coincidence. (In fact, as the NASA rep had said, the odds against it were so high that the possibility was meaningless.)

Had the snakers been engineered for this environment? But that argued a detailed knowledge of an Earth swamp ecosystem, and how could the genetic engineers have that unless they'd been here? If they had, why not just appear themselves? Why send these non-sentient but apparently harmless creatures as forerunners?

And now these much more primitive non-DNA creatures. Too primitive to serve as food for the snakers, which in any case were eating sedges and *Lemna minor* just fine. And that brought the questions full circle to the central issue: How could the snakers be metabolizing food they had not evolved to metabolize?

The rest of the meeting produced no answer. The Harvard geneticist gave a long and detailed progress report of the research into the peculiar, scattered genetic structures in the alien cells. Lisa listened intently. After forty-five minutes she discerned the central point: Nobody knew anything definitive.

There were other reports and what promised to be an intense give-and-take, but she couldn't stay. She had to get Carlo from Mrs. Belling. Paul turned his head as she went out the door, and she saw him frown.

But, then, Paul had a wife looking after his children.

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Danilo showed up while she was feeding Carlo. He opened the apartment door, walked in, and dropped his knapsack on the floor. Carlo sang out, "Hi, Uncle Danilo!" and Lisa was stuck being semi-polite.

"I brought some veggies," Danilo said. "Did you know you have an organic farmer just the other side of town?"

"No," Lisa said. "I don't shop around much."

"Good stuff. No pesticides, no fertilizers. I thought I'd make a salad. Do you like salad, Carlo?"

"Yes!" said Carlo, who liked everything.

"I got some peaches and cherries, too."

Lisa's mouth filled with sweet water. She made herself say, "Thank you, Danilo. But you should knock, you know. It's good manners." She looked pointedly at Carlo.

"You're right. I will. Carlo, watch this."

Danilo tossed cherries in the air, caught them in his mouth, mimed exaggerated satisfaction. Carlo laughed, and so Danilo hammed it up more, until the little boy was whooping with laughter. "Now Carlo's turn."

"Pit them first, Danny," Lisa said quickly. He had always swallowed the cherry pits. Oh God, *Danny*... it had just slipped out.

Danilo played with Carlo all evening. It wasn't until Carlo was in bed that Lisa could throw Danilo out. "You can't do this."

"Do what?" he said.

"Get Carlo used to you, enjoying you, then disappear again."

"Isn't that what 'uncles' do?" Danilo said, and they were facing each other, bristling like cats.

"Danilo, what are you really doing here? I looked up EarthAction on the web. They're suspected in half a dozen environmental bombings. A pesticide factory in Mexico, a supermarket in Germany that refused to remove genetically modified foods from its shelves, a Monsanto distributor in South Africa, a whaling operation in Japan."

"Nothing proven whatsoever," Danilo said.

"Mostly because you haven't hit anything in the United States. God, Danilo, a *supermarket?*"

"Do you know how dangerous those genetically modified foods are? The growers use two to five times the pesticides that regular farmers use. Worse, nobody knows the long-term effects of introducing organisms into the environment that didn't develop there naturally. We could be looking at global disaster down the road, just so the agri-industrial complex can boost its profits now."

"You used to believe that violence was descending to the level of the enemy!"

"And all that peaceful confrontation failed, didn't it? Did you breast-feed Carlo, Lisa? You probably had toxic organochlorines in your breast milk. Do you read the newspaper when you're not in that swampy ivory tower of yours? Did you read about the fish depletion on the Grand Banks because of overfishing? The drought in Africa because of climate shifts due to the actions of industrial countries? The destruction of sustainable, diverse agriculture because of one-crop genetically engineered planting with God-knows-what side effects? The ninety-six people in Manila—" He stopped, breathing hard.

Lisa said quietly, "What about the people in Manila, Danilo? Which people?"

"Nothing. Forget it."

"It was the garbage dump, wasn't it? I saw it on the news. A dump collapsed outside Manila, burying the shanties of people who lived by scavenging in the garbage."

"Men, women, children," Danilo said. "Buried under huge mounds of rotten garbage. Burned when fires broke out from the pathetic makeshift stoves they used to cook their food in the shanties. Cooking *food* there. Rescue people couldn't even get the bodies out right away because of the stench."

Lisa waited.

"My family owns that dump, Lisa. Just like they own most of that Manila suburb."

"Danilo, you—"

"Come out of your bog once in a while and see what's going on with the planet. Which we're not going to have indefinitely unless somebody gets through to the people exploiting it for profit."

He was right, she knew he was right. And yet all she could think was, *He talks like a propaganda leaflet.* Was Danilo still in there somewhere, a real person?

"See you," Danilo said, picking up his knapsack. "Tell Carlo I said good-bye."

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Lisa was the first one in at Kenton the next day, a miracle. She couldn't sleep, and when she saw Mrs. Belling's light go on at 4:00 A.M., she took a chance and asked her if she could take Carlo this early. An emergency at work, Lisa babbled, they'd just phoned, she hated to ask, wouldn't let it happen again...

Mrs. Belling, blinking in either sleep or surprise, agreed. Lisa carried the unconscious Carlo next door. In Mrs. Belling's shabby, comfortable kitchen she noted on the counter a jar of peanut butter, plastic food containers, a receipt for dry cleaning. Genetically modified foodstuffs, persistent organic pollutants, environmental toxins. That's what Danilo would have said.

Screw Danilo.

The lab was cool and sweet-smelling, a window open to the moist night air. Lisa shrugged off her irritation at once again being ribbed by the guard. She pulled out her notes on analyses of snaker fecal matter.

Thrashing sounded from the snaker cage.

A snaker sat in a shallow pool of water smack up against the mesh wall. It ignored Lisa as she approached. Again it thrashed with the back half of its long body. Something was emerging. The snaker was giving birth.

Unable to believe her luck, Lisa grabbed a camcorder. She put it right against the mesh, hoping the fine carbon-filament netting wouldn't interfere too much with the picture. The snaker paid no attention. It was totally absorbed in the excruciating pushing process of mammalian birth, supplemented by a snake-like thrashing.

Finally, something emerged. Lisa gasped and almost dropped the camera.

Not possible.

A brief rest, and the snaker resumed pushing. Lisa could barely hold the camera steady. The offspring looked nothing like the parent, a phenomenon associated with reptiles and amphibians and insects. Tadpoles, larvae. Egg layers. But the snaker was a warm-blooded pseudo-mammal, and its offspring was...

Its offspring looked orders more complex than the parent. It had long, far more developed legs, with knee joints and toes. *Toes.* It had a shorter body. It had... not possible.

It had a prehensile tail.

This didn't happen. Offspring were not more evolutionarily advanced than their parents, not like *this.* This looked like an entirely different animal. No, that wasn't true, either. It looked like a plausible development from this animal but several million years up the evolutionary ladder.

Not possible.

But there it was, a second one, emerging from the snaker. Who then gave a last enormous thrash, curled up, and went to sleep. Apparently completely certain that her two offspring could fend for themselves.

Which they could. They leaned over and both gently bit their mother on the head. A few minutes later, they began to eat her.

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"I have a conjecture," Paul said.

It came after a long silence. The few scientists who had arrived by 5:30 A.M. looked at Lisa's video, gasped in disbelief, looked again, stampeded to the mesh cage, where there was nothing to see. The infant snakers...no, you couldn't call them that, they were clearly something else besides snakers...had disappeared into the cage's lush interior. For the first time, Lisa regretted the large, ecologically correct environments lab animals got at Kenton.

Paul didn't respect the philosophy behind this, not this time. He removed the top and beat the swamp reeds and fished under the lily pads and pond scum until one of the offspring was found. Unceremoniously he hoisted it with a net into a small bench cage, and everyone had gasped a second time.

"I have a conjecture," Paul repeated. Lisa recognized the reluctance of a scientist to make a fool of himself, coupled with the honesty that was going to let him do so. "I think they were genetically engineered to do this. The entire genome—maybe several genomes—exists in the one-celled organisms released from the spacecraft. In fact, one-celled organisms may have been the only things released from the spacecraft. They had the best chance of survival in many conditions, and could subsist on the widest array of chemicals available.

"The genome is in so many pieces in the alien cells because it's so huge. It contains multiple possible evolutionary paths for future organisms, depending on what environment the craft finds itself in. And that same environment triggers which genes kick in for each subsequent generation, advancing as fast up the evolutionary ladder as biology and environment permit."

Immediately objections broke out, some of them vehement. "I didn't say it was a polished theory," Paul finally said angrily. Lisa had never heard him get angry. "I said it was a conjecture!"

More objections, more arguments. Someone else came in—Dr. Clark—and someone else explained to her what had happened. The birth film was run again. People ran back and forth from the bench cage containing the new creature, the totally impossible creature, which had gone to sleep. The NASA rep arrived, looking stunned as he listened to the scientists.

Amid the din, Lisa sat quietly. *I believe Paul,* she thought. Not because the theory was tight, or well-supported, or inevitably logical. She believed it, she realized, because if she were going to send terrestrial life to the stars, that's the way she would do it. The way that respected the unknown ecologies so abruptly intruded upon. The way with the largest possibility of success.

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The next weeks filled with frenzied work. Lab staff and visiting scientists had divided into camps. Only the tremendous excitement of the discovery itself kept the arguing from deteriorating into turf wars. And sometimes, Lisa observed wryly, not even that. Kenton's previous major concern, controlling the invasion of loosestrife into the wetlands, was forgotten. The purple Eurasian weed begat and burgeoned.

Lisa stayed at the lab all she could. Unlike some people, she couldn't physically move in. Paul and Stephanie spent most nights in their offices. One of the CDC scientists, Lisa suspected, was sleeping on the very hard sofa in the break room. She herself drew more money from her small, precious hoard to pay Mrs. Belling as much overtime as Lisa could conscionably allow herself away from Carlo. The child grew cranky with missing her, and Mrs. Belling grew stiffer as Lisa picked him up later and later, but she couldn't stay away from Kenton.

They found more of the new creatures—"post-snakers"—in the Preserve.

The geneticists isolated a few specific sections of the alien genetic material responsible for producing a few specific proteins. A tentative but definite beginning on mapping the genome.

Technicians installed heavy encryption programs for all data flowing between Kenton, Washington, the CDC, and the university research centers involved in the discovery.

A post-snaker was painstakingly dissected. Internal organs and systems were logical but startlingly advanced versions of its parents'.

Paul and Hal got into a public fight—it was not an argument, it was a fight—on the missing links between the worms they'd found in the Preserve and the snakers. From worm to pseudo-mammal with nothing in between? Impossible, said Hal. Irresponsible sensationalism.

The missing forms disappeared because they were no longer needed, Paul said. Just as the eaten maternal snakers were no longer needed after the snaker population had reached a certain level. They'd accomplished their purpose, so they stopped being produced.

Evolution doesn't work that way, Hal retorted. Species don't disappear because they're not "needed"—they disappear because their habitat changes, and not always then. We still have primitive, clumsy birds like hoatzins along with superb flyers like gulls and hawks. We still have alternate-branch primates even though man exists. We still have crocodiles, for God's sake, that were around in the Triassic. *National Enquirer* science is no science at all.

This isn't Terran evolution, Paul replied coldly, and the two men parted in anger.

Lisa watched the fight with sorrow, mingled with impatience. Why were these intelligent, capable men wasting time on turf wars? The greatest discovery in the history of the human race, and they used it to vent long-standing acrimonies, which was how it seemed to her. But maybe she wasn't seeing it too clearly. She was so tired. Being part of history might be exciting, but it was also so exhausting she was often afraid she'd fall asleep at the wheel driving home.

And then one night, as she staggered in past midnight with the sleeping Carlo a dead weight in her arms, Danilo was back.

"Lissy," he said somberly, and she couldn't summon the energy to tell him he wasn't allowed to call her that.

"Leave, Danilo."

"I'm going. This is a two-minute visit. Do you often work at night like this?"

"If I have to." She dumped Carlo in his bed, covered him, and closed the bedroom door.

Danilo said, "And do you often get to work as early as you did today? I was here at five and you were already gone."

"What were you doing here at five? Danilo, leave. I'm exhausted." She yawned.

"I can see that. Do you often get to work as early as you did today?"

This time she heard the casualness in his voice. Too casual. Her senses sharpened. "Why?"

"Just asking."

"No, you're not."

He picked up his ever-present knapsack and headed for the door. "Lissy, you work too hard. Don't go into work so early."

"The hell with you. How else do you suppose work gets done, Danilo? Not that you'd know."

He didn't change expression. "I know you hate me."

"No, Danilo. I don't hate you. I can even admire what you're doing, or at least I could when you were with organizations like Greenpeace. It's necessary, important work. But it's not supposed to be an excuse to avoid normal human responsibilities such as your own child, and then even expect to get credit for doing that."

"I wanted you to put him in an institution, Lisa."

"And I chose not to. Is that it, is the problem that Carlo's deformed? That the healthy Danilo Aglipay, stalwart macho crusader, has a son who will never walk or feed himself? Do you think that my keeping him against your wishes absolves you of responsibility? Whether you approve or not, the kid is here, and he's yours, and you'd rather be Richard the Lion Heart than St. Francis of Assisi. Fine. Just don't expect me, of all people, to applaud you for it."

He didn't answer. Danilo not insisting on the last word was such a novel phenomenon that, watching the door close behind him, she would have felt triumph if she hadn't felt so exhausted. She collapsed into bed and slept, dreamless.

j

The next morning she was late. Lisa overslept, Carlo was in a rare terrible mood, Mrs. Belling had to run errands before she could take him. Lisa didn't get to Kenton until after ten, and it was clear that something big had gone down before

she got there.

"Stephanie, what—"

"Not now. I have to write this report."

Stephanie never rebuffed her. Lisa was afraid to even approach Paul, who stalked tight-lipped through the corridors, looking to neither side.

Hal was on the dock, pushing off in the boat. Blunt, honest Hal. Lisa flew out the back door and down the dock. "Hal! Take me with you!"

"No." Then he saw her face. "Oh, all right, but don't talk to me. Just take this and count." He thrust a clipboard at her with columns headed with the names of various fishes. Most of the boat was taken up with netting. Lisa understood; Hal was sampling the fish population in various parts of the Preserve to determine any changes from baseline since the alien animals appeared. The staff had already established that the post-snakers would eat fish. Meekly, Lisa settled herself in the boat.

It was peaceful away from the research complex. Hal poled the boat past mixed stands of cattails and hard-stem bulrushes, around impenetrable stands of purple loosestrife. A wood duck had nested on a wind-throw mound and Lisa watched the ducklings slide into the water after their mother. A tern perched on top of an abandoned muskrat house. As the boat glided along, frogs splashed from hummocks into the muddy water, croaking indignantly.

She waited until they were far enough out that Hal wouldn't turn back. With Hal it was always best to be direct and brief. "Hal, I wasn't here this morning. Something happened. Please tell me."

"Politics happened. Fear happened. Stupidity happened. The Washington guy made a report."

"And..."

"They don't know down there what to do with the alien animals. But they don't like the speed with which they're both evolving and reproducing. Washington in its cover-your-ass indecision listed several courses of action they might take. One of them was to eliminate the threat entirely."

Lisa suddenly could feel her heartbeat in her teeth. " 'Threat'? 'Eliminate'?"

"You got it. As in, 'Too many unknowns in allowing unknown organisms to propagate in human environments, with totally unknown effects.' As in, 'Kill them all.' "

"But... how..."

"Undecided, of course. Probably poison the entire ecosystem, before the Monsters from Outer Space spread too far. God, you'd think all these guys do is watch B-movies on late-night TV. No wonder nobody's actually governing the country."

"But—"

"No, there's nothing Kenton can do. Haven't you learned yet that science is mostly just the slave of politics and industry? It wasn't once, but it is now. Grow up, girl."

"I don't—"

"Shut up, Lisa. I told you could only come if you shut up. Just count."

Expertly he cast another net, then raised its stiff perimeters high enough in the water to see its thrashing occupants. Lisa counted.

They stayed out till mid-afternoon. Hal said not a single word more. Lisa followed suit. Just before they reached shore, a group of post-snakers swam past them, climbed onto a hummock, and disappeared into the trees. They reminded her of pioneers rolling westward, sturdy and purposeful. Cattails whispered softly, and her face was reflected in the calm golden water.

j

Carlo was still fussy when Lisa picked him up. She fed him dinner, tried to play with him. But his usually sunny nature was in eclipse, and his forehead felt warm.

"Oh, sweetie, don't get sick now. Not now, honey!"

He whimpered, lolling heavily against her breast. She put him to bed with baby aspirin. He breathed easily, not congested. It was nothing; kids got minor infections all the time, and threw them off just as quickly. Carlo had done it before.

Lisa went into the kitchenette and washed three days' accumulation of dishes. It was only nine o'clock, and she had overslept that morning, but she was running a sleep deficit. Ten hours of unconsciousness suddenly seemed to her the most tantalizing idea she'd ever had. She drew the blinds, put on her pajamas, and hauled open the sofabed.

An envelope was taped to the center of the mattress. LISA AGLIPAY.

She had never been Lisa Aglipay, never married Danilo, never used his name. She opened the envelope. A single line of type: "Don't go into work so early, Lisa."

She stood very still. EarthAction. Suspected in half a dozen environmental bombings. A pesticide factory in Mexico, a supermarket in Germany that refused to remove genetically modified foods from its shelves... "Worse, nobody knows the long-term effects of introducing organisms into the environment that didn't develop there naturally..."

No. Kenton was a wildlife preserve. A research facility for pure science, not an industrial lab. And there was no way EarthAction could know about the alien animals. Danilo was just trying to do what he had always done, control her through scaring her. He wanted the last word.

The young soldiers, going in and out of Flaherty's bar in town, more of them all the time as security was increased and then increased again. Were they all as stupid as the scientists thought? As much unthinking robots as the military

thought? Danilo could have talked to any of them. Danilo was good at talking.

No.

She crumpled the piece of paper in her hand and threw it at the wall. In the other room, Carlo coughed. Lisa, hands shaking, put on the TV to distract herself.

"...earlier. The truck was found abandoned near Douglas, Arizona, the site of major and continual border skirmishes between local ranchers and illegal aliens from Mexico crossing into the United States. United States Border Patrol agents found the windowless truck locked from the outside. Inside were the bodies of thirty-two Mexican men, women, and children, dead of heat and dehydration. A spokesperson for the Border Patrol said it is not uncommon for Mexican citizens to pay large sums of money for transport into the United States and then be cheated by receiving no transport. However, this tragedy..."

The visuals were horrendous. Lisa turned off the television.

Don't go into work so early, Lisa.

She dressed swiftly, checked on Carlo, and left him heavily asleep. She had never left him alone before, but it wasn't, she thought grimly, as if he were going to wander out into the street. Carlo was never going to wander anywhere without help.

It started to rain, first lightly, and then a hard driving torrent. The roads were shiny and slick. At Kenton she pulled out her ID for the guard, who came out of his tiny shanty wrapped in a bright yellow poncho. She looked at him hard. He looked like all the others.

"Lisa," Stephanie said somberly in the main lab, "back to work more? What about your son?"

It was the first time Stephanie had ever asked. Lisa said, "He's visiting my mother."

"Good timing, given the workload here," Stephanie said.

"Yes. Who else is in?"

"Nobody. Even Paul went home to see his kids for a change, *mirabile dictu.*"

How long would Stephanie stay? No way to tell. Lisa set to work on some water samples.

Stephanie left at midnight. "You know the locking codes, Lisa?"

"Of course."

Five minutes, seven. Stephanie wasn't coming back. Lisa punched in the codes for the back door. Heavily laden, she made her way along the dock in the dark. A cool wind blew the rain against her body. In a few minutes her jeans and sweater were soaked.

She turned on her huge flashlight, set it at the end of the dock, and untied the boat. Pushing off from the dock, she rowed into the swamp, but not very far; she wasn't that good a boatman. It didn't have to be far. A little ways out lay a half-submerged fallen tree. Its branches encircled a sort of pond-within-the-swamp, rich with algae and the chemicals of decay, exactly what the scientists had determined to be primary breeding grounds. Once there, Lisa leaned over the side of the boat and filled all the plastic containers she'd brought from her apartment. Two empty margarine tubs. Two pieces of Mrs. Belling's Tupperware. A milk jug she'd hastily emptied. A covered pail that had come full of oversized crayons Danny could grasp with his toes. A gallon ice cream container. All of them, tightly lidded, just fit into her canvas gym bag.

The flashlight guided her back to the dock. Only half an hour had elapsed. Ten minutes more and she'd have Kenton locked, the gym bag in the car, herself driving out past the Army's "perimeter."

When would they detonate a bomb? Probably not for hours yet, just before dawn.

Don't go into work so early, Lisa.

Or maybe she was wrong. Maybe EarthAction would do nothing. Maybe it would be the government. Hal, grim in the flat-bottomed boat among the peaceful reeds and rushes. *Probably poison the entire ecosystem... "Too many unknowns in allowing unknown organisms to propagate in human environments, with totally unknown effects."*

She wondered if Danilo would have found it funny that Washington and EarthAction actually agreed. Probably not.

She drove carefully through the rain, aware of her cargo. The microorganisms wouldn't last too long in those closed containers; they had evolved (so rapidly!) in sunlight. Tomorrow she would call in sick, bundle Carlo into the back seat, drive like hell. Where? Not all in one place. Better to diversify.

There were freshwater wetlands on the other side of the Allegheny Mountains, five hours' drive to the south. Wetlands in Maryland, the huge Dismal Swamp in Virginia. In West Virginia there were places so remote the post-snakers might not be discovered for years. And the post-post-snakers, and whatever came after that. Twelve hours' drive. Maybe Carlo would sleep a lot of the way.

Danilo, Hal, Washington... they were all wrong. It wasn't about what humans were doing to the environment, terrible as that was. Concentrating on the rain-slicked road, what Lisa saw reflected in its shiny surface wasn't deforestation or global warming. It was a garbage dump in Manila, crashing down in all its sickening rottenness to bury and burn ninety-six people who had nowhere else to live. A locked truck where human beings left thirty-two men, women, and children to die slowly and horribly. The factory in her childhood home, pumping sludge into the groundwater even after scientific studies had linked that water to cancers and birth defects. Carlo, one of those birth defects but also a happy and precious child, from whom Danilo had walked away with as little sense of responsibility as if Carlo had been an organically grown vegetable that had nonetheless developed an inexplicable blight. The images scalded her. Why didn't they maim everyone else as well?

Somehow, for some reason, they didn't. So they happened again and again and again.

It isn't, she thought slowly and painfully, what humans do to the Earth. It's what we do, have done, will do to each

other. Maybe the aliens, when they were done evolving into whatever they had been designed to become, would do better. It seemed to her they could hardly do worse.

She wondered what they would be like.

Tim Lebbon

THE ORIGIN OF TRUTH

They were stuck in a traffic queue. There was nowhere they could go. They couldn't help but see the melting man.

Doug wanted to turn around, cover his daughter's eyes and hide the sight from her innocent mind. But she had seen stuff just as bad over the last couple of days, and she would probably see a lot worse in the future. He could no longer shield her from the truth. In a normal world, it was only right that his concern translated into action, but the world today was so different from last week. Normal was a word that had lost its meaning.

Besides, she was fascinated.

There were nine television screens in the shop window, and all of them showed the same picture: the man sitting propped outside a baker's, a split bag by his side, crusty rolls and ice slices scattered across the hot pavement. His legs had disappeared from the knees down. He was watching the process, his face stretched in surprise—eyebrows raised, jaw lowered, brow furrowed—as his limbs turned to gas. The view was being captured by a telescopic lens mounted in a helicopter. The picture was hazy and shaky. The ultimate in victim TV, thought Doug. Somewhere in the north of France this man was dying. And here, now, in London, they were watching him.

"Nobody touch the windows," Doug said, even though he had locked them using his own master control. "And keep the cylinder open." There were three compressed air cylinders on the back seat next to Gemma. One had already run out, the second had been opened for several minutes.

"What about when they run out, Dad?" Gemma said sensibly. Damn her, she was so sensible. "What then? Will the air come in from outside?"

"It already is," Lucy-Anne muttered from the passenger seat.

Doug glared at his wife but she did not turn, did not register his attention.

"It won't, honey," he said instead. "The pressure inside will keep it out."

"But what if those things can *crawl?*"

There was no answer to that, so Doug did not attempt one. Instead he glanced at the man on the screens, saw that his stomach was already possessed of a sick, fluid motion. He leant on the horn. "Get a bloody move on." He wanted Gemma to see as little of this as possible.

"If they were here, honey, we'd know it by now." Lucy-Anne sighed. "They'd have started on the car."

"Don't talk like that!" Doug said.

"It's true!"

"Yes," he replied weakly, "but not... in front of Gemma."

"Why is nobody helping him?" his daughter asked without conviction. She was only ten, but she had learned a lot over the past few days. Like sometimes you just can't help people. If they can't help themselves... and against this, no one could... then it's best to leave them and forget about them, pretend that they never were.

In minutes, this man they were watching from afar would no longer exist, and hours later the same thing would be happening right where they were.

As the traffic moved off Doug heard his daughter turn up the air release valve on the second cylinder. He took one last glance at the TV screens and saw why.

The picture was flickering and spinning as the nanos started work on the helicopter.

j

Half an hour later they edged out of the city, along with what seemed like a million other people. Doug was unsure as to why the countryside seemed to offer any better protection from what was soon to come. It was survival instinct, he supposed, an urge to flee that was perhaps a racial hangover from all the wars and ethnic conflicts there had been down through the centuries. As children his grandparents had been evacuated to families they did not know to live lives they could not understand, and now he was subjecting his wife and daughter to the same thing. Leaving what they knew for what they did not. Except in this case, there was no escaping the reason for their flight. No running from what could—and would—be everywhere. May as well try to leave gravity behind.

But he had to do something. There was no argument. There was always a chance.

He kept in the fast lane of the motorway doing little more than twenty miles per hour. His right ankle was aching where he had it tensed on the gas pedal, yearning to press it down and lay out more miles between them and the city. Other cars tried to dart in and out when spaces became available, and there were more than a few fender benders. Normally motorists would stop and help. Now they simply slowed down, joined forces temporarily to shove the bumped cars aside with their own, and went on their way.

It was a scorching summer day. Everyone had their windows up. Doug caught the eye of a few drivers and there was always mistrust there, an animal fear of the unknown—even unknown people—in these times of peril. It made him realize how little it had all really changed, how far humanity had not come, even though it liked to think itself way and above the rest of nature. There were those scientists who had claimed to be a few years away from the Theory of Everything. Now those selfsame egotistical bastards were clouds of gas radiating outward from the hub of humankind's doom.

Where that center was, few people knew any more. Those who did were dead, mixing themselves with the scientists who had killed them, the laboratories they had been working in, the clothes they were wearing, the test tubes and the microscopes and the particle accelerators and the cultures and the notebooks full of folly...

"Dad, I want a pee," Gemma whined.

"Oh honey, you'll have to hold it for a while," Lucy-Anne said.

Doug glanced across at his wife. He'd been ignoring her. He saw her afresh for the briefest instant and realized how much he loved her. He held back a startled sob.

"But Mum—"

"Your mum's right, Gemma. Hold on tight and you can go soon."

"When?"

"Soon."

"But—"

"Gemma," Doug said, his voice low, "did you see the man on the TV?"

"Yes," she said quietly. "He was all... going."

"He had a nasty... it was a bug, Gemma. It's in the air where he was, and it's spreading. We don't want to catch it, and if we stop—"

"And I don't want you to catch it!" she spurted out, bursting into tears and gasping great hitched sobs into the car. "I don't want you and Mummy to catch it!"

Doug felt his temper rising and hated himself for it. She was terrified, she'd seen people dying on TV, *dying,* for Christ's sake. At her age the worst he'd ever seen was a squashed cat by the side of the road. He'd put flowers there, tied to a lamppost. The cat had gone the next day. His child's mind had seen death as a temporary state. Lucy-Anne had turned fully in her seat and was hugging Gemma, soothing her with gentle Mum-words that Doug could not hear. He reached out and patted his wife's behind, giving her a quick squeeze: *all going to be all right,* he tried to impart. He knew she'd know he was lying, but comfort was important. Civilization was important. Without routine and hope, civilization would crumble.

He remembered the pictures from Rome, beamed in seconds before the cameras were swamped and stripped and dismantled to their component atoms by the nanos: a great cloud looming in the distance; a soup of all things organic, metallic, plastic, historic, rock and water and air. The nanos took it all, dismantled everything and spurted it across the land, reality's white noise.

Oh my God, Lucy-Anne had gasped, squeezing his hand, spilling a tear of red wine from her glass. *Surely they can do something about it?*

They? Well, the scientists. The... But she had trailed off as the view jumped further north, showing the whole horizon as an indistinct blur, the land and air merged. Armageddon moved with the wind, the nanos flowing with the air and crawling through the ground itself, so it was said.

"Doug, she really needs to pee."

He looked in the rearview mirror and saw Gemma rocking in his wife's grip. A horn tooted, tires squealed, he glanced forward and slammed on his brakes just as he heard the doom-laden crunch of metal and glass impacting. The accident was several cars in front of them in the slow lane, a Mondeo twisted under the tailgate of a big wagon. The wagon was still moving. Even as a terrible flame licked from beneath the Mondeo's bonnet, and as the driver struggled to open a door distorted shut, the wagon was still moving. Its driver knew that to stop was to die, eventually.

"Oh Jesus," Lucy-Anne whispered, and Doug put his foot down on the gas. At least something had changed—rubberneckers had altered their priorities, and they now wanted to leave the scene as soon as possible. Maybe it was the danger from fire, but more likely it was the heat of guilt.

"You can go on the floor in the back," Doug said. "You hear me, honey?"

"I *can't* pee on the floor," Gemma said in disgust. "It's horrible!"

"Do as Daddy says if you're really desperate. If not, hold on, and you can go when we stop."

"When do we stop?" Doug asked, and wished he hadn't. He saw Lucy-Anne staring at him but he kept facing forward.

"I don't know. What's the plan? Do we have one, other than leaving our home like... like rats from... ?"

"Hey, come on, it was you as much as me! When they reported the first case in Paris—"

"I'm sorry, Doug," she said quickly, and she squeezed his leg. He liked that, he always had. A touch could speak volumes.

In the back, Gemma worked her way down between the seats. Soon the acrid smell of urine filled the car.

Doug wanted to close his eyes, cry refreshing tears. There was a hot knot in his stomach: fear for his family; love for his daughter; a hopeless embarrassment at what she had been forced to do.

"Urine is sometimes used to treat the effects of jellyfish stings," Gemma said suddenly, "especially in the tropics. Sometimes they can't get normal medicines quickly enough, so they pee on the victims."

He glanced over his shoulder at his daughter, crushed between the seats, knickers around her knees. What a

strange thing to say...

She stared back at him, wide-eyed.

He looked at Lucy-Anne, who appeared not to have heard, then decided to say nothing. There had been something in Gemma's young eyes—an uncomfortable sense of loss in a day full of terror—and he did not want to scare her any more.

An hour later they left the motorway. Doug turned north, and Lucy-Anne did not object. Her silent acquiescence depressed him more than he could have imagined.

j

Within half an hour of leaving the M4 the traffic had thinned out considerably. People could leave the city, but it was not so easy for most of them to relinquish the motorways, as if the main roads could lead them somewhere safer.

It was almost midday.

Doug turned on the radio and scanned the channels. Mindless pop, classical tunes linked end to end without a presenter, a conversation on football which he recognized as being about a match played a year ago. A semblance of normality, but underpinned with the terrible hidden truth: that things had gone bad, and might never be good again. He slipped a tape into the player and REM started to piss him off.

Lucy-Anne twiddled her thumbs and only occasionally looked through the windscreen. Doug touched her leg now and then to reassure her, and also to comfort himself. He wished she would do the same back, but he had always been the more tactile one, the one who needed a touch as well as a smile to make him feel good. He glanced at her every now and then, wanting to do more but knowing that there was nothing he *could* do. She knew as well as he that they were not escaping, but merely prolonging the inevitable.

He thought about death, and tried to divert his mind elsewhere. "You okay, honey?"

Gemma whispered that yes, she was okay, but she did not look up.

"So where are we going?" Lucy-Anne said to her hands.

Doug did not answer for a while. A recent signpost had pointed north to Birmingham and Coventry, but their direction so far had been dictated by chance as much as design. "North," he said, because away from France was the best idea.

Lucy-Anne looked up. "Scotland," she whispered.

"Well, we could try, but it depends on fuel and—"

"No, we *must* go to Scotland! Uncle Peter lives near Inverness, we can go there, he'll have us, he'll look after us." She was looking at him now, and her face had come alight. He hated the false hope he saw there.

"Who's Uncle Peter?" Gemma said from the back seat.

Doug snorted. "Precisely."

"Doug, he's not a bad sort."

"You haven't seen him in over ten years. Hell, I think the last time was our bloody wedding!"

"He's a bit eccentric, that's all."

"Does that mean he does odd things?" Gemma asked. "Only, I don't mind that. I quite like people who do odd things."

"We'll go to see him, then," Lucy-Anne said. "Won't we, Dad?"

Doug nodded slowly, already beaten. They would go to see him, sure they would, but what then? That's what was truly bothering him: What then? He had no answer, and seeking it would make him give in, curl into a ball and die.

"Edgar Allan Poe's dying words were, 'Lord help my soul,' " Gemma muttered under her breath.

"What?" Doug asked.

"Huh?"

"What did you say, honey?" Some cars passed the other way, one of them flashing its lights, but he ignored them. As far as he knew Gemma had never read any Poe, let alone read *about* the man.

"Nothing, Dad."

"She's tired and scared, Doug," Lucy-Anne said quietly, so that the sound of the engine would cover her words. "Let's just aim north and leave it at that. When we get there..." She trailed off without substituting the word *if* for *when* .

Doug mentally did it for her.

Another car passed with flashing lights, its driver waving frantically as he sped by.

"Now what?" Doug slowed the car and eased it around a bend in the A-road. When he saw what faced them his foot slipped from the accelerator, and the car drifted onto the grass verge and came to a halt. He forgot to use the brakes. For a while, he forgot even to breathe.

Lucy-Anne was a good mother. She twisted in her seat and motioned Gemma to her, holding her yet again and shielding the girl's eyes with the back of her seat.

"Get us out of here," she said. "Doug, get us out of here. Doug, wake up..."

As the men looked up and saw him staring at them, Doug shoved the car into reverse. He slammed his foot on the gas and glanced in the rearview mirror. If there was another car coming they would meet, crash and burn. At least he hoped they would burn; he did not want to be left alive for these men to be able to get him, and to Lucy-Anne and Gemma, and do to them what they were doing to the family on the road ahead.

It was the dog that shocked Doug more than anything. Why the dog?

The engine screamed as the car slewed across the road. He glanced back at the scene receding in front of them and

saw that the men had gone back to their business. It did not matter. He did not let up on the gas until he had clumsily steered back around the bend and spun into a farm gate to turn around. He smelled an acidic burning, the car crunched against a stone wall, Gemma finally struggled from Lucy-Anne's grip and screamed.

Doug felt like screaming as well. Yesterday, normality, tainted with disquiet over what was apparently happening in the Mediterranean, and a subdued fear that it may come closer.

Today, this.

He shook his head and flicked tears across the dashboard. "We'll try another road."

Lucy-Anne did not answer. She was still trying to hug Gemma, protect her, hide her away from whatever had gone wrong with the world today. If only it were so easy.

j

That afternoon there was a government announcement over the radio. The Prime Minister gave "grave news" about the southern suburbs of London—they were gone—but he assured people that everything was being done that could be done to find a solution to this crisis. Doug wondered just how far away the bastard actually was. The Arctic Circle, perhaps?

Gemma laughed childishly and said: "Tibia, fibula, tarsus, metatarsals, phalanges."

Early that evening they saw the first signs for Edinburgh. The radio had said no more.

j

Uncle Peter was more than eccentric, he was plain insane... and he wanted people to recognize his insanity. His whole estate was floodlit against the night, revealing all of what he had done. Some of it, Doug thought, should have stayed well hidden.

As they cruised along his long, winding driveway, the first signs of this madness presented themselves. Every tree bordering the road had had its lower branches lopped off, the wounds daubed with black tar to seal them, the dead timber disposed of out of sight. Nailed to the naked trunks were animal corpses, a species for each tree: a squirrel on a sycamore, a sparrow on an elm, a deer on an oak. It was as if Uncle Peter were a game hunter, but he had run out of room for trophies inside his house.

And the house... this was fairly unusual as well.

"Holy shit," Doug muttered under his breath as they rounded the final bend in the drive. It was a huge old monolith, stonework sills crumbling with age, windows distorted out of shape by the deadly subsidence plaguing the property and promising to drag it, eventually, back into the stony ground. From plinth to eaves the house looked quite normal, if dishevelled.

Above that, the gargoyles took over.

They were all huge, fashioned from plastic and fibreglass instead of stone, and more gruesome because of that. Garish colors and unsettling designs shouted across at them as they coasted to a halt. Bloody teeth, split throats, dragon-eyes, sabre-toothed monstrosities that would surely be more than able to fulfil their duties... if, indeed, these things had the same employ as their more traditional greystone cousins. Stark artificial light gave them an added sense of the grotesque. They looked like a kid's book made real.

"Mad as a hatter," Doug said. "Uncle Peter has gone AWOL I think, Lucy."

"He always was a bit offbeat," she whispered, aghast.

"Wow," was all Gemma could say. "Wow."

The car stank. All three of them had urinated—Doug had refused to stop, even when Lucy-Anne had begged him and cried and cursed as she tried to miss her seat as she pissed—and they had not opened the windows for eleven hours. The fuel gauge had been kissing red for fifty miles, and for the last twenty Doug had been silently blessing Volkswagen's caution. The food they had managed to bring with them had gone bad in the heat, a pint of milk had spilled, the oxygen cylinders had run out hundreds of miles back... the engine was making a sickly grinding noise... basically, they were on their last legs.

The car rattled and sighed as he turned off the ignition. He was certain it would never start again, not without a great deal of pampering and cajoling. He was equally certain that he would never need to do either.

They sat staring at the house. Doug was expecting mad Uncle Peter to come running out at any moment, a shotgun in one hand and a bottle of Scotch in the other, pumping a hail of lead at the car as he toasted his own questionable health. But the door remained closed, all was calm. Several crows flitted to and fro across the roof, confused by the light, avoiding the gargoyles wherever they could.

"Crows," Gemma said. "Family Corvidae. For instance, *Corvus corax, Corvus corcone, Corvus frugilegus, Corvus splendens,* and the magpie, *Pica pica.* Chiefly insectivorous, in winter it will become omnivorous. Earthworms and grubs. And seeds. It eats... it eats grubs and seeds..." She drifted off, leaning between the front seats, staring through the windscreen at the frolicking birds on the roof of the house.

"Where...?" Doug said. "Honey? Where did you learn stuff like that? They teach you that at school?"

Gemma turned to him, glaring blankly. Her mouth hung slightly open and a string of drool was threatening to spill out. "Huh?"

"Honey, what's wrong?" *Not now,* he thought. *Don't let her be ill now, not with so little time left...*

"Dad, I'm so thirsty," she said. Her voice was weak, diluted. Not as strong as it had been moments before. Not as definite.

"Gemma, how do you know all that about crows—?"

"Leave her, Doug," Lucy-Anne said. "Let's just get her in, can we? For God's sake? We need a rest."

Doug nodded, smoothed Gemma's hair behind her ears, tried to stretch his legs. He could hear the concern in Lucy-Anne's voice, and the doubt, and the fact that she was as unsettled as he. Gemma had never been very good at school... had never taken much of an interest in anything... had been on the verge of being sent to a special school for slow learners.

Corvus corax, Corvus corcone, Corvus frugilegus... *Christ, where the hell did she get that from?*

"Ahhhh," a voice boomed, and Doug's door was snatched open. He jerked back, gasping in relief at the fresh air gushing in, wondering at the same instant what he was inhaling, whether the nanos were here already, inside him now, starting work on his lungs so that the next breath he drew and let out would mist red in front of him.

"Uncle Peter?" Lucy-Anne said.

"Thought I might see some of my folk over the next day or two," the voice said. Then a man leaned down next to the car to give the voice a face. A wild face indeed, with unruly tufts of hair and cheeks veined with evidence of years of alcohol abuse. His eyes, though, they were different. Mad, yes, but intelligent too.

"Sorry to say," Uncle Peter said, "there's nothing I can do for any of us. But still. It will be nice to have company when the time comes."

Doug, his wife, and his daughter heaved themselves from the car, all of them patiently helped by Lucy-Anne's Uncle Peter. He held them when their legs bowed, their muscles cramped, and he wiped tears from Gemma's face when she cried. When Lucy-Anne went to him he hugged her close and closed his eyes. Doug felt a brief but intense moment of jealousy, unreasonable yet unavoidable, and he gathered Gemma into his arms as if to ward off his uncertainty.

"Amazing house," he said, staring up at the grotesque decoration three stories up.

"Made them myself," Peter said. "I must be a fucking fruitcake!"

Laughing, they left the mad night behind and went inside.

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"London went hours ago," Peter said. "So it said on the TV." He was peeling potatoes while Doug diced some vegetables. Lucy-Anne and Gemma were washing and changing in one of the upstairs bedrooms. None of them felt like sleeping. "Haven't been there in a decade. Now all I want to do is to go to Trafalgar Square and feed the pigeons."

"My father lives in London," Doug said. He took his time with each carrot he slit, relishing the hard, crunchy sound. It was a solid sound. Firm. Not too far south of here, *solid* and *firm* were words that no longer held meaning.

"Well," said Peter, but he did not continue.

They worked in silence for a while, Doug thinking around the subject of death, Peter perhaps doing the same. Everything Doug did now was tainted with the promise of their own demise: this food would not be fully digested when the time came; he may never sleep again, it was a waste of time... so no more dreams. Gemma would not grow up to go to university, marry, bear her own children...

"It's just so unfair!" he shouted, throwing the knife at the flagstone floor. He regretted it instantly, felt a cool hand of shame tickle at his scalp. He had not seen this man for ten years, and here he was trying his best to destroy his kitchen.

And there's another irony, he thought. *In days... hours... this kitchen won't be here.*

Peter glanced at him but said nothing. He continued peeling potatoes.

Doug wondered whether the old nutcase was as far gone as he led to believe. "Why all the lights? And the animals on the trees? And the gargoyles?"

Peter shook his hands dry and transferred the vegetables into a huge pan of boiling water. "In reverse order: the gargoyles to keep people away from the house; the animals on the trees to keep trespassers from my land; the lights so that people can see what I've done. It took a long time. Why have it all hidden half the time?"

Doug smiled at the simple logic of it. "But why keep people from the house?"

The old man shrugged. "Don't like people, mostly."

There was a clatter of feet from the hallway and Gemma and Lucy-Anne hurried in. They both had wet hair, loose-fitting clothes that Peter had found in some mysteriously well-appointed wardrobe and rosy complexions that made Doug's heart ache.

"Your turn," Peter said.

"Huh?"

"Shower. Change. Forgive my bluntness, but you smell."

"Daddy smells, Daddy smells!"

He relented, and after giving his wife and daughter a kiss—a hard hug for Gemma, a long, lingering kiss for Lucy-Anne—he made his way up the curving staircase to their bedrooms.

There were towels on the bed, a basket of fruit on the dressing table, a bottle of red wine uncorked and breathing beside the bed, two glasses, and a door between their and Gemma's bedrooms. *Thought I might see some of my folk over the next day or two,* the mad old fool had said. And though he had claimed to hate people, Doug could see that this was what Peter had wanted more than anything else.

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After a hearty meal of steak, fried potatoes, vegetables and great, thick chunks of garlic butter-soaked bread, the four of them made their way into Peter's living room and sat down with a drink. Gemma went to sleep almost immediately, nestled against Peter's arm, and the three adults—though tired—sat talking until the sun set fire to the day outside.

There was a strange atmosphere between them, a feeling that they had known each other forever and that there was not a chasm of ten years between this and their last meeting. Lucy-Anne and Peter seemed especially comfortable, finding it unnecessary to resort to reliving old times or talking about absent—or dead—family members to get by. Instead their talk was of Gemma, what she had done in her short life to date, what she wanted to do. Her prospects.

And for a while, Doug was happy to let this go. He half-closed his eyes, enjoying the sense of the brandy sweeping through his veins and setting his stiff muscles afire, listening to Peter and Lucy-Anne's tempered voices. He found solace in their tone if not their words. He soon tried to tune out what they were saying—because none of it held true meaning any more—and enjoy instead the peace their voices conveyed, the sheer pleasantness of this unreal scene of family conviviality.

But then Gemma stirred and began to mutter in her sleep.

"Never done that before..." Lucy-Anne said idly. And she said no more.

None of them did. There was nothing to do but listen to what the little girl was saying.

"First birds were in the Jurassic period, two hundred and thirteen million years ago," she mumbled into Peter's side.

The old man stared down at her wide-eyed, but he did not move. Moving may have disturbed her.

"First mammals and dinosaurs in the Triassic two hundred and forty-eight million years ago, but the dinosaurs reached their peak in the Cretaceous, one hundred and forty-four million years back. First land plants in Silurian times, four hundred and thirty-eight million years ago." She struggled slightly then, frowning, as if searching for something hidden behind whatever she had been saying. "First humans. Couple of million years ago. Pleistocene epoch."

She sat up and opened her eyes. "Blink of an eye."

"Gemma?" Doug whispered, but then she began to cry.

"Bright girl you've got here, folks."

"Gemma? Honey?"

Gemma's face crumpled as sleep left her behind. Tears formed in her eyes, her nose wrinkled. "Dad," she said. "Mum..." Then the tears came in earnest and Doug darted across the room, lifted his daughter from Peter's side, hugged her close to him.

"Gemma, what's wrong babe?" Lucy-Anne said. Her voice betrayed none of Doug's concern or confusion. Hadn't she heard what Gemma was saying? Hadn't it registered?

"Got a headache," she sniffled into Doug's shoulder. "And I need to pee."

"Here." Lucy-Anne took Gemma and carried her from the room, and seconds later the two men heard her footsteps on the bare timber risers.

Doug was breathing heavily. Something about the last minute had scared him badly, some facet of Gemma's sleep-talking sat all wrong with what was happening, what they were going through.

"Well, I bought her a dinosaur book," he said. "All kids like dinosaurs, but I'm sure... well, that was pretty detailed."

"Like I said, bright girl."

"We're all going to die, aren't we?" Doug said. "You, me, Lucy-Anne... Gemma."

"Of course," Peter nodded. "Nothing we can do about it. But we have some time, don't know how much but there's some. How about we make it the best we can?" He smiled and poured Doug another drink. "Here. Been saving this for a special day."

"End of the world?"

The old man surprised him by laughing out loud. "The end of the world. Hell yes, why not? Might as well enjoy it before those damn little robots get their grubby mitts on it."

The two men drank to that.

"Sun's coming up," Doug said after a couple of minutes. "Today will be the day, I reckon."

"We'll go for a walk," Peter said suddenly. "I have a large estate, you know. A herd of deer, a lake, and a walk up into the mountains that you'd kill for. It'll be wondrous. I'll do a lunch for us. I bake my own bread, you'll faint with delight when you taste it, it's simply heavenly. And I'll even take a few bottles of wine I've been—"

"Saving for a suitable occasion?"

Peter nodded. "Absolutely. A suitable occasion. You'll see, we'll have a fine day. We'll watch the sunset from the mountains. And if it's not the sunset we get to see... well, we'll watch the other from up there. I imagine from what I've heard about it, it will be quite a sight."

"Reality being unmade before our eyes. All matter unstitched. Quite a sight, yes."

"Ah, yes." Peter sat back in his huge chair and steepled his fingers, peering between the arches.

Doug wondered what he saw. "You're enjoying this."

"I suppose I am. Not the circumstances, mind. Just... well, having you here."

"I thought you didn't like people."

Peter looked surprised for a moment, then lowered his eyes slightly. It was the only time Doug ever saw a hint of humility or shame in the old man. "Well, generally maybe... but it's different. You're my folk. And as I said, I knew some of my folk would turn up here sooner or later."

He raised his glass, and the new sunlight streaming through the windows set the liquid aflame.

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Before they left the house Peter found Doug in the downstairs bathroom, trying to contact someone on his mobile phone. They'd already tried the TV that morning... a blank screen and an endless repetition of *God Save the Queen.*

"Selling your shares?" The old man smiled.

Doug could only stare at him for a few seconds, trying to see whatever was behind the joke. "Well actually, I have a couple of friends living in Newcastle. I thought I'd... try them. See if they're still there."

"Any reply?"

"No. No, none. Line must be down, or maybe they're working on it. Or something."

Peter stared back, chewing his bottom lip for a few seconds, obviously turning something over in his mind before he said it. Then he put his hands on Doug's shoulders and drew him close, so close that their noses were almost touching. When he spoke, Doug smelled brandy and tobacco. It was a sweet smell, lively, not at all unpleasant. It inspired a surprising nostalgia for his long-dead grandfather.

"Doug," the old man said, "let it go. We'll likely be dead before sunset, all of us, and there's absolutely nothing you, me, or anyone can do about it. And the crazy thing is... it doesn't matter."

"How do you figure that?" Doug said, anger rising like the sun in his chest. "Why doesn't it matter that my wife and my daughter are about to die?"

"*Everyone* is going to die. *Everything* is being ruined. Within a day or two, there will be nothing left of the surface of this planet, just a sea of mindless, voracious mini-robots. Nothing animal, mineral, metal. And when there's nothing left for them to destroy, I guess they start to take each other apart, reconstruct, take apart again. Everything will be pointless, forgotten, and the only physical thing left of humanity will be a few space probes wandering the stars and a century's worth of radio and TV transmissions winging their way into deep space. Nobody to grieve, nobody to remember, nobody to miss us. It will be like we've never even existed. Nothing... will... matter."

He squeezed Doug's shoulders as if trying to knead the truth into his unwilling muscles.

Doug stepped to the window, pulled the net curtain aside and stared out at the rising sun. It seemed bigger than usual, redder, and as he glanced away he retained its image on his retinas. Looking at the hillsides, the forests and the sloping moorland leading up into the mountains,he saw the sun's red afterimage touch them all.

It was a beautiful sunrise, maybe because it was one of the first that Doug had ever truly taken note of. It could be that dust in the air further south—dust, or those things—was catching the sunlight and spreading it across the sky, breaking up its colors and splashing an artist's palette of light over the lowlands. But if this were the case, then it was a gift from the end of the world. There was no way he could refuse it.

He thought about what Peter had said. He didn't agree with him—he thought that everything mattered now more than ever, because love was still here even when hope was not—and then he turned back to the old man.

"Well we can't let it beat us, I suppose."

Peter nodded.

Doug smiled back, pleased at the compromise he had made.

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They circled around the back of the house and headed toward the forest smothering the lower hills. Peter carried a rucksack bulging with fresh bread and choice cuts from his fridge. Lucy-Anne shouldered another bag, which clinked as she walked.

Doug carried Gemma. He sang softly, enjoying the look of contentment and happiness on her face, loving the way the corners of her mouth turned up whenever he spoke, as he had always loved it. There was nothing more wonderful in the world than seeing his daughter smile when she saw him. It told him that he was doing all the right things.

"Alright sweetie?" he asked quietly.

She planted a kiss on his cheek, leaned back and smiled at him. "Yes thanks, Daddy. You can let me down now, I'd like to walk."

"It's a long way."

She shrugged, looked up into the blue sky. "I don't care. It's a nice day for a walk. It's good for you, anyway."

He stopped and lowered Gemma to the ground. She hurried away and his vision blurred, the tears came, but he fought them back. If she saw him crying, her final day would be an unhappy one. He could never do that to her, no matter what Peter said, however sure he was that nothing mattered any more. He could never hurt his baby.

Soon they were in the woods. Peter pointed out dozens of species of flower and heather to Gemma, who nodded attentively and smelled the blooms and prickled her fingers on the heather, laughing. Lucy-Anne fell into step with Doug and held his hand, saying nothing. Their touch was communication enough, every slight squeeze of fingers or palm sending messages of love, companionship, and comfort back and forth. It made him happy.

Squirrels leapt from branch to branch, flashes of wondrous red. Birds sang from high in the trees, and occasionally fluttered around below the cover, snatching morsels from the ground or simply singing their unknowable songs.

Twenty minutes after leaving the house Doug shuffled the mobile phone from his pocket and dropped it as he walked. He did not worry about littering. And he felt no parting pangs.

Newcastle was only two hundred miles away.

"There used to be gold in these here hills," Peter called out from where he had walked on ahead. "Even did a bit of prospecting myself. Swilled sediment around in a pan for weeks on end, anyway."

"Did you find anything?" Lucy-Anne asked.

"Not a sliver, a filing, or a nugget. But it was a nice few weeks, I'd take lunch with me and a good book, spend the whole day out in the wild and get back just before it was dark enough to get lost." He had stopped, and stood staring through the last of the trees at the hillside looming above them, hands on his hips, shoulders rising and falling as he struggled for breath.

He was an old man, Doug kept having to remind himself. They were walking too fast, rushing to get from here to there, wherever here and there were, because of what would take them soon. "We should slow down," he said. "There's no hurry."

Lucy-Anne glanced at him and smiled, her eyes glittering with tears she would never cry.

"Strange how some metals are so valuable," Peter continued, in a world of his own. "Strange how we're so ignorant, we think we can classify the importance of all the things that go to make the world. Rock, now. Rock. *That* should be the most valuable. Holds it all together, after all."

"I thought gravity did that," Doug mumbled.

"Lithium is the lightest metal there is," Gemma said. She had been skipping along in front of them, pausing occasionally to bend down and stare at a flower or a rock or some crawling thing. Now she became still, and as she looked up into the sky—there was nothing there to see, nothing but blue—she continued. Her voice was the voice Doug had always known, but her words, her tone, her knowledge was pure mystery.

"It floats on water, has a specific gravity of nought-point-five-seven. Relative atomic mass six-point-nine-four-one. It's used in batteries, and its compounds can be employed to treat manic depression. It was named in eighteen-eighteen by Jons Berzelius." She sat down heavily and leaned forward, her head resting between her knees, talking at the ground. "But of course, it was his student Arfwedson who actually discovered it."

Then she was sick.

"What the hell was that?" Doug called. "Eh? Peter? What was that?" He ran to his little girl as he shouted, barely wondering why he expected the old man to know what Gemma was talking about.

Lucy-Anne reached her first and scooped her up, ignoring the spatter of sick that fell across her front. "Honey?" she said. "You okay? You feel okay?"

"Headache," Gemma said weakly, her face buried in her mother's neck.

Doug reached them and stood behind Lucy-Anne, smoothing damp hair from Gemma's pale face. She was sweating, drips of it ran down and pooled darkly on Lucy-Anne's shirt, and she stank of vomit.

Yesterday dinosaurs, today lithium, Doug thought. Hell, I know nothing about lithium. Is this what they teach kids in primary school nowadays?

Peter strolled back to them, concern creasing his brow. "What was that she said?" he asked.

"Does it matter? She's ill." Lucy-Anne was angry, Doug could tell that the moment she spoke, but she did not wish to reveal it to her old uncle.

Peter, however, was wise behind that crazy beard. "Sorry Lucy-Anne. Thoughtless of me. It's just... well, you've a very bright girl there."

"Research into nanotechnology began in the early '80s," Gemma mumbled. "And there were lots of scientists convinced—"

"Gemma," Doug said, confused and afraid and upset. It was not his daughter saying these things, not the Gemma he knew, the little girl who loved the Teletubbies and Winnie the Pooh and riding her tricycle and helping him dig the garden, so long as he moved all the worms out of the way because they were icky.

This was not her.

"Wait, leave her, listen," Peter said.

"—that it would be the new engineering. The Japanese created the first robots small enough to travel through veins, shredding fatty deposits or cancerous cells. The AT&T Bell laboratories in New Jersey constructed gears smaller in diameter than a human hair, and an electric motor a tenth of a millimeter across was built... and then it went top secret, and the various bodies involved started turning the positive research to more warlike ends." There was a pause, just long enough to mark a change of tone. "As always, Man is distinguished only by his foolishness, and nothing good can come of him."

"Gemma, please honey..." Lucy-Anne said, and there was such a note of helplessness in her voice that it froze them all, for just a second or two.

Then Gemma whined, cried for a few seconds more and fell asleep.

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They could not wake her.

Doug and Lucy-Anne refused to leave her side, so Peter hurried away and soaked his shirt in a nearby stream. He squeezed it over Gemma's face as Doug held her in his arms. The water splashed on her skin, ran across her closed eyelids—they were twitching as her eyes rolled behind them—and they even forced some of it between her lips.

But Gemma would not wake up.

"We have to go back," Lucy-Anne said. "Get her to bed, make her warm." Her voice cracked as she spoke, and Doug could see the truth of their situation in her eyes even as her mouth tried to deny it.

"You know there's no point, honey," he said carefully. "By the time we get back to the house it'll be lunchtime, and I doubt we'll set out again before... the end of the day. And..." He looked up at Peter where he stood a little distance away, giving the family the space he assumed they needed. "Well, Gemma will be as comfortable up in the hills as she

will in some bed hidden away indoors."

Lucy-Anne's mouth pursed tightly as she held back tears. "I wanted her to be awake when we died," she said quietly. "Is that selfish of me?"

Doug felt his face burning and his nose tingling as tears came. He had been thinking the same thing. "We'll be together," he said, "whether she's awake or asleep."

"What was she saying?" Peter asked quietly. "About the nanos? She was talking about the nanos, wasn't she? Have there been programs on television, documentaries, news items? Never watch it myself, but it seems to me that was all pretty technical for a pretty little girl like Gemma."

"It wasn't her talking," Doug said, and he hugged her tight to his chest. She was warm and twitching slightly in his arms. Her eyelids flexed as her eyes rolled. He looked up at Peter. "Can we go now?"

Peter frowned and wanted to say more, Doug could see that. But the old man nodded and smiled, and waved them onward. "You carry her for now," he said to Doug. "I'll take her from you when you get tired."

"And then I'll have her," Lucy-Anne said. She stayed close to Doug, reaching out every few steps to stroke her daughter's hair or touch her husband's face.

The going was more difficult, the hillside becoming steeper as they emerged from the forest, but the views did much to alleviate the pain Doug was already feeling in his back and legs. His daughter may only be small, but asleep like this she was a dead weight. Dead people are heavier, he seemed to remember reading somewhere, and the thought chilled him. But then he almost smiled. When they died, they would weigh nothing at all.

"Lovely view of the house and gardens from about here," Peter said, letting them pause and look back down the way they had come.

Doug lowered his daughter to the ground. She groaned slightly, mumbled something, but he didn't try too hard to hear what it was. He was afraid it would be something he did not wish to know.

Peter was right. The forest coated the hillside way down into the valley, and at its edge sat his house, its grounds and the winding driveway leading down to the road. Thankfully the animals and gargoyles were well hidden from this distance, so the scene took on a sense of magnificence and innocence, untainted by an old man's paranoid foibles. It was also possible too to see just how isolated this place was. Roads crisscrossed the countryside here and there, but the patchwork of fields which Doug was used to in the more farm-oriented lands to the south was all but absent here. The land was retained entirely by nature.

"I'll take a turn now," Peter said, stooping to scoop Gemma into his arms.

"Peter, come on, you're not the young man you used to be." Doug reached out and tried to take Gemma from his arms, but the old man's expression was one of such hurt that he stepped back and raised his hands in supplication. "Just don't overdo it, " Doug said. "I can't see me and Lucy-Anne carrying the both of you."

They continued uphill, Doug and Lucy-Anne walking on either side of Peter so that they could constantly touch their daughter, hold her hand, chatter away in an attempt to wake her up.

"How much further?" Lucy-Anne asked after another few minutes.

"We've no destination," Peter said. "Tell me when you're happy to stop, and we'll stop."

She nodded. "I want to walk forever. If another footstep will give us another second, I want to keep walking."

Doug knew what she meant, but he was also aware that she was not serious. They could fight for another few seconds, or they could sit and talk and eat a final meal, drink a last glass of wine.

He would never make love to his wife again; never feel her sigh on his cheek as she came; never have a play-fight with her while Gemma attacked them both with her array of teddy bears; never eat a TV dinner; never swim from a sun-drenched beach out to a yacht; never appreciate a good painting, a thrilling book, an evocative piece of music... he would never hear music again...

Doug lived for music.

"Here," he said. "We stop here. We'll live what we can here, there's no point going any higher or any further." He gave Lucy-Anne a hug and kissed her neck.

Peter eased Gemma to the ground, stood and flexed his back, groaning and cursing. "Bright girl, maybe, but she's a heavy one too."

As if on cue, Gemma woke up and began to talk once more.

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She told them about viroids, nucleic acid strands with no protein coating, and how they cause stunting in plants. She divulged the basics of chaos theory, especially relating to weather patterns and spread of infectious disease. Then after a pause she was back onto nanotechnology, and how the silicone-based had transmuted into a biology-based technology over the past few years. And how self-replicating nano-machines had been created, man-made viruses which had one major advantage over their natural counterparts: they could function perfectly well on their own. They consumed organic and inorganic materials alike, breaking them down, rearranging their constituent parts, creating more of themselves. They did not need a host to replicate.

And they were unstoppable.

Peter opened a bottle of wine and poured three glasses, but only he drank. Doug and Lucy-Anne tried to quieten their daughter, but Gemma only waved them away, told them she was fine and then continued her bizarre monologue.

And the strangest thing was, her eyes were sparkling as she spoke, her hands formed shapes in the air as she illustrated her thoughts and ideas, and she smiled as she revealed another complex truth. It *was* her talking, Doug realized. It *was* Gemma saying these weird, wondrous things, his daughter, his little girl. It was not long before all three

adults knew for sure what Doug had suspected all day: that Gemma had not known any of this before now.

She was learning and imparting at the same time.

"Gemma," Doug tried again, "how do you know all this? Who's telling you? Gemma, you're making Mummy and Daddy sad."

She stopped. Instantaneously, halfway through a series of equations that had lost the adults the moment she had begun reciting them. She looked at Doug, and behind her enthusiastic face he saw his tired, scared daughter. "I don't want to make you sad, Daddy. I really don't. But some things have to be said."

She looked away again, facing south, as if challenging their approaching doom with examples of what humanity had achieved and learned in its too-brief time on the planet. The fact that the doom was a fruit of humanity's misdirected labors did not matter, any more than the cause of wind or the sound of clouds mattered. "There's nobody else to say them," she whispered. And then she started again.

The association of reflex points on the feet and remote organic functions...

Fractionation, and how liquid air can be divided into its component parts at minus one hundred and ninety-six degrees centigrade...

Brownian movement, and from there Einstein, and from there the unified field theory, and then superstrings and the theory of everything...

"Make her stop!" Lucy-Anne shouted, standing up and walking away. Her glass spilled red wine into the earth. "Please, Doug," she said, without turning around, "just bring our daughter back for a while."

Doug remembered a time a couple of years before when Gemma went through a short stage of waking in the night, screaming. It was only a week or so, but the sound of her scream was terrifying, and after the first night neither of them slept at all until it ended as suddenly as it had begun. And when they asked her what was wrong she could only say, *The moon, Daddy, the moon was in my room and it was laughing at me.* He had never really understood what she was afraid of, not then, because the moon was a familiar thing, and the man in the moon was something she loved.

Now, he thought he could see what had disturbed her during those few frantic nights. The man in the moon was something she had known from her storybooks, but that same man *laughing* at her was something new entirely, something threatening and unpleasant and secret, a bastardization of what she had once known.

And that was why Doug felt like he did now. With death approaching, his daughter scared him because she was acting as she never had before. She was still Gemma, but she was a *strange* Gemma.

He would not have time to come to terms with this new strangeness. He would have to live with it, and die with it.

"She's trying to tell us something," Peter said.

"Huh?" Doug could not look away from his daughter. If he did, something might happen.

"Gemma is trying to tell us something. She's imparting information... ideas, theories, histories... she's throwing a jigsaw at us and asking us to complete it." He was becoming more animated now, standing up, pacing as he drank and thought. His expression was wide and frank, not narrow and sardonic as usual.

Doug shook his head. "Peter, she's terrified. She's seen people dying on TV in the last couple of days, she saw... she saw a bunch of men raping women in the road. I don't think Lucy-Anne covered her eyes quickly enough..." He trailed off. Lucy-Anne was coming back, wringing her hands, sitting next to Gemma and trying to soothe her out of whatever hyperactive trance she was in.

Peter glugged another glassful of wine and gave himself a refill. "It's like she's reliving the life of humanity in the face of its end. Flashing our collective memories in front of us before we drown."

"She's just rehashing stuff she's heard."

"You know that's wrong, Doug. Don't you?" Peter held out his hand as if offering some invisible truth. "It may be incredible, but what's more incredible than the here and now?"

Doug looked away from Gemma and felt something lift from his shoulders, some strange weight of responsibility, as if the old man's words had convinced him that none of this was his fault. He closed his eyes and breathed in deeply, smelling the wine Lucy-Anne had spilled.

"So what is she trying to say?" He thought to humor Peter, but as he spoke he realized he was curious. And, perhaps, there was a spark of truth in the old man's mad words.

Peter shrugged, but he was twitchy now, more animated than before. "I don't know. That there's hope, perhaps? A way to stop all this?"

Doug barked a short, bitter laugh. "And we'll be able to do it, will we?"

Peter frowned, then shook his head. He stared down the valley to the south, where somewhere over the horizon past, present, and future were being nulled. "Of course not. But it would be one bitter irony, wouldn't it?"

That made them go quiet, all except for Gemma. *One bitter irony,* Doug thought. *Oh yes indeed.*

He looked at Gemma, listened to what she was saying and tried so hard not to find sense in any of it.

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It did not work. He found sense. They all did.

Gemma fell back into an uneasy trance, but she never stopped talking. Even as she slouched down into Lucy-Anne's arms and her head drooped to one side, the endless monologue continued, spewed out like good breath fleeing bad flesh. A few birds landed in a nearby tree and twittered and cocked their heads, perhaps listening, perhaps not. And what would they hear, Doug thought? Unknowable banter, or unbearable truths? Because wherever Gemma was recalling all this from... or reciting it... it was beginning to hurt.

She knew what was happening, that is what became apparent soon after she lost consciousness again. Most of

what she had been saying over the last hour or so—the superstring theories, freezing air, viroids—all formed some small part of a larger plan that was coalescing, slowly, in the air around her. If the hillsides could echo all her words at once, perhaps it would form something that he and Peter and Lucy-Anne could understand, but as it was there was truly nothing they could do. They all heard the desperate intent in Gemma's voice... a painful thing to hear in a girl so young, so innocent... but none of them could move upon it.

They felt more powerless than they ever had before.

"There must be something," Peter said to no one in particular, opening a second bottle of wine and seeking truth and solace in the grape. "There just *must* be something we can do."

"Dare we hope?" Lucy-Anne said. "Really, Doug? Dare we hope?"

He hated himself for thinking her foolish, and he hated all of them for being so ineffectual. He hated, most of all, the pointless information they were being subjected to. Why them, here and now? Why not someone who could do something with it?

"Because there's no one else left," he said quietly.

"Hmm?" Peter raised an eyebrow past another glass of wine.

"I said there's no one else left," Doug said. "Gemma's telling us all there is to know because there's no one else to tell. What did you say, Peter? We're living all humanity's knowledge in one go, like a drowning man?"

Peter kicked at the loamy ground as he replied. "Well, I only meant it... you know, metaphorically. There must be someone else, someone who can do something with this..."

"No, you meant it. You did. You believed it when you said it."

"How does this help us?" Lucy-Anne said, staring down at Gemma where she twitched and mumbled in her lap. "How does this give us hope?"

Doug stood and walked to his wife and child, sitting behind them so that he could hug them both close to him. "It doesn't."

In the distance, way down the valley, a heavy mist seemed to be forming out of the daylight.

"It doesn't help us, honey. We're beyond help. We've given evolution a helping hand and nudged ourselves away."

Lucy-Anne shook her head, twisting from beneath his arm so that she could look at him. "No, Doug. Peter? He's wrong, isn't he?"

Peter came to them as well, but he did not reach out to touch them. He sat calmly to one side, content at last. "Maybe the truth is, knowledge can never be its own undoing. We're not being teased, we're being taught, right up to the last. Our questing mind goes on, even when nothing matters anymore. That's good enough." He smiled, drank another glass of wine. "Ahh. A fine year. Whatever year it was, a fine year."

The mist had moved quickly up the valley, and now Doug could see that it was actually dark and thick, like a brown soup churning through the air, consuming everything it touched. Nearer, as close to them as Peter's house, birds dropped from the sky, flowers shed petals, leaves fell from trees as the nanos commenced their senseless, programmed task of deconstruction. And every leaf that fell, every bird that was taken apart, soon gave up its component parts to make more of them.

Gemma woke again and sat upright, turning to look at her parents and her great-uncle. "It would have been so easy," she said sadly. "The answers were all there, if we'd only had the will to help ourselves."

"Come here," Doug said, and she hunched herself into his hug, wrapping her arms around her mother's waist at the same time.

Light began to fade and a strange hissing sound drowned out the breeze and the startled cries of the birds, like a trillion grains of sand dancing in the air.

Doug's sight faded, his skin itched, his insides turned warm. He wanted to tell his family he loved them, but he could no longer speak. His muscles still worked, though, for the moment, and so he hugged them.

They hugged him back.

A. M. Dellamonica

NEVADA

The desert stank of magic.

In decades of hunting sorcery, Kyte had never hit a trail so strong, so close to the real that it sang on his tastebuds. A toy on the dashboard pointed the way, a stuffed puppy that bumped its felt nose against the windshield. Magic in the dog hooked Kyte's rented Jeep like a fish, reeling, reeling. Even when he took his foot off the gas the Jeep drove on, into the heat illusions' shimmering promises ahead on the highway.

As an experiment, he tried taking an exit into Fallon. Massive grasshoppers spattered the car in a gory hail, and tumbleweeds leaped at his wheels. Kyte shut off the turn signal happily. As an afterthought he hit the windshield wipers, pushing juiced insects into a half-circle of limbs and carapaces.

Eventually he sped into Yerington, a yellow-white podunk with four casinos and a population of cane-wielding ancients. Plunging through town and down a dirt road to nowhere, the Jeep finally coughed. The engine died and all four tires went flat.

"Old whore." He grinned at the eager, shallow dunes.

Fields of sand stretched from the road. They were fenced with barbed-wire, as if the sagebrush and prickly pear were worth stealing. Town was miles back, and the only house was up the road, a low-slung brick edifice squatting behind a red stone wall.

The stuffed dog moved, one glass eye squeaking against the windshield. Kyte pulled it away, leaving a clean smear on the dusty black dashboard. The toy's fur had come off along the seams, revealing greenish burlap beneath. Red silk on the insides of its ears was faded and fraying. How old was it? Twenty years? Fifty?

It tugged him forward—scenting riches ahead.

He packed the dog into his bag of tricks. Magic called to magic like blood to blood—its hunger eased by the other chantments in the red satchel, the dog went limp. Perspiration tickling his scalp, Kyte plucked out the magic sunglasses and then zipped the bag shut. Hefting his tricks in one hand, he stepped out into a midsummer blast furnace.

Nothing to do but walk.

He was soaked in sweat when he reached the house, a flat, malevolent box with strange additions jutting from its brick body like prosthetic limbs. The surrounding wall was brick, too; chest height, it was nine inches wide and topped by flat concrete slabs.

Beyond the wall, the yard was an oasis of lush lawn and garden, shaded from the sun by massive poplars. Morning glory twined under the trees, each flower a white star amid tangled foliage. There were two front doors—the original enclosed within the porch, and the other a screen door built into one of the additions.

Kyte slid on the enchanted sunglasses. They showed a magical haze over the house, dark and mobile, like a cloud of mosquitoes. This was it, sure enough. He'd do a once-around, check the backyard...

...but then both front doors opened at once, and two women—sisters, from the look of them—stepped outside.

"Car trouble?" The woman who spoke from the shadows of the porch was cadaverously thin, with curly dark hair and a sallow complexion. Black circles smudged the skin under her eyes.

"Yeah," he said. "Use your phone?"

She nodded, and he wondered if that meant there was a man around. Kyte made women nervous—magic had tainted him somehow—but this one wasn't afraid. Instead, the sunglasses showed misery, blue bands of pain swirling around her head and heart. Maybe she was too unhappy to care if Kyte was dangerous.

The other one wasn't afraid, either. Bald and voluptuous, she folded suntanned arms under her tits as she appraised him. Black madness boiled from her—delusions twined around silver specks of clairvoyance.

A psychic. A crazy psychic. There was a chantment working here, all right, a big one. Kyte's mouth watered. With a big enough find, he could retire, sit pretty on a beach somewhere and pull in chantments himself. Caro had sworn that magic called its kind like blood kin to orphans.

Of course, Caro had plenty to say, much of it trash. Don't keep all your tricks in one place, take a month off between hunts, don't get hooked on collecting. Full of pointless advice, that man—afraid of his own power.

"Coming inside, rabbit?" Crazy sister derailed Kyte's memory train.

"Sure. Thanks."

"Use *my* door."

At once the air between the three of them thickened. Kyte found himself frozen, staring from sister to sister. The sunglasses showed invisible webs growing between them, a triangular riot of power somehow unleashed by her

words.

The sad woman rubbed her eyes. "It's not a competition, Mary." Turning her back, she revealed a cartoon on her T-shirt—a slot machine eating a donkey—with a slogan that read, "I lost my ass to a one-armed bandit." She disappeared into the house, and the bonds holding Kyte broke like spiderwebs.

"Come inside," the crazy one—Mary—said again. Fumbling the gate, he followed her into a room walled with canning shelves. "Phone's here."

"Okay."

Mary knelt on a barstool near him, bringing her tits up to eye level. "Are you an actor? I saw you on television."

Was she flirting? Women didn't—not with him, not for decades. "No. Not me."

"It was a show about this guy who wanted this old man's cane. He tricked the geezer out of all this money, and then offered to buy the cane."

"Yeah?" An effort, suddenly, sounding casual.

"It went wrong--I don't remember how. He ended up beating the old man to death."

"Mary." The other woman's voice drifted, dry as dust, from the next room. "Let the man make his call."

"Fuck you, Luci." But the bald girl twisted off the stool, setting it a-spin as she left him alone with the phone and a thousand jars of pickles.

Inside his bag of tricks, the broken halves of the walking stick clunked with a sound like hollow laughter.

Good thing she's crazy, Kyte thought.

He called the rental company, confident that nobody would come. Until the desert was good and ready, Kyte was stranded. Emerging into the kitchen, he found Luci setting a third place at the dinner table.

"Tow truck won't come for awhile," she said.

"Thanks." He slid the sunglasses into his bag, examining her in the real. She had an impressive stone face, but he could smell rage behind it. Something Mary had said? Or maybe just the way the bald woman was lingering, slyly, in the kitchen.

Dinner was two separate meals—Minit rice, pickles and canned mushroom soup for Mary, along with a couple of pills downed resentfully under her sister's watchful eye. Kyte got what Luci was having, meatless chili and bread from a bread machine.

"I saw a show once about a guy who grabbed kids from a mall in Ohio," said Mary. "He wanted their blood to make magic wine. He looked—"

Her sister interrupted calmly. "What do you do for a living?"

"Teacher," He gave out the usual story around a mouthful of tofu and beans. "High school English."

"Here on vacation?"

"Thought I'd play some craps in Vegas."

"Trying your luck?"

"I've got a little cash budgeted—no heartbreak if I lose it."

"Why Vegas? Reno's closer."

"No shortage of casinos. I wanted to see the desert."

"It's beautiful," Mary said. The women lit up, temporarily in agreement. Then their eyes met and the smiles died.

"Actually, the wine bottle was the one wanted the blood," Mary said. "The guy just got the kids for it."

None of the brats died, Kyte thought defensively. He watched, as intently as Mary, to see if Luci would crack or change the subject again.

She didn't.

"How'd it turn out?"

"He was sort of a beetly guy," Mary said, pleased. "He'd find things and figure out how they worked, and he thought he was controlling them. But really they drove him, like a car or a pack mule. He'd kill for them or die for them, the bottle and the stick and the pack of cards and the mirror, the compass and magic sunglasses and the camera..." Her voice droned: a frightening, accurate inventory of Kyte's tricks. Then she caught Luci smiling nastily, enjoying the show.

"They thought he was really stupid," Mary mumbled. With that, she abandoned her pink-slimed rice and retreated into the pickle room.

Kyte met Luci's eye as the door slammed. "What's she like without her meds?"

She shrugged bleakly. "Town closes up at six. Your tow truck's not here by now, it isn't coming. I'll make up a bed in the bunkhouse and we'll drive you in tomorrow. Okay?"

"Kind of you," he said. "Bunkhouse?"

She pointed through a glassed-in porch and he got his first glimpse of the backyard.

The wide red fence continued its circuit of the house, a slender line marking where the desert ended and civilization, such as it was, began. Honeysuckle lounged against the bricks, draping over improvised shelves made of cinderblocks and raw boards. Four pear trees stood in a line on a narrow strip of lawn.

Luci was pointing beyond the perimeter to a tiny green building. "Bunkhouse. Granddad used to have ranchhands."

"Great," he said, still scanning the yard. Everywhere he looked there were rocks: jasper, quartz, granite, petrified wood, turquoise. Random piles of dirt-crusted boulders were stacked on the shelves. Tin buckets glinted like treasure chests, filled with tumbled pebbles. Thin slices of geode sparkled in the porch windows.

"Granddad was a rancher?" Inane conversational gambit.

"When he wasn't building houses. Or messing with this one," Luci said.

"What about Grandma?"

"Rock hound. Spent her life walking the desert, picking things up."

His heart sank. Whatever Grandma picked up was mixed in with the thousands of rocks. Finding it would take time. How he'd manage that... his mind skittered away from the obvious answer. Killing old men was hard enough.

Luci dropped a key into his hand. "Have a look. I'll find a lantern and a sleeping bag."

"Okay." He slipped outside, startling a gray lizard from a rock beside the back door. The sun was edging into the mountains now, but the air hadn't cooled. Did it ever?

The corner of the house hid still more buckets, filled with spent musket balls and obsidian chips—pieces of arrowheads and Indian spears. A shelf next to the garden was covered in old glass, green Coke bottles, and purple perfume bottles with tiny stoppers.

"Rock hound my ass," Kyte hissed. "Grandma was fucking compulsive."

Just then Mary scampered into view, teetering on the fence like it was a balance beam. She had a lizard in one hand and a hunk of rose quartz in the other.

"I saw a show once where a guy put a magic dime into an airport slot machine. Cha-cha-ching! Five hundred bucks. Five thousand dimes, and he's got to check every one to find his enchanted coin."

At least that hadn't really happened. Kyte didn't have a dime, and he was too smart to toss away his chantments. "And he looked just like me?"

She dropped the lizard onto the sand. "Hell, no, rabbit. He was good-looking."

He looked morosely at the rocks, bottles, and musketballs. "Did he find the dime?"

"Stay tuned to find out."

Then she was off the fence and in his arms, her mouth pressed to his. Vinegar-flavored tongue slid past his teeth as her hands worked their way down his back, slow sensuous rub from the tip of his neck to the seat of his jeans. She pulled, thrust her hips against his, gave him time to cup and squeeze her breasts.

Then she yanked loose. "Silly rabbit. Aren't you going to unlock the bunkhouse?"

Flustered and aroused, he stalked to the back gate. "Mary?"

"Yes?"

"How many bedrooms you got in there?"

"Mine and hers, Mummy's and Grandma's."

"Four rooms? For the two of you?"

Mary's mad smile disappeared. "You'll be safer out there, Rabbit. Trust me."

He had a bad night. Horny and worried about scorpions, Kyte chased sleep without ever catching it. Schemes swirled incoherently through his mind. Whatever he found here, it might be good enough to let him sink some roots, let the chantments and power chase him instead of the other way around. Caro hadn't been able to quit, but Kyte would. And there was gold in this place—he could smell it.

With dawn came a sound like slow drums—*tok*, *tok*, *tok*—irregular thunks he couldn't identify. Magic roiled up through the bunkhouse floor, pulling his guts and balls. Legs trembling, he tiptoed outside.

The desert was aglow with lazy golden light. Magpies clustered on the house, black eyes watching the yard. Kyte was surprised to see chipmunks, straining for a look over the fence from the woodpile. Monarch butterflies clogged the pear trees, beating at the warming air.

Panting hoarsely in the backyard, the women were hurtling a birdie back and forth with badminton rackets. Lunging, sometimes falling, they seared grass stains into their knees. Volley, volley, volley, wild swings sending the birdie through the pear trees, but neither of them ever missed a shot.

His heart slammed. There—on the sidewalk—a chantment! It was a cookie tin, lying in a patch of sun, emitting a smell of melted wax. There and not there, half illusion, it shimmered like a mirage.

And there—on the shelf by the bottles, the ghost of an open wallet, full of dimes and butterscotch candy.

Spectral clothes, old-fashioned and faded, hung on the empty line. A ghostly soccer ball rolled on the fence and the scent of crushed berries choked the breeze. Fainter ghosts hinted at dozens, maybe hundreds of chantments.

Kyte had found the mother lode.

"Now!" The shout came from both women and they threw their rackets away. Luci dove for the wallet. Mary went after a spectral cowbell.

They were too late. The chantments faded out of the real, sliding into invisibility. Kyte sucked dry air—a disappointed, silent gasp.

"I thought we had it, Luci," Mary panted.

"We're forgetting something."

"If we had the stuffed dog..."

"Shut up about the fucking dog!" Luci's shriek set the magpies on the roof aloft. Dripping sweat, she lunged for the house. Mary, ducking to avoid her, almost fell into the honeysuckle.

Sighing as the door slammed, Mary bent to retrieve the rackets. Then she froze. Her head came up and she met Kyte's eyes. Her gaze was remarkably clear, free of yesterday's slyness.

"We thought you'd left. Your truck's gone."

"What?"

"Your truck." She pointed down the empty dirt road.

"Stolen?"

She shrugged.

"First I break down, now this?" Knowing he should put more emotion into the outraged tourist routine, he still couldn't summon the energy. Instead, he returned to his bunk and opened the bag of tricks.

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It had begun for him in the Depression, with the arrival in the mail of a strip of braided blue cord. There had been a short note, childish letters written in poor English. Kyte's Daddy had died saving her son, the stranger wrote, and the cord was "for lucky his family." Eight inches long, it was braided with human hair and things like cat whiskers.

Ten years on a widow's pension had made Mamma bitter, and she threw the cord away. Kyte had fished it out of the trash. Curiosity? Whim? Still a kid, maybe he'd even believed the cord was good luck. All he remembered was Mamma finding herself a well-heeled husband, his brother turning out to be some kind of school genius.

Luck for Mamma, luck for the kid. All Kyte got was uprooted from his neighborhood, an unwanted new dad and a stuck-up law school prig for a brother. Not much of a deal, not until a drifter named Caro showed up offering to teach him about the blue braid.

Kyte stroked the red canvas of his bag. Everything was in there, all the items Mary had named, a little chantment family tucked in tight where their varied powers could calm each other. The bottle filled with blood, the two pieces of walking stick, the cards, Caro's mirror, the magic camera, and the toy beagle.

The stuffed dog, Mary had said.

He drew it out—fingered the floppy, tattered body. It was his newest chantment, and right after he had won it in a poker game, it gave him a whiff of magic in Nevada. A new hunt—Kyte had hopped a plane without a second thought.

His fingers found an incision on the belly, stitched with red thread. Something shifted on the other side of the fabric.

Hiding the dog deep in the bag, he touched his chantments one after another. His amazing collection. He'd killed for the stick, sold his body for the compass, bled slow tears into the doll's mouth. His babies, they had been good to him. He hadn't aged since World War Two, hadn't had so much as a cough or the sniffles. People gave him things when he asked—money, information, the names of vulnerable friends.

And if women were scared of him, there was always the comb.

"Rattles and beads," he muttered. Next to this house, his paltry tricks were nothing.

But everything in the house would be his soon enough. Sliding the small disc of the mirror out of a silk handkerchief, he clutched it in his palm, warming it. Time to get to work.

Snail-slow Caro would have counseled caution. In the six months they were together, they only bagged one chantment. Before and after, Caro claimed he was looking for somewhere to settle with his stash. Too slow—Kyte finally stole Caro's chantments, struck out on his own. He'd have gone back when he had more chantments of his own, but without the magic camera, Caro had died of old age in a few months.

Feet on the bunkhouse steps made Kyte shove the mirror in his pocket.

Mary peered inside. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Just surprised about the Jeep."

She sat beside him, squeezed his hand kindly. She smelled like suntan lotion and shampoo, and when Kyte kissed her she didn't resist, submitting passively until he was hard and hopeful. Then she pulled loose, backed for the door. His blood sang angrily; only pride kept him from following.

"You ready to go into town?"

"No. I have to call the rental company so they don't send a tow truck out after nothing."

Her nose wrinkled. "Maybe you should catch a shower, too."

"A cold one, maybe?"

"Kyte, I shouldn't have done that..."

"Forget it." He bit his lip. "A shower, huh? Can you spare the water?"

She nodded. "I have an errand in Mason Valley. I'll come back for you in a couple of hours."

"Fine." He walked her to the car, watched it rattle away down the dirt road, bit his tongue so hard it bled. When the car was out of sight he crept into the kitchen.

Wild sobs echoed out of the hall as he came indoors. Magic mirror in hand, he went in pursuit, finding a room where two little beds faced off against opposite walls. The air was hot, dense with dust; sunbeams curtained slantwise from the windows. Yellowed drawings clung to the wallpaper, and all the furniture looked fifty years old.

"Go away!" Tearful, muffled words leaked through the pillow of the closest bed, where Luci was face down, sobbing. Her sticklike legs jutted off the mattress like spikes.

"It's Kyte."

She bunched and rolled, curling against the wall. Her face emerged from the pillows, pale and tear-streaked. "I thought you were gone."

"Shhh." He opened his palm, gave her a look at the mirror. Frowning, she opened her mouth to banish him, but then her eyes connected with her reflection. Going slack as her pupils dilated, she sagged against the wall. Instant trance.

"Can I... ?"

Perching on the edge of the bed, Kyte passed her the mirror. She cupped it in her hands, staring at herself open-mouthed.

"Mary seems very sane this morning, Luci."

"She is. I took the madness off her."

"How?"

She fingered an enchanted agate bracelet. "With this."

"Why would you do that?"

"Being the crazy one, putting up with the crazy one. It's almost the same thing." Thin shoulders shrugged. "You forget who's who."

"That simple?"

"Nothing's simple," she said bitterly. "But I don't like to drive and it's the only way to get her to lift a finger. And sometimes when her head's clear, she figures out the visions."

"Swell." Kyte grimaced. "Tell me about the stuffed dog, Luci."

"Stupid power struggle." Wide eyes blinked tears. "She took something of mine. I figured she'd swap if I took the dog."

"What did she take?"

"My first chantment."

"You'd been hunting?"

"I made it. Grandma taught me."

His breath caught. "To make chantments?"

"Yes. Where'd you think they came from?"

He took a long breath, absorbing the scent of limitless power on the wind. Making chantments. "So why'd Mary take it? Was she crazy even then?"

"Crazy, sure. It comes with the Sight. But she had a reason, all right. It was fine for her to have visions, but she went jealous-nuts when Grandma started teaching me craft." Her minty breath washed over his face. "So she took my chantment."

"Why'd you pick the dog?"

"Flavor of the week. She was always obsessed with one of her toys, until she trashed it, anyway."

"And you lost it?"

"I hid the dog in a box of old clothes. Mary pitched a fit." Her voice rose, mimicking long-dead adults: " 'Give your sister back her toy, Luci.' "

"You didn't?"

"Swore I didn't have it. Nobody believed me, but what could they do?"

Against that hard blue stubbornness, nothing. He could imagine her, just a kid but her stone face already carved.

"I waited for her to offer a trade, but she wouldn't. Then I remembered... she liked to sew stuff into her toys. She saw Grandma make a chantment that way once..."

"She'd put the stolen chantment in the dog?"

"S'why she was so mad. She thought I'd won—got my chantment back. But just when I figured it out, I saw the church rummage truck going off down the road, and I knew, I knew. I ran to Mom's room and there was just pressed carpet where the rummage box had been." A sob racked the thin body. "I thought the clothes were for mending! Grandma gave them away."

"Easy," he soothed. "Luci, what were you doing this morning?"

"Bringing Grandma's chantments into the real."

"By beating your sister at badminton?"

"I've never beaten Mary at anything." A sad smile carved the thin face. "Not since that box of clothes went down the road."

"No?"

"Not even a board game. Never lost, either. We're deadlocked."

"But playing brings the chantments close to the real?"

"Playing. Arguing. Throwing darts, racing bikes around the fence... but something's missing."

"The dog?"

Her mouth twisted—even tranced, she was reluctant to admit her sister might be right. "If we could just get along... Grandma hated the fighting."

"But you can't."

"Can't get along, can't not fight. Can't make a chantment without grandma's stash. Can't not care about the way she acts..."

"You love her," he said dryly.

"So? You know what it's like? Day in and out with her bullshit? I love her, that just makes it harder. Mary's *broken*. Cutting up her things, pitching screaming fits, everyone's out to get her. And nothing's her fault. She's the pretty one, she got the Sight, but it's all poor fragile Mary and Luci you're the oldest so you have to rise above..."

"Relax, Luci. It'll be okay."

"Rise above..." Comforted, Luci's face relaxed into a smile.

"You're going to get one thing Mary wants," he said.

"When?"

"Right now." The mirror was only good for getting information, for keeping people calm and knocking them out. Now Kyte pulled the comb out of his bag, ran it through the curly black hair. Luci's back arched like she was a cat in

heat. Her mouth opened, rose to meet his, and her kiss tasted of mint and oranges.

Kyte pulled her close, ran the comb down her nape. Her whole body quaked; hot dry fingers clutched his face, pressing the mirror against his cheek. He bent into another kiss as Luci plucked off his shirt. Pressing closer, he fumbled the comb through her hair again.

Sudden pain made him jerk the hand back, too late to escape searing heat. The comb burned away to nothing, leaving an acrid stink of scorched hair behind. Blackened flesh marked a path across the center of his hand.

Kyte's erection died and his balls crawled north. He snatched up the mirror as Luci's eyelids fluttered, half-amorous, half-dismayed.

"Grandma?" Luci whispered. "That you?"

"Sleep now," he said, bringing her face to face with her reflection again. The magic mirror soothed her and she collapsed, snoring, clinging to his shirt like a beloved toy. Kyte backed out of the room. His palm burned and throbbed.

The protection chantment was palpable, angry eyes burning holes into his back. It followed him through the kitchen, into the yard, fell away only when he stepped outside the fence.

So Grandma had her limits. Useful information

By now it was obvious he'd have to kill the girls. They knew what the chantments were and wouldn't give them up. They were wild and unpredictable, crazed and dangerous.

He paced the outside of the fence. He'd need to get Luci outside, maybe lure her into the bunkhouse. Quick, before Mary gets back. Do it there, wait for Mary. Get to *her* before she even got into the yard.

But first they had to bring the chantments into the real. He'd have to hide the dog in the backyard with the rest of the crap.

"Last hunt," he promised, and then he cleared his mind of every murderous thought and stepped through the gate. Nothing happened—no burning, no angry eyes. "Last time for the mother lode."

He was looking for a good hiding spot when the front door banged.

"Luci! Where's the rabbit?"

Luci's voice was muzzy with sleep. "Out back. Why?"

"My vision. He's got the dog!"

Kyte's blood chilled. His hand tightened around the bag of tricks.

He darted around the side of the house. Mary's car was in the lane, keys in the ignition, still running. He sprinted for it, skidding on the rock-covered shelf as he bounded up onto the red bricks of the fence.

At the threshold, he froze.

Poisonous creatures boiled up out of the sand. Spiders, ants, and rattlesnakes swirled around the fence; scorpions glittered like Christmas ornaments in the sagebrush. Black widows' hourglasses glinted red on their shiny backs as they wove webs between the prickly pears. Wasps and bees whirled laps around the perimeter, howling like miniature racecars. Coyotes wailed, just out of sight.

Here and there amid the flow were corpses—lizards, butterflies, chipmunks, magpies, even the long body of a jackrabbit.

"Dammit," Kyte mumbled. Fumbling on his sunglasses, he pulled out half of the walking stick and wedged it into the waist of his jeans.

"Here, bun-bun-bunny..." Mary burst through her screen door with an agile leap. Her sister staggered out onto the porch, still fighting the mirror's spell. Through the glasses, he could see that Mary had taken her madness back. Sane, Luci was nevertheless waking into murderous rage.

"Give me the dog, rabbit," Mary said.

Luci didn't speak, just shook her head.

He had his bag clutched against his chest—now he lowered it slowly. The sisters' eyes shone and they crept forward an identical half-step before freezing to glare at each other.

Kyte reached into the bag, catching the smooth neck of the magic bottle. It was icy to the touch, like a chilled soda. A swig of baby's blood at the right time had got him out of jail. Could it get him out of this?

The desert hummed around him. No.

"Kyte, my chantment's in there. If you give the dog to..."

Mary's voice cut through molten air. "Shut up, Luci!"

He dug deeper, his hand falling on threadbare fur. Pulling the dog out, he found he couldn't throw it to either of them. Frozen, he stared from one sister to the other, helpless. The magic triangle wove between them, like choking vines, morning glory.

"I saw on television two women tore a bunny in half." Mary bared her teeth.

Toss it outside the fence. Fight them for it there.

A wasp changed his mind, driving a hot welt of agony into his elbow before he'd even moved. Jerking reflexively, he let go of the dog, tossing it overhand. It flopped onto the lawn, landing near Luci. She cried triumphantly, reached out...

"No!" Mary pounced, yanking Luci off-balance. The women landed in a pile, punching and swearing, their caged feelings finally loose. Their floodgates opened on a full-on fight that neither of them could win or lose.

Which didn't stop them from trying, hammering at each others' faces, ribs, kicking and pulling hair.

Chantments appeared all over the yard, clearer than before: a porcelain frog, a pile of red stones, a wind-up boat, a stained glass fish, two halves of an obsidian spearhead, a bicycle, a white bowl and pitcher, a book, a rusted music

stand, a pair of plastic sandals, a perfume bottle, a stainless steel salt shaker, a paper boat, a carton of golden eggs, a figurine of a little girl, a fan that opened and shut of its own accord, *whick, whick, whick...*

They had forgotten Kyte, were pounding each other bloody. A grim fight now—no game this time, no way out unless they killed each other—and if they did, the chantments would vanish.

Think, Kyte. They couldn't beat each other and they both wanted the dog.

"I gotta pick?" He was still bound to the women, but they were so close together that he was able to move in a circle around them, like a dog on a leash.

One of them had to win. His choice. Luci would never help him, but maybe the madwoman would. Especially if she owed him.

He leapt down from the fence, squeezing the burned and wasp-stung arm against his ribs. Skirting the fighting women, he snatched up the dog by its tail. Now what? Pull them apart and give the dog to Mary?

But then the house creaked. The two front doors opened.

The dog was warm in his hand, heavy as the air slushing in and out of his lungs. Magic tugged him in two directions, toward Luci's door on the porch, toward Mary's silver screen door. Dust devils twisted on the driveway, mini-tornadoes which flung grit against his face in tiny pinpricks.

Kyte clenched his teeth and forced himself across the lawn. Invisible fingers clutched him, resisting every step. Behind him, the fight went on, a soundtrack of shrieks and thuds and grunts.

"Mary wins," Kyte spat through stretched and aching teeth. "I choose Mary's door."

Slam. The screen door shut as he reached it, opened again. Kyte shoved the dog through the opening into Mary's sanctum.

There. He dropped it.

A scream ripped through the desert then, and the arm with the wasp sting and burn got caught as the door slammed. Kyte struggled like a pinned butterfly as the door gnashed his arm like a toothless jaw. Sand chewed at his face and the red bricks of the house bit his naked back as he tried to pull free. Heat lightening whickered across the Sierra Nevadas, rose-purpled mountains looming on the horizon, flowing like the robes of a judge.

Finally the grip relaxed. Kyte's arm dropped, gashed and fractured, to his side.

He hissed at the pain, staring at his bloodied, vulnerable fingers, hanging limp at the end of his arm. The comb—what passed for Kyte's sex life—was gone. And now this...

"Kyte?" Bruised and bloody, Luci climbed to her feet. The chantments were in the real now, clustered in the corners of the yard. She wrapped her fingers around the handle of the pitcher.

Was she still sad? He realized he couldn't tell. The sunglasses were blasted to chipped plastic by that hot, sandy wind.

"Mary?" he asked, indicating the limp form on the lawn behind her.

"Out of it."

"You killed her?"

"She's breathing..." Her voice was uncertain.

His injured arm throbbed. Even if Mary was dead, killing Luci one-handed would be a hell of a trick. And did he even want to mess with these women anymore?

Too risky. "I ought to get into town."

"Finished playing?"

He nodded.

"Smart." She squinted. "You want to cash in?"

"Pardon?"

Wincing, Luci nodded at her sister's door, ignoring the blood drying on its aluminum edge. The stuffed dog was lying in a patch of sunlight beside the pickle shelves. It was hazy, insubstantial. "You gave her the dog back, right? It's hers. I can't touch it."

"So?"

"My chantment's inside. I can't touch that, either. If you can, take it."

"That's... kind of you."

"It's not kindness. Why should she have it?"

Warily he knelt and reached into the dog. His hand sank through as if it was liquid, warm butter. A smell of scorched stuffing bathed his face as his fingers closed on two plastic cubes.

Dice.

He straightened, opening his hand. They were red, transparent, their dots gold paint. "Magic Casino" was stenciled in a circle around the single dots of the ones. Jumping on his palm, they came up seven. Jumped again. Seven again.

"A parlor trick?"

"I was only a kid." Wistfully, she reached out. The dice jumped back against Kyte like frightened children.

"Yeah..." he said, oddly encouraged. They weren't worth the losses he'd taken so far. But maybe they were a sign. Maybe he shouldn't give up just yet.

"Your Jeep's out at the irrigation ditch. I'll take you." Sliding past him, her thin body barely displaced any air. She opened the gate, and the snakes, spiders, and scorpions all vanished. Bees and wasps thrummed away in clouds, vanishing into heat mirages.

Kyte stuffed the dice in his pocket, slung his bag over his good shoulder, and shuffled out of the yard. His eyes

strayed to the magic pitcher in Luci's hand. They were outside the fence...

No. His arm throbbed. Bad idea. Just get out.

But all that magic, just lying there behind him... Blood dried in itchy patches on his ribcage as they crunched farther from the chantments.

"What happens now—with you and Mary? Try to fix her?"

"She'd have to give up the Sight. She'll never agree."

"Maybe the chantments will make things better."

"Different, anyway."

"You're an optimist."

"I know when to give up, that's all." She wasn't just talking about her sister.

Kyte sighed. "I'll settle soon. Replace some chantments and..."

"And find just a few more? How many, Kyte? Hunt lust's—"

"Did I ask for a lecture?"

"All part of the service."

"Would you have thanked me if I'd chosen your door?" He was startled by a glitter up ahead—water. The air smelled cooler, and magpies chattered from a small clutch of cottonwoods. The rented Jeep lounged in the shade of the trees, as if it was a wandering horse.

Club Luci from behind, an inner voice whispered. Go to town, claim the sister did it. Get them dragged to jail and you'll have time to loot the house.

A gamble, maybe, but a pair of jumping dice was no payment for what Kyte had been through. Even if he just got the pitcher...

Reaching into the waistband of his jeans, he drew out the cane, falling back a pace as he raised it. The polished wood gleamed like steel as he brought it down on Luci's head.

But the weight of the cane changed in mid-swing, and the wood broke over her curls in a shower of dust, no more harmful than balsa wood.

"Still haven't learned not to bet against the house?" Bending, Luci scooped at the sand. She came up with a perfect arrowhead, white and black zebra-striped obsidian, intricate and deadly.

His trusted killing tool, broken to splinters on the sand...

"Bet on this. I'm still bigger than you." He lashed out with a boot, striking the back of her knee. Heat rubbed him like a lover as she fell, as he kicked again. "Bet on this. Grandma can't help you out here."

She cackled, flung sand at his eyes, tripped him. He went over on his back and his bag of tricks. Glass crunched, and an icy spill of children's blood flowed down his back.

"Goddammit!" He kicked again, hard enough to lift Luci half out of the sand which was coating her sweat and blood-slicked skin but somehow not hard enough to dent the grin spreading over her face. Aiming for teeth this time, he raised the boot.

"Double or nothing, rabbit?" Mary's voice stopped him. One eye black and swollen, her knuckles bloodied, she was clutching a chantment, the porcelain frog.

"Yeah," he said. "Get her."

Luci laughed and spit sand. Mary shook her head sadly, like she was a teacher and he a backward pupil. Magic wove between the women, and Kyte found he couldn't move.

"Don't—" he got out before his throat closed.

Mary offered a hand to her sister, hauled her upright. Together they staggered close. Luci looked into his eyes, read the fear there, reached up as if to touch or slit his throat. Then she tucked the Jeep keys into Kyte's shirt pocket.

Not a dead man after all. Breath slipped from his lungs in loose-lipped relief as Luci's arm dropped. She was done.

But then Mary was touching him, fingers tickling over his groin, up his belly, one nail tracing a line across his nipple as her hand rose to his shoulder, where his collection hung on its red canvas strap.

No.

His eyes widened and he fought to move, fought so hard he could feel blood threatening to blow out his temples, so hard his nose began to run.

Mary slipped the bag of tricks off his shoulder.

Then the women limped away, back to the house. They left him penniless and paralyzed on the desert, alone with his mangled arm and a rented Jeep, and they didn't look back. The gate banged shut before Kyte could move again.

The dice shifted in his pocket, reminding him suddenly that they hadn't taken everything. He fished them out. A single parlor trick, all he had left.

But maybe...

Maybe he could find something else. One lucky hunt could still put him ahead. Someday he might even come back for revenge, for what he was so dearly owed.

But now he'd better hurry. Without the magic camera, he already felt five years older.

Cursing the hours he'd lose getting the fractured arm treated, Kyte jogged to the Jeep, struggling one-handed to get it unlocked. He got in, dropping the dice on the dashboard, into the clean-of-dust space where the stuffed dog had been. One-handed, hurting, he fumbled the key.

As the motor caught and Kyte sped away, the red and gold dice began to bounce on the dashboard, rolling seven over and over again.

James P. Blaylock

THE OTHER SIDE

It was evening, half past five on a late autumn Thursday, and the sun had already gone down on the changing season. The homely smell of wood smoke from fireplace chimneys lingered in the air of the lamplit neighborhood, and there was the smell of damp vegetation from yesterday's rain. Nina, Art and Beth's five-year-old daughter, was at a friend's house where she had stayed for dinner despite its being a school night, and Art was on a mission to pick her up and haul her home while Beth fixed their own supper of steamed crab legs and drawn butter, food that no right-minded child of five would eat, any more than she'd eat onions or mushrooms or a fish head at the Chinese restaurant.

He opened the car door and sat down on the cold upholstery, and in that moment, abruptly and incongruously, there came into his mind the starkly clear picture of a possum crossing a road, illuminated by a car's headlights. Just as quickly the image was gone, as if he had caught a second's worth of a television program while switching through the channels. He looked out through the windshield at the empty street, his thoughts interrupted and scattered.

As he drove, he recalled the image clearly, rerunning it in his mind out of curiosity—a dark grove of some sort, the weedy dirt shoulder of the road, the big possum angling across the asphalt, caught for a moment in his headlights as it scurried toward the shrubbery on the far side. He rolled the window down an inch to let in the night air and headed down Cambridge Street toward Fairhaven Avenue, barely seeing the human shadows in the silent cars that passed him, bound for their own lighted living rooms and fireplaces and suppers.

At the stop sign opposite the cemetery he waited for a car to swing past in front of him, and then he turned left onto Fairhaven, remembering suddenly that he was supposed to stop at the market for a container of sour cream for the baked potatoes. Thinking about it, his mind drifted back on course, which at this time of night inevitably meant food, and he realized that he was ravenously hungry and that the evening ahead looked to him like a paid vacation.

Fairhaven was dark, with only a few lights glowing in the cemetery chapel. His headlights illuminated the turned earth of the first rows of the orange grove on his left and the shadowy oleander bushes that hedged the shoulder on the right. And just then something appeared ahead of him, moving across the road. He braked the car, slowing down more out of amazement than necessity: a big possum had appeared from the grove and was running with a heavy gait toward the oleanders, its fur showing silver in the headlights. In a moment the animal had disappeared in the night.

A horn honked behind him, and he accelerated, realizing that he had come to a full stop there in the middle of the road, and for a moment he was so addled that he couldn't recall his destination. The thought came to him that he should pull over and go back on foot to see if he could find the possum, just to make sure that he hadn't imagined it, but he gave the idea up as lunacy and drove on across Tustin Street and into the neighborhood on the far side, slowly returning to his senses.

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"So you didn't get the sour cream?" Beth asked him, setting the big plate of crab legs on the table. She poured him a glass of white wine as he hacked open his baked potato.

"I was too... shook up, I guess."

"By a possum? You didn't *hit* it, did you?"

"Heck no. I was nowhere near it. It was... *seeing* it, you know, after what happened when I got into the car. I don't think you're following what I'm saying. I'm not talking about a simple *déjà vu* or something."

Nina came into the kitchen, dressed in her pajamas, skinny as an orphan. She had her mother's dark hair and eyes. "I have homework," she said. She held out an empty shoebox.

"In kindergarten you have homework?" Art picked up a crab leg and pulled it open along the slit that Beth had cut into it with a knife.

"She has to make a collection," Beth said. "Mrs. Barnes was talking about it at back-to-school night, remember?"

"Sure," Art said. "I think she told everyone it shouldn't be bugs."

"Nothing dead," Beth said, taking the butter out of the microwave and sitting down. "You don't have to kill things to have a collection."

"How about leaves?" Art asked helpfully. He doubled a long piece of crab and dipped it into the drawn butter right up to his fingertips. "Do leaves count as dead?"

"Leafs?" Nina wrinkled up her nose in the style of a rabbit. "What's that thing?"

"That thing is a crab leg," Art said. "Hey! I'll tell you what. How about a crab leg collection?"

Nina frowned and shook her head in small jerks. "Those smell."

"And they're dead," Beth added. The telephone rang, and Beth stood up again to answer it.

"Anthony Collier," Art said, looking up sharply. The name had simply popped into his head, arriving out of nowhere, like a light blinking on.

"Wait," Beth told him, waving him silent and picking up the receiver, clearly assuming that he was starting to tell her something about his old friend Anthony, who had moved to New York the previous winter. "Hello," she said, and then listened, double-taking just a little bit. She handed him the phone, her hand over the mouthpiece. "Anthony Collier," she said.

"Hey," Art said weakly. He realized that his heart was racing now, and he replied in half sentences, finally begging off to eat dinner.

"Wow," she said. "*That* was a weird coincidence. What were you going to tell me?"

"Nothing."

"What do you mean nothing? You started to tell me something about Anthony."

"Just his name. His name sort of flew into my head. It was weird, like the thing with the possum."

"I think feathers," Nina said, looking at the parakeets, which had started chattering when the phone rang. They had two of them, both green, in a cage suspended from the ceiling. Nina climbed onto a chair and peered into the cloth seed guard that aproned the underside of the cage. She reached into it and pulled out a loose feather, smiling and holding it up for them to see before dropping it into the shoebox.

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For the next hour Art was unable to concentrate on anything else. He tried to think out the *meaning* of the two incidents, possessed by the idea that they were a new category of experience, that they were evidence of... other things. He had never been a rationalist, and had always been willing to consider things he himself had never witnessed—ghosts, flying saucers, the hollow earth, New Zealand. But never had he ever been a party to a public display of these things. The paranormal was something he had read about, something that happened to others, whose stories were related in pulp-paper magazines.

During the evening the phone rang twice more, and each time his mind supplied him with a name as he leaped up to grab it, but he was wrong both times, and he realized that he had been merely guessing. With Anthony he hadn't guessed. The information had come from *outside* of himself somehow, independent of his own thinking, exactly as if it had been beamed into his head.

He stopped himself. That kind of thinking sounded crazy even to him, and he wondered suddenly if this was some kind of schizophrenic episode, the precursor to a gibbering decline into nuttiness. Except, of course, that Beth had been a witness. She could misunderstand the possum, because she hadn't been there, but she'd *heard* him come up with Anthony's name out of the blue.

He went into the pantry and dug out a deck of cards, then returned to his chair in the living room, fanning the cards out on the coffee table. Coincidence wouldn't answer the possum question. That much was clear to him. Beth came out of Nina's room, where she had been reading the nightly story, and she stood watching him move the cards around. He could see that she was interested. This thing had gotten to her.

"Five of spades," he said out loud, flipping over a random card from the middle of the spread. It was a queen of hearts. He tried again, naming the two of clubs, then the eight of diamonds, and then a half dozen other numbers and suits, dead wrong every time. The five of spades finally appeared, meaninglessly late. Beth had already lost interest and gone into the family room to watch television. He heard the theme song from *Jeopardy!* start up, and he put the cards back in the pack, giving up and going in to kiss Nina goodnight.

"Read me one," Nina whispered, pulling the covers up to her chin so that she looked like Kilroy.

"You already had a story," Art told her. By her bed lay the shoe box, empty except for the parakeet feather. "This is a good collection," he said.

"It's only one. Mom says one's not a collection."

"Maybe we should go feather collecting."

"Do you know where?" she asked.

But just like that he had lost the thread of the conversation. In his mind's eye he saw the possum again, returning to haunt him, its hairless tail vanishing into the oleander. Everything had been identical in his mind and on the road—the angle at which it crossed, the grove off to the left, the way the headlights picked it out of the darkness, the way the creature had been swallowed up by the shrubbery and the shadows...

Something struck him then, something he hadn't thought of before.

"Do I know where what?" he asked, finally reacting to Nina's question.

"Where there's feathers?"

"Sure. I know a place. We'll go looking." He tucked her in and went out, hurrying into the family room where Beth sat watching *Jeopardy!* He saw right away that the Double Jeopardy categories weren't up his alley. "Listen to this," he said to Beth, sitting down next to her on the couch. "The two incidents aren't the same thing."

"Okay," she said, her eyes on the television screen.

"With Anthony, his name came into my mind the instant the phone rang. At the *same time.*"

"I still say it's coincidence."

"That's all right. It might be. But listen to what I'm telling you. With the possum it was different. I *predicted* the possum. You see the difference? I forecast it. There was a five- or six-minute lag between when I pictured it and when it appeared."

"I do see the difference. I don't know what it means, but I see what you're saying. The possum is kind of...

psychic."

"Yeah, I guess so. Actually they're both kind of psychic, aren't they? Unless you really think the phone call thing was coincidence."

"I don't know what I think. What's the Santa Maria?"

"What?" he asked, utterly baffled by this.

"The name of Columbus's ship," she said. "Explorers for six hundred."

"Oh." He watched the game show for a minute. It was winding up. "You know why it's not a coincidence? Because of the possum. That would make *two* weird things on the same night, which would be a double coincidence."

"The Final Jeopardy subject is British History," Alex Trebek said, looking shrewdly at the audience, and the program cut away to a commercial.

"Oliver Cromwell," Art said, the name almost leaping out of his throat. This time he was sure of it. It was like the possum and like Anthony Collier. He hadn't guessed. He hadn't had time to guess. The name had simply come to him. Beth looked at him wonderingly and he nodded his head. "That's it again," he said. "At least I think it is." Instantly he had come to doubt himself. *Was* this another guess, like the five of spades? Or was this the possum, crossing the road to get to the other side?

There were half a dozen commercials, interminable commercials, but finally the show was on the air again. Trebek read off the answer: "This Puritan Prime Minister of England was so hated by the populace, that after he was dead and buried his body was exhumed and..."

Art didn't hear the rest of it. He sat with his mouth open, his mind swimming. Beth stared at him when the answer was revealed. "Now you're giving me the creeps," she said.

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On Friday evening he tried again with the cards, and again he couldn't make them work. He rolled dice, but that was a washout, too. He made a mighty effort to blank out his mind, to open himself to psychic suggestion, but it was no good. The harder he tried, the more he understood that it wouldn't speak to him, whatever it was, and he tried hard not to try as hard. When the phone rang at eight o'clock he shouted "Jimmy Carter!" but it was the Fireman's Fund selling tickets to a talent show. Beth humored him to the point of asking the caller whether his name was Jimmy Carter, but it turned out not to be, and the man hung up angry, thinking that she was making fun of him.

"I guess it's not working as good as it was," Beth said, and from her tone of voice Art could tell that her Oliver Cromwell enthusiasm had pretty much worn off.

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On Saturday morning he stopped at Rod's Liquors and bought five dollars' worth of lottery tickets, marking the little ovals as random numbers wandered unbidden into his head, rejecting numbers that seemed too insistent or that appeared there twice or that were clearly ringers, like Nina's birthday or his own age. Quickly, however, every number on the lottery ticket began to seem suspect, and he filled in the last two games by shutting his eyes and pointing.

On the way home, he stopped at the used book store where he found something promising: a book called A Field Guide to the Paranormal. He knew the clerk at the counter, a thin, owl-eyed man named Bob who had worked there forever and, in fact, lived a couple of blocks away from him and Beth.

"You're interested in the paranormal?" Bob asked him, taking his money.

"Yeah," Art confessed. "I find it kind of fascinating."

"My sister's a psychic. She has a sort of organization."

"Really? What do you think about it," Art asked. "Just out of curiosity." He realized that he wanted very badly to tell someone about his experiences, and it dawned on him that he was more than a little bit proud of himself. He wasn't the same man today that he had been last week.

"I've got no problem with it. There's a guy at Krystal's meetings that bends spoons. That and all kinds of other stuff. I've seen it. How about you?"

"Yeah, I'm a believer. A couple of things happened to me recently..." He realized that he couldn't think of any way to relate the possum story or the phone calls in such a way as to give them the punch they deserved, and he wished that something more grand had happened to him, like predicting an earthquake or a train wreck.

"What kind of things?"

"Oh, you know, knowing in advance who's calling on the phone, that kind of thing. And I nailed a Jeopardy! answer before the question was asked."

"You mean you got the question before the answer."

"Yeah, that's what I meant. It was Oliver Cromwell."

"Cromwell? The host? I thought it was that other guy."

"It is that other guy. I meant the answer was Oliver Cromwell."

"I got Oliver Hardy once," Bob told him, counting out change. "The category was silent films, I think. Or maybe it was comedians. Either way." The transaction, just like the conversation, had run its course.

"Sure," Art said. "I guess so. Look, what's this thing with your sister? She has meetings or something?"

"Thursday nights, at her house. It's a kind of support group, you know?"

"Psychics need a support group?"

"Hell, everyone needs a support group these days."

"And her name's really Crystal?"

"With a K," Bob said. He wrote his sister's name and number on the back of the sales receipt and handed it to Art, who slipped it into his wallet. When he got home he sat down in the overstuffed chair in the living room and thumbed through the book, but it turned out to be volume one of a set, mostly concerned with spontaneous human combustion and the aura phenomenon, neither of which, apparently, applied to his own situation.

He had the house to himself, and he decided to take advantage of the peace and quiet to meditate in order to foster psychic suggestion. As he sat there with his eyes shut, his thoughts spun idly, and he began to develop the notion that unwittingly he had managed to access a particular grotto inside his mind, a place where the subconscious depths lay like a hidden pool, where he might swim if only he could find it in the darkness. He pictured the pool itself, illuminated by moonlight, and he wandered toward it along shadowed corridors...

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He awoke to find that Beth and Nina had gotten home from lunch. Nina had a nondescript gray feather to show him, probably from a pigeon. The thought came to him that he had wasted the entire morning chasing after psychic phantoms. It had been three days since Anthony Collier and Oliver Cromwell and the disappearing possum. Perhaps he had sailed temporarily into some sort of whimsical psychic breeze, which he would never again pick up no matter how much sail he loaded onto the masts.

The thought was disheartening, and he realized that the experiences of Thursday night were... special in some way. That they somehow made him special. They showed beyond all doubt that... He tried to grasp what it was they showed, exactly. They showed... that there were enormous things that were true about the universe, things that he now had a first hand knowledge of. He recalled the derailed conversation at the book store, and he knew there must be a larger picture. There had to be. He had a handful of puzzle pieces, but he needed more if ever he were to get a clear view.

"Can we go feathering?" Nina asked him, coming out of her bedroom with the shoebox.

"Okay," he said. "How about around the neighborhood?"

"But there was that place you said. With the birds."

"There's birds in the neighborhood," he told her. "We don't want to ignore them and go to the park, or they might feel bad."

"I might go after groceries," Beth said, coming out of the kitchen.

Art and Nina went out onto the sidewalk and into a perfect fall day. The wind gusted leaves along the pavement, and again there was the smell of wood smoke, perhaps someone burning tree prunings. The sky was as clear as water, inconceivably deep and blue between brush strokes of cloud drift. Art found that he was distracted though, unable to enjoy the afternoon, constantly anticipating another psychic interlude, reassessing what had been happening to him. He tried to keep his mind on the here and now, but he had to work at it. Several houses down they found a white feather lying forlornly on a clipped lawn, perhaps a seagull feather, and then, at the corner house, they discovered a dead mockingbird beneath a curb tree, torn apart by a cat.

"Yuck," Nina said, "what is that?"

"It's a mockingbird," Art told her, picking up a long mottled feather.

"But is it guts?"

"Yep," Art said, "it's guts."

"That's yuck."

They walked on, heading up the next block where an acorn woodpecker hammered away at the trunk of a palm tree. The bird stood upside down, defying gravity, showing off.

"See his red head?" Art asked.

"Can we get a red feather... ? Look!" Nina shouted, pointing at the sky. An airplane blew out a vapor trail off to the east, a skywriter, spelling something out. They waited for it, shading their eyes, naming the letters before the November wind bore them away. "April," it said, and the plane circled back around and circumscribed it with a heart, although by the time the heart was completed it was blown to tatters, and the whole thing looked like an ill-drawn parallelogram containing ghostly hieroglyphics.

Art was suddenly overwhelmed with the idea that it meant something, that it was a sign, maybe some sort of spirit writing, perhaps intended for him...

...but just as soon as he conceived the thought, he realized that he was off his rocker, lost inside his own bafflement, confusing an endearment with a ghost. He forced himself to focus on the world around him, the weathered sidewalk, the comical dog that watched them through a picket fence, the wind in his hair. He put his arm on Nina's shoulder as they walked, and immediately he felt steadier.

"There's one!" Nina shouted, and she ran straight to a blue feather that lay half covered with dead leaves.

"From a blue jay!" Art said. "How many is that?"

Nina counted the feathers in the shoebox, making a laborious job of it, losing track and re-counting to get it right. "Five," she said finally.

They wandered home now, having pretty much run through the neighborhood birds. Beth's car was gone. As they stepped up onto the front porch, Art heard the phone ringing, and instantly it came to him that it was Anthony again. He sprinted into the kitchen and grabbed it just as the answering machine picked it up. He punched the star sign to kill the recording.

"Yeah," he said breathlessly.

"Art! It's Anthony."

"Wow," Art said. "I guessed it was you."

"Unlucky guess, eh?" Anthony laughed.

"No, really. I was out on the front porch, and when I heard the phone ring, your name popped into my head. The same damned thing happened the other night when you called. It was kind of spooky, actually."

"Yeah, well, you sounded kind of spooked the other night. You didn't say more than about ten words."

"I'll tell you what, I had some weird experiences that night. If you've got a second... ?"

Art explained about the possum, giving the story slightly amusing overtones to diminish the kook factor, then told him about the phone call and Oliver Cromwell, before starting in on the interesting difference between the various occurrences. In the middle of the explanation the call-waiting signal went off in his ear. He kept talking, but Anthony interrupted him: "If you've got a call, grab it."

"To heck with it," Art said. He hated to interrupt a long distance call, especially on Anthony's dime. It always turned out to be Jimmy Carter butting in, selling talent show tickets. He finished telling his story, then waited for Anthony's response.

"I wouldn't worry about it," Anthony told him.

"I wasn't really worrying about it," Art said. "I want to know what it means."

"I think it's one of those things you never figure out. It's better just to put it away, you know, back in the dead letter file. Worry about it when something starts to happen, like you start cutting the heads off of dogs or something. Until then, forget about it. You can't explain it."

"Sure," Art said, let down by this advice. They chatted for a while longer and then Art hung up. Anthony was probably right, but right or wrong, apparently his sailboat had tacked back into the psychic breeze.

Feeling guilty about not answering the interrupting call, he picked up the receiver and punched star-six-nine into the keypad. The phone rang six times before a woman picked it up.

"Hey," Art said, "it's Art Johnson, did somebody there call me?"

There was silence on the other end, and then the woman said simply, "No."

"Sorry to bother you, then," Art told her. He hung up, embarrassed, wondering what the hell he could have done to star-six-nine a wrong number. That didn't seem possible to him, unless there was some kind of crossed line. Wait, he thought suddenly, figuring it out. The woman probably had called him, but by mistake. Probably she'd dialed a wrong number but didn't know it because he hadn't picked up her call. She had assumed simply that no one was home where she thought she'd called, and...

The phone rang and he snatched it up, half expecting Anthony Collier. "Hello," he said.

"Art... ?"

"Yeah," Art said. "Who's this?"

"It's Nancy. Nancy Bronson."

For a moment the name meant nothing to him. Then he knew who it was - a woman he had known at college. Bronson was her married name. She'd moved to Texas a decade ago.

"Nancy? How the heck are you doing?"

"Did you just call me?"

"What do you mean?"

"I think it was you. You just called my number and asked if I'd called your house, and then you hung up when I said no."

Art's stomach turned over. He sat down in a kitchen chair, too confused to speak.

"Art?"

"Yeah. I guess I did call you. What happened was that I got a call, and I couldn't answer it, so I hit star-six-nine to call back. Apparently it was your number."

Now it was Nancy's turn to be silent. "But I didn't call you," she said after a moment. "To tell you the truth, after you called me, I called Gayle to get your number. I don't have it in my book. I didn't want to use the star-six-nine function, because what if it wasn't you? I'd end up talking to some nut."

"You couldn't have called me by mistake the first time?"

"Not if I didn't have your number. And besides, I didn't call anyone. I was doing the dishes. Do you have my number? My new number? Because we moved to San Antonio last year."

"I don't know," Art said, although it came to him then that he in fact didn't have it. Not a week ago Nancy's name had come up in conversation with a mutual friend, and Art had realized in a moment of passing nostalgia that he had lost touch with her and most of the rest of his old school friends. He flipped through the pages of his and Beth's address book now and read off the number written down there, apparently years ago, given its position at the top of the B page.

"That's the old one," Nancy told him, and she filled him in on the new phone and address before chatting some more and hanging up.

Art realized that he had been holding his breath off and on, and he let it out now and walked into the livingroom, swamped with a strange fear and nearly reeling with vertigo. Why Nancy? Only because her name had been in his mind a week ago, fleetingly, unimportantly? And now he had connected with her in this bizarre way...

He saw through the sliding glass doors that Nina was out in the backyard, playing on the swing, which was good, because even a child like Nina could have seen that he was blasted, and he didn't need that. He couldn't let this affect Nina. He headed upstairs to the bathroom, where he was impulsively sick. Then he lay down on the bed and stared at

the ceiling, the pieces of the puzzle going around in his head.

"I don't know if I can explain it," Beth said, putting away the groceries. "It's pretty weird. But there's one obvious explanation, and you already know what that is, I think."

"What?"

"That you're going crazy."

"Wait, though. I've been worrying about that. I thought that maybe I blanked out or something and called her up using her number, but I didn't know I used her number, because I was blanked out, and when I un-blanked I remembered it as a star-six-nine call. You get what I'm saying?"

"Yeah. Maybe you did."

"But where'd I get her number? We don't have it. I couldn't get it from information, because I didn't know her address. I didn't even know they'd moved to San Antonio till she told me. And Anthony heard the call-waiting click, too. I didn't imagine that part."

Beth shrugged. Apparently she had nothing to add. He wondered if her silence was fear, and, if so, what she was afraid of. Him? He didn't like the thought, but he realized that he was fearful himself. Perhaps she was fearful for him. He saw that he had to work this out logically, find the rationale behind the irrational before it did drive him crazy.

"The thing is, if this is another psychic episode, it's different again. This is way more complicated than the possum."

"That's for sure," she said.

"Seriously. It involves screwing around with the phone lines, you know what I mean? Manipulating them with my mind. I push a couple of buttons and come up with Nancy Bronson, just like that, out of nowhere. If she didn't call me, then I had to have contacted her... psychically, I guess you'd say. And I used the telephone to do it. This involves electricity, numbers, distances..."

"How do you know she didn't call you? That's an easier explanation. Maybe she's had a thing for you all these years and she did call you, but she won't admit it, because she had second thoughts when she heard your voice. It's an easier answer, isn't it?"

"But she said she had to call Gayle to get our number..." He stopped. Nancy's calling or not calling Gayle had nothing to do with psychic phenomena. If this whole thing was initiated on Nancy's end, then Beth was probably right. But the thought of Nancy "having a thing for him" didn't seem likely, not after ten years. On the other hand, he had always thought Nancy had been attracted to him a little bit back in the old days. It wasn't so hard to imagine that some sort of fresh spark had reignited an old flame.

Beth was grinning at him. "I love it that you came up with a lame-brained psycho explanation instead of the obvious thing. If Nancy calls back, let me talk to her."

"Sure," Art said, but he was somehow certain that Nancy wouldn't call back. Beth's explanation was too simple, too pat. There was a flaw in it somewhere. The mere fact that Nancy's name had passed through his head a week ago had monstrous implication here, if only he could see what it was.

Now he thought of something else: who had made the first call, the call-waiting call? He could grasp the idea that a person might somehow make a telepathic phone call, that he might get Nancy on the phone for mysterious telepathic reasons. But if she hadn't called him first, who had? Had he called himself? But how could he call himself if he was on the phone talking to Anthony? It suggested an independent consciousness-someone or something inside his head who, or which, had set off the call-waiting beep. His brain reeled. Again the specter of schizophrenia loomed in his mind.

He wandered out back to find Nina, who was in the sandbox building a fort out of twigs, and for a half hour he crawled around helping, finding sticks and leaves and rocks so that Nina could keep building. In the shrubbery he found a fallen nest, which he showed to her. Pushed down into the bent twigs was a plain brown and black feather, a sparrow feather, beautiful in its simplicity.

j

It was three days later, after he'd had time to simmer down again, that there was another phone call. It happened the same way as before, except this time he ignored an incoming call because he was talking to his father, who was ninety and troubled and couldn't grasp the idea of being put on hold. After hanging up, still worrying about their chat, he punched in the star-six-nine return without any anticipation at all, the Nancy episode temporarily forgotten. The strangely familiar voice at the other end brought him instantly to his senses.

For a moment he was at a loss, but then, as before, he identified himself and asked it anyone there had called him.

"Art? Is that you?"

"Yeah," Art said, "it's me." He still didn't place the voice.

"This is Steven. Steven Nichols."

"Steven! How the hell are you doing?" His hand trembled so violently that he knocked the telephone receiver against his teeth, and he had to force himself to ask Steven the same questions he had asked Nancy. He was distracted the entire time by the uncanny coincidence of having seen Steven's name on their Christmas card list just a couple of days ago. He hadn't given it a moment's thought at the time, just a glance, but he recalled that it had been there, on the dining room table along with four boxes of Christmas cards that Beth was determined to get into the mail early. Here it was again-the same damned thing as with Nancy.

He hadn't talked to Steven in years.

"Not me," Steven told him when Art asked if he'd called. "I made a couple of phone calls fifteen or twenty minutes ago, but I didn't call you. Mine were local calls anyway. What the hell's your area code?"

"Seven-one-four," Art said pointlessly. He already knew beyond doubt that Steven hadn't called him.

"Not a chance, man. It's good to hear from you, though." There was doubt in his voice, however. Evidently it wasn't all that good to have heard from Art, at least under the circumstances: five years of silence and then a nut call out of the blue. When he hung up he wondered whether to reveal this to Beth or to keep it to himself. He remembered what Anthony had said about cutting the heads off dogs, which had seemed funny to him at the time. Now it didn't seem so funny.

Had he made the possum cross the road, just like he had apparently made the phone do his psychic bidding? Why not? And if he had, then where would it end? Airplanes plunging from the sky? Cars veering off the road? His own car veering off the road, just as his own telephone had veered off course?

He was full of a new fear, something that he hadn't seen before, although it had always been right there in front of him: none of these episodes were within his conscious control. All of them had simply happened to him while he was thinking of something else, like the onset of a disease. He hadn't wanted Nancy or Steven to call. He hadn't been in high hopes of spotting a possum. This new aspect was horrifying in its simplicity. He had a sort of psychic Midas touch, only worse, because at least Midas had to put his finger out and poke something.

He took out his wallet and found the receipt from the bookstore, then punched Krystal's number into the phone, counting the rings, ready to be connected to any damned thing at all. The telephone had become a monster of unpredictability. The world had become a monster of unpredictability. Krystal, God bless her, answered the phone with a simple hello.

"Yeah, hey, I'm a friend of your brother's and he gave me your number," Art said. "I'll come straight to the point. I've had a couple of psychic experiences, and I'm really... mystified. He says you've got some kind of group."

He half hoped that she would ask questions so that he could unburden himself right now, but she didn't; she simply told him to come by on Thursday night at seven and to bring cookies. He wrote her address on the receipt and put it into his wallet again. Beth might roll her eyes at the very idea of him being involved in a society of psychics, but he had to go, and realistically she would agree that he had to go. After all, Nancy didn't know Steven from Adam, and even a skeptic like Beth would admit that the two of them couldn't be in cahoots to plague Art with some kind of complex phone prank. Beth's attempts at simple explanations, even the theory that he was crazy, just didn't work.

j

Beth turned out to be almost encouraging about the Thursday night meeting, not even objecting to Krystal's name. She was simply happy that he would have another ear to bend. By now the paranormal had become virtually the only subject that he could focus on. All their discussions drifted in that direction-either that or his mind drifted that way and he left Beth and the discussion behind. He had promised Nina twice that he would go feathering with her, but had put it off both times, and Beth wasn't picking up the slack there. She was leaving Nina's project to him, giving him a chance to keep his promises.

Krystal's house was in Santa Ana, a nice old Mediterranean place off Flower Street with arched windows and a tile roof. The door was opened by a small man in a goatee and startlingly thick eyeglasses, who took the cookies from him. "Welcome," he said, showing Art in. "Krystal is meditating. My name is Roderick Gunther."

"Art Johnson," Art said, nodding. "Pleased to meet you." There were a dozen others milling around inside. Art seemed to be the only one who had brought cookies, although there were pots of tea kept hot on metal racks. He could smell incense and burning Sterno.

He was a little unnerved to see that the rest of the crowd were members of an identifiable type-bookish and unstylish and evidently eccentric, except for one blond woman who looked a great deal like Marilyn Monroe. She was attractive, with an evident sexual allure and a dress meant to emphasize it, but the word neurotic sprang into Art's mind within ten seconds of being introduced to her. She had apparently led past lives, the same phenomenon that accounted for the presence of several others of the group. All of them had been of elevated rank centuries past, although the blond woman, whose name turned out to be Cassandra, had been a peasant girl originally, only becoming a queen, like Ruth in the Bible, after catching the eye of the king. Art found himself uninterested in this kind of thing-not that he had any grudge against it, but because past lives were just that, past. His life and its weird complications was on the front burner right now. He thought of the man who could bend spoons, but noticed right off that the spoons by the teapots were made of plastic, and he felt a little bit let down.

After pouring a cup for himself and spooning in honey, he struck up a conversation with the man who had let him in, Roderick Gunther, who had written a book on Atlantis, and although Gunther's connection to the lost city was obscure, there were hints that he could trace his lineage back to that far-flung time. His face was narrow and he was nearly chinless, and his forehead tilted back at a surprising angle. His heavy glasses magnified his eyes, which darted back and forth as he spoke, not as if his attention was wandering, but simply because of some optical tic. He showed Art a copy of his book, which was full of line drawings and maps, none of them very convincing. Art told him a little bit about his own adventures, the predictions, the telephone rigamarole. The man considered what he was saying with apparent interest.

"Which direction do you sleep?" Gunther asked.

"Pardon me?"

"Is your bed oriented east to west or north to south?"

"North to south," Art told him.

"Good. And you sleep with your head to the... ?

"South."

"There's a problem. It's as simple as this - you're incorrectly magnetized. Turn around. Sleep with your head to the north."

"All right," Art said, nodding at the man. But it was impossible, actually. Their bedroom was set up in such a way that there was only one good place for the bed. If he turned around, he'd have to have his head at the foot end, in the middle of the room, and that seemed simply wrong to him. Sleeping backwards would certainly be the first step on the slippery slope of eccentricity. Art noticed then that Gunther wore shoes with Velcro straps instead of laces and that there was a trail of hooked-together paper clips attached to his heel through a brass grommet.

"I drink and bathe in ocean water," Gunther was telling him. "Not mere salt water, mind you, but ocean water."

"Can a person drink ocean water?" Art thought of sailors, dying of thirst in open boats.

"Oh yes, very much so - an astonishing array of minerals in ocean water. You want it from ten miles out, though, far beyond any sewage outfall, preferably from the depths. I have a contract with a fisherman out of San Pedro who keeps me supplied. If you're interested I can increase the order. He'll fill a ten-gallon drum for twenty dollars, but you'll have to pick it up at the docks, and only on Sunday afternoon."

A strange idea came into Art's head-that Gunther's high collar was intended to hide gill slits. Time to move on, he thought, and he excused himself cheerfully and wandered over to where a woman who must be Krystal talked to an older woman, perhaps in her seventies. "I'm Art Johnson," he said, introducing himself to his hostess. "We spoke on the telephone."

"It's nice to see you, Art. Let me introduce you to Mrs. Selma Vallerian. She was deeply involved in the search for Dr. Halsey."

Art smiled and nodded, wishing he knew whether Dr. Halsey had been found or if the search was still underway.

"Dr. Halsey, of course, was related to Admiral Halsey," Krystal said, perhaps sensing that Art hadn't connected with any of this.

A snatch of song came into his head. "The Admiral Halsey who notified Pete?" he asked brightly. She looked at him blankly. "That song by Paul McCartney," he said. He decided against singing it when he saw that Krystal was nodding at him in much the same way that a few moments ago he had been nodding at Roderick Gunther about the idea of drinking ocean water. She slipped away then, leaving him with Mrs. Vallerian.

"And what brings you here?" Mrs. Vallerian asked him. She had wispy blue-gray hair and was very small and laden with primitive jewelry. She had such an open and natural smile that Art immediately liked her. At last he had an opportunity to talk about himself.

"I had a few... experiences. Psychic experiences, I guess you'd say, and I guess I needed to find people who..."

"Understood," she said, nodding seriously. "That's a basic human need, as fundamental as food and sex. Tell me about what happened."

He told her happily, without any of the lightheartedness that he had affected in the past, even with Beth, in an effort to lighten things up when in fact they weren't especially light. But no one would say he was crazy here. He was free to speak his mind. "It's the phone calls that bother me," he said at last.

"Of course. They can't be coincidence. That word is the world's great shield, you know. People wear it as a mask, in order to appear very rational, but there's nothing rational about it, because it's merely denial."

"That's exactly my way of looking at it," Art said.

"But what we want is validation. We sensitives see things clearly, and yet here we are, finding comfort in each other's company, because there's no comfort in the world."

"I'd kind of like to know what the whole thing means," Art said.

"It means that you're special. That you have a special insight. Our culture should honor and cherish it. In past cultures we would have been revered as shamans and mystics."

"Yes, but what's it an insight into? I feel like I need to get a grasp of it somehow. What good is it being a shaman if you don't have a clue? With me it's all... possums, if you know what I mean, wrong numbers." Art wondered suddenly what he did mean. Had he come here for some sort of personal validation? Did Mrs. Vallerian see right into his heart? It struck him that he had come partly out of fear, too. "I'm a little scared by it," he said, coming clean.

"Of course you are. You see the problem, don't you? You're taught to be frightened by it. A person is trained to disbelieve. No ghosts, you know. No alien visitations, no out-of-body experiences, no psychic phenomena. Then it turns out that there's something in you that's... sensitive. Something happens to you to shake your disbelief. And instead of cherishing that sensitivity, it merely frightens you, like the boogie man. But there are no boogie men here." She gestured at the room, taking it all in, and Art glanced around in response. He saw that Krystal had taken out a Tarot deck and was giving a reading to Cassandra, the blond woman, who was openly weeping.

He nodded at Mrs. Vallerian, considering her insights uneasily: he was sensitive and frightened, like a child just coming to know the world. Looking for validation, he had found these fellow travelers, this haven that was free of boogie men. He was among friends-lots of them, too, if you counted up their past lives. Gunther glided passed just then, heading toward the teapots, goggling at him pleasantly. "What's the meaning of the paper clips in Roderick's shoe?" he asked Mrs. Vallerian.

"It's a grounding," she said. "He's really quite expert in magnetization and grounding mechanisms. He helped a friend of mine, in fact, who had excess energy in her joints. It was marvelous. He made her a tiara of copper washers."

Art was suddenly deflated. He wanted a theory if he couldn't have an outright answer-something consistent, something that added up.

He thought suddenly about Nina, and he looked at his watch. It was nearly eight, and she'd already be in bed. It was his night to read the bedtime story, although Beth had been covering for him and of course would fill in for him again tonight. Nina's favorite book was something called Wacky Wednesday, a story about a day when everything went haywire-birds wearing shoes, turtles climbing trees, headless people going nonchalantly about their business, airplanes flying backward. She was perpetually fascinated by the book, marveling at the oddball illustrations, wishing she could wake up to wacky things.

"Would you like a reading?" Mrs. Vallerian asked him.

"Pardon me?" He realized that he had been far away-three miles, as the crow flew, but almost infinitely distant by any other measure.

She nodded in the direction of the kitchen, and he saw that Krystal was holding the Tarot deck up, as if to offer him another avenue toward enlightenment. Art shook his head at her. "I don't think so," he said to Mrs. Vallerian. "I just noticed how late it is. I want to thank you for hearing me out, though. You don't know how much you've helped."

"I hope we'll see you here again," she said to him, and he shook her hand before moving toward the fortune-telling table to thank Krystal, who was already manipulating the deck, drawing cards for a grizzled old gentleman in suspenders who wore a ratty T-shirt that read, "I crapped out in Las Vegas."

Roderick Gunther had disappeared, which was disappointing, because Art would have liked to have said good-bye to the man. Their planets had momentarily converged, but they were spinning away again on celestial tradewinds. Art left, closing the door softly behind him, going out into a clear and starry night. In five minutes he was home, where he slipped into Nina's room.

"Read me one," Nina said, still awake.

"What one?" He switched on the bedside lamp.

"You know," she said, smiling at him.

j

The country park was abandoned on weekday afternoons, which was good, because no one would have picked up the feathers dropped by wandering peacocks. They found three big tail feathers behind the zoo, in the high oak-shaded grass. There was a big speckled brown feather, too, the size of a quill pen, from a female peacock probably, and then at the far end of the park, deep in the sycamore grove across Santiago Creek, they found what must have been a wing feather from a big raven.

As they searched, there was a rustling in the treetops and a rush of wings, and Art looked up to see a big hawk swoop down, its talons extended, and snatch up a ground squirrel that ran along through a clearing. Clutching the animal, the hawk beat its wings, trying to gain altitude, and after a moment it soared straight up through the branches and disappeared. Art looked down at Nina, who was busy watching a passing parade of ants. She hadn't seen the hawk, thank God. There'd be time enough for that in the years to come.

They hiked back up to the zoo and paid their dollar to get in, watching the keepers feed enormous pigs whole heads of iceberg lettuce, which the pigs rolled around the barnyard with their snouts in complicated and unfathomable patterns before tiring of it finally and tearing into the lettuce, eating, literally, like pigs.

"What are they playing?" Nina asked, climbing up to the second rung of the corral fence.

"Wackyball," Art told her. "Only pigs know the rules."

"Wackyball," Nina said. "You're wacky, I think."

Jeffrey Ford

THE FAR OASIS

In their exquisite self-centeredness our ancestors believed that they were alone in the universe. At the same time, they had convinced themselves that earth was the blue apple of God's eye and the sole reason for all of creation. This two-headed fallacy caused humanity both delusions of grandeur and a paranoiac sense of loneliness. Although we eventually achieved the ability of space travel at speeds exceeding that of light and discovered a proliferation of planets along with the near-infinite diversification of species inhabiting them, we could never flee far enough to escape those ingrained disabilities of ego and the angst of isolation, but carried them with us like ghostly stowaways to the most remote corners of the universe. The drama caused by the tension between these two psychological conditions born of the same impulse played itself out on a million far-flung stages. As a historian, I can tell you that in studying the history of mankind, this is, though it dons a multitude of disguises, the sole phenomenon one studies. At least a thousand instances come readily to mind, but allow me to apprise you of a single case, and it will be for you like a mirror. One glance and you will be assured that you are not alone in your willful loneliness.

j

The celestial city of Aldebaran had pirouetted through the limitless vacuum for centuries, and its population, whose original purpose was to find a habitable world to colonize, had grown so at home in the star-studded blackness of space that the group mind could not conceive of leaving its clear domed vessel for the natural atmosphere and sunlight of any planet, no matter how blue. The citizens of Aldebaran had done well, not only in maintaining their systems, both mechanical and organic, but also in maintaining their society. To their credit, they remembered the concept of love, and kept it alive all the long years they aimlessly drifted.

In order to ensure survival it was absolutely necessary that their laws be strict. Those of the original population who had written the precepts for the city knew the dangers of allowing chaos to get a foothold in a closed system. Justice on Aldebaran was humane, but it was also swift and given a place of utmost importance. When a citizen too egregiously violated the code, he or she was viewed as a plague virus and banished, with the greatest expediency, to the surface of the closest habitable planet. The citizens viewed this punishment in the same manner that their ancient earth ancestors did consignment to Hell.

Somewhere in the fifth century of the history of Aldebaran, a little less than halfway to its annihilation in the maw of a black hole, there lived within the city a man named Honis Sikes. He was just one of a hundred other agricultural workers who tilled the soil that lay between the boundary of the dome and the structural complex that was the city at its center. He was a hard worker, and although he was by nature shy, he was well known for his expertise at a popular strategy game played with corn kernels on a board that carried a labyrinthine design. The name of this entertainment was Maize. In his time away from the fields, he designed boards for this game and recorded some of the more interesting points of strategy from famous games he remembered having played or seen. There were very few players who had ever beaten him, and the lucky ones who did never repeated the feat. In this fact, he enjoyed a modest notoriety all throughout Aldebaran.

Once when he was playing in the city park, a large group of onlookers present, he called for his next opponent and a young woman stepped up to the table. She was carrying a board of her own making, and when she placed it down on the table for all to see, the crowd gasped at the complexity of the design. Sikes smiled at her, for the only thing he wanted more than to be admired for his play at Maize was a real challenge. The game began and right from the very start, the young woman took the lead. Play was heated and corn kernels came and went from the labyrinth so fast that many of the onlookers couldn't follow what was happening. Near the end, when it looked like Sikes was about to lose, he put into effect a secret strategy that rapidly depleted the woman's store and closed down the labyrinth around her. He had trapped her only remaining viable pieces, causing them to (in the parlance of the game) rot.

Sikes knew that he had met a formidable opponent, but it was not until after he was finished playing the game that he noticed how beautiful she was. Her hair was long and light, the color of the beams from the artificial growth lamps that were positioned throughout the fields. Her face was unusual in that it was not as pale as that of the predominance of citizens but still held the tone of some ancient earth ethnicity. The eyes also were startling in their exotic almond shape and deep green color, like the fabled wandering star, Karjeet. He quickly packed up his board and pieces and followed her out of the park. On the street that ran past the entrance to the underground generators and gravity replicators, he caught up to her.

"Hello," he called.

She turned, her hair whipping in a bright wave over her left shoulder, and he knew he would never forget the sight

of it. As he approached, he felt weak, but held himself together and inquired as to her name.

"Methina," she said.

They exchanged some comments about the game. He told her about his job in the fields, and she said to him that everyone who played Maize knew about him. She volunteered that she was a laborer in the fission plant.

"And can you tell me that strategy you used at the end of the game?" she asked, smiling.

"That is my secret," he said. "It must be begun in the second move of the game or it will not work. I call it the Winner's Conceit."

They walked on a way down the street together, conversing and when they came to the place where their intended paths diverged, Sikes, who had always been very shy with women, very much a loner, screwed up his courage and asked if she would join him on the upcoming holiday when the city governors allowed the gravity replicators to be turned way down and everyone gained, for an hour's time, something akin to the power of flight. To this she agreed, told him where and when to meet her, and then turned away, leaving him standing on the corner. It took a few moments for her acceptance to sink in, and when it did, he dropped his board and box of pieces, his kernels scattering everywhere.

On the day of the holiday, they met as agreed upon at the outdoor café in the center of town. Methina wore a long, white dress that billowed around her, and when she leaped and swept through the skies above the city she embodied for Sikes the ancient concept of an angel. It was a custom of good luck that one must jump upward from the smaller buildings to the tallest, Shiva Tower, and from there kick off and ascend to touch the inner apex of the dome. This they each did, encouraged and applauded by the other. Methina and Sikes held hands and performed midair somersaults together. They flew, laughing, arms flapping, like earth birds above the fields.

After the gravity replicators had been restored to their standard settings and the city lights had been turned down to the merest glow, the two found themselves alone in a clearing of a small thicket of woods, an island of green out in the golden wheat field. They lay on the ground while above, way out past the clear boundary of the dome, a spiraled galaxy turned slowly like a milky pinwheel in a cosmic breeze. Pieces of space debris occasionally collided with the invisible force field surrounding Aldebaran and these shards of creation disintegrated in showers of orange sparks.

The two Maize players had long since lost interest in using their tongues for speech and were now twining them heatedly; their bodies locked in a tight embrace. Off came their clothes. But just at the moment of fruition, Sikes panting like a robot worker suffering a power surge, Methina put her palms against his chest and held him back.

"First, you must give me the secret of the Winner's Conceit," she whispered.

He, who had imagined himself taking the technique smugly to the grave, who had long daydreamed of future generations puzzling over the riddle of the move, spewed forth the strategy with its placement of kernels, its series of moves and when to perform them with each of the basic types of labyrinths. "You must distract the opponent," he grunted, "by letting her take the lead, clouding her mind with the Winner's Conceit."

"All right," she said and removed her palms, but it was too late. Sikes lurched inelegantly forward once with bad aim, his kernels scattering everywhere.

She dressed quickly and left him there on the ground weeping, for now it had become clear to him that he had squandered the treasure of his secret and never so much as entered the labyrinth.

In the days that followed, Sikes could not return to Maize. The game was finished for him. When he would try to force himself to contemplate strategies he had been assiduously building in his mind for months, they were crowded out by the image of Methina's beauty and the somatic memory of her naked body. He did not know where she lived, but she had told him that she worked at the fission plant. One afternoon he left the fields early without telling his superiors and went to wait for her outside the plant's entrance.

He watched the workers exit, filled with the excitement that he would again see her. But she never materialized. Going down into the plant, he found the office and gave her name, inquiring as to what shift she worked. Since the secretary was a devotee of Maize and was impressed to be speaking with Sikes, she told him that there was no one with that name among the workers. Methina had lied to him. For a moment he felt lost, but then reassured himself with the thought that Aldebaran was an island from which there was no escape.

He began looking for her everywhere in the city, at the café, in the museums, along the shore of the lake. He had forsaken his job in the fields, dodging calls from his superiors. With each passing day, he succumbed more and more to a growing sense of melancholy. He began to believe that she had been merely a figment of his imagination generated by his own loneliness until, one day on the observation deck of Shiva Tower, he ran into Porleman, another aficionado of the game.

"Where have you been, Sikes?" asked the thin, horse faced man.

"I'm out of the Maize," he said.

"Just in time," said Porleman. "There is a new champion, a woman, who is hacking through the ranks of players with what appears to me to be that famous tactic of yours."

"You've seen her?" asked Sikes.

"She crushed me the other day over at the Provident Club. She's taking on all opponents. No one has been able to stand up to her."

Sikes stood, hidden down an alley, across the street from the Provident Club. He waited patiently for hours until the city lights had been dimmed and the players and fans began to file out and head home to their apartments. Finally, he saw Methina, if that was her real name, exit the club and head down the street. She walked alone through the shadows cast by the buildings. The governors had opted for a windy night and the breeze machines had been set at three-quarter speed. With a stealth born of his desire, he snuck quietly up behind her and grabbed her by the

shoulder. She gave a sharp cry and turned quickly, her hair whipping over her left shoulder as it had the day he had met her.

"Sikes," she said, and seemed relieved it was not something more threatening. "Good to see you again."

"You tricked me," he said. "You stole my move."

She shook her head and laughed softly. "I had my own strategy," she said, "and beat you with it. You were too foolish to see that the game extends beyond the boundaries of the board. I broke no rules."

"I don't care," said Sikes, "have the strategy. What I want is to see you again. I haven't been able to think of anything but you," he said.

"Feel free to think of me," she said, "but I have as little interest in you as I might a single kernel on the twenty-ninth space of a spiral labyrinth riddled with rot."

"What about the holiday?" he asked. "The clearing in the trees?"

"You, Sikes, were a victim of the Winner's Conceit," she said. "Good night." She turned to leave.

He could not let her go and employed a new intuitive strategy, one devoid of intellect and logic. His only goal was to touch her again. He put his hands around the soft flesh of her throat and held on with all his strength until her arms stopped flailing and she slumped, lifeless, against him. When the city lights were brought up again hours later, the citizens on their way to work found him in the same spot, clutching her to him in a vise-like embrace. The security officers were called out, and the game closed down around him.

Honis Sikes was found guilty and sentenced to banishment. On the day of his sentencing, he begged the magistrate that he simply be executed on Aldebaran and not be sent out into space to some nameless planet. The good man on the bench felt the horror of Sikes's situation and, never having had to banish someone from the city before, had a hard time refusing him. But in the end, after consulting with the other magistrates, they all concluded that his crime was too heinous and if their ancestors insisted on one thing that would ensure the perpetuation of the celestial city, it was the upholding of the law as it was written.

The probe that was to be Sikes's new island in the void for what would end up being the next four hundred years was not much larger than he was. Inside was a suspended animation chamber called a cocoon, for the process that was used to preserve human life on long space flights was one borrowed from the chrysalis stage of earth caterpillars. Those insects wrapped themselves in a cocoon and then through their own organic chemistry were broken down into a liquid state only to be reformed from that mucous later into the guise of a butterfly. Through the use of technology and inorganic chemistry, so was the case with the body of the traveler in this device. Sikes's bone and muscle, flesh and blood, would again cohere out of the liquid sleep, the only difference being he would not come forth a resplendent winged creature but merely the same old Sikes.

Along with the criminal were stowed a microwave rifle with rechargeable pack, a knife, a handheld fire starter, a single set of clothing and a heavy coat. There was also a small six-by-six cube sealed in a bag that, when released, would draw in the ambient water vapor and grow to become a modest box-like shelter with a door and a window. The prisoner was allowed to request a personal belonging and Sikes requested his favorite labyrinth board and set of kernels. All of this was done with the mind that, surely, the outcast had little chance for survival on an alien world. Still, it eased the consciences of the people of Aldebaran and was in keeping with their humane philosophy.

Sikes was stuffed, screaming for the mercy of death, into the cocoon cylinder of his temporary space tomb. In minutes he was deep in the liquid sleep, his physical being sloshing back and forth within as the small vessel was wheeled to the launch pad in the underground of the city. The controls had been set so that the probe would wander through the universe until its sensors, acute spectrographs that used a technique called light dissection, picked up signs of a habitable planet. Then the navigational devices would take over; the single rocket would fire and send him to his new home.

Criminal probe #87659 was shot into the absolute zero of space in the wake of the turning city, a gleaming chrome kernel cast into a game without boundaries. One would think that Sikes's mind might be a complete blank, but no. There was, even in that suspended state, a dim sort of consciousness; a psychedelic inner realm of intermittent ghost life and insect memory, like pieces of a shattered mirror taking wing.

Then Time was a maniac scattering dust and miles had no meaning until, suddenly, for what easily could pass for an eternity, those shards of the shattered mirror flew together like pieces of a puzzle, assembling themselves, and Sikes awoke, reformed from the chemical soup that was himself into Sikes. The panel of the cocoon slid open, the door of the probe drew back, and he beheld his prison. He gasped frantically, trying to recall the process of respiration, and once he did, he screamed from the pain of the sunlight in his eyes. For the first hour on his new world, he lay where he was, dizzy and nauseous. These ill affects soon passed, and though he was weak, he managed to crawl out of the probe and on to the burning sands.

He found the clothes where, four centuries earlier, they had told him they would be. Dressing quickly with shaking hands, he finally got his feet into the heavy boots that protected them somewhat from the searing heat of the red desert. He looked into the sky and saw that the sun was at midday. What he was unsure of was how long a day would be. Scanning the flat terrain, he saw no signs of life, not even the merest scrap of vegetation. His mind was still cloudy from the liquid sleep, but he managed to make a plan. He would retrieve the rifle and knife and shelter cube from the probe, pack the smaller items in the sack they had sent with him, and strike out in one direction. As long as his strength held out he would search, but if he did not find a more inviting landscape in his travels before he became too weak to continue, he would turn the rifle on himself and end his misery.

"Habitable planet, indeed," he said aloud as he struck out due west from the probe. He went only a few yards before remembering the Maize board and pieces, and because of the comfort of their being a link to his previous life, he

returned to fetch them.

Walking on a planet with a yellow sky above him and not the reassuring scoop of the dome was frightening at first. He felt very much as if he had died and gone, a spirit, to another realm as in the religious earth myths of old. Then he remembered more clearly his reason for being there, and he thought back through the thousands and thousands of miles and hours to Aldebaran and the image of Methina. Now, with so much distance on her murder, he wondered what he had been thinking to have done something so unspeakable. The why of things was totally lost to his memory, but try as he might he could not forget the feel of her body and the long, bright wave of her hair.

Sikes journeyed far. His mouth was parched and perspiration rolled off him and evaporated before hitting the sand. He halted, wondering if it was time to use the rifle, and that is when he saw in the heat rippled distance the definite outline of what he believed to be trees, a wide swath of them sprouting from the unforgiving sand. He made his way toward them, and at first they seemed to be receding as he approached. Eventually, he closed his eyes against the brightness of the day and doggedly continued to put one foot in front of the other. When he stopped to take a rest some time later, he opened his eyes and beheld before him an enchanted scene like something from a child's picture book of long ago.

He found himself standing on the edge of a forest whose trees were straight, blue-trunked giants topped with silver leaves. A little way in beyond them, he saw a meadow of long violet grass blowing in a wind that seemed only to exist within the boundary of the trees. Rushing forward, he ran in under the canopy of silver leaves and the second he was beneath their shade, he felt the heat in the soles of his boots subside and a breeze against his face. He had not yet thought about what reason there was to survive, but for the first time he had an inkling that it might be possible.

As it was, Sikes did survive, for within the borders of the roughly three-hundred-acre oasis he had stumbled upon there were three good-sized lakes, fruit-bearing trees, and wildlife in all its various and intricate forms. Surrounding his living prison was a vast sea of impassable red desert. This place was just large enough for him to feel comfortable in. Aldebaran had been no more than an island in a forbidding void, and so he was used to a life within definite boundaries. He thought of the oasis as a large Maize board, and as he went through his quiet days there he dreamed of strategies that would allow him to outsmart his crafty opponents, Boredom and Death.

He set up his camp next to one of the lakes. The water vapor–absorbing structure they had sent with him only partially inflated, since the climate of that area was so very dry. Still, there was enough room for him to lie down inside and to store his belongings. The water in the lake was not only clean and satisfied his thirst, but it was composed of some other element than hydrogen and oxygen that gave it a sweet flavor.

The first thing that Sikes became aware of was the length of the days and nights. They were not too different from the artificial ones that had been imposed on Aldebaran. The night always seemed a little longer than the day, if that was possible, and there was, with regularity, the hulking presence of a large ringed planet in the southern sky. The star that was the sun of this world burned much whiter and hotter than his childhood learning implant had said earth's sun had, but it also appeared somewhat farther away.

Sikes surmised that the entire desert must have at one time been a forest, but because of some climate change or erosion the sands had overtaken the flora and dried up the rivers and streams. Only in rare places like the oasis, where the water most likely came up from deep in the ground, were there pockets of life, miniatures of how things had once been on a grand scale. He also knew that somewhere on the planet, not further away than birds would want to migrate, there must have been a different terrain, since there were flocks of different types of small winged creatures that infested the trees for a week of two and then were gone.

In addition to the strange life-forms of armored insects, large stupid fish with pig-like faces he caught with his hands, and chittering little things that were a cross between lizards and chipmunks, there was a species of larger animal with which he shared the oasis. He was surprised at their number, what with the surrounding hostile environment and the long time they must have existed within the boundary of three hundred acres. They were disconcertingly bipedal, going almost upright with the same basic body form of two arms, two legs, a torso, and head, as humans have. They were covered with long hair of various different shades, yet they were not human at all, not even primate.

The flesh of these creatures was soft, almost like plant meat, and they were so lacking in intelligence it seemed to Sikes that even the fish of the lakes were more cognizant. Hairy, walking asparagus was how he thought of them. At night, he heard their calls—the sound of a sickly old woman wheezing. They were, luckily, not aggressive. In fact, Sikes could walk right up to them and blow their brains out with the rifle. He found them an excellent source of sustenance, but found he could not cook them without first removing the head. Once they were dead, their eyes gave the illusion that all had finally become clear to them. Sikes killed them indiscriminately, sometimes for food and sometimes for sport to counteract boredom.

So this then became Sikes's life, the existence of the castaway. He had conceived of all manner of diversions in order to try to retain his sanity. At night he studied the stars, trying to determine what quadrant of space his planet resided in. During the day he hunted, practicing with the rifle so often that his aim was perfection itself. He replaced the kernels of corn from his Maize box with pebbles and played against himself every afternoon before the sun set. With nothing but time on his hands, what amazing strategies he came up with. The least of them made the Winner's Conceit look like the tactic of a dim-witted child. The kernels of corn he planted in four neat rows and watered consistently everyday. On the morning that he first saw the small green sprouts poking through the soil, he felt a sense of accomplishment like none he had experienced in his entire life.

Once he had established his presence in the oasis, he went on half-day journeys of exploration. The landscape of the entire expanse was fairly uniform in its composition. There were groves of the silver-leafed trees, small clearings and meadows of violet grass, and then the three lakes. Only in one spot at the northernmost extent of the oasis were

there outcroppings of rock that jutted up from the soil in small hills. There were caves carved by erosion into the faces of these stony eruptions, and it was here where the two-legged creatures—the Geets, as he had come to call them, after the inventor of Maize—lived. On a particularly tedious afternoon, he sat a little way off from the colony of them and took target practice, drilling young and old alike with blasts from the rifle.

There were changes in season, but they were minor ripples in the natural routine of the land. They came every few weeks it seemed, and he could note them by transformations in the leaves of the blue-trunked trees. In one season the silver leaves shone at night, in another they dropped off, in the next the ones that had dropped off disintegrated into a kind of fuzz that blew on the breeze all over the oasis. Then the leaves sprouted and grew again, and this cycle continued without fail.

The only other marker of the change in season was that with each permutation of the leaves, the Geets would give birth to a new brood of young. He could not tell if there were male and female Geets, for they all had two womanly breasts, nor what their mating procedure was, but it was a certainty that, although they were short-lived, they were incredibly prolific. "I may very well utterly deplete the capacity of this rifle before all is said and done," thought Sikes after putting a neat hole through the head of one a hundred yards away. Soon after this, he noticed that they had begun to flee when they knew he was nearby.

The corn had apparently retained its distant genetic memory of earth, because it ignored the seasons of the new planet and grew at its own slow speed. Sikes lavished attention on the stalks as if they were his children, and eventually silky-topped ears began to sprout. He looked forward to a meal of orange-eyed pink bird stuffed with corn. Every morning he checked the progress of the precious fruit, and then one day he discovered that some of the ears were missing. He knew immediately, from the footprints in the soil, that the Geets had come at night and stolen from him.

That night he did not go to sleep but kept himself awake by designing in his mind a new Maize board he would carve out with his knife on a section of blue bark. This kept him well awake and so entranced he did not hear the first stirrings in the corn stalks outside his shelter. When the noise finally became clear to him, he grabbed the rifle and crept outside. Up in the sky, the ringed planet lightened the night with its reflected glow. He moved cautiously around the corner of the rows and saw before him a good-sized Geet, reaching for a second ear of corn. He brought the rifle up to aim and pressed the wave generator button at the side. The creature heard the subtle click and, startled, turned to look. By then, Sikes had his finger on the trigger, but he did not fire. The Geet clumsily plucked the second ear of corn and lumbered away into the night with it.

Back in the shelter, Sikes lay on the floor, the same scene repeatedly playing in his mind's eye. He saw the Geet turn to look at him, and when it did, its long blonde hair whipped in a wave over its left shoulder, just as Methina's had back on Aldebaran a lifetime before. Since he had begun his struggle to survive, he had not allowed himself to think of her once, but now the memory of their night together came flooding back to him. In his mind he again touched the soft skin of her legs and stomach, and his loneliness became a momentary pain in his chest that nearly killed him. It was also in that moment that his most incredible and diabolical strategy of all was born. He would later come to call it the Lover's Conceit.

In the next ten days, Sikes mercilessly murdered all of the Geets he could find whose hair was not the same color as the beams of the growth lights positioned in the fields of Aldebaran. The extent of the killing sickened him, but he would not stop. By the time his rampage was over, there were very few of the Geets left living in the caves at the north of the oasis. To these chosen blonde creatures, he brought all but an armful of the corn he had grown. Although they fled when he arrived with it, he watched from a blind as they later snuck out of the forest and feasted on his offering. When the silver leaves fell from the trees, there were now many more young with hair the color of Methina's. Even the babies with lighter hair, but not the exact shade, he murdered.

The microwave rifle was rarely given a chance to cool down in the seasons that followed. Sikes no longer thought of it as an instrument of death but now as a tool of creation. After the blonde color was achieved, he began to select for a lack of body hair. This process took the equivalent of two full earth years and many Geet generations , but Sikes was patient and focused. The days passed more quickly now and he was never bored. He had a purpose that, for him, bordered on the religious.

In the years that followed, he selected for nakedness, skin tone, the shape of the eye, weight and height. The Geet populations dwindled as they grew more and more to resemble Methina. He knew he could never hope, in the span of his life, to achieve her intelligence and personality in them, but something had changed in their ability to think for they had become increasingly difficult to hunt. They seemed to know when he was coming, and they abandoned the caves altogether a year or two after he had created a brood whose soft flesh was the color of weak tea. Although he had nearly forgotten Aldebaran, the image of Methina remained crystal clear in his mind, and like a depraved sculptor whose medium was an innocent species, he carefully carved his way toward his concept of perfection.

The silver leaves fell, turned to ghosts, and were resurrected so many times that the new blue-barked Maize board, chipped and cracked in half, had twice been replaced. I need not describe at length the horrors Sikes's experiment had visited upon those poor creatures throughout this long age of slaughter, but one day when he was out in the woods searching for their new hiding place, he saw, at a distance one of the adults of the species. She must have heard him approaching and froze in a crouch. He looked through the telescopic sight of the rifle and nearly lost his breath. There, two hundred yards away, stood, for all intents and purposes, Methina. He was an old man now, wrinkled, stoop-shouldered, bald and bad in the knees, but the sight of her made his passion stir. The only work left to be done was to produce eyes the color green of the fabled wandering star, Karjeet.

He continued to grow corn, and had increased his yearly output by ten times what the first crop had yielded.

Besides having been a main staple of his diet, the Geets loved the taste of it more fervently with each altered generation, and he would use it as a lure to draw them into the open. This is what he was doing one day, hiding in a blind behind a fallen tree fifty yards from a pile of corn, when he heard something behind him. He turned quickly only to catch the sight of Methina charging at him. She opened her mouth to display a row of sharp teeth, an item of anatomy he had not before seen in the Geets. Lunging for his rifle, he inadvertently knocked it out of his reach. She lunged for him, pinned him to the ground and sunk her fangs into his shoulder. Even with the pain, having her lying on top of him confused his thinking, mixing desire in equal parts with fear. At the last moment, before she could disengage and go for his neck, he reached for his knife and cut her throat.

As he knelt over the beautiful body he had created, he shook his head, wondering how he had managed to overlook the Geets' increasing aggression. He remembered how, not a few days earlier, he had witnessed a pack of his special Methinas attack and eat an imperfect one with throwback hair on its face that he had wounded in the arm with a bad shot. So immured had he become to the death of the lesser Geets that at the time it had not struck him as anything worth noting. But now he saw that as they approached perfection, they were becoming more dangerous. He then heard others in the woods around him and fled back to his camp by the southern lake.

The color of Karjeet eluded him, but he continued to try to render it. More incidents of the Methinas aggression had taken place, but now he kept the rifle perpetually with him and turned on. He hated to have to shoot some perfectly good specimens, whose eye color was now tending toward that of a ripe lime, not perfect but moving in the right direction. As he went about his gruesome work, he began to have more and more memories from his days on Aldebaran.

One night, after playing what he considered to be perhaps the most perfect game of Maize against himself, he fell asleep in the structure and dreamed of flying above the spires of the bottled city with Methina. They stood atop Shiva Tower, and when it was his turn to leap up to touch the inner dome, he did not ascend but halfway. With each subsequent jump he made, he flapped his arms harder and felt, within, as though he were approaching some kind of total climax. She stood on the observation deck beneath him and yelled louder and louder with each successive thrust that took him closer to his goal. Just as the tip of his finger was about to touch the center of the inner dome, he awoke.

The glow of the ringed planet shone in the one small window above where he slept on the floor. He became immediately aware that he was not alone in the structure. He cleared his eyes and saw the gleam of their hair and the shadowed curves and soft contours of their naked bodies.

"Methina," he said and held out his arms.

As she came toward him, the final move of the Lover's Conceit, she smiled sharply in her myriad forms.

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There you have it, one kernel of human history to serve as an example of the whole twisted game. The planet that Sikes had been stranded on is now called Fereshin, and the oasis that held him captive still exists. The Geets are still there and yet more changes have been wrought in them, leading on from the work he had accomplished. There are those who still bear a strong resemblance to Methina, and irony of ironies, their eyes are now the exact green of Karjeet. This development came not directly from Sikes but from their acquired cannibalism of those born differently without their selected beauty. Some chemical in the heart, I believe.

Sikes's unnatural stress on the species moved them to a sharper level of cognizance. The Methinas, who became violently ill from the consumption of his flesh, now had the wherewithal to remember never to devour another like Sikes again. His looks had become imprinted upon their newly vibrant minds, and in their eating of the ugly others of their species, they avoided those Geets who carried any of his physical traits. Follow the progression of this practice over generations. Now, if you were to travel to Fereshin and the far oasis in the red desert, you would find it predominantly populated with a multitude of Sikes and Methinas, like a single couple trapped in a labyrinth of mirrors.

Andy Duncan

THE POTTAWATOMIE GIANT

On the afternoon of November 30, 1915, Jess Willard, for seven months the heavyweight champion of the world, crouched, hands on knees, in his Los Angeles hotel window to watch a small figure swaying like a pendulum against the side of the *Times* building three blocks away.

"Cripes!" Willard said. "How's he keep from fainting, his head down like that, huh, Lou?"

"He trains, Champ," said his manager, one haunch on the sill. "Same's you."

Training had been a dispute between the two men lately, but Willard let it go. "Cripes!" Willard said again, his mouth dry.

The street below was a solid field of hats, with an occasional parasol like a daisy, and here and there a mounted policeman statue-still and gazing up like everyone. Thousands were yelling, as if sound alone would buoy the upside-down figure writhing 150 feet above the pavement.

"Attaboy, Harry!"

"Five minutes, that's too long! Someone bring him down!"

"Five minutes, hell, I seen him do thirty."

"At least he's not underwater this time."

"At least he ain't in a milk can!"

"Look at him go! The straitjacket's not made that can hold that boy, I tell you."

"You can do it, Harry!"

Willard himself hated crowds, but he had been drawing them all his life. One of the farm hands had caught him at age twelve toting a balky calf beneath one arm, and thereafter he couldn't go into town without people egging him on to lift things—livestock, Mr. Olsburg the banker, the log behind the fancy house. When people started offering cash money, he couldn't well refuse, having seen Mama and Papa re-count their jar at the end of every month, the stacks of old coins dull even in lamplight. So Jess Willard, at thirty-three, knew something about what physical feats earned, and what they cost. He watched this midair struggle, lost in jealousy, in sympathy, in professional admiration.

"God damn, will you look at this pop-eyed city," Lou said. "It's lousy with believers. I tell you, Champ, this fella has set a whole new standard for public miracles. When Jesus Christ Almighty comes back to town, he'll have to work his ass off to get in the newspapers at all." Lou tipped back his head, pursed his lips, and jetted cigar smoke upstairs.

"Do you *mind?*" asked the woman directly above, one of three crowding a ninth-floor window. She screwed up her face and fanned the air with her hands.

"Settle down, sister, smoke'll cure you soon enough," Lou said. He wedged the cigar back into his mouth and craned his neck to peer around Willard. "Have a heart, will you, Champ? It's like looking past Gibraltar."

"Sorry," Willard said, and withdrew a couple of inches, taking care not to bang his head on the sash. He had already banged his head crossing from the corridor to the parlor, and from the bathroom to the bedroom. Not that it hurt—no, to be hurt, Willard's head had to be hit plenty harder than that. But he'd never forgotten how the other children laughed when he hit his head walking in the door, that day the Pottawatomie County sheriff finally made him go to school. All the children but Hattie. So he took precautions outside the ring, and seethed inside each time he forgot he was six foot seven. This usually happened in hotel suites, all designed for Lou-sized men, or less. Since Havana, Willard had lived mostly in hotel suites.

Leaning from the next-door window on the left was a jowly man in a derby hat. He had been looking at Houdini only half the time, Willard the other half. Now he rasped: "Hey, buddy. Hey. Jess Willard."

Willard dreaded autograph-seekers, but Lou said a champ had to make nice. "You're the champ, now, boy," Lou kept saying, "and a champ has gotta be *seen!*"

"Yeah, that's me," Willard said.

His neighbor looked startled. Most people were, when they heard Willard's bass rumble for the first time. "I just wanted to say congratulations, Champ, for putting that nigger on the canvas where he belongs."

"I appreciate it," Willard said. He had learned this response from his father, a man too proud to say *thanks*. He tried to focus again on Houdini. The man seemed to be doing sit-ups in midair, but at a frenzied rate, jackknifing himself repeatedly. The rope above him whipped from side to side. Willard wondered how much of the activity was necessary, how much for effect.

The derby-hatted guy wasn't done. "Twenty-six rounds, damn, you taught Mr. Coon Johnson something about white men, I reckon, hah?"

Ever since Havana. Cripes. Houdini's canvas sleeves, once bound across his chest, were now bound behind him.

Somehow he'd worked his arms over his head—was the man double-jointed?

"Say, how come you ain't had nothing but exhibitions since? When you gonna take on Frank Moran, huh? I know that nigger ain't taken the fight out of you. I know you ain't left your balls down in Cuba." He laughed like a bull snorting.

Willard sighed. He'd leave this one to Lou. Lou wouldn't have lasted ten seconds in the ring, but he loved a quarrel better than any boxer Willard knew.

"Balls?" Lou squawked, right on schedule. "Balls? Let me tell you something, fella."

Now Houdini's arms were free, the long canvas strap dangling. The crowd roared.

"When Moran is ready, we'll be ready, you got me?" Lou leaned out to shake his finger and nearly lost his balance. "Whoa," he said, clutching his hat. "Fella, you're, why, you're just lucky there's no ledge here. Yeah. You think he's taking it so easy, well, maybe you want to spar a few rounds with him, huh?"

Now Houdini had looped the canvas strap across the soles of his feet, and was tugging at it like a madman. More and more of his white shirt was visible. Willard resolved that when he started training again—when Lou got tired of parties and banquets and Keys to the City and let Willard go home to the gymnasium, and to Hattie—he would try this upside-down thing, if he could find rope strong enough.

"Well, how about I spar with *you,* buddy? Who the hell are you, Mr. Milksop?"

"I'm his manager, that's who I am! And let me tell you another thing..."

Houdini whipped off the last of the jacket and held the husk out, dangling, for all to see. Then he dropped it and flung both arms out to the side, an upside-down T. Amid the pandemonium, the jacket flew into the crowd and vanished like a ghost. Trash rained from the windows, as people dropped whatever they were holding to applaud. Willard stared as a woman's dress fluttered down to drape a lamppost. It was blue and you could see through it. Even the guy with the derby was cheering, his hands clasped overhead. "Woo hoo!" he said, his quarrel forgotten. "Woo hoo hoo!"

With a smile and a shake of his head, Lou turned his back on it all. "The wizard of ballyhoo," he said. "Too bad they can't string up *all* the Jews, eh, Champ?" He patted Willard's shoulder and left the window.

As he was winched down, Houdini took inverted bows, and there was much laughter. Willard, who had neither cheered nor applauded, remained motionless at the window, tracking Houdini's descent. Someone's scented handkerchief landed on his head, and he brushed it away. He watched as the little dark-haired man in the ruffled shirt dropped headfirst into the sea that surged forward and engulfed him. His feet went last, bound at the ankles, patent-leather shoes side by side like a soldier's on review. Willard could imagine how they must shine.

j

That night, as Willard followed Lou up the curving, ever-narrowing, crimson-carpeted stairs leading to the balconies of the Los Angeles Orpheum, the muffled laughter and applause through the interior wall seemed to jeer Willard's every step, his every clumsy negotiation of a chandelier, his every flustered pause while a giggling and feathered bevy of young women flowed around his waist. Hattie didn't need feathers, being framed, in Willard's mind, by the open sky. These women needed plenty. Those going down gaped at him, chins tipping upward, until they passed; those going up turned at the next landing for a backward and downward look of frank appraisal. "We had a whole box in Sacramento," Lou muttered as he squinted from the numbers on the wall to the crumpled paper in his hand. "Shit. I guess these Los Angeles boxes is for the quality." A woman with a powder-white face puckered her lips at Willard and winked. Grunting in triumph, Lou overshot a cuspidor and threw open a door with a brown grin. "Save one of the redheads for me, willya?" Lou hissed, as Willard ducked past him into darkness.

Willard stopped to get his bearings as a dozen seated silhouettes turned to look at him. Beyond, the arched top of the stage was a tangle of golden vines. The balcony ceiling was too low. Willard shuffled forward, head down, as Lou pushed him two-handed in the small of the back. "Hello," Willard said, too loudly, and someone gasped. Then the others began to murmur hellos in return. "So good to meet you," they murmured amid a dozen outstretched hands, the male shapes half-standing, diamond rings and cufflinks sharp in the light from the stage. Willard was able to shake some hands, squeeze others; some merely stroked or patted him as he passed. "A pleasure," he kept saying. "A God's honest pleasure."

Lou made Willard sit in the middle of the front row next to Mrs. Whoever-She-Was, someone important; Lou said her name too fast. She was plump as a guinea hen and reeked of powder. Willard would have preferred the aisle. Here there was little room for his legs, his feet. Plus the seat, as usual, was too narrow. He jammed his buttocks between the slats that passed for armrests, bowing the wood outward like the sides of a firehose. As his hams sank, his jacket rode up in back. Once seated, he tried to work the jacket down, to no avail. Already his face was burning with the certainty that all eyes in the hall were focused not on the stage but on the newly hunchbacked Jess Willard. "Don't worry, he's just now begun," Mrs. Whoever whispered across Willard, to Lou. "You've hardly missed a thing."

His knees cut off the view of the stage below. He parted his knees just a little. Between them, on the varnished planks of the stage far below, Houdini patted the air to quell another round of applause. He was a short, dark, curly-haired man in a tuxedo. At his feet were a dozen scattered roses.

"Thank you, my friends, thank you," the little man said, though it sounded more like "Tank you"—a German, Willard had heard, this Houdini, or was it Austrian? Seen from this unnatural angle, nearly directly above like this, he looked dwarfish, foreshortened. He had broad shoulders, though, and no sign of a paunch beneath his cummerbund. Lou jabbed Willard in the side, glared at Willard's knees, then his face. Sighing, Willard closed his knees again.

"Ladies and gentlemen—are the ushers ready? Thank you. Ladies and gentlemen, I beg your assistance with the

following part of the program. I require the services of a committee of ten. Ten good men and true, from the ranks of the audience, who are willing to join me here upon the stage and to watch closely my next performance, that all my claims be verified as accurate, that its every particular be beyond reproach."

The balcony was uncomfortably hot. Sweat rolled down Willard's torso, his neck. Mrs. Whoever opened her fan and worked up a breeze. A woman across the auditorium was staring at Willard and whispering to her husband. He could imagine. *All I can say is, you cannot trust those photographs. Look how they hide that poor man's deformities.*

"Ten good men and true. Yes, thank you, sir, your bravery speaks well for our boys in Haiti, and in Mexico." A spatter of applause. "The ushers will direct you. And you, sir, yes, thank you as well. Ladies, perhaps you could help us identify the more modest of the good men among us?" Laughter. "Yes, madam, your young man looks a likely prospect, indeed. A fine selection you have made - as have you, sir! No, madam, I fear your fair sex disqualifies you for this work. The stage can be a dangerous place."

Willard retreated to his program, to see which acts he missed because dinner with the mayor ran late. Actually, the dinner, a palm-sized chicken breast with withered greens, had been over quickly; you learned to eat fast on the farm. What took a long time was the mayor's after-dinner speech, in which he argued that athletic conditioning was the salvation of America. Willard bribed a waiter for three thick-cut bologna sandwiches, which he munched at the head table with great enjoyment, ignoring Lou. Now, looking at the Orpheum program, Willard found himself more kindly disposed toward the mayor's speech. It had spared him the "Syncopated Funsters" Bernie & Baker, Adelaide Boothby's "Novelty Songs and Travesties" (with Chas. Everdean at the piano), Selma Braatz the "Renowned Lady Juggler," and Comfort & King in "Coontown Diversions," not to mention a trick rider, a slack-wire routine, a mystery titled "Stan Stanley, The Bouncing Fellow, Assisted by His Relatives," and, most happily missed of all, The Alexander Kids, billed as "Cute, Cunning, Captivating, Clever." *And crooked,* thought Willard, who once had wasted a nickel on a midget act at the Pottawatomie County Fair.

"Thank you, sir. Welcome. Ladies and gentlemen, these our volunteers have my thanks. Shall they have your thanks as well?"

Without looking up from his program, Willard joined the applause.

"My friends, as I am sure you have noticed, our committee still lacks three men. But if you will indulge me, I have a suggestion. I am told that here in the house with us tonight, we have one man who is easily the equal of any three."

Lou started jabbing Willard again. "G'wan," Willard whispered. "I closed my knees, all right?"

"Knock 'em dead, Champ," Lou hissed, his face shadowed but for his grin.

Willard frowned at him, bewildered. "What?"

"Ladies and gentlemen, will you kindly join me in inviting before the footlights the current heavyweight boxing champion—*our* champion—Mr. Jess Willard!"

Willard opened his mouth to protest just as a spotlight hit him full in the face, its heat like an opened oven.

Willard turned to Lou amid the applause and said, "You didn't!"

Lou ducked his chin and batted his eyes, like a bright child done with his recitation and due a certificate.

"Ladies and gentlemen, if you are in favor of bringing Mr. Willard onto the stage, please signify with your applause."

Now the cheers and applause were deafening. Willard gaped down at the stage. Houdini stood in a semicircle of frenziedly applauding men, his arms outstretched and welcoming. He stared up at Willard with a tiny smile at the corner of his mouth, almost a smirk, his eyes as bright and shallow as the footlights. *Look what I have done for you,* he seemed to be saying. *Come and adore me.*

The hell I will, Willard thought.

No, *felt,* it was nothing so coherent as thought, it was a gut response to Lou, to the mayor, to Mrs. Whoever pressing herself up against Willard's left side in hopes of claiming a bit of the spotlight too, to Hattie more than a thousand miles away whom he should have written today but didn't, to all these row after row of stupid people, most of whom thought Willard hadn't beaten Jack Johnson at all, that Johnson had simply given up, had *floated* to the canvas, the word they kept using, *floated,* cripes, Willard had been *standing there,* had heard the *thump* like the first melon dropped into the cart when Johnson's head had bounced against the canvas, *bounced,* for cripes' sake, spraying sweat and spit and blood, that fat lip flapping as the head went down a second time and stayed, *floated,* they said, Willard wasn't a *real* fighter, they said, he had just *outlasted* Johnson—an hour and forty-four minutes in the Havana sun, a blister on the top of his head like a brand, Hattie still could see the scar when she parted his hair to look—*outlasted,* the papers said! Beneath the applause, Willard heard a distant *crunch* as he squeezed the armrest, and was dimly aware of a splinter in his palm as he looked down at Houdini's smirking face and realized, clearly, for the first time: *You people don't want me at all, a big shit-kicker from the prairie.*

It's Jack Johnson you want.

And you know what? You can't have him. Because I beat him, you hear? I beat him.

"No, thanks!" Willard shouted, and the applause ebbed fast, like the last grain rushing out of the silo. The sudden silence, and Houdini's startled blink, made Willard's resolve falter. "I appreciate it," he added. He was surprised by how effortlessly his voice filled the auditorium. "Go on with your act, please, sir," Willard said, even more loudly. Ignoring Lou's clutching hand, which threatened to splinter Willard's forearm as Willard had splintered the armrest, he attempted comedy: "I got a good seat for it right here." There was nervous laughter, including someone immediately behind Willard—who must have, Willard realized, an even worse view than he did.

Arms still outstretched, no trace of a smile now, Houdini called up: "Mr. Willard, I am afraid your public must insist?"

Willard shook his head and sat back, arms folded.

"Mr. Willard, these other gentlemen join me in solemnly pledging that no harm will come to you."

This comedy was more successful; guffaws broke out all over the theater. Willard wanted to seek out all the laughers and paste them one. "Turn off that spotlight!" he yelled. "It's hot enough to roast a hog."

To Willard's amazement, the spotlight immediately snapped off, and the balcony suddenly seemed a dark, cold place.

"Come down, Mr. Willard," Houdini said, his arms now folded.

"Jesus Christ, kid," Lou hissed. "What's the idea?"

Willard shook him off and stood, jabbing one thick index finger at the stage. "Pay *me* what you're paying *them*, and I'll come down!"

Gasps and murmurs throughout the crowd. Willard was aware of some commotion behind him, movement toward the exit, the balcony door slamming closed. Fine. Let them run, the cowards.

In indignation, Houdini seemed to have swollen to twice his previous thickness. Must come in handy when you're straitjacketed, Willard thought.

"*Mister* Willard," Houdini retorted, "I am pleased to pay you what I am paying these gentlemen—precisely *nothing*. They are here of their own free will and good sportsmanship. Will you not, upon the same terms, join them?"

"No!" Willard shouted. "I'm leaving." He turned to find his way blocked by Lou, whose slick face gleamed.

"Please, Champ, don't do this to us," Lou whispered, reaching up with both hands in what might have been an attempted embrace. Willard grabbed Lou's wrists, too tightly, and yanked his arms down. "Ah," Lou gasped.

Houdini's drone continued as he paced the stage, his eyes never leaving the balcony. "I see, ladies and gentlemen, that the champ is attempting to retreat to his corner. Mr. Willard, the bell has rung. Will you not answer? Will you not meet the challenge? For challenge it is, Mr. Willard—I, and the good people of this house, challenge you to come forward, and stand before us, like a champion. As Mr. Johnson would have."

Willard froze.

"Or would you have us, sir, doubt the authenticity of your title? Would you have us believe that our champion is unmanned by fear?"

Willard turned and leaned so far over the rail that he nearly fell. "I'll do my job in the ring, you do your job onstage," he yelled. "Go on with your act, your trickery, you faker, you four-flusher!" The audience howled. He shouted louder. "Make it look good, you fake. That's all they want—talk!" He felt his voice breaking. "Tricks and snappy dialogue! Go on, then, give 'em what they want. Talk your worthless talk! Do your lousy fake tricks!" People were standing up and yelling at him all over the theater, but he could see nothing but the little strutting figure on the stage.

"Mr. Willard."

Willard, though committed, now felt himself running out of material. "Everybody knows it's fake!"

"Mr. Willard!"

"Four-flusher!"

"Look here, *Mister* Jess Willard," Houdini intoned, his broad face impassive, silencing Willard with a pointed index finger. "I don't care what your title is or how big you are or what your reputation is or how many men you've beaten to get it. I did you a favor by asking you onto this stage, I paid you a compliment, and so has everyone in the Orpheum." The theater was silent but for the magician. Willard and those in the balcony around him were frozen. "You have the right, sir, to refuse us, to turn your back on your audience, but you have no right, sir, *no* right whatsoever, to slur my reputation, a reputation, I might add, that will long outlive yours." In the ensuing silence, Houdini seemed to notice his pointed finger for the first time. He blinked, lowered his arm, and straightened his cummerbund as he continued: "If you believe nothing else I do or say on this stage today, Mr. Willard, believe *this*, for there is no need for special powers of strength or magic when I tell you that *I can foresee your future.* Yes, sir."

Now his tone was almost conversational as he strolled toward center stage, picked up a rose, snapped its stem, and worked at affixing it to his lapel. "Believe me when I say to you that one day soon you no longer will be the heavyweight champion of the world." Satisfied by the rose, he looked up at Willard again.

"And when your name, Mr. Millard, I'm sorry, Mr. *Willard*, has become a mere footnote in the centuries-long history of the ring, everyone—*everyone*—even those who never set *foot* in a theater—will know *my* name and know that *I* never turned my back to my audience, or failed to accomplish *every* task, *every* feat, they set before me. And that, sir, is why champions come and champions go, while I will remain, now and forever, the one and only Harry Houdini!" He flung his arms out and threw his head back a half second before the pandemonium.

There had been twenty-five thousand people in that square in Havana, Willard had been told. He had tried not to look at them, not to think about them—that sea of snarling, squinting, sun-peeled, hateful, ugly faces. But at least all those people had been on his side.

"Go to hell, Willard!"

"Willard, you bum!"

"Willard's a willow!"

"Go to hell!"

Something hit Willard a glancing blow on the temple: a paper sack, which exploded as he snatched at it, showering the balcony with peanut shells. Willard felt he was moving slowly, as if underwater. As he registered that Mrs. Whoever, way down there somewhere, was pummeling him with her parasol—shrieking amid the din, "You bad man! You bad, bad man!"—Willard saw a gentleman's silver-handled cane spiraling lazily through the air toward his head.

He ducked as the cane clattered into the far corner. Someone yelped. With one final glance at the mob, Willard turned his back on the too-inviting open space and dashed—but oh, so slowly it seemed—toward the door. People got in his way; roaring, he swept them aside, reached the door, fumbled at it. His fingers had become too slow and clumsy—numb, almost paralyzed. Bellowing something, he didn't know what, he kicked the door, which flew into the corridor in a shower of splinters. Roaring wordlessly now, Willard staggered down the staircase. He cracked his forehead on a chandelier, and yanked it one-handed out of the ceiling with a snarl, flinging it aside in a spasm of plaster and dust. His feet slipped on the lobby's marble floor, and he flailed before righting himself in front of an open-mouthed hat-check girl. Beyond the closed auditorium doors Willard could hear the crowd beginning to chant Houdini's name. Willard kicked a cuspidor as hard as he could; it sailed into a potted palm, spraying juice across the marble floor. Already feeling the first pangs of remorse, Willard staggered onto the sidewalk, into the reek of horseshit and automobiles. The doorman stepped back, eyes wide. "I ain't done nothing, Mister," he said. "I ain't done nothing." Willard growled and turned away, only to blunder into someone small and soft just behind him, nearly knocking her down. It was the hat-check girl, who yelped and clutched at his arms for balance.

"What the hell!" he said.

She righted herself, cleared her throat, and, lips pursed with determination, held out a claim ticket and a stubby pencil. "Wouldja please, huh, Mr. Willard? It won't take a sec. My grandpa says you're his favorite white man since Robert E. Lee."

j

Jess Willard lost the heavyweight title to Jack Dempsey on July 4, 1919, and retired from boxing soon after. When the fight money dried up, the Willards packed up Zella, Frances, Jess Junior, Enid, and Alan, left Kansas for good and settled in Los Angeles, where Willard opened a produce market at Hollywood and Afton. By day he dickered with farmers, weighed oranges, shooed flies, and swept up. Nights, he made extra money as a referee at wrestling matches. He continued to listen to boxing on the radio, and eventually to watch it on television, once the screens grew large enough to decently hold two grown men fighting. He read all the boxing news he could find in the papers, too, until holding the paper too long made his arms tremble like he was punchy, and spreading it out on the kitchen table didn't work so good either because the small print gave him a headache, and there weren't any real boxers left anyway, and thereafter it fell to his grandchildren, or his great-grandchildren, or his neighbors, or anyone else who had the time to spare, to read the sports pages aloud to him. Sometimes he listened quietly, eyes closed but huge behind his eyeglasses, his big mottled fingers drumming the antimacassar at one-second intervals, as if taking a count. Other times he was prompted to laugh, or to make a disgusted sound in the back of his throat, or to sit forward abruptly—which never failed to startle his youngest and, to his mind, prettiest great-granddaughter, whom he called "the Sprout," so that despite herself she always gasped and drew back a little, her beads clattering, her pedicured toes clenching the edge of her platform sandals—and begin telling a story of the old days, which his visitors sometimes paid attention to, and sometimes didn't, though the Sprout paid closer attention than you'd think.

j

One day in 1968, the Sprout read Jess Willard the latest indignant *Times* sports column about the disputed heavyweight title. Was the champ Jimmy Ellis, who had beaten Jerry Quarry on points, or was it Joe Frazier, who had knocked out Buster Mathis, or was it rightfully Muhammad Ali, who had been stripped of the title for refusing the draft, and now was banned from boxing anywhere in the United States? The columnist offered no answer to the question, but used his space to lament that boxing suddenly had become so political.

"Disputes, hell. I disputed a loss once," Willard told the Sprout. "To Joe Cox in Springfield Moe in 1911. The referee stopped the fight, then claimed I *wouldn't* fight, give the match to Cox. Said he hadn't stopped nothing. I disputed it, but didn't nothing come of it. Hell. You can't win a fight by disputing."

"I thought a fight *was* a dispute," said the Sprout, whose name was Jennifer. Taking advantage of her great-granddad's near-blindness, she had lifted the hem of her mini to examine the pear-shaped peace symbol her boyfriend had drunkenly drawn on her thigh the night before. She wondered how long it would take to wash off. "Boyfriend" was really the wrong word for Cliff, though he *was* cute, in a scraggly dirty hippie sort of way, and it wasn't like she had a parade of suitors to choose from. The only guy who seemed interested at the coffeehouse last week was some Negro, couldn't you just die, and of course she told him to buzz off. She hoped Jess never found out she'd even said so much as "buzz off" to a Negro boy—God knows, Jess was a nut on *that* subject. Nigger this and nigger that, and don't even bring up what's his name, that Negro boxer, Johnson? But you couldn't expect better from the old guy. After all, what had they called Jess, back when—the White Hope?

"No, no, honey," Willard said, shifting his buttocks to get comfortable. He fidgeted all the time, even in his specially made chair, since he lost so much weight. "A fight in the ring, it ain't nothing *personal.*"

"You're funny, Jess," Jennifer said. The old man's first name still felt awkward in her mouth, though she was determined to use it—it made her feel quite hip and adult, whereas "Popsy" made her feel three years old.

"You're funny, too," Willard said, sitting back. "Letting boys write on your leg like you was a Blue Horse tablet. Read me some more, if you ain't got nothing else to do."

"I don't," Jennifer lied.

Jess Willard died in his Los Angeles home December 15, 1968—was in that very custom-made chair, as a matter of fact, when he finally closed his eyes. He opened them to find himself in a far more uncomfortable chair, in a balcony at

the Los Angeles Orpheum, in the middle of Harry Houdini's opening-night performance, November 30, 1915.

j

"Where you been, Champ?" Lou asked. "We ain't keeping you up, are we?"

"Ladies and gentlemen, these our volunteers have my thanks. Shall they have your thanks as well?"

Amid the applause, Lou went on: "You ought to *act* interested, at least."

"Sorry, Lou," Willard said, sitting up straight and shaking his head. Cripes, he must have nodded off. He had that nagging waking sensation of clutching to the shreds of a rich and involving dream, but no, too late, it was all gone. "I'm just tired from traveling, is all."

"My friends, as I am sure you have noticed, our committee still lacks three men. But if you will indulge me, I have a suggestion. I am told that here in the house with us tonight, we have one man who is easily the equal of any three."

Lou jabbed Willard in the side. "Knock 'em dead, Champ," he said, grinning.

For an instant, Willard didn't understand. Then he remembered. Oh yeah, an onstage appearance with Houdini—like Jack London had done in Oakland, and President Wilson in Washington. Willard leaned forward to see the stage, the magician, the committee, the scatter of roses. Lou jabbed him again and mouthed the word, "Surprise." What did he mean, surprise? They had talked about this. Hadn't they?

"And so, ladies and gentlemen, will you kindly join me in inviting before the footlights the current heavyweight boxing champion—*our champion*—Mr. Jess Willard!"

In the sudden broil of the spotlight, amid a gratifying burst of cheers and applause, Willard unhesitatingly stood—remembering, just in time, the low ceiling. Grinning, he leaned over the edge and waved to the crowd, first with the right arm, then both arms. Cheered by a capacity crowd, at the biggest Orpheum theater on the West Coast—two dollars a seat, Lou had said! Hattie never would believe this. He bet Jack Johnson never got such a reception. But he wouldn't think of Johnson just now. This was Jess Willard's night. He clasped his hands together and shook them above his head.

Laughing above the cacophony, Houdini waved and cried, "Mr. Willard, please, come down!"

"On my way," Willard called, and was out the balcony door in a flash. He loped down the stairs two at a time. Sprinting through the lobby, he winked and blew a kiss at the hat-check girl, who squealed. The doors of the auditorium opened inward before him, and he entered the arena without slowing down, into the midst of a standing ovation, hundreds of faces turned to him as he ran down the central aisle toward the stage where Houdini waited.

"Mind the stairs in the pit, Mr. Willard," Houdini said. "I don't think they were made for feet your size." Newly energized by the audience's laughter, Willard made a show of capering stiff-legged up the steps, then fairly bounded onto the stage to shake the hand of the magician—who really was a *small* man, my goodness—and then shake the hands of all the other committee members. The applause continued, but the audience began to resettle itself, and Houdini waved his hands for order.

"Please, ladies and gentlemen! Please! Your attention! Thank you. Mr. Willard, gentlemen, if you will please step back, to make room for—The Wall of Mystery!"

The audience *ooh*ed as a curtain across the back of the stage lifted to reveal an ordinary brick wall, approximately twenty feet long and ten high. As Willard watched, the wall began to turn. It was built, he saw, on a circular platform flush with the stage. The disc revolved until the wall was perpendicular to the footlights.

"The Wall of Mystery, ladies and gentlemen, is not mysterious whatsoever in its construction. Perhaps from where you are sitting you can smell the mortar freshly laid, as this wall was completed only today, by twenty veteran members, personally selected and hired at double wages by the management of this theater, of Bricklayers' Union Number Thirty-Four. Gentlemen, please take a bow!"

On cue, a half dozen graying, potbellied men in denim work clothes walked into view stage left, to bow and wave their caps and grin. Willard applauded as loudly as anyone, even put both fingers in his mouth to whistle, before the bricklayers shuffled back into their workingmen's obscurity.

"Mr. Willard, gentlemen, please approach the wall and examine it at your leisure, until each of you is fully satisfied that the wall is solid and genuine in every particular."

The committee fanned out, first approaching the wall tentatively, as if some part of it might open and swallow them. Gradually they got into the spirit of the act, pushing and kicking the wall, slamming their shoulders into it, running laps around it to make sure it began and ended where it seemed to. To the audience's delight, Willard, by far the tallest of the men, took a running jump and grabbed the top of the wall, then lifted himself so that he could peer over to the other side. The audience cheered. Willard dropped down to join his fellow committeemen, all of whom took the opportunity to shake Willard's hand again.

During all this activity, Houdini's comely attendants had rolled onstage two six-foot circular screens, one from backstage left, one from backstage right. They rolled the screens to center stage, one screen stage left of the wall, one screen stage right. Just before stepping inside the left screen, Houdini said: "Now, gentlemen, please arrange yourselves around the wall so that no part of it escapes your scrutiny." Guessing what was going to happen, Willard trotted to the other side of the wall and stood, arms folded, between the wall and the stage-right screen; he could no longer see Houdini for the wall. The other men found their own positions. Willard heard a *whoosh* that he took to be Houdini dramatically closing the screen around him. "I raise my hands above the screen like so," Houdini called, "to prove I am here. But now—I am gone!" There was another *whoosh*—the attendants opening the screen? The audience gasped and murmured. Empty, Willard presumed. The attendants trotted downstage into Willard's view, professionally balanced on their high heels, carrying between them the folded screen. At that moment the screen behind Willard went

whoosh, and he turned to see Houdini stepping out of it, one hand on his hip, the other raised above his head in a flourish.

Surprised and elated despite himself, Willard joined in the crescendo of bravos and huzzahs.

Amid the din, Houdini trotted over to Willard, gestured for him to stoop, and whispered into his ear:

"Your turn."

His breath reeked of mint. Startled, Willard straightened up. The audience continued to cheer. Houdini winked, nodded almost imperceptibly toward the open screen he just had exited. Following Houdini's glance, Willard saw the secret of the trick, was both disappointed and delighted at its simplicity, and saw that he could do it, too. Yet he knew that to accept Houdini's offer, to walk through the wall himself, was something he neither wanted nor needed to do. He was Jess Willard, heavyweight champion of the world, if only for a season, and that was enough. He was content. He'd leave walking through walls to the professionals. He clapped one hand onto Houdini's shoulder, engulfing it, smiled, and shook his head. Again almost imperceptibly, Houdini nodded, then turned to the audience, took a deep bow. Standing behind him now, feeling suddenly weary—surely the show wouldn't last much longer—Willard lifted his hands and joined the applause. Backstage to left and right, and in the catwalks directly above, he saw a cobweb of cables and pulleys against stark white brick—ugly, really, but completely invisible from the auditorium. On the highest catwalk two niggers in coveralls stood motionless, not applauding. Looking about, gaping, he was sure, like a hick, Willard told himself: *Well, Jess, now you've had a taste of how it feels to be Harry Houdini.* The afterthought came unbidden, as a jolt: *And Jack Johnson, too.* Disconcerted, Willard turned to stare at the stage-right screen, as two of the women folded it up and carted it away.

j

Jennifer barely remembered her Grandma Hattie, but she felt as if she sort of knew her by now, seeing the care she had lavished for decades on these scrapbooks, and reading the neat captions Hattie had typed and placed alongside each item:

FORT WAYNE, 1912—WORKING THE BAG—KO'd J. Young in 6th on May 23 (Go JESS!)

The captions were yellowed and brittle now, tended to flutter out in bits like confetti when the albums were opened too roughly.

"I'm a good typist, Jess," Jennifer said. "I could make you some new ones."

"No, thanks," Jess said. "I like these fine."

"Where's the Johnson book?"

"Hold your horses, it's right here. There you go. I knew you'd want that one."

Jennifer was less interested in Jack Johnson *per se* than in the fact that one of Hattie's scrapbooks was devoted to one of her husband's most famous opponents, a man whom Jess had beaten for the title and never met again. Jennifer suspected this scrapbook alone was as much the work of Jess as of Hattie—and the aging Jess at that, since it began with Johnson's obituaries in 1946. Hence the appeal of the Johnson scrapbook; this mysterious and aging Jess, after all, was the only one she knew. The last third of the book had no typewritten captions, and clippings that were crooked beneath their plastic. The last few pages were blank. Stuck into the back were a few torn out and clumsily folded newspaper clippings about Muhammad Ali.

"Johnson was cool," she said, turning the brittle pages with care. "It is so cool that you got to fight him, Jess. And that you won! You must have been proud."

"I *was* proud," Willard said, reaching for another pillow to slide beneath his bony buttocks. "Still am," he added. "But I wish I had known him, too. He was an interesting man."

"He died in a car wreck, didn't he?"

"Yep."

"That's so sad." Jennifer knew about the car wreck, of course; it was all over the front of the scrapbook. She was just stalling, making noise with her mouth, while pondering whether now was the time to get Jess talking about Johnson's three wives, all of them white women, all of them *blonde* white women. Jennifer was very interested to know Jess's thoughts about that.

"You fought him in Havana because, what? You weren't allowed to fight in the United States, or something?" She asked this with great casualness, knowing Johnson was a fugitive from U.S. justice at the time, convicted of violating the Mann Act, i.e. transporting women across state lines for "immoral purposes," i.e., white slavery, i.e., sex with a white woman.

"Yeah, something like that," Jess said. He examined the ragged hem of his sweater, obviously uninclined to pursue the conversation further. God, getting an eighty-seven-year-old man to talk about sex was *hard*.

"I was trying to tell Carl about it, but I, uh, forgot the uh, details." She kept talking, inanely, flushed with horror. *Massive* slip-up. She never had mentioned Carl in front of Jess before, certainly not by name. Carl was three years older than she was, and worse yet, a dropout. He was also black. Not Negro, he politely insisted: black. He wanted to meet Jess, and Jennifer wanted that to happen, too—but she would have to careful about how she brought it up. Not this way! Sure, Jess might admire Jack Johnson as a fighter, but would he want his teenage great-granddaughter to date him?

"There was some rule against it, I think," Jess said, oblivious, and she closed her eyes for a second in relief. "I be doggoned but this sweater wasn't worth bringing home from the store." He glanced up. "You didn't give me this sweater, did you, Sprout?"

"No, Jess," Jennifer said. She closed the Johnson scrapbook, elated to avoid *that* conversation one more day.

"I wouldn't hurt you for nothing, you know," Jess said. "Wouldn't let no one else hurt you, neither."

She grinned, charmed. "Would you stand up for me, Jess?"

"I sure would, baby. Anybody bothers you, I'll clean his clock." He slowly punched the air with mottled fists, his eyes huge and swimming behind his glasses, and grinned a denture-taut grin. On impulse, Jennifer kissed his forehead. Resettling herself on the floor, she opened one of the safer scrapbooks. Here was her favorite photo of Jess at the produce market, hair gray beneath his paper hat. He held up to the light a Grade A white egg that he smiled at in satisfaction. Grandma Hattie had typed beneath the photo: TWO GOOD EGGS.

"One hundred and thirteen fights," Jess said. Something in his voice made Jennifer glance up. He looked suddenly morose, gazing at nothing, and Jennifer worried that she had said something to upset him; he was so moody, sometimes. "That's how many Johnson fought. More than Tunney, more than Louis. Twice as many as Marciano. Four times as many as Jeffries, as Fitzsimmons, as Gentleman Jim Corbett. And forty-four of them knockouts." He sighed and repeated, almost inaudibly, "Forty-four."

She cleared her throat, determined, and said loudly: "Hey, you want to write another letter?" About once a month, Jess dictated to her a letter to the editor, saying Ali was the champ fair and square whether people liked it or not, same as Jack Johnson had been, same as Jess Willard had been, and if people didn't like it then let them take Ali on in the ring like men. The *Times* had stopped printing the letters after the third one, but she hadn't told Jess that.

He didn't seem to have heard her. After a few seconds, though, his face brightened. "Hey," he said. "Did I ever tell you about the time I got the chance to walk through a wall?"

Relieved, she screwed up her face in mock concentration. "Well, let's see, about a hundred million billion times, but you can tell me again if you want. Do you ever wish you'd done it?"

"Nah," Jess said, leaning into the scrapbook to peer at the two good eggs. "I probably misunderstood him in the first place. He never let anybody *else* get in on the act, that I heard of. He was too big a star for that." He sat back, settled into the armchair with a sigh. "I must have misunderstood him. Anyway." He was quiet again, but smiling. "Too late now, huh?"

"I guess so," Jennifer said, slowly turning the pages, absently stroking her beads so that the strands clicked together. Beside her Jess began, gently, to snore. She suppressed a laugh: Could you believe it? Just like that, down for the count. Without realizing it, she had turned to a clipping from the *Times*, dated December 1, 1915.

TWO CHAMPIONS MEET
RING ARTIST, ESCAPE ARTIST SHAKE ON ORPHEUM STAGE

Young Jess looked pretty spiffy in his evening wear, Jennifer thought. *Spiffy*, she knew from reading the scrapbooks, had been one of Grandma Hattie's favorite words. Jess was crouched to fit into the photograph, which must have been taken from the front row. The two men looked down at the camera; at their feet a couple of footlights were visible. At the bottom edge of the photo was the blurred top of a man's head. Someone had penciled a shaky arrow from this blur and written, "Lou." The background was murky, but Jennifer could imagine a vaulted plaster ceiling, a chandelier, a curtain embroidered with intricate Oriental designs. Beneath the clipping, Grandma Hattie had typed: JESS MEETS EHRICH WEISS a.k.a. HARRY HOUDINI (1874–1926). On the facing page, Houdini's faded signature staggered across a theater program.

Even as a kid, Jennifer had been intrigued by Houdini's eyes. Although the clipping was yellowed and the photo blurred to begin with, Houdini always seemed to look right at her, *into* her. It was the same in the other photos, in the Houdini books she kept checking out of the library. He wasn't Jennifer's type, but he had great eyes.

As she looked at the clipping, she began to daydream. She was on stage, wearing a tuxedo and a top hat and tights cut up to *there*, and she pulled back a screen to reveal—who? Hmm. She wasn't sure. Maybe Carl; maybe not. Daydreaming was a sign, said the goateed guy who taught her comp class, of sensitivity, of creativity. Yeah, right. Sometimes when she was home alone—she told no one this—she put on gym shorts and went out back and boxed the air, for an hour or more at a time, until she was completely out of breath. Why, she couldn't say. Being a pacifist, she couldn't imagine hitting a *person*, no, but she sure beat hell out of the air. She really wanted to be neither a boxer nor a magician. She was a political science major, and had her heart set on the Peace Corps. And yet, when Carl had walked into the coffeehouse that night alone, fidgeting in the doorway with an out-of-place look, considering, maybe, ducking back outside again, what did she say to him? She walked right up to Carl, bold as brass (that was another of Grandma Hattie's, BOLD as BRASS), stuck out her chin and stuck out her hand and said, "Hi, my name is Jennifer Schumacher, and I'm the great-granddaughter of the ex-heavyweight champion of the world." Carl shook her hand and looked solemn and said, "Ali?" and people stared at them, they laughed so hard, and if *I* ever get a chance to walk through a wall, she vowed to herself as she closed the scrapbook, *I'm* taking it—so *there*.

Afterword

"The Pottawatomie Giant," while mostly my own invention, has a few facts in it. Jess Willard was indeed the "Great White Hope," long anticipated by racists nationwide, who finally felled the great black fighter Jack Johnson on April 5, 1915, thus reclaiming the heavyweight title for the white race. The bout was held in Havana because Johnson was a fugitive from U.S. "justice" at the time. Willard and illusionist Harry Houdini did indeed have an unpleasant quarrel in front of a packed house at the Los Angeles Orpheum the night of November 30, 1915. The whole incident, complete

with the near-riot that sent Willard fleeing in ignominy, unfolded pretty much as I have described it. I got to thinking about Willard while reading Kenneth Silverman's fine 1996 biography of Houdini. How poignant, I thought, that this man, who once was world-famous, who must have had his own hopes and dreams and loves, is known to me only as a bit player, practically a stock villain, in the lives of Johnson and Houdini, two figures to whom history has been kinder: I wondered, in short, what the real Jess Willard, the one lost to history, was like. And so I wrote "The Pottawatomie Giant" about a fictional Jess Willard, who addresses some of my lingering questions about the real one.

Ursula K. LeGuin

THE FLYERS OF GY

An Interplanary Tale

The people of Gy look pretty much like people from our plane except that they have plumage, not hair. A fine, fuzzy down on the heads of infants becomes a soft, short coat of speckled dun on the fledglings, and with adolescence this grows out into a full head of feathers. Most men have ruffs at the back of the neck, shorter feathers all over the head, and tall, erectile crests. The head-plumage of males is brown or black, barred and marked variously with bronze, red, green, and blue. Women's plumes usually grow long, sometimes sweeping down the back almost to the floor, with soft, curling, trailing edges, like the tail-plumes of ostriches; the colors of the feathers of women are vivid—purple, scarlet, coral, turquoise, gold. Gyr men and women are downy in the pubic region and pit of the arm and often have short, fine plumage over the whole body. People with brightly colored bodyfeathers are a cheerful sight when naked, but they are much troubled by lice and nits.

Moulting is a continuous process, not seasonal. As people age, not all the moulted feathers grow back, and patchy baldness is common among both men and women over forty. Most people, therefore, save the best of their headfeathers as they moult out, to make into wigs or false crests as needed. Those whose plumage is scanty or dull can also buy feather wigs at special shops. There are fads for bleaching one's feathers or spraying them gold or crimping them, and wig shops in the cities will bleach, dye, spray, or crimp one's plumage and sell headdresses in whatever the current fashion is. Poor women with specially long, splendid headfeathers often sell them to the wig shops for a fairly good price.

The Gyr write with quill pens. It is traditional for a father to give a set of his own stiff ruff-quills to a child beginning to learn to write. Lovers exchange feathers with which to write love letters to one another, a pretty custom, referred to in a famous scene in the play *The Misunderstanding* by Inuinui:

> *O my betraying plume, that wrote his love*
> *To* her! *His love—my feather, and my blood!*

The Gyr are a staid, steady, traditional people, uninterested in innovation, shy of strangers. They are resistant to technological invention and novelty; attempts to sell them ballpoint pens or airplanes, or to induce them to enter the wonderful world of electronics, have failed. They go on writing letters to one another with quill pens, calculating with their heads, walking afoot or riding in carriages pulled by large, doglike animals called *ugnunu*, learning a few words in foreign languages when absolutely necessary, and watching classic stage plays written in iambic pentameter. No amount of exposure to the useful technologies, the marvelous gadgets, the advanced scientific knowledge of other planes—for Gy is a fairly popular tourist stop—seems to rouse envy or greed or a sense of inferiority in the Gyran bosom. They go on doing exactly as they have always done, not stodgily, exactly, but with a kind of dullness, a polite indifference and impenetrability, behind which may lie supreme self-satisfaction, or something quite different.

The crasser kind of tourists from other planes refer to the Gyr, of course, as birdies, birdbrains, featherheads, and so on. Many visitors from livelier planes visit the small, placid cities, take rides out into the country in ugnunu-chaises, attend sedate but charming balls (for the Gyr like to dance), and enjoy an old-fashioned evening at the theater without losing one degree of their contempt for the natives. "Feathers but no wings," is the conventional judgment that sums it up.

Such patronizing visitors may spend a week in Gy without ever seeing a winged native or learning that what they took for a bird or a jet was a woman on her way across the sky.

The Gyr don't talk about their winged people unless asked. They don't conceal them, or lie about them, but they don't volunteer information. I had to ask questions fairly persistently to be able to write the following description.

Wings never develop before late adolescence. There is no sign at all of the propensity until suddenly a girl of eighteen, a boy of nineteen, wakes up with a slight fever and a terrible aching in the shoulder blades.

After that comes a year or more of extreme physical stress and pain, during which the subject must be kept quiet, warm, and well fed. Nothing gives comfort but food—the nascent flyers are terribly hungry most of the time—and being wrapped or swaddled in blankets, while the body restructures, remakes, rebuilds itself. The bones lighten and become porous, the whole upper body musculature changes, and bony protuberances, developing rapidly from the shoulder blades, grow out into immense alar processes. The final stage is the growth of the wingfeathers, which is not painful. The primaries are, as feathers go, massive, and may be a meter long. The wingspread of an adult male Gyr is about four meters, that of a woman usually about a half meter less. Stiff feathers sprout from the calves and ankles, to

be spread wide in flight.

Any attempt to interfere, to prevent or halt the growth of wings, is useless and harmful or fatal. If the wings are not allowed to develop, the bones and muscles begin to twist and shrivel, causing unendurable, unceasing pain. Amputation of the wings or the flightfeathers, at any stage, results in a slow, agonizing death.

Among some of the most conservative, archaic peoples of the Gyr, the tribal societies living along the icy coasts of the north polar regions and the herdsfolk of the cold, barren steppes of the far south, this vulnerability of the winged people is incorporated into religion and ritual. In the north, as soon as a youth shows the fatal signs, he or she is captured and handed over to the tribal elders. With rituals similar to their funeral rites, they fasten heavy stones to the victim's hands and feet, then go in procession to a cliff high above the sea and push the victim over, shouting, "Fly! Fly for us!"

Among the steppe tribes, the wings are allowed to develop completely, and the youth is carefully, worshipfully attended all that year. Let us say that it is a girl who has shown the fatal symptoms. In her feverish trances she functions as a shaman and soothsayer. The priests listen and interpret all her sayings to the people. When her wings are full grown, they are bound down to her back. Then the whole tribe set out to walk with her to the nearest high place, cliff, or crag—often a journey of weeks, in that flat, desolate country.

On the heights, after days of dancing and imbibing hallucinatory smoke from smudge-fires of *byubyu* wood, the priests go with the young woman, all of them drugged, dancing and singing, to the edge of the cliff. There her wings are freed. She lifts them for the first time, and then like a falcon leaving the nest, leaps stumbling off the cliff into the air, wildly beating those huge, untried wings. Whether she flies or falls, all the men of the tribe, screaming with excitement, shoot at her with bow and arrow or throw their razor-pointed hunting spears. She falls, pierced by dozens of spears and arrows. The women scramble down the cliff, and if there is any life left in her they beat it out with stones. They then throw and heap stones over the body till it is buried under a cairn.

There are many cairns at the foot of every steep hill or crag in all the steppe country; the ancient cairns furnish stones for the new ones.

Such young people may try to escape their fate by running away from their people, but the weakness and fever that attend the development of wings cripple them, and they never get far.

There is a folktale in the South Marches of Merm of a winged man who leapt up into the air from the sacrificial crag and flew so strongly that he escaped the spears and arrows and disappeared into the sky. The original story ends there. The playwright Norwer used it as the base for a romantic tragedy. In his play *Transgression,* the young man has appointed a tryst with his beloved, and flies there to meet with her; but she has unwittingly betrayed him to another suitor, who lies in wait. As the lovers embrace, the suitor hurls his spear and kills the winged one. The maiden pulls out her own knife and kills the murderer and then—after exchanging anguished farewells with the not quite expired winged one—stabs herself. It is melodramatic, but if well staged, very moving; everybody has tears in their eyes when the hero first descends like an eagle, and when, dying, he enfolds his beloved in his great bronze wings.

A version of *Transgression* was performed a few years ago on my plane, in Chicago, at the Actual Reality Theater. It was probably inevitably, but unfortunately, translated as *Sacrifice of the Angels.* There is absolutely no mythology or lore concerning anything like our angels among the Gyr. Sentimental pictures of sweet little cherubs with baby wings, hovering guardian spirits, or grander images of divine messengers would strike them as a hideous mockery of something every parent and every adolescent dreads: a rare but fearful deformity, a curse, a death sentence.

Among the urbanized Gyr, that dread is mitigated to some degree, since the winged ones are treated not as sacrificial scapegoats but with tolerance and even sympathy, as people with a most unfortunate handicap.

This might seem odd. To soar over the heads of the earthbound, to race with eagles and soar with condors, to dance on air, to ride the wind, not in a noisy metal box or on a contraption of plastic and fabric and straps but on one's own vast, strong, splendid, outstretched wings—how could that be anything but a joy, a freedom? How stodgy, sullen-hearted, leaden-souled the Gyr must be, to think that people who can fly are cripples!

But they do have their reasons. The fact is that the winged Gyr can't trust their wings.

No fault can be found in the actual design of the wings. They serve admirably, with a little practice, for short flights, for effortless gliding and soaring on updrafts and, with more practice, for stunts and tumbling, aerial acrobatics. When winged people are fully mature, if they fly regularly they may achieve great stamina. They can stay aloft almost indefinitely. Many learn to sleep on the wing. Flights of over two thousand miles have been recorded, with only brief hover-stops to eat. Most of these very long flights were made by women, whose lighter bodies and bone structure give them the advantage over distance. Men, with their more powerful musculature, would take the speed-flying awards, if there were any. But the Gyr, at least the wingless majority, are not interested in records or awards, certainly not in competitions that involve a high risk of death.

The problem is that flyers' wings are liable to sudden, total, disastrous failure. Flight engineers and medical investigators on Gyr and elsewhere have not been able to account for it. The design of the wings has no detectable fault; their failure must be caused by an as yet unidentified physical or psychological factor, an incompatibility of the alar processes with the rest of the body. Unfortunately no weakness shows up beforehand; there is no way to predict wing failure. It occurs without warning. A flyer who has flown his entire adult life without a shadow of trouble takes off one morning and, having attained altitude, suddenly, appallingly, finds his wings will not obey him—shuddering, closing, clapping down along his sides, paralyzed. And he falls from the sky like a stone.

The medical literature states that as many as one flight in twenty ends in failure. Flyers I talked to believed that wing failure was not nearly as frequent as that, citing cases of people who had flown daily for decades. But it was not a matter they wanted to talk about with me, or perhaps even with one another. They seemed to have no preventive

precautions or rituals, accepting it as truly random. Failure may come on the first flight or the thousandth. No cause has been found for it—heredity, age, inexperience, fatigue, diet, emotion, physical condition. Every time a flyer goes up, the chance of wing failure is the same.

Some of course survive the fall. But they never fall again, because they can never fly again. Once the wings have failed, they are useless. They remain paralyzed, dragging along beside and behind their owner like a huge, heavy feather cape.

Foreigners ask why flyers don't carry parachutes in case of wing failure. No doubt they could. It is a question of temperament. Winged people who fly are those willing to take the risk of wing failure. Those who do not want the risk do not fly. Or perhaps those who consider it a risk do not fly, and those who fly do not consider it a risk.

As amputation of the wings is invariably fatal, and surgical removal of any part of them causes acute, incurable, crippling pain, the fallen flyers and those who choose not to fly must drag their wings about all their lives, through the streets, up and down the stairs. Their changed bone structure is not well suited to ground life; they tire easily walking, and suffer many fractures and muscular injuries. Few non-flying flyers live to sixty.

Those who do fly face their death every time they take off. Some of them, however, are still alive and still flying at eighty.

It is a quite wonderful sight, takeoff. Human beings aren't as awkward as I would have expected, having seen the graceless flapping of such masters of the air as pelicans and swans getting airborne. Of course it is easiest to launch from a perch or height, but if there's no such convenience handy, all they need is a run of twenty or twenty-flve meters, enough for a couple of lifts and downbeats of the great extended wings, and then a step that doesn't touch the ground, and then they're up, aloft, soaring—maybe circling back overhead to smile and wave down at uplifted faces before arrowing off above the roofs or over the hills.

They fly with the legs close together, the body arched a little backward, the legfeathers fanning out into a hawklike tail as needed. As the arms have no integral muscular connection to the wings—winged Gyr are six-limbed creatures—the hands may be kept down along the sides to reduce wind resistance and increase speed. In a leisurely flight, they may do anything hands do—scratch the head, peel a fruit, sketch an aerial view of the landscape, hold a baby. Though the latter I only saw once, and it troubled me.

I talked several times with a winged Gyr named Ardiadia; what follows is all in his own words, recorded, with his permission, during our conversations.

"Oh, yes, when I first found out—when it started happening to me, you know—I was floored. Terrified! I couldn't believe it. I'd been so sure it wouldn't happen to me. When we were kids, you know, we used to joke about so-and-so being 'flighty,' or say 'he'll be taking off one of these days'—but me? Me grow wings? It wasn't going to happen to me. So when I got this headache, and then my teeth ached for a while, and then my back began to hurt, I kept telling myself it was a toothache, I had an infection, an abscess... But when it really began there was no more fooling myself. It was terrible. I really can't remember much about it. It was bad. It hurt. First like knives running back and forth between my shoulders, and claws digging up and down my spine. And then all over, my arms, my legs, my fingers, my face... And I was so weak I couldn't stand up. I got out of bed and fell down on the floor and I couldn't get up. I lay there calling my mother, 'Mama! Mama, please come!' She was asleep. She worked late, waiting in a restaurant, and didn't get home till way after midnight, and so she slept hard. And I could feel the floor getting hot underneath me, I was so hot with fever, and I'd try to move my face to a cooler place on the floor...

"Well, I don't know if the pain eased off or I just got used to it, but it was a bit better after a couple of months. It was hard, though. And long, and dull, and strange. Lying there. But not on my back. You can't lie on your back, ever, you know. Hard to sleep at night. When it hurt, it always hurt most at night. Always a little fevery, likely to think strange thoughts, have funny ideas. And never able to think a thought through, never able quite to hold on to an idea. I felt as if I myself really couldn't think any more. Thoughts just came into me and went through me and I watched them. And no plans for the future any more, because what was my future now? I'd thought of being a schoolteacher. My mother had been so excited about that, she'd encouraged me to stay in school the extra year, to qualify for teachers' college... Well, I had my nineteenth birthday lying there in my little room in our three-room flat over the grocery on Lacemakers Lane. My mother brought some fancy food from the restaurant and a bottle of honey wine, and we tried to have a celebration, but I couldn't drink the wine, and she couldn't eat because she was crying. But I could eat, I was always starving hungry, and that cheered her up... Poor Mama!

"Well, so, I came out of that, little by little, and the wings grew in, great ugly dangling naked things, disgusting, to start with, and even worse when they started to fledge, with the pinfeathers like great pimples—but when the primaries and secondaries came out, and I began to feel the muscles there, and to be able to shudder my wings, shake them, raise them a little—and I wasn't feverish any more, or I'd got used to running a fever all the time, I'm not really sure which it is—and I was able to get up and walk around, and feel how light my body was now, as if gravity couldn't affect me, even with the weight of those huge wings dragging after me... but I could lift them, get them up off the floor...

"Not myself, though. I was earthbound. My body felt light, but I wore out even trying to walk, got weak and shaky. I'd used to be pretty good at the broad jump, but now I couldn't get both feet off the ground at once.

"I was feeling a lot better, but it bothered me to be so weak, and I felt closed in. Trapped. Then a flyer came by, a man from uptown, who'd heard about me. Flyers look after kids going through the change. He'd looked in a couple of times to reassure my mother and make sure I was doing all right. I was grateful for that. Now he came and talked to me for a long time, and showed me the exercises I could do. And I did them, every day, all the time—hours and hours. What else did I have to do? I used to like reading, but it didn't seem to hold my attention any more. I used to like going

to the theater, but I couldn't do that, I still wasn't strong enough. And places like theaters, they don't have room for people with unbound wings, you take up too much space, you cause a fuss. I'd been good at mathematics in school, but I couldn't fix my attention on the problems any more. They didn't seem to matter. So I had nothing to do but the exercises the flyer taught me. And I did them. All the time.

"The exercises helped. There really wasn't enough room even in our sitting room, I never could do a vertical stretch fully, but I did what I could. I felt better, I got stronger. I finally began to feel like my wings were mine. Were part of me. Or I was part of them.

"Then one day I couldn't stand being inside any more. Thirteen months I'd been inside, in those three little rooms, most of them just in the one room, thirteen months! Mama was out at work. I went downstairs. I walked the first ten steps down and then I lifted my wings. Even though the staircase was way too narrow, I could lift them some, and I stepped off and floated down the last six steps. Well, sort of. I hit pretty hard at the bottom, and my knees buckled, but I didn't really fall. It wasn't flying, but it wasn't quite falling.

"I went outside. The air was wonderful. I felt like I hadn't had any air for a year. Actually, I felt like I'd never known what air was in my whole life. Even in that narrow little street, with the houses hanging over it, there was wind, there was the sky, not a ceiling. The sky overhead. The air. I started walking. I hadn't planned anything. I wanted to get out of the lanes and alleys, to somewhere open, a big plaza or square or park, anything open to the sky. I saw people staring at me but I didn't much care. I'd stared at people with wings, when I didn't have them. Not meaning anything, just curious. Wings aren't all that common. I used to wonder a little about what it felt like to have them, you know. Just ignorance. So I didn't care if people looked at me now. I was too eager to get out from under the roofs. My legs were weak and shaky but they kept going, and sometimes, where the street wasn't crowded with people, I'd lift my wings a little, loft them, get a feel of the air under the feathers, and for a little while I'd be lighter on my feet.

"So I got to the Fruit Market. The market had shut down, it was evening, the booths were all shoved back, so there was a big space in the middle, cobblestones. I stood there under the Assay Office for a while doing exercises, lifts and stretches—I could do a vertical all the way for the first time, and it felt wonderful. Then I began to trot a little as I lofted, and my feet would get off the ground for a moment, and so I couldn't resist, I couldn't help it, I began to run and to loft my wings, and then beat down, and loft again, and I was up! But there was the Weights and Measures Building right in front of me, this grey stone facade right in my face, and I actually had to fend off, push myself away from it with my hands, and drop down to the pavement. But I turned around and there I had the full run ahead of me, clear across the marketplace to the Assay Office. And I ran, and I took off.

"I swooped around the marketplace for a while, staying low, learning how to turn and bank, and how to use my tailfeathers. It comes pretty natural, you feel what to do, the air tells you... but the people down below were looking up, and ducking when I banked too steep, or stalled... I didn't care. I flew for over an hour, till after dark, after all the people had gone. I'd got way up over the roofs by then. But I realized my wing muscles were getting tired and I'd better come down. But that was hard. I mean, landing was hard because I didn't know how to land. I came down like a sack of rocks, bam! Nearly sprained my ankle, and the soles of my feet stung like fire. If anybody saw it they must have laughed. But I didn't care. It was just hard to be on the ground. I hated be down. Limping home, dragging my wings that weren't any good here, feeling weak, feeling heavy.

"It took me quite a while to get home, and Mama came in just a little after me. She looked at me and said, 'You've been out,' and I said, 'I flew, Mama,' and she burst into tears.

"I was sorry for her but there wasn't much I could say.

She didn't even ask me if I was going to go on flying. She knew I would. I don't understand the people who have wings and don't use them. I suppose they're interested in having a career. Maybe they were already in love with somebody on the ground. But it seems... I don't know. I can't really understand it. Wanting to stay down. Choosing not to fly. Wingless people can't help it, it's not their fault they're grounded. But if you have wings...

"Of course they may be afraid of wing failure. Wing failure doesn't happen if you don't fly. Of course it doesn't happen, how can it? How can something fail that never worked?

"I suppose being safe is important to some people. They have a family or commitments or a job or something that makes it important. I don't know. You'd have to talk to one of them. I'm a flyer."

j

I asked Ardiadia how he made his living. Like many flyers, he worked part-time for the postal service. He mostly carried governmental correspondence and despatches on long flights, even overseas. Evidently he was considered a gifted and reliable employee. For particularly important despatches, he told me that two flyers were always sent, in case one suffered wing failure.

He was thirty-two. I asked him if he was married, and he told me that flyers never married; they considered it, he said, beneath them—"Affairs on the wing," he said, with a slight smile. I asked if the affairs were always with other flyers, and he said, "Oh, yes, of course," unintentionally revealing his surprise or disgust at the idea of making love to a non-flyer. His manners were pleasant and civil, he was most obliging, but he could not quite hide his sense of being apart from, different from the wingless, having nothing really to do with them. How could he help but look down on us?

I pressed him a little about this feeling of superiority, and he tried to explain. "When I said it was as if I was my wings, you know?—that's it. Being able to fly makes other things seem uninteresting. What people do seems so trivial. Flying is complete. It's enough. I don't know if you can understand. It's one's whole body, one's whole self, up in the whole sky. On a clear day, in the sunlight, with everything lying down there below, far away... Or in a high wind, in a

storm—out over the sea, that's where I like best to fly. Over the sea in stormy weather. When the fishing boats run for land, and you have it all to yourself, the sky full of rain and lightning, and the clouds under your wings. Once off Emer Cape I danced with the waterspouts... It takes everything to fly. Everything you are, everything you have. And so if you go down, you go down whole. And over the sea, if you go down, that's it, who's to know, who cares? I don't want to be buried underground." The idea made him shiver a little. I could see the shudder in his long, heavy, bronze-and-black wingfeathers.

I asked if the affairs on the wing sometimes resulted in children, and he said with indifference that of course they sometimes did. I pressed him a little about it and he said that a baby was a great bother to a flying mother, so that as soon as a baby was weaned it was usually left "on the ground," as he put it, to be brought up by relatives. Sometimes the winged mother got so attached to the child that she grounded herself to look after it. He told me this with some disdain.

The children of flyers are no more likely to grow wings than other children. The phenomenon has no genetic factor, but is a developmental pathology shared by all Gyr, which appears in less than one out of a thousand.

I think Ardiadia would not accept the word "pathology."

I talked also with a non-flying flyer, who let me record our conversation but asked that I not use his name. He is a member of a respectable law firm in a small city in Central Gy. He said, "I never flew, no. I was twenty when I got sick. I'd thought I was past the age, safe. It was a terrible blow. My parents had already spent a good deal of money, made sacrifices to get me into college. I was doing well in college. I liked learning. I had an intellect. To lose a year was bad enough. I wasn't going to let this business eat up my whole life. To me they are simply excrescences. Growths. Impediments to walking, dancing, sitting in a civilized manner on a normal chair, wearing decent clothing. I refused to let something like that get in the way of my education, my whole life. Flyers are stupid, their brains go all to feathers. I wasn't going to trade in my mind for a chance to flitter about over the rooftops. I'm more interested in what goes on *under* the roofs. I don't care for scenery. I prefer people. And I wanted a normal life. I wanted to marry, to have children. My father was a kind man; he died when I was sixteen, and I'd always thought that if I could be as good to my children as he was to us, it would be a way of thanking him, of honoring his memory... I was fortunate enough to meet a beautiful woman who refused to let my handicap frighten her. In fact she won't let me call it that. She insists that all this"—he indicated his wings with a slight gesture of his head—"was what she first saw in me. Claims that when we first met, she thought I was quite a boring, stuffy young fellow, till I turned around."

His headfeathers were black with a blue crest. His wings, though flattened, bound, and belted down (as non-flyers' wings always are, to keep them out of the way and as unnoticeable as possible), were splendidly feathered in patterns of dark blue and peacock blue with black bars and edges.

"At any rate, I was determined to keep my feet on the ground, in every sense of the words. If I'd ever had any youthful notions about flitting off for a while, which I really never did, once I was through with the fever and delirium and had made peace with the whole painful, wasteful process—if I had ever thought of flying, once I was married, once we had a child, nothing, nothing could induce me to yearn for even a taste of that life, to consider it even for a moment. The utter irresponsibility of it, the arrogance—the arrogance of it is very distasteful to me."

We then talked for some while about his law practice, which was an admirable one, devoted to representing poor people against swindlers and profiteers. He showed me a charming portrait of his two children, eleven and nine years old, which he had drawn with one of his own quills. The chances that either child would grow wings was, as for every Gyr, a thousand to one.

Shortly before I left I asked him, "Do you ever dream of flying?"

Lawyerlike, he was slow to answer. He looked away, out the window.

"Doesn't everyone?" he said.

Kim Newman

TOMORROW TOWN

This way to the Yeer 2000.

The message, in Helvetica typeface, was repeated on arrow-shaped signs.

"That'll be us, Vanessa," said Richard Jeperson, striding along the platform in the indicated direction, toting his shoulder-slung hold-all. He tried to feel as if he were about to time-travel from 1971 to the future, though in practice he was just changing trains.

Vanessa was distracted by one of the arrow signs, fresh face arranged in a comely frown. Richard's associate was a tall redhead in hot pants, halter top, beret, and stack-heeled go-go boots—all blinding white, as if fresh from the machine in a soap-powder advert. She drew unconcealed attention from late-morning passengers milling about the railway station. Then again, in his lime day-glo blazer edged with gold braid and salmon-pink bell-bottom trousers, so did he. Here in Preston, the fashion watchword, for the eighteenth consecutive season, was "drab."

"It's misspelled," said Vanessa. "Y-double-E-R."

"No, it's F-O-N-E-T-I-K," he corrected. "Within the next thirty years, English spelling will be rationalised."

"You reckon?" She pouted, skeptically.

"Not my theory," he said, stroking his mandarin moustaches. "*I* assume the lingo will muddle along with magical illogic as it has since the Yeer Dot[1]. But orthographic reform is a tenet of Tomorrow Town."

"Alliteration. Very Century 21."

They had travelled up from London, sharing a rattly first-class carriage and a welcome magnum of Bollinger with a liberal bishop on a lecture tour billed as "Peace and the Pill" and a working-class playwright revisiting his slag-heap roots. To continue their journey, Richard and Vanessa had to change at Preston.

The arrows led to a guarded gate. The guard wore a British Rail uniform in shiny black plastic with silver highlights. His oversized cap had a chemical lighting element in the brim.

"You need special tickets, Ms and Mm," said the guard.

"Mm," said Vanessa, amused.

"Ms," Richard buzzed at her.

He searched through his pockets, finally turning up the special tickets. They were strips of foil, like ironed-flat chocolate bar wrappers with punched-out hole patterns. The guard carefully posted the tickets into a slot in a metal box. Gears whirred and lights flashed. The gate came apart and sank into the ground. Richard let Vanessa step through the access first. She seemed to float off, arms out for balance.

"Best not to be left behind, Mm," said the guard.

"Mm," said Richard, agreeing.

He stepped onto the special platform. Beneath his rubber-soled winkle-pickers, a knitted chain mail surface moved on large rollers. It creaked and rippled, but gave a smooth ride.

"I wonder how it manages corners," Vanessa said.

The moving platform conveyed them towards a giant silver bullet. The train of the future hummed slightly, at rest on a single gleaming rail which was raised ten feet above the gravel railbed by chromed tubular trestles. A hatchway was open, lowered to form a ramp.

Richard and Vanessa clambered through the hatch and found themselves in a space little roomier than an Apollo capsule. They half-sat, half-lay in over-padded seats which wobbled on gyro-gimbals. Safety straps automatically snaked across them and drew tight.

"Not sure I'll ever get used to this," said Richard. A strap across his forehead noosed his long, tangled hair, and he had to free a hand to fix it.

Vanessa wriggled to get comfortable, doing a near-horizontal dance as the straps adjusted to her.

With a hiss the ramp raised and became a hatch-cover, then sealed shut. The capsule-cum-carriage had berths for eight, but today they were the only passengers.

A mechanical voice counted down from ten.

"Richard, that's a Dalek[2]," said Vanessa, giggling.

As if offended, the voice stuttered on five, like a record stuck in a groove, then hopped to three.

At zero, they heard a rush of rocketry and the monorail moved off. Richard tensed against the expected g-force slam, but it didn't come. Through thick-glassed slit windows, he saw green countryside passing by at about twenty-five miles per hour. They might have been on a leisurely cycle to the village pub rather than taking the fast train to the future.

"So this is the transport of tomorrow?" said Vanessa.

"A best-guess design," explained Richard. "That's the point of Tomorrow Town. To experiment with the lives we'll all be living at the turn of the century."

"No teleportation then?"

"Don't be silly. Matter transmission is a fantasy. This is a reasonable extrapolation from present-day or in-development technology. The Foundation is rigorous about probabilities. Everything in Tomorrow Town is viable."

The community was funded partially by government research grants and partially by private sources. It was projected that it would soon be a profitable concern, with monies pouring in from scientific wonders developed by the visioneers of the new technomeritocracy. The Foundation, which had proposed the "Town of 2000" experiment, was a think tank, an academic-industrial coalition dedicated to applying to present-day life lessons learned from contemplating the likely future. Tomorrow Town's two-thousand-odd citizen-volunteers ("zenvols") were boffins, engineers, social visionaries, health food cranks, and science fiction fans.

Three years ago, when the town was given its charter by the Wilson government[3], there had been a white heat of publicity: television programmes hosted by James Burke and Raymond Baxter[4], picture features in all the Sunday colour supplements[5], a novelty single ("Take Me to Tomorrow" by Big Thinks and the BBC Radiophonic Workshop[6]) which peaked at Number 2 (prevented from being Top of the Pops by The Crazy World of Arthur Brown's "Fire"[7]), a line of "futopian fashions" from Carnaby Street, a heated debate in the letter columns of New Scientist[8] between Arthur C. Clarke[9] (pro), Auberon Waugh[10] (anti) and J. G. Ballard[11] (hard to tell). Then the brouhaha died down and Tomorrow Town was left to get on by itself, mostly forgotten. Until the murder of Varno Zhoule[12].

Richard Jeperson, agent of the Diogenes Club[13]—least-known branch of the United Kingdom's intelligence and investigative services—was detailed to look into the supposedly open-and-shut case and report back to the current Prime Minister on the advisability of maintaining government support for Tomorrow Town.

He had given Vanessa the barest facts.

"What does the murder weapon of the future turn out to be?" she asked. "Laser beam? Poisoned moon rock?"

"No, the proverbial blunt instrument. Letting the side down, really. Anyone who murders the cofounder of Tomorrow Town should have the decency to stick to the spirit of the game. I doubt if it's much comfort to the deceased, but the offending bludgeon was vaguely futurist, a stylised steel rocket ship with a heavy stone base."

"No home should be without one."

"It was a Hugo Award, the highest honour the science fiction field can bestow. Zhoule won his murder weapon for Best Novelette of 1958, with the oft-anthologised 'Court Martian.' "

"Are we then to be the police of the future? Do we get to design our own uniforms?"

"We're here because Tomorrow Town has no police force as such. It is a fundamental of the social design that there will be no crime by the year 2000."

"Ooops."

"This is a utopian vision, Vanessa. No money to steal. No inequality to foster resentment. All disputes arbitrated with unquestionable fairness. All zenvols constantly monitored for emotional instability."

"Maybe being 'constantly monitored' leads to 'emotional instability.' Not to mention being called a 'zenvol.' "

"You'll have to mention that to Big Thinks."

"Is he the boss-man among equals?"

Richard chuckled. "He's an *it*. A computer. A very large computer."

Vanessa snapped her fingers.

"Ah-ha. There's your culprit. In every sci-fi film I've ever seen, the computer goes power-mad and starts killing people off. Big Thinks probably wants to take over the world."

"The late Mm Zhoule would cringe to hear you say that, Vanessa. He'd never have deigned to use such a hackneyed, unlikely premise in a story. A computer is just a heuristic abacus. Big Thinks can beat you at chess, solve logic problems, cut a pop record, and make the monorail run on time, but it hasn't got sentience, a personality, a motive, or, most importantly, arms. You might as well suspect the fridge-freezer or the pop-up toaster."

"If you knew my pop-up toaster better, you'd feel differently. It sits there, shining sneakily, plotting perfidy. The jug-kettle is in on it, too. There's a conspiracy of contraptions."

"Now you're being silly."

"Trust me, Richard, it'll be the Brain Machine. Make sure to check its alibi."

"I'll bear that in mind."

j

They first saw Tomorrow Town from across the Yorkshire Dales, nestled in lush green and slate grey. The complex was a large-scale version of the sort of back-garden space station that might have been put together by a talented child inspired by Gerry Anderson[14] and instructed by Valerie Singleton[15], using egg boxes, toilet roll tubes, the innards of a broken wireless, pipe cleaners, and a lot of silver spray-paint.

Hexagonal geodesic domes clustered in the landscape, a central space covered by a giant canopy that looked like an especially aerodynamic silver circus tent. Metallised roadways wound between trees and lakes, connecting the domes. The light traffic consisted mostly of electric golf carts and one-person hovercraft. A single hardy zenvol was struggling along on what looked like a failed flying bicycle from 1895 but was actually a moped powered by wing-like solar panels. It was raining gently, but the town seemed shielded by a half-bubble climate control barrier that shimmered in midair.

A pylon held up three sun-shaped globes on a triangular frame. They radiated light and, Richard suspected, heat. Where light fell, the greenery was noticeably greener and thicker.

The monorail stopped outside the bubble, and settled a little clunkily.

"You may now change apparel," rasped the machine voice.

A compartment opened and clothes slid out on racks. The safety straps released them from their seats.

Richard thought for a moment that the train had calculated from his long hair that he was a Ms rather than a Mm, then realised the garment on offer was unisex: a lightweight jumpsuit of semi-opaque polythene, with silver epaulettes, pockets, knee- and elbow-patches, and modesty strips around the chest and hips. The dangling legs ended in floppy-looking plastic boots, the sleeves in surgeon's gloves.

"Was that 'may' a 'must'?" asked Vanessa.

"Best to go along with native customs," said Richard.

He turned his back like a gentleman and undressed carefully, folding and putting away his clothes. Then he took the jumpsuit from the rack and stepped into it, wiggling his feet down into the boots and fingers into the gloves. A seam from crotch to neck sealed with velcro strips, but he was left with an enormous swathe of polythene sprouting from his left hip like a bridal train.

"Like this," said Vanessa, who had worked it out.

The swathe went over the right shoulder in a toga arrangement, passing under an epaulette, clipping on in a couple of places, and falling like a waist-length cape.

She had also found a pad of controls in the left epaulette, which activated drawstrings and pleats that adjusted the garment to suit individual body type. They both had to fiddle to get the suits to cope with their above-average height, then loosen and tighten various sections as required. Even after every possible button had been twisted every possible way, Richard wore one sleeve tight as sausage skin while the other was loose and wrinkled as a burst balloon.

"Maybe it's a futopian fashion," suggested Vanessa, who—of course—looked spectacular, shown off to advantage by the modesty strips. "All the dashing zenvols are wearing the one-loose-one-tight look this new century."

"Or maybe it's just aggravated crackpottery."

She laughed.

The monorail judged they had used up their changing time, and lurched off again.

j

The receiving area was as white and clean as a bathroom display at the Belgian Ideal Home Exhibition. A deputation of zenvols, all dressed alike, none with mismatched sleeves, waited on the platform. Synthesised Bach played gently and the artificial breeze was mildly perfumed.

"Mm Richard, Ms Vanessa," said a white-haired zenvol, "welcome to Tomorrow Town."

A short Oriental girl repeated his words in sign language.

"Are you Georgie Gewell?" Richard asked.

"Jor-G," said the zenvol, then spelled it out.

"My condolences," Richard said, shaking the man's hand. Through two squeaking layers of latex, he had the impression of sweaty palm. "I understand you and Varno Zhoule were old friends."

"Var-Z is a tragic loss. A great visioneer."

The Oriental girl mimed sadness. Other zenvols hung their heads.

"Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring" segued into the "Dead March" from *Saul*. Was the Muzac keyed in somehow to the emotional state of any given assembly?

"We, ah, founded the Foundation together."

Back in the 1950s, Varno Zhoule had written many articles and stories for science fiction magazines, offering futuristic solutions to contemporary problems, preaching the gospel of better living through logic and technology. He had predicted decimal currency and the vertical-takeoff aeroplane. Georgie Gewell was an award-winning editor and critic. He had championed Zhoule's work, then raised finances to apply his solutions to the real world. Richard understood the seed money for the Foundation came from a patent the pair held on a kind of battery-powered circular slide rule that was faster and more accurate than any other portable calculating device.

Gewell was as tall as Richard, with milk-fair skin and close-cropped snow-white hair. He had deep smile and frown lines and a soft, girlish mouth. He was steadily leaking tears, not from grief but from thick, obvious reactalite contact lenses that were currently smudged to the darker end of their spectrum.

The other zenvols were an assorted mix, despite their identical outfits. Most of the men were short and tubby, the women lithe and fit—which was either Big Thinks's recipe for perfect population balance or some visioneer's idea of a good time for a tall, thin fellow. Everyone had hair cut short, which made both Richard and Vanessa obvious outsiders. None of the men wore facial hair except a red-faced chap who opted for the Puritan beard-without-a-moustache arrangement.

Gewell introduced the delegation. The oriental girl was Moana, whom Gewell described as "town speaker," though she continued to communicate only by signing. The beardie was Mal-K, the "senior medico" who had presided over the autopsy, matched some bloody fingerprints and seemed a bit put out to be taken away from his automated clinic for this ceremonial affair. Other significant zenvols: Jess-F, "arbitrage input tech," a hard-faced blonde girl who interfaced with Big Thinks when it came to programming dispute decisions, and thus was the nearest thing Tomorrow

Town had to a human representative of the legal system—though she was more clerk of the court than investigating officer; Zootie, a fat little "agri-terrain rearrangement tech" with a bad cold for which he kept apologising, who turned out to have discovered the body by the hydroponics vats and was oddly impressed and uncomfortable in this group, as if he weren't quite on a level of equality with Gewell and the rest; and "vocabulary administrator" Sue-2, whom Gewell introduced as "sadly, the motive," the image of a penitent young lady who "would never do it again."

Richard mentally marked them all down.

"You'll want to visit the scene of the crime?" suggested Gewell. "Interrogate the culprit? We have Buster in a secure store-room. It had to be especially prepared. There are no lockable doors in Tomorrow Town."

"He's nailed in," said Jess-F. "With rations and a potty."

"Very sensible," commented Richard.

"We can prise the door open now you're here," said Gewell.

Richard thought a moment.

"If you'll forgive me, Mr Jep—ah, Mm Richard," said Mal-K, "I'd like to get back to my work. I've a batch of anti-virus cooking."

The medico kept his distance from Zootie. Did he think a streaming nose reflected badly on the health of the future? Or was the artificial breeze liable to spread sniffles around the whole community in minutes?

"I don't see any reason to detain you, Mm Mal-K," said Richard. "Vanessa might pop over later. My associate is interested in the work you're doing here. New cures for new diseases. She'd love to squint into a microscope at your anti-virus."

Vanessa nodded with convincing enthusiasm.

"Mal-K's door is always open," said Gewell.

The medico sloped off without comment.

"Should we crack out the crowbar, then?" prompted Gewell.

The cofounder seemed keen on getting on with this: to him, murder came as an embarrassment and an interruption. It wasn't an uncommon reaction. Richard judged Gewell just wanted all this over with so he could get on with things, even though the victim was one of his oldest friends and the crime demonstrated a major flaw in the social design of Tomorrow Town. If someone battered Vanessa to death, he didn't think he'd be so intent on putting it behind him—but he was famous for being sensitive. Indeed, it was why he was so useful to the Diogenes Club.

"I think as long as our putative culprit is safely nailed away, we can afford to take our time, get a feel for the place and the setup. It's how I like to work, Mm Gewell. To me, understanding why is much more important than knowing who or how."

"I should think the why was obvious," said Gewell looking at Sue-2, eyes visibly darkening.

She looked down.

"The arbitration went against Buster, and he couldn't accept it," said Jess-F. "Though it was in his initial contract that he abide by Big Thinks's decisions. It happens sometimes. Not often."

"An arbitration in a matter of the heart? Interesting. Just the sort of thing that comes in a box marked 'motive' and tied with pink string. Thank you so much for mentioning it early in the case. Before we continue the sleuthing, perhaps we could have lunch. Vanessa and I have travelled a long way, with no sustenance beyond British Rail sandwiches and a beverage of our own supply. Let's break bread together, and you can tell me more about your fascinating experiment."

"Communal meals are at fixed times," said Gewell. "The next is not until six."

"I make it about six o'clock," said Richard, though his watch-face was blurred by the sleeve-glove.

"It's only f-five by our clock," said Sue-2. "We're on two daily cycles of ten kronons. Each kronon runs a hundred sentikronons."

"In your time, a kronon is 72 minutes," explained Gewell. "Our six is your..."

Vanessa did the calculation and beat the slide rule designer, "twelve minutes past seven."

"That's about it."

Richard waved away the objection.

"I'm sure a snack can be rustled up. Where do you take these communal meals?"

Moana signalled a direction and set off. Richard was happy to follow, and the others came too.

j

The dining area was in the central plaza, under the pylon and the three globes, with zinc-and-chrome sheet-and-tube tables and benches. It was warm under the globes, almost Caribbean, and some zenvols wore poker players' eyeshades. In the artificially balmy climate, plastic garments tended to get sticky inside, which made for creaky shiftings in seats.

An abstract ornamental fountain gushed nutrient-enriched, slightly carbonated, heavily fluoridized water. Gewell had Moana fetch a couple of jugs for the table, while the meek Sue-2 hustled off to persuade "sustenance preparation" techs to break their schedule to feed the visitors. Vanessa cocked an eyebrow at this division of labour, and Richard remembered Zhoule and Gewell had been planning this futopia since the 1950s, well before the publication of *The Female Eunuch*. Even Jess-F, whom Richard had pegged as the toughest zenvol he had yet met, broke out the metallised glass tumblers from a dispenser by the fountain, while Gewell and the sniffling Zootie sat at their ease at table.

"Is that the building where Big Thinks lives?" asked Vanessa.

Gewell swivelled to look. Vanessa meant an imposing structure, rather like a giant art deco refrigerator decorated with Mondrian squares in a rough schematic of a human face. Uniformly-dressed zenvols came and went through airlock doors that opened and closed with hisses of decontaminant.

Gewell grinned, impishly.

"Ms Vanessa, that building is Big Thinks."

Richard whistled.

"Bee-Tee didn't used to be that size," said Jess-F. "Var-Z kept insisting we add units. More and more complicated questions need more and more space. Soon, we'll have to expand further."

"It doesn't show any telltale signs of megalomania?" asked Vanessa. "Never programs Wagner for eight straight hours and chortles over maps of the world?"

Jess-F didn't look as if she thought that was funny.

"Bee-Tee is a machine, Ms."

Sue-2 came back with food. Coloured pills that looked like Smarties[16] but tasted like chalk.

"All the nutrition you need is here," said Gewell, "in the water and the capsules. For us, mealtimes are mostly ceremonial, for debate and reflection. Var-Z said that some of his best ideas popped into his head while he was chatting idly after a satisfying pill."

Richard didn't doubt it. He also still felt hungry.

"Talking of things popping into Zhoule's head," he said, "what's the story on Buster of the bloody fingerprints?"

Jess-F looked at Sue-2, as if expecting to be contradicted, then carried on.

"Big Thinks assessed the dispute situation, and arbitrated it best for the community if Sue-2 were to be pair-bonded with Var-Z rather than Buster."

"Buster was your old boyfriend?" Vanessa asked Sue-2.

"He is my husband," she said.

"On the outside, in the past," put in Jess-F. "Here, we don't always acknowledge arbitrary pair-bondings. Mostly, they serve a useful purpose and continue. In this instance, the dispute was more complicated."

"Big Thinks arbitrated against the arbitrary?" mused Richard. "I suppose no one would be surprised at that."

He looked from face to face and fixed on Sue-2, then asked: "Did you leave Buster for Mm Zhoule?"

Sue-2 looked for a cue, but none came.

"It was best for the town, for the experiment," she said.

"What was it for you? For your husband?"

"Buster had been regraded. From 'zenvol' to 'zenpass.' He couldn't vote."

Richard looked to Jess-F for explication. He noticed Gewell had to give her a teary wink from almost-black eyes before she would say anything more.

"We have very few citizen-passengers," she said. "It's not a punishment category."

"Kind of you to clarify that," said Richard. "I might have made a misconclusion otherwise. You say zenpasses have no vote?"

"It's not so dreadful," said Gewell, sipping nutrient. "On the outside, in the past, suffrage is restricted by age, sanity, residence and so on. Here, in our technomeritocracy, to register for a vote—which gives you a voice in every significant decision—you have to demonstrate your applied intelligence."

"An IQ test?"

"Not a quotient, Mm Richard. Anyone can have that. The vital factor is application. Bee-Tee tests for that. There's no personality or human tangle involved. Surely, it's only fair that the most useful should have the most say?"

"I have a vote," said Zootie, proud. "Earned by applied intelligence."

"Indeed he does," said Gewell, smiling.

"And Mm Jor-G has fifteen votes. Because he applies his intelligence more often than I do."

Everyone looked at Zootie with different types of amazement.

"It's only fair," said Zootie, content despite a nose-trickle, washing down another purple pill.

Richard wondered whether the agri-terrain rearrangement tech was hovering near regrading as a zenpass.

Richard addressed Sue-2. "What does your husband do?"

"He's a history teacher."

"An educationalist. Very valuable."

Gewell looked as if his pill was sour. "Your present is our past, Mm Richard. Buster's discipline is surplus."

"Doesn't the future grow out of the past? To know where you're going you must know where you've been."

"Var-Z believes in a radical break."

"But Var-Z is in the past too."

"Indeed. Regrettable. But we must think of the future."

"It's where we're going to spend the rest of our lives," said Zootie.

"That"s very clever," said Vanessa.

Zootie wiped his nose and puffed up a bit.

"I think we should hand Buster over to you," said Gewell. "To be taken outside to face the justice of the past. Var-Z left work undone that we must continue."

"Not just yet," said Richard. "This sad business raises questions about Tomorrow Town. I have to look beyond the simple crime before I make my report. I'm sure you understand and will extend full cooperation."

No one said anything, but they all constructed smiles.

"You must be economically self-supporting by now," continued Richard, "what with the research and invention you've been applying intelligence to. If the Prime Minister withdrew government subsidies, you'd probably be better off. Free of the apron strings, as it were. Still, the extra cash must come in handy for something, even if you don't use money in this town."

Gewell wiped his eyes and kept smiling.

Richard could really do with a steak and kidney pie and chips, washed down with beer. Even a Kit-Kat would have been welcome.

"Have you a guest apartment we could use?"

Gewell's smile turned real. "Sadly, we're at maximum optimal zenvol residency. No excess space wastage in the living quarters."

"No spare beds," clarified Zootie.

"Then we'll have to take the one living space we know to be free."

Gewell's brow furrowed like a rucked-up rug.

"Zhoule's quarters," Richard explained. "We'll set up camp there. Sue-2, you must know the way. Since there are no locks we won't need keys to get in. Zenvols, it's been fascinating. I look forward to seeing you tomorrow."

Richard and Vanessa stood up, and Sue-2 followed suit.

Gewell and Jess-F glared. Moana waved bye-bye.

j

"What are you looking for?" Vanessa asked. "Monitoring devices."

"No," said Richard, unsealing another compartment, "they're in the light fittings and the communicator screen, and seem to have been disabled. By Zhoule or his murderer, presumably."

There was a constant hum of gadgetry in the walls and from behind white-fronted compartments. The ceiling was composed of translucent panels, above which glowed a steady light.

The communicator screen was dusty. Beneath the on-off switch, volume and brightness knobs and channel selector was a telephone dial, with the Tomorrow Town alphabet[17] (no Q or X). Richard had tried to call London but a recorded voice over a cartoon smiley face told him that visiphones only worked within the town limits. Use of the telephone line to the outside had to be approved by vote of zenvol visioneers.

In a compartment, he found a gadget whose purpose was a mystery. It had dials, a trumpet and three black rubber nipples.

"I'm just assuming, Vanessa, that the co-founder of Tomorrow Town might allow himself to sample the forbidden past in ways denied the simple zenvol or despised zenpass."

"You mean?"

"He might have real food stashed somewhere."

Vanessa started opening compartments too.

It took a full hour to search the five rooms of Zhoule's bungalow. They discovered a complete run of *Town Magazeen*, a microfilm publication with all text in fonetik, and a library of 1950s science fiction magazines, lurid covers mostly promising Varno Zhoule stories as backup to Asimov or Heinlein.

They found many compartments stuffed with ring-bound notebooks which dated back twenty years. Richard flicked through a couple, noting Zhoule had either been using fonetik since the early '50s or was such a bad speller that his editors must have been driven to despair. Most of the entries were single sentences, story ideas, possible inventions or prophecies. *Tunel under Irish See. Rokit to Sun to harvest heet. Big lift to awbit. Stoopids not allowd to breed. Holes in heds for plugs.*

Vanessa found a display case, full of plaques and awards in the shapes of spirals or robots.

"Is this the murder weapon?" Vanessa asked, indicating a needle-shaped rocket. "Looks too clean."

"I believe Zhoule was a multiple Hugo winner. See, this is Best Short Story 1957, for 'Vesta Interests.' The blunt instrument was..."

Vanessa picked up a chunk of ceramic and read the plaque, "Best Novelette 1958." It was a near-duplicate of the base of the other award.

"You can see where the rocket ship was fixed. It must have broken when the award was lifted in anger."

"Cold blood, Vanessa. The body and the Hugo were found elsewhere. No blood traces in these quarters. Let's keep looking for a pork pie."

Vanessa opened a floor-level compartment and out crawled a matt-black robot spider the size of an armoured go-kart. The fearsome thing brandished death-implements that, upon closer examination, turned out to be a vacuum cleaner proboscis and limbs tipped with chamois, a damp squeegee, and a brush.

"Oh, how useful," said Vanessa.

Then the spider squirted hot water at her and crackled. Electrical circuits burned out behind its photo-eyes. The proboscis coughed black soot.

"Or maybe not."

" 'I have seen the future, and it works,' " quoted Richard. "Lincoln Steffens, on the Soviet Union, 1919."

" 'What's to become of my bit of washing when there's no washing to do,' " quoted Vanessa. "The old woman in *The Man in the White Suit*[18], on technological progress, 1951."

"You suspect the diabolical Big Thinks sent this cleaning robot to murder Varno Zhoule? A Frankensteinian rebellion against the Master-Creator?"

"If Bee-Tee is so clever, I doubt it'd use this arachnoid doodad as an assassin. The thing can't even beat as it sweeps as it cleans[19], let alone carry out a devilish murder plan. Besides, to use the blunt instrument it would have to climb a wall, and I reckon this can't manage stairs."

Richard poked the carapace of the machine, which wriggled and lost a couple of limbs.

"Are you still hungry?"

"Famished."

"Yet we've had enough nourishment to keep body and spirit together for the ten long kronons that remain until breakfast time."

"I'll ask medico Mal-K if he sees many cases of rickets and scurvy in futopia."

"You do that."

Richard tried to feel sorry for the spider, but it was just a gadget. It was impossible to invest it with a personality.

Vanessa was thinking.

"Wasn't the idea that Tomorrow Town would pour forth twenty-first-century solutions to our drab old 1970s problems?"

Richard answered her. "That's what Mr Wilson thought he was signing up for."

"So why aren't Mrs Mopp Spiders on sale in the Charing Cross Road?"

"It doesn't seem to work all that well."

"Lot of that about, Mm Richard. A monorail that would lose a race with Stephenson's Rocket. Technomeroticratic *droit de seigneur*. Concentrated foods astronauts wouldn't eat. Robots less functional than the wind-up ones my nephew Paulie uses to conquer the playground. And I've seen the odd hovercraft up on blocks with 'Owt of Awder' signs. Not to mention Buster the Basher, living incarnation of a society out of joint."

"Good points all," he said. "And I'll answer them as soon as I solve another mystery."

"What's that?"

"What are we supposed to sleep on?"

Around the rooms were large soft white cubes which distantly resembled furniture but could as easily be tofu chunks for the giants who would evolve by the turn of the millennium. By collecting enough cubes into a windowless room where the lighting panels were more subdued, Richard and Vanessa were able to put together a bed-shape. However, when Richard took an experimental lie-down on the jigsaw-puzzle affair, an odd cube squirted out of place and he fell through the gap. The floor was covered with a warm fleshy plastic substance that was peculiarly unpleasant to the touch.

None of the many compartment-cupboards in the bungalow contained anything resembling twentieth-century pillows or bedding. Heating elements in the floor turned up as the evening wore on, adjusting the internal temperature of the room to the point where their all-over condoms were extremely uncomfortable. Escaping from the Tomorrow Town costumes was much harder than getting into them.

It occurred to Richard and Vanessa at the same time that these spacesuits would make going to the lavatory awkward, though they reasoned an all-pill diet would minimise the wasteful toilet breaks required in the past. Eventually, with some cooperation, they got free and placed the suits on hangers in a glass-fronted cupboard which, when closed, filled with coloured steam. "Dekontaminashun Kompleet," flashed a sign as the cabinet cracked open and spilled liquid residue. The floor was discoloured where this had happened before.

Having more or less puzzled out how the bedroom worked, they set about tackling the bathroom, which seemed to be equipped with a dental torture chamber and a wide variety of exotic marital aids. By the time they were done playing with it all, incidentally washing and cleaning their teeth, it was past ten midnight and the lights turned off automatically.

"Nighty-night," said Richard.

"Don't let the robot bugs bite," said Vanessa.

j

He woke up, alert. She woke with him.

"What's the matter? A noise?"

"No," he said. "No noise."

"Ah."

The Tomorrow Town hum, gadgets in the walls, was silenced. The bungalow was technologically dead. He reached out and touched the floor. It was cooling.

Silently, they got off the bed.

The room was dark, but they knew where the door—a sliding screen—was and took up positions either side of it.

The door had opened by touching a pad. Now that power was off, they were shut in (a flaw in the no-locks policy), though Richard heard a winding creak as the door lurched open an inch. There was some sort of clockwork backup system.

A gloved hand reached into the room. It held an implement consisting of a plastic handle, two long thin metal rods, and a battery pack. A blue arc buzzed between the rods, suggesting lethal charge.

Vanessa took the wrist, careful not to touch the rods, and gave a good yank. The killing-prod, or whatever it was, was dropped and discharged against the floor, leaving a blackened patch and a nasty smell.

Surprised, the intruder stumbled against the door.

As far as Richard could make out in the minimal light, the figure wore the usual Tomorrow Town suit. An addition

was an opaque black egg-shaped helmet with a silver strip around the eyes which he took to be a one-way mirror. A faint red radiance suggested some sort of infra-red see-in-the-dark device.

Vanessa, who had put on a floral bikini as sleepwear, kicked the egghead in the chest, which clanged. She hopped back.

"It's armoured," she said.

"All who defy Buster must die," rasped a speaker in the helmet.

Vanessa kicked again, at the shins, cutting the egghead down.

"All who defy Buster must die," squeaked the speaker, sped-up. "All who de... de... de... de..."

The recorded message was stuck.

The egghead clambered upright.

"Is there is a person in there?" Vanessa asked.

"One way to find out," said Richard.

He hammered the egghead with a bed-cube, but it was too soft to dent the helmet. The intruder lunged and caught him in a plastic-and-metal grasp.

"Get him off me," he said, kicking. Unarmoured, he was at a disadvantage.

Vanessa nipped into the en-suite bathroom and came back with a gadget on a length of metal hose. They had decided it was probably a water-pick for those hard-to-clean crannies. She stabbed the end of the device at the egghead's neck, puncturing the plastic seal just below the chin-rim of the helmet, and turned the nozzle on. The tappet-key snapped off in her fingers and a high-pressure stream that could have drilled through cheddar cheese spurted into the suit.

Gallons of water inflated the egghead's garment. The suit self-sealed around the puncture and expanded, arms and legs forced out in an X. Richard felt the water pressure swelling his captor's chest and arms. He wriggled and got free.

"All who defy Buster..."

Circuits burned out, and leaks sprouted at all the seams. Even through the silver strip, Richard made out the water rising.

There was a commotion in the next room.

Lights came on. The hum was back.

It occurred to Richard that he had opted to sleep in the buff and might not be in a decorous state to receive visitors. Then again, in the future taboos against social nudity were likely to evaporate.

Georgie Gewell, the ever-present Moana and Jess-F, who had another of the zapper-prod devices, stood just inside the doorway.

There was a long pause. This was not what anyone had expected.

"Buster has escaped," said Gewell. "We thought you might be in danger. He's beyond all reason."

"If he was a danger to us, he isn't any longer," said Vanessa.

"If this is him," Richard said. "He was invoking the name."

The egghead was on the floor, spouting torrents, super-inflated like the Michelin Man[20] after a three-day egg-eating contest.

Vanessa kicked the helmet. It obligingly repeated "All who defy Buster must die."

The egghead waved hands like fat starfish, thumbing towards the helmet, which was sturdier than the rest of the suit and not leaking.

"Anybody know how to get this thing off?" asked Richard

The egghead writhed and was still.

"Might be a bit on the late side."

Gewell and Jess-F looked at each other. Moana took action and pushed into the room. She knelt and worked a few buttons around the chin-rim of the helmet. The egghead cracked along a hitherto unsuspected crooked seam and came apart in a gush of water.

"That's not Buster," said Vanessa. "It's Mal-K, the medico."

"And he's drowned," concluded Richard.

j

"A useful rule of thumb in open-and-shut cases," announced Richard, "is that when someone tries to murder any investigating officers, the case isn't as open-and-shut as it might at first have seemed."

He had put on a quilted double-breasted floor-length jade green dressing gown with a Blakeian red dragon picked out on the chest in sequins.

"When the would-be murderer is one of the major proponents of the open-and-shut theory," he continued, "it's a dead cert that an injustice is in the process of being perpetrated. Ergo, the errant Buster is innocent and someone else murdered Mm Zhoule with a Hugo Award."

"Perhaps there was a misunderstanding," said Gewell.

Richard and Vanessa looked at him.

"How so?" Richard asked.

Wheels worked behind Gewell's eyes, which were amber now.

"Mm Mal-K might have heard of Buster's escape and come here to protect you from him. In the dark and confusion, you mistook his attempted rescue as an attack."

"And tragedy followed," completed Jess-F.

Moana weighed invisible balls and looked noncommittal.

It was sixty-eight past six o'kronon. The body had been removed and they were in Zhoule's front room. Since all the cubes were in the bedroom and wet through, everyone had to sit on the body-temperature floor. Vanessa perched decorously, see-through peignoir over her bikini, on the dead robot spider. Richard stood, as if lecturing.

"Mm Jor-G, you were an editor once," he said. "If a story were submitted in which a hero wanted to protect innocent parties from a rampaging killer, would you have allowed the author to have the hero get into a disguise, turn off all the lights and creep into the bedroom with a lethal weapon?"

"Um, I might. I edited science fiction magazines. Science fiction is about *ideas*. No matter what those New Wavers say. In sf, characters might do anything."

"What about 'All who defy Buster must die'?" said Vanessa.

"A warning?" Gewell ventured, feebly.

"Oh, give up," said Jess-F. "Mal-K was a bad 'un. It's been obvious for desiyears. All those speeches about 'expanding the remit of the social experiment' and 'assuming pole position in the larger technomeritocracy.' He was in a position to doctor his own records, to cover up instability. He was also the one who matched Buster's fingerprints to the murder weapon. Mm and Ms, congratulations, you've caught the killer."

"Open-and-shut-and-open-and-shut?" suggested Richard.

Moana gave the thumbs-up.

"I'm going to need help to convince myself of this," said Richard. "I've decided to call on mighty deductive brainpower to get to the bottom of the mystery."

"More yesterday men?" said Jess-F, appalled.

"Interesting term. You've been careful not to use it before now. Is that what you call us? No, I don't intend to summon any more plods from the outside."

Gewell couldn't suppress his surge of relief.

"I've decided to apply the techniques of tomorrow to these crimes of the future. Jess-F, I'll need your help. Let's take this puzzle to Big Thinks, and see how your mighty computer does."

Shutters came down behind Jess-F's eyes.

"Computer time is precious," said Gewell.

"So is human life," answered Richard.

j

The inside of the building, the insides of Big Thinks, was the messiest area Richard had seen in Tomorrow Town. Banks of metal cabinets fronted with reels of tape were connected by a spaghetti tangle of wires that wound throughout the building like coloured plastic ivy. Some cabinets had their fronts off, showing masses of circuit boards, valves, and transistors. Surprisingly, the workings of the master brain seemed held together with a great deal of Sellotape, string, and blu-tak. Richard recognised some components well in advance of any on the market, and others that might date back to Marconi or Babbage.

"We've been making adjustments," said Jess-F.

She shifted a cardboard box full of plastic shapes from a swivel chair and let him sit at a desk piled with wired-together television sets. To one side was a paper towel dispenser which coughed out a steady roll of graph paper with lines squiggled on it.

He didn't know which knobs to twiddle.

"Ms Jess-F, could you show me how a typical dispute arbitration is made. Say, the triangle of Zhoule, Buster, and Sue-2."

"That documentation might be hard to find."

"In this futopia of efficiency? I doubt it."

Jess-F nodded to Moana, who scurried off to root through large bins full of scrunched and torn paper.

Vanessa was with Gewell and Zootie, taking a tour of the hydroponics zone, which was where the body of Varno Zhoule had been found. The official story was that Buster (now, Mal-K) had gone to Zhoule's bungalow to kill him but found him not at home. He had taken the Hugo from its display case and searched out the victim-to-be, found him contemplating the green gunk that was made into his favourite pills, and did the deed then and there. It didn't take a computer to decide it was more likely that Zhoule had been killed where the weapon was handy for an annoyed impulse-assassin to reach for, then hovercrafted along with the murder weapon to a public place so some uninvolved zenvol clot could find him. But why ferry the body all that way, with the added risk of being caught?

"Tell you what, Ms Jess-F, let's try BeeTee out on a hypothetical dispute? Put in the setup of *Hamlet*, and see what the computer thinks would be best for Denmark."

"Big Thinks is not a toy, Mm."

Moana came back waving some sheaves of paper.

Richard looked over it. Jess-F ground her teeth.

Though the top sheet was headed "Input tek: Buster Munro," this was not the triangle dispute documentation. Richard scrolled through the linked print-out. He saw maps of Northern Europe, lists of names and dates, depositions in non-phonetic English, German and Danish, and enough footnotes for a good-sized doctoral thesis. In fact, that was exactly what this was.

"I'm not the first to think of running a hypothetical dispute past the mighty computer," said Richard. "The much-maligned Buster got there before me."

"And wound up recategorised as a zenpass," said Jess-F.

"He tried to get an answer to the Schleswig-Holstein21 Question, didn't he? Lord Palmerston said only three men in Europe got to the bottom of it—one who forgot, one who died, and one who went mad. It was an insanely complicated argument between Denmark and Germany, over the governance of a couple of border provinces. Buster put the question to Big Thinks as if it were a contemporary dispute, just to see how the computer would have resolved it. What did it suggest, nuclear attack? Is that why all the redecoration? Buster's puzzle blew all the fuses."

Richard found the last page.

The words "forgot died mad" were repeated over and over, in very faint ink. Then some mathematical formulae. Then the printer equivalent of scribble.

"This makes no sense."

He showed it to Jess-F, hoping she could interpret it. He really would have liked Big Thinks to have got to the bottom of the tussle that defeated Bismarck and Metternich and spat out a blindingly simple answer everyone should have seen all along.

"No," she admitted. "It makes no sense at all."

Moana shrugged.

Richard felt a rush of sympathy for Jess-F. This was painful for her.

"BeeTee can't do it," said Richard. "The machine can do sums very fast, but nothing else?"

Jess-F was almost at the point of tears.

"That's not true," she said, with tattered pride. "Big Thinks is the most advanced computer in the world. It can solve any logic problem. Give it the data, and it can deliver accurate weather forecasts, arrange schedules to optimise efficiency of any number of tasks..."

"But throw the illogical at it, and BeeTee just has a good cry."

"It's a machine. It can't cry."

"Or arbitrate love affairs."

Jess-F was in a corner.

"It's not fair," she said, quietly. "It's not BeeTee's fault. It's not my fault. They knew the operational parameters. They just kept insisting it tackle areas outside its remit, extending, tampering, overburdening. My techs have been working all the hours of the day..."

"Kronons, surely?"

"...all the bloody kronons of the day, just trying to get Big Thinks working again. Even after all this, the ridiculous demands keep coming through. Big Thinks, Big Thinks, will I be pretty, will I be rich? Big Thinks, Big Thinks, is there life on other planets?"

Jess-F put her hands over her face.

" 'They'? Who are 'they'?"

"All of them," Jess-F sobbed. "Across all disciplines."

"Who especially?"

"Who else? Varno Zhoule."

"Not any more?"

"No."

She looked out from behind her hands, horrified.

"It wasn't me," she said.

"I know. You're left-handed. Wrong wound pattern. One more question: what did the late Mm Mal-K want from Big Thinks?"

Jess-F gave out an appalled sigh.

"Now, he *was* cracked. He kept putting in these convoluted specific questions. In the end, they were all about taking over the country. He wanted to run the whole of the United Kingdom like Tomorrow Town."

"The day after tomorrow, the world?"

"He kept putting in plans and strategies for infiltrating vital industries and dedicating them to the cause. He didn't have an army, but he believed Big Thinks could get all the computers in the country on his side. Most of the zenvols thought he was a dreamer, spinning out a best-case scenario at the meetings. But he meant it. He wanted to found a large-scale Technomeritocracy."

"With himself as Beloved Leader?"

"No, that's how mad he was. He wanted Big Thinks to run everything. He was hoping to put BeeTee in charge and let the future happen."

"That's why he wanted Vanessa and me out of the story. We were a threat to his funding. Without the subsidies, the plug is pulled."

"One thing BeeTee can do is keep track of figures. As a community, Tomorrow Town is in the red. Enormously."

"There's no money here, though."

"Of course not. We've spent it. And spent money we don't have. The next monorail from Preston is liable to be crowded with dunning bailiffs."

Richard thought about it. He was rather saddened by the truth. It would have been nice if the future worked. He wondered if Lincoln Steffens had any second thoughts during the Moscow purge trials?

"What threat was Zhoule to Mal-K?" he asked.

Jess-F frowned. "That's the oddest thing. Zhoule was the one who really encouraged Mal-K to work on his coup

plans. He did see himself as, what did you call it, 'Beloved Leader.' All his stories were about intellectual supermen taking charge of the world and sorting things out. If anything, he was the visioneer of the tomorrow takeover. And he'd have jumped anything in skirts if femzens wore skirts here."

Richard remembered the quivering Sue-2.

"So we're back to Buster in the conservatory with the Hugo award?"

"I've always said it was him," said Jess-F. "You can't blame him, but he did it."

"We shall see."

Sirens sounded. Moana put her fingers in her ears. Jess-F looked even more stricken.

"That's not a good sign, is it?"

j

The communal meal area outside Big Thinks swarmed with plastic-caped zenvols, looking up and pointing, panicking and screaming. The three light-heat globes, Tomorrow Town's suns, shone whiter and radiated hotter. Richard looked at the backs of his hands. They were tanning almost as quickly as an instant photograph develops.

"The fool," said Jess-F. "He's tampered with the master controls. Buster will kill us all. It's the only thing he has left."

Zenvols piled into the communally-owned electric carts parked in a rank to one side of the square. When they proved too heavy for the vehicles, they started throwing each other off. Holes melted in the canopy above the globes. Sizzling drips of molten plastic fell onto screaming tomorrow townies.

The sirens shrilled, urging everyone to panic.

Richard saw Vanessa through the throng.

She was with Zootie. No Gewell.

A one-man hovercraft, burdened with six clinging zenvols, chugged past inch by inch, outpaced by someone on an old-fashioned, non–solar-powered bicycle.

"If the elements reach critical," said Jess-F, "Tomorrow Town will blow up."

A bannerlike strip of paper curled out of a slit in the front of Big Thinks.

"Your computer wants to say goodbye," said Richard.

SURKIT BRAKER NO. 15.

"Not much of a farewell."

Zootie walked between falling drips to the central column, which supported the three globes. He opened a hatch and pulled a switch. The artificial suns went out. Real sunlight came through the holes in the canopy.

"Now that's what computers can do," said Jess-F, elated. "Execute protocols. If this happens, then that order must be given."

The zenvol seemed happier about her computer now.

Richard was grateful for a ditch-digger who could read.

j

"This is where the body was?" he asked Zootie. They were by swimming-pool–sized tanks of green gunk, dotted with yellow and brown patches since the interruption of the light source. "Bit of a haul from Zhoule's place."

"The body was carried here?" asked Vanessa.

"Not just the body. The murder weapon too. Who lives in that bungalow?"

On a small hill was a bungalow not quite as spacious as Zhoule's, one of the mass of hutches placed between the silver pathways, with a crown of solar panels on the flat roof, and a dish antennae.

"Mm Jor-G," said Moana.

"So you do speak?"

She nodded her head and smiled.

j

Gewell sat on an off-white cube in the gloom. The stored power was running down. Only filtered sunlight got through to his main room. He looked as if his backbone had been removed. All the substance of his face had fallen to his jowls.

Richard looked at him.

"Nice try with the globes. Should have remembered the circuit-breaker, though. Only diabolical masterminds construct their private estates with in-built self-destruct systems. In the future, as in the past, it's unlikely that town halls will have bombs in the basement ready to go off in the event that the outgoing Mayor wants to take the whole community with him rather than hand over the chain of office."

Gewell didn't say anything.

Vanessa went straight to a shelf and picked up the only award in the display. It was another Hugo.

"Best Fan Editor 1958," she read from the plaque.

The rocketship came away from its base.

"You killed him here," said Richard, "broke your own Hugo, left the bloody rocketship with the body outside. Then, when you'd calmed down a bit, you remembered Zhoule had won the same award. Several, in fact. You sneaked over to his bungalow—no locks, how convenient—and broke one of his Hugos, taking the rocket to complete yours.

You made it look as if he were killed with his own award, and you were out of the loop. If only you'd got round to developing the glue of the future and fixed the thing properly, it wouldn't be so obvious. It's plain that, though you've devoted your life to planning out the details of the future, your one essay in the fine art of murder was a rushed botch-up job done on the spur of the moment. You haven't really improved on Cain. At least, Mm Mal-K made the effort with the space suit and the zapper-prod."

"Mm Jor-G," said Jess-F, "*why?*"

Good question, Richard thought.

After a long pause, Gewell gathered himself and said "Varno was destroying Tomorrow Town. He had so many... so many *ideas.* Every morning, before breakfast, he had four or five. All the time, constantly. Radio transmitters the size of a pinhead. Cheap infinite energy from tapping the planet's core. Solar-powered personal flying machines. Robots to do everything. Robots to make robots to do everything. An operation to extend human lifespan threefold. Rules and regulations about who was fit to have and raise children, with gonad-block implants to enforce them. Hats that collect the electrical energy of the brain and use it to power a personal headlamp. Non-stop, unrelenting, unstoppable. Ideas, ideas, ideas..."

Richard was frankly astonished by the man's vehemence. "Isn't that what you wanted?"

"But Varno did the easy bit. Once he'd tossed out an idea, it was up to *me* to make it work. Me or Big Thinks or some other plodding zenvol. And nine out of ten of the ideas didn't work, couldn't ever work. And it was always our fault for not making them work, never his for foisting them off on us. This town would be perfect if it hadn't been for his ideas. And his bloody dreadful spelling. Back in the '50s, who do you think tidied all his stories up so they were publishable? Muggins[22] Gewell. He couldn't write a sentence that scanned, and rather than learn how he decreed the language should be changed. Not just the spelling, he had a plan to go through the dictionary crossing out all the words that were no longer needed, then make it a crime to teach them to children. It was something to do with his old public school. He said he wanted to make gerunds extinct within a generation. But he had these wonderful, wonderful, ghastly, terrible *ideas.* It'd have made you sick."

"And the medico who wanted to rule the world?"

"Him too. He had ideas."

Gewell was pleading now, hands fists around imaginary bludgeons.

"If only I could have had ideas," he said. "They'd have been *good* ones."

Richard wondered how they were going to lock Gewell up until the police came.

j

The monorail was out of commission. Most things were. Some zenvols, like Jess-F, were relieved not to have to pretend that everything worked perfectly. They had desiyears—months, dammit!—of complaining bottled up inside, and were pouring it all out to each other in one big whine-in under the dead light-heat globes.

Richard and Vanessa looked across the Dales. A small vehicle was puttering along a winding, illogical lane that had been laid out not by a computer but by wandering sheep. It wasn't the police, though they were on the way.

"Who do you think this is?" asked Vanessa.

"It'll be Buster. He's bringing the outside to Tomorrow Town. He always was a yesterday man at heart."

A car-horn honked.

Zenvols, some already changed out of their plastic suits, paid attention. Sue-2 was excited, hopeful, fearful. She clung to Moana, who smiled and waved.

Someone cheered. Others joined.

"What is he driving?" asked Vanessa "It looks like a relic from the past."

"For these people, it's deliverance," said Richard. "It's a fish 'n' chip van."

Notes

1. Since the Year Dot: Since time immemorial.

2. Dalek: A trundling cyborg giant pepperpot featured in the long-running BBC-TV science fiction programme *Doctor Who*, introduced in 1963. The Daleks' distinctive mechanical voices were much-imitated by British children in the 1960s. Their catch-phrase: "ex-ter-min-ate!"

3. The Wilson Government: Harold Wilson was Labour Prime Minister of Great Britain from 1964 to 1970 and again from 1974 to 1976. A Maigret-like, pipe-smoking, raincoated figure, he famously boasted of "the white heat of technology" when summing up British contributions to futuristic projects like the Concorde. At the time of this story, he had been succeeded by the Tory Edward Heath, a laughing yachtsman.

4. James Burke and Raymond Baxter: The hosts in the 1960s of BBC-TV's long-running *Tomorrow's World*, a magazine programme covering the worlds of invention and technology. They were also anchors for UK TV coverage of the moon landings.

5. The Sunday colour supplements: A UK publishing phenomenon of the 1960s, magazines included with Sunday newspapers. The pioneering rivals were *The Sunday Times* and *The Observer*.

6. The BBC Radiophonic Workshop: The corporation's sound effects department, responsible for Dalek voices and the *Doctor*

Who theme. Their consultants included Pink Floyd and Michael Moorcock.

7. The Crazy World of Arthur Brown: "I am the God of Hell Fire," rants Arthur on his single "Fire," which was Number One in the UK charts in 1968. An influence on Iron Maiden and other pioneer heavy metal groups, Arthur was also a devoted surrealist-cum-Satanist. He never had another hit, but is still gigging.

8. *New Scientist*: UK weekly magazine, scientific sister publication to the left-leaning political journal *New Statesman.*

9. Arthur C. Clarke: Now Sir Arthur C. Clarke, author of *Childhood's End,* screenwriter of *2001: A Space Odyssey,* writer on scientific topics, and Sri Lankan resident. Known in the UK as host of *Arthur C. Clarke's Mysterious World,* a TV series about Fortean phenomena that is twenty years on the template for much *X Files*–ish fringe documentary programming.

10. Auberon Waugh: Crusty conservative commentator, son of the satirical novelist Evelyn Waugh. In the 1960s, his waspish journalism was most often found in *The Spectator* and the *Daily Telegraph.*

11. J. G. Ballard: Major British novelist, a key influence in the so-called New Wave of British sf in the 1960s.

12. Varno Zhoule: British s-f author, most prolific in the 1950s, when he published almost exclusively in American magazines. His only novel, *The Stars in Their Traces,* is a fix-up of stories first seen in *Astounding.* His "Court Martian" was dramatised on the UK TV series *Out of the Unknown* in 1963.

13. The Diogenes Club: First mentioned by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in "The Greek Interpreter" and revealed as a government agency by Billy Wilder and I. A. L. Diamond in *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes,* the Diogenes Club has employed various investigators of the odd and paranormal for over a century. Richard Jeperson and Vanessa have also appeared in "End of the Pier Show" (*Dark of the Night,* edited by Stephen Jones; also Kim Newman's collection *Seven Stars),* "You Don"t Have to Be Mad..." (*White of the Moon,* edited by Stephen Jones; also *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror: Thirteenth Annual Collection,* edited by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling, and *Seven Stars),* "The Biafran Bank Manager" (*Dark Detectives,* edited by Stephen Jones; also *Seven Stars),* and the forthcoming "Egyptian Avenue" (*Embrace the Mutation,* edited by Bill Sheehan).

14. Gerry Anderson: TV producer famous in collaboration with his wife, Sylvia, for the 1960s technophilic puppet shows *Fireball XL-5, Stingray, Thunderbirds,* and *Captain Scarlet and the Mysterons.* His 1970s live-action *Space 1999* has not achieved the lasting place in UK pop culture attained by the "supermarionation" shows.

15. Valerie Singleton: Presenter of the BBC-TV children's magazine programme *Blue Peter.* Well-spoken and auntie-like, she famously showed kids how to make things out of household oddments without ever mentioning a brand name (a co-host who once said "Biro" instead of "ball-point pen" was nearly fired).

16. Smarties: Chocolate discs inside shells of various colours, available from Rowntree & Company in cardboard tubes. Still a staple "sweet" (i.e., candy) in the UK; similar to M&Ms.

17. The Tomorrow Town Alphabet: Q and X are replaced by KW and KS; the vestigial C exists only in CH and is otherwise replaced by K or S. E.g.: "The kwik brown foks jumped over the layzee dog."

18. *The Man in the White Suit:* Film directed by Alexander Mackendrick, starring Alec Guinness. An inventor develops a fabric that never wears out or gets dirty, and the clothing industry tries to keep it off the market.

19. "Can't even beat as it sweeps as it cleans": The UK slogan for Hoover vacuum cleaners in the 1970s was "it beats as it sweeps as it cleans."

20. Michelin Man: Cheery advertising mascot of the tire company, he consists of white bloated tires.

21. The Schleswig-Holstein Question: Bane of any schoolboy studying O-level European history in 1975. It's a key plot point in George Macdonald Fraser's novel *Royal Flash.* O levels— tricky exams taken at 16. A levels— trickier exams taken at 18. Both superseded by GCSE exams, which those of us who have O and A levels think of as worthless bits of paper any clot can get, like American high school diplomas.

22. Muggins: A sap, a patsy.

Steven Utley

THE DESPOBLADO

Within the big gray ship's boat bay, they had simply driven the truck down a ramp onto the barge. On its bow, the barge's civilian owners, Walton & Wicket, had emblazoned the name *Karen* in gilt-edged script. Now, as Navy men lowered the rest of the cargo, the mate, a big, blocky man who was in fact the subordinate half of Walton & Wicket, secured it. Throughout, another man, about forty years old, of average size and trim-looking in a tropical suit, took particular interest in the treatment accorded the truck and several crates stenciled with various caveats; he stood watching with his hands thrust into the pockets of his jacket and occasionally issued an instruction which the mate blithely ignored. The third man aboard *Karen*, Walton himself, middle-aged, very spare of frame, very sparse and white of hair, watched from the pilothouse.

The mate suddenly paused halfway through the motion of manhandling a crate into position; his expression of intense concentration did not change, but his gaze became fixed on a point beyond the pilothouse. Walton turned and saw a woman standing on the lowest rung of the access ladder. She called out to him, "Permission to come aboard?"

Without thinking, momentarily incapable of doing so, Walton nodded assent, and she stepped down lightly onto the deck. There she paused and posed for his inspection. She wore canvas shorts, a faded blue work shirt, and scuffed hiking boots. A seabag rested against her slim leg, a professional's battered camera case swung against her opposite hip. Beneath a broad-brimmed hat pulled down tight over close-cropped hair, she had a full, round face, almost high-school-girlish in its unfinished prettiness. Her dark hair and eyes contrasted nicely with her fair skin. She sounded all of nineteen years old when she asked, "Are you Mister Walton?"

"Yes," he said slowly and after a moment more, "I am."

"My name's Michelle Kelly." She offered her right hand, which he automatically shook, then her left to present an envelope with his name written upon it. "I have a letter of introduction. Kevin Barnet recommended you very highly."

Walton said, "Ah," and grimaced, "Kevo," and peered upward expecting to see the man himself grinning down at him from the catwalk. He saw only the Navy men who had been loading cargo onto *Karen;* now they regarded the young woman with obvious and approving interest. Walton snatched the envelope from her. He split it open with his thumb and frowned as he read:

> *Bud—*
> *This is to introduce Michelle Kelly, another damn nature photographer, but she's bright, opinionated as only someone her age can be, and as you'll undoubtedly notice has a behind like a good fresh peach. She wants to have a look-see upriver, and you owe me a favor, so please take her away with you and return her in one piece.*
>
> *Best, Kevo*

Walton's frown etched itself deeper into his face. He sighed profoundly. "I'll just go have a word with Mister Barnet," he said.

"Oh, he's back at Stinktown."

Walton worked his frown into a full scowl. "Miz Kelly, as you can plainly see, this is not really an excursion boat. As for sightseeing, there's not much more to look at upriver than there is here. We are going into the despoblado. The unpeopled land. There're no electric lights, no showers, no mess tents, no amenities. And no handsome young Navy men."

Now she scowled. It should have made her look like a balked child but did not. Instead, hard angles revealed themselves within the creamy unblemished skin, and the lips, rather than distending into a pout, compressed into a firm straight line. "I'm not just sightseeing, I'm working. I'll pay for my passage, of course, and I've already signed a dozen waivers relieving everybody of responsibility for me." She nudged her seabag with the side of her foot. "I've got a gallon of sunscreen and my own food and everything else I'll need right here. I just want to hitch a ride. Sort of like Darwin."

"Darwin."

"On the *Beagle.*"

"Darwin was *invited* to go along on that trip."

"Oh, let her come along, Walton." This was the man in the tropical suit, who stood leaning against one of his worrisome crates. He had sand-colored hair and a good profile, and he looked amused. He stepped forward and introduced himself as John Moen. He gave her a conspiratorial wink and said to Walton, "She doesn't look like she'll take up much space at all. Let her come."

Encouraged, she said, "I can even make myself useful if you need me to be. Swab the bo'sun, squeegee the fo'c'sle, whatever."

"A comedienne," Walton growled. "My insurance doesn't cover passengers who try to be helpful—or funny." He had no sooner spoken these words than he realized that he had ceased to scowl. He tried not to look abashed as he said, "But if you'll promise to behave yourself, come on, stow your gear below."

She stepped past him. Moen turned in place to watch as she went by, then gave Walton a look of astonished delight. Wicket looked at her and then turned quickly away as she passed.

"It'll be nice," Moen said to Walton, "to have someone to talk to on this beamy scow of yours." He inclined his head ever so slightly to indicate Wicket. "For a change."

"I should've asked her if she had a note from her mother."

"Oh, I dunno," Moen said easily, "that jilleroo is older than she looks."

The frown began to reassert itself on Walton's face. "If I were you," he snapped, "I'd make damn sure she's of legal age." He turned away from Moen and told Wicket to finish securing the cargo and called out for the lines to be cast off. Then he went to the wheel, and with a thrum of diesels the boat moved smoothly out of the bay and away from the ship.

Without, the view disappointed. The peneplained land appeared only as an off-white band separating the sea from the sky; the single emphatic note was provided by bright orange buoys marking a navigable channel among the delta's myriad braided courses. The Navy ship had stood well offshore to avoid the risk of running aground, for there was no abyssal ocean deep here, but inundated continental interior, with a gradient so slight that the land seemed simply to slip beneath the edge of the water like one sheet of paper under another.

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Michelle Kelly came back on deck and found herself a place to sit among some crates. A camera hung suspended on a strap encircling her neck, and from time to time she raised it, peered through the viewfinder, and snapped the shutter.

Moen appeared beside her and held out a bottle of water beaded with condensation. She hesitated, then accepted it and thanked him. She rolled the cool plastic across her forehead before she drank. "I could've stayed in Stinktown and been this hot and sticky. May I ask how far upriver you're going, Mister Moen?"

"Please call me John. We'll reach my camp tomorrow. We make better time once we're out of this swamp." He regarded her with frank curiosity. "You can't just be rattling around loose here."

"I'm not. What do you do, John?"

Her using his first name evidently made up for her evasiveness, for he smiled at her and said, "I'm a geologist."

She nodded toward the great yellow truck lashed to the deck. "So that's yours?"

"Yes. Fair being fair, tell me what you're doing here."

"I'm working, too. Seeing as much of this world as I can, while I can."

"Who's your sponsor?"

"I'm privately funded."

"So'm I."

"I'm here because my father has the money and my Uncle Ivan has the clout. Ivan Kelly?"

Moen shook his head.

"Before your time, I guess. He was the first man to go through the hole. And my dad's a Hollywood screenwriter, so the pressure was really on me to make something of my life. So here I am."

"Here you are."

"Once I leave, I'll never get to come back. You don't get to come back unless some multinational's footing the bill. You, for instance, will get to come back all you like. You're looking for oil."

He was taken aback but recovered quickly. "Yes, I'm looking for oil."

She nodded gravely. "What else would you be doing? I've seen aircraft flying around everywhere towing those little gliders with the magnetometers. And that"—she nodded at the truck again—"is a vibrator truck."

He looked at the truck as though it had suddenly materialized from thin air. "Why, so it is. And that salesman swore it was a rec vehicle."

She made a visible effort not to smile. "You jack it up on a central pedestal and make it vibrate, and then you use the sound waves in rock to make subsurface maps."

"You don't say."

Now she did smile, excellently.

The boat entered the mouth of the channel. The brown, turbid water was choked with broad algal mats, some of them more than a yard across. Built of delicate interlaced filaments, they looked more solid than they were; they disintegrated into their constituent strands as the boat eased through them. Here and there low muddy islets supported other algal growth. The air was heavy with a stench of decomposition.

"A pomander would be handy right about now," she said.

Moen nodded. "Or nose plugs. But it smells ten times worse when the tide's out. The mud here's of such fine consistency that it feels like oil when you rub it between your fingertips. You'd sink right into it, over your head. The particles in it are all that's left of a mountain range. It's all been worn away and dumped here in a geosyncline. And it's full of decaying stuff."

"Charles Darwin said a wide expanse of muddy water has neither grandeur nor beauty."

"Smart old Charlie."

They saw a large, honey-colored arthropod, with bristly black grasping appendages outstretched, that had pulled itself onto an islet. It lay perfectly still among intorted tendrils of foliage and might have been looking around or

listening or simply basking. Moen observed unnecessarily that there was little for it to see and nothing for it to hear. He opined that the creature's eyes probably did not work very well, and he expressed doubt that it even possessed ears.

She asked, "Are you an expert on sea scorpions?"

He shook his head. "No, not really. I was just repeating what some paleontologist said. I know my forams and conodonts—those are the index fossils I use in my work—but I don't know all that much about other Paleozoic life-forms and don't have much interest in them, frankly."

"Just in oil."

"Oil's fascinating. It's a product of a chain of improbable occurrences."

Michelle crossed her arms, leaned against the rail with her hip, and faced him. "I don't understand," she said, "how you propose to get the oil back even if you do find it. You can't pump it through the hole, and taking it out by the barrel would be prohibitively expensive."

He shrugged. "I'm sure there're people trying to figure that out. My job is just to find it. So. Can't we be friends in spite of everything?"

She gave him an appraising look. "I'm not sure I could be friends with anybody who thinks the way you do."

He laughed pleasantly. "Well, you're young, and I work for a big old evil multinational. We're *supposed* to have extremely definite opinions. But wait till we get to my camp and you meet Dews. You'll love Dews. Dews," and he laughed again, "is pure unreconstructed slash-and-burn, suck-it-dry, throw-it-away."

"Can't wait," she murmured.

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Walton glumly watched Moen and the young woman from the pilothouse. He noted how Moen had moved closer to her without appearing to realize that he was doing so. For a moment, both of them stood leaning on the rail, arms folded, elbows almost touching. Then Michelle casually turned away and incidentally increased the distance between Moen and herself without appearing to realize that she had done so. It struck Walton that Moen almost succeeded at covering his disappointment.

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The two people at the rail were quiet for a time. The unchanging landscape glided past. Then Michelle asked where the facilities were, and Moen directed her belowdecks.

When she returned, she indicated the pilothouse and its occupant with a nod and said, "Give me your extremely definite opinion of Walton and Wicket. There's more to them than meets the eye."

"You might better ask Walton about Walton. I've known him a while now. I've spent maybe eight years here, if you add up my field time, and in all that time I don't think I've ever seen or heard of him venturing more than a quarter mile from water. He's got the boatman's view of the world—a navigable body of water bounded on one to three sides by terra incognita. There're probably sea scorpions with drier feet than Walton's."

"What about Wicket?"

"I've never been able to decide if he's not all there or if he just tunes me out. Or some combination of the two. He may be mentally handicapped or something. I'm surprised he got past screening."

"Interesting library they've got on this tub."

"Mm?"

"Books. Voltaire. *The Wind in the Willows.* Someone on this barge reads books."

"Well, what else is there for someone to do on a barge?"

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Behind them, the big gray ship shrank to an insignificant speck on the landscape and was finally lost to view. Ahead, the highest visible point was a particular patch of orange rising slightly above the succession of swampy mounds. The patch resolved itself into the roof of a small prefabricated storage building at the base camp. Moored amid the islets, the base camp itself was a floating platform supporting the storage shed and smaller structures. A small motorboat tied up at a low pier sat motionless in the water, and there was no movement on or around the platform until Walton brought *Karen* close. Then the motorboat bobbed in the backwash, and a tall, thin, sun-darkened woman stepped out of the operations shack and stood watching and waiting until the barge was secured.

Moen gave Michelle a grin and gestured expansively. "Our home away from home! And there's our charming and lovely hostess, the Dame Paleontologist herself."

Walton, carrying a handful of mail, stepped onto the platform, with Michelle and Moen right behind. Walton gruffly introduced Michelle to Merry Grenon, who regarded her with undisguised amazement. After a moment, the older woman said, "What brings you this way?"

"I hope to get a book of photos out of this."

"Well, I hope you don't break a nail or anything."

Michelle's smile never wavered. "Would you mind if I took pictures and asked questions?"

"Not at all."

Close by, Moen favored the two women with a smile, and to the older he said, "Be careful what you say to her, Merry, she's got a sociopolitical agenda."

Merry Grenon said to Michelle, "Come on, I'll show you around," and then, by some means the young woman did not quite understand but had to admire, effortlessly detached her from Moen and, preceded by Walton, steered her toward a shed used as both laboratory and operations center. Moen obviously wanted to follow, but then he noticed that Wicket had begun unloading supplies onto the platform, and he quickly reboarded *Karen* to watch over his crates like a mother hen.

On one side within the shed sat radio equipment, and a small cabinet in a corner held cooking utensils. Two dented but clean-looking refrigerators stood in opposite corners; the door of one bore an emphatically hand-lettered sign: NO FOOD!!!, and an excellent reproduction of Georges Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte;* the door of the other bore an equally emphatic sign: FOOD ONLY !!!, and an equally good reproduction of a van Gogh, *The Potato Eaters.* The rest of the cramped space was given over to a long workbench and racks of specimen trays.

Walton asked, "Where're the others?"

"Helen's ashore. Pete took the other boat upriver to try and catch himself some sharks."

Surprise and alarm struggled for supremacy in Walton's expression. "There are *sharks* here?"

Grenon plainly savored the moment. "Spiny freshwater sharks."

"Well, I wish to hell somebody'd told me. I've been known to dangle my feet in this river."

Merry Grenon offered him a pitying look. "We didn't know there were sharks here until about an hour ago. There're tons of things we don't know about this place, Bud. That's why we're here. Anyway, Pete found a decomposing spiny shark washed up on the bank, and now he's all excited. Here, I'll show you." She went to the refrigerator marked NO FOOD!!!, opened it, withdrew a metal tray. There was a thick odor of decomposition and preservative. In the tray lay a desiccated fish carcass about six inches long, blunt-headed, with ganoid scales and paired rows of spikelike fins along its belly.

"What's this," Walton demanded, "the chihuahua of the shark family?"

"It's *Climatius,"* Grenon said proudly, "or a first cousin. The order of Climatiiformes, in any case. Not really sharks at all, but the earliest vertebrates with jaws that we know about."

"Well, I'll be go to hell," Walton drawled. He looked askance at the mouth, frozen in a fierce toothy miniature grimace. "What does it eat?"

"Invertebrates and maybe small jawless fish. Sea scorpions probably consider it a delicacy."

A thickset middle-aged woman entered, set down her collecting case, removed a sun hat. Michelle was introduced to Helen Wheeler, who greeted her warmly and said, "It's always a pleasure to see a new face."

"I've just been admiring your sharklet," Michelle said, "and the art collection. Is this the Paleozoic version of the Louvre?"

"I'm afraid so. There're more in the bunkhouse. Merry and I wouldn't let Pete put up girlie pictures in there, so we got him a Modigliani nude instead. Now he claims he's in love." Wheeler gestured at the Seurat picture and said, "I saw the original once. It's stunning. You know about pointillism? Up close, it's just all these individual points of color that seem unconnected with one another. Step back, and you notice two things. First you notice that all those dots become a whole greater than its parts. Then you notice that each figure, each group of figures seems to have its own light source. You think it shouldn't work, and yet somehow it does work." She turned and indicated *The Potato Eaters* and gave a soft little laugh. "And that's my idea of a religious print. I first came to the Paleozoic when I was a grad student, probably not much older than you. I kept coming back, and then one time I found God here. I mean God the source, the everywhere-spirit. I'm not talking about Jesus and religion. Some people turn to holy books and fairy stories—I don't know how else to put it. I don't care if Jesus walked on water or rose from the dead. Even if I did care, I still wouldn't believe it. I don't need to hear about miracles like those. The real miracles are life and spacetime and art. I can feel God's presence in art. Literature, too, sometimes. And music."

"Oh, yes," Michelle managed to say; she had been unprepared for the turn Helen Wheeler's monologue had taken. While she tried to think of something to say, she peered at the picture as though seeking out hidden meaning. Then memory came to her rescue. "My mother told me once she'd always thought Bach and Mozart must've felt the presence of God."

The other woman nodded. "Absolutely. But I'm partial to painters. God spoke through the great painters, at least into the twentieth century."

"My guess would be that God lost interest after Cubism."

"Maybe. But, oh, the Impressionists."

"Van Gogh," Michelle murmured, "was very disturbed, of course, but how could God's presence not be disturbing?"

Wheeler shook her head. "No. God's presence brings peace and joy. Poor van Gogh was mentally ill."

"Can't mentally ill people know God?"

"I believe anybody can know God. But looking at it realistically, I've got to admit that it seems easier for some people than for others."

Michelle and Walton returned to the barge. As *Karen* pulled away from the platform, Michelle, standing next to the pilot house, exchanged waves with the two women on the platform, then turned to Walton and asked, "Is Helen Wheeler always like that? Kind of, you know—"

"Goofy and mystical?" Walton snorted with amusement. "Helen's a case."

Michelle frowned slightly. "I liked her, but—"

"I like her, too, but she's still a case."

"Does she always start talking about God with people she's just met?"

"Well, it's not like she's decided that it's her personal mission in life to lead all her hell-bent colleagues to Jesus Christ. She isn't trying to convert anybody. I think God is just one of the really interesting things in her life, like bugs and plants." Walton shrugged. "God's presence is disturbing. You said so yourself."

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Gradually, as they entered the estuary's upper reaches, the character of the vegetation changed. The delta's winding channels converged, separated, and reconverged, at last merging into a single broad channel, brown and sluggish, with low banks overgrown in tangles of creeping, curlicued greenery, some with stems topped with buttonlike sporangia. The sun was descending behind them toward the now unseen sea when they made their first stop upriver from the base camp. Walton brought the barge in close to the bank, and Wicket ran out a gangplank and maneuvered a heavily-loaded dolly ashore. There was no one there to greet him and no sign of a camp, only a neat stack of specimen crates. Michelle looked questioningly at Moen, who told her, "Couple of scientists are off back there scraping lichens from rocks or some such. Baxter and Sterling. Husband-and-wife team. They can lug their own supplies into camp when they get back. Walton'll pick up their crates on the way back downriver."

"It's okay to leave stuff sitting there on the bank like that?"

"Who is there to steal it? Nothing's going to come along and eat it."

Vegetation on the floodplain gradually retreated from the land to the splash zones along either bank, exposing barren flatlands that stretched away to the horizon. The silvery phantom pools shimmering out on the baking white surfaces looked more inviting than the muddy water at hand.

Wicket occasionally replaced Walton in the pilothouse for substantial lengths of time, during which Walton might disappear below or needlessly inspect the cargo or simply watch the land as it rolled by. Whenever he passed near Moen or Michelle, which was as rarely as possible, he acknowledged their presence with a nod and tried not to make eye contact and to hurry on without seeming to hurry. Once, however, when he did inadvertently meet Moen's look, he was certain that he saw a glint of smugness in it, and he felt his eyebrows draw together. The reaction puzzled and annoyed him. What the hell does it matter to me, he thought fiercely, what these two get themselves into? Don't approve of shipboard romances or workplace romances, and here it's practically the same thing. He retreated quickly to the pilothouse and sent Wicket to do busywork.

He put the boat in close to shore for the evening. When the diesel engines were shut off, the silence was almost stunning. Wicket busied himself in the galley, filling the tiny space from side to side and front to back; he seemed to have room only for his hands, which worked expertly at transforming dried vegetables and meat bar into stew.

"You are welcome to join us for dinner," Walton said to Michelle, so stiffly that she visibly recoiled.

"We're having Walton's speciality," said Moen. "Meat bar in fusel oil."

"Thank you," she said, "but I brought my own food."

Moen grinned. "Coward."

She seemed to relax. "But if I can bring my veggie bars, I'd be delighted to sit with you."

There was little conversation at table, though. After dinner, the three of them paused on deck amid the quietude and watched the great cold moon's stately emergence from a vast bank of clouds. No mosquitoes vexed them. There were no insect noises, no frog choruses, no sounds at all but that of the backwash. There was not a breath of air. Wicket sat quietly by himself on a stack of pallets, reading a book by the light of a lantern.

Walton said, "Will you please read to me, Wicket?" The mate ducked his head sheepishly. "Please? No?" Walton gave Michelle an apologetic glance. "I like him to read to me before I turn in at night, but—in front of company..."

Before he retired, Walton showed Michelle where she could string a hammock. Moen, a frequent passenger, had a bunk belowdecks as well; he was still on deck with her, however, and the two of them were listening to music from a chip pack when Walton made to go below. He paused and listened and decided that it was one of Brahms's overtures, the *Festival* or the *Tragic*—it had been some time since he had heard either, and they always had tended to run together in his mind. The music was punctuated by laughter. Michelle Kelly had a rich, uninhibited laugh, but it had the effect of making Walton go to his bed muttering about foolish young women. But he suddenly knew, and was not surprised to know, that the real problem was jealousy, pure and simple, and both the knowledge and its unsurprising nature only made him angrier. Dammit, he told himself, I refuse to feel jealousy over some little thing who's half my age, if that. Before he fell asleep, however, he heard Moen come below—alone—and turn in—alone—and, strangely gratified, he thought, Well, at least she's not a pushover.

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The following morning, everyone on the barge was awake and had eaten breakfast by the time the violet sky began to lighten. Even as they watched, that quadrant faded to a deep-sea blue, streaks of rust-colored clouds appeared low above a backlit irregular line of highlands far to the east, and then the filmiest hint of pink suffused the sky behind the clouds. But for that glimpse of distant hills it would have been impossible to say that the land was rising before them, and as the sun continued its swift ascent the highlands faded and blended into the indefinite demarcation of earth and sky.

As they moved upriver, Michelle pointed out a small fish swimming at the surface. "Spiny shark," she said.

Moen peered over the side. "There're sharks here?"

"That seems to be the standard reaction. These are freshwater spiny sharks. Merry Grenon showed me a dead one at the base camp yesterday. She told me the scientific name, but I don't think I can pronounce it right."

They reached the oil geologists' camp before noon. It consisted of a few tents and an area marked off as a helipad, and total present population evidently comprised three more or less sunburnt men. Two were dressed in old clothes; the third, wearing only boxer shorts and boots, darted into a tent when he saw Michelle and promptly re-emerged wearing a more nearly complete ensemble. Moen displayed his previous particularity about his crates, and this time Wicket appeared to heed his instructions during the unloading. Then, laughing, boyishly happy, Moen personally drove the vibrator truck onto the bank, leaving deep tracks in the loose, crumbly marl. He invited Walton and Michelle to stay for dinner, and they accepted. Wicket's exclusion seemed to Michelle to be taken as a given.

Moen was clearly in charge and in his element. The camp's working day ended when he said so. This, as it turned out, was an hour before sundown, which gave the junior member of the geology team, a sweating red-faced man named Bloodworth, little time to wash up and prepare some kind of meal—"for up to a dozen people," Moen explained, "depending on whether the helicopter's brought some in or taken some out"—and seemed to leave Moen himself and his guests barely enough time to wash up and have drinks in hand when the edge of the sun dipped behind the far edge of the world. They sat with the other two members of Moen's crew, Dews and McCampbell, at a long camp table in the mess tent; the tent flaps were turned back so that they could watch the sun set.

"All I want out of life," Moen said as the harried Bloodworth placed a steaming tureen on the table, "is to be able to sip good whiskey and watch spectacular sunsets. No, actually, I want a good deal else. I want this team to produce the results I want to take back to my bosses. I want to be ten times richer than I am and ten years younger than I am, and to weigh ten pounds less than I do. I want to have back all the hair I've lost." He paused as Bloodworth set dinner before him. "I want a decent meal." He regarded the food. "Meat bar in fusel oil," he said, "my favorite," and laughed.

Bloodworth looked apologetic and backed away. Dinner was eaten with a minimum of talk, most of it having to do with the arcana of oil geology. Michelle dutifully chewed overcooked reconstituted vegetables and made no attempt to join in the conversation, nor did Moen's men make any attempt to draw her into it. It was obvious to Walton that she was conscious of the appraising looks they gave her whenever they thought she was not looking. Moen seemed thoroughly amused by the effect she was having on them.

j

My responsibility ends at the gangplank, Walton thought, and forced his attention to his food. He ate with such resolute single-mindedness that a second or two elapsed before he realized that the conversation had suddenly and unexpectedly taken a combative turn, that Dews had said something to which Michelle objected; he looked up and saw her regarding Dews piercingly, saw Dews return her look with one of happy belligerence, heard Moen say blandly, "Dews, I don't think our young guest approves of any of this—do you, Miz Kelly?"

"I don't. Call me an eco-maniac, but I don't like the idea of raiding the past to keep the present going. A lot of people don't."

Dews leaned back in his chair and knitted his blunt red fingers over his midsection; Michelle did not flinch from his gaze. "The quantum-mechanics boys," he drawled, "say we haven't traveled into our own Earth's prehistoric past at all. They say there must be duplicate Earths, parallel Earths—each more or less different from our own. So nothing we do here can make any difference in our own timeline."

"It's certainly a convenient theory. But there's nothing here that contradicts anything we already knew for certain about mid-Paleozoic times. We knew about maybe two percent of the whole story from what we found in the fossil record. Now we can at least glimpse the other ninety-eight percent, and it's roughly what we imagined it would be. Even if the physicists're right, even if this isn't our own Earth, it might as well be. What about this planet's future? Even if it's only a duplicate Earth, what if, four hundred million years from now, humans arise but can't invent technological civilization all over again because the resources needed to do so aren't there?"

"There's no guarantee," Dews said, "that humans necessarily arise on Earth-type planets. Maybe humans don't make it here. Maybe the dinosaurs never go extinct, no big meteor crash, and the mammals never get their shot at greatness. Maybe there never are even dinosaurs here, just bugs and shellfish until the sun expands and the planet fries. We can't see into the future of this world and find out if it's a good thing or a bad thing to exploit its resources. Meanwhile, we need the oil."

"What we *need* is a replacement for the internal-combustion engine."

"You may not believe me, but I agree. I've been waiting all my life for one of those hydrogen-powered buckets. And you, Bud," Dews said to Walton, "how much'd that tub of yours save you if you didn't have to use diesel fuel?"

Walton did not look up from his dinner; he said, without enthusiasm, "A bundle."

"Right!" Dews returned his attention to Michelle. "But the fact of the matter is, we don't *have* a replacement, and—meanwhile—the internal-combustion engines we *do* have need the oil!"

Michelle said nothing but shook her head emphatically.

Dews rolled his eyes. "Eco-maniacs give me a highly localized pain. Because people like me know how to take what the earth has to offer, everybody, including you, lives better and longer than any people in history. But people like you don't want us to hurt their precious goddamn salamanders and bugs."

"Time out," Moen interjected, "for a sunset," and everybody relaxed as one and turned as one to watch the sun go down.

Conversation, slow to resume, restricted itself to requests for condiments, then died altogether. After the silence had stretched out across half an eternity Michelle suddenly said, "Well, everybody, how about some music?" and took her chip pack from her shirt pocket.

Simultaneously, Dews said, "What?" and Moen exclaimed, "Excellent idea!"

"I've got Mozart and the three Bees," she said, "plus bop, pop, hop, drop, and truckstop."

"Lady's a poet," said McCampbell, and Bloodworth asked, "You got the Shiners?"

She gave him a regretful look. "Sorry, fresh out. Oh, I know." She did something with the chip pack. "What I'm about to inflict on you is an actual top-ten country-and-western hit back in the twenty-first century," and at the touch a button there came a twangy guitar introduction, and then a woman sang, in a nasal but good-humored voice,

Baby, come on back with me,
let's skinny-dip in the Tethys Sea.
Let's pack a bag and leave today
four hundred million years away,
and marvel at exotic fauna
living in or near Gondwana—
trilobites and placoderms
and seven thousand kinds of worms.

During an instrumental interlude, McCampbell said, "Sure's hell don't write songs like they used to."

"That's for damn sure," Dews said.

Moen laughed. "It's wonderful, boys. A top-ten hit, she says. I bet it's playing at truck stops all over America."

We'll pitch a tent, and through the door
we'll watch those creatures flop ashore
and bet on how well each one waddles—
we'll be excellent role models,
we'll leave our tracks along the shore
and demonstrate what feet are for.
We'll brew some psilophytic tea
and make love by the Tethys Sea.

Moen laughed again as the song ended. "I bet there's not a trucker or a waitress in a hundred who knows what the hell it's even about."

"Course they will," McCampbell said. "It's about having sex in the great outdoors."

Michelle gestured with the chip pack. "Want to hear it in some other style?"

"Once is enough," Dews muttered.

Moen gave Michelle a sidelong look and asked, "What other delights've you got in that little box of yours?"

Walton flushed and frowned, and though he looked at Moen when he spoke, he clearly meant his words for Michelle. "I don't want to be a party-pooper, but I have to get an early start tomorrow. We're—I'm on a tight schedule."

Michelle leaned back in her seat, looked first at Walton, then at Moen. She slipped the chip pack back into her shirt pocket. She looked around the table and said, "It's been nice meeting you fellows."

"Come back any time," McCampbell ventured jocosely, "and bring your girlfriends."

"Listen to you," Michelle said as she stood up. "Wouldn't it be more fun if you had some women geologists here all the time?"

"Yep," McCampbell conceded, "even if they were tree-huggers. Maybe especially if they were tree-huggers."

Michelle gave him a look of politest inquiry.

McCampbell said, "Gal who'll hug a tree'll hug anything," and laughed uproariously. After a moment, Dews followed his lead. Bloodworth joined in, but halfheartedly. Moen smiled thinly.

Walton rose and nodded to Moen, whose smile was suddenly replaced by a disappointed and slightly desperate expression; the geologist almost overturned his own chair as he pushed to his feet. Walton cast a final look around the table, let his gaze rest for a moment on the grinning McCampbell, and murmured, "Gentlemen." As he turned away, he heard Moen utter Michelle's name, but without waiting to see if she would follow he began walking toward the river. He felt embarrassed and angry and vaguely unclean.

He did not look back until he had reboarded the barge, and he had no sooner done so than he saw her emerge from darkness into the light of *Karen*'s lamps, looking as cool and casual as though she had been for a stroll around the block. Moen trailed one or two paces behind her with the air of someone trying to salvage an unexpectedly and rapidly deteriorating situation. She turned at the gangplank and told him gaily, "Thank you for a perfectly lovely evening," and came on board, and as she passed Walton she called out, "Perhaps we'll have time to visit again on the way back downriver."

Moen wilted on the bank. He did not set his foot on the gangplank. "Well," he said. "I guess I should say good night."

"Good night," she said, and Walton seconded her. The geologist smiled wanly and went back to his camp.

"I thought you might be thinking of spending the night ashore," Walton told Michelle in an even tone, without quite looking at her.

"So did he. In fact, I believe he had his whole weekend planned out. Straight-ahead romantic plunge on a boat, followed by hours of grunting and bucking. I guess setting me and Dews on each other was his idea of foreplay." She had plainly meant for him to laugh or at least smile.

Walton did not respond; he still would not look at her. "If you don't mind my asking, what're your plans for when we get back to the base camp? All I do is come upriver and go downriver. Occasionally, I hug the coast to Wegener

Point and back, but not anytime soon."

The edge in his voice was matched in hers. "I might try to hitch a ride to someplace else. Or I could just walk."

"Walk? Walk where?"

Her tone became defiant. "Wegener Point's only about a hundred klicks north of the base camp, right? Stinktown's another few hundred."

"But walk?"

She raised a foot and waggled it for a moment. "I may've grown up in car culture, but I know what these things on the end of my legs are for. If hiking through hills and canyons in southern California didn't prepare me—"

"It's mostly evaporite flats between here and Wegener Point. Truly grisly places."

"I'm sure. But there's a great tradition in my family of walking through hostile environments. One of my ancestors walked from Berlin to the south of France to get away from Nazis when he was fifteen."

"Well, then, I must say I am impressed. With you and your ancestor both. But you can't possibly carry enough food to last you till you reached the point."

"I wouldn't have to carry it. I can always find it lying around."

Walton shook his head—admiringly, in spite of himself, for though her cocksure attitude grated, he found himself liking her adventurousness and apparent fearlessness. He suppressed his irritation and said, "Nature girl."

"Why don't you let me make dinner tomorrow and see for yourself?" He looked dubious. "I promise not to poison you. I'd like you to try some of my food."

"Exactly what do you eat?" Walton said warily.

"Whatever there is. My Uncle Ivan was one of the first scientists to study Paleozoic life-forms and ecosystems *in* the Paleozoic. He told me what I'd be able to eat here and what not to eat. Um, Wicket is invited, of course."

Walton shook his head emphatically. "It'd just disturb him." Neither of them spoke for a good part of a minute. Then: "I mean, set something aside for him if you want, and I'll give it to him, but—everything considered, he's done quite well these past few days. He's doing the best he can. He can't do any better than he does."

Presently, from the direction of the camp came the sound of a diesel engine cranking up.

Michelle gazed off into the darkness. "Boys with toys," she said.

j

At last they left the floodplain astern, and the river changed its character, ceasing its languid meandering, becoming a great broad current coursing with seeming purpose. The landscape changed as well. The undulations of the peneplain had gradually become perceptible as such, next as low mounds of marl studded with broken rock, and then the land abruptly crumpled itself into a succession of barren knolls. The banks rose until it was often impossible to see what lay beyond them. The rocks above the splash zone were spotted with lichens; below it, they glistened with slimy greenery. *Karen* made another stop at midday to leave a cache of dried foodstuffs and mail. Michelle went ashore to take pictures and, as she told Walton, collect some specimens of her own.

That evening, in the cramped cubicle that served as *Karen*'s formal mess area, Michelle set before Walton a serving of what seemed to be snap beans and brown rice. There was also a small mound of what could have been black beans or caviar. He said, "Is it a good idea to ask what this stuff is before I put it in my mouth?"

"Probably not, if you have irrational food prejudices."

He thought of her collecting sortie. "Then don't tell me afterward, either, okay?" He slipped his fork into the black beans or caviar and put three or four of them into his mouth. They were neither black beans nor caviar, but he allowed after chewing them a couple of times that they tasted pretty good. She beamed at him and dug into her own food.

When they had finished eating, he sat back and told her, "Michelle Kelly, I salute you. In you are met all the best of French and Irish."

"German, too. The name's just the legacy of my ethnically bewildered parents. I'm only very attenuated anything."

Walton started to gather up his tableware.

"No," she said, rising, "don't get up, I'll take care of the dishes."

He watched her putter in the tiny galley for a minute. Then he said, seriously, "Tomorrow we go on as far as we can. The last outpost this side of Gondwana. I'll appreciate your staying on the boat then. I can't be sure how he'll take to you being there." He thought, but did not say, I don't want you getting into anything with him the way you almost did with Dews.

Kelly glanced over her shoulder at him. "How who'll take what?"

"How the hermit'll take to you being there. The old man of the mountain, as I call him."

"Who is he, and what's his story?"

"He's part of the paleoclimate survey. Mans the radio station out here."

"What's his story?"

"I don't know. Maybe he doesn't have a story."

"Nobody just becomes a hermit."

"No? Most people know or feel—even if they don't know they know it, or don't know they feel this—for most people, selfhood exists not in isolation from other people but in relationships to other people. But there're always some men who want solitude. In pioneer days, they were the ones who pulled up stakes and moved on because they felt crowded by their closest neighbors, five miles away."

Michelle dried the last dish and put it away. She turned, leaned against the tiny sink, began carefully drying her fingers. Without looking at Walton, she said, "Is that how it is with you?"

"God, no. I'm gregarious as hell."

Now she did look at him. "You know, Mister Walton, I believe there's a good deal more to you than meets the eye. You're not just some old river rat."

"No," he said slowly, "I guess I'm not."

"What's your story? Or don't you have one either?"

"I have a degree from UCLA School of Philosophy. It's true. In another life, another time. On another world. I was the complete philosophy wonk. Even to having a tall, fair, Nordic girlfriend who liked to dress in black. She did look fine in a leotard, too. The stuff of being and meaning was our breakfast conversation and our pillow talk. She was doing her thesis on Kierkegaard, which may explain why she was about as lively in bed as a Norwegian cheese. Well, here's the best part of her story—her name was Joy! So. I had my degree in hand, I was all set to start teaching the next generation of philosophy wonks everything I'd just been taught about ethical formalism and intuitionism and what all, when the news came out about the spacetime anomaly. Time-travel, expeditions to prehistoric times! Then and there, in an instant, my life turned itself inside out. I told myself, told my girlfriend, Dammit, I want to go on one of those expeditions! Of course, as far as the National Science Foundation was concerned, a degree in philosophy wasn't all that relevant to Paleozoic research. So I hooked up with an uncle who plied the Intercoastal Waterway out of Mobile and learned how to handle a boat. Hired out to one of the private companies. Now I'm a private enterprise in my own right, with my own damn government contract. Ferrying supplies and delivering mail. Never regretted it for a second."

"And Wicket?"

"My sister Karen's boy. I became his legal guardian after she died. He's terminally shy, in case you haven't noticed, but he's quite intelligent, never forgets anything, whiz at math. So I made him the company accountant. When they said I couldn't bring him along in my capacity as an equal-opportunity employer helping somebody overcome a handicap, I made him my business partner. And some people went to bat for me. Kevin Barnet, for one." Walton paused, then said carefully, "By the way, do you know Kevo well?"

"Well enough to know he's a character."

"He's hardly what you'd call an unimpeachable character reference."

"I think this was in the way of one character recommending another. I distinctly heard him call you colorful."

"You should take everything that man says with a five-pound block of salt. He's a drunken old bum and a lecher. I really don't care much for the man. But I owe him on Wicket's account. Anyway, I believe Wicket's happy here. He likes being on the boat, likes his work. He doesn't have to deal with anyone but me and the occasional lower life-form."

"Such as me."

"You know perfectly well what I mean."

j

The next morning as they went upriver, Walton called to her, and she saw him point to starboard. Well back from the bank the land was puckered into a line of rough hills, and set at intervals along the ridgeline were the improbable spindly forms of windmills. "Powers his generator. The old man of the mountain's. You'll see him around the next bend in the river."

"I don't even see the mountain."

"It's a metaphorical mountain. And he's a metaphorical old man." He tugged on the whistle cord, and *Karen* let out a piercing shriek. "That'll let him know to expect us. I don't want to scare him into the underbrush by just showing up. Metaphorical underbrush, you understand."

They rounded the bend, and Walton brought the barge in close to the bank. The radio station consisted of a shed fashioned of corrugated metal sheets, dominated by a dish antennae. A smaller shed with one open side housed the generator. The three people on the water waited. Nothing moved on the land.

"What do we do," Michelle said, "just toss everything onto the shore like before and leave?"

Walton shook his head. "I always like to see him. They always ask me when I get back, 'How'd he look?' And I have to tell 'em. He'll show himself. He knows I won't leave until he does."

"How does he look, usually?"

"Like a Neanderthal who's down on his luck."

Wicket ran out the gangplank, took up a gigantic armload of cartons, and went ashore. Walton followed, carrying a carton under each arm. After a moment's hesitation, Michelle picked up a carton and followed as well.

Walton glared back at her, "Asked you to stay on the barge."

"I think your hermit's off hiding someplace."

Wicket deposited his armload of cartons by the door to the shed and immediately turned back toward the barge. The door was ajar. Michelle set the carton on the ground, then, overcome with curiosity and helpless to do otherwise, stepped to the doorway and peered within. Her nose was crinkled in anticipation of squalor served up, perhaps, with the thick, sickening smell of dirty socks and foodstuffs gone bad; instead she found only an inconsistent sort of untidiness—a cluttered table, a disheveled cot, and radio equipment that looked well-maintained and clean. A rude shelf mounted at eye level on the near wall contained not tapes or chips but old-fashioned books. She was not certain what she would have expected to find in the cabin of a hermit—*Robinson Crusoe*, perhaps, or *Heart of Darkness*—but it disappointed her that the only titles she could read were those of electronics maintenance manuals.

She suddenly sensed someone behind her and turned.

The old man of the mountain wore cutoff jeans, a T-shirt, and a baseball cap—all frayed and rather dirty—and a

pair of sandals that appeared to have been repaired with insulated electrical wire. His long, matted hair covered his head like the hood of a parka, and his beard grew up his face almost to the lower eyelids, yet the face in the midst of this unkempt hyperpilosity was that of a man in his mid-thirties. His eyes, clear blue, alert, nervous, never quite met hers. He gave the impression of an animal that found itself cut off from its burrow.

Walton hove into view behind and to one side of the man and said, "Hello." The hermit shot him a startled glance, and Michelle took the opportunity to step aside, out of the doorway. She made an apologetic sound as the man pushed by, trailing a sour smell. He stopped just inside the door, turned, stood there blinking and fidgeting as Walton continued speaking. "You remember Wicket, don't you?" he said, gesturing over his shoulder at the big man standing stock still on the path. "Of course you do. This"—indicating Michelle—"is our new friend, Miz Kelly. Say hello."

"Hello," said Michelle.

The man looked as though he were about to speak but settled for nodding.

"We've put everything here by the door for you," Walton said.

"Good. Good. That's good." The man spoke as though it amazed him to discover that he still possessed a voice, and he seemed to repeat words as though to make certain they sounded right when he spoke them. "Thank you. That's good. Good."

"We'll be going now. Till next time. Michelle."

Michelle hurried to rejoin Walton, and then the hermit practically herded them back to the boat and watched until Walton had backed the barge away from the bank, brought it about, pointed its blunt bow downriver. Then he disappeared into his shed and did not show himself again. She imagined a couple of times that she glimpsed his face at the window, but could not be certain of it. The boat followed the bend of the river, and the radio station passed from view.

j

For some time after they had left the hermit's camp, Walton, in his pilot house with the windows opened to create the impression of a breeze moving through the confined space, watched Michelle as she moved restlessly about the deck. Occasionally she paused at the rail to peer at something unapparent to him. Finally, though, heat and glare drove her into such shade as the superstructure had to offer. He heard her back thump against the pilot house as she sat down by it, but he saw and heard nothing more of her for several minutes. Then, above the rhythm of the diesels, there came music. He recognized it after a moment as the emotive second movement of Bach's Violin Concerto in A Minor. It was followed in short order by "Pas d'action," from *Swan Lake.* Ah, Christ, he thought unhappily, we're going to be awash with melancholy all the way back downriver. She surprised him, however, by next playing the "Dance of the Swans," and Walton could not help smiling, could not resist picturing for a moment a row of sprightly tutu-clad young women prancing and whirling along the stony bank.

After dinner, they sat looking up at the dark purple sky. Walton stretched, crossed his arms tightly across his chest, and made a contented sound. She looked around at him and said, "How'd he get past screening? The old man of the mountain."

Walton shrugged. "I guess he was well enough to get through screening. Living in the Paleozoic brought out the craziness in him. It's some kind of progressive disorder."

"What happens to him if everybody else here just folds up and goes home?"

"Well, that's not very likely to happen, is it? Listen, he's not the only one. There're several more just like him, living off in the badlands with just a radio set and some crates of canned goods and a case of whiskey. That one we visited today, he told me once that man is the ape that lives like a cockroach."

"I guess he's the living proof of that."

"He meant that we tend to pack ourselves together in confined spaces and live in our own dirt, and we eat anything and breed like crazy."

"That man needs professional help."

Walton shrugged again. "Nobody can help him."

"Not here they can't."

"Not back in the twenty-first century, either. Where could he go there, what could he do, to find the kind of isolation and seclusion he wants? Here, at least, he's happy, or content, or whatever the hell he is. You can't get much more secluded and isolated than four hundred million years in the past and way off in the hinterlands."

"He looked at me like I was—like I was I don't know what."

"Like you were just another member of the whole damned human race he came here to get away from. It's nothing personal. There's nothing personal about any of it. I'm not sure he really thinks of himself as a member of our species any more. Somebody who needs isolation that bad must've been born without the ape gene for gregariousness. I'm not sure what he thinks at all, to tell the truth. We may be just symbionts to him. We bring him food and whiskey, he transmits data to us. It's about the same kind of relationship you have with the bacteria in your guts."

"It sounds sociopathic."

"Maybe. It's antisocial at the very least. But maybe sociopaths are really mutants adapted for life off by themselves. Preadapted for life in the unknown places. It's always the loners who're the trailblazers, the first ones to go out into the unknown. Probably wherever the human race goes, out in space to other worlds, back in time, there'll always be some seriously unsocialized character way out ahead on the edge of everything. Maybe men like that are our ace in the hole. Maybe they guarantee the survival of our species."

"Not if they are all men and don't take along girlfriends."

"There're women hermits, too."

"Out here?"

Walton shrugged. "Who knows?"

They said no more for several minutes. Then Michelle made an amused sound. "What do you suppose courtship between a male and a female hermit is like?"

"Maybe like scorpions mating. Hell, I don't know. Maybe hermits aren't our ace in the hole. It's just a hypothesis."

"Well, I've had it up to here with hypotheses. Can a person buy something to drink on this beamy scow?"

"If it's Scotch, and if a person doesn't call this beautiful and versatile craft of mine a beamy scow." He glanced at her sharply. "And I should probably ask to see some identification."

"I turned twenty-five in November."

"Moen was right. You are older than you look."

Walton fetched a bottle and two glasses, and he and Michelle settled into a comfortable silence. After a minute or two, however, he realized that he was unaccountably quite happy, and then after a moment more that he was perhaps not quite so happy after all, that he wanted to say to her and, moreover, that he probably would never dare to say to her, I think I shall miss you terribly when you've gone. He was grateful when Wicket, who had been sitting on a stack of palettes at the bow, reading a book, suddenly got up and came and stood about six feet from Walton and Michelle. Walton looked at him in frank astonishment and murmured, "Well, well." Wicket looked from Walton to a point in space near Michelle and then back at Walton, who told Michelle, "Looks like you've finally been sort of kind of accepted."

She made a visible effort not to look directly at the big man. "I thought he was never going to make up his mind about me."

"Moen distracted him for a bit. He's not crazy about Moen."

"Imagine that."

Walton gave Wicket an expectant look and said, "Will you please read from your book now?"

The big man softly cleared his throat and began to read aloud. He had a surprisingly sweet voice; he read with passable enunciation and made a respectable attempt at inflection. "Fanny had the pleasure of seeing Edmund continue at the window with her, in spite of the expected glee, and of having his eyes soon turned like hers toward the scene without, where all that was solemn and soothing, and lovely, appeared in the brilliancy of an unclouded night, and the deep shade of the woods. 'Here's harmony!' said she. 'Here's repose! Here's what may leave all painting and all music behind, and what poetry can only attempt to describe. Here's what may tranquilize every care, and lift the heart to rapture! When I look out on such a night as this, I feel as if there could be neither wickedness nor sorrow in the world; and there certainly would be less of both if the sublimity of Nature were more attended to, and people were carried more out of themselves by contemplating such a scene.' "

Michelle laughed her good laugh and said, "Whoa!"

Walton regarded him with wonder. "What *are* you reading from?" Wicket shyly held the book out to him. " *Mansfield Park.* Jane Austen. Jesus Christ. You are such a romantic."

j

The barge moved with the current and put in at each of the camps previously visited to take on crates of specimens. The landscape smoothed itself out, and the river slowed and began to meander. In the amber light of a late afternoon, they approached the oil geologists' camp and saw gouged and furrowed marl along the bank. Its yellow sides caked with mud, the vibrator truck sat dormant amid a crazy pattern of treadmarks. There was no sign of the men. Walton reached for the whistle cord, then withdrew his hand. To Michelle, who stood leaning against the pilot house, he said, "Might be taking their naps."

"Looks like they've been cutting doughnuts."

"What else is there for them to do for fun around here?"

"Maybe they've been celebrating. Maybe they've found what they were looking for. Are we going ashore now?"

Walton shook his head. "Not unless you want to."

"I don't want to."

"Then not till we have to."

Special thanks to Jessica Reisman and her pals.

Lisa Tuttle

A COLD DISH

Throughout my pregnancy I was haunted by an ancient story.

Not so much a story, really, as a scene: the horrific climax to a dark drama of betrayal and revenge. There are only two people in the scene, a man and a woman. They are, or have been, married, and the woman has had two sons by him. Once she loved the man, but now her love has turned to hate. He knows, but is indifferent to her feelings, because he is a powerful and important figure, a force in the land, and she is a mere woman, powerless.

The setting is her house, in her kitchen. Although he has left her, abandoned her for another woman, he has returned to reclaim his sons. They are his heirs, after all; this was in the olden days when children were the property of their father, and women merely conveniences for their begetting.

With typical male vanity, he's not surprised that she is prepared to entertain him, has even cooked a meal for the man who, having ruined her life, has now come to take her children away. Accepting it all as his due, he sits and allows her to serve him. He eats heartily, never wondering why she doesn't join him in the feast.

Finally, replete, he asks for his sons.

She, laughing horribly, tells him he's just had them.

What is this story? Who is she? Who is he? Without names, I couldn't research it, I had no idea where to begin. I looked through books of ancient myths, and Greek tragedies, but could never find it. But I must have read it somewhere, or seen it staged...

"People don't do such things." That's from a more modern play—Ibsen, is it, or Strindberg? Anyway, that's how I feel. Yet even if it never really happened, someone wrote it, someone thought it up and found it plausible. Women have killed their own children, I know, but... men are the ones who made parenthood all about ownership, inheritance, and staking a claim, giving a name or not, as if love were dependent on genes, or law. It's men, not women, who have always had the option of denying their bastards. It's women who adopt, or even steal babies, just to have someone to love. And it's men who want to believe that they're more important than the children they sire, that a woman spurned would butcher her own children just to spite the man who left her.

Yet what do I know, really, about what people will do in extremis?

And what if the story I think I remember is something I made up myself?

j

Carmen was reassuring. Strange dreams, violent fantasies, are not so unusual. They don't mean I'm an awful person. I certainly don't have to act on my fantasies. That I fear I might... well, it's not surprising if I seem a stranger to myself, if my mind works differently these days: pregnancy is an altered state.

Carmen started out as my guilt counselor but she's become my friend. She was supposed to help me come to terms with my own accountability, to break down the "criminal mind-set" which had put me on the wrong path, and help me with "reintegration" into society. Over the months she's become more of a general advisor, and a good friend. Maybe the only friend I've got, after all that happened.

j

I did feel guilty when we first got caught; so did Josh. Actually, we felt guilty even before that, fearful of being caught—office affairs are always a bad idea, but sometimes they're irresistible.

I should have resisted, I know that. We both knew about the legislation specifically outlawing sexual activity on federal property between federal employees. To make matters worse, we weren't equals: I was his boss.

But it wasn't sexual harrassment! It wasn't like that between us. I didn't force him into anything. Everything he said in court was a ruse designed by his lawyer to get him a lighter sentence. It worked, too. He was so convincing even I wondered: was I really a heartless, predatory she-devil who had intimidated poor young Josh into providing sexual gratification?

I know lawyers will say anything. My own lawyer wanted to accuse Josh of rape, but I kept her reined in. I wasn't prepared to do that to him—and, anyway, she admitted that if we weren't believed, it could backfire really badly. I thought I had less to lose than Josh: no partner, money in the bank... I'd lost my job, of course—we both had—but I figured I'd move into the private sector once the uproar died down.

I knew I'd done wrong, and I accepted that I would be punished. I thought losing my job was punishment enough. When I admitted my guilt, I didn't realize it would go to court.

Legal bills ate up my savings in no time. I didn't know how I'd manage to pay the fine. I didn't know the judge had worse than a fine up his sleeve.

Judge Arnold Jason. A handsome, vigorous man, undeniably attractive. He was married, but I'd bet there were affairs. Maybe not actually in chambers, and maybe not with anyone who worked for him, but a man like that would find plenty of opportunities, have plenty of offers... I'd be astonished if he turned them all down. And I'd thought it might make him a little more sympathetic to people like me and Josh.

But he lectured us like some Old Testament prophet, like some patriarch bearing the word of God down to the miserable sinners... Yes, he used the word "sin," without irony. We had sinned against society, and we must make amends.

When he first said the words "community service" I relaxed a little. It wasn't going to be jail or bankruptcy. I imagined myself working with the handicapped or the very old; maybe cleaning out bedpans—well, somebody had to do it. It was honest work, and I swore to myself I would not complain.

With his faintly lecherous smile, Judge Arnold Jason said that the punishment should fit the crime. Back in the good old days, he went on—as if he were old enough to remember!—immoral sex had *consequences*. Women kept themselves in check from fear of getting pregnant. Society had gone to hell when contraception had become readily available to anyone who wanted it.

The last election had shown that the great American public was sick of immorality. Many laws had recently been passed to define and ban unacceptable activities. Deviant behavior was to be discouraged—so the great Judge Jason decided to make an example of me.

I wasn't the first woman to receive a sentence of pregnancy, but the ones before me had all been prostitutes. As an alternative to time in jail, with the added bonus of a year's free health care, as far as most law-abiding, tax-paying citizens were concerned, such "punishment" was more like a holiday! And it had the longer-lasting effect of helping to reintegrate these "fallen women" into normal society. Although most of them gave the babies up for adoption, a few opted for motherhood, and the new responsibility kept them on the straight and narrow—at least, that's what I read in an article which presented this enlightened new approach to vice in a wholly approving way. It seemed, when I read about it, like a great compromise between punishment and rehabilitation.

Somehow it seemed very different when I was on the receiving end.

Compromise! We're all suckers for it. The ideal of the magical middle way which is good for everyone.

For so long it seemed there could be no compromise between those who promoted "the right to choose" and those who proclaimed an irrefutable "right to life." Then cryogenics and medical technology created a compromise. Legislation followed. Conflict was eradicated. No more abortions; women had the right to choose; *and* the right to life was upheld. Instead of "termination" we had "removal." Tiny lives were frozen in stasis until a more willing womb, a welcoming home, could be found for them.

It seemed so simple. Everyone knew there were more people eager to adopt than there were healthy, adoptable newborns—but somehow this demand didn't transfer to all the new unborns. Usually people who were willing and able to hire a surrogate mother wanted a child with some of their own genetic material. Otherwise, they'd shop around for premium eggs and sperm—those who could afford them wanted designer babies, not something removed from careless or immoral women.

Yet homes could always be found for newborn babies. It was a psychological thing. People who wouldn't adopt an unknown embryo responded differently to babies. I was assured of this even before the fetus was implanted in my womb.

"Don't worry that you'll have to keep the baby—there's already a loving home just waiting for the little one to be born," said a bright-eyed, curly-haired social worker. "If it would make you feel better, you can sign the adoption-release papers at any time during your pregnancy. Would you like to do that now?"

But I wasn't willing to do or sign anything which might imply that I accepted what was being done to me. Even though I didn't want a baby, and couldn't see how keeping it could possibly benefit me, I resisted, almost instinctively.

I sometimes felt like a rat in a cage, but I was a clever rat. My mind never stopped working furiously to find a way out. And if I couldn't get myself out, then—clever, nasty rat that I was—I would make someone else suffer.

Not just anyone, though. I wanted revenge. Revenge would be my solace. I was going to get the people who had done this to me. Josh? No. He'd been hurt enough. My poor Abelard. He was a coward, that was all, desperate to save his own skin. I'd loved him once, and couldn't forget that.

But I'd like the chance to do something to his lawyer. And the prudish gossip who'd turned us in. And my useless lawyer, who had let this happen. And the judge. Yes, above all, Judge Arnold Jason was the one I really wanted to see suffer. I had lots of cruel and childish fantasies about what I'd do to him if I ever got the chance...

I knew it was unlikely. I knew my fantasies of revenge would have to stay just that, fantasies. And even they started to fade, as my pregnancy progressed, under the softening effects of hormones and—might as well give her the benefit of the doubt—Carmen's professional counselling skills.

New fantasies crept in and took their place. Daydreams about motherhood. The baby, instead of an unknown "unborn," became, in my dreams, Josh's son or daughter. Although we couldn't be together, I would always have his baby...

Sometimes I horrified myself.

And yet, on the other hand, why shouldn't I have a child—this child? So what if I hadn't chosen it—the idea of choice was such a modern thing; maternal instinct (if that's what I was feeling) was far more primitive. This baby was

inside me, and that made it mine. I began to hate the idea of losing it. The thought of handing my baby over to strangers came to seem more of a punishment than even the pregnancy itself. Like it or not, I was becoming a mother.

If I was going to do this, I knew I had to go in with my eyes open. My new job—entry-level data processing, if you please!—left me with too much time to fantasize. I decided to put that time to better use. I set out to research my baby's background. I promised myself that if the baby inside me had come from someone too obviously horrible and unfit, I would give it up, rather than raise a ticking genetic time-bomb.

I was sure that background details of the heritage of all the unborn must be kept on file somewhere. Their mothers at least would be identified, in case they wanted to return to reclaim their unborn babies when their situations improved (this did sometimes happen).

Of course, I had no right to any of this information. It could only be accessed illegally.

It's just not true that punishment is a deterrent to further crime. All my previous experience of the law did was make me much more careful not to be caught this time.

It didn't take me long to find the name of my baby's genetic mother. She was called Chelsea Mott. No information on the father.

I ran a search on the name Chelsea Mott. I was astonished at the number of links that came up, but even more astonished by the connections they made.

I sat and stared at my computer screen, feeling as if all the breath in my body had gone sighing out.

Chelsea Mott was a law student. Two years ago she had worked as a summer intern for Judge Arnold Jason. She'd worked for him from June through August. In October she'd gone in for a pregnancy removal. Significantly, although she was at law school in another state, she'd come back *here*—the home State of Judge Arnold Jason—for the removal.

My revenge had just been handed me on a plate.

j

When I arrived at the hospital, in the early stages of labor, a lawyer was waiting with papers for me to sign.

Carmen—I'd asked her to come along as my doula, to help me through the pain, and to run interference—told her to get lost.

"It's only to make things easier," the lawyer explained with a kindly smile. "So they can take the baby away as soon as—"

"Nobody's taking my baby," I objected. "I'm keeping her—or him."

"But you can't! It's all arranged—the parents are *here*."

Someone at the hospital must have called them as soon as I'd phoned to say I was on my way. Before I could respond, another contraction made me gasp and double over.

"Get out," Carmen told the lawyer. "Or I'll have somebody throw you out."

"I'll be back," the lawyer promised.

And, of course, she was. But she couldn't make me sign her papers—nobody could. And without my agreement, no one could adopt my baby. I had given birth to him, and he was mine, according to both natural justice and the law. At least he was more mine than anyone else's, besides Chelsea Mott, and it wasn't Ms. Mott who was trying to take him away from me.

Carmen saw Judge Arnold Jason and his wife conferring with the lawyer on the very steps of the hospital. That was the deciding moment for her. Up until then, I think she'd thought I was paranoid about Judge Jason, and that it was my "criminal mind-set" keeping me from accepting the fairness of the punishment he'd disinterestedly inflicted.

But if he wanted the baby I carried, how disinterested could he be?

Most women go home with their babies within twenty-four hours of giving birth, if there are no complications. In my case, the hospital wasn't willing to let my baby go. I knew there must be pressure on them from behind the scenes, because there was absolutely nothing wrong with him. They were eager enough for *me* to get out; but I wouldn't let them separate me from my baby. I could see perfectly well that possession, which had worked in my favor until now, could be made to work for someone else.

These early days were crucial, especially if the adoptive parents wanted their name on the birth certificate.

I toyed with the lawyer, who was eager to believe I could be bought. When I told her that I wanted to meet the potential adoptive parents first, before I made up my mind, we both knew her protest was just for show.

He wouldn't come, and *she* didn't want me to know her name. But I knew. Mrs.-Judge was not a publicity hound, but there were photos of her to be found on the web, anyway: on her husband's arm at a charity ball, or snapped, face bleached and startled by the flashbulb, in a restaurant. In life, she looked older than I'd expected, maybe because her husband looked so young.

"Did you want to ask me questions?" she asked, getting straight down to business as she came in. "We'll give the baby a good home, a wonderful life, so much love..." she darted a longing glance at my little baby—still unnamed, except in my head—in his clear plastic hospital bed.

"Why do you want *this* baby?" I asked.

She looked startled by my question, but her halting reply seemed utterly innocent. This was the baby they'd been told they could have, that was all. And they'd been waiting for months, ever since they'd been told... It was just too hard to be let down now.

"So there's nothing special about *my* baby?"

"Well, all babies are special." She stared at him so hungrily... Did she know or not? I couldn't tell.

"Get yourself another baby, then," I said. When she looked at me I went on, "You don't have to wait for some poor sucker like me to mess up. I'm sure you've got plenty of money. Go hire somebody to carry one of the unborn for you. Plenty of women would do it if the price was right. Draw up a contract right at the start, everything spelled out, nice and legal, with most of the money to come on delivery, and then you won't get let down."

Her expression changed. "Oh, I see."

"What do you see?"

"The dollar signs in your eyes. Don't you know that buying and selling babies is *illegal?*"

I almost laughed. "Yeah, right. But *forcing* somebody to have a baby and then taking it away from her is perfectly okay. Just as long as you've got the law on your side." I shook my head. "It's a false economy, Mrs. Jason. You and your husband should have hired a surrogate mother, instead of trying to get it for free."

She backed away from me, towards the door. "It's a lost cause, trying to help people like you," she said, icily furious. "We would have given that little boy a good home, and you could have gotten on with your life. But you had to ruin it for everyone. Well, enjoy your motherhood."

"I won't blame *you* if I don't," I promised her.

Twenty minutes later, my baby and I were home.

j

That might have been the end of the story—or the beginning, anyway, of a different one—if the Judge had let go.

If simple adoption had been their aim, they should have looked elsewhere. Taken my advice and hired a surrogate, or just waited until another newborn needed the home they could provide. I don't know if his wife knew the truth or not, but the Judge wanted his own son, and he wouldn't accept that his clever plan had failed.

I don't deny what I did. I know I have to take responsibility for that.

All the same, it wouldn't have happened if Judge Arnold Jason had just let us go. Had let me win. Hadn't been so determined to claim ownership of the child he'd forced me to bear.

A strange shadow-dance began. He sent his representatives to meet with me—meetings which he could later claim had never happened. We had unofficial discussions about hypothetical funding for work which I might do. To buy a human being is against the law. But gifts are not illegal, nor are loans. I could start my own business. Money need not be a problem, but it would be difficult for a single mother to devote enough time to this job or that... If I felt I would be better off without this child—which, after all, was not really biologically or genetically mine—a good home could be found for it.

I never intended to say yes. But I didn't say no. Out of perversity or curiosity, I let them continue. Finally, when pushed to make a decision, to name my price (as it were), I said that I would need to meet with my child's father face to face. Alone, on my own ground. I would hand him over personally, or not at all.

What sort of vanity made him agree, I wonder?

The same, I suppose, which had driven him all along, making him think he was so much better than me, that he could use me, and ruin my life, and profit by it.

He came to my apartment for dinner.

I had the big pot simmering on the stove when he arrived. A rich, spicy, meaty aroma filled the air. Music was playing from the classical station—some opera; a wronged woman warbling away in the background. I poured him a glass of wine, red as blood.

Although he'd arrived looking wary, expecting hostility, he soon relaxed under the influence of the wine, the atmosphere, my own, slightly hectic, sexiness. My breasts were much bigger than they'd been when he saw me in court, and I was wearing an abreviated top to show them off. He found it easier to look at them than at my face. The baby was nowhere to be seen or heard, but he never asked.

"Dinner's ready," I said, and sat him down at the table. I leaned over him—giving him a good look—and ladled the ragout into his bowl.

"What is it?" he asked, frowning down at the little bones, the odd-shaped chunks of meat floating in the thick red sauce with tiny onions, potatoes and carrots.

"My own recipe," I told him. "Try it!" I pressed my breasts against his back before moving away. "Tell me what you think."

He took a bite, chewed thoughtfully, and nodded as he swallowed. "It's good!"

"I'm glad you like it." I leaned against the wall and watched him.

He paused, mid-chew, to give me a puzzled look. "Aren't you eating?"

"Oh, in a minute. I want to finish my wine."

"Well, you'd better hurry up, before I eat it all!" When he grinned, I could see a piece of meat stuck between his front teeth. It made me feel quite ill.

"What's wrong?" He made as if to get up from the table.

"Nothing. I forgot the bread." I hurried over to the oven and took out the rolls I'd been warming, put them in a basket and brought them to the table. By then, I was able to smile again.

"Sit down, you're making me nervous, hanging around like a servant or something."

"Isn't that what I am to you?"

Something of my true feeling must have cut through his self-absorption. He spoke carefully. "No, not at all."

"I've done you a service—but of course, I've never been paid for it," I pointed out.

His eyes cut around the room at the mention of payment. I knew he would be thinking the place was bugged, that

I'd brought him here to trap him, convict him out of his own mouth.

"Oh, never mind," I said, and sat down.

"Have some of this... what is it, exactly?" He gestured at the pot in the center of the table.

"Ragout," I said. "A fancy word for stew."

From the radio, the singers were reaching some sort of climax.

"You're not eating?" Now, too late, he was suspicious.

I smiled and shook my head. "I'm on a diet. Have to lose some of that weight I gained while I was pregnant, or no man will ever want me."

He pushed his plate roughly aside. "What *is* this? If you've poisoned me, I'll—"

"Don't be ridiculous."

But the fear had infected him; the wrongness of this whole setup had finally penetrated. He stood up. "I'll put you away forever, I swear! Where's my son? I'm taking him now."

I began to laugh. It wasn't funny, but I couldn't help myself. And once I'd started, I couldn't stop.

His eyes got bigger as he stared at me. He took a step towards me, and I thought he was going to hit me. But he didn't.

Instead, he charged away, shouting, "Where is he? Where's my son?"

I heard him in the bedroom, knocking over things. He broke a lamp.

It was a small apartment, with few hiding places. It didn't take him long to figure out that the baby wasn't there. He came back into the living room then, glaring at me.

"What have you done with him?"

I didn't say anything. I just looked at the stewpot, laughter still welling up, painful now, like hiccoughs.

He turned pale. He made a sort of grunting noise and swayed on his feet. For a minute I thought he would faint. He closed his eyes and shook his head, and then—

Carmen tells me I'm lucky he didn't kill me, knock me out, strangle me—he could have, so easily, and I had no kind of weapon to stop him. But he didn't. I think he was too horrified by what he thought he'd done to think of anything else.

He ran for the door, desperate to escape. I could hear him retching as he hurried away.

As soon as he was gone, I grabbed my coat and the bag I'd packed earlier, and headed for the airport. Carmen was waiting for me there with the baby, who was getting fractious, ready for his feed. We caught our plane with minutes to spare, my breasts leaking milk.

"Closure," I told Carmen as we buckled up. "I did the crime, I served the time, and I got my revenge—and my reward." Looking down at the little one on my breast, it was hard to imagine that I—or anyone—could ever have thought of him as a punishment. I felt like the hero with the golden fleece or something.

I still don't know what character I was playing at dinner with the Judge, what story we were acting out, but it must be a famous one, since he recognized it. I almost wish I'd asked him.

Elizabeth Hand

CHIP CROCKETT'S CHRISTMAS CAROL

"This day we shut out Nothing!"
"Pause," says a low voice. "Nothing? Think!"
"On Christmas Day, we will shut out from our fireside, Nothing."
"Not the shadow of a vast City where the withered leaves are lying deep?" the voice replies. "Not the shadow that darkens the whole globe? Not the shadow of the City of the Dead?"
Not even that...

Charles Dickens, "What Christmas Is as We Grow Older"

Tony was the one who called him.

"Brendan, man. I got some bad news."

Brendan felt a slight hitch in his stomach. He leaned back in his chair, nudging his office door closed so his secretary wouldn't hear. "Oh yes?"

"Chip Crockett died."

"Chip Crockett?" Brendan frowned, staring at his computer screen as though he was afraid Tony might materialize there. "You mean, like, *The Chip Crockett Show?*"

"Yeah, man." Tony sighed deeply. "My brother Jake, he just faxed me the obituary from the *Daily News.* He died over the weekend but they just announced it today."

There was a *clunk* through the phone receiver, a background clatter of shouting voices and footsteps. Tony was working as a substitute teacher at Saint Ignatius High School. Brendan was amazed he'd been able to hang onto the job at all, but he gathered that being a substitute at Saint Ignatius was way below being sanitation engineer in terms of salary, benefits, and respect. He heard a crackle of static as Tony ran into the corridor, shouting.

"Whoa! Nelson Crane, man! Slow down, okay? Okay. Yeah, I guess it was lung cancer. Did you know he smoked?"

"You're talking about Chip Crockett the kiddie show host. Right?" Brendan rubbed his forehead, feeling the beginning of a headache. "No, Tony, I didn't know he smoked, because I don't actually *know* Chip Crockett. Do you?"

"No. Remember Ogden Orff? That time he got the milk jug stuck on his nose? 'That's my boy, Ogden Orff!' " Tony intoned, then giggled. "And that puppet? Ooga Booga? The one with the nose?"

"Ogden Orff." Brendan leaned back in his chair. Despite himself, he smiled. "God, yeah, I remember. And the other one—that puppet who sang? He did 'Mister Bassman' and that witch doctor song. I loved him..."

"That wasn't a puppet. That was Captain Dingbat—you know, the D.J. character."

"Are you sure? I thought it was a puppet."

"No way, man. I mean, yes! I am ab-so-lute-ly sure—"

An earsplitting whistle echoed over the line. Brendan winced and held the phone at arm's-length, drew it back in time to hear Tony's voice fading.

"Hey man, that's the bell, I gotta go. I'll fax this to you before I leave, okay? Oh, and hey, we're still on for Thursday, right?"

Brendan nodded. "Right," he said, but Tony was already gone.

Late that afternoon the fax arrived. Brendan's secretary gave it to him, the curling cover sheet covered with Tony's nearly illegible scrawl.

OGDEN ORFF LIVES! SEE YA THURS. AT CHILDE ROLAND.

TONY

Brendan tossed this and turned to the *Daily News* obituary, two long columns complete with photo. The faxed image was fragmented but still recognizable—a boyishly handsome man in suit and skinny tie, grinning at a puppet with a huge nose. Above him was the headline:

AU REVOIR, OOGA BOOGA

Brendan shook his head. "Poor Ooga Booga," he murmured, then smoothed the paper on his desk.

Iconic kiddie show host Chip Crockett died yesterday at his home in Manhasset, after a long and valiant battle with lung cancer. While never achieving the recognition accorded peers like Soupy Sales or Captain Kangaroo*'s Bob Keeshan, Chip*

Crockett's legend may be greater, because it lives solely in the memories of viewers. Like other shows from the late 1950s and early 1960s, The Chip Crockett Show *was either performed live or videotaped; if the latter, the tapes were immediately erased so they could be reused. And, as though Fate conspired to leave no trace of Crockett's comic genius, a 1966 warehouse fire destroyed the few remaining traces of his work.*

For years, rumors of "lost" episodes raced among baby boomer fans, but alas, none have ever been found. The show's final episode, the last of the popular Chip Crockett *Christmas specials, aired on December 23rd, 1965.*

The gentle Crockett was noted for a surreal sense of humor that rivaled Ernie Kovacs'. His cast consisted of a dozen puppets—all created by Crockett—and a rogue's gallery of over-the-top human characters, also given life by the versatile performer. Every weekday morning and again in the afternoon, Chip Crockett's jouncy theme would sound and the fun began, as potato-nosed Ooga Booga, sly Ratty Mouse, and the lovable knucklehead Ogden Orff appeared on WNEW-TV, reaching a broadcast audience of millions of children—and, occasionally, their unsuspecting parents.

Chip Crockett was born in 1923 in Birdsboro, Pennsylvania. His broadcast career began in 1949 with a radio show...

Brendan sighed and looked up. Outside a sky the color of scorched nickel hung above Pennsylvania Avenue. In the very corner of his window, you could just make out the scaffolding that covered the Capitol building, a steel trellis overgrown with plywood and poured-concrete forms. When he and Robert Flaherty, his law partner, had first taken this office, Brendan had proudly pointed out the view to everyone, including the Capitol police officers who dropped in with paperwork and Congressional gossip during their breaks. Now Rob was dead, killed four years ago this Christmas Eve by a drunk driver, though Brendan still hadn't taken his name from the brass plate by the front door. The Capitol looked like an image from war-torn Sarajevo, and the officers Brendan had once known were unrecognizable behind bulletproof jackets and wraparound sunglasses.

"Mr. Keegan?" His secretary poked her head around the door. "Okay if I leave a little early today? It's Parent Conference week at Jessie's school—"

"Sure, sure, Ashley. You get that Labor Department stuff over to Phil Lancaster?"

"I did." Ashley already had her coat on, rummaging in a pocket for her farecard. "How's Peter these days?"

Peter was Brendan's son. "Oh, he's great, just great," he said, nodding. "Doing very well. Very, very well."

This wasn't true and, in fact, never really had been. Shortly after his second birthday, Peter Keegan had been diagnosed as having Pervasive Developmental Disorder, which as far as Brendan could figure was just a more socially acceptable term for his son's being (in the medical parlance) "somewhere within the autism continuum." Batteries of tests had followed—CAT scans, MRIs and PETs—and the upshot of it all was yet another string of letters: PDDNOS, or Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified. In other words, Peter Xavier Keegan, now four, had never spoken a word to anyone. If you touched him he moved away, deliberately but casually, with no more emotion than if he'd brushed up against a thorny hedge. If you tried to look him in the eye, he looked away; if anyone tried to hold him, however gently, he would scream, and hit, and bite, and eventually fall screaming to the floor.

He had not always been like that. Brendan had to remind himself every day, lest the fragmentary images of eighteen-month-old Peter smiling in his lap disappear forever. Once upon a time, Peter had been okay. Brendan had to believe that, despite the doctors who told him otherwise. That his son had been born with this condition; that Peter's neural wiring was defective; that the chances for reclaiming that other child—the one who clung to his father and babbled wordlessly but cheerfully, the one who gazed at Brendan with clear blue eyes and held his finger as he fell asleep—were slim or nil. Just last week Brendan's ex-wife, Teri, had begun a new regime of vitamin therapy for their son, the latest in an endless series of efforts to reclaim the toddler they had lost.

They were still waiting to see the results. And Brendan's secretary Ashley would have known all this because Teri had told her, during one of her daily phone calls to Brendan to discuss the million details of shared custody arrangements—pickup times, doctors' appointments, changes in Peter's medication, nightmares, biting incidents, bills for the expensive Birchwood School, missing shoes, and loose teeth. To his recollection, Brendan had never volunteered a single word about his son or his divorce to Ashley, but he had no doubt but that, if called upon, his secretary could testify in District Court about everything from his prior sexual relationship with his ex-wife (satisfactory if unremarkable) to his current attendance at AA meetings (occasional).

"Peter's very well," he repeated one last time. He made a tube of Tony's fax and eyed his secretary through one end. "Good luck at school, Ashley."

He walked home that evening, his briefcase nudging his leg as he made his way up Pennsylvania Avenue, keeping his bare head down against the chill night wind. Tony's fax stuck up out of his overcoat pocket, still curled into a tube. He ducked into the gourmet kitchen shop and bought some coffee beans, then headed down Fourth Street towards his apartment. He was thinking about the old Chip Crockett Show, and how his secretary was born a good ten years after it had gone off the air.

How did I get to be so old? he marveled, kicking at the pile of sodden leaves banked against his building's outer door. *"Mr. Keegan." When the hell did* that *happen?* And he went inside, to silence and *The Washington Post* still unread on the kitchen counter, the unblinking red eye of the answering machine signaling that no one had called.

j

Thursday night he met Tony Kemper at Childe Roland. The club had been a big hangout for them back when Brendan was in law school at Georgetown in the early 1980s. Tony was still playing with the Maronis in those days, and the Childe Roland was a popular after-hours spot for musicians on tour. Later, after Tony left the Maronis and moved back to D.C., he'd headline with local bands, and he and Brendan and Brendan's cousin, Kevin, had gotten into the habit of meeting at the Childe Roland every Thursday after closing time, to drink and listen to whatever performers happened

to drop by.

Now, years later, all three were veterans of Alcoholics Anonymous, although Kevin was the only one who still attended meetings regularly. But they still met once a week at the Childe Roland, sitting at a table in the shabby downstairs room with its brick walls and fading posters for Root Boy Slim and Tommy Keene and the Dale Williams Band. They'd eat hamburgers and drink coffee or Evian water, feed quarters to the vintage Wurlitzer jukeboxes, and argue politics and football over "96 Tears" and "Bastards of Young" and "Pretty Vacant."

Tonight Brendan was the first to arrive, as usual. He'd been divorced for nearly a year but still couldn't quite get the hang of being single. He didn't date, he didn't cook. He worked late when he could, but Flaherty, Keegan & Associates didn't generate enough of a caseload to merit more than two or three nights a week. He had Peter on alternate weekends and Tuesdays, but that still left a lot of downtime. He hated to admit it, but when Tony or Kevin had to cancel Thursdays at Childe Roland, Brendan was depressed—depressed enough that he'd come to Childe Roland by himself and sit at their usual place and feed the jukebox, playing the songs Kevin or Tony would have played, even the ones he hated.

But he wouldn't be alone tonight. He heard Tony before he saw him. Or rather, he heard everyone else seeing him—

"Tony, my man! What's shakin'?"

"Tony Maroni! '*Hooray, hello, whoa whoa whoa!*' "

"Tony!"

"It's the Tonester!"

Brendan watched as his friend grinned and waved, crossing the room in that bizarre way he had, half-glide and half-slouch, resplendent in his ancient black leather jacket and decrepit Converse hightops, his long black hair streaked with grey but otherwise pretty much unchanged from the lanky, goofy-faced nineteen-year-old who once upon a time had been the Great White Hope of Rock and Roll. On the Bowery, anyway, for a few years in the mid-1970s, which (according to Tony) was the last time rock had mattered.

That was when Tony founded The Maronis, the proto-punk band whose first, self-titled record had recently been cited by *The New York Times* as one of the ten most influential rock albums of the century. (The follow-up, *Maronis Get Detention*, came in at number 79.) The band's formula, equal parts three-chord rock and *Three Stooges*, won them a record contract with EMI, a national tour, and all the attendant problems as Tony, Mony, Pony, and Tesla (*né* Tony Kemper, Marty Berenstein, Paul Schippa, and Dickie Stanton) played, fought, drank, dropped acid, shot up, and eventually OD'd.

Not all at the same time, of course, but that was it as far as EMI was concerned. The Maronis lost their only contract with a major label. Worse, they lost their catalog—they hadn't bothered with an attorney when they signed—and the ensuing decades had seen one failed lawsuit after another brought by band members, whenever one was flush enough to hire a lawyer.

Still, the band continued to tour and record, on the small New Jersey-based Millstone label. When Mony died of a heroin overdose, he was replaced, first by Joni, the band's first female guitarist, and then by Sony, a Japanese fan who attached himself to the Maronis after their disastrous 1984 Tokyo appearance. That was when Tony left the band. Despite the rumors, he'd never gotten into heroin. Even as a kid in Yonkers he'd been terrified of needles; Kevin used to steal hypos from his doctor father and hide them in Tony's Deputy Dawg lunchbox, something Brendan would never have forgiven his cousin for, but Tony was incapable of anything resembling anger. Whatever demons he encountered, he fought them down with beer—preferably Budweiser, even when he (briefly) could have afforded Heineken. He'd finally lost it in Japan when, jet-lagged and suffering from food poisoning, he'd gotten the DTs and started screaming about Gojiro in the lobby of the Tokyo Hilton. Millstone had no money for an emergency medical evacuation, and so Brendan and Kevin arranged to have their childhood friend flown back to the States. Kevin had gone over to escort Tony—Kevin was raking it in at Merrill Lynch—and on their return he and Brendan checked their friend into detox.

He'd been sober ever since. Although, because he was Tony Maroni, this wasn't always readily apparent.

"Hey, Brenda Starr! How's it goin'?"

Brendan looked up, making a face at the boyhood nickname. "Tony. Good to see you—"

He reached across the table to shake his hand. Tony leaned forward and grabbed him in a hug. "Yeah, man, great to see you, too!" As though it had been a year instead of a week; as though they hadn't just talked on the phone, oh, about two hours ago. "Where's Kevo?"

Brendan shrugged. "He should be here soon."

"Right, right. The Family Man. Family matters. Family matters," Tony repeated, cocking his head and scrunching his face up. "Hey, get it? Like, it *matters*—"

"I get it, Tony."

"I never did. Not until just now."

Brendan sighed, glanced up to see a young woman in torn fishnets and polyester skirt, Mandelbrot tattoos and enough surgical steel piercings to arm an emerging nation. "Oh good. Here's the Bionic Waitress."

Tony whirled to grin at her. "Bethie! Hi! Hey, you look nice in that outfit—"

"It's my uniform, Tony," the waitress said, but smiled, displaying more gleaming metal and a tongue stud. "Where's your other partner in crime?"

"Kevo? He'll be here. He's got kids, you know—" Tony suddenly looked across the table, stricken. "Oh hey, man, I didn't mean—I mean, *he's* got kids too," he said, pointing at Brendan. "It's just—"

"Tony. It's okay," said Brendan.

"—just, uh, Kevin's got a lot of 'em. Well, two, anyway."

"Really?" The waitress looked down at Brendan curiously. "I never knew you were married."

"He's not," said Tony. "He's—"

"I'm divorced," Brendan broke in. He gave Tony an icy look. "I have a little boy."

"Yeah? You ought to bring him in some night. Okay, you want something now or you want to wait for your friend?'

They ordered, coffee for Brendan, club soda with lemon for Tony. When she brought the drinks back, Tony took the straw and blew its paper wrapper across the table at Brendan. "No offense, man," he said. "About—"

"None taken, Tony." Brendan lifted his coffee mug and smiled.

"Cheers."

"Cheers." Tony took a sip of his drink, then slid from his chair. "Gotta feed the jukebox, man. Right back."

Brendan watched as his friend sidled over to one of the club's vintage jukeboxes, spangled man-sized bijoux that glittered and bubbled and glowed along the brick walls. There was a Seeburg, a Rockola, and the Childe Roland's crown jewel: a 1946 Wurlitzer Model 1015, special edition "Rites of Spring" in mint condition, down to the 45s stacked on their glittering turntable spindle. Tony hunched over this now, drumming his fingers on the glass surface. The green-and-gold Bakelite pilasters and ruby lights made him look like one of his own adolescent daydreams, long hair touched with crimson, his Silly Putty face given a momentary semblance of gravity, as though he were gazing into some piece of sophisticated medical machinery instead of an old jukebox.

"Hey." Tony frowned. "What happened to 'Moulty?' And who the fuck put the Eagles on this thing?"

Brendan shook his head, marveling as he always did at how long it took Tony to make his selections. "You know," he said as Tony slouched back to the table, the opening drumbeats of "Be My Baby" echoing around them, "it took Phil Spector less time to record that than it did for you to punch it in."

Tony slid back into his seat. "Hey, you know what that is? That's the Big Bang, man! *Bum, bum-bum! Bum, bum-bum!* That's the noise God made when He made the universe! When I die, make sure they play that, okay?" He clapped a hand to his forehead. "Geez, I almost forgot! Check this out—"

He fumbled in a pocket of his leather jacket, withdrew a wad of folded-up paper. "There's, like, a Chip Crockett Web page. Listen—"

Tony smoothed out the paper, then cleared his throat. " 'Like a lot of other people, I grew up in the early 1960s watching *The Chip Crockett Show*,' " he read. " 'I was still pretty young when I watched it, though, and I don't really remember much, except that the puppets were sort of scary. But since starting this Web page I have had many other people write to me about their memories of the show, and I have come to realize that Chip Crockett has actually influenced me in ways that I am only beginning to understand.' "

Brendan shook his head. "Wow. That's some testimony."

"Yeah, man, but he's right. I mean, Chip Crockett had an amazing impact on *me*—"

"Yeah, but you're Tony Maroni. Chip Crockett could have *invented* you. Here, give me that—"

Brendan took the page and glanced down it. No pictures, just a web address, a brief introduction and listing of contents.

BROADCAST HISTORY
ARTICLES & OBITUARIES (NEW)
THEME SONG
THE GREAT FIRE OF 1966
CHIP CROCKETT'S CHRISTMAS SPECIAL

"I didn't have time to print out the whole thing," Tony said apologetically. "I had duty in the computer lab but then there was a fire drill..."

"I remember the Christmas Special." Brendan looked thoughtful. "It was *A Christmas Carol*, but with all the puppets playing the parts. Ooga Booga was Scrooge—"

"Scrooga Booga," Tony corrected him. "And Ogden Orff was Bob Cratchit—"

"Brendan." A gigantic hand suddenly descended to grip Brendan's shoulder. "Tony. Sorry I'm late." Kevin Donnelly's shadow fell across the table—a big shadow. "Eileen had to work late and I had to get the girls from dance and then dinner—"

Tony clasped Kevin's hand, moving his chair over to make room. Kevin sat and waved at their waitress.

"An O'Douls, please," he said, then turned to his cousin. "Brendan. How you doing?"

"Good, very good." Brendan smiled. "What's new with you?"

"Not much. What you got there?"

"The Chip Crockett Web page. Listen—" Brendan held the page up and gestured dramatically. " 'I have come to realize that Chip Crockett has actually influenced me in ways that I am only beginning to understand.' You know, I think Tony could start a religion based on this."

"Mmm. Eileen wouldn't like that. Let me see—"

In Kevin's hand the page looked insubstantial as tissue. He was a big man who in the course of two decades of steadfast bodybuilding had become absolutely huge, red-haired and ruddy-faced, his arms and shoulders so powerful they always looked as though they were about to burst through his hand-tailored suit jackets, like some demented Capitol Hill version of The Incredible Hulk. As a boy he'd terrorized not just Brendan and Tony but everyone within a five-block radius of Tuckahoe Road, and started dipping into the altar wine before his twelfth birthday. At Notre Dame

on a football scholarship, he'd brought the team to the Nationals, then gone on to get an MBA from the Wharton School. He'd made his first million before he was thirty, gotten sober, bailed out of Merrill Lynch exactly one month before Black Monday, and taken a job as a lobbyist for Standard Oil.

"You read this, Brendan?" Kevin scowled. "Did you read this?"

"Yup. What do you think?"

Kevin continued to scan the printout, while Brendan flagged their waitress for more coffee. Whenever he saw his cousin, Brendan felt as though he were glimpsing himself in some alternate universe. Kevin looked like Brendan on steroids, Brendan's sandy hair turned to flame, Brendan's body pumped full of Vitamin B-12 and Proteinex. His cousin's career and domestic life were shiny perverse reflections of Brendan's own—immense financial success, gorgeous ex-model spouse, perfect children, perfect Potomac home, perfect perfect perfect. Whereas Brendan felt as though he were channeling his ex-wife through his secretary, and his only child seemed to live in that other universe as well, gazing into Brendan's world as though it were an empty expanse of sky.

"I think it's a capital offense if my taxes are paying Tony to print out this kind of stuff on school time." Kevin shook his head and handed the page back to Tony. "Tell me, Tony, how the hell do you keep that job? I mean, what do you tell those kids, as a teacher?"

"You know. Follow your bliss. Stay out of jail. I tell them to be really, really careful, otherwise they'll end up like me."

Brendan and Kevin laughed, but Tony only shrugged. "Well, it's true," he said. "The way I figure, I'm saving the school system thousands of dollars a year in anti-drug programs and stuff like that."

"But you never did drugs, Tony," said Kevin.

"Yeah, but they don't know that. I tell 'em: Stay in school, go to the college of your choice, learn a viable trade. Otherwise you'll spend the rest of your life giving practice SATs to dimbulbs like Nelson Crane."

The Bionic Waitress reappeared and refilled Brendan's coffee cup. As he moved the papers aside she glanced down at them curiously.

"Who died?"

"Chip Crockett," said Tony.

She wrinkled her nose. "Who's Chip Crockett?"

Tony rubbed his chin. "Well, he was this kiddie show host a long time ago. Kind of like Chuck McCann."

"Or Paul Winchell," said Kevin.

"Who're they?"

"Do you remember Uncle Floyd Vivino?" asked Brendan.

"Uh, no."

Tony frowned, thinking. Finally he brightened. "What about PeeWee Herman?"

The waitress scrunched her face up. "Mmm, maybe a little."

"Mister Rogers?"

"Sure!" She looked more closely at the obituary.

"Well, Chip Crockett was sort of like a cross between Mister Rogers and PeeWee Herman," explained Brendan.

"Or Adam Sandler," said Kevin. "Actually, he was more like a cross between Mister Rogers and Tony here."

The waitress laughed. "Wow. Sorry I missed out on that one."

She turned and headed back to the kitchen. Tony stared after her admiringly, then shoved his chair back. " 'Scuse me, gotta hit the head."

His friends watched him go. "So," said Kevin, easing himself into the chair next to Brendan. "Tony's taking the news about Chip Crockett pretty hard. How 'bout you?"

"Aw, don't give him a hard time, Kev," said Brendan. He sometimes felt as though he'd spent his entire life defending Tony against Big Tough Guys like Kevin. "He gets on these kicks, he'll get over it."

Kevin looked hurt. "I wasn't giving him a hard time. I actually feel kind of bad about it myself."

"About Chip Crockett?"

"Sure. I liked Chip Crockett. Especially Ogden Orff..." Kevin rapped his knuckles again his forehead and cried, " 'No, Ogden, noooo!' " Then, in fonder tones, " 'That's my boy—Ogden Orff!' "

Brendan smiled. "Good old Ogden Orff. But gee, Kev. I never figured you'd be all broken up about Chip Crockett."

"I dunno. I was thinking about how that fire just, like, wiped any evidence of him off the planet. Like if you're not on TV somewhere, or on the net, you just don't exist anymore. Freaks me out, all that stuff. You know, getting old. People dying. That kind of thing."

Brendan eyed his cousin suspiciously. "Is something wrong?" he asked, fighting the faintest, cruelest spasm of glee at the thought.

"No. That's the problem. Everything's perfect. Too perfect. I mean, the girls are gonna need braces in a year or two, and Eileen's a screaming banshee because of this remodeling job she's doing out in Warrenton, but—well, don't you ever feel like that? Like everything's just going too well?"

Brendan stared at his cousin. Kevin stared back, his bright blue eyes completely guileless. "No," Brendan said at last. He turned to grab his coffee from the waitress. "You know, I got to get going—I've got a case coming up, I need to go over some stuff before the weekend."

He took a gulp of coffee, pulled out a ten-dollar bill and slid it under the mug. Behind him Tony reappeared, grinning and singing along with the jukebox in that immediately recognizable, nasal just-north-of-the-Bronx voice. Brendan pulled on his overcoat, watching him. It was always disconcerting to him, the difference between Tony

Kemper and Tony Maroni. The latter's now-famous stage persona, a gangly stoop-shouldered goofus doing his trademarked knock-kneed dance—practically immobile from the waist up and looking as though he were swallowing the mike, his face hidden behind a curtain of lank black hair as he blurted out his customary greeting—"*Hooray hello, whoa whoa whoa!*"—followed by three-chord anthems like "ECT" and "Gonna Have a Bad Trip" and "Tibbets Park," the FM radio hit he'd dedicated to Brendan and Kevin—

Come with me tonight
Playin' in the dark
We can have a great time
Down at Tibbets Park...

Tony Maroni was a goofball, a knucklehead, a refugee from all those kiddie shows they'd lived on back in Yonkers—Soupy Sales doing The Mouse, Chuck McCann sticking pennies on his eyes and pretending to be Little Orphan Annie, ventriloquist Paul Winchell arguing with his dummy sidekick Jerry Mahoney. Whereas the real Tony Kemper moved with an unconscious but intensely sexy, almost feminine grace: he was like someone feigning drunkenness, catching you off guard by catching himself just when you thought he was going to walk into the wall. And he was a *great* dancer. Back at Sacred Heart High School, Tony was the guy all the girls wanted to slow-dance with, while teenage guitarists struggled through the solos in "Southern Man" and "Nights in White Satin."

Now Tony blinked, staring at Brendan in dismay. "Brenda! You're not leaving already?"

"Sorry, Tony. I've got this case, we'd like to try and get a settlement before Christmas—"

"Wait." Kevin whistled and held a hand up, as though officiating a fight. "Before I forget: Eileen wants you both to come for Thanksgiving." He pointed at Brendan. "Do you have Peter that weekend? 'Cause the girls would love it if—"

"I think I do. I'm pretty sure Teri has him for Christmas."

"Great. What about you, Tony?"

Tony rubbed his chin. "Yeah, I think I can swing it. There's this girl I've been sort of seeing, but—"

"Well, bring her. Or dump her. Whatever. Just let Eileen know, okay?"

Tony nodded. He swung around to throw an arm over Brendan's shoulder. "See you here next week, then?"

"Righto." Brendan headed for the stairs, pausing to give his friends a salute. "Very, very good to see you guys."

"Call Eileen, okay? Let her know if you can come," Kevin called after him. "And hey, I really hope Peter can make it."

"I'll let you know," Brendan said with a wave. " 'Night—"

Kevin watched thoughtfully as his cousin disappeared up the steps. Beside him Tony sipped his club soda, tapping the table in counterpoint to the jukebox.

"You know," Tony said after a minute, "Peter's sort of like Tommy, isn't he?"

"Tommy?" Kevin started, shook his head. "Tommy who?"

"You know, Tommy—'that deaf, dumb and blind kid sure plays a mean pinball.' "

Kevin swiveled to stare at him. His eyes narrowed as he drew his breath in. "You know what? You're an idiot, Tony," he said softly. "A total fucking idiot."

Tony put down his club soda. "I just meant—"

"And you ever say something like that to Brendan, I'll put your fucking lights out." He tossed a handful of bills on the table. "I'll see you at Thanksgiving."

"Yeah, sure." Tony waved meekly as Kevin left. "Thanksgiving. My favorite holiday. Damn, that's not what I *meant,* you *know* that's not what I meant." He ran a hand through his hair, fumbled around for a fistful of change and added it to the money on the table. Then he stood, rocking anxiously back and forth on his heels until he saw the waitress approaching. "Thanks Bethie," he said, grabbing the printout from Chip Crockett's Web page. "See you soon."

"Goodbye hello, Tony."

"Whoa whoa whoa," he said ruefully, and left.

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As it turned out, Brendan saw Tony a lot sooner than Thanksgiving—the next day, in fact. Every other Friday Brendan had his son for the weekend, picking him up early from the Birchwood School, where fourteen caregivers exposed his son and seventeen other very young children to a rigorously ordered curriculum. The days were exquisitely maintained: children sat at table for meals, games were devised so that students learned cooperative behavior, objects were labeled and their names repeated consistently. Teachers taught parents to use the same specific words and phrases over and over again, to maintain consistency at home.

Brendan's ex-wife, Teri, had great faith in the Birchwood School and its intensive program of early intervention. Although the administration and teachers disliked labeling, most of their students had been diagnosed as having some form of Pervasive Developmental Disorder and, like Peter, their behavior placed them somewhere along the autism continuum. Whenever he visited the school Brendan found himself contemplating an adult correlation to this, something he called the Parental Anguish Continuum. Peter was verbally non-communicative and, like many of the other children, hypersensitive to touch and sensory stimulation. But his tantrums had grown less frequent in the last year, and he had done wonderfully well in the ordered environment at Birchwood. What would it be like to have a son like Sasha Petrowicz, whose sensitivity to the world was such that he spent much of the day screaming in pain? Or a

daughter like Ivy Montrose, who had been adopted from an orphanage in Rumania and had a band of scar tissue across her forehead, from headbanging in an iron-sided crib? What would it be like to be Kurt and Donna Raymond, whose only child had died of pneumonia after surgery? Setting himself within that arc, Brendan with customary Irish Catholic stoicism (Teri called this denial) found himself counting his blessings. On one hand and with gritted teeth, to be sure; but Brendan knew better than to feel sorry for himself or his son, at least for more than an hour or two, and never when visiting the Birchwood School.

"Brendan! Hi!"

Peggy Storrs, Peter's teacher, waved to him from a corner. Brendan smiled and walked over. "Hi, Peggy. How's everyone doing?"

"He's having a pretty good day." Peggy sat cross-legged on the floor, a number of blocks scattered around her. She was in her late twenties, Brendan guessed, and completing her Masters in Education at G.W., a strong-featured young woman with thick chestnut hair hidden beneath a brightly checked wool hat, batiked cotton trousers and a fuzzy handknit sweater. Brendan figured her for a lesbian, because of the hat; she reminded him of certain nuns he'd had as teachers back at Sacred Heart, steely-eyed women who in another life might have become neurosurgeons, astrophysicists, attorneys specializing in medical malpractice. "Joni's got the flu, so I'm with Allen, too, which is making it a little difficult. We had a little outburst at snack time, but other than that Peter's doing great."

Peggy smiled at Brendan, then turned her attention back to work. Beside her, but a few feet apart from each other, knelt two little boys. They were stacking blocks, Allen in a distracted manner, placing two or three atop each other before knocking them down, Peter with intense concentration—stacking first a blue block, then a yellow one, then another blue, then yellow.

"Put in a green one, Peter," Peggy urged, and held out another block. "Here. Put in the green block."

Peter ignored her. He continued stacking, head tilted, his resolute gaze fixed not so much on the blocks as on some point just beyond. Watching his son made Brendan think of hummingbirds; how their metabolisms were supposedly so quick-working, their bodies and brains wired at a rate so much faster than humans that they did not even perceive us. To a hummingbird, Brendan was only a massive grey-and-black blur, solid and unmoving as a boulder.

What was he to his son?

"Peter," he said gently. "Peter, hi. Hi, honey, hi Peter."

A smile flickered across Peter's face, so fast it was like one of those phantom looks that cross a dreamer's face in deep REM sleep. But Brendan recognized it. He smiled back, feeling a surge of joy so acute it was like grief. "Good, Peter! Take the green block from Peggy."

Peggy's hand hovered a few inches from the blue and yellow stack.

"Take the green block, Peter," she said.

Another flicker, annoyance this time; then only that unwavering concentration as Peter put another blue block on top of the pile. Brendan's stomach clenched. He knew his son wasn't being stubborn, but sometimes he found it impossible to keep from reading his behavior that way. If you saw these kids in an ordinary setting—and the Birchwood School was, in most ways, an ordinary setting—you might not know there was anything unusual about them. They were small, they wore rompers and Gap jeans and L.L. Bean sweaters,Teletubbies sweatshirts and Elmo sneakers, they toddled and ran around and cried like other kids. It was only after been you'd been here for a while that you noticed the dreamily intent rocking in front of a window; the methodical ordering and reordering of blocks and cups and plastic forms; the boy whirling in a corner until reminded that it was time to go outside; the constant and insistently repeated statements from the teachers—

"Take the green block, Peter. I'm going to put it on top. I'm going to put the green block there, Peter—"

Peter's head was half-turned to pick up another yellow block from the floor. Peggy placed the green one on top of his tower, breaking its careful symmetry. Blue yellow blue yellow blue yellow blue—

Without a word Peter turned, smacking the pile. Blocks flew everywhere, one of them striking Allen on the leg. He began to cry, and Peggy moved quickly to comfort him.

"It's all right, Allen. That was an accident—"

"Right." Brendan let his breath out and clapped his hands on his knees. "We're going to the zoo now, Peter. This is the day when we go to the zoo."

The same flicker across the boy's face, water rushing over pale sand. Without looking at his father he shook his head. "Great," said Brendan. He pointed to the row of cubbies against one wall. "Let's go get your jacket and your knapsack. Have a good weekend, Peggy."

"You too, Brendan. Bye, Peter!"

Peter turned and walked to his cubby. Brendan followed him and started to gather his son's butterfly-colored paraphernalia, green and blue knapsack, yellow rubber boots in case in rained, yellow rubber duck. He went into the kitchen and retrieved Peter's medication, then caught up with Peter waiting by the door.

"Okay, Peter. You ready?"

They went to the zoo. Ever since his law school days Brendan had loved it, the illusion of order and safety and immense distance granted by carefully designed landscapes and cast-resin boulders.

He had learned, however, that all of this was too much for Peter; everything except the Reptile House. Peter was fascinated by the displays here, especially the iguanas as they slid with sinister intent from rock to sand, finally ending up in a great heap atop each other.

"Look at that lizard, Peter. How many lizards in that pile? One, two, three lizards..."

Peter moved closer to the glass. Brendan stepped towards him, and bumped into someone.

"Excuse me, I'm sorry—"

"Hey, Brendan."

"Tony?" Brendan looked up into his friend's lopsided grin. Tony was wearing his work clothes, grey herringbone tweed jacket, skinny black tie. "Jeez, Tony, hi. What are you doing here?"

Tony shrugged. "Oh, I dunno. I like snakes, I guess."

"I know, but aren't you..." Brendan stopped. "Oh no. Tony..."

Tony gave him a sheepish look. "Yeah. I, uh, actually, well—I got canned. That girl I was seeing—"

"Oh, Christ, Tony! Don't tell me, please don't tell me—"

"No! I mean, she's eighteen, anyway, but nothing happened, I just sort of hung out with her after school a couple of times, but someone said something, and—"

"Tony—"

"—and anyway, we didn't have all that much in common. As it turned out."

" 'As it turned out.' 'As it turned out.' Tony, this is *not* a good thing. I mean, do you have an attorney—"

"No, man! Nothing happened. I'm not getting sued, or anything like that. I mean, I was only a substitute anyway. They just, uh, said it wasn't working out. Plus I already have another job, Russ Acton said he has a gig for me, working nights at Gigantor Records."

"Gigantor Records." Brendan shifted so he could keep an eye on Peter, still standing mesmerized by the iguanas. "Whoo boy. Tony..."

"Hey, it's a good deal. Only three nights a week, plus I get the employee discount. But, uh, that's actually not why I was looking for you."

Brendan closed his eyes. Overhead a ceiling fan turned desultorily. He took a deep breath, and opened his eyes again. "Yes?"

"I, uh—well, you know, I only had this month-by-month lease after Kimberly split, and it turns out the lease wasn't even in her name but that guy she used to go out with, what's his name, you know, Roy, the bartender down at—"

"*Tony.*"

"And I, uh, well—do you think I could crash at your place for a while? Just until I can get on my feet? Like a month or two, till the new year—"

Brendan shook his head. "I don't know if that would work, Tony. Like now—I have Peter every other weekend, and sometimes during the week, and—"

"It would be temporary. Very temporary. Say a week."

"You just said a month."

"Okay, fine, a month. And I promise, I *promise* it won't be any longer—"

Brendan rubbed his eyes, defeated. "Oh, Christ. All right. Yes. But only for—"

"—'cause like, there's this place I'm guaranteed, I know I can get it, up by Nebraska Ave., but the guy isn't moving till right after New Year's. Plus that way I can, like, save up enough for the security deposit and stuff. And Christmas presents."

"It's okay, Tony. I mean, I guess it'll work out, if it's only for a while. Just—when Teri's over, maybe you better keep a low profile."

"Sure, man. I mean, I really appreciate it, I know it's a hassle and stuff—"

"It's no hassle."

"—but I really appreciate it." Tony tugged at the neck of his tweed jacket, then held out his hand. "Thanks, Brendan."

"No prob." Brendan gave his friend's hand a cursory shake, turned and walked over to the wall of glass cages. "Hey, Peter, look who's here. Uncle Tony."

"It's Crazy Uncle Tony!" Tony announced. He crossed to stand directly behind Peter. "Hey, look at all those lizards making a big pile. 'Dogpile on the rabbit! Dogpile on the rabbit!'"

Brendan frowned as Tony went on. "You remember—Bugs Bunny! Boy, check him out, that guy's huge." A flicker, and Peter tilted his head, looking where Tony pointed. "You know, I think I used to date his sister."

Brendan laughed. "How old was she?"

"Aw, man. I mean, you should've seen this girl, there's no way she looked under—"

"Uh-uh-uh. That's the first thing they teach you at law school: *Never* date anyone in high school. God,Tony. Do me a favor, do not mention this to Teri. Or anyone else."

"Absolutely, man." Tony's gaze didn't move from the cage. "I definitely dated that guy's sister."

"Come on, let's look at the crocodiles. Peter?" Brendan moved to take his son's hand. For a fraction of a second Peter's rested against his father's palm, warm and sticky, his fingernails rough where he'd bitten them. Then they slid away. Brendan felt that same small stab at his chest, familiar and painful as a pulled tendon; but he only looked at his son and smiled. "Remember the crocodiles? You liked them last time we were here..."

They wandered through the rest of the reptile house, Tony expressing remorse over the remains of several white mice and a dead sparrow. After a quarter hour, Peter grew restive. He started grabbing at the railings in front of the glass cages and rocking back and forth, his cheeks flushed.

Brendan turned to Tony. "He's hungry," he said. "Okay Peter, time to go. It's time to leave the zoo now."

Peter said nothing; only rocked faster, back and forth on the rail.

"Time to go," repeated Brendan. "Come on, Peter. We have to leave now."

Peter closed his eyes and swung sideways.

"Peter," Brendan said again. He looked at Tony and took a deep breath. "All right, Peter—I'll have to pick you up, then—"

He stepped towards Peter, wrapped his arms firmly around him and started disentangling him from the rail. Peter kicked, grunting loudly; then began to scream. At the other end of the room a mother with two small girls stared at Brendan, frowning.

"Peter," Brendan said in a strained voice, prising his son's fingers from the railing. "Come on, Peter—"

Peter started crying. Brendan held him as tight as he could and carried him to the exit. When he saw the door, Peter's cries abruptly stopped, but he continued to push at his father, trying to get away. Tony bounced after them.

"I'm hungry too, Peter," Tony announced loudly. Peter narrowed his eyes and looked the other way. "Gentlemen? It's dinner time—"

Tony held the door for them as they stepped outside. "My treat," he said with a bow.

"Tony, you don't—"

"*My treat.* Come on, Peter, we're going to McDonald's."

Brendan shook his head. "That may not be a good idea, Tony." He bent and let Peter slide from his arms to the ground. "When he goes off like this..."

But Peter was already brightening. He took a few steps, stopped, and looked at the sky, shutting his eyes and letting that same half-smile flash across his face. Brendan watched him, then turned to Tony.

"Okay. We can try McDonald's," he said. "Just don't tell Teri, she'll hold you personally responsible for the extinction of the poison arrow frog."

Peter stared up at Tony, but looked away when the tall man gazed down at him.

"We can walk there," Tony said. "Right, Peter?" Peter turned, continuing to watch Tony from the corners of his eyes. Tony began to walk backwards down the sidewalk. "Plus, Brenda, this way you don't have to do the dishes afterwards...

"—*plus*, I have one more favor to ask you," he added, sidling up alongside of Brendan as they approached Connecticut Avenue.

Brendan stopped, grabbing Peter as he ran towards the gate. "What?" he asked tersely. His son struck at his hands as he zipped up Peter's jacket and pulled a knit cap down over the boy's sleek hair.

"No biggie. Just, could you help me move my stuff? There's not a lot," Tony added, "it's just too much for one cab ride, you know, plus your car has so much more room."

Brendan sighed. "All right, Tony."

"And could you maybe do it tonight? 'Cause the landlady said she's, like changing the locks tomor—"

"*Yes Tony.*"

Brendan's blue eyes glittered dangerously. Tony said nothing more; just nodded and walked with them up Connecticut Avenue, past the first crowds of commuters heading home in the early dusk.

They ate. Peter was quiet, repeatedly squeezing his chicken nuggets between his fingers and refusing to eat more than a few mouthfuls. But Brendan was relieved that it was nothing more than that, no screaming fits, no throwing food or trays or cups, nothing to make all the other parents and children turn from their Big Macs and Happy Meals to stare at an uncontrollable four-year-old and his ineffectual father. Afterwards they found Brendan's Volvo wagon and drove to Adams Morgan to retrieve Tony's stuff. This consisted of a stereo system, five large boxes of CDs and tapes, another six cartons containing records by Firesign Theater and dozens of one-hit wonders from the late '60s and early '70s; a small carton of paperbacks, heavy on the Illuminati and the Beats; a spatula; Tony's Mosrite electric guitar; and a single black trash bag holding Tony's wardrobe, which consisted entirely of black T-shirts and black jeans.

"That's it," Tony announced. He tossed the trash bag into the back of the car. In the middle seat, Peter sat quietly and stared out the side window. Brendan had remained behind the wheel—they were illegally parked, and he was also doing lookout duty for Roy, putative owner of both Tony's ex-girlfriend and her lease, a bartender known for his humorless attachment to World Wrestling Federation events.

"Good." Brendan leaned out the car window. "Now can we go?"

"Yeah, yeah, just hold on. One more thing—" Tony raced back upstairs, long hair flying. A moment later he returned and sprinted down the steps, his battered black leather jacket in his arms. "God, it feels so great getting out of that hellhole! I thought I'd never escape."

"You were only there for three months," said Brendan. The Volvo pulled away from the curb. Tony turned to look back.

"Yeah, well, it seemed like a lifetime," he said. "Hey, there's Roy!"

He rolled down the window, flapping his hands at a big bearded man in a Redskins windbreaker. "Yo, Roy! Your mother sews socks that smell!"

"Tony!" Brendan started to laugh. "You really are an idiot, you know that? That guy better not have your new address—"

"No way, man." He turned to grin at the boy in the back seat. "Pretty good, huh, Peter? Stick around with your old Uncle Tony, tomorrow I'll teach you how to meet girls." Peter smiled, so quickly that Brendan caught only the faintest shimmer of it in the rearview mirror. Tony beamed, pounding on the dashboard and nodding. "This is going to be great, Brenda, you know? Having the chance to hang out with you, spend some QT..."

"When do you start work?"

"Good question. You know, I think maybe I'm supposed to go in tonight, just to get acclimated. You got an extra key?"

"Tonight? What, like now? You want me to drop you—"

"No, man. I told you, I'm the graveyard shift, midnight to seven."

Brendan groaned. "You didn't tell me. And you better not wake me up or you'll be living in Stanton Square Park."

"No prob, man, no prob. Just give me an extra key, I'll kiss you guys good night and then bye-bye—"

Tony let his arm drape out the open window. As they rounded a corner he waved at a group of spike-haired kids hanging out in front of a 7-11. "Bye-bye," he repeated.

"Fuck you," one of the kids shouted. "Motherfucker, you fuck—"

A bottle exploded on the street just behind the car, broken glass spattering up against the rear window.

"Damn it!" Brendan swerved, then glanced at Tony. He was gazing at the dashboard, his expression unreadable. "Boy, talk about a lack of respect! If only they knew Tony Maroni was in this car."

"Good thing they don't." Tony's voice was flat. "Jello Biafra got the shit beat out of him in Berkeley by a bunch of kids like that. He was going to watch a gig at Gilman Street, they thought he'd sold out."

"Yeah, well, that won't happen to you," said Brendan dryly.

Tony turned back to staring out the window. In the seat behind them Peter began to snore softly, as the car turned down Mass. Ave. and they headed for Brendan's apartment.

It was nearly dark when they got there, the sulfur-yellow streetlights casting a Halloween glow over sidewalks and lawns and boxtree hedges. Brendan's place was a brick rowhouse, the second one from the corner on a street just a few blocks from the old riot corridor; a neighborhood that had spent the last fifteen years being gentrified without ever quite achieving its goal. He double-parked in front and gave Tony the keys, waiting in the car as Tony ran in and out with the stereo and guitar and boxes of records.

"Okay, that's everything except the clothes," Tony said breathlessly, hopping back into the front. "I stuck it all in the front closet, that okay?"

"Yeah." Brendan cocked a thumb at the backseat where Peter lay slumped, his hand in his mouth. "But tonight you sleep on the couch—Peter'll be in his room."

"No prob."

He swung the car around the corner and parked in front of Big Mo's Liquor and Tobacco Plus. A few underdressed men stood in front, their breath staining the air as they cadged change from commuters hurrying home with shoulders hunched against the cold. Brendan glared at them as he stepped from the car.

"Damn winos, get a fucking job. All right, Peter," he said, and reaching into the back seat he hefted the boy in his arms. "Tony, can you get that stuff on your own?"

"Sure, man."

"The car alarm's set, don't mess with it once you close the door."

Brendan gave the street men a final scowl, then headed towards the corner. Tony hopped onto the sidewalk. He yanked out the black trash bag and his leather jacket, dropped them behind the car and slammed the door shut.

"Hey—you—" one of the men yelled hoarsely. "You—Whoa Whoa!" He lifted a malt liquor bottle in an unsteady toast.

Tony turned and smiled. "Dave. How you doin'?"

"Mmm fahn. Jus' fahn." Dave teetered on one foot, a wizened man in a filthy trench coat, wispy white hair sticking out from beneath a Microsoft gimme cap. At his feet a whippety mongrel wagged its tail frantically. "Uh-huh, uh-huh." Dave peered up at Tony with clouded eyes and stuck out one hand. "Whoa whoa whoa."

"Yeah, yeah. Here." Tony fished out a five-dollar bill and gave it to him, bent to scratch the dog's head. "Good doggie! Hold on—"

He peeled off his tweed jacket and held it up. "See if this fits, Dave."

"Thangs, thangs..." Dave smiled, showing a few ravaged teeth, and took the coat. Behind him the other men nodded approvingly. "Go' bless you..."

"No prob, man." Tony reached down for his leather jacket, grabbed the trash bag and started down the street. "See ya—"

Brendan met him at the door. "I'm getting Peter to bed. I pulled out the sofa for you, there's sheets and stuff in the bathroom." As Tony bounded past him into the living room he frowned.

"Where's your jacket?"

"I gave it to Dave the Grave."

"You gave it to Dave the Grave? *I* gave you that jacket!"

"Yeah, well now you can see it whenever you want," said Tony brightly. "I gotta fly, I've gotta be at work early tonight. Thanks again, man. Don't wait up for me."

"Right." Brendan said through clenched teeth. He watched as Tony raced back out the front door and down the steps to the sidewalk. "You have your keys?" he shouted after him.

"Keys to the city, man!" Tony yelled, punching the air with his fist as he started towards the Metro. "Later—!"

From the room behind him, Brendan heard his son banging impatiently on the door. "I'm coming, Peter." He gave Tony one last look, a gangly stoop-shouldered figure slouching its way downstream, past the overcoated men and women armed with briefcases and leather backpacks, the kids in their Timberland street gear, and a single slight whitehaired man weaving his way across Maryland Avenue in a white gimme cap and grey herringbone tweed jacket.

"Dave the fucking Grave," muttered Brendan, and he shut the door.

He and Peter were already up when Tony got home from work the next morning.

"You want breakfast?" Brendan pointed at the frying pan still on the stove. "There's some bacon left, I can make you eggs or something."

Tony shook his head. "No thanks. Got an Egg McMuffin on the way home. Check this out—"

He pulled a CD from his leather jacket. "Promo of the new Advent Moth. Wanna hear it?"

"No."

"Aw, c'mon—"

"No." Brendan slid back into his chair at the table beside Peter.

"Peter, here's Uncle Tony. Peter has to finish eating before he can leave the table," he said. "Okay, Peter. Pick up your fork, and eat this before it gets cold."

Tony stood watching them. "Hey, Peter," he said. "That looks like a good breakfast. Yum yum yum."

Peter sat at the table in a booster seat, a plastic bowl in front of him holding a small yellow heap of scrambled eggs. Around him the floor was smeared with more scrambled eggs and several pieces of toast. "Pick up the fork," repeated Brendan.

Peter reached for the cup. "That's the cup," said Brendan firmly. "Pick up the fork."

Peter put down the cup but did nothing. "This is the fork," said Brendan, pointing. "You eat your food with the fork." Peter picked it up stiffly, and began to eat.

"Listen," said Brendan. He looked up at Tony and patted the empty chair next to him. "We have to talk."

Tony sank obediently into the chair. "This isn't going to work, right?"

"Well, no, probably not. Or well, maybe for just a few days—" Brendan sighed and took a sip of coffee. "I was talking to Teri—"

"Oh, yeah, right. I thought we weren't supposed to tell Teri."

"I have to tell Teri, because of Peter." Brendan glanced at his son and smiled. "You're doing a good job with that fork, Peter." He turned back to his friend. "Look, Tony—you know what it's like. We're doing this intensive treatment, Peter's doing really well with it, and—well, we have to be consistent. Anything disruptive is just going to confuse him, and..."

"Right," said Tony. He spread his hands out on the tabletop and began drumming them. Peter looked over, drew his own hand to his mouth, and bit it.

"Pick up your fork, Peter. Put down your hand and pick up your fork." Brendan reached over, took Peter's hand and brought it back to the table. Peter began to scream, but then abruptly stopped.

"See what I mean?" Brendan shot an exasperated look at Tony. "We're working on that kind of stim, him biting his hand—"

Tony nodded. "He's not doing it as much as he used to."

"He's not doing it at all. Hardly. That's one of the things you do—you don't let them indulge in any self-stimulation, not until after they've eaten their breakfast, or done computer time, or whatever. Then, instead of letting him bite his hand we give him something else—"

Brendan turned so the boy couldn't see him and went on *sotto voce,* "—we give him this rubber duck, he can soothe himself with that for a few minutes."

Tony rubbed his chin. "Uh-huh. Well, I can do that. I mean, I can remember to—"

"No, you can't. No offense, but just your being here is disruptive—not you personally, but anyone else beside me, or Teri. We have this all worked out and it's—well, it's pretty rigid, Tony, it's like this total one-on-one stuff and let me tell you, it's exhausting."

"But then maybe you can use me—I mean, I can help with *something,* right?" Tony asked, a little desperately.

"Well, maybe." Brendan gave his friend a doubtful look. "I guess we can try it and see."

"Why didn't you just tell all me this last night?"

"Jesus, Tony, you didn't really give me a chance, did you? I mean, you ambushed me at the zoo, saying how you're getting kicked out of your place and you've got twenty-four hours to live, and—use your *fork,* Peter."

"I didn't mean to put you out." Tony ran a hand through his long hair, his leather jacket squeaking. "Okay. Well, I guess I could, I can always find somewhere else to crash, just let me get on the horn and see who I can get in touch with, okay?"

"Wait. Let me finish—but hold on a minute." Brendan stood, got behind Peter's chair and put his hands firmly on the boy's shoulders. Peter wriggled, but paused as his father went on, "Peter—you did a good job eating your breakfast. You did a good job using your fork. Let's go in now, you can watch *Sesame Street.*"

He pulled the chair out. Peter scrambled down and walked beside him into the living room. "See? Check this out—"

Brendan leaned down to pick up a videotape from a stack alongside the VCR. "We watch the same *Sesame Street* tape every day. It's close-captioned, and we read it out loud."

"He can read?"

Brendan slid the tape into the machine. Peter settled in the middle of the floor, staring straight ahead as his father walked past him and Big Bird filled the screen.

"Yes. No. I mean, I actually don't know *what* he can do," Brendan said, joining Tony back in the kitchen. "You know? They keep running all these tests, and—well, he tests above average for language comprehension, and he does well with all these learning games they play. And he's bonded really well with Peggy, his teacher, which is wonderful—at first he wouldn't even let her near him. But he's still not talking, obviously. And he's still doing the stims

when he feels stressed out, though that's pretty normal."

Brendan drew a hand across his forehead, blinking as though the light were too bright. "But what's normal, right? God, I'm tired."

He looked at Tony and smiled wearily. Brendan had gained a few pounds when he quit drinking, and his light brown hair was thinner and flecked with grey, but otherwise he looked pretty much the same as he did back in law school. Same pale blue eyes behind tortoiseshell glasses, same faded freckles in a round boyish face, same faded rugby shirt and chinos and worn L.L. Bean topsiders. The kind of attorney a GS-3 receptionist might trust in a dispute over a rush-hour fender-bender, or a checkout clerk at Rite Aid who lost his job when his drinking became a problem; a guy who looked reliable and intelligent, but not dangerously so. Not like his ex-wife, a lawyer who represented a pharmaceutical corporation in federal lawsuits over the unanticipated side effects of designer drugs with names Tony couldn't even pronounce; a woman who wore Donna Karan clothes and contact lenses that tinted her hazel eyes an astonishing jade-green; a woman who before her divorce had taken a year off from her job, to stay home and work every single day with her autistic son.

"Well, you know, Brendan, maybe I could help out. I mean, if you told me how..."

Brendan tilted back in his chair. "Thanks, Tony. But you know, it's like, *complex*. All this patterning stuff. The theory is, you just keep doing the same thing over and over and over again, and eventually you end up burning new neural pathways in the brain."

Tony raised an eyebrow. "Sounds weird. Actually, it sounds boring."

"Well, yeah, it *is* boring. Sort of. But it *works*. These kids—their brains are wired differently than ours. Someone like Peter, he goes into sensory overload at the slightest stimulation, the sort of thing maybe you or me wouldn't notice but he's incredibly sensitive to. The rest of us, our sensory levels are set at five or six; but his are cranked all the way up to nine, or ten."

"No—eleven!" Tony said, bopping up and down in excitement. "I get it! You know, like in *Spinal Tap*—the dials go all the way to *eleven*."

Brendan closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "You know, Tony—the best thing would probably be if—well, maybe you could kind of stay out of the way. It's fine your being here, I mean, I'd kind of even like it for a little while."

Tony looked hurt. "Oh. Thanks."

"Come on, Tony, you know what I mean. It's just incredibly stressful, that's all. Actually, it would be nice to have you around," Brendan went on a little wistfully. "Since Teri has commandeered Peter for most of the holidays. Not that he gets any of it," he ended, glancing into the living room.

How would you *know what he gets?* Tony thought. He leaned forward, leather-clad elbows nudging aside an empty glass of orange juice as he watched the little boy in the next room. On the floor in front of Peter, a huge plastic container of Legos had been spilled. Methodically, his brow furrowed, Peter was picking through the multicolored blocks, taking only the yellow and blue ones and being very careful not to even touch the others. On the TV behind him, a fuzzy red figure floated in a star-flecked ultramarine sky, silhouetted against a calm moon while a cat danced beneath. Tony blinked; letters scrolled across the bottom of the screen. On the floor, Peter tilted his head to one side, and his mouth moved silently.

"What's he saying?" said Tony. "Brendan? Is he, uh—"

Brendan turned, springing from his chair with such force that it skidded across the room. "Peter? Peter—"

Peter sat calmly and regarded the wall of yellow and blue that separated him from the remaining Legos. Above him Brendan stood, hands opened helplessly as he stared down at his son. "You okay, Peter? You okay?"

Peter said nothing, his mouth a straight line as he stretched out a hand and began to touch the blocks: yellow blue yellow blue yellow blue. After a moment Brendan turned and looked at Tony in the kitchen. "What happened?"

Tony opened his mouth, thought better of it. "Uh. Nothing. I mean—"He shook his head and shrugged. "Nothing, man. Sorry. I guess I'm just kinda beat, you know? I think I'll crash for awhile—"

He stood, chair scraping loudly. In the living room something flashed across Peter's face, unobserved by the grownups. A wince or perhaps a smile, the bright spark of a moth's wing in the dark. Brendan continued to stare at his friend.

"Beat," he said at last. He nodded, pushed up the sleeve of his old rugby shirt to scratch his arm. "Right. Use my room—just sleep on top of the bed, there's a blanket in the closet. Teri's coming by at noon to pick up Peter. You can have his room then—okay, Peter? That okay if Uncle Tony uses your room?"

This time Peter did smile. Tony saw it. Brendan didn't; he had already turned to adjust the volume on the TV. For just an instant the two others locked eyes and for once Tony could really *see* him: Peter's gaze questioning, the blue eyes pale as his father's but green-flecked, the firmly-set mouth neither stubborn nor remote but merely intent, slightly distracted but also puzzled by all the to-do. Tony gazed back, and in that instant it was as though a thread were stretched taut between them, silvery and shimmering, ephemeral as Peter's smile, something else that only Tony could almost see—

"Hey," he murmured. "*Hey*... !"

His heart surged as though on an explosive adrenaline rush, he had a flash of delight so intense and primal it was like one of those things you know you should never be able to remember but in a miraculous amphetamine moment you do: the first time you saw the moon, the first time you understood the color red; the first silver-grey flicker of a man's face on a small square screen, gentle and smiling, and other smaller faces dancing around him: a mouse, a beatnik, a gross-beaked clown. It was like that, seeing Peter smile, the echo of some emotional Big Bang—*bum, bum-bum!*—

And then it was gone. Without moving his head, Peter's attention back to the blue and yellow wall of Legos. Tony was staring down at him open-mouthed, feeling at once bereft and exultant.

Fuckin' A, he thought. His hand closed on the back of his chair as he stood, dazed, love and sleeplessness and the rush of blood to his head all one solid revelation. He blinked, eyes aching as Brendan walked past him to gather dishes from the table.

"Tony. You go on," he said with a glance over his shoulder. "Peter and I'll be out for awhile, down at the park or something. If the phone rings just let the machine catch it, okay?"

Tony stared at him, then nodded. "Sure," he said. "Thanks, man."

He turned, stopped to look back. Peter was framed within the doorway, kneeling in front of his Legos. The TV hummed at his back, a fuzzy red figure twirled around the moon, words formed and changed on the screen.

"Bye Peter." Tony waited to see if the boy would look up, if that mad rush of feeling would overcome him again.

It didn't. Peter remained where he was, making his patterns: yellow blue yellow blue. Yellow.

"Bye bye," murmured Tony. He swiped a long strand of unwashed hair from his face; then turned and walked down the corridor to Brendan's room.

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In the weeks that followed they fell into a surprisingly easy routine. Surprising because in all their years of knowing each other, Brendan and Tony had never actually lived together. Oh, there had been numerous occasions when one or the other had been bounced out by a girlfriend, or a group house had gotten just too crazy even for Tony's patience. And certainly there had been plenty of drunken evenings when Brendan had passed out on Tony's sofa or floor, or vice versa. And so Brendan had always assumed—extremely very *wrongly,* as Tony quickly pointed out with a hurt look—that Tony was a slob.

In fact Tony was exceedingly, even excessively, neat. He cleaned dishes immediately after washing them; he picked up damp towels and hung them over the shower rod to dry, and later folded them carefully, in three parts, and replaced them on the towel rack. If Brendan put his half-full coffee mug down somewhere and forgot about it, the next time he'd see it would be in the dishwasher, or back in the cupboard. Each section of *The Washington Post* was in the recycling bin as soon as it was read, and sometimes even sooner.

"You know, Tony, I was *saving* that Redskins article," Brendan said the Sunday before Thanksgiving, aggrieved to find the sports section gone a few hours before game time. "Christ, you're worse than my mother! Were you always like this?" Brendan gave his friend a suspicious look as Tony sorted through the CDs in the living room. "I thought you were a slob. Like me," he added, yanking the offending sports section from the recycling bin.

"No way, man."

"*Yes,* way—what about all those places you lived? What about your place with Kimberly? *That* was disgusting."

"Wasn't me, man." Tony shook his head. "That was her. That was all of them. I just like messy women," he said, shrugging. He held up a CD and struck a thoughtful pose: Marcus Welby, Punk Rocker. "I think they're better in bed. Haven't you ever noticed? Big Fat Slob Equals Great Head."

Brendan laughed. "Oh. *That's* what I've been doing wrong."

"Sure, man. Problem is, eventually, you just can't find 'em."

"You mean like, all the good ones are taken?"

"No, man—I mean, like, Kimberly's place was such a fucking pigsty, it took me a week to figure out she'd gone off with Roy." Tony turned back to the stack of CDs. "And you know, these days I'm so wired when I get home from work in the morning—it's like when I used to play. Takes me a while to wind down. It calms me, straightening stuff. And I mean, what's your fucking problem?" He glared over his shoulder at Brendan. "Cleaning up is a lot more productive than shooting smack."

Brendan hooted. "Is that what you told your students? 'This is Tony Maroni for a Drug-Free America. Clean your'—ouch!"

He ducked as a CD went skimming past his head. "Go watch your Foreskins game!" yelled Tony. "Let me clean in peace!"

They went out to dinner that night after the game, Tony's domestic abilities not extending as far as cooking food. Peter was at his mother's until Wednesday, when Brendan would pick him up for the long Thanksgiving weekend.

"How come you got the night off?" he asked Tony, dousing his salad with balsamic vinegar. "I thought Gigantor was open for all major holidays."

"They are. But I said I'd cover for Jason so he could go see his girlfriend in Charlottesville." Tony picked up a french fry, dabbed it in ketchup and drew a little heart; erased it and ate the fry. "Wish *I* had a girlfriend," he said. "We still on for Cousin Kevin's?"

"Far as I know. Kevin says Eileen's bought a five-hundred-pound turkey and upset the Chicago trading floor by sucking up cranberry futures. So I guess we're expected."

Tony laughed: he loved Eileen. "You think she'll do that thing again with the little teeny pumpkins and jalapeño cheese? And the girls doing their Irish dancing?"

"Jesus, I hope not. Kevin said come any time after ten, so we can catch some of the parade. And we're supposed to bring cider."

"Cider?"

"Yeah—" Brendan pulled an ATM receipt from his pocket and squinted, trying to read something scrawled there. "Magyar Farms Organic Flash-Pasteurized Cider. Four gallons."

"Wow. Flash Pasteurized." Tony leaned back in his chair and grinned. "Thanksgiving. I can't hardly wait. Remember when we were kids, watching the parade and stuff? And that story your Uncle Tom always told, about the turkey who ate the Pepperidge Farm Man?"

Brendan laughed. "I forgot about that."

"And Chip Crockett... Remember how Captain Kangaroo always used to have Thanksgiving dinner, like a real formal dinner—you know, Mister Green Jeans and Dancing Bear saying Grace with all the silverware and good china. And so Chip Crockett started doing that thing with Ooga Booga and Ogden Orff trying to stuff a kielbasa?"

Brendan speared a cherry tomato and shook his head. "Jeez, Tony. How the hell do you remember that stuff?"

"Chip Crockett Web page, man! It's like a memory enhancer. Or a time machine, or something." He hesitated, recalling that weird charged moment with Peter; thought of mentioning it to Brendan, but instead said, "Like when you smell something, or hear something—a song, or the way a balloon smells—and all of a sudden you flash back to when you were really, really little? Like Peter's age? But you can't remember exactly what it is that you're remembering, because you were so young then it was before you started remembering things. It's like that."

Brendan stared at him blankly. "Balloons?"

"Sure!" Tony leaned back a little too enthusiastically in his chair, nearly tipped before he came crashing back down. "Oops. Yeah, balloons."

"Tony? What the hell are you talking about?"

"I told you: Chip Crockett's Web page! It's all there. All that stuff you thought you forgot when you grew up—"

"Like where I put my Casey Stengel baseball cards?"

"Absolutely. And all those Bosco commercials? And Cocoa Marsh?" Tony pushed aside Brendan's salad and leaned across the table. "*It's all in there.* Bonomo Turkish Taffy. Enemee Electric Organs. Diver Dan and Baron Barracuda. 'They're Coming to Take Me Away, Ha Ha.' Ooga Booga. Ogden Orff. *Everything.*"

"Right." Brendan closed his eyes, opened them, and slid his salad plate back where it belonged. "You know, Tony," he said between mouthfuls of mesclun and seared porcini mushrooms, "doesn't it ever strike you that some of this stuff is—well, sort of useless?"

Tony looked confused. "What do you mean?"

"All this baby boomer detritus. Beatlemania. Mickey Mouse Club hats. *Three Stooges* T-shirts. It's all bullshit. They're just trying to sell you shit. It's all one big fucking infomercial."

"But that's not what I'm talking about." Tony shook his head, hair whipping round his face. "*I'm* talking about the stuff that was *lost*—all those people you never heard of again. Like Chip Crockett. All those puppets he made, " he said plaintively. "And his characters. Ogden Orff. I mean, there's nothing left but these little tiny ten-second videoclips, but he's *there,* man! He's still alive!"

Brendan dropped his fork onto his plate and buried his face in his hands. "Tony." He cracked his fingers so that he could peer at his friend. In front of him, Tony's cheeseburger platter was almost untouched, the ghostly red outline of a heart just visible alongside the pickle. "Listen. I hate to be the one to give you the bad news about Santa Claus, but—"

"But this is *real.* Ogden Orff was real—or, well, Chip Crockett was. They were *real,*" Tony repeated, pounding the table. "Real."

"Yeah, but Tony! They don't *matter.* They *never* mattered! I mean, it's cute and nice that you can find this stuff and look at the funny pictures and all, but Jesus Christ! You're forty-three years old! I got my access bill and you spent thirty-nine hours online in the last *two weeks.* That's a lot of Ogden fucking Orff, Tony. And to tell you the truth, I'm kind of—"

"I'll pay you back. I'll pay you right now, here—"

Brendan made a tired gesture as Tony fumbled in his pocket. Dollar bills fluttered around him, coins *chink*ed across the table and onto the floor in a steady rain. "I don't want your money, Tony. I *definitely* don't want it in nickels and dimes—stop, for chrissake! Listen to me—

"I know you just started working again, but—well, you've got to, like, get a life, Tony. A *real* life. You can't spend all your time online, looking at pictures of Ogden Orff."

"Why not?" The look Tony gave Brendan was definitely hostile. "Why the fuck not? What do *you* think I should do? Huh? Mister Big-Time lawyer. What, are you pulling in thirty grand these days, after you make child support? Forty?"

"That has nothing to—"

"Yes it does! Or, well—no it doesn't, does it?" The hostility drained from Tony's face. Suddenly all he looked was tired, and sad, and every one of his forty-three years old. "Hey man. I'm sorry. I was out of line there, with that money stuff—"

"It's okay, Tony."

"Way out of line. 'Cause like, I know you could earn more if you wanted to. Right?" Tony raised his eyebrows, then looked away. "But, like, I understand that you don't *want* to. I identify with your integrity, man. I respect it. I really do."

"My what?" Without warning, Brendan began to laugh. "My integrity? My *integrity?* Oh Tony. You big dope!" Hard; harder than he'd laughed in a long time, maybe since before Peter was born. Maybe since before he was married, when slowly everything had stopped being funny — because what was funny about being married, especially when you didn't *stay* married? Or having a kid, even a perfectly normal boring healthy kid; or a job, a perfectly normal healthy job that you hated? There was nothing funny about any of that; there was nothing *fun* about it at all.

And there was Tony Maroni, with his soulful dopey eyes, his long greying hair and stretched Silly Putty face, his black leather jacket with its Jimmy Carter campaign button rusted to the lapel and the faxed copy of Chip Crockett's obituary still wadded in one pocket. Tony who remembered the words to every back-of-the-schoolbus song they'd sung thirty-five years ago; Tony who had dedicated a song to his childhood friends, and treasured Officer Joe Bolton's autograph as though it were the Pope's; Tony who'd nearly wept when PeeWee Herman got booted off the air; who *did* weep, as a kid, when he'd gotten the bad news about the North Pole.

Tony Maroni was fun. Tony Maroni was funny. Most of all, Tony Maroni had integrity. Sort of.

"What?" Tony tilted his head, puzzled. "What?"

"Nothing." Brendan shook his head, wiping his eyes. "Nothing—just, you know—"He flapped his hand and coughed, trying to calm down. "Me. You. All this stuff."

Now Tony sounded suspicious. "All *what* stuff?"

"Life. You thinking I have *integrity*, when—"

The laughter started up again: spurts of it, hot somehow and painful, like blood. *Laughing blood*, Brendan thought, but couldn't stop. "—when I'm just—a—a—*terrible—lawyer!*"

"Awwww." Tony rubbed his forehead and frowned. Then he started laughing, too. " 'No, Ogden, no!' " he said, imitating Chip Crockett. " 'Don't file that tort!' "

Brendan lifted his head. His pale blue eyes were brilliant, almost feverishly so; but there was a kind of calm in them, too. Like a beach that's been storm-scoured, all the sand castles and traces of an endless hot afternoon smoothed away, so that only a few still sky-reflecting pools remain.

Calm. That was how he felt. Their waiter passed and Brendan smiled at him, signaling for the check; then turned back to Tony. "Okay. So maybe you can show me that Web site."

Tony's face cracked into a grin like Humpty Dumpty's. "Sure, man! Absolutely!"

"And maybe you can write me a check—not now, jeez, Tony. When you get settled. More settled. Whenever."

The waiter brought the check. Brendan paid it. Tony left the tip, in little neatly-stacked piles of quarters and dimes and nickels. On the way out Tony held the door as Brendan shrugged into his heavy camel's hair coat, still smiling. As he stepped past him onto the sidewalk Brendan tripped, catching himself as he lurched between an immaculately dressed Capitol Hill couple who scowled as Brendan drew himself up, laughing, alongside his friend.

"That's my attorney," said Tony fondly. "Ogden Orff."

j

Thanksgiving Day dawned clear and warm, the air glittering with that magical blue-gold tinge Brendan recalled from his undergrad days—late-autumn light that seemed to seep into the pores of even the most disenchanted bureaucrats in their holiday-weekend drag of paint-spattered chinos and faded Springsteen T-shirts, rearranging leaves on vest-pocket lawns with their Smith & Hawken rakes. That was what Teri was doing when he went to pick up Peter at The House Formerly Known as Brendan's, way up Connecticut Avenue just past the Bethesda line.

"Hi, Teri," he said, stepping from the car and hopping over a brown heap at the edge of the driveway. "How you doing? Where's the boy?"

Teri paused, balancing the rake on her shoulder like a musket, and cocked a thumb at the house behind her. "Taking a nap. You can go wake him if you want."

Brendan nodded. His ex-wife as always looked harried, her short hair stuck with twigs and her dark eyes narrowed with a furious concentration that seemed expended needlessly upon innocent dead leaves. "Great," he said. "What're you doing today? Kevin said—"

"Leon's coming over. We're going out to Harper's Ferry."

Leon was Teri's paralegal, a wispy young man ten years her junior who'd been her companionate default since before the divorce was final. Brendan had never been able to figure out if Leon was sleeping with his ex-wife, if he were even heterosexual, or a careerist, or what? "That's nice," he said. "Well, Kevin and Eileen send their love."

"And Tony?" Eileen swung the rake down from her shoulder, plonked it in the ground in front of her and leaned on the handle. To Brendan it still looked like a musket.

"Tony?"

"Does Tony send his love? I understand he's living at your place these days."

"Tony! Oh, sure, Tony sends his love." Brendan kicked at the leaves, noticed Teri's wince of disapproval and quickly began nudging them back into place with his foot. "Loads of hugs and kisses from Tony Maroni."

"Hm." Teri eyed him measuringly. Then, "You should have told me."

"You know, Teri, I don't need to ask for—"

"I didn't say *ask*," she said calmly. "I said *told*. You should have told me, that's all. I don't care if Tony's living with you. I know it's—I'm sure it must make things easier for you. I just need to know, so I can arrange Peter's schedule accordingly."

Brendan frowned. "Accordingly to what?"

Behind Teri the front door of the little mock-Tudor house swung open. Peter stood there, yellow rubber duck in one hand. He smiled, staring at a point just above Brendan's head, then walked across the lawn towards him.

"We can talk about this later," said Teri. She wiped a smudge of dirt form her cheek and called to the boy. "Hi sweetie. Ready to go with Daddy?"

Brendan grinned as Peter came up alongside him. "Hey, Peter!" He caressed the top of his son's head, ever so gently, as though it were dandelion fluff he was afraid to disperse. "We're going to go see Kevin and the twins.

Remember the twins? Give Mommy a kiss goodbye."

Peter remained beside his father. "I'll go get his stuff," Teri called as she started for the house.

"I'll bring him back Sunday afternoon. Is that still okay?"

Teri nodded. A few minutes later she returned with his knapsack and extra bag of clothes. "Okay. This should be everything. Here's the number where we'll be till Saturday."

She crouched in front of Peter and took his hands in hers. He writhed and tried to pull away, but Teri only stared at him, her eyes glazed with tears. "I'll miss you," she said. Her voice was loud and steady. "You have a great time with Daddy and Uncle Kevin and the twins, okay? I love you, Peter—"

Peter said nothing. When Teri kissed him and stood, he drew the rubber duck to his mouth, rubbing it against his cheek.

"All right then." Brendan started for the car, turning and beckoning for Peter to follow. "Wave goodbye, Peter."

The boy followed him. "Wave bye-bye," Brendan repeated, standing aside to let Peter climb into the back seat. Brendan strapped him in, then got in front. "Bye-bye," he said to Peter, the boy kicking at the seat in front of him. And, "Bye-bye," Brendan called to Teri, rolling down the window as he backed from the drive, "Bye-bye," as behind them she grew smaller and smaller, the rake just a rake again, his ex-wife just a mother, waving to her son as he disappeared down the street.

j

Kevin lived in an expensive contemporary house in Potomac, its cedar siding tinted a rich russet-brown and lushly overgrown with Virginia creeper and English ivy, its front yard a miniature forest of rhododendron and birch trees and azaleas. There were no stray leaves on the ground, save beneath a solitary Japanese maple whose bounty was scattered across the grass like crimson handprints.

"Uncle Brendan! Uncle Brendan's here!"

Two small girls, Cara and Caitlin, danced excitedly on the front porch. Twins, with long silken hair so deep a red it looked violet in certain lights, paper-white skin and green eyes. They were wearing smocked flowered dresses and their hair was ribboned with pink satin bows so immense it looked as though they were wearing throw pillows on their heads.

"Peter! Where's Peter! Hi Peter!"

The girls ran over to the car and began pounding on the window. Peter regarded them with the same reserved interest he'd shown the iguanas at the zoo, but when Cara yanked the door open and flung herself at him he kicked fiercely at the back of Brendan's seat.

"Cara! Hey, honey, come give Uncle Brendan a kiss—it's okay, Peter—come here, sweetie, remember he gets a little excited if—"

"Actually, you're our cousin." Caitlin stood watching him solemnly. "Not our uncle. Our first cousin once removed."

"Oh yeah? Well here, come give Uncle Cousin Brendan Once Removed a kiss—"

"Brendan!"

Another figure appeared on the porch, radiant in crimson velvet and ecru lace, her hair a gold corona framing a face even paler than the girls'.

"Eileen, hi—gee, you look great! Hi, Caitlin, Cara, hi hi hi hi—"

Brendan unfolded himself from the car and the twins' embrace, freed Peter from his carseat. Eileen clattered down to hug him, Peter sliding behind his father's legs as she did so; and Brendan felt that irresistible tug of lust and awe he always felt when he saw his cousin's wife.

"Wow!" He drew back to admire her dress, protected by a spattered apron with the legend JESUS IS COMING: LOOK BUSY. "You *really* dressed for dinner."

"Tell me about it." Eileen dabbed Brendan's chin with a finger, erasing a smudge of lipstick. "Girls, go get your father."

She swatted at the twins and sent them racing into the house. "And close the door! I've been doing this job out in Warrenton, redecorating Senator Weston's place," she continued, turning back to Brendan. "Almost broke my wrist on that goddam chainsaw , the chain came off and—"

Brendan laughed. Eileen had been a lingerie model—"the Rosey Underwear girl," she called it—for the Rosellen's Boudoir Catalog, before quitting to have babies and then become an interior decorator for the horsy set out in Middleburg. Now she wielded a chainsaw and glue-gun like Martha Stewart on steroids.

"—oh, but *you* know what it's like," she ended.

"Breaking my wrist on a chainsaw in a senator's house? Actually, no."

"And how is Peter?" Eileen's tone softened as she took in Peter, sheltered behind his father and chewing his rubber duck. "Hi, darlin'—"

She glanced at Brendan. "Will he let me hug him?"

"No. But Peggy—his teacher at Birchwood—he'll let her hold him, now. Sometimes."

Eileen gazed down at Peter. "That's okay," she said softly. "That's just fine, okay Peter?" She turned back to his father, holding the front door open. "I'm glad he's doing so well, Brendan. Kevin told me, that new school is great and he's just making such great progress..."

Brendan followed her inside, wondering what on earth Kevin could have said. The two cousins seldom confided anything more personal than Redskins' scores. "Oh, and listen," Eileen went on, taking his arm. "Tony said not to

worry, he got the cider."

"The cider!" Brendan slapped his forehead. "I totally forgot."

"That's what I'm telling you, Tony's bringing it.

"Tony? I thought he had to work."

"Change of plans. Here, Peter, you can put your things in here. Brendan, you too"

"Brendan! Peter! Glad you could make it—" Kevin loomed in the doorway, beaming.

"Yeah, great to be here, Kevin, thanks."

"Girls!" Kevin ordered. "You all go play nicely together, you and Peter." He turned and made his way down the hall.

"Sure Dad." Caitlin smiled respectfully at the younger boy. "Hi, Peter. Would you like to come watch TV with us? In the other room?"

"It's down here," said Cara, and started off. Peter shook his head, looking at the ceiling and patting his rubber duck against one cheek.

"You know what?" Brendan started to explain. "Sometimes he doesn't like to go off on his own. But maybe in a few minutes, if I go—"

Without a word Peter began walking. Still gazing at the ceiling, but following Cara into the cozy room where a TV was already turned to the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade.

"Hey, Brendan." Kevin stuck his head out from the kitchen. "What're you drinking?"

"Uh, club soda. Fizzy water, anything." Brendan's brow furrowed, and he crossed to where the children sat.

"He's watching with us," said Caitlin. On screen the camera panned a crowd of waving children, then swept up to take in a shapeless scarlet mass floating against a backdrop of skyscrapers and cobalt-blue sky. "Look Peter, it's Elmo!"

"*Sesame Street.* The universal language."

Brendan looked up to see Tony standing in the hall. He wore a black T-shirt, faded black jeans, and his leather jacket, augmented by four gallons of cider balanced very precariously in his arms.

"Tony. Hey, why didn't you tell me you were coming, I would've given you a lift." Brendan scooped up two of the gallons and took a step towards the kitchen. "I thought you had to work."

Tony shrugged. "Well, you know how it is." His gaze remained fixed on the television. "Gee, look at Elmo! He sure looks bigger in real life, huh? Hi goils," he called to the twins. "Look: it's Crazy Uncle Tony."

The girls glanced up, gave high-pitched squeals of glee, and raced over to hug him.

"Uncle Tony! Crazy Uncle Tony!"

"Hey," said Brendan. "How come he's Uncle Tony and I'm only Cousin Brendan?"

"Come on, guys," called Eileen from the kitchen. "Come hang out with the big kids. Girls, dinner'll be ready in an hour."

It was warm enough to sit outside on the deck, looking out onto a small stand of maples still clinging to their shaggy red leaves. Now and then one of the children would wander out, the girls looking for snacks (refused) or attention (given), Peter simply standing for a moment beside his father before turning and walking back inside.

"Tony said he's starting to read?" Eileen asked. She alone was drinking wine, a good Sémillon that gave off topaz sparks as sun struck her glass.

Brendan's mouth twitched in an automatic smile. "Actually, no, I don't think he's reading. Well, we're not *sure* he's reading. We have close-captioned TV, and he watches it, and Teri thinks maybe he makes out some of it. But I don't know," he ended, pressing his glass of club soda to his cheek. "I just don't know."

"Well, but everything has to be taken slowly, doesn't it?" Eileen leaned over and touched his knee. "Every little thing is sort of a major triumph with kids. Any kids."

"Sure." Brendan thought of Peter going in by himself to watch TV with the twins. "Every little bit counts."

"It's all important," agreed Eileen.

"Sure," said Kevin, standing. "But what's *really* important is *football.*"

Tony looked stricken. "What about *The March of the Wooden Soldiers?*"

"Don't worry, Tony, we got it all set up." Kevin started for the kitchen. "And you know what else, Tony? This year you even get to sit at the grownups' table."

When dinner was ready they all moved into the formal dining room. At his father's side, Peter sat quietly as Brendan cut up turkey and green beans. For a little while the room was happily silent, except for grunts of "Great job, Eileen" and muffled requests for more stuffing. Seconds were dispersed, plates emptied, and soon everyone save Peter began talking at once—the twins eager to tell Brendan about some complicated arrangement they had for sharing hamsters, Kevin ribbing his cousin about the last football game, Eileen sharing her recipe for jalapeño-pumpkin dip with Tony.

And, gradually, and despite Eileen's best efforts, the conversation began to turn to childhood. Brendan and Kevin and Tony's childhood, in particular; Chip Crockett, in even more particular.

"Kevin, man, you got to check out his Web site. I was gonna show it to Brendan the other night but it got too late. It'll blow your mind. Right, Brenda?"

Kevin sniffed. "Sounds more like something the girls'd go for, Tony. I personally don't watch a lot of Chip Crockett these days."

"Well, no one does," said Tony. He turned to Eileen. "You remember Chip Crockett. They had him over in New Jersey, right?"

"Oh sure. He was great—you girls would've loved him. I had a total crush on Chip Crockett," she added dreamily. "He was—"

"What was he like?" Cara broke in.

"He was just like your Uncle Tony," said Kevin. "Plus or minus a few brain cells."

"I was *going to say,*" Eileen continued, "that he was like my father. Or what I wanted my father to be like. He was funny—"

"He was silly," said Kevin.

"He was *wonderful*. I still remember, after Kennedy was assassinated—that Monday morning Chip Crockett came back on the air and tried to explain it to us. He looked awful, but he was so gentle and sad—I never forgot that."

The twins looked bored. "Can we be excused? Please?"

Eileen nodded. "Yes. Of course, just clear your plates..."

They were already out the door. A moment later Cara poked her head back in. "Peter? Wanna come? We have that movie—"

"The movie!" Tony shot to his feet. "Wait, girls—"

"Go ahead, Peter," said Brendan, smiling encouragingly. "Go with Tony." Peter slid from his chair and left.

"Tony! Clear your place!" Kevin shouted as Tony hurried down the hall. "God, he drives me nuts. Doesn't he drive you crazy, Brendan? Living with him?"

"Not really. Well, a little. He's very neat."

"Neat? Well, his life's a fucking mess. You know he got canned from Gigantor Music?"

Brendan blinked. "No."

"Yes. He showed up for work last night, they told him to go home."

"Kevin." Eileen's lacquered red nails poised menacingly above his wrist. "*Shut up.*"

Brendan began to unwind a crescent roll. "What happened?"

"Who knows? Who cares? Look at him—forty-three years old, he's still wearing a leather jacket and hightop sneakers and waiting to collect his first royalty check. He's a fucking loser."

Eileen's eyes narrowed. "Yeah? Well, I've never seen anyone wearing a T-shirt with *your* face on it."

"He hasn't even played a pickup gig in three years." Kevin picked up his glass of non-alcoholic beer and stared at it. "He depresses me."

"He makes me laugh." In a swirl of red velvet and Chakra perfume, Eileen stood. "He's the only one who's still the way we were when we all met. *I* think he's a sweetheart."

"Oh yeah?" sputtered Kevin. "Well, then, why—"

"And *you* can do the dishes."

She stalked off, carrying the bottle of sémillon. Kevin stared after her. "Christ. My wife's leaving me for Tony Maroni."

Brendan took a bite of his roll. "You know, it's a concept."

"What?"

"T-shirts with your picture on them. They could give 'em out at Greenpeace rallies. You'd be bigger than Saddam Hussein."

Kevin gazed broodingly at the deconstructed turkey. After a minute, Brendan asked, "Why does he bother you so much?"

"Tony? Because he's superfluous. He has absolutely no place in the food chain."

"Then why do you stay in touch with him at all?"

Kevin sighed. "Because he's the only one of us who's still the same as when we met."

"Dad?" Caitlin stood in the doorway. "The tape's not working."

"I'll go." Brendan stood, put a hand on his cousin's shoulder. "You help Eileen with the dishes."

He followed the girl into the hall. "How's Peter doing, Caitlin?"

She shrugged. "Okay, I guess. He doesn't talk."

"That's right."

"Did he ever?"

"No, he didn't."

Caitlin stopped outside the door to the TV room. Peter and Cara were sitting on the floor with Tony sprawled between them, counting out Gummy Worms.

"Hey, guys," said Brendan. He stepped over them to the television and picked up the remote. "What's the problem?"

The screen blipped to blue, then black. In a flurry of electronic snow the tape started. Brendan sank onto the couch, balancing the remote on his knees. "There—"

Mother Goose appeared on the screen, warbling tremulously about Toyland. Heroes and villains were identified: Little Bo Peep, Tom Thumb ("That sap," said Tony), wicked Barnaby, and, last of all, Stan and Ollie lying side by side in bed sound asleep.

"Do they talk?" Cara frowned. "I don't like it when they don't talk."

"It's been colorized," said Brendan. "I hate that."

"I don't." Caitlin scrunched closer to the screen. "I hate black-and-white. No way..."

"Way," said Tony. "Black-and-white is cool, man. You just have to get used to it. Here—"

He grabbed the remote from Brendan and started fiddling with it, pushing buttons and pointing it around the room.

"Beam me up, Captain—oops, not that one..." Caitlin and Cara giggled. Even Peter turned to watch. "Hmm. There's gotta be a way to do this..."

Brendan shook his head. "It doesn't work like that, Tony. Older TVs, you can adjust the color to make it black-and-white again. But not anymore. Not with a remote, at least. Believe me, I've tried."

On screen, Stan Laurel froze, rose-pink mouth open in a wail.

"Uh-oh. Looks bad for Old Mother Hubbard." Kevin's massive frame filled the doorway. He looked down at the kids and smiled. "We used to watch this every year on Thanksgiving. But it wasn't in color then."

"Uncle Tony's fixing it."

Kevin glanced suspiciously at Tony. "Uncle Tony better not be *breaking* it."

"—see what *this'll* do—"

"Look!" Cara jumped up excitedly. "He did it! Uncle Tony *did* it!"

Stan's wail filled the room. He reached up to tousle his thatch of hair—black-and-white hair, black-and-white hand; black-and-white Ollie rolling black-and-white eyes in disgust.

"*Now, Stannie, what'd you go and do that for?*"

"That's impossible." Brendan shook his head. "You can't do that with a remote. I've tried. I've even called the video store—"

"You sure can't do it with *that* remote." Kevin strode over and snatched it from Tony's hand. "If you screwed this up—"

"Daddy, be quiet!"

"Shhh!" said Tony. "I like this part."

"Well, don't mess it up *now*, Kev, for Chrissakes." Brendan whacked at his cousin's knee. "At least wait'll it's over."

"Yeah, Daddy—come sit with us—"

Kevin sat. Tony flopped back, arms outspread and long hair tangled as he watched, a huge grin on his face. Brendan slid past him onto the floor and edged towards his son. Without taking his eyes from the screen, Peter moved away. Brendan stopped, feeling as though someone were squeezing his ribs. Then he turned back to the movie. After a few minutes, Eileen appeared and sat down next to Tony. She cupped her wineglass between her knees and put the half-empty bottle on the floor beside the couch.

"I love this movie," she murmured. "But I don't like the way they colorized—but hey! Who fixed it?"

"Tony!" everybody shouted.

Eileen raised her glass at him. "Way to go, Tony Maroni."

"*Shhhh*... !"

Everybody *shhh*ed. The story unfolded, like one of those card tricks you know in advance won't be much of a trick at all—*Guess which one's the king, Daddy!*—because they're *all* kings.

But no one cared. Cara and Caitlin and Peter watched, huge-eyed. Brendan sat as close to Peter as he could, feeling his heart constrict again when the boy winced at the Bogey Men.

"It's okay, Peter—they're just pretend. See—you can see the zipper on that one. Are you scared, honey? Do you want to sit with Daddy?"

Peter shook his head.

"This is the best part," whispered Tony. "Watch..."

There was Santa's Workshop. There were Laurel and Hardy. There were one hundred wooden soldiers six feet high.

And there was the music. A solitary horn, high and sweet and strong, a sound Brendan still heard in dreams; an answering blare of trumpets and drums—

And the toy soldiers became real, black helmets lifting above impassive white faces, stiff black legs slicing the air as they began to march. As a child, this moment had always filled Brendan with such inexpressible joy that he had simply jumped to his feet and leapt up and down. Then Tony would do it, too, and Kevin, and all their brothers and sisters, until the rec room would be filled with giddy leaping children, and on the screen behind them rank upon rank of implacable, unstoppable soldiers making war upon the Bogey Men.

Now, for just an instant, he felt that way again: that tide of joy and longing, that same impulse to leap into the air, because he could not leap into the screen. Without thinking, he moved to put his arm around Peter. His son shrank away.

"Peter..."

The name came out before Brendan could stop it, a sound nobody heard. The trumpets swelled, the soldiers broke rank and began routing the Bogey Men. Brendan looked down and wiped his eyes. He glanced aside and saw Kevin doing the same, and Eileen, eyes fixed on the screen and their arms around their children.

"Mommy, will they win?"

"Of course, watch..."

On the floor beside Brendan, Tony sat unnaturally still, his hands clasping his knees, his bare arms goosefleshed as the soldiers triumphed and the Bogey Men were driven back into the darkness and the lovers reunited before Old King Cole.

"That was a good movie," said Cara.

"Whaddya mean?" said Kevin. "That's the *best* movie—"

"I liked it when the soldiers saved everybody."

"I liked it when the soldier stepped on that guy's head."

"I liked it when the alligators ate Barnaby."

Brendan turned to his son. "What did *you* like, Peter?" he asked, struggling to keep his voice steady. "Did you like the soldiers? Were they cool?"

Kevin flashed the remote at the television. The tape began to rewind, soldiers marching backwards, crooked Barnaby wriggling back into his crooked house.

"Hey, look." Cara walked up to the screen. "It's in color again."

"Damn good thing, too," said Kevin. "This remote cost a hundred bucks."

"Come on, girls." Eileen yawned, looked dismayed into her empty wineglass. She set it in on the floor and stood. "Who wants dessert?"

A rush for the kitchen, the girls elbowing Tony as he pretended to hold them back. Kevin drooped an arm around Eileen and snuck in a kiss as the others raced down the hall, Peter trailing after them. Only Brendan remained sitting on the floor, staring at the empty TV screen. After a minute, he turned and reached for Eileen's empty wineglass; then angled around the couch until he found the half-empty bottle of sémillon. He poured some into his glass and drank it, slowly but steadily. Then he refilled the glass and drank again, and then a third time, until the bottle was empty.

"Mm."

For a minute he sat, feeling the muffled rush that came when he drank too quickly: like pressing a pillow over his face and jumping from the top bunk when he was a kid. Doing that always made his head ache, eventually, just like drinking did.

But not yet. Brendan got to his feet, feeling purposeful, perfectly focused, and walked down the hall. Away from the kitchen, to the huge back room where his cousin had set up a pool table and wide-screen TV, sofas and club chairs and the small liquor cabinet Eileen insisted on keeping for guests and clients.

Tony had wandered off as well, looking for the bathroom. He finally found it, a room bigger than any living room he'd ever had. More furniture, too, including a bookcase that contained reprints of vintage comic books. He got so caught up in *Namor the Sub-Mariner* that it wasn't until his Pokemon watch beeped six o'clock that he realized he'd been in there for half an hour.

"Damn."

He shoved the Sub-Mariner under his arm and hurried back to join the others in the kitchen.

The children had gone out onto the deck to eat. A floodlight cast a weird movie-set glow over them: the twins' hair pumpkin-orange, Peter's rubber duck a blob of yellow paint beside his elbow. Cara and Caitlin sat side by side at the picnic table, sharing a fluffy pink blanket against the November chill. Peter was on the other bench, alone, picking at apple pie and rocking slowly back and forth. Inside, Eileen had dimmed the kitchen lights and brought candles in from the dining room. It took a minute for Tony's eyes to adjust to the odd patchwork of light and shadow, the surreally bright window framing the children so that they looked like a film running behind their silent, candle-lit parents.

Only it wasn't really silent at all. As he entered the room, Eileen turned, her cheeks red and golden hair seemingly aflame.

"*Here's* Tony!" she said, too brightly. She lifted a bottle of mineral water and beckoned at a stool pulled up beside the counter. Kevin was leaning beside her, arms folded against his big chest, scowling with even more than his customary ferocity. "Here! I was just making some coffee to go with dessert!"

"Uh, thanks." Tony looked around uneasily. What the hell was going on? "Is there any more cider?"

"Cider? Sure, sure..." Eileen hurried over to the fridge, and that was when Tony saw Brendan. He was sitting at the big round kitchen table, holding a wineglass and looking up at Tony and Eileen and Kevin with a dangerously fixed smile. Tony remembered that smile. He hadn't seen it in about ten years. The last time he *had* seen it, it had been followed by an empty bottle of Jameson's that nearly cracked Tony in the skull.

"Why, it's Tony Maroni," said Brendan. His eyes glittered, but his voice sounded as though he were talking through a cardboard tube. "Hey hey. Whoa whoa whoa."

This time the bottle wasn't Jameson's but white wine. It wasn't empty yet, either. The cork lay at Brendan's elbow beside Eileen's Williams-Sonoma corkscrew, and beside that was a steaming coffee mug, untouched.

"Hi, Brendan."

"Hi, Tony. Pleased to meet me?"

"Oh sure, sure." Tony nodded. Eileen walked over and handed him a glass of cider.

"There you go!" She turned to Brendan. "What about you, Brendan? Some cider?"

"Not on your fucking life."

Tony cleared his throat and lifted his glass. "Mmm." His mouth was so dry that when he took a sip, it tasted like raw sugar on his tongue. "Hey, great seeing that movie with the kids, huh?"

Eileen and Kevin both swiveled to stare at him. Tony flushed and looked over at Brendan. His friend's blue eyes had gone cold and distant: he looked like a distinctly less benign version of his son.

"Hey, no," said Brendan. "It actually really sucked. It actually made me feel really *bad.*"

"Brendan." Eileen pressed a hand against her cheek. "I—maybe you could—"

"Never mind." Brendan took a drink of his wine. "It doesn't matter."

"I just thought, I can make some—"

"Why don't you put it down, Brendan."

Eileen sucked her breath in audibly as Kevin pushed past her. "Kevin, why don't you—"

"Why don't you let me handle this," he said harshly. "I told you, no wine—"

Eileen stood her ground. "You know what? *I* am not the one who—"

"Uh-oh." Brendan laughed. "The annual Thanksgiving dinner meltdown! Hey Tony, what would Chip Crockett say about that?"

"I know what Curly would say." Everyone turned, and Tony said, "*Nyuk nyuk, nyuk*..."

"Put it down, Brendan. You don't need that. Come on." Kevin looked down at his cousin. His arms were uncrossed now, half-raised before his chest. One hand was already unconsciously starting to curl into a fist. "You've got to drive."

"You can stay here," broke in Eileen. At Kevin's glare she said, "I just meant he wouldn't have to—"

"Give it to me." Kevin reached for the wineglass. Brendan continued to smile, continued to stare at some place in the air above a flickering candle. "You don't want it, Brendan."

"What do you know about what I want?" Brendan's smile grew broader, and he took another gulp of wine. "You have no fucking clue. You've never had a fucking clue. You—"

Kevin's hand clamped down on his shoulder. Brendan rocked back in the chair, teeth grinding as his smile became a terrible fixed grin. A drop of blood welled from his lower lip where he'd bitten it. In his hand the wineglass began to tremble, as Kevin's arm fell.

And froze in mid-air. Kevin turned, writhing, as Tony held him by the wrist.

"Leave him alone, Kevo," he said softly.

"The fuck you say! I'm not letting my goddam cousin kill himself and—"

"Leave him." Tony gazed calmly into Kevin's eyes, but under his black T-shirt his chest rose and fell, rose and fell, as though he'd been running. "Just leave him, Kev."

"You—!" Kevin tried to yank his hand free. But Tony moved with him, looking more like he was slamdancing than fighting one of his oldest friends. "Let *go*—"

With a muffled shout Kevin stumbled back against the table, sending it sliding across the floor. Brendan remained in his chair as the wine bottle toppled and then fell onto his cousin.

"Goddamit!" Kevin yelled, still struggling to pull himself from Tony. "You goddamn—"

"Oops," said Brendan, gazing at the spilled wine as Eileen darted over with a dish towel. Tony looked at Kevin, measuringly but without rancor, then let him go.

"I'll drive Brendan and Peter," said Tony. He turned to Brendan and nodded. "If that's okay? I'll drive you back. Just let me know when you're ready."

"I'm ready now."

Brendan sat in his chair. He stared at his cousin, his eyes cold; then turned and let his gaze flick from Tony to Eileen to the children, still oblivious on the porch. The acid light had poisoned everything, time had poisoned everything. He remembered that now, with the taste of wine souring on his tongue and the return of the dreadful drunken clarity that had fed him for so many years. Why had he ever forsaken it? For an instant he felt like Superman, his eyes burning into those of his family, scorching right through Kevin, leaving Eileen a little charred around the edges, skipping the children completely: they were all doomed anyway. He grinned, his lips pulled tight across his teeth, and got to his feet. "Sure, Tony. I'm ready."

The room seemed watery and amber-tinged, though maybe that was his eyes? He blinked, and suddenly everything came back into focus. Or rather, it lost the bright malign shimmer the alcohol had given it. The wine had burned right off; someone had snuck Kryptonite into the kitchen. He blinked again, this time because he could feel tears starting, and took an unsteady step towards the door. He reached blindly for the back of his chair, fumbling so that he knocked it over. Tony caught it, stepping forward to put a hand on his friend's shoulder.

"It's okay, man. You're just a little tired. I'll drive. Maybe you could get Peter and I'll, like, meet you by the car."

"That's a *great* idea, Tony." Eileen paused on her way out to the deck. "It's time for the girls to get ready for bed, too."

They prepared to leave. Peter began to scream when Brendan tried to put his coat on, and the twins watched with great interest until Kevin shouted at them to go upstairs. Brendan finally gave up with the boy's coat and simply picked him up and carried him, shrieking, to the car. The effort exhausted him. He flung the back door open and strapped Peter in, then staggered out again and threw himself into the front passenger seat, his head throbbing. He was dimly aware of Eileen and Tony hugging farewell on the front steps, Kevin's brooding figure looming behind them. The wind rose, cold and smelling of wood smoke, and sent leaves whirling up into the darkness. Then Tony was beside him, adjusting the seat for his longer legs and playing with the radio.

"Check it out." Tony beamed as the Volvo filled with the strains of "Mister Grinch." "Christmas music!"

Brendan closed his eyes. "Are you going to drive?" he asked after a minute had passed.

"Not until you give me the keys."

"Oh. Right. Here"

Tony drove. Brendan sat beside him with his eyes shut; but after a moment he rubbed them, blinking, and turned to stare at his friend.

How had the car radio been on, if Brendan hadn't given Tony the keys? Was that possible, even in a late-model Volvo? Brendan shook his head, framing the question; then thought better of it. He was the drunk, after all. He sank back down in the seat, gazing numbly out the window as they made their way back through the silent suburbs, trees dark and bare as lampposts, lampposts already woven with sparkling Christmas lights and plastic greenery. Houses prim as Peter's Lego towers, butter-yellow windows and an occasional flash of the grand meal in progress, heads thrown back in laughter, dishes being passed, televisions blinking in the background. Brendan shut his eyes again,

praying that he might fall asleep.

He did not. Tony kept fiddling with the radio, scanning between oldies stations and the left of the dial, finally settling on a station whose playlist seemed to consist almost entirely of guitar feedback. Brendan winced and sighed loudly; shifted, trying to shut out the sound. At last he gave up, sliding down in the seat and shielding his eyes with one hand, wondering if there was a single human being playing on this song, or even working at the radio station.

"Doesn't it ever bother you?"

Beside him, Tony nodded in time to a beat Brendan couldn't hear; but after a moment he glanced aside. "What?"

"You know. This—" Brendan gestured feebly at the radio. "I mean, you were in *Newsweek* and *Rolling Stone*, and that movie. Everything just seemed like it was going to be so great. Doesn't it ever bum you out?"

Tony stared straight ahead. His long hair had slipped from its ponytail, catching inside the collar of his battered leather jacket. He turned the car onto Connecticut Avenue, drove for several minutes in silence. Finally he said, "Well, sure. Especially after Dickie went, you know? I kept thinking, fuck, what'm *I* waiting for? Put a bullet in my fucking head."

Brendan turned to lean against the door and stared, surprised, at his friend. "No shit?"

"Well, yeah. What'd you think?"

Brendan shrugged, embarrassed. "I don't know. I guess—I don't know."

Tony smiled but said nothing. They slid in and out of traffic, until finally Brendan asked, "Why didn't you?"

"What? Kill myself?" Tony shook his head. He poked at the radio, blips of noise, chatter, static, treacly ballads, relentless country twang, guitar. He stopped, finger poised above the scanner. A twelve-string jangled, and he hit the volume.

"Like that," he said, and grinned that loopy Tony Maroni grin. "Now and then, you hear something. You know? And then you think, well, what the hell."

Brendan shook his head bitterly. "Yeah, but it only lasts for three minutes."

Tony rolled his eyes. "Well, sure! What do you expect?"

Brendan stared at him, and suddenly they both started to laugh. The song played on, Tony sang along until it ended. In the backseat, Peter grunted and kicked, but when his father looked back at him the boy was yawning, staring out at the streetlights. Brendan turned back, rubbing his forehead and smiling ruefully. "What did I expect," he said, and they drove on home.

j

Tony slept on the couch that night, as he always did when Peter was there. He didn't even bother pulling it out; just lay facedown, still in his leather jacket, and pulled a blanket over his head. Within minutes he was asleep.

He woke, so suddenly that for a moment he wondered if he'd even been asleep at all. He lifted his head, hair falling in his eyes, then gingerly raised the edge of the blanket to peer out. Beyond the edge of the couch wan grey light was filtering through the rice-paper shades. The street was unusually quiet: no rush-hour traffic or trash pickup on the day after Thanksgiving. No street people, either; they'd all still be down by the Fourteenth Street shelter, finishing off their turkey leftovers and getting in line for breakfast.

Then what had awakened him? With a frown Tony sat up, the blanket sliding to the floor. It was so still he could hear the faint *tick* of his wristwatch on the VCR, and the rustling of leaves along the sidewalk; nothing more.

Still, he'd heard something, or dreamed it—a bird, or maybe a cat. Though whatever it was, it was gone now. He stood, stretching, then padded down the hall to the bathroom.

And stopped. The sound came again, a pinched high-pitched cry, like a trapped animal struggling to breathe.

But Tony knew it wasn't an animal. He turned, and saw the open door of Peter's room.

"Peter?" He walked over hesitantly, squinting. "Hey, man, you having a bad dream?"

Peter's bed was pushed against the wall. A white Ikea bed with high rails, it gleamed in the soft glow of a night-light shaped like the moon. On the floor beside it, a large pillow had fallen. At first Tony thought it was Peter, but it was too big. And now he could see Peter, lying on his side with one hand cupped against his cheek. He looked tiny, dark hair and eyes smudged against pale skin, his rubber duck clutched to his chest. And he was having a nightmare—the noise was louder here, a harsh wheezing that stuttered and then started up again. Tony shook his head, stood on tiptoe and took a step inside.

"It's okay," he whispered. "Don't be scared..."

On the floor beside the bed, the pillow moved. Tony froze. A pale rope looped up from the shapeless heap that was not a pillow, wobbled in the air above the boy's head, and finally materialized into an arm grabbing at the bedrail. There was a gasp, a terrible sound that made Tony dart back into the doorway again. The rest of the heap fragmented into blots of shadow: a thatch of unruly hair, a maroon t-shirt, another arm: a man, his shoulders heaved forward and shaking.

"Brendan?"

Tony wasn't even sure if he'd said the name aloud. It didn't matter. His friend clasped both hands around the bedrails, so tightly that the entire bed shook.

"*Peter*..."

Tony flinched, turning his head so he wouldn't have to see Brendan there in his sweatpants and Redskins T-shirt, rocking back and forth until the bed began to racket against the wall. But he could do nothing to shut out the sound, Brendan crying out wordlessly, unrelentingly, his fingers weaving through the rails and tugging helplessly at the blankets.

"... *come back—please come back—*"

Tony turned and stumbled down the hall. His own breath came in such short sharp bursts that when he reached the kitchen he slid to the floor and sat there, heart pounding, waiting for Brendan to suddenly burst in and turn that awful spotlit glare of grief upon him.

But Brendan did not come. Tony waited for a long time, watching the dawn brighten from grey to pearl to white. Gradually the echo of his friend's weeping died away, into the faint rattle of the first buses on Maryland Avenue. And with that small reassuring sound, Tony felt better. He got to his feet, a little unsteadily, opened the fridge and grabbed a carton of orange juice. He downed it, shoved the empty carton into the trash and then stuck his head back out into the hall, listening.

Silence. He waited, then very softly crept back down to Peter's room.

On the floor beside the bed sprawled Brendan, seemingly fast asleep, one hand against his cheek. Above him, Peter's body was curled into the same posture. The rubber duck had fallen from his grasp, and his hand had escaped between two of the rails to rest upon his father's shoulder. For a minute Tony stood and watched them. Then he turned away.

He went back to the living room and did a peremptory check of the television, half-hoping to find some remnant of Thanksgiving Past buried in the strata of infomercials and commercial sludge he sifted through. Except for the fade-out of *It's a Wonderful Life,* there was nothing. He clicked it off, singing "Auld Lang Syne" under his breath as he wandered down the hall. By the time he'd settled in behind Brendan's computer, he was humming "Rudolph" and beating time with a pair of unsharpened pencils.

He checked his e-mail, the usual notes from friends and several of the effusive, occasionally lunatic, letters from Maroni fans that made up the bulk of his correspondence. There was also a brief message from Marty Berenstein, a.k.a. Mony Maroni.

> *Dear Tony,*
> *Just wanted to let you know that our latest effort to extricate the catalog from EMI went down in flames, again. Sorry. Otherwise things here are fine. Jocelyn's doing her junior year abroad in Madrid, so Helen and I are having a second honeymoon, of sorts. Actually, make that a *first* honeymoon. All the best to you and yours for the holiday season—*
> *Marty*

"Ho ho ho," said Tony. "Another day, another lawsuit. Now—"

He started clicking around, looking at the *New York Times* headlines, checking Amazon for the standing of the first three Maronis albums. Even twenty-odd years later, these sold well enough to generate modest but reliable royalties—if, of course, any of the surviving band members could have collected them. He was just starting to compare the sales figures for various musical rivals, when a shadow drifted across the keyboard.

"You know, I always figured there'd be a Tony Maroni Web page."

Tony looked up to see Brendan, holding a glass of water. He still wore his sweatpants and rumpled T-shirt, his face stubbled and eyes bleary as though he'd been on a three-day toot, rather than the losing end of a minor skirmish with three quarters of a bottle of expensive sémillon. "You guys were so big in Japan," Brendan went on, pulling up a chair. "I would've thought you'd at least have a Web site."

"Well, yeah, sure. I mean, actually, there's a lot of them. A lot for me, I mean. I don't know about the others."

Brendan raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean, a lot? Like how many?"

Tony bounced out of the Amazon page, nibbling thoughtfully at a long strand of hair. "I dunno. Like fifty, maybe? I forget."

"Fifty? *Fifty* Tony Maroni Web pages?"

Tony looked embarrassed. "Well, yeah. But, I mean, none of 'em's *authorized.*"

Brendan laughed. "How come none of 'em's ever helped you get the rights back to your stuff?"

"I dunno. Sometimes they offer to, you know? Like some big LA lawyer writes me about it. But—I guess I just don't care so much anymore, with all the other guys being gone." Tony sighed. "We wrote all that stuff together. It just wouldn't feel right."

Brendan nodded. "Yeah. Well, I guess I can see that."

He leaned forward, and Tony caught the faint reek of wine and sweat and unwashed clothes, that sad tired smell he associated with church meeting rooms and the long tearful exegeses of weekend binges—conventions where sales reps got locked out of their hotel room after closing time, college students missing the crucial exam after a beer bash, mothers forgetting to feed their kids. Brendan sipped his water and Tony waited, hoping there wasn't going to be an apology.

There wasn't. Instead, Brendan ran a finger across the computer screen, raising a little trail of electrified dust. "Okay." He cocked his finger at Tony and smiled. "So, like, where's Chip Crockett's Web page?"

Tony's head bobbed up and down. "Aw *right,*" he said, relieved. "Check this out, man, you're gonna love this—"

Tony hunched over the keyboard, fingers tapping eagerly. Brendan sank back into his chair and watched him. He rubbed his forehead, hoping he looked better than he felt—although what he felt wasn't even hung-over so much as some pure distillation of humiliation, depression, and exhaustion, with a healthy dollop of anxiety about just how Teri was going to react when she heard about him falling off the wagon. It hadn't happened once in the years since he'd joined AA, and somehow he suspected it wouldn't happen again. Brendan didn't drink because he was depressed, or lonely, or even just out of habit. He used to drink when he was *happy,* in that long joyous sunny rush of years between high school and the failure of his marriage. Back then he'd drink with his friends, in bars and at the beach, at ballgames and concerts. He drank because he liked it, and everyone else he knew liked it. He drank because it was fun.

Even now Brendan wasn't sure what had gone wrong. He suspected there was some sort of malign convergence between his body chemistry and the way the world had suddenly changed, round about the time he saw Lou Reed shilling for Honda motorbikes. After that, when he drank he saw the world differently. It was as though all his worst fears were confirmed, and after a while, he was drinking just so they *would* be confirmed. Marriages were doomed. Mothers drowned their children. Your father developed Alzheimer's disease and died without remembering your name. That guy you used to play softball with wasted away with AIDS, and you never even knew. Your favorite TV show was canceled, your dog had to be put to sleep. The music you loved seeped away from the radio, and all of a sudden when you walked down a street where you'd lived for twenty years, there were strangers everywhere. One day you had a toddler who'd always been a little colicky, but who smiled when he saw you and crawled into your lap at night. The next day you had a changeling, a child carved of wood who screamed if you touched him and whose eyes were always fixed on some bright horizon his parents could never see. The terrible secret Brendan kept was that he hadn't quit drinking to save his marriage, or himself, or even his child. He'd quit because he now knew, irrefutably, that the world had become the wasteland. And he no longer needed any confirmation of that.

"Okay, Brenda Starr." Tony pecked at one last key, grinning. "Technical difficulties, please stand by. I control the horizontal, I control the vertigo..."

"Vertical," said Brendan.

"Whatever. I control it." With a flourish Tony straightened. "Do not adjust your screen! We have *liftoff*!"

Brendan blinked. On the monitor in front of him, that morning's *New York Times* headlines glowed, flickered and disappeared. For an instant the screen was black. Then, very slowly, a scrim of sky blue and white scrolled down. The white became clouds, the sky shimmered and melted like summer afternoon. In the center of the screen a small rectangle appeared, holding the black-and-white image of a man leaning on a stage-set Dutch door. He had neatly combed blond hair, side-parted, and a boyish, smiling face. He wore the kind of suit Brendan associated with the second Beatles album, a light-colored Glen plaid, and beneath that a white shirt and skinny dark tie. Above his head, small letters floated in a streaming red banner:

WELCOME TO CHIP CROCKETT'S WEBPAGE!

"Well," said Tony. He sucked at his lower lip and looked sideways at Brendan. "There he is."

Brendan didn't say anything. He stared at the screen, then reached out and traced the outline of Chip Crockett's picture. The monitor crackled a little at his touch, and he shook his head, still silent.

Because there he was. He hadn't seen him for—what? thirty years, at least—but now it was like looking at a picture of his father when he was young. The same haircut; the same skinny tie. The same magically complicit smile, which he'd only seen on his father at the Fourth of July or Thanksgiving or Christmas, but which Brendan had seen twice a day, every day, on *The Chip Crockett Show.*

"Wow," whispered Brendan. "Chip Crockett."

It was like dreams he had, that his dog was alive again. He pulled his chair up closer, inadvertently nudging Tony aside. "Sorry—but hey, this is great." His voice was husky; he coughed, took another swig of water and cleared his throat. "This is really, really great."

Tony laughed. "That's just a picture. Actually, it's the same picture from the obituary in the *News.* But here—"

He moved the mouse, and more phantom letters filled the screen. Brendan recognized the printout Tony had brought to the Childe Roland a few weeks ago.

BROADCAST HISTORY
PHOTOGRAPHS
ARTICLES & OBITUARIES (NEW)
THEME SONG
THE GREAT FIRE OF 1966
CHIP CROCKETT'S CHRISTMAS SPECIAL

Without thinking, he reached over and took the mouse from Tony's grasp. "Oops—sorry—but you, would you mind if I—"

Tony smiled. "Go for it."

Brendan clicked on THEME SONG. The screen shifted, blue sky fading to a grainy black-and-white backdrop, much enlarged, showing a cheap soundstage. Long white drapes covered the back wall. There was a painted plywood table, and strewn on top of it were a number of puppets. By today's standards, they were slightly intimidating, more crackbrained Punch and Judy than benign Muppet. One looked like a pirate, with a patch on his eye and a gold hoop earring and a cigarette; another was a little guy with white fuzzy hair and a scholar's mortar. There were more—a spaceman, a beatnik, a dog—but the only puppet that was upright was a figure with small beady eyes and an enormous nose, his mouth cracked in a huge, slightly demonic grin, his tiny cloth hands clapped together as though he were about to witness—or perform—something wonderful.

"Ooga Booga," whispered Brendan. "Holy cow. I totally forgot what he looked like— I'd even forgotten his name, till you showed me that obituary."

He drew a long breath and leaned forward, clicked on an icon. A moment when all was still. Then the song began: a jouncy chorus of horns and strings, those unshakably chipper background voices you heard on records in the early '60s. Elevator music, but this was an elevator that only went up.

"*Bum bum bum bum,*" sang Tony happily. "*Bum bum bum bum!*"

Brendan started to cry. Knowing it was stupid, knowing it was the sort of thing you did on a jag, when you'd lost it

completely, when you were so far gone you'd sit around all day long surfing the Net for the names of girls you'd had a crush on in the second grade, or listening to Muzak and commercial jingles.

Didn't matter, didn't matter, didn't matter. He squeezed his eyes shut, eyelids burning as he willed himself to stop: another Irish Catholic trick that Teri hated. Back when they'd first started trying to understand what was wrong with Peter, back when they barely even knew there *was* something wrong—back then, it was one of the first things Teri had accused him of—

"This fucking Irish Catholic thing, you guys can never cry, you can never show *anything*, any emotion at all—and now, now—*look at him*—"

Pointing at the silent toddler crawling across the floor, but crawling in that awful horror-show way he had, dragging himself on his elbows and knees, head canted sideways so he could stare at the ceiling but not at what was in front of him; and never, ever, at his parents.

"—*look at him, look at him*—"

Her voice rising to a shriek, her fists pounding against her thighs as she stood there screaming. And Peter never looked, never even noticed at all, and Brendan—

Brendan walked away. Only into the next room, saying nothing, feeling rage and grief and sorrow swelling in his head until he thought blood would seep from his eyes; blood, maybe, but never tears. His entire body shook, but he wouldn't cry; just stood there like a human Roman candle waiting to ignite; waiting for the house to grow silent once more.

"Wanna hear something else?"

Brendan blinked. The theme song was over. Before he could say anything, Tony clicked on another icon, and the faint oozy strains of Chip Crockett's closing theme began to play.

"...*danke schoen*..."

"Jeez..." Brendan shuddered. "I forgot about that."

"Yeah. Maybe we better not. Here, listen to this one."

Tony clicked on OGDEN ORFF. A faint voice echoed from the speaker, declaiming proudly.

"*That's my boy—Ogden Orff!*"

"Let me!" Brendan poked Tony's arm. "C'mon, c'mon, c'mon, *To-neee*—"

Tony laughed. "Be my guest."

Brendan looked at the pictures, black-and-white publicity stills of Chip Crockett as his most notorious character: the weirdly Edwardian Ogden Orff, a man dressed as a boy in black jacket and trousers, with a long floppy tie and his hair slicked down. Ogden never spoke; only listened as Chip Crockett's sonorous off-screen voice offered him advice and the inevitable admonition—

"*No, Ogden, noooo!*"

—but always ending with the same triumphant announcement—

"*That's my boy—Ogden Orff!*"

There were other characters, too. Ratnik, the beady-eyed beatnik puppet who carried around a copy of *No Exit* and ended each of his scenes by failing to find his way off the set. There was Captain Dingbat, navigating the Sloop John B through New York Harbor and calling the Statue of Liberty a Hotsy-Totsy. There was the Old Professor, quoting Groucho Marx instead of Karl; and Mister Knickerbocker lip-synching "Mr. Bassman." And last of all there was Chip Crockett himself again, sitting with a copy of *Millions of Cats* on his knees and reading to a studio audience of a dozen entranced children.

Only of course these were only pictures. No voiceovers, no soundtrack, no living color, except in Brendan's head. Just pictures. And there were only nine of them.

"That's it?" Brendan tried to keep his voice from breaking. "What about, you said something about some video clips?"

"Yeah. Well, sort of. There's nothing from the actual show, just a couple of outtakes. But they're not very long. Everything was lost." Tony sighed. "Just—*lost*. I mean, can you believe it? They just taped over all of it. That's like taping over the moon landing, or Nixon's resignation or something."

"Not really," said Brendan, and he grabbed back the mouse.

The videoclips were about the size of Brendan's thumbprint, framed within a little grey TV screen. COCOA MARSH COMMERCIAL. FUNORAMA BLOOPER. CHIP'S THEME.

"Wow," said Brendan. A timer underneath the little screen indicated how long each clip was. Sixteen seconds. Twenty-seven seconds. Thirty-two seconds. "There's not a lot of him left, is there?"

"Nope. But you know, I was thinking—like, maybe there could be like a hologram or something, you know? Like cloning someone. You have a tiny piece of their DNA and you can make a whole person. So, like, you'd only need a tiny piece of Chip Crockett, and you could bring back a whole episode."

"Tony." Brendan stopped himself before giving his automatic answer of thirty-odd years: *Tony, you're an idiot.* "Tony, you're the Steve Wozniak of Massachusetts Avenue. Do I just click on this?"

Tony nodded. Brendan clicked. A swirl of black-and-white-and-grey dots filled the tiny screen, danced around jerkily while a hollow voice intoned something Brendan could barely understand, though the words "Cocoa Marsh" seemed prominent. It took nearly sixteen seconds for Brendan's eyes to force the pixels into an image that resembled a man's face and a puppet. By then the clip was over.

"That's it?"

"That's it."

Brendan played it again. This time he could make out the image more easily, a closeup of Chip Crockett and Ooga Booga, the puppet holding a glass and trying to drink from it while Chip encouraged him.

"*That's right, Ooga Booga! Drink your Cocoa Marsh*—"

Bam: the image froze, the screen went blank. Brendan ran it six more times, trying to fix it in his mind's eye, see if it stirred any memory at all of the original commercial. It didn't; but just that tiny clip was enough to bring rushing back the wonderful sound of Chip's voice, the deep and deeply humorous tones that were the echo of some great benign Everydad. You could imagine him telling knock-knock jokes over the barbecue grill of your dreams, holding Ooga Booga as he tucked you into bed at night, taking sips from a can of Rheingold between verses of "They're Coming to Take Me Away, Ha Ha!" You could imagine all of this, you could *live* all of this, and sometimes it seemed that you had.

"Check these out, man!"

He started, as Tony ran the other clips. They resembled the first: fuzzy black-and-white pointillist figures, tinny voices beamed from a million light years away; cheap sets. The last few notes of Chip's theme song faded and the screen cut to Ooga Booga nestled against Chip's face, his little hands clapping spasmodically and Chip's lips moving, seemingly by remote control.

"... *now Ooga Booga, tell all the boys and girls what you just told me*—"

The image froze. It was over. No matter how many times you played it back, you'd never hear Ooga Booga's secret.

"Man, this really bites," said Brendan. He replayed the blooper clip, Chip bumping into a boom mike and pretending to wrestle it. "There's really nothing else?"

"Nope." Tony pulled his hair back, making a ponytail with his fingers. "But if you read through all the letters people have sent, there's, like, all these *rumors* of other stuff. Like a couple of people say they've heard about some bootleg tapes that were shown on Italian TV in the '70s, tapes of actual shows that somehow got shipped over there or something. So there's this entire Chip Crockett Mafia trying to track them down, a bunch of fans and this retired video cameraman from New York. If they find them, they can broadcast them over the Net. They could probably broadcast them on TV, one of those stations that plays old stuff all the time."

"I doubt they could do that, Tony. Even if they found the tapes. Which they won't."

Tony swept the curtain of hair from his face and gave Brendan a hurt look. "Hey, don't believe *me*. Here, look—"

Another click, and there were the e-mails from devoted fans: kids grown to doctors, lawyers, teachers, garbage men, rock stars, TV weathermen, editors.

> I'm 45 years old and boy, was I amazed to find an entire Web site devoted to Chip Crockett...

They were all pretty much like that, though surprisingly well-written and grammatically correct for e-mail. Brendan imagined an entire invisible electronic universe seething with this obsessive stuff, billions of people crowding the ether with their own variations on Chip Crockett— obscure baseball players, writers, musicians, cars, books, dogs. He scanned the Chip Crockett messages, all variations on the themes of Boy, was I amazed and Gee, I remember when and Oh if only, a long lamentation for videos perdus.

> If only they'd saved them!
>
> If only WNEW knew what they were losing when they erased those tapes!
>
> If only the technicians had done something!
>
> If only I'd been there!

Brendan sighed and ran a hand across his face. "You know, this stuff is sort of depressing me. I think I'm gonna get the coffee going."

Tony nodded without looking away from the screen. Reflexively, Brendan glanced back, saw a brief message that seemed to be the very last one.

> Happy T'giving, everyone! Has anyone else heard about a bootleg of "Chip Crockett's Christmas Carol" that's supposed to air on Christmas Eve? I'd like time/station info so I can tape it.

"You know about that, Tony?"

"Uh-uh." Tony frowned, leaning forward until his nose almost touched the screen. "That's kind of weird. Where would you hear about something like that? I mean, apart from this site?"

"Probably there's a thousand other sites like this. You know, weird TV, collectors' stuff. Christ, Tony, move back, you're gonna go blind."

He put his hands on Tony's shoulders and gently pulled him away from the screen. "Come on. Time for breakfast. Time for Cocoa Marsh."

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm coming." Tony stood, reluctantly, and yawned. "Christmas. Wow. How could I forget it was Christmas?"

"It's not Christmas. It's the day after Thanksgiving," said Brendan, seeing the first faint flickers of that other movie starting to burn around the edges of his head. Very deliberately he blinked, snowflakes melting into slush, a forest of evergreens flaming into ash and smoke, a black boot disappearing up a chimney that crumbled into rubble. "You have a whole month to remember Christmas." But Christmas was what Brendan was already trying to forget.

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The truth was, over the last few years Brendan had become an expert at forgetting about Christmas. A few days after the start of the Official Holiday Shopping Season, the ubiquitous background soundtrack of "Silver Bells" and "Silent

Night" and "Christmas at K-Mart" had diminished to nothing more than a very faint whining echo in his ears, choir boys and rampaging reindeer and Bing Crosby relegated to that same mental dungeon where he banned homeless people on the Metro, magazine ads for starving children, stray cats, and junkies nodding out at Dupont Circle. It didn't snow, so a whole gauntlet of joyfully shrieking kids on sleds or snowboards or big pieces of cardboard could be avoided. But it was cold, that frigid dank D.C. cold that seeped into your pores and filled the newcasts with reports of homeless people freezing in alleys and cars stalling on the Beltway on their daily exodus to the sprawl.

It sure didn't feel like Christmas to Brendan Keegan. But then, he'd been successfully inoculated against the holiday two years ago, right about the time they'd been busy playing that popular parlor game, What's Wrong With Our Baby? Peter had been a toddler that December, and it was Christmas that had finally triggered Brendan's realization that something *was* wrong.

"Hey, what do you think of this tree, huh, Peter? What do you think, is this the greatest tree ever or what?"

It was a beautiful tree, a blue spruce that had set Brendan back almost a hundred bucks; but hey, what was Christmas for? There were presents hidden away that he'd bought back when Teri first told him she was pregnant, a baseball mitt and football helmet, plush Redskins mascot and oversized jersey, copies of *Winnie-the-Pooh* and *The Hobbit* and a videotape of *The March of the Wooden Soldiers* that his cousin Kevin had given him. Most of the presents were still too old for Peter, he knew that; but he also knew that this was the age when kids started getting into tearing off the wrapping paper and gazing at Christmas ornaments and stuff like that. A sort of synaesthetic experience of Christmas; and Brendan wanted to be right there, video cam in hand, when Peter got his first look at a real Christmas tree, his very *own* real Christmas tree.

Well, Brendan was there, all right, and he got it all down on tape. A few months later, playing it back for doctors and psychiatrists and a few close family members, it amazed Brendan that he hadn't grabbed Peter and driven directly to GW Hospital.

Because what the tape showed was a fantastically decorated tree, branches drooping beneath the weight of popcorn strings and cranberry strands, Shiny Brite balls salvaged from Brendan's own childhood, hand-carved wooden Santas from a shop in Georgetown, and, most wonderful of all, an entire North Pole's worth of fabulous glass ornaments from Poland—clowns and dragons, cathedrals and polar bears, banana-nosed Puncinellos and one vaguely ominous St. Nick. Eileen and Teri had spent hours hanging baubles and carefully hiding each tiny bulb so only its glow was seen, magically, from within the secret forest of dusky blue-green needles.

"Close your eyes!" Teri had cried, covering his face with her hand as she led him into the room. "Now—"

When Brendan saw the tree, he got gooseflesh: that atavistic sense of looking down some endless tunnel, past the window displays at Mazza Gallerie, past the Cratchit children exclaiming over the plum pudding, past the manger and the Romans and the circled stones: all the way back to a forest clearing and falling snow, cold flung against his limbs and the unspeakable wonder of flames leaping beneath an evergreen. He blinked back tears, touched Eileen and Teri each on the arm and mumbled something about incredible, amazing, beautiful; and bent to scoop up his son.

"Look, Peter, look—"

But Peter wouldn't look. His gaze shifted, then his head, and finally his whole body, so that no matter how Brendan turned and twisted, trying to hold Peter so he could have the perfect view of the perfect tree—no matter what he did, his son would not look. It was as though the tree did not exist. Indeed, the more Brendan tried to direct his gaze, the more his son struggled, until he was thrashing in his father's arms, making those soft *nnnhh nnnhh* sounds that, so far, were his only efforts at speech.

"Look, honey, see where Daddy is? Look! Look at the pretty Christmas tree! See where Aunt Eileen is pointing—look at the bird! You like birds—look, look!"

Look. They had played the tape for Dr. Larriday, after she observed Peter in her office. Waiting for her comments, Brendan and Teri held hands so tightly that Brendan's knuckles ached for two days. For hours they perched at the edge of the precipice, the doctor's diagnostic terms whizzing past them like stones—

Lack of affect
Little receptive language
Little or no eye contact
Impaired motor skills
Ritual behavior
Failure to speak
Morbid fear of change in routine

Peter had struggled and screamed in his father's arms while Dr. Larriday went down her list. Finally he had fallen asleep. They had brought an evaluation from their family physician, along with seven hours of videotaped footage of Peter—Peter crying, Peter sleeping, Peter crawling on his knuckles and toes, Peter obsessively pulling himself up and down, up and down, on the edge of his crib. Peter stacking one block on top of a second—clumsily, the wooden pieces flying from his unwieldy grip between pinkie and thumb. Peter sitting in front of the glass door, moving his head back and forth, back and forth, watching the flicker of movement from the corner of his eye. Hours and hours of tape; but Dr. Larriday was most interested in the earliest one, the Christmas tape.

"Let's see what we have—"

And there it was, glistening branches blocked by Brendan's struggling figure as he crossed and recrossed the living room, towheaded child screaming in his arms. Even now, almost three years later, Brendan couldn't bear to think of that tree; any Christmas tree. Because watching the tape again in Dr. Larriday's office that July afternoon, it was apparent that Peter had not been ignoring the tree.

He was avoiding it. He was terrified of it.

Morbid fear of change in routine...

Teri had wept, sobbing until the words were lost. "Oh, Christ, how could we—I mean, look at him, it looks like he's being *tortured*..."

Dr. Larriday looked, and took notes. Brendan stared straight ahead, his sleeping child in his lap, Peter's damp face pressed against his arm and his own tears falling, unheeded, onto his son's cheek.

That was the end of Christmas for Brendan. The end of everything, really—his marriage, his dream of himself as a father, his dream of a child. Oh, he still did everything he was supposed to, buying presents for Peter, encouraging him to open them under the small artificial tree at Teri's house, its sparse aluminum branches threaded with a few red plastic balls. Opening the presents for Peter, when he showed no interest in them himself; following the behavioral therapists's directives as to modeling play behavior with the new blocks and games and trucks.

But Christmas? Christmas was gone. Brendan didn't even hate it, because how could you hate something that was dead? Instead he focused on his work, and tried his best to ignore whatever demands the season put upon his senses, if not his time.

"Mr. Keegan?" His secretary's voice came through the intercom. "It's Toys for Tots again."

"Thanks." He put the phone on monitor, his gaze still fixed on the computer screen, a half dozen heavily scrawled-upon yellow legal pads scattered on the desk before him.

"Mr. Flaherty?" A cheerful voice boomed from the speaker. Brendan winced, reaching to turn the volume down. "This is Don Huchison from the Capitol City Chapter of Toys for Tots. As I'm sure you know, we—"

"This is Mr. Keegan, not Mr. Flaherty. And I don't take solicitation calls at the office—"

"Well, Mr. Keegan, I'll be happy to note that and request that someone call you at home, at your convenience and when you have time. When might that be?"

"Never."

Don Huchison laughed, a sympathetic, *Ain't that the truth!* chuckle. "I hear you! This time of year, there's never enough time to—"

"I mean, never call me. Again. Anywhere." Brendan flipped through a legal pad with one hand, with the other reached to turn off the monitor.

"Mr. Keegan, I'm sure you're aware of the difficulties many families have at this time of year, meeting their children's expectations for a happy—"

"I don't give a shit about anyone's expectations. Remove me permanently from your list, and please don't call here again."

Click.

That evening he walked home. The cold spell remained unbroken. Pockets of slush filled potholes and broken edges of sidewalk. The eastern sky had a blackened cast to it, like a scorched pan; behind him, the last glowering trails of sunset streaked the horizon blood-red, so that the walls of the Library of Congress seemed to burn as night fell. Clouds of vapor surrounded the crowds hurrying home from work, giving everyone a ghostly familiar. But they were were cheerful ghosts haunting cheerful people: even the rat-tailed mongrel who kept Dave the Grave company on his bench in Stanton Square Park raced excitedly back and forth, rising on its hind legs and walking backwards when smiling passersby tossed coins into Dave's battered Starbucks coffee mug.

"God bless ya, god bless ya—"

Brendan gritted his teeth, staring stonily at a down-clad woman who stooped to put a five-dollar bill into Dave's hand. "You're wasting your money," he said loudly. The woman looked up, startled; Dave swayed back and forth on his bench, his litany uninterrupted. He still wore Tony's coat—*Brendan's* coat—though it was black now with grime, the sleeves and collar disintegrating. "He's a wino. You're just feeding his addiction."

The woman stared at Brendan coolly. "It's Christmas. And it's none of your damn business what I do with my money."

"Ha ha!" Dave laughed; the dog did a back flip, to applause from several of Dave's cronies drinking malt liquor on the brittle grass. "God bless you, darlin, that's right..."

Brendan started to yell after the woman's retreating back, but then he noticed that people were stopping to stare at him. Instead he glared contemptuously at Dave, spun on his heel and stalked home.

"Merry Chrissmas!" Dave called after him, and the other homeless men raised their voices raucously. "Merr' Chrissmass!"

He had left work earlier than was his habit. Since his divorce, he'd adjusted his schedule so that he seldom left the office till after dark; an exception had always been those days when he had Peter. No word of his Thanksgiving fall from grace had reached Teri—Brendan silently blessed Kevin and Eileen. But since then, his visits with his son had been cut back, at Brendan's own suggestion, to every other week. Just until the new year, he assured Teri, pleading pressure from work, a case long pending that now looked as though it would be settled out of court but there was still paperwork, and client interviews, and of course it was the holidays—

And of course that was it, exactly. Teri had seen it in her ex-husband's face when they had last met a week earlier, staring out at her from the front of the Volvo.

"Don't you want to come in for a minute? It's so cold."

Brendan shook his head. "I'm not cold," he said, his voice tight. He continued to stare resolutely at the steering column. "Is he ready? I have to get going."

"He's ready." Teri looked at the house, where Peter stood impassively on the steps, then turned back to the car.

"Will Tony be there?"

"You got a problem with Tony, take it up with your lawyer." Brendan's knuckles whitened as he clasped the wheel. "I don't give a—"

"I am *not being hostile.*" Teri's voice shook. "I'm *glad* Tony's there. At least Tony is capable of something resembling an *emotion.* At least Tony remembers what time of *year* it is. You know why you don't feel the cold, Brendan? Do you know why?"

Brendan turned the key in the ignition. "Get him in the car. I'm leaving."

"Because—"

He tapped the accelerator. The engine roared. On the porch Peter began to cry. Without a word Teri walked back to the house and got her son.

"You have a good time, sweetheart," she murmured as she buckled him into his car seat. He had stopped crying almost immediately, and she tucked a scarf around his shoulders. "You have a good time with your Daddy..."

She drew away from the car and stared at Brendan in the front seat. In the back Peter pushed off the scarf, letting it drop to the floor. "You could do something with him, you know." Her voice was perfectly calm now. "He's doing so well at school these days. You could take him to see the White House tree, or Santa out at White Flint. Peggy said that might be a good idea. She said—"

Fuck what she said, thought Brendan. He glanced back to make sure Peter was buckled, then rolled up the window. He had already started to pull away when Teri ran up beside him and pounded at the glass.

"What?" He stopped and rolled the window down a crack. "Now what?"

"I wanted to make sure you hadn't forgotten and made other plans for next week."

"What's next week?"

"Christmas." Teri's smiled tightened. "You said you wanted to have him Christmas Eve—last summer, remember? When we—"

"I remember."

"I thought—I *hoped* that we could all be together. To give some, some continuity. For Peter. I asked Kevin and Eileen—"

"Oh, Christ—"

"And I wanted you to ask Tony for me. If you don't mind." Teri's voice had taken on the same brisk oldest-daughter tone she used with her elderly clients. "If you don't want to stay you don't have to. They're going to come after church, mid-morning. You can just drop him off if you want. Or you're welcome to stay."

"We'll see. I'll let Tony know."

But tonight, walking up the sidewalk towards his apartment, he remembered that he never *had* let Tony know. Not that he suspected him of having any big plans for the holiday. Occasionally Brendan could hear music from behind the closed door of his room, Tony playing guitar and singing softly to himself; but that seemed to have stopped with the onset of the holiday season. Unemployment didn't just suit Tony better than any job he'd had since fronting the Maronis. It was as though he had actually *found* another job, one that involved getting up each morning promptly at six A.M., showering, shaving, dressing in black jeans and T-shirt and leather jacket, then eating a modest bowl of Grape-Nuts before getting down to work.

Which, in Tony's case, seemed to consist of watching every single Christmas special that every single television station on Earth chose to air between the first and twenty-fifth of December. No program was too obscure or too terrible for Tony's viewing pleasure—not *The House Without a Christmas Tree* or *The Bishop's Wife;* not Andy Williams' Christmas Special, or Elvis's, the King Family's, and Barbara Mandrell's; not *A Very Brady Christmas!* or Mickey's Extra Special Christmas Eve or *The Little Drummer Boy Returns.*

And certainly not Rudolph, the Grinch, Charlie Brown, Frosty the Snowman or Mr. Magoo. Tony had *It's a Wonderful Life* committed to memory; what was harder to take was that Tony knew every word of *Santa Claus Versus the Martians,* as well as *The Christmas That Almost Wasn't* and *Fuzzy the Christmas Donkey.*

"That one ought to be called *The Christmas Jackass,*" Brendan had snapped one morning when he woke to find Tony already sitting transfixed on the living room couch, steaming coffee mug beside him.

"You should check this out." Tony shot a quick grin at Brendan, then hunched closer to the edge of the sofa. "Shh, this is the sad part—"

Now, as he hurried up the steps, Brendan saw the familiar blue-grey wash of light through his apartment window, the telltale flicker of shadow on the wall behind the sofa where he knew he would find Tony in the exact same place he had left him that morning.

Only this time when Brendan walked inside it was different. On the floor, staring at the television with the same rapt expression, was Peter.

"Peter." Brendan shut the door and dropped his briefcase. "Tony? What's going on?"

Tony looked up and smiled. "Oh, hey, man! You're home early. That's good, I'm glad—"

"What's he doing here? What happened?" Brendan quickly stepped over a small mountain of Peter's things, knapsack and overnight bags, his pillow, his lunchbox, his duck. "What—"

"There was a problem..."

"Problem?" He knelt beside his son, fighting the need to hold him, to shout at Tony gazing at them calmly from the couch. Peter edged away, making a small humming sound, his gaze fixed on the TV. "What problem? What happened? Is he—"

"No, no—*Teri* had the problem. She tried calling you but she couldn't get through—"

Brendan sighed with relief, then nodded. "Right—Ashley left this afternoon, she'll be gone till next week. But—"

"I dunno, some client thing? Teri said she'd call from the airport—"

Right on cue the phone rang. Brendan grabbed it.

"*Brendan.*" Brendan could hear her swallow, fighting tears. "Jesus, Brendan. I called and called—"

"I know. What happened?"

"Oh, Christ, some stupid thing. Well, not really—old Mr. Wright died, everyone was expecting it but not right before Christmas, I mean he was ninety-three. But I have to go out there to deal with his wife and ex-wife and his sister and his kids. I'm at Dulles now, this case is a mess, you remember me telling you—"

"But Peter's okay?"

"Peter's *fine*. He really likes Tony, doesn't he?"

"Yeah, yeah, sure. So what's the deal here?"

Silence. He heard airport noises in the background, the squawk and boom of flight announcements. "The deal is, Brendan, that I have to be out of town on business right now. And—"

"How long?"

"Just till tomorrow. It was impossible to get a flight, they're completely booked, but—"

"And Peter's schedule? All this talk you had about how fucking important it is for everything to be—"

"Look, Brendan, stuff happens. You can't control everything. Or maybe *you* can, but I can't. Peter is with me every hour, every day, every week—"

"*Except when he's with me*—"

"—you have no idea how exhausting it is, being with him all the time. It's killing me, Brendan, it's—"

Her voice broke, drowned in a spurt of static as another flight announcement thundered somewhere behind her. —I can't, Brendan, not anymore, he's—"

Brendan shut his eyes and took a long breath. "Teri? Teri?" He turned so that Tony and Peter wouldn't see him. "Can you hear me? Listen, I'm sorry, really. Don't cry. We'll be fine. I know you're with him all the time, I know how hard it is. He'll be fine—"

"Shit. That's my flight. I'm sorry, Brendan, this is so crazy. But I really *did* try to call. He's got school, I gave Tony the schedule. Except for Christmas Eve, but you knew that. His medicine's in the blue bag with the dinosaurs. Okay, shit, I have to run—kiss him for me, I'll call you, bye—"

So.

"So." Brendan put down the phone, turned. In the living room, Peter sprawled on the floor, fingers pulling at a thread in the carpet. On the couch behind him sat Tony, pointing excitedly at the screen.

"—see, remember? Those are the *real* three Kings, and that guy there, he's one of the *real* shepherds. But that other guy with the black beard who's sneaking up on the little donkey, he's a *Sears* shepherd—"

"Tony. You were here when Teri dropped him off?"

Tony looked over at Brendan, surprised. "Oh. Hey, I forgot you were home. Yeah, sure I was. I was right here, Peter and I settled down to some serious holiday cheer. Right, Petie?"

Peter continued to make the same soft nasal humming sound he always did. His eyes were still glued to the screen: when the bad shepherd grabbed the little Puppetoon donkey and stuffed him in a sack, Peter flinched. His father didn't notice; he was already going through Peter's bags, looking for the pages of instructions he knew would be there.

"Well, thanks. What the hell was she going to do if you weren't here? Why didn't she go by my office?"

"She did. She couldn't even get in the building."

Brendan grimaced. "Damn, that's right. Christmas party next door, they all went down to the Hawk & Dove. And I wasn't picking up the phone."

"You didn't go to the Christmas party?"

"No, Tony, I didn't go to the Christmas party. I mean, what's the point? They don't give you a present."

Tony looked shocked. "They don't give you a present?"

"No, you bonehead." Brendan bopped him on the shoulder with Teri's instructions. "Of course they don't give you a present. That was a joke. But I really am glad you were here when she came. C'mere, Peter—"

He reached for his son, steeling himself for the boy to turn away or, worse, fail to acknowledge him at all. Instead Peter remained where he was, watching TV. When Brendan touched his arm, he could feel the ripple of muscle beneath his son's bare skin. Or maybe it wasn't muscle at all; maybe it was nerve, maybe that was how exposed it all was to Peter, bound sheaves of neurons and ganglions and dendrites, veiled with nothing more than that soft white tissue of baby skin, the tiny hairs like a dusting of snow, the sweet powdery smell of him. For an instant he was close enough to smell him, so close it made him dizzy, made him forget for a moment where or when it was—like when Teri was still breastfeeding and they would lie in bed together and he could smell all of them at once, his own sweat, and Teri's, and Peter's scent, a scent he had always thought came from baby powder—strange and warm, like honeysuckle, or bread—but which he knew now came from babies.

"Peter," he whispered.

For a split second, Peter did not move away. Brendan held his breath until it hurt, until he could feel his own nerves shimmering alongside his son's, the two tines of a broken tuning fork suddenly and miraculously vibrating together. Peter's skin was warm, warmer than Brendan's own; there was a sticky spot within the crook of his elbow, jelly or paste or generic childhood crud. He was close enough to see the small red crescent just below his hairline, where another child had accidentally struck him with a block. Still holding his breath, Brendan let his fingers move ever so slightly down his son's arm, towards his hand—

—but it was too much. The nasal humming became a grunt, of annoyance or fear or pain; and the boy shrugged him off.

"Peter." Brendan spoke his name, louder this time. Peter nodded—a half-nod, really, jerking his chin downward a fraction of an inch—and scooched closer to the television. Brendan watched him, biting his lip; then turned to Tony. "Well. One big happy family. I guess I'll make dinner."

He waited for Tony's usual offer to help, or clean up, or bring out the trash. But Tony only sprawled on the couch and stared at the television, lips moving as he recited along with King Melchior.

"... *greatest gifts are always those that cannot be bought with gold or silver*..."

"Ugh." Brendan rolled his eyes. "I'm outta here."

He made dinner, pasta with butter sauce for Peter, with pesto for himself and Tony. While it was cooking he rummaged around for that morning's *Post.* It was gone. When he looked outside the back door, the entire stack of papers waiting to be recycled was gone, too.

"Tony? You do something with today's paper?"

"Um, well, yeah. I did." His expression was distinctly furtive.

"Um, well, yeah. Could you tell me where it *is?*"

Tony shifted uncomfortably, knocking a pillow onto the floor. "Uh. Actually, no. I mean, it's gone."

Brendan frowned. "But the pickup isn't till tomorrow." Although, now that he thought about it, he hadn't seen any newspapers out there all last week, either.

"I know. I just needed them for something."

"What?"

"Just something. A surprise."

"A surprise. Right." Brendan sighed. "Well, tomorrow leave the damn paper for me to read, okay? I don't need any more surprises."

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Peter went to bed with surprisingly little trouble that night. Usually any change in his routine was enough to send him into a fit of heart-splintering screams, but except for the usual tantrum over brushing his teeth, the evening was calm. Brendan read to him in bed, *Goodnight, Moon* and "The Owl and the Pussycat"; and before he was finished his son was asleep, hand knuckled up against one cheek, the much-gnawed rubber duck nestled against his breast.

"Don't you read him Christmas stories?"

Brendan gently tugged the blanket up around Peter's shoulders, motioning Tony to be quiet. "No," he whispered, and joined him in the hall. "I don't have any here."

"Teri packed some. I saw them. *The Grinch, The Night Before Christmas*—"

"Tony." Brendan poked his friend in the stomach. "You know what? I'm going to tell you a secret. Christmas depresses me. It makes me sad. It *totally bums me out.*"

"But why?"

He sucked his breath in angrily; but when he looked into Tony's eyes he saw only genuine puzzlement. Brendan sighed, drew his hand back and ran it through his thinning hair.

"It just does," he said. "Okay? I just don't get in much of a Christmas spirit anymore."

"You're not kidding," said Tony.

Still, after he'd finished cleaning up and going through his e-mail and sorting out Peter's clothes for the next day, Brendan found himself in the living room again, sprawled beside Tony on the couch. Outside, icy rain spattered against the windows and tossed red and green confetti onto the ground beneath the traffic light. On the TV screen, snow whipped around a man with shoulders hunched against the cold as he hurried down a narrow lane, rosy-cheeked urchins singing merrily in his wake.

Brendan nudged Tony with his foot. "Who's this one?"

"George C. Scott. The Reagan-era Scrooge. See? *His* clothes are expensive—nice cut, nice fabric? He just can't be bothered helping anyone else. Classic Republican Scrooge. As opposed to Alistair Sim, the classic Dickensian Scrooge, who was a genuine miser." Tony wiggled his fingers. "Holes in his gloves, stuff like that. Then there's Mr. Magoo, the great Broadway Musical Scrooge."

Brendan laughed. "What, are you a Scrooge scientist?"

"Sure, man. Lionel Barrymore, Reginald Owen—vintage Hollywood. And Scrooge McDuck—what can I say? Quite simply one of the greats."

"Yeah? What about me?"

"You?" Tony scrutinized his friend, rubbing his chin. "You're the classic post-po-mo Scrooge. Involved with the text, yet denying your own place within it. Definitely post-post-modern."

Brendan snorted. "Right." He leaned forward, picked up the *TV Guide* from the floor and began flipping through it. "Where do you find all this stuff? I mean, half of it isn't even listed in here."

"I dunno. But I can always find it. Sometimes it takes a while, but..." Tony shrugged. "It's there."

"What about that Chip Crockett Christmas thing? Ever hear any more about that?"

"No." Tony looked sad. "I keep checking, but nobody seems to know anything except these sort of vague rumors. I figure I'll just, like, stay up all night Christmas Eve and see what happens."

"Great idea, Tony." Brendan took a deep breath. "But you know what? I've kind of had enough of Uncle Ebeneezer. I'm going to bed."

Tony nodded absently, engrossed once more in the movie. "Sure. 'Night, Brenda."

It was a scramble to get Peter ready for school the next morning. He refused to eat anything, screaming and throwing first a bagel, then Cheerios, toast, english muffin, cantaloupe, and instant oatmeal on the floor, before his increasingly desperate father gave up and began the struggle to get him dressed. When Peter stayed on the weekend, Brendan always let him wear his pajamas until lunchtime. Now it took both Brendan and Tony a full fifteen minutes to get the boy into his clothes, and even then Peter ended up wearing the same T-shirt he'd gone to sleep in the night before.

"Hey, Pete, man, calm down," said Tony when the ordeal was finally over. "It's only *clothes.*"

Brendan shook his head, red-faced and panting, and started shoving plastic containers and juice boxes into Peter's knapsack. "That's just it. It's *not* just clothes. It's everything—*everything* is a battle." He found himself blinking back tears, and turned to the kitchen counter, waiting until he could speak without his voice breaking. "I swear to god, I don't know how Teri does it."

"No lie." Tony sighed and began to scoop congealed oatmeal from the floor. In the living room Peter sat rigidly on the couch, watching Cookie Monster eat an aluminum plate. "Does she have to drive him in every day?"

"Yeah. And she—*shit.*" Brendan straightened, smacking himself in the forehead with his palm. "How'm I going to do this?"

"Do what?"

"Well, I can't take him on the Metro in rush hour. And it'll be so late, I'll never find a parking spot by the office after I drive him in. Let me think, let me think—

"I know." Brendan snapped his fingers, pointed at Tony. "You're not doing anything, right? You mind coming with me? Then you can drop me off at the office and drive back here, and I don't have to worry about parking."

Tony frowned, glancing at the television. "Yeah, I guess. Do I have time to—"

"*No.* If the Grinch is on you can damn well tape him. Let's go—come on, Peter, sweetie, time for school..."

Out on Maryland Avenue, the city's ineffectual road crews were doing their usual job of making the morning commute even worse. The night's sleet had been reduced to a puree of salted slush and dead leaves clogging the roadside, and numerous tow trucks were still doing a brisk business on the narrow side streets.

Yet despite the mess, the commuters crowding the sidewalks were cheerful, men and women in trenchcoats and lightweight parkas waving to each other as they hurried towards Union Station and the Capitol grounds. Strands of white lights spun through trees and hedges and outlined the fronts of brick rowhouses and storefronts. In Stanton Square Park, an evergreen glittered green and blue and red where some street people had strung together empty beer cans and bottles with strapping tape and bits of aluminum foil.

"Hey, check it out!" said Tony as the Volvo crawled past. "That looks nice, doesn't it?"

Brendan grunted. On a bench by the sidewalk, Dave the Grave and his dog were already settled with a paper bag between them. Dave's battered tweed jacket had been augmented by a long red muffler and some tinsel; his dog lolled beside him, the ends of the comforter tucked between his paws. At sight of Brendan's car, Dave lifted his bottle and shouted a greeting.

" 'Aaay, whoa whoa! M'ry 'issmiss!"

Tony rolled down his window and leaned out. "Merry Christmas, Dave!"

"Shut up, Tony." Brendan pressed a button and sent Tony's window sliding back up. "He's a goddam bum."

"Aw, give him a break, man! It's *Christmas.*"

"Yeah, well, he can go to the shelter with everyone else, then. Or freeze on a grate."

"Jeez, Brendan!" Tony shook his head in dismay. "What about all those poor people in the missions we used to collect for at Sacred Heart? You never wanted *them* to freeze on a grate."

"If they'd been outside my house, I'd have wanted them to freeze. And their little dogs, too."

"Boy, what a grouch. Hey, Peter, you ever know your old man was such a grouch?" Peter said nothing; only chewed thoughtfully on his yellow duck and stared out at the bottle-decked tree behind Dave the Grave.

Brendan continued to be a grouch the whole way to the Birchwood School, immune to Tony's admiration for the White House Christmas tree, the decorations in the windows of the restaurants at Dupont Circle, the group of kids from Gonzaga High School singing by a subway entrance. In the front seat Tony rocked and sang, too, turning to pick up Peter's duck when it fell and yelling encouragement at some boys trying to slide down a driveway on a cafeteria tray.

"Keep your weight in the front—the *front*—"

"They're going to kill themselves," Brendan said, turning up the side road leading to the school. "And then their parents will hire me to sue the company that makes those trays."

"Don't you remember doing that? Only we had those flying saucers?"

"Yeah. And we had *snow.* All right, here we are. Let's make this snappy, I have a client coming in at ten."

Tony slid from the front seat and began gathering Peter's things. "How come you're so busy right before Christmas?"

"Because I want to be," Brendan said tersely. "Okay, Petie, here we are at school."

Inside, everything looked pretty much as it always did. There were green-and-red cutouts on the wall, a few reindeer and trees, some yellow cardboard stars and blue Menorahs; but no Christmas tree, no lights, no scary Santas. There were fewer kids as usual, too, and half as many teachers.

"Peter! Hi!" Peter looked up, a faint smile on his face as Peggy knelt before him. "I missed you when your Mom picked you up early yesterday—hi!"

She reached forward and gave him a hug, holding him very tightly for just a moment and then withdrawing. She stood, brushing the hair from her eyes, and smiled. She was wearing a long green sweater with stars on it, and a small red-and-green-striped wool cap. "Brendan! I haven't seen you for a while—"

"I know, my schedule changed, I—" Brendan was still staring at his son. "He let you hug him?"

"Yeah, that's a new thing, just this week. But we've been working up to it for while. He's really doing great, you know, he's been making some incredible progress just these last few weeks. Do you have a minute? 'Cause I can—"

She looked over and for the first time saw Tony. "Oh! Hi, I'm sorry, I work with Peter here, Peggy Storrs."

She stuck out her hand. For a moment Tony just stared at her, with an expression Brendan had last seen when he'd received the new Advent Moth promo. Then,

"Very pleased to meet you," he said, grabbing her hand and pumping it. "Anthony Kemper. I'm an old friend of Brendan's. We went to high school together. In Yonkers. Actually, we're living together now, if you ever—"

"That is *very* temporary." Brendan glared at him, then turned back to Peggy. "Actually, Peggy, I'm kind of in a rush this morning, but—"

But Peggy was still looking at Tony, her brow furrowed. "You know, you look very familiar. I mean, *really* familiar. Have you, like, been in here before? Although I don't remember—"

Brendan sighed. "Peggy, meet Tony Maroni."

"Tony—*Maroni?*" Her blue eyes got huge. "You're like, the *real* Tony Maroni? Oh my god. You *are*. I don't believe it! God, I saw you guys when I was in high school! In Seattle, I guess it was—jeez, it must be fifteen years ago! God, you guys were great, that was like the greatest show I have ever seen in my life!"

Tony smiled dreamily. "Yeah, yeah... I remember that. The Limehouse. That was right before we went to Japan. That was, like, the last time we really played together," he added wistfully. "I mean, all of us, in the States."

"You left after that..." Peggy ran a hand over her cap. "God, I was so bummed out. I was only fifteen, and that was it, I felt like I'd missed *everything*. Tony Maroni." She shook her head. "This is so amazing. I guess I'd heard once that you lived here in D.C., but—"

Brendan cleared his throat. "You know, I hate to break up the Rock Trivia Show, but I have a client coming in half an hour and I need Mr. Maroni here to drive me back to my office."

"Oh sure, sure." Peggy glanced down at Peter, then up at Brendan again. She was actually *blushing*. "But I just can't *believe* that—"

"Oh, please, believe," said Brendan. He wondered what Peggy would think if she knew that Tony considered *This Is Spinal Tap* a model for behavioral therapy. "Look, I'm in a real hurry today, that's all. Maybe tomorrow when I drop him off, we could go over some of this great stuff you're talking about."

"Oh, but there's no school tomorrow. Christmas Eve. So many kids and teachers are going away or have family stuff, Deirdre decided that we'd just close until the 28th. We have early release today, at noon. It was in the newsletter..."

Brendan swore under his breath. Peggy hunched her shoulders. "I'm really sorry—you didn't know? That was why Teri was so freaked out about having to go away..."

"Right, right. It's okay, not a problem..." Brendan turned and stooped beside his son. "Peter, Peter, Peter. What am I going to do about you?" he murmured.

"*I'll* be there." Tony's voice was so loud that several of the other teachers turned. "I mean, hey, what else do I have going on? It'll be great, we'll do Christmas stuff."

"Christmas can be a little intimidating for some of these kids." Peggy smiled. "But you probably know that already if you're hanging out with this little guy here at home. I still can't believe you and Brendan went to *high school* together."

Brendan stared at the floor and shook his head despairingly. Tony nodded, bopping back and forth on his heels.

"You know what?" he said. "I can come pick him up at noon, and you can tell me what I need to know about being with him. I mean, whatever I don't know already."

"Which would fill an encyclopedia," Brendan muttered darkly. "Listen, Elvis, I really do have to get back to the office. Peggy, Peter will be fine with Tony, you just tell him anything you think he needs to know, okay?"

Peggy nodded. "I don't think you're on the sheet as an authorized pickup, are you, Tony? So maybe you could just come to the office and fill out a form, and Brendan can sign it, and we'll be all set," she said, and started for the office.

"Sure, sure!" Tony loped after her.

"Do you believe this, Peter?" Brendan shook his head. "*I* graduated fourth in my class at Georgetown. Plus, I thought she was gay."

Peter said nothing. Though if his father had turned his head, he might have seen something like reflected light shining in his son's eyes, as Peter gazed sideways at Tony jouncing up and down outside the office.

"Listen, sweetie. Daddy has to go to work now. Uncle Tony's going to pick you up at lunchtime. Can you remember that? It won't be me and it won't be Mommy—"

"Okay. I'm signed on, Captain Kirk," Tony announced, sweeping up behind Brendan. "You ready? Want me to drive?"

"No, I'll drive." Brendan sighed. "Yeah, I guess I'm ready. Remember, Peter." He stood, pointed at Tony. "Uncle Tony here will pick you up."

Tony nodded. "Noon, right?"

"Actually, if you can come a little earlier, it'll make it easier in case he's having a rough day." Peggy smiled. "Or if *I* am."

Brendan groaned. "Let's *go*—"

"Bye, then—see you around noon. Hooray hello, Tony!"

"Whoa whoa whoa!" Tony called. "Ouch! Jeez, I'm *coming*, Brenda, for chrissakes—"

Brendan drove back to Capitol Hill. Tony bopped and drummed on the dashboard and sang "Christmas (Baby Please Come Home)" until Brendan threatened to throw him out and make him walk from Foggy Bottom.

"Okay, okay, I've stopped, see? Man, I just can't believe that girl Peggy, huh? She's great, she's like *so* great..."

But Brendan was brooding over how Peggy had been able to hug his son. Automatically he glanced into the rearview mirror, looking for Peter in his car seat. For a split second he had a flash of panic, seeing it was empty—

But of course Peter wasn't there. Peter was at school, bonding with strangers. Panic subsided into a wash of despair, and Brendan gripped the wheel until his hands hurt.

"How come you never told me about her?"

Brendan swallowed, let his breath out. "You never asked."

"I can't believe she saw us at the Limehouse. That was probably the best show we ever did, you know that? I can't believe she saw it."

"At least she's old enough to vote." Brendan pulled over near his office. For a moment he just sat there, waiting to see if the despair would fade. It did not. A young woman pushing a stroller around puddles on the sidewalk stopped, pointing at the window of the Trover Shop. Swags of fresh holly hung there, their berries so deep and glistening a red they looked like drops of blood. Brendan shut his eyes, then turned and reached into the backseat for his briefcase.

"Listen, Tony. Get there early like Peggy said, okay? But *don't forget Peter*. Make sure he eats something when he gets home—actually, bring something in the car, there's some juice boxes and peanut butter crackers in the kitchen. Ask Peggy to check if he needs any medicine before you leave, okay? I'll try to get out early but probably I won't be back till five or so."

"Sure man, sure, no prob." Tony clambered into the driver's seat as Brendan climbed out. "Don't worry, we'll be great, it'll be *fun.*"

"Make sure he's in his car seat!" Brendan shouted as Tony pulled away, an arc of slush rising behind him. "Get there early. And be *careful*—!"

Tony was careful, and he got there early. In fact, he got there about an hour after leaving Brendan on Pennsylvania Avenue. It would have been even sooner, but he stopped at the flower vendor's at Eastern Market and bought a small crimson poinsettia in a green plastic pot shaped like a Christmas tree.

"Hi," he said breathlessly when he arrived back at the Birchwood School. A half dozen children were settled at separate tables around the room, each with a grownup and a cookie and a little paper cup full of juice. Peggy looked up from where she sat across from Peter, holding the cookie for him.

"Tony! You *are* early."

"Here. This is for you. Merry Christmas." Tony plonked himself on the floor beside Peggy and handed her the poinsettia. "Unless you're not allowed to accept gifts."

"Oh no, gifts are *highly* encouraged. Look, Peter! See? This is a poinsettia. A flower—this is a *flower*—"

"So. Any instructions?" Tony turned and smiled at Peter, stretched his hand out to within a few inches of his face and waved gently. "Hey, Petie. You ready to come home with me? Watch Mister Magoo?"

Peter moved his head so that he faced away from Tony; but his gaze edged sideways, watching.

"Mister Magoo!" exclaimed Peggy. "God, I loved that—it used to be my favorite Christmas show. But they never run it anymore. Did you rent it?"

"Uh-uh." Tony wiggled his fingers at Peter.

"Is it on Nickelodeon or something?"

"No. I mean, I don't know. I guess."

"Huh. Well, I'll check it out when I get home, maybe I can catch the end."

"Wanna come over with me and Pete here? Cause then you could watch it with—"

Peggy shook her head. "I wish I could. But I have to write up all the weekly reports and stuff like that. Maybe another time." She smiled across the table at Peter. "So, Peter, are you ready? Tony here's going to drive you home today. Then your Daddy will be back later. Okay? Let's finish our snack and get everything ready to go..."

Tony went with her to gather Peter's things. "So. Is he, like, really doing better? I haven't seen so much of him the last two weeks, 'cause he's been with Teri."

Peggy nodded. She turned from the wall of brightly-painted cubbies and leaned against it, cradling Peter's jacket to her chest. "You know, he really is. We work so intensely with the kids here, and it can take years, but sometimes all of a sudden you just have a breakthrough. And I really think that could happen with Peter. Although," she added, lowering her voice, "probably I shouldn't say that. People get very, very sensitive about the issue of 'curing' autism."

Tony stared at Peter, standing off by himself and staring at a knothole in the wall. "Right," Tony said softly. "Well, I know his Mom and Dad love him no matter what."

Peggy bit her lip, then nodded. "Oh, sure," she said. "Though I think Brendan has some unresolved issues. He seems a little—distracted lately. Not as focused. But like I said, I shouldn't be saying this..."

"It's okay. I'm, like, family," said Tony. "And let me tell you, Brendan really loves *that.*"

He laughed and bent to pick up Peter's knapsack. "Okay, Petie. Let's go watch *Mister Magoo's Christmas Carol*. One of the very best—"

Peggy walked them to the front door. A few other parents were waiting by the office now with wrapped packages, greeting teachers and waving at their children.

"Yvonne! I'll be right with you—" Peggy touched the shoulder of a woman in a faux-mink coat, then turned back to Tony. "That's the mother of my other student. I should go. But thanks so much for coming by, Tony."

"So, are you, like around? After the holidays maybe?"

Peggy straightened her little wool cap and smiled. "Maybe. Thanks for the poinsettia. Tell Mister Magoo I said hi. And Peter—"

She stooped and gave him another quick strong hug. "You have a *wonderful* Christmas, Peter. I'll see you very soon. Very, very soon..."

They walked outside, Peter stopping once to stare ruminatively at a spiral of oil sending spectral currents across a puddle. Tony waited with him. "Hey, pretty cool, huh?" he said, and continued to the car. "You know, you're a lucky guy, Pete."

Tony held open the Volvo's back door and watched as Peter slowly climbed in. "Having a babe like that for a teacher. Man oh man."

They returned to Brendan's apartment. The sky was inked with clouds like slate-colored smoke, the air had that metallic bite that precedes snow. Peter was careful not to look into Tony's eyes when he glanced back at him. He seemed not to hear Tony when he asked a question or pointed out something—Christmas lights, sidewalk Santa—and after they parked the boy walked in front of him, dragging his backpack and making rhythmic *huff-huff* noises.

"Okay. Lunchtime," announced Tony when they got inside. He cut up an apple and smeared the slices with peanut butter. Peter refused to sit, so Tony fed him standing. Tony ended up eating most of it, but he did manage to get Peter to drink some milk, only half of which ended up on the floor.

"All right. Now Uncle Tony has to check his e-mail. Come on—"

Peter ignored him. He walked into the living room and sat on the floor and began pulling at a thread in the carpet. Tony frowned, then turned and walked down the hall.

"I'll be right back. You come on down here if you want, okay?"

He checked his mail and spent a few minutes reading the headlines, then went to Chip Crockett's Web site. Nothing new there. A few messages from a week ago, Tony's own unanswered request for information about Chip's Christmas special. He was just going to log off when he heard a soft *huff-huff* behind him.

"Hey, Peter. C'mere, want to check this out?"

Peter stepped forward, keeping a good distance from where Tony sat. There was still peanut butter on his face, and a clump in his hair where he'd twiddled it into a knot.

"Look," said Tony. "See? That's Chip Crockett. Your Daddy and I liked him when we were little. Like you like Cookie Monster."

Peter avoided his eyes, but when Tony turned back to the computer the boy stepped forward, staring at the monitor. "And that's Ogden Orff. Listen—"

Tony punched a key. Static; then,

"*That's my boy—Ogden Orff!*"

Peter moved closer.

"Wanna hear it again?"

Tony played the sound bite again; then drew up the black-and-white image of Chip Crockett dressed as Ogden Orff. "See? That's him? Ogden Orff. And look—here's Captain Dingbat. And this one, this is my favorite. Ooga Booga. Isn't he great? Check out that schnozz, man—ever see a nose like that? Hey, you're blocking me!"

Peter stepped in front of him, his face scant inches from where the black-and-white image of a puppet with bulbous nose and tiny hands filled the screen.

"Pretty cool, huh?" asked Tony. Peter shook his head and continued to stare. "Ooga Booga. Good ol' Ooga Booga."

Tony sighed, swiping the hair from his eyes. "But you know, we oughta go check out Mister Magoo. Come on, let me turn it off now."

He started to move the mouse, but as the screen changed Peter shook his head again, and when the screen went blank he made a sharp angry sound.

"Hey man, I know; but I promise, we can come back later. Let's go watch TV now. Come on, it's Mister Magoo—you'll like him, he's like Ooga Booga only he moves."

Tony started for the living room. Peter remained where he was, gazing at the empty monitor.

"Come on, Petie," Tony urged. "Let's go..."

At last Peter followed him. Tony put the television on and slumped onto the couch, remote in hand. Peter sat on the floor. Tony began flipping through the stations until he found what he was looking for.

"Hey, great, it's just starting! Watch, Petie, you're gonna *love* this show—"

That was how Brendan found them when he got home hours later. They were onto the Grinch by then, the floor around them scattered with popcorn and broken crackers.

"Tony. Peter." Brendan shut the door, shaking moisture from his overcoat. "Man, it's getting cold out. Hi, guys."

"Hey, Brenda Starr! You're just in time. Look, he's stealing the Christmas tree!"

"Yeah, great. " Brendan rolled his eyes. He looked back down at the handful of letters he'd just picked up from the floor beneath the mail slot. "Here, you got something."

He handed Tony a letter and set his own mail on the kitchen counter. Tony glanced at the envelope, then shoved it into a pocket.

"Did he have anything to eat?" asked Brendan. He ran a finger along the counter top, frowning: someone had

spilled something there, flour it looked like, or maybe salt. "Beside what's on the floor?"

"Some peanut butter and apple and some milk. And a lot of popcorn."

"All the major food groups. Well, we've got frozen pizza for dinner." Brendan stepped back into the living room and stood behind his son. "What do you think, Peter? You like this Grinch guy?"

Peter shook his head slightly. On screen the Grinch covered his ears against the sound of villagers caroling. Brendan crouched down to pick up bits of popcorn.

"I do," he said. "I can really relate to him. You know why? Because there *is* too much noise. Turn it down, Tony."

Still, after Peter was in bed the rest of the evening was quiet—too quiet for Tony, who wanted to watch David Bowie and Bing Crosby singing "The Little Drummer Boy" but was forbidden to by Brendan.

"For the next forty-eight hours, this is a Christmas-free zone," he announced, shooing Tony from the couch and changing the channel to CNN.

"Forty-eight hours? Jesus, Christmas'll be over by then!"

"You got it." Brendan stretched out on the couch and yawned, then wrinkled his nose. "What's that smell? Paint?"

Tony shrugged. "Mmmm, yeah." He stood in the hall, looking lost and disconsolate. His T-shirt was spattered with white powder, his hair pulled back in a sloppy ponytail. "I told you, I'm working on something. I just wanted to take a break and hear—"

"Forget it, Tony."

"But—"

"Good night, Tony."

That night his father came to him. At first Brendan thought it was Peter, but as the sound of footsteps grew clearer he recognized it unmistakably as his father's tread, that familiar pause as he went into the bathroom and after a minute or two returned to the hall, heading down towards Brendan's room. Brendan was lying in bed, staring at the ceiling where the soft mingled lights from the tree fluttered like blue and green and red moths. He couldn't wait, how could anyone wait? Surely it was morning now... ?

And yes, of course it was, because his father's shadow filled the doorway, just as it always had. Brendan started, then with a cry sat up. Joy scalded him, and amazement: because there he was, wearing the red L.L. Bean nightshirt he'd gotten for Christmas one year, its sleeves worn and hem frayed, his bare legs still muscular though the hair on them was grey now. His face, however, was young, the way it looked in old family pictures, the way it looked in Brendan's mind—and that was the other amazing thing, not just that his father should be here, alive, but that he was young. Brendan gasped with delight, realizing anew what he had forgotten since the last time this had happened: that people didn't really die, or even if they did, you could still be with them again, *it didn't matter that they were dead after all!* Relief poured over him like water and he shook himself, feeling the sheets sliding from his arms as he tried to get to his feet, to cross the room and hug him. Because his father saw him, too, it wasn't like it had been those last two years in the nursing home, he saw Brendan and recognized him and he was smiling, one hand half-raised in the familiar greeting that mimed tossing a baseball, the other stretched out to his son.

"Dad! Dad—"

But the words didn't come out. All the air had been sucked from him, and all the light too—the room was black again, or no, his eyes were closed, he could still see those phantom lights pulsing behind his eyelids and somewhere behind them his father stood, waiting, and all he had to do was open his eyes and he could see him, he could leap from the bed and in two steps he would be there, he would see him again—

But his eyes would not open. When he tried to cry out his throat closed and he could only grunt, horribly, thrashing at the bed and struggling to rise while his hands sank down and the darkness pressed upon his face like a door falling on him. He screamed then, and as the sound echoed around him he opened his eyes and found himself sitting up in bed. A narrow slab of light fell into the room where the door was cracked, then disappeared as it was flung open.

"Brendan?" Tony stood there in his boxer shorts, hair a wild nimbus around his face. "You okay?"

Brendan shook his head, then nodded. When he opened his mouth air rushed in to fill his throat, and he gasped.

"Jesus... I had a nightmare. Or—no—"

He ran his hands across his face, feeling how cold his skin was, and moist. "—just a—this dream. But I'm fine. Go—go back to bed. I'm sorry I woke you."

"I wasn't asleep." Tony remained in the doorway, his face creased with worry. "You sure you're okay? I thought someone was, like, breaking in or something."

"No, really, it was just a dream. I—I'll just check Peter. Go on—"

He stood shakily, the sheets falling to the floor around him. Tony moved to let him get by, and as he passed him Brendan paused, then put a hand on his shoulder. "Hey. Tony. Sorry I woke you."

"No prob, man." Tony smiled. In the half-light leaking from the bathroom his raggedy features looked gaunt, his hair more silver than grey; and for the first time Brendan thought, *he's old.* The notion shook him almost as much as the dream had. He stood there for a moment, gazing at his oldest friend as though trying to recall his name; and finally smiled back.

"Yeah. Well, 'scuse me—"

"Hey, you know what today is?" Tony called after him softly. "Christmas Eve!"

Brendan took a deep breath. "Yeah," he said, pausing to lean against the bathroom door. For an instant spectral lights flickered around the perimeter of his vision, red and green and blue, the shadow of a tree. He drew a hand across his face and winced. "Thanks. I—I remembered."

The morning was cold and heavy with moisture, the sky leaden and a few fine flakes already biting Brendan's cheeks as he hurried to work, his fingers numb where they curled around the handle of his briefcase. He'd forgotten to wear gloves—refused to, actually, indulging in some absurd belief that if he didn't dress as though it were winter, it wouldn't be.

But the day promised more miserable weather, more sleet and freezing rain, maybe even snow. Dave the Grave and his cronies had gotten an early start on the holiday, gathering on a corner opposite the Library of Congress and bopping up and down against the cold. Dave's wiry dog nosed at a pile of refuse spilling from a trash can, and Dave himself looked pale and rheumy-eyed, the filthy tweed jacket hanging loosely from his stooped shoulders. One of his friends held him up as he waved at passersby. Brendan saw him and started across the street, Dave's cracked voice trailing forlornly after him.

"Where's Whoa Whoa? Whoa... c'mere, goddamit..."

"Shut up, goddamit." Brendan hopped onto the curb, glanced up and saw a well-dressed man passing him with a suspicious look: he must have spoken aloud. He glared back and the man hurried on.

There was no one in his office when he arrived. He let himself in, trying to summon up some sense of well-being at having the place to himself. But everything looked desolate and abandoned, the computer monitors staring blankly from his partners' desks, Ashley's tiny Norfolk pine dropping yellowing needles onto the floor, its branches drooping beneath the weight of three miniature glass balls. Brendan spent a good minute staring at it glumly, before picking the tree up and depositing it in the wastebasket. Then he set to work.

He'd made a point of scheduling back-to-back client appointments all morning, starting at nine. At just past eight-thirty the phone began to ring with the first of the day's cancellations.

"Brendan Keegan."

"Yes—hi, Mr. Keegan, this is Paulette Yates? I was supposed to see you this morning? About a personal injury suit?"

"Yes, Miss Yates." Brendan swiveled so that he could gaze out the window, took in the Capitol's scaffolding glazed black with snow and ice, and immediately swiveled back to glance at his appointment book. "Let's see—yes, that's at nine."

"Well, you see, I—I have to cancel? I forgot it was Christmas Eve, and I have to get the train to see my parents, and—"

"You're canceling the appointment."

Nervous silence. Then, "Yes. I'm really sorry, I just—"

"Would you like to reschedule now? Or, no, it'd be better if you called next week, my secretary's out."

Her voice brightened with relief. "Oh! Sure, sure—"

"Fine. And, um, Miss Yates: you know I have to charge you for the missed appointment."

Another silence. "You do? Even though I called?"

"Well, you called at twenty-five to nine. I can't put someone else in that slot now."

"But—how much?"

"The hourly rate, one twenty-five."

"One hundred—" He heard a brisk intake of breath, and then a softer, muffled sound. "Oh, jesus. That's, like—can't you—"

"I'm afraid I can't. Now, we can reschedule after—"

Click.

He read the morning *Post*, rescued before Tony could find it and spirit it away for whatever knucklehead purpose he had. He made phone calls, setting up meetings and hearings for after the holiday, responding politely to the Greetings of the Season and Best Wishes For, all carefully worded these days and especially in this place, make sure no one feels excluded: Merry Christmas, Chanukah, Kwaanza, Solstice. In the background, laughter and music, recordings announcing We Will Be Closed Until; receptionists answering phones with breathless voices, already anticipating the afternoon's office party, early release, Midnight Mass.

And alone of everyone he spoke to, Brendan felt grounded, sober, adult; already looking to next year, a *new* year. Like someone on a long international flight, everyone around him fidgeting restlessly while he slept, his watch already set ahead seven hours, his mind at peace, untrammeled by excitement, and cold to the allure of *gratis* wine, chocolates, movies, smiling fellow passengers.

Three of his other appointments canceled as well; two, actually, with the other a no-show. Brendan carefully noted all this in his book, copying the information out for Ashley for billing purposes. He researched a case that would be going to trial in February—the thought comforted him, February a nice no-nonsense month, nothing there to worry about except for Valentine's Day, and God knows *that* had never been much of a threat.

At lunchtime he ventured out for a sandwich. Big wet flakes were falling now, whitening black overcoats and Timberland parkas but turning to slush as soon as the flakes made contact with the pavement. The takeout shop was crowded; *everyplace* was crowded, nothing, seemingly, being out of the running for consideration as a last-minute Christmas gift. Brendan waited impatiently while the man behind the counter prepared cold-cut platters and wrapped a roast beef sandwich in green butcher paper with a gold bow.

"I'll have one of those." Brendan pointed at the sandwich. "Only without the wrapping paper."

"That'll be about five minutes—I've got to get this party platter over to Senator Easton's office—"

"Forget it." Brendan jabbed his finger at the glass front of the counter. "Just give me a Kaiser roll."

The roll was tasteless. He ate it on his way back to the office, dodging Senate staffers rushing for cabs and giddy interns hugging each other goodbye on their way to the airport. When he got back inside, there was a message on the machine from Teri, giving him her flight arrival time and reminding him to come by with Peter the next morning at ten o'clock for Christmas cheer.

"Cheer," Brendan repeated, erasing the message. "Cheer cheer cheer."

The phone rang. He answered it, still shrugging out of his wet overcoat and shaking crumbs onto the floor alongside dead Norfolk pine needles. "Brendan Keegan."

"Brendan. Kevin."

"Kevin." Brendan hung up his coat, slid into his chair. "How are you."

"Well, I'm good. Been thinking about you. See the game the other night?"

"Wasn't that something," Brendan said, his voice sounding like a hollow echo of his cousin's bluff tone. He hadn't spoken to Kevin since Thanksgiving. "What's up?"

"Well, Eileen and I wanted to invite you and Peter over this evening. If you're not doing anything. The girls would love to see you. You could even stay over if you want. We're going to Teri's tomorrow and we could all go together, if you feel like it."

"Well, thank you." Brendan cleared his throat: why did he and Kevin always sound as though they were trying to arrange a subpoena? "I mean, that would be nice, except that I don't know when you last talked to Teri—she had to go out of town, and so Peter's with me until tomorrow morning, and I think probably we'll just stick to our original plans."

"Peter's there with you right now?"

"No, no—he's at home, with Tony." Brendan cleared his throat again and adjusted the contrast on his monitor. "As a matter of fact, I better get going—I should get back early, make sure everything's okay."

"Oh." Kevin's voice rose slightly. He paused, then added, "Well, you know, Tony would be very welcome, too. Eileen's got a ton of food, there's plenty of room—"

"Thanks, Kevin. But, you know, I have a client waiting. We'll just see you tomorrow, okay?"

He waited a long moment until Kevin finally replied. "Sure. Sure, Brendan. Give Peter a hug, okay? We'll see you tomorrow. Merry Christmas—"

"Right. Thanks, Kevin—"

He hung up. Around him the room was dim, the windows ash-colored: he'd forgotten to turn the lights back on. He didn't do so now; just hunched closer to the computer screen, scrolling down a list of dates and names as he punched his home number into the telephone. Tony answered just as the answering machine kicked in, sounding out of breath.

"Tony? It's me, Brendan. Everything okay?"

"Oh, hey, hi. Yeah, it's okay, I guess. I don't know what it is—yesterday he was great, but today he doesn't want to eat at all. He doesn't want to do anything. I finally just parked him in front of the TV, he seems to be all right there."

Brendan felt conflicting emotions, a bitterly gleeful *I told you so!* and anxiety for his son. "Well, he can be a handful. Are you sure you're all right?"

"No kidding he's a handful. But I think we're okay..."

There was no concomitant bitterness in Tony's voice; only exhaustion. And suddenly Brendan wondered what, exactly, he was doing here in his office; what had he been thinking, leaving his child at home alone with a stranger? What the hell was wrong with Teri, taking off like that at the last minute, not even *talking* to him first? His concern spiked to rage, thinking of Peter hungry, Peter suffering, Peter—

"Brendan? I gotta go check on him—I'll see you later, okay—?"

And Tony was gone. Brendan started to call back, to demand to know what was happening; but as quickly as it had come his anger disappeared. He drew a long shuddering breath, replaced the phone in its cradle. *He* should have stayed home today; he should be there now. Even thinking of Teri and trying to transfer this granite load of guilt to her didn't make Brendan feel any better.

"Ah, shit."

He switched his computer off, and for several minutes sat alone in the dark. Snow and freezing rain hissed against the window; now and then he could feel the walls shake as wind buffeted the building. He had to go home, he should never have left this morning, how could he even have dreamed of doing so?

But the thought of returning there, of facing the hours of tedium and cleaning up and fruitless insistent arguing with a child who never spoke—his child, his son, a boy who would scream if Brendan tried to look him in the eye, a boy who would only bear his father's touch when he was asleep—the thought of being with Peter in that desolate apartment on Christmas Eve filled him with such despair that he moaned aloud.

And, at last, stood and dressed to go home. What else could he do? He could no more blame Peter for his own grief than he could blame Teri. And of course Peter did recognize him, he wept sometimes when Brendan dropped him off at school, and when he left the room after tucking him into bed at night; he woke up some nights whimpering, and would only go back to sleep after Brendan spoke to him, murmuring nonsense, snatches of half-remember nursery rhymes, the words to "Meet the Mets."

And of course Peter loved him, there was no doubt about it, he was his *father*. Brendan tried not to hear Teri saying that, or the therapist they'd seen; tried to hear the words in his own voice inside his head; tried to imagine them coming from his son...

But at that his imagination balked, the thought of Peter speaking made his father feel sick and dizzy with hopelessness. It was too much like his dream; too much like giving in for a few moments, even in sleep, to love and

belief and hope. You could not steel yourself against disappointment and loss and grief in this life, if nothing else Brendan knew that; but you could arm yourself against the rest of it. You could arm yourself against desire and hope, you could be a fucking fortress and never fall, never let a single arrow through. And so as the sleet gave way to snow and every radio in the city began to sound, gently or noisily, its welcome to the imminent feast, Brendan Keegan picked up his briefcase, locked the door to his office, and began to trudge home.

It was a miserable walk. Just as Brendan had spent the last few years trying to ignore the sigils of the season, so he had attempted to ignore its weather, refusing to invest in anything more winter-worthy than his Brooks Brothers overcoat. No down parkas, no Thinsulate-lined gloves, no sturdy L.L. Bean boots with leather uppers to shield his expensive wool trousers from the surging tide of slush and curbstone filth that inevitably caught up with him. In this he was not alone: much of the city's workforce, save those hardy Congressional underlings from places like Maine or Minnesota, continued to indulge the hopeful but ultimately unsupportable notion that they lived in a Southern city, with weather befitting retirement communities along the Gulf Coast. In reality D.C.'s weather could be as extreme as it was unpredictable, a fact now underscored for Brendan by the sight of two laughing, red-cheeked young women in Park Police mufti, making their way past Eastern Market on cross-country skis. He shuddered and tugged his collar up around his neck, averting his eyes. It was harder to avoid the row of cut evergreens leaning against the brick facade of the Market itself, or the plastic buckets full of fresh-cut holly and box, the ropes of princess pine and balsam and the ghostly clouds of mistletoe dangling from oak branches sawn from trees along Skyline Drive. He skirted the line of greenery, stepping off the curb into the street; but the fragrance of balsam and boxwood dogged him, along with the sound of pleading children, the faint thrum of a church organ and an unsteady soprano struggling with "O Holy Night."

"God damn it," whispered Brendan through chattering teeth. He spoke aloud, as much to drown the music of the world in his ears, as to protest the cold. But it was so cold, and the expectant world was so tightly wrapped around him that he kept it up the whole way home, the mean rigorous chant rising and falling as he scurried across streets and past driveways packed with cars, kicking at mysterious boxes that had already disgorged their secrets to garages and attics, jostling passers-by who unwisely wished him Merry or Happy, his head down and eyes fixed on nothing but the grey ice-scummed sidewalk before him. "God damn, god damn..."

Finally he reached the corner of Seventh and Maryland. For a long moment he stood there, heedless of his neighbors hurrying past, and stared at the defiantly barren windows of his rowhouse apartment. There were no lights there; no spangled promise of a tree within; no fake plastic candles; no Menorahs or Kwaanza candles. No wreath on the door; just a red paper flyer from the Capitol Hill Food bank—

SORRY WE MISSED YOU! WE ARE STILL ACCEPTING DONATIONS OF CANNED GOODS FOR OUR HOLIDAY HUNGER DRIVE, PLEASE DROP OFF AT—

He tore it down, crumpled it and tossed it onto the steps behind him; then went inside.

The apartment was silent. All was calm, all was bright. Actually, all was an incredible mess.

"What the—?"

Brendan frowned, putting down his briefcase and surveying the living room. The TV was on: scampering reindeer, an elf. He switched it off, turned to survey the galaxy of spilled popcorn sweeping from wall to wall, mingled with cracker crumbs and an apple core, an empty juice box, videotapes. There were shreds of newsprint everywhere, a trail of apple juice leading to the kitchen, and smudges of white powder on the carpet.

And where the fuck was Tony? Brendan could feel the rage knotted inside him starting to uncoil, a slow serpent suddenly awakened. "Peter?" he called. "Tony?"

"In here, dude—we're in the bathroom—"

Brendan shook his head, then lowered himself into a crouch. He dabbed a finger in the white stuff on the floor, brought it to his mouth and hesitantly touched it to his lips.

"Blech." He grimaced, standing. Well, at least it wasn't cocaine. Or heroin. "Tony—?"

He found him in the bathroom leaning against the tub in a white-streaked RAW POWER T-shirt. Peter sat on the toilet, pants around his ankles, nuzzling his rubber duck and humming to himself.

"Hey, Brenda." Tony lifted his head and smiled weakly. For an instant Brendan thought he'd apologize for the mess, but no, he was just tired. "Jeez Louise, I'm glad to see you. We—"

"What the fuck is going on?" Brendan stared at him, his eyes too bright, his hands white and raw from the sleet outside.

"Huh?"

" 'Huh' nothing. What's this mess? The whole place is a goddam mess—" He moved his hand, too quickly, to point to the living room, and bashed it into the door. "Ow—god *damn* it—"

"Hey, man—" Tony glanced uneasily at Peter, then at Brendan. "Take it easy, he's had kind of a rough day, like—"

"Oh yeah? Well, I've had kind of a rough *week*. I've had kind of a rough fucking *life*—"

"Hey, whoa! C'mon, man, you're too loud, you'll scare him, Peggy said—"

"The fuck what Peggy says. What is this goddam *mess?"*

He stepped forward and grabbed the shower rod. His entire body shook. In his hand the plastic rod bent, then snapped, and the curtain flopped down around Tony's head.

"Whoa, man, who's making the mess now? Jeez, Brendan! I was just—"

He smashed the curtain aside, grabbed for Tony's shoulder; but before he could touch it Tony's hand curled around his.

"Brendan," said Tony, softly but urgently. Tony's grip was tight, his hand bigger than Brendan's and his grasp, Brendan realized with a small shock, far stronger than his own. "Calm down, man, I'll clean it up! But he wouldn't eat anything, I tried all day until finally he, like, ate a whole gallon of popcorn and I think he got a stomach ache. That's what we're dealing with now."

Behind him, Brendan could hear a low *nhhhh nhhhh nhhhhh.* Tony nodded, tipping his head toward Peter; then gazed back at Brendan. His brown eyes were not puzzled so much as they were utterly without comprehension. He stared down at Brendan's hand, gripped in his own like some remnant of a life-size toy, and abruptly let it fall. He shook his head. "Hey, man—it's *Christmas."*

Brendan stared back at him; past him, at his own shadow on the shiny white tiles of the shower stall. By some trick of the overhead light Tony's shadow dwarfed his, but when Tony turned away Brendan's shadow sprang back up, filling the empty space and the corners of the ceiling. He swallowed, the inside of his mouth tasting sour and chalky, his lips aching and chapped from the cold. "Get out," he said. It hurt to talk, it hurt to say that but he turned, bending to put his hand gently on Peter's shoulder where he sat. "Get out."

"But." Tony watched as his friend gazed down at his son. Without looking at his father, the boy twisted, trying to slip from Brendan's touch. After a moment Brendan let go of him, and Peter began to cry. Tony bit his lip, then turned away.

"Okay," he said quietly.

"Thank you." Brendan remained standing above the child. Like Tony's shadow moments before, his son seemed to shrink. Brendan shivered, a wave of dizziness flooding him; then steadied himself by grabbing the back of the toilet. The dizziness passed; his anger hardened, grew small and cold and compact, a stone he swallowed, just one of thousands. He blinked, feeling granite in his chest, a deadening behind his eyes. His child was crying, and he reached for him automatically but knowing he would not give him comfort, could not, not ever. Tony was gone, there was the sound of a door closing and once more Brendan was helping Peter, cleaning him and dressing him and waiting for the boy to follow him from the bathroom back into the kitchen. It was a night like any other, cold, dark, sleet slashing the windows and the curtains drawn against what was outside, the apartment silent, the sounds of song and voices muffled by the steady dull pounding of his heart. He cleaned the living room; Peter stood and watched him from the sides of his eyes but his father did not see him, did not seem to know he was there. When he was finished he dumped the dustpan full of grit and flour and popcorn into the trash, then started on the kitchen, wiping up spilled juice and more kernels and fishing an uneaten apple from beneath the table. He straightened, his hair still damp and unkempt from the walk home, and gazed across the room at the child leaning against the wall: his fist curled against his cheek, the yellow rubber duck with its gnawed head resting against his chin.

"Peter," he said. A moment; the boy shook his head, once, his gaze oblique, fixed on a tendril of dust hanging from the side of the refrigerator. "Peter. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Peter..."

No reply.

He put him to bed. There was no fight over changing his clothes, because Brendan didn't change them; just slid the purple socks from his son's feet and pulled the blankets over him. Peter kicked them off. Brendan pulled them up again, but when the boy began to thrash he moved aside, letting the blankets fall to the floor.

"You'll be cold," he said. His eyes stung. He reached and turned off the small bedside lamp, Hickory Dickory Dock, and closed his eyes, waiting for the tears to pass. When he opened them he saw the small rigid figure of his son, lying on his back with his head slightly turned away. He was staring at the ceiling, moving the rubber duck back and forth across his lips. "Goodnight, Peter," Brendan whispered. He leaned down and kissed his son's forehead, let his hand light upon the child's cheek, cool and smooth as a pillowcase. "Goodnight."

He started for bed, but in the hallway he paused, listening. He could hear a faint ringing music, and at first thought a radio had been left on somewhere. Then he noticed the thread of light beneath Tony's closed door. He had not left, after all. Brendan took the few steps towards the door, stopped. The music continued, still faint but loud enough that he could make out the chiming chords, sweet and familiar as church bells, and the low, almost whispered sound of Tony singing, his nasal voice hoarser now but still that voice you would never mistake for any another, still that song—

I know that you remember
How we made our mark
Oh we had a great time
Down at Tibbets Park...

Brendan blinked. He remembered the first time he'd heard it, not at the Maronis' legendary first show at the Coventry in Queens but years earlier when they were all still kids, him and Tony and Kevin, practicing in Brendan's basement. He'd had a little snare drum set, bright red with that weird metallic finish, and Kevin had some cheap Sears guitar. Only Tony had a real instrument, a Mosrite that he could barely hold, let alone play. The guitar was a going-away present from his older cousin; the going-away part had been to Viet Nam, and the cousin had not come back. Tony had saved up and bought a small amp, and he'd stuck knitting needles into the front of it, so that it would sound like a fuzztone. He'd made up the song one winter afternoon when they'd all been sitting around watching *The Three Stooges* and *Officer Joe Bolton*, trying to learn the chords to "Pleasant Valley Sunday" during the commercials. Finally Tony leaned over and kicked at the little Kenmore Lift N'Play Record Player, sending the Monkees 45 flying, and started to sing.

Hey hey, whoa whoa whoa

Gonna tell you now
Where I wanna go
Running with my friends
Playing in the dark
Gonna have a good time
Down in Tibbets Park!

"That's retarded," Kevin shouted over the din of Tony's Mosrite. "That's the stupidest song I ever—"

It had ended in a scuffle, as usual, Brendan breaking things up even though he secretly agreed with Kevin. But now...

Now it made him cry. Without a sound, one hand pressed against the wall with such force that his wrist grew numb but he just stood there, listening. The song ran on and the darkness grew complete, he could see nothing before him but a blurred tunnel and, very far away, a gauzy gleam of red and green. The joke had always been that Tony knew only three chords but he had them down straight; yet now when he finished the one song he began another. Strumming the slow somber chords, his voice cracking as he stumbled over the words even as Brendan struggled to recall the song's name.

Lully, lulla, thou little tiny child,
By by, lully lullay.
How may we do
For to preserve this day
This poor youngling
For whom we do sing,
By by, lully lullay?

"Ah, shit," Brendan whispered. The "Coventry Carol"...

He drew his hands to his face. They had learned it in third grade, for Midnight Mass at Sacred Heart. Now Tony was still trying to sing the boy soprano's part, his falsetto breaking into a wan croak at the chorus.

Herod the king,
In his raging
Charged he hath this day
His men of might
In his own sight
All young children to slay.
That woe is me,
Poor child for thee
And ever mourn and may
For thy parting
Neither say nor sing
By by, lully lullay...

He could not bear it. He fled down the hall, knocking over a side table and stumbling into his bedroom. The door slammed shut behind him. The lights were already off. He yanked down the shades, shoving them against the window so that no light would get in and then turning to fling himself onto his bed. He groaned, kicking his shoes off and throwing his suit jacket onto the floor, burrowed under the covers and pressed his hands against his ears the way he did during airplane takeoff, trying to drown out the roar of engines, the implicit threat in any flight. Still the phantom lights pulsed behind his eyelids. A child's hand moved monotonously back and forth, back and forth, tracing the pattern of a solitary dance upon his lips. And a boy's high clear voice lifted, impossibly sweet and far away, welcoming the first arrivals to Midnight Mass.

He woke, hours later it seemed. It was a minute before he remembered where he was—the shock of being in his own bed with his clothes on but sober, no remnant of a hangover. It was dark; he recalled that it was Christmas Eve. With a subdued sort of dread he realized that it might even be Christmas Day. For some minutes he lay there, gazing blankly at the ceiling. Now and then he wondered if he actually *was* staring at the ceiling—it was so dark, the room devoid of anything that might delineate between the abyss behind his eyes and that which awaited him when he rose.

Which, at last, he did. His limbs felt heavy; his arms, when he sat up and rested them at the edge of the mattress, seemed swollen and cold to the point of numbness. But he had to get up: the thought of lying in bed suddenly filled him with an unease that was close to horror. Because if he was at last able to feel nothing, even on this night—especially on this night—he might as well be dead, he knew that. He might indeed *be* dead, and unaware. It was this awful thought, unbidden by the customary sirens of alcohol and rage, that spurred him to his feet, and out into the hall.

Immediately he felt better. The apartment was empty and mundane as ever: no leaking ceiling, no damp footprints on the bare wood floor, no disorder in the few photographs of himself and Peter and Teri in happier days hanging on the wall. He walked slowly, with each step feeling himself grow stronger and more fully awake. He must have had a nightmare, though he could not remember it, and very purposefully he made no effort to. He stopped and peeked into Peter's room. His son was on his side, sound asleep, his mouth parted and hand cupped before his face. His hand was empty. The beloved yellow duck lay on the floor beneath. Brendan walked in silently and picked it up, placed it gently back into the child's grasp. Peter's fingers curled around it and he sighed, deeply; then breathed as before. Brendan

stiffened, feeling stones shift within his chest: he had bought no presents for his son this year, not one. Cruel reassurance sprang up immediately—Peter would not notice, he never had—and before grief or sadness could claw at him Brendan hurried back into the hall, closing the door behind him.

The door to Tony's room was shut, too. There was no light showing beneath it, and for a moment Brendan thought of looking inside, to check on his friend. Then he thought of what he might see. What if Tony actually did sleep in his leather jacket? Or worse, in a Maronis T-shirt?

Instead he felt his way through the dim hall to the kitchen. He was fumbling for the light switch when he noticed the blinking light on the answering machine. He touched it and played back a single message, from Teri. She had arrived safely though her flight was four hours late, she was completely exhausted, she was going right to bed, she'd see them in the morning. I love you Peter. Merry Christmas.

"I forgot to tell you, she called."

Brendan started, cracking his head on a cabinet. "Ouch! Jesus Christ, you scared me!" He rubbed his head, wincing. "Tony? Where the hell are you?"

"Sorry, man. Actually, you were here when she called, but I guess you were asleep, or something..."

Tony's voice trailed off awkwardly. Blinking, Brendan made his way warily through the kitchen, until he could just make out Tony's lanky form on the edge of the couch. The glowing numerals on the kitchen clock showed 12:17. In the darkened living room the TV was on, its screen empty of anything but hissing grey static. Tony had his hands on his knees, angular shoulders hunched as he gazed at the television. He didn't look up when Brendan came in to stand next to him.

"Tony? What are you doing?"

Tony continued to stare at the screen. Finally: "Just checking to see what's on," he said.

Brendan glanced from the TV to his friend, wondering if this were a joke. Tony's expression was intent, almost fierce: apparently not. "Tony. You know what? It doesn't look like anything is on."

Tony nodded. He turned to gaze up at Brendan. "I know." He smiled sadly, then slid over on the couch, patting the cushion beside him. "C'mon in and set a spell, pardner."

Brendan did. There were bits of popcorn on the sofa; he brushed them aside, leaning back and sighing. Tony continued to stare at the screen. After a moment he reached over, absently picked up a handful of the popcorn and ate it. "What time is it?"

"Midnight. A little past."

"Huh." Tony sat quietly for a while longer. Finally, "Well, Merry Christmas," he said.

Brendan hesitated. Then, "Merry Christmas, Tony."

Tony nodded but said nothing. Brendan squinted, staring at the television and trying to determine if he was missing something. "Do you want me to, like, change the channel?"

"No. Well, not yet."

Brendan waited. He thought of calling Teri, weighing up the peril of waking her against the notion of his sincerely apologizing for—well, everything. I'm sorry I'm such an asshole, sorry I was such a bad husband, lousy father, shitty lawyer, mean middle-aged baby boom critter who sneers at street people and doesn't recycle. I'm not making any promises. I'm just sorry. That's all.

"Tony?"

"Mmm?"

"I'm sorry."

"Huh?" Tony turned, startled. "What?"

"For being such an asshole. I'm sorry. For everything."

"Well, jeez. It's okay." Tony shrugged. "Hey, you weren't *such* an asshole. I mean, not always, at least."

Brendan looked at him hopefully. "What do you mean, not always?"

"Well, like, not for the entire last twenty years." Tony turned away again, brow furrowed as he stared at the hissing set. Suddenly he relaxed, all the lines of his face smoothing as he let his breath out.

"There," he said softly. "Look."

Brendan looked. On the television there was a test pattern, something he hadn't seen for twenty years, at least. Black-and-white and grey, the familiar bull's-eye pattern with large black numerals counting down in the middle.

10

"Hey," he said, pointing.

9

8

"—that's really weird, it's a test—"

3

2

1

The screen cleared. Instead of the ancient Atomic Era Mondrian of numbers and circles, there was now a fireplace. A big fireplace, black-and-white and filled with black-and-white flames, holding a heap of crackling black-and-white logs with white glowing embers beneath. Superimposed on it was a circle with the letters WPIX-NYC written inside.

"Whoa," whispered Brendan in awe. "It's the Yule Log."

Tony could only nod. His eyes were huge and round, his open mouth another cartoon O. The crackling of the logs faded in and out of the crackling of the TV. Brendan's mouth hung open, too, but before he could say anything a man's voice echoed from the screen.

"Broadcasting from Gracie Mansion, home of the Mayor of New York City, where we are bringing you our viewers the Christmas Yule Log."

An instant of silence. Then music swelled to fill the room. The 1,001 Strings, "The First Noel." Tony and Brendan turned to each, gaping; and began to laugh.

"It *is* the Yule Log!" Tony's hair whirled around his face as he bounced up and down on the couch. "And *listen!"*

"The First Noel" segued into "Jingle Bell Rock." The fire crackled, the music swelled; a section of the yule log broke and fell onto the hearth. The screen went slightly jerky, and there was the same log—but unbroken now, the tape loop had begun again—still burning merrily in black-and-white.

"—that's the Jackie Gleason Orchestra!"

They listened, to the Carol of the Bells and the Vienna Choir Boys, the Hollywood Strings and Guy Lombardo. All that soupy stuff you never heard anymore, except as a joke, maybe, or archived on some ToonTown Web site. The tape loop of the yule log played and replayed, interrupted now and then by the same ponderous announcement.

"From Gracie Mansion..."

Brendan felt as though he were dreaming; knew at least once that he *was* dreaming, because he woke, not with a start but with eyes opening slowly, sleepily, to monochrome flames and the back of Tony's leather jacket, Tony's hair the same silver-grey as the screen, his cracked marionette's face silhouetted against the little bright rectangle in the front of the room.

Then, abruptly, there was silence. The television went black, scribbled with a few white lines. Brendan sat up and frowned. "What's the matter? It's over?"

"Shhh," hissed Tony. A moment when they were both balanced at the edge of the sofa, staring intently at an empty screen.

And suddenly it went white; then grey; then white again. The grainy photographed image of a man's face appeared, his eyes wide and surprised, his mouth a perfect circle. A Santa Claus hat was superimposed on his head. As Brendan stared, black letters danced across the screen and the first bars of peppy music sounded.

CHIP CROCKETT'S CHRISTMAS CAROL

"Holy shit," whispered Brendan. He didn't even feel Tony's hand clutching at his. "It's *on."*

The words faded. The screen showed a small black-and-white stage, made up to look like a bedroom. A potato-nosed puppet in a long white nightshirt and nightcap stood in front of an open cardboard window, papier-mâché hands clasping a rock.

"Merry Christmas, Merry Christmas, ha ha ha!" the puppet shouted, and flung the rock out. Silence; then the crash of broken glass and a scream. *"Humbug!"* shouted the puppet gleefully. It bopped across the stage, picking up more rocks and throwing them.

"It's Ooga Booga!" cried Brendan.

"Scrooga Booga," said Tony. "Shhh..."

Brendan started to *shhh* him back, but a sound distracted him. He turned and saw Peter standing in the doorway, staring at the TV.

"Oh, jeez—poor Peter. We woke you—" Brendan stood, without thinking swept over and scooped up the boy. "Shoot, I'm sorry. But it's okay, honey, come on, come in and watch with us..."

For once Peter didn't fight; only gazed at the screen. When his father sat back down on the couch the boy slid from his grasp to the floor, scooching a few inches away and then sitting bolt upright, watching.

"See?" exclaimed Brendan as the puppet tossed a final rock onto an unseen passer-by. "See? There's Ooga Booga, see? Ooga Booga. He's a real grouch. Just like your dad." He glanced over at Tony. "Fuckin' A," he said, and laughed.

"Shhh!" said Tony. *"Watch."*

They watched, Tony and Brendan leaning so far over it was a wonder they didn't plummet, face-first, like one of the puppets onto the floor. Peter sat at their feet, silent, now and then shaking his head and looking sideways, the yellow rubber duck pressed against his chin. Onscreen the old old story played out with a few additions—Ratnik in the role of Christmas Past, and of course, Chip himself doing Ogden Orff as Bob Crockett. Brendan whooped, grabbing Tony's knee and punching his shoulder, laughing so hard his eyes burned and his throat hurt. Ogden Orff decorated a tree with cake frosting. Officer Joe Bolton made a surprise cameo appearance as Jacob Marley and Scrooga Booga hit him in the head with a flashlight. There were commercials for Bosco and Hostess Cream-Filled Cupcakes. Captain Dingbat appeared as the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, accompanied by a chorus of dancing, chanting finger-puppets.

Don't be a meanie,
Show us your bikini!

And at the end, all of them were onstage together, miraculously—Ratnik and Ooga Booga and the other puppets, Ogden Orff breaking character to become Chip Crockett laughing over some invisible technician's backstage antics, a boom mike hovering over Chip's head and fake snow falling, first in tiny flakes, then in handfuls and finally in huge clumps, until the entire soundstage was adrift with it.

"Merry Christmas!" shouted Chip Crockett, as the closing music began to play. *"Merry Christmas, and God help us, everyone!"*

Brendan and Tony roared. Peter bounced up and down. When the screen went black he began to cry.

"Oh honey, don't cry, don't cry—it's okay, Peter, look, there's the Yule Log—"

Brendan pointed, bending down to take Peter's shoulders and gently pulling him round to see. "It's okay. It's—it will be on again," he said, then swallowed. He looked over at Tony, who was watching him. Tony shrugged, gazed down at the floor and then at the TV.

"Yeah. Well, maybe," he said. For a moment he looked immeasurably sad. Then he hunched his shoulders, his leather jacket slipping forward a little, and smiled. "But hey. We got to see it. Right? I mean, it was *on."*

Brendan nodded. "It was on," he said. He smiled, bent forward until his face was inches above his son's head. He shut his eyes, moved his mouth in a silent kiss and felt the brush of Peter's hair against his lips. "It was great."

"And it even lasted more than three minutes!" said Tony.

Brendan felt his heart lurch. He shut his eyes, feeling the fire burning there, black-and-white; opened them and saw the room again, his son's yellow duck, the soft auburn cloud of his curls, Tony's grey hair and the ragged black cuff of his jacket. Onscreen a yule log crackled. "That's right," he whispered hoarsely, and reached to touch his friend's hand. "It even lasted more than three minutes.

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He had no idea when he fell asleep. When they all fell asleep, Brendan and Tony on the couch, Peter curled on the floor at his father's feet. But when he finally woke the sun was shining, the windows slick and brilliant with frost flowers and ice, the floor speckled with bits of popcorn he'd missed the night before. He moved slowly, groaning. Beside him Tony lay slumped and snoring softly, his mouth ajar and a strand of hair caught on his lower lip. In front of them the TV was on, Regis and Kathie Lee wearing red hats and laughing. Brendan reached over and switched it off. On the floor Peter stirred, sat up and looked around, surprised; then began to whine wordlessly.

"All right, hang on a minute. What time is it? Oh, jeez—"

Brendan turned and shook Tony. "Tony, hey Tony—we got to get up. If you want to go to Teri's with us, we have to go, it's past nine."

"Go?" Tony blinked and sat up, stretched, moaning. "Aw, man, it's so *early."*

"Well, it's Christmas. And it's nine-fifteen, so it's *late.* Teri's going to kill me, come on come on come on..."

He unearthed Peter's knapsack, tore through it until he found a red-and-green sweater and bright red corduroy pants. Peter's whining turned to shrieks when his father started dressing him, but Brendan only shook his head and pulled off the boy's T-shirt and pants, pulled on the clean clothes and then started on the socks and shoes. Tony stumbled past, rubbing his eyes, and disappeared into his room. A few minutes later he reappeared, hair dishevelled and a bulky plastic bag tucked under one arm.

"Aren't you going to change?" asked Brendan, yanking on one of Peter's sneakers.

Tony frowned. "I *did* change." He pulled open the front of his leather jacket to display a black t-shirt and faded black jeans. "See?"

"Right. Well, do me a favor, sit with him for a minute so *I* can get changed."

"Sure, man. C'mere, Petie. Did you like watching Chip Crockett? Yeah, he was pretty good, huh! Did you see Ooga Booga? Huh? Good ol' Ooga Booga..."

Brendan dressed quickly. He shaved, forgoing a shower, then raced back into the kitchen. For a moment he stood gazing longingly at the coffee machine, but finally turned, gathered up his keys and overcoat, and headed for the door.

"Grab his coat, will you, Tony? You don't need to put it on him, just bring it, and his knapsack and that other stuff—"

Tony got Peter's things, and Brendan got Peter. "Merry Christmas, Merry Christmas," Brendan said, hurrying outside and holding the door for Tony. "C'mon, put a spin on it, Tony!"

"Consider it spun, man," Tony yelled. He jumped down the steps to the sidewalk. "Ooof &3133;"

They headed for the car, Peter digging his heels into the sidewalk and starting to cry, Brendan pulling him after him. "We're going to see Mommy," he said desperately, as a family in their Yuletide best hurried past him, on the way to church. "Come on, Peter, we'll be late—"

At last they were all in the car. Peter was strapped safely in his carseat, Tony was hanging out his open window, waving.

"Merry Christmas!" he called as another family walked past. The parents smiled and waved back, the children shouted Merry Christmas. "That's a beautiful coat, ma'am, Santa bring you that?"

The woman laughed and did a little pirouette on the sidewalk, showing off a bright red duster. "You bet!" she cried.

"Get your arm in, Tony, before it gets cut off," yelled Brendan as the engine roared. He backed up and did an illegal U-turn, and started for Teri's house.

"Hey, look at Dave the Grave!" Tony waved furiously. "Dave, my man! Nice lid!"

On his park bench, Dave the Grave sat with a bottle in his lap. As they drove by he doffed a green-and-red-checked fedora. "Whoa Whoa!" he cried. His dog yelped and jumped onto his lap, and Dave pushed him down again. "Murr' Curssmuss, mrr' crussmuss—!"

Brendan smiled in spite of himself. The sun was so bright his eyes hurt, and he drove a little too fast, running a red light. He no longer felt like apologizing to Teri—that would just scare her, probably—but he felt quiet, almost peaceful. Well, not peaceful, really, but resigned, and somehow satisfied. It wouldn't last, he knew that. Terrible things would happen and just plain bad ones, and most of all the relentless downward toboggan run of his own life as a

just-good-enough father and barely tolerable ex-husband. But for now at least the sun was shining and the road crews had somehow managed not to totally screw up holiday traffic. His developmentally challenged child was in the backseat, chewing on a yellow rubber duck, and his oldest friend, the village idiot, was leaning out the window and startling churchgoers as they passed the National Cathedral.

And, somehow, this was all okay. Somehow it was all good, or at least good enough. Later he knew it would be different; but for now it was enough.

They arrived at Teri's house a little after ten. Kevin and Eileen's red Range Rover was parked in the driveway, and a car Kevin didn't recognize, an ancient Volvo sedan with a rusting undercarriage held together by virtue of about thirty-five different liberal Wiccan feminist No Nukes bumper stickers.

"Whose car is that?" asked Tony.

"I have no idea." Brendan pulled in behind it, crossly, because now the end of *his* car was sticking out into the cul-de-sac. "But maybe as a Christmas present you can teach them how to park."

He got out, and there on the doorstep was Teri, pale, her eyes shadowed, but smiling in a short black dress with the crimson cloisonne necklace he'd given her their first Christmas together.

"Peter!" she cried, and ran to greet them. "Brendan, hi, hi. Tony. Merry Christmas!"

Brendan hugged her stiffly, drew back and smiled. "Merry Christmas, Teri." He turned and helped her open the back door of the car. "Here's your present—"

He reached in for Peter. Teri waited until Brendan set the boy on the driveway, then stooped to hug him. "Peter! I missed you!" She looked up at Brendan and smiled again. "It's just what I wanted."

Peter slipped from her grasp and ran up the drive to the house. Brendan looked after him and saw Kevin and Eileen in the doorway, beside the twins in their Diane Arbus Christmas dresses. "Hi," he said, and waved.

"Merry Christmas!" shouted Tony. He reached back in the car for his plastic bag. "Hiya, goils!"

On the steps, the twins separated to let Peter pass. Another face appeared above theirs, masses of chestnut hair spilling from beneath a long green ski hat. "Hi, guys!"

"Peggy?" Tony gaped, then whirled towards Teri.

"I called Peggy to check on things after you picked Peter up Tuesday," she explained, smiling. "And she said she wasn't doing anything. So I got all the Christmas orphans." She glanced at Brendan. "That okay with you?"

Brendan shrugged. "Sure. Well, it'll be a very Maroni Christmas, I guess, huh Tony?"

But Tony was already loping towards the house.

"Brendan. Come on in," said Teri. She stared at the snow-glazed lawn, then looked up at him. "Thanks for dropping him off."

"Oh. Well, I thought I'd stay," Brendan said awkwardly. "Just for a little while. If you don't mind."

Teri continued to stare at the grass, finally nodded. "Sure. Sure, of course." She smiled. "That would be really good for Peter. For everyone, I think."

They walked inside. Eileen greeted Brendan at the door, enveloping him in yards of velvet and lace and perfume and hugging him as though it were *her* house. "Brendan! And you brought Tony!"

"Oh well, you know. Wouldn't be Christmas without Tony Maroni."

He smiled; his face was starting to hurt from smiling. Beside Eileen, Kevin stood in a tweed suit and tie with a blinking Rudolph on it. He was clapping Tony on the back.

"Get a damn tie, Tony, don't you own a tie?" he bellowed, then flopped his own tie in Brendan's face. "Merry Christmas, cuz! Check out the eggnog—"

"Eggbeaters," said Eileen, nodding. "Totally fat-tree and no cholesterol, Eggbeaters, Olestra, sugar substitute—"

Kevin made a retching sound. Brendan laughed. He stepped into the room, shading his eyes as he looked for Peter. He sighted him off by himself near the TV. It was on but the sound had been turned off. Peter stared at it, puzzled, then slapped the screen gently with his palm.

"The place looks nice, Teri," Brendan said as Teri passed him, heading for their son.

"Thanks." She stopped and pointed to the small artificial tree by a window. Dark green, its branches slightly furred to resemble, very fleetingly, real evergreens. A handful of green plastic Christmas balls hung from its branches, and there was an enormous pile of presents beneath. "Peggy said maybe we might try a tree again. A little one. And of course I got him too much stuff."

She sighed, then bit her lip, watching Peter as he once again pressed his hand against the mute TV screen. "Do you think he'll be okay with it?"

"He doesn't seem to have noticed."

"So maybe that's good?"

"Maybe."

They joined the others in the living room. The twins darted between grownups, sharing details of presents already received and glancing around hopefully for new ones. Brendan sampled Eileen's ersatz eggnog.

"Is that good?" asked Peggy. She was wearing a long shapeless wool dress, wooden clogs and a very large button that was rusting around the edges. The button had an old black-and-white picture of Tony's face on it, and the words HOORAY HELLO WHOA WHOA WHOA!

"No," said Brendan. He discreetly put his cup on a table and turned back to her. "Wow. A real Tony Maroni button," he said, tracing its edges with a finger. "That's, like, a genuine antique."

Behind her Tony appeared, still holding his plastic bag and balancing two crystal cups brimming with eggnog.

"Here, try this, it's *great*," he said, handing one to Peggy. "I don't know how Eileen does it."

"Jet fuel," whispered Kevin as he passed them on the way to the kitchen.

"Well, Peggy." Brendan cleared his throat and looked at Tony. He had an arm draped around Peggy's shoulder, and his long grey hair was wisping into her face. "I guess we'll have to have you over soon. So you can check out Tony's pad."

Tony shook his head. "Hey, no." He smiled at Peggy, then looked apologetically at Brendan. "I, like, totally forgot to tell you—"

He shifted, careful to keep his arm around Peggy, careful not to lose the plastic bag still in his hand; and in a complicated manuever dug into his back pocket. "I got this. That letter you gave me the other day?"

He held a crumpled envelope up for Brendan and Peggy to see. The return address was from a law firm in Century City. "From, like, this attorney. A guy Marty hired?" Tony paused, breathing slightly fast, then went on. "They settled. *We* settled. Out of court."

Brendan looked at him blankly. "You what?"

"The law suit. Our catalog, all those royalties. We're getting a settlement."

"You're kidding!" Peggy turned to stare up at him. "You—"

"Yeah, really." Tony looked at Brendan and shrugged, then grinned. "Amazing, huh?"

Brendan just stared at him. Finally he said, "That's incredible. I mean, that's *fantastic*. Tony!"

He grabbed him by the front of his leather jacket and pulled him forward, until their heads cracked together. "Ow!" yelped Tony.

"How much, what'd they give you—?"

"A ton. I mean, there's Dickie's ex, she's got his kids, and the other guys who're left, but—"

Tony looked down at Peggy. "I can definitely get my own place." He started to laugh. "I can get *thirteen* places—"

"Tony! Omigod, that's incredible, that's just so incredible—"

Peggy hugged him, and Brendan turned away. In the kitchen, Eileen was helping Teri get things out of the refrigerator. Kevin and the twins were lugging shopping bags full of presents from the foyer into the living room. Peter was still standing by the silent television, frowning, his hands at his sides.

"Peter?"

Brendan started towards him, then thought better of it. Peter was being quiet. This was Teri's house. Instead, Brendan turned and walked slowly over to the artificial Christmas tree. It smelled strongly of pine car deodorizer. He reached out to touch one of the plastic ornaments; then craned his neck and squinted, peering into the heart of the tree. There was no magic there, no hand-carved Santas or meticulously hidden lights; only neat rows of microfiber branches like dark-green spokes, rising to a point.

"Some tree," he murmured. Suddenly he felt exhausted. His head ached; he thought of everything that had happened last night, and how he hadn't gotten much sleep. No matter how you factored it all in, he was tired.

And sad. Behind him he could hear the twins giggling, the crumple of paper and Kevin scolding one of them.

"Not yet! And anyhow, those aren't for you, those are for Peter—"

"Peter!" Tony's voice cut through the chatter; as from a great distance Brendan could hear him stomping across the room. "Peter, I almost forgot, I brought you something. Look, Uncle Tony brought you a present..."

Brendan sighed and drew a hand over his eyes. There was a rustling, the girls' voices squealing; then sudden quiet.

"What is it?" said Cara.

Brendan took the end of one of the tree's branches and pinched it. The whole thing started to pitch towards him and he let go, so that it settled softly back in place. He was dimly aware that the room behind him was still silent. Then:

"Tony." Eileen's voice cracked. "What—where'd you get it?"

"I made it."

"You *made* it?"

"Sure. I mean, yeah..."

At Brendan's feet something crunched. He looked down and saw the corner of a present that he'd stepped on. He closed his eyes, his throat tight. He hadn't gotten Peter anything, anything at all...

"Deh."

One of the girls touched his elbow. He flinched, took a deep breath and tried to compose himself. "Yeah," he whispered hoarsely. "Yes, I'll be right there—"

"Deh..." The touch came again, insistently. "Deh. Sss."

Brendan looked down. A bulbous-faced puppet stared back up at him, black button eyes and enormous nose, little cloth arms capped by hands like crudely sewn mittens. Its face was uneven, bumps and ridges where the papier-mâché had refused to smooth out, spots where the paint had globbed together and dried unevenly.

"Deh," the voice came again. A low voice, hoarse, as the puppet nudged his chest. "Deh—"

It was Peter.

"Deh," he said.

Brendan stared at him, the boy's pale blue eyes gazing at his father from behind the puppet's head, for just a fraction of a second. Then Peter looked away again, back at the puppet in his hand.

"Ssss? Oog buh." The puppet thrust upward into Brendan's face, so close that he could smell it, flour and newsprint, tempera paint. "*Deh*," the boy said, impatiently. "Oog buh!"

"Peter?" Brendan dropped to his knees, his hands shaking, his head; all of him. He stared past the puppet at the boy who held it. "Peter?"

In the room behind him Eileen gasped. The twins squealed, Kevin made a low sound.

"Peter?" cried Teri. "Did he—?"

"Peter," said Brendan. "Oh, Peter."

The boy glanced away, smiling faintly, and bopped him with the puppet.

"Oog buh," he said again. "Sss, Deh? Sss?"

"Yes," said Brendan. "Oh yes."

He smiled. Through his tears he saw them all above him, framed by bits of green plastic greenery and the flickering outline of the TV screen, Teri and Kevin and Eileen and the twins in their halos of lace, Peggy with her hands pressed against her head and beside her Tony, grinning and nodding, the plastic bag and torn wrapping paper dangling from his fist; and last of all his son, still thrusting the puppet at him and chattering, the sounds so thick they were scarcely words at all but Brendan knew, he could understand, suddenly he could see—

"Sss, Deh? Sss?"

"Oh yes, Peter, that's my boy, oh Peter," Brendan gasped, hugging him and laughing even as he wept and turned to the rest of his family. "I *do* see it. I see you now. I can—I can see it all."

For my children, and in memory of Sandy Becker

Paul Di Filippo and Bruce Sterling

THE SCAB'S PROGRESS

The federal bio-containment center was a diatom the size of the Disney Matterhorn. It perched on fractal struts in a particularly charmless district of Nevada, where the waterless white sands swarmed with toxic vermin.

The entomopter[1] scissored its dragonfly wings, conveying Ribo[2] Zombie above the desert wastes. This was always the best part of the program: the part where Ribo Zombie lovingly checked out all his cool new gear before launching into action. As a top-ranking scab[3] from the otaku-pirate[4] underground, Ribo Zombie owned reactive gloves with slashproof ligaments and sandwiched Kevlar-polysaccharide[5]. He owned a mother-of-pearl crash helmet, hung with daring insouciance on the scaled wall of the 'mopter's cockpit. And those Nevada desert boots!—like something built by Tolkien orcs with day-jobs at Nike.

Accompanying the infamous RZ was his legendary and much-merchandised familiar[6], Skratchy Kat. Every scab owned a familiar: they were the totem animals of the gene-pirate scene. The custom dated back to the birth of the scab subculture, when tree-spiking Earth Firsters and obsessive dog breeders had jointly discovered the benefits of outlaw genetic engineering.

With a flash of emerald eyes the supercat rose from the armored lap of the daring scab. Skratchy Kat had some much cooler name in the Japanese collectors' market. He'd been designed in Tokyo, and was a deft Pocket-Monster commingling of eight spliced species of felines and viverines, with the look, the collector cachet, and (judging by his stuffed-toy version) plenty of the smell of a civet cat. Ribo Zombie, despite frequent on-screen cameos by busty-babe groupies, had never enjoyed any steady feminine relationship. What true love there was in his life flowed between man and cat.

Clickable product-placement hot-tags[7] were displayed on the 'mopter screens as Ribo Zombie's aircraft winged in for the kill. The ads sold magnums of cheap, post-Greenhouse Reykjavík Champagne. Ringside tix to a Celebrity Deathmatch (splatter-shields extra). Entomopter rentals in Vegas, with a rapid, low-cost divorce optional.

Then, *wham!* Inertia hit the settling aircraft, gypsum-sand flew like pulverized wallboard, and the entomopter's chitinous canopy accordioned open. Ribo Zombie vaulted to the glistening sands, clutching his cat to his armored bosom. He set the beast free with a brief, comradely exchange of meows, then sealed his facemask, pulled a monster pistol, and plucked a retro-chic pineapple grenade from his bandolier.

A pair of crystalline robot snakes fell to concussive explosions. Alluring vibrators disoriented the numerous toxic scorpions in the vicinity. Three snarling jackalopes[8] fell to a well-aimed hail of dumdums. Meanwhile the dauntless cat, whose hide beneath fluffy fur was as tough as industrial Teflon, had found a way through the first hedge-barrier of barrel cacti.

The pair entered a maze of cholla. The famously vicious Southwestern cholla cactus, whose sausage-link segments bore thorns the size of fishhooks, had been rumored from time immemorial to leap free and stab travelers from sheer spite. A *soupçon* of Venus flytrap genes had turned this Pecos Pete tall-tale vaporware into grisly functionality. Ribo Zombie had to opt for brute force: the steely wand of a back-mounted flamethrower leapt into his wiry combat-gloves. Ignited in a pupil-searing blast, the flaming mutant cholla whipped and flopped like epileptic spaghetti. Then RZ and the faithful Skratchy were clambering up the limestone leg of the Federal cache.

Anyone who had gotten this far could be justly exposed to the worst and most glamorous gizmos ever cooked up by the Softwar Department's Counter-Bioterrorism Corps.

The ducts of the diatom structure yawned open and deployed a lethal arsenal of spore-grenade launchers, strangling vegetable bolas, and whole glittering clouds of hotwired fleas and mosquitos. Any scab worth his yeast knew that those insect vectors were stuffed to bursting with swift and ghastly illnesses, pneumonic plague and necrotizing fasciitis among the friendlier ones.

"This must be the part where the cat saves him," said Tupper McClanahan, all cozy in her throw rug on her end of the couch.

Startled out of his absorption, yet patiently indulgent, Fearon McClanahan froze the screen with a tapped command to the petcocks on the feedlines. "What was that, darling? I thought you were reading."

"I was." Smiling, Tupper held up a vintage *Swamp Thing* comic that had cost fully ten percent of one month's trust-fund check. "But I always enjoy the parts of this show that feature the cat. Remember when we clicked on those high-protein kitty treats, during last week's cat sequence? Weeble loved those things."

Fearon looked down from the ergonomic couch to the spotless bulk of his snoring pig, Weeble. Weeble had outgrown the size and weight described in his documentation, but he made a fine hassock.

"Weeble loves anything we feed him. His omnivorous nature is part of his factory specs, remember? I told you

we'd save a ton on garbage bills."

"Sweetie, I never complain about Weeble. Weeble is your familiar, so Weeble is fine. I've only observed that it might be a good idea if we got a bigger place."

Fearon disliked being interrupted while viewing his favorite outlaw stealth download. He positively squirmed whenever Tupper sneakily angled around the subject of a new place with more room. More room meant a nursery. And a nursery meant a child. Fearon swerved to a change of topic.

"How can you expect Skratchy Kat to get Ribo Zombie out of this fix? Do you have any idea what those flying bolas do to human flesh?"

"The cat gets him out of trouble every time. Kids love that cat."

"Look, honey: kids are not the target demographic. This show isn't studio-greenlighted or even indie-syndicated, okay? You know as well as I do that this is *outlaw media.* Totally underground guerrilla infotainment, virally distributed. There are laws on the books—unenforced, sure, but still extant—that make it illegal for us even to watch this thing. After all, Ribo Zombie is a biological terrorist who's robbing a Federal stash!"

"If it's not a kid's show, why is that cute little cartoon in the corner of the screen?"

"That's his grafitti icon! The sign of his street-wise authenticity."

Tupper gazed at him with limpid spousal pity. "Then who edits all his raw footage and adds the special effects?"

"Oh, well, that's just the Vegas Mafia. The Mafia keeps up with modern times: no more Rat Pack crooners and gangsta rappers! Nowadays they cut licensing deals with freeware culture heroes like Ribo Zombie, lone wolf recombinants bent on bringing hot goo to the masses."

Tupper waved her comic as a visual aid. "I still bet the cat's gonna save him. Because none of that makes any difference to the archetypical narrative dynamics."

Fearon sighed. He opened a new window on his gelatinous screen and accessed certain data. "Okay, look. You know what runs security on Federal Biosequestration Sites like that one? Military-grade, laminated, mouse brains. You know how smart that stuff is? A couple of cubic inches of murine brain has more processing power than every computer ever deployed in the twentieth century. Plus, mouse brain is unhackable. Computer viruses, no problem. Electromagnetic pulse doesn't affect it. No power source to disrupt, since neurons run on blood sugar. That stuff is indestructible."

Tupper shrugged. "Just turn your show back on."

Skratchy was poised at a vulnerable crack in the diatom's roof. The cat began copiously to pee.

When the trickling urine reached the olfactory sensors wired to the mouse brains, the controlling network went berserk. Ancient murine anti-predator instincts swamped the cybernetic instructions, triggering terrified flight responses. Mis-aimed spore bomblets thudded harmlessly to the soil, whizzing bolas wreaked havoc through the innocent vegetation below, and vent ports spewed contaminated steam and liquid nitrogen.

Cursing the zany but dangerous fusillade, Ribo Zombie set to work with a back-mounted hydraulic can opener.

Glum and silent, Fearon gripped his jaw. His hooded eyes glazed over as Ribo Zombie crept through surreal diorama of waist-high wells, HVAC[9] systems and plumbing. Every flick of Ribo Zombie's hand torch revealed a glimpse of some new and unspeakable mutant wonder, half concealed in ambient support fluids: yellow gruel, jade-colored hair gel, blue oatmeal, ruby maple syrup...

"Oh, honey," said Tupper at last, "don't take it so hard."

"You were right," Fearon grumbled. His voice rose. "Is that what you want me to say? You were right! You're always right!"

"It's just my skill with semiotic touchstones, which I've derived from years of reading graphic novels. But look, dear, here's the part you always love, when he finally lays his hands on the wetware[10]. Honey, look at him stealing that weird cantaloupe with the big throbbing arteries on it. Now he'll go back to his clottage[11] and clump[12], just like he does every episode, and sooner or later something really uptaking[13] and neoteric[14] will show up on your favorite auction site."

"Like I couldn't brew up stuff twice as potent myself."

"Of course you could, dear. Especially now, since we can afford the best equipment. With my inheritance kicking in, we can devote your dad's legacy to your hobby. All that stock your dad left can go straight to your hardware fetish, while my money allows us to ditch this creepy old condo and buy a new modern house. Duckback[15] roof, slowglass[16] windows, olivine[17] patio—"Tupper sighed deeply and dramatically. "Real quality, Fearon."

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Predictably, Malvern Brakhage showed up at their doorstep in the company of disaster.

"Rogue mitosis, Fearon my man. They've shut down Mixogen and called out the HazMat[18] Squad."

"You're kidding? Mixogen? I thought they followed code."

"Hell no! The outbreak's all over downtown. Just thought I'd drop by for a newsy look at your high-bandwidth feed."

Fearon gazed with no small disdain on his bullet-headed fellow scab. Malvern had the thin fixed grin of a live medical student in a room full of cadavers. He wore his customary black leather lab coat and baggy cargo pants, their buttoned pockets bulging with Ziploc baggies of semi-legal jello[19].

"It's Malvern!" he yelled at the kitchen, where Tupper was leafing through catalogues.

"How about some nutriceuticals[20]?" said Malvern. "Our mental edges require immediate sharpening." Malvern pulled his slumbering weasel, Spike, from a lab coat pocket and set it on his shoulder. The weasel—biotechnically

speaking, Spike was mostly an ermine—immediately became the nicest-looking thing about the man. Spike's lustrous fur gave Malvern the dashing air of a Renaissance prince, if you recalled that Renaissance princes were mostly unprincipled bush-league tyrants who would poison anyone within reach.

Malvern ambled hungrily into the kitchen.

"How have you been, Malvern?" said Tupper brightly.

"I'm great, babe." Malvern pulled a clamp-topped German beer bottle from his jacket. "You up for a nice warm brewski?"

"Don't drink that," Fearon warned his wife.

"Brewed it personally," said Malvern, hurt. "I'll just leave it here in case you change your mind." Malvern plonked the heavy bottle onto the scarred Formica.

Raised a rich, self-assured, decorous girl, Tupper possessed the good breeding and manners to tolerate Malvern's flagrant transgressive behavior. Fearon remembered when he, too, had received adoring looks from Tupper—as a bright idealist who understood the true, liberating potential of biotech, an underground scholar who bowed to none in his arcane mastery of plasmid vectors. Unlike Malvern, whose scab popularity was mostly due to his lack of squeamishness.

Malvern was louche and farouche, so, as was his wont, he began looting Tupper's kitchen fridge. "Liberty's gutters are crawling!" Malvern declaimed, fingersnapping a bit to suit his with-it scab-rap. "It's a bug-crash of awesome proportions, and I urge forthwith we reap some peptides from the meltdown."

"Time spent in reconnaissance is never wasted," countered Fearon. He herded the unmannerly scab back to the parlor.

With deft stabs of his carpalled fingertips, Fearon used the parlor wallscreen to access *Fusing Nuclei*—the all-biomed news site favored by the happening hipsters of scabdom.

Tupper, pillar of support that she was, soon slid in with a bounty of hotwired snackfood. Instinctively, both men shared with their familiars, Fearon dropping creamy tidbits to his pig while Malvern reached salty gobbets up and back to his neck-hugging weasel.

Shoulder to shoulder on the parlor couch, Malvern and Fearon fixed their jittering attention on the unfolding urban catastrophe.

The living pixels in the electrojelly cohered into the familiar image of Wet Willie, FN's star business reporter. Wet Willie, dashingly clad in his customary splatterproof trenchcoat, had framed himself in the shot of a residential Miami skyscraper. The pastel Neo-Deco walls were sheathed in pearly slime. Wriggling like a nautch dancer, the thick, undulating goo gleamed in Florida's Greenhouse sunlight. Local bystanders congregated in their flowered shirts, sun hats, and sandals, gawking from outside the crowd-control pylons. The tainted skyscraper was under careful attack by truck-mounted glorp[21] cannons, their nozzles channeling high-pressure fingers against the slimy pink walls.

"That's a major outbreak all right," said Fearon. "Since when was Liberty City clearstanced for wet production?"

"As if," chuckled Malvern.

Wet Willie was killing network lagtime with a patch of infodump[22]. "Liberty City was once an impoverished slum. That was before Miami urbstanced into the liveliest nexus of the modern Immunosance[23], fueled by low-rent but ingenious Caribbean bioneers[24]. When super-immune systems became the hottest somatic upgrade since osteojolt, Liberty City upgraded into today's thriving district of artlofts and hotshops.

"But today that immuconomic quality of life is threatened! The ninth floor of this building houses a startup named Mixogen. The cause of this rampaging outbreak remains speculative, except that the fearsome name of Ribo Zombie is already whispered by knowing insiders."

"I might have known," grunted Malvern.

Fearon clicked the RZ hotlink. Ribo Zombie's ninja-masked publicity photo appeared on the network's vanity page. "Ribo Zombie, the Legendary King of scabs—whose thrilling *sub rosa* exploits are brought to you each week by *Fusing Nuclei*, in strict accordance with the revised Freedom of Information Act and without legal or ethical endorsement! *Click here* to join the growing horde of cutting-edge bioneers who enjoy weekly shipments of his liberated specimens direct to their small office/home office wetware labs..."

Fearon valved off the nutrient flowline to the screen and stood abruptly up, spooking the sensitive Weeble. "That showboating scumbag! You'd think he'd invented scabbing! I hate him! Let's scramble, Mal."

"Yo!" concurred Malvern. "Let's bail forthwith, and bag something hot from the slop."

Fearon assembled his scab gear from closets and shelves throughout the small apartment, Weeble loyally dogging his heels. The process took some time, since a scab's top-end hardware determined his peer ranking in the demimonde of scabdom (a peer ranking stored by retrovirus, then collated globally by swapping saliva-laden tabs of blotter paper).

Devoted years of feral genetic hobbyism had brought Fearon a veritable galaxy of condoms, shrinkwrap, blotter kits, polymer resins, phase gels, reagents, femto-injectors[25] serum vials, canisters, aerosols, splat-pistols, whole bandoliers of buckybombs[26], padded cases, gloves, goggles, netting, cameras, tubes, cylinder dispensers of pliofilm[27]—the whole assemblage tucked with a fly fisherman's neurotic care into an intricate system of packs, satchels, and strap-ons.

Tupper watched silently, her expression neutral shading to displeased. Even the dense and tactless Malvern could sense the marital tension.

"Lemme boot up my car. Meet you behind the wheel, Fearo my pard."

Tupper accompanied Fearon to the apartment door, still saying nothing as her man clicked together disassembled

instruments, untelescoped his sampling staff, tightened buckles across chest and hips, and mated sticky-backed equipment to special patches on his vest and splashproof chaps.

Rigged out to his satisfaction, Fearon leaned in for a farewell kiss. Tupper merely offered her cheek.

"Aw, come on, honey, don't be that way! You know a man's gotta follow his bliss: which in my special case is a raw, hairy-eyed lifestyle on the bleeding edge of the genetic frontier."

"Fearon McClanahan, if you come back smeared with colloid, you're not setting one foot onto my clean rug."

"I'll really wash up this time, I promise."

"And pick up some fresh goat's-milk prestogurt[28]!"

"I'm with the sequence."

Fearon dashed and clattered down the stairs, his nutraceutically enhanced mind already filled with plans and anticipations. Weeble barreled behind.

Malvern's algal-powered roadster sat by the curb, its fuelcell thrumming. Malvern emptied the tapering trunk, converting it into an open-air rumble seat for Weeble, who bounded in like a jet-propelled fifty-liter drum. The weasel Spike occupied a crash-hammock slung behind the driver's seat. Fearon wedged himself into the passenger's seat, and they were off with a pale electric scream.

After shattering a random variety of Miami traffic laws, the two scabs departed Malvern's street-smart vehicle to creep and skulk the last two blocks to the ongoing bio-Chernobyl. The federal swab[29] authorities had thrown their usual cordon in place, enough to halt the influx of civilian lookyloos[30], but penetrating the perimeter was child's play for well-equipped scabs. Fearon and Malvern simply sprayed themselves and their lab animals with chameleon-shifting shrinkwrap, then strolled through the impotent ring of ultrasonic pylons. They then crept through the shattered glass, found the code-obligatory wheelchair access, and laboriously sneaked up to the ninth floor.

"Well, we're inside just fine," said Fearon, puffing for breath through the shredded shrinkwrap on his lips.

Malvern helped himself to a secretary's abandoned lunch. "Better check *Fusing Nuclei* for word on the fates of our rivals."

Fearon consulted his handheld. "They just collared Harry the Brewer. 'Impersonating a Disease-Control Officer.' "

"What a lack of gusto and panache. That guy's just not serious."

Malvern peered down streetward through a goo-dripping window. The glorp-cannon salvos had been supplemented by strafing ornithopter runs of uptake inhibitors and counter-metabolizers. The battling federal defenders of humanity's physiological integrity were using combined-arms tactics. Clearly the forces of law and order were sensing victory. They usually did.

"How much of this hot glop you think we ought to kipe?" Malvern asked.

"Well, all of it. Everything Weeble can eat."

"You don't mind risking ol' Weeble?"

"He's not a pig for nothing, you know. Besides, I just upgraded his digestive tract." Fearon scratched the pig affectionately.

Malvern Velcroed his weasel Spike into the animal's crittercam[31]. The weasel eagerly scampered off on point, as Malvern offered remote guidance and surveillance with his handheld.

"Out-of-Control Kevin uses video bees," remarked Fearon as they trudged forward with a rattle of sampling equipment. "Little teensy cameras mounted on their teensy insect backs. It's an emergent network phenomenon, he says."

"That's just Oldstyle Silicon Valley," Malvern dismissed. "Besides, a weasel never gets sucked into a jet engine."

The well-trained Spike had nailed the target, and the outlaw wetware was fizzing like cheap champagne. It was a wonder that the floor of the high-rise had withstood the sheer weight of criminal mischief. Mixogen was no mere R&D lab. It was a full-scale production facility. Some ingenious soul had purchased the junked remains of an Orlando aquasport resort, all the pumps, slides, and water-park sprinklers. Kiddie wading pools had been retrofitted with big gooey glaciers of serum support gel. The plastic fishtanks were filled to overflowing with raw biomass. Metastasizing cells had backed up into the genetic moonshine somehow, causing a violent bloom and a methane explosion as frothy as lemon meringue. The animal stench was indescribable.

"What stale hell is this?" said Malvern, gaping at a broken tub that brimmed with a demonic assemblage of horns, hoofs, hide, fur, and dewclaws.

"I take that to be widely variegated forms of mammalian epidermal expression." Fearon restrained his pig with difficulty. The rotting smell of the monstrous meat had triggered Weeble's appetite.

"Do I look like I was born yesterday?" snorted Malvern. "You're missing the point. Nobody can maintain a hybridoma with that gross level of genetic variety! Nothing with *horns* ever has *talons!* Ungulates and felines don't even have the same chromosome number."

Window plastic shattered. A wall-crawling police robot broke into the genetic speakeasy. It closed its gecko feet with a sound like Venetian blinds, and deployed a bristling panoply of lenses and spigots.

"Amscray," Malvern suggested. The duo and their animal familiars retreated from the swab machine's clumsy surveillance. In their absence came a loud frosty hiss as the police bot unleashed a sterilizing fog of Bose-Einstein[32] condensate.

A new scent had Spike's attention, and it set Malvern off at a trot. They entered an office warren of glassblock and steel.

The Mixogen executive had died at her post. She sprawled before her desktop in her ergonomic chair, still in her business suit but reeking of musk and decay. Her swollen, veiny head was the size of a peach basket.

Fearon closed his dropped jaw and zipped up his Kevlar vest. "Jeez, Malvern, another entrepreneur-related fatality! How high do you think her SAT got before she blew?"

"Aw, man—she must have been *totally* off the IQ scale. Look at the size of her frontal lobes. She's like a six-pack of Wittgensteins."

Malvern shuddered as Spike the weasel tunneled to safety up his pants leg. Fearon wiped the sweat from his own pulsing forehead. The stench of the rot was making his head swim. It was certainly good to know that his fully-modern immune system would never allow a bacteria or virus to live in his body without his permission.

Malvern crept closer, clicking flash-shots from his digicam. "Check out that hair on her legs and feet."

"I've heard about this," marvelled Fearon. "Bonobo hybridoma. She's half chimp! Because that super-neural technique requires... so they say... a tactical retreat down the primate ladder before you can make that tremendous evolutionary rush for breakthrough extropian[33] intelligence." He broke off short as he saw Weeble eagerly licking the drippy pool of ooze below the dead woman's chair. "Knock it off, Weeble!"

"Where'd the stiff get the stuff?"

"I'm as eager to know that as you are, so I'd suggest swiping her desktop," said Fearon craftily. "Not only would this seriously retard police investigation, but absconding with the criminal evidence would likely shelter many colleagues in the scab underground, who might be righteously grateful to us, and therefore boost our rankings."

"Excellent tactics, my man!" said Malvern, punching his fist in his open palm. "So let's just fall to sampling, shall we? How many stomachs is Weeble packing now?"

"Five, in addition to his baseline digestive one."

"Man, if I had your kind of money... Okay, lemme see... Cut a tendril from that kinesthetically active goo, snatch a sample from that wading-pool of sushi-barf—and, whoa, check the widget that the babe here is clutching."

From one contorted corpse-mitt peeked a gel-based pocket lab. Malvern popped the datastorage and slipped the honey-colored hockey puck into his capacious scabbing vest. With a murmured apology, Fearon pressed the the tip of his sampling-staff to the woman's bloated skull, and pneumatically shot a tracer into the proper cortical depths. Weeble fastidiously chomped the mass of gray cells. The prize slid safe into the pig's gullet, behind a closing gastric valve.

They triumphantly skulked from the reeking, cracking high-rise, deftly avoiding police surveillance and nasty street-spatters of gutter-goo. Malvern's getaway car rushed obediently to meet them. While Malvern slid through traffic, Fearon dispensed reward treats to the happy Spike and Weeble.

"Mal, you set to work dredging that gel-drive[34], okay? I'll load all these tissue samples into my code-crackers. I should have some preliminary results for us by, uhm... well, a week or so."

"Yeah, that's what you promised when we scored that hot jellyfish from those Rasta scabs in Key West."

"Hey, they used protein-encrypted gattaca[35]! There was nothing I could do about that."

"You're always hanging fire after the coup, Fearon. If you can't unzip some heavy-duty DNA in your chintzy little bedroom lab, then let's find a man who can."

Fearon set his sturdy jaw. "Are you implying that I lack biotechnical potency?"

"Maybe you're getting there. But you're still no match for old Kemp Kingseed. He's a fossil, but he's still got the juice."

"Look, there's a MarthaMart!" Fearon parried.

They wheeled with a screech of tires into the mylar lot around the MarthaMart, and handed the car to the bunny-suited attendant. The men and their animals made extensive use of the fully-shielded privacy of the decon chambers. All four beings soon emerged as innocent of contaminants as virgin latex.

"Thank goodness for the local franchise of the goddess of perfection," said Fearon contentedly. "Tupper will have no cause to complain of my task-consequent domestic disorder! Wait a minute—I think she wanted me to buy something."

They entered the brick-and-mortar retail floor of the MarthaMart, Fearon racking his enhanced memory for Tupper's instructions, but to no avail. In the end he loaded his wiry shopping basket with pop bottles, gloop[36] cans, some recycled squip[37], and a spare vial of oven-cleaning bugs.

The two scabs rode home pensively. Malvern motored off to his scuzzy bachelor digs, leaving Fearon to trudge with spousal anxiety upstairs. What a bringdown from the heights of scab achievement, this husbandly failure.

Fearon faced an expectant Tupper as he reached the landing. Dismally, he handed over the shopping bag. "Here you go. Whatever it was you wanted, I'm sure I didn't buy it." Then he brightened. "Got some primo mutant brain-mass in the pig's innards, though."

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Five days later, Fearon faced an irate Malvern. Fearon hedged and backfilled for half an hour, displaying histo-printouts, some scanning-microscope cinema, even some corny artificial-life simulations.

Malvern examined the bloodstained end of his ivory toothpick. "Face defeat, Fearon. That bolus in the feedline was just pfisteria. The tendril is an everyday hybridoma of liana, earthworm, and slime mold. As for the sushi puke, it's just the usual chemosynthetic complex of abyssal tubeworms. So cut to the chase, pard. What's with those explosively ultra-smart cortical cells?"

"Okay, I admit it, you're right, I'm screwed. I can't make any sense of them at all. Wildly oscillating expression-inhibition loops, silent genes, jumping genes, junk DNA that suddenly reconfigures itself and takes control—I've never seen such a stew. It reads like a Martian road map."

Malvern squinched his batrachian eyes. "A confession of true scabbing lameitude. Pasting a 'Kick Me, I'm Blind' sign on your back. Have I correctly summarized your utter wussiness?"

Fearon kept his temper. "Look, as long as we're both discreet about our little adventure downtown, we're not risking any of our vital reputation in the rough-and-tumble process of scab peer-review."

"You've wasted five precious days in which Ribo Zombie might radically beat us to the punch! If this news gets out, your league standings will fall quicker than an Italian government." Malvern groaned theatrically. "Do you know how long it's been since my groundbreaking investigative fieldwork was properly acknowledged? I can't even *buy* a citation."

Fearon's anger transmuted to embarrassment. "You'll get your quotes and footnotes, Malvern. I'll just shotgun those genetics to bits, and subcontract the sequences around the globe. Then no single individual will get enough of the big picture to know what we've been working on."

Malvern tugged irritably at the taut plastic wrapper of a Pynchonian British toffee. "Man, you've completely lost your edge! Everybody is just a synapse away from everybody else these days! If you hire a bunch of scabs on the net, they'll just search-engine each other out, and patch everything back together. It's high time we consulted Dr. Kingseed."

"Oh, Malvern, I hate asking Kemp for favors. He's such a bringdown billjoy[38] when it comes to hot breakthrough technologies! Besides, he always treats me like I'm some website intern from the days of Internet slave labor."

"Quit whining. This is serious work."

"Plus, that cobwebby decor in Kemp's retrofunky domicile! All those ultra-rotten Hirst assemblages—they'd creep anybody out."

Malvern sighed. "You never talked this way before you got married."

Fearon waved a hand at Tupper's tasteful wallpaper. "Can I help it if I now grok interior decor?"

"Let's face some facts, my man: Dr. Kemp Kingseed has the orthogonal genius of the primeval hacker. After all, his startup companies pushed the Immunosance past its original tipping point. Tell the missus we're heading out, and let's scramble headlong for the Next New Thing like all true-blue scabs must do."

Tupper was busy in her tiny office at her own career, moderating her virtual agora on twentieth-century graphic narrative. She accepted Fearon's news with only half her attention. "Have fun, dear." She returned to her webcam. "Now, Kirbybuff, could you please clarify your thesis on Tintin and Snowy as precursor culture-heroes of the Immunosance?"

Weeble and Malvern, Spike and Fearon sought out an abandoned petroleum distribution facility down by the waterfront. Always the financial bottom-feeder, the canny Kemp Kingseed had snapped up the wrecked facility after the abject collapse of the fossil-fuel industry. At one point in his checkered career, the reclusive hermit-genius had tried to turn the maze of steampipes and rusting storage tanks into a child-friendly industrial-heritage theme park. Legal problems had undercut his project, leaving the aged digital entrepreneur haunting the ruins of yet another vast, collapsed scheme.

An enormous spiderweb, its sticky threads thick as supertanker hawsers, hung over the rusting tanks like some Victorian antimacassar of the gods.

Malvern examined the unstable tangle of spidery cables. "We'd better leave Weeble down here."

"But I never, ever want to leave dear Weeble!"

"Just paste a crittercam on him and have him patrol for us on point." Malvern looked at the pig critically. "He sure looks green around the gills since he ate that chick's brain. You sure he's okay?"

"Weeble is fine. He's some pig."

The visitors began their climb. Halfway up the tank's curving wall, Kemp Kingseed's familiar, Shelob, scuttled from her lair in the black pipe of a giant smokestack. She was a spider as big as a walrus. The ghastly arachnid reeked of vinegar.

"It's those big corny spider-legs," said Malvern, hiding his visceral fear in a thin shroud of scientific objectivity. "You'd think old Kingseed had never heard of the cube-square law!"

"Huh?" grunted Fearon, clinging to a sticky cable.

"Look, the proportions go all wrong if you blow them up a thousand times life-size. For one thing, insects breathe through spiracles! Insects don't have lungs. An insect as big as a walrus couldn't even breathe!"

"Arachnids aren't insects, Malvern."

"It's just a big robot with some cheap spider chitin grown on it. That's the only explanation that makes rational sense."

The unspeakable monster retreated to her lair, and the climbers moved thankfully on.

Kemp Kingseed's lab was a giant hornet's nest. The big papery office had been grown inside a giant empty fuel tank. Kingseed had always resented the skyrocketing publication costs in academic research. So he had cut to the chase, and built his entire laboratory out of mulched back issues of *Cell* and *Nature Genomics.*

Kingseed had enormous lamp-goggle eyeglasses, tufts of snowy hair on his skull, and impressive white bristles in his withered ears. The ancient Internet mogul still wore his time-honored Versace labcoat, over baggy green ripstop pants and rotting Chuck Taylor hightops.

"Africa," he told them, after examining their swiped goodies.

"'Africa?'"

"I never thought I'd see those sequences again." Kingseed removed his swimmy lenses to dab at his moist red eyes with a swatch of lab paper. "Those were our heroic days. The world's most advanced technicians, fighting for the

planet's environmental survival! Of course we completely failed, and the planet's ecosystem totally collapsed. But at least we didn't suck up to politicians."

Kingseed looked at them sharply. "Lousy, fake-rebel pimps like that Ribo Zombie, turned into big phony pop stars. Why, in *my* generation, we were the *real, authentic* transgressive-dissident pop stars! Napster... Freenet... GNU/Linux... Man, that was the stuff!"

Kingseed beat vaguely at the air with his wrinkled fist. "Well, when the Greenhouse started really cooking us, we had to invent the Immunosance. We had no choice at that point, because it was the only way to survive. But every hideous thing we did to save the planet was totally UN-approved! Big swarms of rich-guy NGOs[39] were backing us, straight out of the WTO[40] and the Davos Forum. We even had *security clearances.* It was all for the *public good!*"

Malvern and Fearon exchanged wary glances.

Kingseed scowled at them. "Malvern, how much weasel flesh do you have in your personal genetic makeup?"

"Practically none, Dr. Kingseed!" Malvern demurred. "Just a few plasmids in my epidermal expression."

"Well, see, that's the vital difference between your decadent times and my heroic age. Back in my day, people were incredibly *anxious* and *fussy* about genetic contamination. They expected people and animals to have clean, unpolluted, fully natural genelines. But then, of course, the Greenhouse Effect destroyed the natural ecosystem. Only the thoroughly unnatural and the totally hyped-up could thrive in that kind of crisis. Civilization always collapsed *worst* where the habitats were *most nearly natural.* So the continent of Africa was, well, pretty much obliterated."

"Oh, we're with the story," Fearon assured him. "We're totally with it heart-of-darkness-wise."

"'Ha!" barked Kingseed. "You pampered punks got no idea what genuine chaos looks like! It was incredibly awful! Guerrilla armies of African mercenaries grabbed all our state-of-the-art lab equipment. They were looting... burning... and once the narco-terror crowd moved in from the Golden Triangle, it got mondo bizarre!"

Malvern shrugged. "So how tough can it be? You just get on a plane and go look." He looked at Fearon. "You get on planes, don't you, Fearon?"

"Sure. Cars, sleds, waterskis, you bet I get on planes."

Kingseed raised a chiding finger. "We were desperate to save all those endangered species, so we just started packing them into anything that looked like it would survive the climate disruption. Elephant DNA spliced into cacti, rhino sequences tucked into fungi... and hey, we were the *good* guys. You should have seen what the *ruthless terrorists* were up to."

Malvern picked a fragment from his molars, examined it thoughtfully, and ate it. "Look Dr. Kingseed, all this ancient history's really edifying, but I still don't get it with the swollen, exploding brain part."

"That's also what Ribo Zombie wanted to know."

Fearon stiffened. "Ribo Zombie came here? What did you tell him?"

"I told that sorry punk nothing! Not one word did he get out of me! He's been sniffing around my crib, but I chased him back to his media coverage and his high-priced market consultants."

Malvern offered a smacking epidermal high-five. "Kemp, you are one uptaking guru! You're the Miami swamp yoda, dad!"

"I kinda like you two kids, so let me cluetrain you in. Ever seen NATO military chimp-brain? If you know how to tuck globs of digitally altered chimp brain into your own glial cells—and I'm not saying that's painless—then you can radically jazz your own cortex. Just swell your head up like a mushroom puffball." Kingseed gazed at them soberly. "It runs on DNA storage, that's the secret. Really, really long strands of DNA. We're talking like infinite Turing-tape strands of gattaca."

"Kemp," said Fearon kindly, "why don't you come along with us to Africa? You spend too much time in this toxic old factory with that big smelly spider. It'll do you good to get some fresh jungle air. Besides, we clearly require a wise native guide, given this situation."

"Are you two clowns really claiming that you wanna pursue this score to *Africa?*"

"Oh sure, Ghana, Guinea, whatever. We'll just nick over to the Dark Continent duty-free and check it out for the weekend. Come on, Kemp, we're scabs! We got cameras, we got credit cards! It's a cakewalk!"

Kingseed knotted his snowy eyebrows. "Every sane human being fled out of Africa decades ago. It's the dark side of the Immunosance. Even the Red Cross ran off screaming."

" 'Red Cross,' " said Malvern to Fearon. The two of them were unable to restrain their hearty laughter. " 'Red Cross.' "What ineffectual lame-os! Man, that's rich."

"Okay, sure, have it your own way," Kingseed muttered. "I'll just go sherlock my oldest dead-media and scare up some tech-specs." He retreated to his vespine inner sanctum. Antic rummaging noises followed.

Fearon patiently sank into a classic corrugated Gehry chair. Malvern raided Kingseed's tiny bachelor kitchen, appropriating a platter of honey-guarana snack cubes. "What a cool pad this rich geezer's got!" Malvern said, munching. "I am digging how the natural light piped in through fiber-optic channels renders this fuel-tank so potent for lab work."

"This place is a stinking dump. Sure, he's rich, but that just means he'll overcharge us."

Malvern sternly cleared his throat. "Let's get something straight, partner. I haven't posted a scab acquisition since late last year! And you're in no better shape, with married life putting such a crimp in your scabbing. If we expect to pull down big-time decals and sponsorships, we've just got to beat Ribo Zombie to a major find. And this one is definitely ours by right."

After a moment, Fearon nodded in grim commitment. It was impossible to duck a straight-out scab challenge like this one—not if he expected to face himself in the mirror.

Kingseed emerged from his papery attic, his glasses askew and the wild pastures of his hair scampering with dustbunnies. He bore a raven in a splintery bamboo cage, along with a moldy fistful of stippled paper strips.

"Candybytes[41]! I stored all the African data on candybytes! They were my bonanza for the child educational market. Edible paper, tasty sugar substrate, info-rich secret ingredients! "

"Hey yeah!" said Malvern nostalgically. "I used to eat candybytes as a little kid in my Time-Warner-Disney Creche. So now one of us has to gobble your moldy old lemon-drops?" Malvern was clearly nothing loath.

"No need for that, I brought old Heckle here. Heckle is my verbal output device."

Fearon examined the raven's cage. "This featherbag looks as old as a Victrola."

Kingseed set a moldy data strip atop a table, then released Heckle. The dark bird hopped unerringly to the start of the tape, and began to peck and eat. As Heckle's living read-head ingested and interpreted the coded candybytes, the raven jumped around the table like a fairy chess knight, a corvine Turing Train.

"How is a raven like a writing desk?" murmured Kemp.

Heckle shivered, stretched his glossy wings, and went Delphic. In a croaky, midnight-dreary voice, the neurally-possessed bird delivered a strange tale.

A desperate group of Noahs and Appleseeds, Goodalls and Cousteaus, Leakeys and Fosseys had gathered up Africa's endangered flora and fauna, then packed the executable genetic information away into a most marvelous container: the Panspecific Mycoblastula[42]. The Panspecific Mycoblastula was an immortal chimeric fungal ball of awesome storage capacity, a filamentously aggressive bloody tripe-wad, a motile Darwinian lights-and-liver battle-slimeslug.

Shivering with mute attention, Fearon brandished his handheld, carefully recording every cawed and revelatory word. Naturally the device also displayed the point of view of Weeble's crittercam.

Suddenly, Fearon glimpsed a shocking scene. Weeble was under attack!

There was no mistaking the infamous Skratchy Kat, who had been trying, without success, to skulk around Kingseed's industrial estate. Weeble's porcine war cry emerged tinnily from the little speakers. The crittercam's transmission whipsawed in frenzy.

"Sic him, Weeble! Hoof that feline spy!"

Gamely obeying his master's voice, the pig launched his bulk at the top-of-the-line postfeline. A howling combat ensued, Fearon's pig getting the worse of it. Then Shelob the multi-ton spider joined the fray. Skratchy Kat quickly saw the sense of retreat. When the transmission stabilized, the superstar's familiar had vanished. Weeble grunted proudly. The crittercam bobbed rhythmically as the potent porker licked his wounds with antiseptic tongue.

"You the man, Fearon! Your awesome pig kicked that cat's ass!"

Kingseed scratched his head glumly. "You had a crittercam channel open to your pig this whole time, didn't you?"

Fearon grimaced, clutching his handheld. "Well, of course I did! I didn't want my Weeble to feel all lonely."

"Ribo Zombie's cat was watergating your pig. Ribo Zombie must have heard everything we said up here. I hope he didn't record those GPS coordinates."

The possessed raven was still cackling spastically, as the last crackles of embedded data spooled through its postcorvine speech centers. Heckle was recaged and rewarded with a tray of crickets.

Suddenly, Fearon's handheld spoke up in a sinister basso. It was the incoming voice of Ribo Zombie himself. "So the Panspecific Mycoblastula is in Sierra Leone. It is a savage territory, ruled by the mighty bushsoldier, Prince Kissy Mental. He is a ferocious cannibal who would chew you small-timers up like aphrodisiac gum! So Malvern and Fearon—take heed of my street-wisdom. I have the top-line hardware, and now, thanks to you, I have the data as well. Save yourselves the trouble, just go home."

"Gumshoe on up here, you washed-up ponce!" said startled Malvern, dissed to the bone. "My fearsome weasel will go sloppy seconds on your big fat cat!"

Kingseed stretched forth his liver-spotted mitt. "Turn off those handhelds, boys."

When Fearon and Malvern had bashfully powered down their devices, the old guru removed an antique pager from his lab bench. He played his horny thumb across the rudimentary keypad.

"A *pager?*" Malvern goggled. "Why not, like, jungle drums?"

"Pipe down. You pampered modern lamers can't even manage elementary anti-surveillance. While one obsolescent pager is useless—two are a secure link."

Kingseed read the archaic glyphs off the tiny screen. "I can see that my contact in Freetown, Dr. Herbert Zoster, is still operational. With his help, you might yet beat Zombie to this prize." Kingseed looked up. "After allowing Ribo Zombie to bug my very home, I expect no less from you. You'd better come through this time, or never show your faces again at the Tallahassee ScabCon. With your dalkon shields—or on them, boys."

"Lofty! We're outta here pronto! Thanks a lot, gramps."

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Tupper was very alarmed about Africa. After an initial tearful outburst, hot meals around Fearon's house became as rare as whales and pandas. Domestic conversation died down to apologetic bursts of dingbat-decorated e-mail. Their sex life, always sensually satisfactory and emotionally deep, became as chilly as the last few lonely glaciers of Greenhouse Greenland. Glum but determined, Fearon made no complaint.

On the day of his brave departure—his important gear stowed in two carry-on bags, save for that which Weeble wore in khaki-colored saddle-style pouches—Fearon paused at the door of their flat. Tupper sat morosely on the couch, pretending to surf the screen. For thirty seconds the display showed an ad from AT&T (Advanced

Transcription and Totipotency) touting their latest telomere upgrades. Fearon was, of course, transfixed. But then Tupper changed channels, and he refocused mournfully for a last homesick look at his frosty spouse.

"I must leave you now, Tuppence honey, to meet Malvern at the docks." Even the use of her pet name failed to break her reserve. "Darling, I know this hurts your feelings, but think of it this way: my love for you is true because I'm true to my own true self. Malvern and I will be in and out of that tropical squalor in a mere week or two, with minimal lysis[43] all around. But if I don't come back right away—or even, well, forever—I want you to know without you, I'm nothing. You're the feminine mitochondrium in my dissolute masculine plasm, baby."

Nothing. Fearon turned to leave, hand on the doorknob. Tupper swept him up in an embrace from behind, causing Weeble to grunt in surprise. Fearon slithered around within the cage of her arms to face her, and she mashed her lips into his.

Malvern's insistent pounding woke the lovers up. Hastily, Fearon redonned his outfit, bestowed a final peck on Tupper's tear-slicked cheek, and made his exit.

"A little trouble getting away?" Malvern leered.

"Not really. You?"

"Well, my landlady made me pay the next month's rent in advance. Oh, and if I'm dead, she gets to sell all my stuff."

"Harsh."

"Just the kind of treatment I expect."

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Still flushed from the fever-shots at U.S. Customs, the two globetrotting scabs watched the receding coast of America from the deck of their Cuba-bound ferry, the *Gloria Estefan.*

"I hate all swabs," said Malvern, belching as his innards rebooted.

Fearon clutched his squirming belly. "We could have picked better weather. These ferocious Caribbean hurricane waves—"

"What 'waves'? We're still in the harbor."

"Oh, my Lord—"

After a pitching, greenish sea-trip, Cuba hove into view. The City of Havana, menaced by rising seas, had been relocated up the Cuban coast through a massive levy on socialist labor. The crazy effort had more or less succeeded, though it looked as if every historic building in the city had been picked up and dropped.

Debarking in the fragrant faux-joy of the highly colored tropics, the eager duo hastened to the airfield—for only the cowboy Cubans still maintained direct air-flights to the wrecked and smoldering shell of the Dark Continent.

Mi Amiga Flicka was a hydrogen-lightened cargolifter of Appaloosa-patterned horsehide. The buoyant lift was generated by onboard horse stomachs, modified to spew hydrogen instead of the usual methane. A tanker truck, using a long boom-arm, pumped a potent microbial oatmeal into the tethered dirigible's feedstock reservoirs.

"There's a microbrewery on board," Malvern said with a travel agent's phony glee. "Works off grain mash just like a horse does! *Cerveza muy potenta,* you can bet."

A freestanding bamboo elevator ratcheted them up to the zeppelin's passenger module, which hung like a zippered saddlebag from the buoyant horsehide belly.

The bio-zep's[44] passenger cabin featured a zebrahide mess hall that doubled as a ballroom, with a tiny bandstand and a touchingly antique mirrorball. The Cuban stewards, to spare weight and space, were all jockey-sized.

Fearon and Malvern discovered that their web-booked "stateroom" was slightly smaller than a standard street toilet. Every feature of the tiny suite folded, collapsed, inverted, everted, or required assembly from scattered parts.

"I don't think I can get used to peeing in the same pipe that dispenses that legendary microbrew," said Fearon. Less finicky, Malvern had already tapped and sampled a glass of the golden boutique *cerveza.* "Life is a closed loop, Fearon."

"But where will the pig sleep?"

They found their way to the observation lounge for the departure of the giant gasbag. With practiced ease, the crew detached blimp-hook from mooring mast. The bacterial fuel cells kicked over the myosin motors, the props began to windmill and the craft surged eastward with all the verve and speed of a spavined nag.

Malvern was already deep into his third *cerveza.* "Once we get our hands on that wodge of extinct gene-chains, our names are forever golden! It'll be vino, gyno, and techno all the way!"

"Let's not count our chimeras till they're decanted, Mal. We're barely puttering along, and I keep thinking of Ribo Zombie and his highly publicized private entomopter."

"Ribo Zombie's a fat show-biz phony, he's all talk! We're heavy-duty street-level *chicos* from Miami! It's just no contest."

"Hmmph. We'd better vortal[45] in to *Fusing Nuclei* and check out the continuing coverage."

Fearon found a spot where the zep's horsehide was thinnest, and tapped an overhead satellite feed. The gel screen of his handheld flashed the familiar *Fusing Nuclei* logo.

"In his one-man supercavitating[46] sub, Ribo Zombie and Skratchy Kat speed toward the grim no-man's land of sub-Saharan Africa! What weird and wonderful adventures await our intrepid lone-wolf scab and his plucky familiar? Does carnal love lurk in some dusky native bosom? Log on Monday for the realtime landing of RZ and Skratchy upon the sludge-sloshing shores of African doom! And remember, kids—Skratchy Kat cards, toys, and collectibles are available only through Nintendo-Benz—"

"Did they say 'Monday'?" Malvern screeched. "Monday is tomorrow! We're already royally boned!"

"Malvern, please, the straights are staring at us. Ribo Zombie can't prospect all of Africa through all those old UN emplacements. Kingseed found us an expert native guide, remember? Dr. Herbie Zoster."

Malvern stifled his despair. "You really think this native scab has got the stuff?"

Fearon smiled. "Well, he's not a scab quite like us, but he's definitely our type! I checked out his online resumé! He's pumped, ripped, and buff, plus he's wily and streetsmart. Herbie Zoster has been a mercenary, an explorer, an archaeologist, even the dictator of an offshore datahaven. Once we hook up with him, this ought to be a waltz."

In the airborne hours that followed, Malvern sampled a foretaste of the vino, gyno and techno, while Fearon repeatedly wrote and erased apologetical e-mail to his wife. Then came their scheduled arrival over the melancholy ruins of Freetown—and a dismaying formal announcement by the ship's Captain.

"What do you mean, you can't moor?" demanded Malvern.

Their captain, a roguish and dapper, yet intensely competent fellow named Luis Sendero, removed his cap and slicked back the two macaw feathers anchored at his temple. "The local *caudillo,* Prince Kissy Mental, has incited his people to burn down our trading facilities. One learns to expect these little setbacks in the African trade. Honoring our contracts, we shall parachute to earth the goods we bring, unless they are not paid for—in which case, they are dumped anyway, yet receive no parachute. As for you two Yankees and your two animals—you are the only passengers who want to land in Sierra Leone. If you wish to touch down, you must parachute just as the cargo."

After much blustering, whuffling, and whining, Fearon, Malvern, and Weeble stood at the open hatch of *Mi Amiga Flicka,* parachutes strapped insecurely on, ripcords wired to a rusty cable, while the exotic scents of the rainy African landscape wafted to their nostrils.

Wistfully, they watched their luggage recede to the scarred red earth. Then, with Spike clutched to his breast, Malvern closed his eyes and boldly tumbled overboard. Fearon watched closely as his colleague's fabric chute successfully bloomed. Only then did he make up his mind to go through with it. He booted the reluctant Weeble into airy space, and followed suit.

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"Outsiders never bring us anything but garbage," mumbled Dr. Zoster.

"Is it *Cuban* garbage?" said Malvern, tucking into their host's goat-and-pepper soup with a crude wooden spoon. "Because if it is, you're getting ripped off even in terms of trash."

"No. They're always Cubans bringing it, but it's *everybody's* garbage that is dumped on Africa. Africa's cargo-cult prayers have been answered with debris. But perhaps any sufficiently advanced garbage is indistinguishable from magic."

Fearon surreptitiously fed the peppery *cabrito* to his pig. He was having a hard time successfully relating to Dr. Herbie Zoster. It had never occurred to him that elderly Kemp Kingseed and tough, sunburnt Herbie Zoster were such close kin.

In point of fact, Herbie Zoster was Kingseed's younger clone. And it didn't require Jungian analysis to see that, just like most clones, Zoster bitterly resented the egotistical man who had created him. This was very clearly the greatest appeal of life in Africa for Dr. Herbie Zoster. Africa was the one continent guaranteed to make him as much unlike Kemp Kingseed as possible.

Skin tinted dark as mahogany, callused and wiry, dotted with many thorn scratches, parasites, and gunshot wounds, Zoster still bore some resemblance to Kingseed—about as much as a battle-scarred hyena to an aging bloodhound.

"What exactly do people dump around here?" said Malvern with interest.

Zoster mournfully chewed the last remnant of a baked yam and spat the skin into the darkness outside their thatched hut. Something with great glowing eyes pounced upon it instantly, with a rasp and a snarl. "You're familiar with the Immunosance?"'

"Oh yeah, sure!" said Malvern artlessly, "we're from Miami."

"That new Genetic Age completely replaced the Nuclear Age, the Space Age, and the Information Age."

"Good riddance," Malvern offered. "You got any more of that *cabrito* stew? It's fine stuff!"

Zoster rang a crude brass bell. A limping, turbaned manservant dragged himself into their thatched hut, tugging a bubbling bucket of chow.

"The difficulty with massive technological advance," said Zoster, spooning the steamy goop, "is that it obsolesces the previous means of production. When the Immunosance arrived, omnipresent industries already covered all the advanced countries." Zoster paused to pump vigorously at a spring-loaded homemade crank, which caused the light-bulb overhead to brighten to its full thirty watts. "There simply was no *room* to install the new bioindustrial revolution. But a revolution was very necessary anyway. So all the previous junk had to go. The only major planetary area with massive dumping grounds was—and still is—Africa."

Zoster rubbed at his crank-stiffened forearm and sighed. "Sometimes they promote the garbage and sell it to us Africans. Sometimes they drop it anonymously. But nevertheless—no matter how we struggle or resist—the very worst always ends up here in Africa, no matter what."

"I'm with the sequence," said Malvern, pausing to belch. "So what's the 411 about this fabled Panspecific Mycoblastula?"

Zoster straightened, an expression of awe toughening his face below his canvas hatbrim. "That is garbage of a very special kind. Because the Panspecific Mycoblastula is an entire, outmoded *natural ecosystem.* It is the last wild

continent, completely wadded up and compressed by foreign technicians!"

Fearon considered this gnomic remark. He found it profoundly encouraging. "We understand the gravity of this matter, Dr. Zoster. Malvern and I feel that we can make this very worth your while. Time is of the essence. When can we start?"

Zoster scraped the dirt floor with his worn boot-heel. "I'll have to hire a train of native bearers. I'll have to obtain supplies. We will be risking our lives, of course... What can you offer us in return for that?"

"A case of soft drinks?" said Malvern.

Fearon leaned forward intently. "Transistor radios? Antibiotics? How about some plumbing?"

Zoster smiled for the first time, with a flash of gold teeth. "Call me Herbie."

j

Zoster extended a callused fingertip. It bore a single ant, the size and color of a sesame seed.

"This is the largest organism in the world."

"So I heard," Malvern interjected glibly. "Just like the fire-ants invading America, right? They went through a Darwinian bottleneck and came out supercharged sisters, genetically identical even under different queens. They spread across the whole USA smoother than marshmallow fluff."

Zoster wiped his sweating stubbled jaw with a filthy bandanna. "These ants were produced four decades ago. They carry rhizotropic fungi, to fertilize crops with nitrogen. But their breeders overdesigned them. These ants cause tremendous fertile growth in vegetation, but they're also immune to insect diseases and parasites. The swabs finally wiped them out in America, but Africa has no swabs. We have no public health services, no telephones, no roads. So from Timbuktu to Capetown, cloned ants have spread in a massive wave, a single super-organism big as Africa."

Malvern shook his head in superior pity. "That's what you get for trusting in swabs, man. Any major dude could've told those corporate criminals that top-down hierarchies never work out. Now, the approach you Third Worlders need is a viral marketing, appropriate-technology pitch..."

Zoster actually seemed impressed by Malvern's foolish bravado, and engaged the foreign scab in earnest jargon-laced discussion, leaving Fearon to trudge along in an unspeaking fug of sweat-dripping, alien jungle heat. Though Zoster was the only one armed, the trio of scabs boldly led their little expedition through a tangle of feral trails, much-aided by their satellite surveillance maps and GPS locators.

Five native bearers trailed the parade, fully laden-down with scab-baggage and provisions. The bare-chested, bare-legged, *dhoti*-clad locals exhibited various useful bodily mods, such as dorsal water storage humps, toughened and splayed feet, and dirty grub-excavating claws that could shred a stump in seconds. They also sported less rational cosmetic changes, including slowly moving cicatrices (really migratory subepidermal symbiotic worms) and enlarged ears augmented with elephant musculature. The rhythmic flapping of the porters' ears produced a gentle creaking that colorfully punctuated their impenetrable sibilant language.

The tormented landscape of Sierra Leone had been thoroughly reclaimed by a clapped-out mutant jungle. War, poverty, disease, starvation—the Four Landrovers of the African Apocalypse—had long since been and gone, bringing a drastic human population crash that beggared the Black Death, and ceding the continent to resurgent flora and fauna.

These local flora and fauna were, however, radically human-altered, recovering from an across-the-board apocalypse even more severe and scourging than the grisly one suffered by humans. Having come through the grinding hopper of a bioterror, they were no longer "creatures" but "evolutures[47]." Trees writhed, leaves crawled, insects croaked, lizards bunny-hopped, mammals flew, flowers pinched, vines slithered, and mushrooms burrowed. The fish, clumsily re-engineered for the surging Greenhouse realities of rising seas, lay in the jungle trails burping like lungfish. When stepped upon, they almost seemed to speak.

The explorers found themselves navigating a former highway to some long-buried city, presumably Bayau or Moyamba, to judge by the outdated websites. Post-natural oddities lay atop an armature of ruins, revealing the Ozymandias lessons of industrial hubris. A mound of translucent jello assumed the outlines of a car, including a dimly perceived skeletal driver and passengers. Oil-slick–colored orchids vomited from windows and doors. With the descending dusk invigorating flocks of winged post-urban rats, the travelers made camp. Zoster popped up a pair of tents for the expedition's leaders and their animals, while the locals assembled a humble jungle igloo of fronds and thorns.

After sharing a few freeze-dried packets of slumgullion, the expedition sank into weary sleep. Fearon was so bone-tired that he somehow tolerated Malvern's nasal whistling and Zoster's stifled dream shouts.

He awoke before the others. He unseamed the tent flap and poked his head out into the early sunshine.

Their encampment was surrounded by marauders. Spindly scouts, blank-eyed and scarcely human, were watching the pop-tents and leaning on pig-iron spears.

Fearon ducked his head back and roused his compatriots, who silently scrambled into their clothes. Heads clustered like coconuts, the three of them peered through a fingernail's width of tent-flap.

Warrior-reinforcements now arrived in ancient Jeeps, carrying anti-aircraft guns and rocket-propelled grenades.

"It's Kissy Mental's Bush Army," whispered Zoster. He pawed hurriedly through a pack, coming up with a pair of mechanical boots.

"Okay, girls, listen up," Zoster whispered, shoving and clamping his feet in the piston-heavy footgear. "I have a plan. When I yank this overhead pull-tab, this tent unpops. That should startle the scouts out there, maybe enough to cover our getaway. We all race off at top speed just the way we came. If either of you survive, feel free to rendezvous

back at my place."

Zoster hefted his gun, their only weapon. He dug the toe of each boot into a switch on the heel of its mate, and his boots began to chuff and emit small puffs of exhaust.

"Gasoline-powered seven-league boots," Zoster explained, seeing their stricken expressions. "South African Army surplus. There's no need for roads with these things, but with skill and practice, you can pronk along like a gazelle at thirty, forty miles an hour."

"You really believe we can outrun these jungle marauders?" Malvern asked.

"I don't have to outrun them; I only have to outrun *you.*"

Zoster triggered the tent and dashed off at once, firing his pistol at random. The pistons of his boots gave off great blasting backfires, which catapulted him away with vast stainless-steel lunges.

Stunned and in terror, Malvern and Fearon stumbled out of the crumpling tent, coughing on Zoster's exhaust. By the time they straightened up and regained their vision, they were firmly in the grip of Prince Kissy Mental's troops.

The savage warriors attacked the second pop-tent with their machetes. They quickly grappled and snaffled the struggling Spike and Weeble.

"Chill, Spike!"

"Weeble, hang loose!"

The animals obeyed, though the cruel grip of their captors promised the worst.

The minions of the Prince were far too distanced from humanity to have any merely ethnic identity. Instead, they shared a certain fungal sheen, a somatype[48] evident in their thallophytic[49] pallor and exopthalmic[50] gaze. Several of the marauders, wounded by Zoster's wild shots, were calmly stuffing various grasses and leaves into the gaping suety holes in their arms, legs, and chests.

A working squad now dismantled the igloo of the expedition's bearers, pausing to munch meditatively on the greenery of the cut fronds. The panic-stricken bearers gabbled in obvious terror, but offered no resistance. A group of Kissy Mental's warriors, with enormous heads and great toothy jaws, decamped from a rusty Jeep. They unshouldered indestructible Russian automatic rifles and decisively emptied their clips into the hut. Pathetic screams came from the ruined igloo. The warriors then demolished the walls and hauled out the dead and wounded victims, to dispassionately tear them limb from limb.

The Army then assembled a new booty of meat, to bear it back up the trail to their camp. Reeking of sweat and formic acid, the inhuman natives bound the hands of Fearon and Malvern with tough lengths of grass. They strung Weeble and Spike to a shoulder-pole, where the terrified beasts dangled like *piñatas.*

Then the antmen forced the quartet of prisoners forward on the quick march. As the party passed through the fetid jungle, the Army paused periodically to empty their automatic weapons at anything that moved. Whatever victim fell to earth would be swiftly chopped to chunks and added to the head-borne packages of the rampaging mass.

Within the hour, Fearon and Malvern were delivered whole to Prince Kissy Mental.

Deliberately, Fearon focused his attention on the Prince's throne, so as to spare himself the sight of the monster within it. The Army's portable throne was a row of three first-class airplane seats, with the armrests removed to accomodate the Prince's vast posthuman bulk. The throne perched atop a mobile palanquin, juryrigged from rebar, chipboard, and astroturf. A system of crutches and tethers supported and eased the Prince's vast, teratological skull.

The trophy captives were shoved forward at spearpoint through a knee-deep heap of cargo-cult gadgets.

"Holy smallpox!" whispered Malvern. "This bossman's half-chimp and half-ant!"

"That doesn't leave any percentage for human, Mal."

The thrust of a spear-butt knocked Fearon to his knees. Kissy Mental's coarse-haired carcass, barrel-chested to support the swollen needs of the head, was sketched like a Roquefort cheese with massive blue veins. The Prince's vast pulpy neck marked the transition zone to a formerly human skull whose sutures had long since burst under pressure, to be patched with big, red, shiny plates of antlike chitin. Kissy Mental's head was bigger than the prize-winning pumpkin at a 4-H[51] Fair—even when "4-H" meant "Homeostasis, Haplotypes, Histogenesis, and Hypertrophy."

Fearon slitted his eyes, rising to his feet. He was terrified, but the thought of never seeing Tupper again somehow put iron in his soul. To imagine that he might someday be home again, safe with his beloved—that prospect was worth any sacrifice. There had to be some method to bargain with their captor.

"Malvern, how bright do you think this guy is? You suppose he's got any English?"

"He's got to be at least as intelligent as British royalty."

With an effort that set his bloated heart booming like a tribal drum, the Prince lifted both his hairy arms, and beckoned. Their captors pushed Mal and Fear right up against the throne. The Prince unleashed a flock of personal fleas. Biting, lancing, and sucking, the tasters lavishly sampled the flesh of Fearon and Malvern, and returned to their master. After quietly munching a few of the blood-gorged familiars, the Prince silently brooded, the tiny bloodshot eyes in his enormous skull blinking like LEDs. He then gestured for a courtier to ascend into the presence. The bangled, headdressed ant-man hopped up and, well-trained, sucked a thin clear excretion from the Prince's rugose left nipple.

Smacking his lips, the lieutenant decrypted his proteinaceous commands, in a sudden frenzy of dancing, shouting, and ritual gesticulation.

Swiftly the Army rushed into swarming action, trampling one another in an ardent need to lift the Prince's throne upon their shoulders. Once they had their entomological kingpin up and in lolling motion, the Army milled forward in a violent rolling surge, employing their machetes on anything in their path.

A quintet of burly footmen pushed Malvern and Fearon behind the bluish exhaust of an ancient military jeep. The flesh of the butchered bearers had been crudely wrapped in broad green leaves and dumped into the back of the vehicle.

Malvern muttered sullenly below the grumbles of the engine. "That scumbag Zoster... All clones are inherently degraded copies. Man, if we ever get out of this pinch, it's no more Mr. Nice Guy."

"Uh, sure, that's the old scab spirit, Mal."

"Hey, look!"

Fearon followed Malvern's jerking head-nod. A split-off subdivision of the trampling Army had dragged another commensal organism from the spooked depths of the mutant forest. It was a large, rust-eaten, canary-yellow New Beetle, scribbled over with arcane pheremonal runes. Its engine long gone, the wreck rolled solely through the juggernaut heaving of the Army.

"Isn't that the 2015 New Beetle?" said Fearon. "The Sport Utility version, the one they ramped up big as a stretch HumVee?"

"Yeah, the Screw-the-Greenhouse Special! Looks like they removed the sunroof and moonroof, and taped all the windows shut! But what the hell can they have inside? Whatever it is, it's all mashed up and squirmy against the glass—"

A skinny Ant Army courtier vaulted and scrambled onto the top of the sealed vehicle. With gingerly care, he stuffed a bloody wad of meat in through the missing moonroof.

From out of the adjacent gaping sunroof emerged a hydralike bouquet of heterogenous animal parts: tails, paws, snouts, beaks, ears. Snarls, farts, bellows and chitterings ensued.

At length, a sudden flow of syrupy exudate drooled out the tailpipe, caught by an eager cluster of Ant Army workers cupping their empty helmets.

"They've got the Panspecific Mycoblastula in there!"

The soldiers drained every spatter of milky juice, jittering crazily and licking one another's lips and fingers.

"I do wish I had a camera," said Fearon wistfully. "It's very hard to watch a sight like this without one."

"Look, they're feeding our bearers into that thing!" marvelled Malvern. "What do you suppose it's doing with all that human DNA? Must be kind of a partially-human genetic mole rat thing going on in there."

Another expectant crowd hovered at the Beetle's tailpipe, their mold-spotted helmets at the ready. They had not long to wait, for a fleshy diet of protein from the butchered bearers seemed to suit the Panspecific Mycoblastula to a T.

Sweating and pale-faced, Malvern could only say, "If they were breakfast, when's lunch?"

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Fearon had never envisioned such brutal slogging, so much sheer physical work in the simple effort of eating and staying alive. The Prince's Army marched well-nigh constantly, bulldozing the landscape in a whirl of guns and knives. Anything they themselves could not devour was fed to the Mycoblastula. Nature knew no waste, so the writhing abomination trapped in the Volkswagen was a panspecific glutton, an always-boiling somatic stewpot. It especially doted on high-end mammalian life, but detritus of all kinds was shoved through the sunroof to sate its needs: bark, leaves, twigs, grubs, and beetles. Especially beetles. In sheer number of species, most of everything living was always beetles.

Then came the turn of their familiars.

It seemed at first that those unique beasts had somehow earned the favor of Prince Kissy Mental. Placed onboard his rollicking throne, the trussed Spike and Weeble had been subjected to much rough cossetting and petting, their peculiar high-tech flesh seeming to particularly strike the Prince's fancy.

But such good fortune could not last. After noon of their first day of captivity, the bored Prince, without warning, snapped Spike's neck and flung the dead weasel in the path of the painted Volkswagen. Attendants snatched the weasel up and stuffed Spike in. The poor beast promptly lined an alimentary canal.

Witnessing this atrocity, Malvern roared and attempted to rush forward. A thorough walloping with boots and spear-butts persuaded him otherwise.

Then Weeble was booted meanly off the dais. Two hungry warriors scrambled to load the porker upside down onto a shoulder-carried spear. Weeble's piteous grunts lanced through Fearon, but at least he could console himself that, unlike Spike, his pig still lived.

But finally, footsore, hungry, and beset by migraines, his immune system drained by constant microbial assault, Fearon admitted despair. It was dead obvious that he and Malvern were simply doomed. There was just no real question that they were going to be killed and hideously devoured, all through their naïve desire for mere fame, money, and professional technical advancement.

When they were finally allowed to collapse for the night on the edge of a marshy savannah, Fearon sought to clear his conscience.

"Mal, I know it's over, but think of all the good times we've had together. At least I never sold Florida real estate, like my Dad. A short life and a merry one, right? Die young and leave a beautiful corpse. Hope I die before I get—"

"Fearon, I'm fed up with your sunnysided optimism! You rich-kid idiot, you always had it easy and got all the breaks! You think that rebellion is some kind of game! Well, let me tell you, if I had just one chance to live through this, I'd never waste another minute on nutty dilettante crap. I'd go right for the top of the food chain. Let me be the guy on top of life, let me be the winner, just for once!" Malvern's battered face was livid. "From this day forth, if I have to lie,

or cheat, or steal, or kill... aw, what's the use? We're ant meat! I'll never even get the chance!"

Fearon was stunned into silence. There seemed nothing left to say. He lapsed into a sweaty doze amidst a singing mosquito swarm, consoling himself with a few last visions of his beloved Tupper. Maybe she'd remarry after learning of his death. Instead of following her sweet romantic heart, this time she'd wisely marry some straight guy, someone normal and dependable. Someone who would cherish her, and look after her, and take her rather large inheritance with the seriousness it deserved. How bitterly he regretted his every past unkindness, his every act of self-indulgence and neglect. The spouses of romantic rebels really had it rough.

In the morning, the hungry natives advanced on Weeble, and now it was Fearon's turn to shout, jump up and be clouted down.

With practiced moves the natives slashed off Weeble's front limbs near the shoulder joints. The unfortunate Weeble protested in a frenzy of squealing, but his assailants knew all too well what they were doing. Once done, they carefully cauterized the porker's foreparts and placed him in a padded stretcher, which was still marked with an ancient logo from the Red Cross.

They then gleefully roasted the pig's severed limbs, producing an enticing aroma Fearon and Malvern fought to abhor. The crisped breakfast ham was delivered with all due ceremony to Prince Kissy Mental, whose delight in this repast was truly devilish to watch. Clearly the Ant Army didn't get pig very often, least of all a pig with large transgenic patches of human flesh. A pig that good you just couldn't eat all at once.

By evening, Fearon and Malvern were next on the menu. The two scabs were hustled front and center as the locals fed a roaring bonfire. A crooked pair of nasty wooden spits were prepared. Then Fearon and Malvern had their bonds cut through, and their clothes stripped off by a forest of groping hands.

The two captives were gripped and hustled and frogmarched as the happy Army commenced a manic dance around their sacred Volkswagen, ululating and keening in a thudding of drums. The evil vehicle oscillated from motion within, in time with the posthuman singing. Lit by the setting sun and the licking flames of the cannibal bonfire, big chimeric chunks of roiling Panspecific Mycoblastula tissue throbbed and slobbered against the glass.

Suddenly a brilliant Klieg light framed the scene, with an 80-decibel airborne rendition of "Ride of the Valkyries."

"Hit the dirt!" yelped Malvern, yanking free from his captor's grip and casting himself on his face.

Ribo Zombie's entomopter swept low in a strafing run. The cursed Volkswagen exploded in a titanic gout of lymph, blood, bone fragments, and venom, splattering Fearon—but not Malvern—from head to toe with quintessence of Mycoblastula.

Natives dropped and spun under the chattering impact of advanced armaments. Drenched with spew, Fearon crawled away from the Volkswagen, wiping slime from his face.

Dead or dying natives lay in crazy windrows, like genetically modified corn after a stiff British protest. Now Ribo Zombie made a second run, his theatrical lighting deftly picking out victims. His stagey attack centered, naturally, on the most dramatic element among the panicking Army, Prince Kissy Mental himself. The Prince struggled to flee the crimson targeting lasers, but his enormous head was strapped to his throne in a host of attachments. Swift and computer-sure came the next burst of gunfire. Prince Kissy Mental's abandoned head swung futilely from its tethers, a watermelon in a net.

Leaping and capering in grief and anguish, the demoralized Army scattered into the woods.

A swarm of mobile cameras wasped around the scene, carefully checking for proper angles and lighting. Right on cue, descending majestically from the darkening tropic sky came Ribo Zombie himself, crash-helmet burnished and gleaming, combat boots blazoned with logos.

Skratchy Kat leaped from Zombie's shoulder to strike a proud pose by the Prince's still-smoking corpse. The superstar scab blew nonexistent trailing smoke from the unused barrels of his pearl-handled sidearms, then advanced on the cowering Fearon and Malvern.

"Nice try, punks, but you got in way over your head." Ribo Zombie gestured at a hovering camera. "You've been really great footage ever since your capture, though. Now get the hell out of camera range, and go find some clothes or something. That Panspecific Mycoblastula is all mine."

Rising from his hands and knees with a look of insensate rage, Malvern lunged up and dashed madly into the underbrush.

"What's keeping you?" boomed Ribo Zombie at Fearon.

Fearon looked down at his hands. Miniature parrot feathers were sprouting from his knuckles.

"Interesting outbreak of spontaneous mutation," Ribo Zombie noted. "I'll check that out just as soon as I get my trophy shot."

Advancing on the bullet-riddled Volkswagen, Ribo Zombie telescoped a razor-pincered probe. As the triumphant conqueror dipped his instrument into the quivering mass, Malvern charged him with a levelled spear.

The crude weapon could not penetrate Ribo Zombie's armor, but the force of the rush bounced the superstar scab against the side of the car. Quick as lightning a bloodied briar snaked through a gaping bullet hole and clamped the super-scab tight.

Then even more viscous and untoward tentacles emerged from the engine compartment, and a voracious sucking, gurgling struggle commenced.

Malvern, still naked, appropriated the fallen crash helmet with the help of a spear haft. "Look, it liquefied him instantly and sucked all the soup clean out! Dry as a bone inside. And the readouts still work on the eyepieces!"

After donning the helmet, a suspiciously close fit, Malvern warily retrieved Ribo Zombie's armored suit, which lay in its high-tech abandonment like the nacreous shell of a hermit crab. A puzzled Skratchy Kat crept forward. After a

despondent sniff at the emptied boots, the bereaved familiar let out a continuous yowl.

"Knock it off, Skratchy," Malvern commanded. "We're all hurting here. Just be a man."

Swiftly shifting allegiances, Skratchy Kat supinely rubbed against Malvern's glistening shins.

"Now to confiscate his cameras for a little judicious editing of his unfortunate demise." Malvern shook his helmeted head. "You can cover for me, right, Fearon? Just tell everybody that Malvern Brakhage died in the jungle. You should probably leave out the part about them wanting to eat us."

Fearon struggled to dress himself with some khaki integuments from a nearby casualty. "Malvern, I can't fit inside these clothes."

"What's your problem?"

"I'm growing a tail. And my claws don't fit in these boots." Fearon pounded the side of his head with his feathery knuckles. "Are you glowing, or do I have night vision all of a sudden?"

Malvern tapped his helmet with a wiry glove. "You're not telling me you're massively infected now, are you?"

"Well, technically speaking, Malvern, I'm the 'infection' in this situation, because the Mycoblastula's share of our joint DNA is a lot more extensive than mine is."

"Huh. Well, that development obviously tears it." Malvern backed off cautiously, tugging at this last few zips and buckles on his stolen armor to assure an airtight seal. "I'll route you some advanced biomedical help... if there's any available in the local airspace." He cleared his throat with a sudden rasp of helmet-mounted speakers. "In any case, the sooner I clear out of here for civilization, the better."

All too soon, the sound of the departing entomopter had died away. After searching throught the carnage, pausing periodically as his spine and knees unhinged, Fearon located the still-breathing body of his beloved pig. Then he dragged the stretcher to an abandoned Jeep.

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"And then Daddy smelled the pollution from civilization with his new nose, from miles away, so he knew he'd reached the island of Fernando Po, where the UN still keeps bases. So despite the tragic death of his best friend Malvern, Daddy knew that everything was going to be all right. Life would go on!"

Fearon was narrating his exploit to the embryo in Tupper's womb via a state-of-the-art fetal interface, the GestaPhone. Seated on the comfy Laura Ashley couch in their bright new stilt house behind the dikes of Pensacola Beach, Tupper smiled indulgently at her husband's oft-polished tale.

"When the nice people on the island saw Daddy's credit cards, Daddy and Weeble were both quickly stabilized. Not exactly like we were before, mind you, but rendered healthy enough for the long trip back home to Miami. Then the press coverage started, and, well son, someday I'll tell you about how Daddy dealt with the challenges of fame and fortune."

"And wasn't Mommy glad to see Daddy again!" Tupper chimed in. "A little upset at first about the claws and fur. But luckily, Daddy and Mommy had been careful to set aside sperm samples while Daddy was still playing his scab games. So their story had a real happy ending when Daddy finally settled down and Baby Boy was safely engineered."

Fearon detached the suction cup terminal from Tupper's bare protuberant stomach. "Weeble, would you take these, please?"

The companionable pig reached up deftly, plucked the GestaPhones out of Fearon's grasp, and moved off with an awkward lope. Weeble's strange gait was due to his new forelimbs, a nifty pair of pig-proportioned human arms.

Tupper covered her womb with her frilled maternity blouse and glanced at the clock. "Isn't your favorite show on now?"

"Shucks, we don't have to watch every single episode..."

"Oh, honey, I love this show, it's my favorite, now that I don't have to worry about you getting all caught up in it!"

They nestled on the responsive couch, Tupper stroking the fish-scaled patch on Fearon's cheek while receiving the absent-minded caresses of his long tigerish tail. She activated the big wet screen, cohering a close-up of Ribo Zombie in the height of a ferocious rant.

"Keeping it real, folks, still keeping it real! I make this challenge to all my fellow scabs, those who are down with the Zombie and those who dis him, those who frown on him and those who kiss him. Yes, you sorry posers all know who you are. But check this out—who am I?"

Fearon sighed for a world well lost. And yet, after all—there was always the next generation.

Glossary

1) entomopter, *noun:* a small flying vehicle whose wings employ elaborate, scissoring insectoid principles of movement, rather than avian ones; abbreviated as 'mopter.

2) ribo, *adjective:* all-purpose prefix derived from the transcriptive cellular organelle, the ribosome; indicative of bioengineering.

3) scab, *noun:* a biohacker.

otaku, *noun:* Japanese term for obsessive nerds, trivia buffs.

5) polysaccharide, *noun:* an organic polymer such as chitin.

6) familiar, *noun:* the customary modified-animal partner of a scab.

7) hot-tag, *noun:* clickable, animated icons.
8) jackalope, *noun:* the legendary antlered rabbit of Wyoming, now reified.
9) HVAC, *noun:* heating, ventilation, air-conditioning system.
10) wetware, *noun:* programmed organic components; software in living form.
11) clottage, *noun:* residence of a scab.
12) clump, *verb:* to enjoy meditative solitary downtime
13) uptaking, *adjective:* a term of scably approbation.
14) neoteric, *adjective:* a term of scably approbation.
15) duckback, *noun:* a water-resistant building material.
16) slowglass, *noun:* glass in which light moves at a radically different speed than it does elsewhere; term invented by Bob Shaw.
17) olivine, *noun:* a naturally occuring gemstone used as a building material.
18) HazMat, *noun:* hazardous materials.
19) jello, *noun:* culture and transport medium.
20) nutriceutical, *noun:* a foodstuff modified with various synthetic compounds meant to enhance mental or physical performance.
21) glorp, *noun:* an antibiological sterilizing agent used by swabs.
22) infodump, *noun:* large undigested portion of factoids.
23) Immunosance, *noun:* the Immunological Renaissance, the Genetic Age.
24) bioneer, *noun:* a bioengineering pioneer.
25) femto-injector, *noun:* a delivery unit capable of perfusing substances through various membranes without making a macroscopic entry wound.
26) buckybomb, *noun:* an explosive in a carbon buckminsterfullerene shell.
27) pliofilm, *noun:* all-purpose millipore wrap.
28) prestogurt, *noun:* instant yogurt modified to be a nutriceutical.
29) swab, *noun:* governmental and private agents of bioregulation; the cops; antagonists to every scab.
30) lookyloo, *noun:* a gaping bystander at a public spectacle, usually the cause of secondary accidents.
31) crittercam, *noun:* small audio-video transmitter mounted on animals.
32) Bose-Einstein condensate, *noun:* ultra-frigid state of matter.
33) extropian, *noun, adjective:* one who subscribes to a set of radical, wild-eyed optimistic prophecies regarding mankind's glorious high-tech future.
34) gel-drive, *noun:* organic data-storage unit.
35) gattaca, *noun:* DNA; any substrate that holds genetic information.
36) gloop, *noun:* a foodstuff.
37) squip, *noun:* a foodstuff.
38) billjoy, *noun:* a doomsayer; derived from Bill Joy, a fretful member of the twentieth-century digerati.
39) NGO, *noun:* non-governmental organization.
40) WTO, *noun:* World Trade Organization.
41) candybytes, *noun:* an educational nutriceutical.
42) Panspecific Mycoblastula, *noun:* a MacGuffin.
43) lysis, *noun:* cell destruction.
44) bio-zep, *noun:* a pseudo-living, lighter-than-air zeppelin.
45) vortal, *noun, verb:* virtual portal.
46) supercavitation, *noun:* process of underwater travel employing leading air pockets.
47) evoluture, *noun:* an artificially evolved creature.
48) somatype, *noun:* the visible expression of gattaca.
49) thallophytic, *adjective:* mushroom-like.
50) exopthalmic, *adjective:* pop-eyed.
51) 4-H, *noun:* an amateurs' club, primarily for children, that focuses on homeostasis (bodily maintenance through negative feedback circuits), haplotypes (gamete amounts of DNA), histogenesis (cell differentiation from general to specific), and hypertrophy (gigantism).

Michael Cassutt

MORE ADVENTURES ON OTHER PLANETS

This is what they used to call a cute meet, back when movies were made by people like Ernst Lubitsch or Billy Wilder, when movies had plots and dialogue, when life and love had rules, back in the last century. A handsome officer in the Soviet embassy (does that tell you how long ago?) picks up the phone one day and hears a lilting female voice asking him if he can tell her, please, what is Lenin's middle name. "It's for my crossword puzzle."

Affronted, the officer snaps, "To dignify that question would be an insult to the Soviet Union!" And slams down the phone.

But not before he hears a lovely laugh.

That evening the officer goes to the British Embassy for some reception, and hears that same laugh emerging from the oh so lucious mouth of an English woman who should probably be Audrey Hepburn. Smitten, the officer walks up to Miss Hepburn, bows, and says, "Ilyich."

And so the story begins.

And so *our* story begins. Only—

Look, you're going to have to be patient with me. Because the couple is not just a couple. It's more of a quartet. And two of the individuals aren't even *people*.

Picture the surface of Europa, the icy moon of Jupiter. It is midday, local time, but the sky is black: what little atmosphere Europa possesses is insufficient to scatter enough light to give it a color. The combination of ice, snow, and rock create a patchwork of white and gray, something like a chessboard with no straight lines.

Europa is tectonically active, about ten times as bouncy as any place on earth, so the landscape is marked by jagged upthrusts and creepy fissures known as cycloids.

But forget the landscape and the color of the sky. What really catches your attention is the striped ball that is Jupiter, looming overhead like a gigantic jack-o'-lantern. It actually seems to press down on the snowy landscape. What makes it a little worse is that since Europa is tide-locked, always keeping the same face toward its giant mother, if you happen to be working on that side of Europa, Jupiter is always there!

And so are several elements of the J^2E^2, the Joint Jupiter-Europan Expedition, three tiny rovers that have been operating on the icy plains for two years, scouting the site for the "permanent" Hoppa Station and erecting such necessary equipment as a shelter (even machines get cold on Europa), a radiothermal power plant, and the communications array.

On this particular day, rover element one, also known as "Earl," is approximately seven kilometers north of Hoppa when he receives a query from a source in motion (his comm gear is sophisticated enough to detect a slight Doppler effect) for range-rate data.

Element Earl can't see the source: his visual sensor is a hardy multi-spectral charged-couple device that is excellent for showing a view forward and all around. It lacks, however, a tilt mechanism that will let it see *up*.

Nor, given the priorities in his guidance system, can he presently provide range-rate data. In the burst of bits that made up rover-speak, Element Earl says, more or less, "I'm a Pathfinder-class rover element. You should be talking to the base unit at Hoppa Station."

He would think no more about the contact, except that there is a message of sorts embedded in the acknowledgment that suggests... compatiblity. More than seems to exist between the Dopplering radio source and the base unit at Hoppa, in any case.

The Dopplering source is, in fact, a series of follow-up J^2E^2 packages designed to conduct the search for life in the dark, frigid ocean under Europa's icy crust.

All of these elements are wrapped inside a landing bag dropped from a mission bus launched from Earth two years after the initial bunch that included Element Earl and propelled Europa-ward by lightsail. The bus has burned into orbit around Europa, then waited for a command from La Jolla to separate the bag and its retro system.

The follow-up flight has been marred by software glitches, some of them due to undetected programming lapses back in the avionics lab in La Jolla, others to the assault of Jupiter's magnetic field. After all, the chips are only hardened against electromagnetic pulse from a nuclear weapon, not the steady and relentless assault of charged Jovian particles. Like a human trained to withstand a stomach punch only to find himself dragged behind a truck, the bus has suffered some damage.

Which is why one of its four elements, soon to be known as "Rebecca," goes on-line during the descent phase as a backup to the lander's systems, which are having a tough time locking on to the signal from Hoppa Station. Not to prolong the suspense, the landing package arrives safely, bouncing half a dozen times on the icy plain, punching

holes in itself by design, and eventually disgorging four new elements.

It is only a week later when Element Earl, returning to station for thermal reasons, happens to detect (not see: his visual sensor is usually turned off to conserve power and he was simply retracing his original route) four new arrivals—the drilling, cargo, submersible, and portable power rover elements that will soon begin the search for life.

He passes close enough to the drilling rover, which is currently deploying its array, since diagnostics show it to have been damaged in the rolling, rocking landing. It so happens that the array wasn't damaged. But in the stream of bits flowing from the drilling rover to the Hoppa central unit and splashing from one rover to another, Element Earl notes the familiar signature of Element Rebecca.

As a bit of a joke, he aims his dish at hers, and feeds her the range-rate data she had asked for earlier.

j

Mission control for J^2E^2 is in a crumbling three-story structure in the bad part of La Jolla, south of the Cove and bordering on the aptly-named Mission Beach. The building formerly housed an Internet service provider. The ISP had purchased and remodelled the place in 1998, hoping for business from the San Diego and North County high-tech communities, which were then wallowing in an unprecedented economic boom.

And did so for the better part of a decade, until a series of mergers closed the node. Then the AGC Corporation, newly formed by three researchers from UC-SD, just over the hill in La Jolla proper, leased the building for tests of their first real-time Superluminal Light Pulse Propogation/Emulation Regime (usually known as SLIPPER) on the 2012 asteroid Neva flyby. What the hell: the facility was already wired for fiber-optic and extreme bandwith, and was configured for electrical and thermal support of AGC's ten-petaflop computer.

That was eighteen years and five interplanetary missions ago, and while the guts of what is now the J^2E^2 mission control have continued to evolve, the exterior has been left alone. Which presents the staff with a problem. The ISP operation had never employed more than a dozen people, while the AGC SLIPPER project has thirty or more in the building at all times.

The parking lot is simply inadequate, and with public transport in this part of La Jolla (remember, this is California) limited to the occasional bus, with working hours staggered, with rents and home prices in La Jolla among the highest in the country... well, disputes are inevitable.

Earl Tolan pulls his battered Chevy pickup into the gated lot and drives up to space eleven, only to find a brand-new Volvo already there.

Tolan is fifty-nine, a senior operator on the J^2E^2 project after moving to AGC from Lockheed Martin, where he led teams through good times and bad for twenty years. He is not one to lose his temper without reason.

But today he happens to be returning to work after a what should have been a quick visit to the doctor, a checkup which wound up taking four hours and has left him in a bad mood. So the site of this impudent little Volvo taking up his space launches him into a state of only theoretically controlled fury.

He squeals the truck around so that its tailgate backs up to the Volvo. This is a bit of a trick, given the confined space. Tolan has to drive up and over a curb and sidewalk median just to get into position.

Once on station, as ops guys are fond of saying, he drops the tailgate, hauls out a length of chain and a hook he usually uses for attaching the smaller of his two boats to a trailer, wedges the hook in the Volvo's rear bumper, and loops the chain around his trailer hitch.

Then he gets into the truck, puts it in low, and hauls the Volvo out of his space, a maneuver which takes him up and onto the sidewalk and into the driveway beyond. The Volvo, its gear in park and its brake set, makes a screeching sound with its tires, followed by an ominous undercarriage scraping, before fetching up onto the sidewalk median.

Where Tolan leaves it.

Wallowing in momentary self-satisfaction, he pulls around into his space. He is still quite angry, in fact, when he emerges from the truck and heads for the building entrance, where he brushes shoulders with a woman going the other way.

Had his mood been anything less than ultraviolet anger and disgust, Tolan would certainly have managed to sidestep the charging woman while simultaneously noting her looks. Which, allowing for a certain air of growing confusion, are barely worth noting: she is a little over five feet, but adding stature with heeled sandals. A pair of gray slacks suggest muscular legs, and a vest worn over a J^2E^2 polo shirt does nothing to conceal the solidity within. Her hair is shoulder-length, dark, with a few lighter streaks, appropriate to her age, which is fiftyish. He thinks the eyes are green, but needs a closer look.

Not that he's inclined to give one. Twice-divorced, his sexual relationships are generally with women who would register as more attractive than this one on any visual scale.

What actually gets Tolan's attention is this woman's voice, which has what used to be called (in the days when people still consumed both) a whiskey and cigarette tone, tinged with some kind of Euro accent. Or perhaps it is the words she uses: "I'm gonna kill the son of a bitch who did this." Meaning haul her Volvo onto the median.

The woman calmly walks up to the vehicle, which still quivers in the aftermath of its relocation. She folds her arms, smiles with what could have been a touch of amusement.

Tolan can still make a clean escape, though he knows it won't be long before someone connects the evidenciary dots between Tolan's parking space, the skid marks from it to the Volvo's resting place. Besides, he is curious about the color of those eyes—so curious he forgets his anger over the momentary theft of a parking place, and his frustration over two hours of unwarranted medical tests.

"I'm the son of a bitch," Tolan said.

She looks at him. Yes, green, with a charming set of smile lines. "Aren't you old enough to know better?"

This strikes Tolan as unfair, given that he is staring at sixty on his next birthday and has just had a medical experience all-too-appropriate for that age. "Apparently not."

To her great credit, she laughs. "I assume this was your space." He nods. "Well, I'm so new I don't have an assigned one. And the guard did tell me you weren't likely to return today."

"Surprises all around." He holds out his hand. "Earl Tolan."

"Rebecca Marceau."

"I think we've met before."

"Cologne?" she said, then realizes where. She blushes. "Oh! Hoppa Station." Operators like Earl and Rebecca are often brought into the program without prior introductions. After all, they are usually mature professionals.

"Actually, about twelve klicks away," Earl says, wondering why he feels the need to be so precise.

j

You have to forget everything you think you know about space flight. The SLIPPER operators aren't astronauts. In fact, there are damned few astronauts here in 2026, just a few poor souls stuck going round and round the earth for months at a time in the crumbling EarthStar space station, hoping their work will somehow overcome the bone loss or radiation exposure or even psychological barriers that prevented a manned mission to Mars, not to mention even more distance locales such as Europa.

But exploration of the solar system continues, using unmanned vehicles which can be controlled from distances of tens of millions of miles, more or less in real-time, by human beings. The advantages are many: the vehicles can be smaller, they need only be built for a one-way trip, and using SLIPPER-linked human operators allows spacecraft builders to skip the lengthy and unpredictable development of artifical intelligence systems.

J^2E^2's mission control in La Jolla, then, is more like a virtual reality game den than a Shuttle-era firing room. Yes, there are the basic trajectory and electrical support stations, complete with consoles, and there is a big screen that displays telemetry from all of the many separate elements, along with selected camera views.

But the real work is done in the eight booths at the back of the control room, where each operator strips naked and dons a skintight SLIPPER suit and helmet not awfully different from scuba gear, allowing her to link up in real-time with her avatar on Europa.

To see Jupiter looming permanently on the horizon.

To feel the shudders of the hourly quakes.

To hear the crunch of treads on ice.

To smell metal and composite baked by radiation.

You can even taste the surge of energy when linked to the generator for recharging.

It's all *faux* reality, of course, the work of clever programmers who have created a system which translates digital data from the elements themselves into simulated "feelings," then reverses the process, translating an operator's muscular impulse to reach, for example, into a command to rotate an antenna.

The best operators are those who know spacecraft and their limitations, who have proven that they can commit to a mission plan. People who simply like machines also make good operators. For J^2E^2, AGC tries to find those who can fit both matrixes.

And who are willing to take the risk of permanent nerve damage caused by the interface.

j

Rebecca operates Earl's truck as he rocks the Volvo. He has chained the two vehicles together, and is learning that undoing his prank is easier than doing it, since the tightness of the driveway is forcing Rebecca and the truck to pull the Volvo at an angle.

But she expertly guns the motor just as Earl gets the Volvo's front wheels on the pavement. With a *hump!* and a *whoof!* and a reasonable amount of scraping, the Volvo shoots free. "That was suspiciously close to good sex," Rebecca says, delicately wiping sweat from her eyes.

Now it is Earl's turn to blush, something he can't remember happening in years. (He is old enough to know better about this, too.) He had been thinking the same thing. "You like cars," he says, lamely, fitting her neatly into that subset of the operator personality matrix, something the operators do both consciously and instinctively, like long-lost tribesmen smelling each other.

"Guilty, officer," she says, and looks at the truck, with its complement of nautical equipment. "And for you it must be boats."

"Two of them. A runabout and a forty-five-footer." The tribal recognition isn't strong enough to overcome their mutual antagonism. Note that there is no invitation to take a sail.

"See you on Europa."

j

On Europa, science is marching more slowly than usual. Element Rebecca is tasked with drilling a hole through the icy crust at a site seven kilometers north of Hoppa Station. The same spot Element Earl was scouting the day the science package arrived.

Now, from a distance, at the macro level, Europa's surface isn't as rugged as that of the rockier moons in the solar

system. The constant Jovian tidal forces working on the ice and slush tend to smooth out the most extreme differences in height.

But at the micro level, down where a wheeled or tracked element must traverse, the surface resembles an unweathered lava field, filled with sharp boulders, crossed with narrow but deep fissures, cracks, and cycloids. These, of course, were mapped by Element Earl on his original recon—collecting that data was one of his primary goals, so it could be beamed to earth, turned into a three-dimensional map file, then uplinked to Element Rebecca.

The problem is, new cycloids can form in days, changing the whole landscape. Before Element Rebecca, her traverse delayed due to other equipment problems, gets five kilometers from Hoppa, her map ceases to be useful.

And there she stops, asking for guidance.

j

Earl Tolan is what they used to call an unsympathetic character, back when people still made such judgments. You wouldn't like him, on first meeting. He is smart and also opinionated, a combination which has made friends, family, and co-workers uncomfortable, since he has a bad habit of telling others how best to live their lives, and with great accuracy.

You could wonder—Earl does, in his rare reflective moments—whether this trait was magnified by his twenty years in space ops, where you don't open your mouth unless you're sure of your facts, or Earl prospered in that field because it suited his nature.

He's also bull-headed and fatalistic. See above.

He has paid for his sins, however, in two failed marriages and the cool, distant relationships with his three children. His first marriage, to Kerry, the girl from his hometown in Tennessee, crumbled under the weight of too many moves, too much travel, ridiculous working hours. Kerry, who had put her own career on hold, understandably resented raising three children by herself. Earl, even less sympathetic in this period of his life than at present, started a relationship with Jilliane, a co-worker, which destroyed the marriage as quickly and thoroughly as if targeted by a cruise missile.

The collateral damage was to Earl's relationship with his three children, aged twelve, ten, and seven at the time of the breakup. His oldest daughter, Jordan, decided that the divorce was probably only seventy-five percent Earl's fault, and managed to forgive him, and even made friends with Jilliane when she and Earl married.

But the younger two children, Ben and Marcy, were lost to Earl. They are cordial, exchanging Christmas cards and the occasional phone call, and possibly seeing each other every two years. But their lives no longer intersect.

Jordan, who is in touch with her father more frequently, saw what you would see, if you spent time with Earl. His energy, for example. It is formidable enough when employed on a project such as J^2E^2, but is downright memorable when put to use on, say, a weekend vacation with Jordan and her family, or on a remodelling job at her small house in Tucson.

Maybe this will help: Earl has learned some of life's harsher lessons. He works less. He flosses more often. He no longer allows a first impression to be his only impression.

j

"Guess what? We have a problem."

It is the day after the cute meet in the AGC parking lot. On the floor below J^2E^2 mission control, Earl is buttoning his shirt after a shower and *pro forma* medical check, having just pulled the maximum authorized SLIPPER shift in taking Element Earl back to Hoppa Station. Gareth Haas, the Swiss deputy flight director, shows up. With him is Rebecca Marceau, half out of her SLIPPER suit. She is sweaty, her skin is lined with smeared marks from suit sensors, and her green eyes are red. At first Earl is almost disgusted by the sight of her.

Then he tries to be charitable, knowing that he wasn't looking any better half an hour earlier, knowing that, let's face it, in physical terms, with his stocky build, thinning hair, thick jaw and heavy brows, he's not much of a prize on his best day.

Especially with the results of his tests, just received this morning before his shift.

"I'm listening."

Haas and Rebecca explain the difficulties. "Rebecca," he says, meaning Element Rebecca, "can't get to the site."

Earl feels sick to his stomach. "Something wrong with the map?" The map derived from Element Earl data.

"The map's perfect," Rebecca says. "But Tufts Passage seems to have gotten tighter." She is referring to a tunnel in an ice hill just large enough for Element Earl (which is, in fact, about the size of a supermarket shopping cart) to pass through. "I'm stuck. Can't go forward, can't back up."

"That's pretty goddamn strange," Earl says.

"It might have been something as simple as the heat of Earl's passage melting the ice," Haas says, trying to be helpful.

"The power module's right on my butt, too," Rebecca says, "and Asif's even fatter than I am." She means Element Asif, named for its operator, a Bangladeshi Earl doesn't know well.

"So you need me to map a new route." What Earl wants to do is walk out of J^2E^2 mission control and never look back. To go to his forty-five-footer and take a sail, and maybe never come back. But what he says is, "Let's do it."

"You're outside your margin," Haas says. "I can't ask you to do the job."

"I'll get the doctors to sign a waiver."

"They won't. You know that."

"It's so risky," Rebecca says. "What if he has a failure while you're linked." This was a genuine problem: ten years ago, during an earlier AGC SLIPPER operation on Mars, an operator happened to be linked real-time when his rover suffered a catastrophic failure. The operator suffered a stroke and was never the same again. Hence the limits and mission rules.

"Earl won't let me down," Earl says.

"He's got all the power he needs," Haas says, agreeing, "but he's had the Big Chill. He'll be going back into the cold without a bake. The accident rate is substantially higher—"

"I know that, you know that, we all know that," Earl snaps. "We also know that you wouldn't have asked me if you didn't need me. So let's go."

Rebecca requires further convincing. "What about the doctors?"

"Don't tell them I'm getting back in the suit."

Angry at their clumsiness, he chases them out of the dressing room. As he begins to don the suit, however, his mood changes. What if something did happen to Element Earl? The human operator knows that a mission is finite, that his linkage won't go on forever. But the elements on Europa are powered by radio-thermal generators that can give life for hundreds of years. Unless an element is totally destroyed, it lives on, diminished, possibly blind, but capable of responding to stimuli or processing data.

He zips up the suit, feeling a surprising pang of sadness. For Element Earl, or himself?

j

It is always a mixture of pleasure and terror, being linked via SLIPPER to an element on Europa. One of Earl's first instructors, knowing Earl's fondness for sailing and things nautical, compared it to Acapulco cliff diving. After a dozen sessions in the SLIPPER suit, Earl decided that his instructor was an idiot. Linking with an element was only like diving off a cliff if the moment of fear and exhilaration were stretched to an hour. Yes, there is the wonder of feeling that you are crunching Europan snow beneath your "feet," navigating your way through the jumbled heaps of ice like a child picking his way through a forest.

But you must also endure the sheer discomfort of the SLIPPER suit: the data leads that bite and scratch; the sweat that oozes from your neck, armpits, and crotch (occasionally shorting out a lead), then cools to a clammy pool in the small of your back; the stomach-turning smell of burnt flesh (which no one can seem to explain); the data overlays that mar your pristine vision; the goddamn chatter from Haas and his team, who treat all operators like children with "special needs"—all while feeling that you are being flung across the universe on the nose of a starship driven at near–light speed by a drunk.

Somehow, Earl forces himself to accept the usual stresses while ignoring the protests from the medical support team as he drives Element Earl back out on the trail. (The doctors have been conditioned to look for conditions that could be linked directly to SLIPPER side effects. Other than that, they give the operators great license, especially since each operator has already released AGC from liability now and forever.) For amusement, he watches the thermal readout of his element's temperature. It dropped sharply as he exited the Hoppa shelter, and now it climbs slowly as friction and the general expenditure of heat are displayed. It reminds Earl of waiting for a download on his first computer forty years back.

Except for the thin wall between booths, Earl and Rebecca could reach out and touch fingertips. Yet each exchange of data must go from Earl to Hoppa Station to Element Earl to Element Rebecca back to Hoppa and La Jolla, a round trip of 964,000,000 miles in a fraction of a second, thanks to the SLIPPER technology, which pumps data at 300 times the speed of light. For years Earl grew excited every time he thought about the process; now, of course, he finds even the tiniest glitch or lag to be an annoyance.

Today he even finds the traverse on Europa to be less than totally engaging. He is re-covering the same ground as the earlier traverse, in essence, crawling through an icy ditch for the second time.

But then he emerges onto a spot of flat ground, notes the tracks of Element Rebecca and its power unit on his original route, and veers off.

This is more challenging, up and down the slopes at an amazing five kilometers an hour. It feels like sailing in the open sea.

Then, just as Earl has grown comfortable with the traverse, Element Earl stalls on a slope that is slightly too steep. He is also in a shadow. Several data packets are squirted back, forth and around, their tone as close to panic as the operators and mission control ever get. Earl is encouraged to let Element Earl slip backwards down the icy slope in search of traction. Meanwhile, the Hoppa base unit will try to find a passable route—

Now the temperature readout, having gotten no higher than a sixth of the way up its scale, starts to plummet, like a barometer just before a storm. Earl finds this troubling, but knows that turning around now would mean doom.

"Back up twenty-two meters," Haas says on the voice loop. "We've got something here."

Element Earl slowly retraces his path—blindly, since the camera only points forward—but surely, since each turn of his wheels has been recorded and can be replayed precisely in reverse. Out of the shadow into the light.

Then forward into what appears to be a narrow passage in a wall of ice. Left. Left again. Temperature rising again. Good. Had it dropped much more, Earl would have had to begin the lengthy disengagement process—

Ping! It's Element Rebecca pulsing him, in direct line of sight. One more turn to the left, and Element Earl has visual, not only on Rebecca, but on Element Asif, the power rover, behind.

There is time for one slight push, an expensive one in terms of power. An electrical arc leaps between them, a

common enough event when two machines touch in a vacuum. The event startles both Earls, and causes the displays to drop out for a moment.

Then all is well. Element Rebecca slews free, and continues backing up, clearing the way for Earl to approach Asif. "The drill site is that way. Follow me."

j

"How do you like the work so far?" Earl has checked into Rebecca's background and knows that the J^2E^2 mission is her first. Just as he knows that her personal history makes him look like a model of stability, with three marriages (none lasting longer than four years) and at least one other semi-famous liaison. No children. Remembering a phrase from his youth, Earl has decided that Rebecca has commitment issues.

"Europa? It reminds me of home."

"You must have grown up someplace very cold and a long time ago." Which is a joke, since by 2026, after thirty years of global warming, there aren't many cold places left on the planet.

"It's not so much the cold," she says. "It's big Jupiter. My parents were teachers in B.C., British Columbia. We lived in a place called Garibaldi, which had this gigantic rock face hanging over it. It always creeped me out. Jupiter feels like that."

They are having martinis as they watch the sun set from the stern of Earl's boat, the *Atropos*, in its slip in Mission Bay. Both have been drained by the experience on Europa today, which required them to operate for six hours in Rebecca's case, ten in Earl's—much longer than the usual three. In spite of his initial feeling that he and Rebecca will never have anything beyond a professional relationship, Earl has accepted her invitation for a drink. A tribute to his stamina, she says.

Hoping to control the agenda, he suggested they come to his boat. Where he pours a second round, as a tribute to her courage, he says, and now Earl is feeling the effects of the alcohol, something he does not enjoy. But he would rather stay here overlooking the Pacific than return to his condo.

"How about you?" she says. "You've been doing this work almost from the beginning."

Earl is not one for introspection or emotion, or so he believes. "It's a great way to be on the cutting edge of exploration at an age when everyone else is retired."

She nods, amused at the banality of this. "Yeah, let's strike a blow for our demo. Age shall not only not wither us, it shan't even slow us down." Then she looks at him closely. "Earl, forgive me, we hardly know each other, but you don't look well."

And then, his barriers eroded by vodka, he starts to weep. "I've got a growth in my neck." In spite of his reservations, he reaches for her, and she takes him in.

j

During the next week, the elements on Europa move into position. Element Earl stays in Pathfinder mode, blazing a trail to the crevasse picked out years ago by prior orbiting imagers. Element Rebecca follows, and deploys her drilling rig. Element Asif sets up nearby, a portable power station for the submersible operation. And the cargo element begins its trek from Hoppa carrying the submersible that will soon be sinking through Europa's ice into the mysterious darkness below.

The operations run relatively smoothly, with only nagging glitches caused by momentary loss of signal and a few jounces from J-quakes.

Here's the funny thing about elements like Earl and Rebecca: they are only being operated during critical maneuvers, perhaps a few hours out of every twenty-four. The rest of the time, when not powered down or recharging, they are autonomous.

There is a persisent feeling among all operators that their elements retain some of their personalities, even when the link is gone. It's silly, of course. As Earl's idiot instructor once said, "A turned-off light bulb doesn't remember that it used to give light!" To which Earl, in spite of his agreement with the instructor's point, answered, "A mobile computer with several gigabytes of memory is not a goddamn light bulb."

Every time Earl and Rebecca go back into operation, they find that Earl, no matter what his last programmed position, has returned to the crevice where Element Rebecca chews through the ice. "I think it might be a case of love at first bite," Rebecca tells Earl one night, as they walk along the dock, hand in hand.

Earl's response is to kiss her, though he stops a bit sooner than she would like. "I won't break," she tells him, playfully.

"*I* might, though." Earl feels frail, or dishonest. He has told Rebecca everything the doctors told him, that the growth is malignant, but that chemo and radiation and even some experimental genetic treatments might knock it down. For the first few days after being slammed with the news, he almost laughed it off, knowing he could fight and win. But the first rounds of chemo left him shaken. The horizon of his life has drawn closer, like that of an ice plain on Europa compared to the Pacific.

"I'll be gentle," she says, kissing him again. Rebecca's intensity has helped. It's as if she is offering her own strength as another form of treatment.

This is an evening in winter, with the marine layer already rolling in from the west, shrouding the hills of Point Loma across the bay. Earl is lost in them. "Still ploughing snow on Europa?" she says, fishing for a connection.

"No. Thinking about a trip I've wanted to make." He nods out to sea. "Catalina Island's out there, a hundred miles

away. I've always wanted to sail up and never have."

"Doesn't AGC give vacations?"

"Sure. But nobody wants to take one with an op in progress."

"This one will end."

"For you," he says, meaning Element Rebecca, who only has so much drilling to accomplish before she is shunted off to the side, to a secondary mapping mission for which she is ill-equipped. "Sorry," he adds, realizing how shitty and snappish he sounds. "I just—"

She touches a finger to his lips. "Sshh. I know exactly what you mean. I knew the ops plan when I signed up."

Within a few steps they reach the *Atropos*, and the sight of it bobbing in the twilight raises Earl's spirits. By the time he has finished rigging it for an evening sail, he feels strong enough to face anything, and slightly ashamed of his earlier weakness. "Love at first *byte*," he says, laughing. "I just now got it."

j

As the drilling proceeds, Element Earl is relegated to geological surveys of the area further to the north and east of the site. He finds it smoother, icier and flatter than the terrain around Hoppa Station, and Earl himself wonders again why that location was chosen, only to be told by Haas that it provided easier access to the crevasse. Or so it seemed.

In any case, the flight control team and the science support group are completely consumed by the descent of the submersible element through the ice and "the beginnings of the first real search for life in the history of human exploration of the solar system"—at least, according to the AGC Website.

The cargo unit has replaced Element Rebecca at the drillhead, and she has been moved off to her secondary mission as well, mapping to the south and east of the hole in the ice, her data combined with Element Earl's to give a multi-dimensional picture of the terrain. They amuse themselves by giving completely inappropriate southern California names to Europan landmarks: Point Loma for an ice lake, the Beach and Tennis Club for a jumble of ice boulders, Angeles Crest for a jagged crevasse, Catalina Island for a passageway visible on the far end of Point Loma.

Neither element can venture too far away, of course, since they need to be in line-of-sight comm every few hours. Whenever Earl suits up, he finds himself strangely comforted by the sight of Element Rebecca—shiny, box-like, asymmetrical, and small—through Element Earl's sensors.

j

In between shifts, Earl deals with ex-wives Kerry and Jilliane. The old bitterness toward and from Kerry still garbles communications between them, the way a solar flare degrades the SLIPPER link. The fact of Earl's new condition only means that Kerry will allow some sympathy and tenderness to leak into encounters that have been frosty for years. The same applies to the children, Ben and Marcy.

Jilliane, who ultimately left Earl four years ago, is consumed by guilt, and offers herself as everything from nurse to sexual partner, until Earl's work schedule and general moodiness cause her to remember why she ran off in the first place. Rebecca's presence makes her feel superfluous.

Then there is Jordan, who takes time from her family and flies to La Jolla for a visit. She meets Rebecca, and offers her approval, and will be present whenever Earl needs her. At the moment, that's not often. He believes he will beat the disease—at least postponing his inevitable doom by five years.

A month to the day after meeting Rebecca, after his diagnosis, Earl shows up at AGC mission control with his head shaved. Concerned about his privacy, and surprised, Rebecca can't ask him why until hours later.

"I start chemo on Monday," Earl says, tentatively rubbing his shiny dome. "The hair is going to be the first casualty."

"Not right away!" she says, protesting.

"No. But everyone will be able to see it coming out in clumps, and I'd rather not display my deterioration so soon."

Rebecca's despair over Earl's change in looks—the pale, naked skull is not an improvement—and Earl's own ambivalence over what may have been a self-destructive impulse are lost in the broad spectrum noise emerging from the science support room at AGC mission control. The submersible element, after three weeks of increasingly frustrating dives in the lightless freezing slurry that is Europa-under-the-crust, has picked up motion at the very limit of its sonar system.

Is it some sort of animal or plant life? Or is it a spurious signal? The science team and its journalistic symbionts spread the news anyway.

When Earl and Rebecca return to AGC early the next day for their shifts, they are forced to park off the site and walk through the crowd that has gathered.

Earl, just out of a chemo session, is weakened by the walk and the wait to a degree he finds astonishing. He barely has the strength to zip up his SLIPPER suit, alarming the medical support team, who know by now that he has a "problem."

Even Rebecca finds herself distracted and jittery when she finally dons her SLIPPER suit to resume the mapping operation.

It is Element Rebecca and Element Earl who find themselves together on the Europan ice plain. "Just imagine," Rebecca says, thumping one of her manipulators on the surface, "something is swimming around down there."

"Yeah, the submersible."

"Come on! I mean some Europan jellyfish! Doesn't that excite you?"

"Only because it means we accomplished the mission."

"That's not very romantic."

"Who said I was romantic?"

"*You* did. You and your blue eyes and your goddamned boat and sailing to Catlina—"

"Well, I'm not feeling very romantic these days. Unless dying of the same disease that killed U. S. Grant and Babe Ruth is romantic."

In La Jolla, Rebecca forms an answer, but even at three hundred-plus times light speed, there is not enough time to relay it, because Element Rebecca has rolled across a thin sheet of ice insufficient to support even a mass of a twenty kilograms.

The ice cracks, separates. As Element Earl helplessly records the scene from a distance of sixty-five meters, Element Rebecca teeters in the fissure, antenna slewing one way, the drilling arm swinging forward in what can only be a desperate search for traction, then silently disappears into a crevasse.

j

The aftermath of the event is prolonged and messy. There is only momentary loss of comm between Rebecca and her element, because Element Earl moves into position at the rim of the crevasse and provides line-of-sight.

Rebecca herself experiences the loss of support and the beginning of a terrifying plunge just as surely as if she'd been standing on the Europan ice in person.

Then there is nothing.

Then there comes a rattle of almost randomly-scattered data bits, quickly telling Rebecca that her element is wedged on its side in a fisssure of ice, that her drilling arm and camera have been torn off. She is blind, broken, beyond reach.

But alive. Her radio-thermal power source ensures that Element Rebecca will continue to send data for the next several years.

Nauseous from his medication and the horrifying accident, Earl can do nothing but wait, though not silently. Even while operating Element Earl, he has grown irritated with the mission control team's obvious distraction, as the ghost sonar squiggle of a theoretical Europan life form is played over and over again. "Haas," he snaps on the open loop, "drop the Ahab routine and pay some fucking attention here."

"No need to get nasty, Earl," Haas says. "We're on top of things."

"If you were on top of things, she wouldn't have fallen."

"Earl," Rebecca says. "It's okay."

Hearing her voice quiets him, as does the false serenity of the Europan landscape. Jupiter is at the edge of his field of vision. The sight angers him. Big, fat useless ball of ice—

Then he sees nothing at all. The link between Element Earl and La Jolla still functions, but the La Jolla end has failed.

j

Earl Tolan is taken to UC-SD Medical Center, where he dies four hours later. The cause of death is listed as a heart attack; the real cause is almost certainly complications from throat cancer and related treatment.

Once over her shock at the double loss of a single day—Element Rebecca and Earl himself—Rebecca sees the unexpected heart attack as a blessing, saving Earl and Rebecca and Jordan the horror of the almost certain laryngectomy and talking through a stoma and more radiation and the swelling and the pain and the horror of knowing that it will never get better, only worse.

Rebecca helps Jordan dispose of Earl's possessions. The *Atropos* is the trickiest of them, ultimately sold for a pittance in a depressed boating market.

The submersible element records more ghost blips before falling silent, a victim of cold, several weeks past its design life. Rebecca resigns from the operator program and is reassigned to AGC's "advanced planning" unit, helping with the design of a new set of elements for another Europan mission.

One day three months after that awful day she returns to mission control, dons a SLIPPER suit and spends a few moments on the icy plains of Europa with Element Earl.

Her last command aims him across Point Loma toward distant Catalina.

Richard Bowes

THE QUICKSILVER KID

1

For the nearly thirty years that Jess Quick has been a minor celebrity, every interviewer has asked about those legendary photos. An easy question that elicits an automatic response. But in all that time, no reporter has ever managed to find out what goes on behind that amused smile. The smile that launched a great man's career.

For Jess, what those photos evoke is old and personal. Usually the memories start with a vast and dusty second-hand and cut-out record store on a quiet Greenwich Village corner. The place didn't have a sales clerk. Anything you liked, you took across the street to the actual shop where you could also buy *Broadside Magazine* and the latest 45s by Sam Cooke, Bob Dylan, and the first wave of the British Invasion.

That's how long ago it was: Manhattan still had quiet corners and merchants operating on a slap-happy honor system. One morning, Jess, in a denim jacket a couple of sizes too large, flipped through the remainder bins. Stenciled on the back of the jacket was a winged sandal and the words FIVE ACES.

With a few minutes spare time between a delivery and a pick-up, this messenger had stepped inside the store looking for reminders of home. Or, more accurately, for some confirmation that home had ever actually existed.

One other customer poked around in the bins. Because a messenger is on the street a lot, Jess recognized the man. A week or so before, on a Saturday evening, both had stood on the outskirts of a Washington Square hootenanny. In the spring of 1964, Greenwich Village had its established eccentrics but even the junkies still wore suits and mind-boggling freaks were, as yet, few and far between.

This guy qualified. Plump-faced, ageless, he had no hair, not even eyebrows. The last made him seem quite expressionless. To compensate, he carried two little glass cubes, each with a black eyebrow inside. He would hold one or both of them up to express skepticism, wonder, or that certain something Groucho conveyed when he looked into the camera and wiggled his.

Eyebrow Man hummed under his breath, seemingly unaware anyone else was in the place. Jess, intent on being a quiet boy, took being able to blend into the nearest wall as a triumph. So it was startling and unwelcome when the man suddenly cocked a glass cube at an inquisitive angle and asked, "Isn't that Senator Macauley's kid?"

Instinctively, the messenger looked to where Eyebrow man looked and saw a tall young man with russet hair who had paused across the street. The elegant young woman with him smiled at something he had said. The friend they had obviously been waiting for popped out of the record store, face florid, and tossed his hands in the air dramatically. The young man and woman laughed.

Jess stared, wide-eyed. At that moment, by chance, or destiny, the man turned and met the messenger's gaze. And grinned. Jess recognized him from silver TV images of his father. And from a dream.

Young Macauley turned away but Jess watched as the party continued down the street. Kids can't really hide those moments when things click into place, synapses get connected. Normally they don't have to.

"You're too young to remember his father," said Eyebrow Man.

The kid from Five Aces responded, "Everyone remembers the funeral on..." Then Jess had the tingling feeling that a third party was watching and remembered to shut up.

The walls of the store were decorated with album covers. One was of the soundtrack to *Fantasia*. It showed the conductor, Stokowski, with his long silver hair, high forehead and ancient wizard's eyes. For an instant, those eyes were alive and amused. Suddenly wary, the messenger was out of that store and headed away in an instant. Macauley and company were already gone. Sunlight danced as a breeze blew salt air in off the Atlantic. Good sailing weather, Jess knew.

Five Aces business, the hustle of the street, made it hard to concentrate on the incident. Over on Washington Square, a doorman handed Jess the package of sketches from the fashion designer in 14D. Thirty years working in the Village meant that he didn't look twice at a skinny boy who needed a haircut. Besides, he'd recently seen the Beatles sing on the Sullivan show.

Things were different uptown. In the Garment District, men over thirty still wore hats and tipped them in the presence of a lady. When Jess stepped onto a crowded elevator, salesmen and buyers touched their snap brims and fedoras. A few did double takes, shook their heads, baffled by the new androgyny.

The delivery made, Jess asked to use the men's room, checked out the mirror. In it was what would shortly become a common sight: a Mod Boy, thin, a little too pretty. Jess stepped into the stall and adjusted a rolled-up sweat sock in

the front of the skintight pants. That trick had been learned from a seventeen-year-old hustler who lived in the same cheap hotel. In this city, some boys wanted a penis down to their knees. Others didn't want one at all.

Jess ate a Nedick's hotdog on Thirty-Fourth Street, drank an Orange Julius, took the crosstown bus. Five Aces operated out of a storefront in a nameless neighborhood in the East Twenties. Bike messengers were the elite. A pair of tough kids with sunglasses and jackets worn like matadors' capes flicked butts in the gutter and spat on the sidewalk before mounting up. One muttered, "Eat me, faggot!" as Jess passed him.

Inside, a few messengers sat waiting on splintery folding chairs, but the dispatcher in his wire cage looked up as Jess came in. He was older. Twenty-two, at least. He'd busted both his legs making a delivery one rainy night a couple of years before and still walked funny.

The dispatcher had done the hiring without asking questions when Jess, attracted by the logo, had walked in off the street six weeks before. He pulled out a slip and subway tokens. "Pick-up and delivery. Waverly Place near Broadway. Quicksilver Promotions. Probably take the rest of the day."

Jess knew something was up. But the favorable winds held steady east by northeast and the bright afternoon was full of promise. The address down on Waverly had an Armenian restaurant on the ground floor and a hat factory on the third. Quicksilver Promotion was on two. Jess bounded up the stairs, pressed a button, pushed open the door when the buzzer sounded.

And stopped dead. Refinished lofts were still a novelty. So the height of the white tin ceiling, the sunlight through full-length windows, the big silkscreen on the wall opposite the door seemed like magic. The picture was of the phone company symbol, the bare-assed guy in winged sandals and helmet.

Behind a huge desk was a familiar face. Jess stood in the doorway prepared to leave fast.

Eyebrow Man wiggled one glass cube roguishly. "Oh come on, you knew you'd see me again! Some part of you did anyway." He nodded yes until, finally, Jess gave a slight nod.

"Now that you've found the young Macauley, we need to talk." He indicated a chair next to the desk.

Jess took a step backward.

"Don't do that, kid." Eyebrow Man put his hand on a phone. "Leave without talking to me, and I'll drop a dime on you. Not to those slap-happy klutzes on the local version of the NYPD. The Time Rangers make a specialty of rounding up world-jumpers. You've heard about them?"

Jess hadn't. But a short time spent close to the street had taught the messenger that there was always someone interested in returning stray kids to the hellholes they had escaped. "I'm not going back. I'm not going to wear a dress and be some kind of good little bride for some returning warrior the government selects for me."

"I don't blame you, sweetheart," said Eyebrow Man. "Nobody should wear a dress with which they are not absolutely comfortable. On the other hand," and he fluttered his left brow as he said this, "if you close the door and sit down, I'll make you a proposal. If you don't like it, you can walk out of here free and clear. Agreed?"

Jess said nothing, but shut the door and sat down, tense and wary.

"Harvey is my name. Like the invisible rabbit," said Eyebrow Man, "President and Chief Operating Officer of Quicksilver Promotions. My boss told me that Jess Waters, from a world where being a girl is maybe not very attractive, might show up here. Little details, like finding you and finding a way of making sure you were the real deal, he left to me. You do an excellent boy, by the way. If I hadn't known, I wouldn't have guessed. I will not pass that secret on to anyone."

Jess' s hands trembled, but she held them steady on the arms of the chair. "What do you and your boss want?"

"The Rangers think of Time as a river that flows from the past into the future. With their kind permission and a few navigational tricks, you can travel from Chairman Mao's Beijing to Julius Caesar's Rome.

"Others think of Time as a wine-dark sea dotted with infinite worlds. A favoring wind and the right star can take them from Caesar's Beijing to Mao's Rome. Don't like the place to which the Fates have assigned you?" Harvey said. "Sail away! I'm one of those who felt that. So are you.

"Parts of your story I know firsthand. You come from a place that's happening right about now. Things there are bad. For you, certainly; probably for everybody. Nowhere in that rat hole world is there a ray of hope, a place to run. Then you had, what? A glimmer? A vision? A dream?"

Jess nodded at the last choice. "Tell me!" And this strange man settled back like a small child awaiting a bedtime story.

Jess forgot the door behind her and the street below. She stretched her legs out. Rested her feet on the corner of the desk. When she spoke it was with a hoarse catch in her voice. A boy trying to appear older and tougher than he was. Harvey smiled when she did that.

2

I live... lived out in Washington. A little place you wouldn't know. Way up Puget Sound. North of Seattle. I remember when I was ten or so, Macauley's funeral on TV, my parents crying. My father said it was the end of the country and my mother told him to be quiet because she was afraid of who'd hear.

After that, war was all anyone talked about. The president was some guy in uniform. No fighting but everyone on TV said that was coming. The boys in school were cadets. Uniforms. Dummy rifles. Girls were in their own auxiliary.

They kept taking kids. First the troublemakers, the tough boys and bad girls. Then they took boys after graduation. That's what happened to my brother Dan. Finally, at the start of senior year they took the oldest cadets. That's when they got Terry. He and I were steadies. We'd planned on doing everything together. College, marriage. All of a sudden, he was on a bus and we were both crying.

Good girls were the only ones left. We wore dresses. Always. No pants for the good girls. We were going to do office work. Be nurses. For the war. We wore aprons in Home Ec. Lucky ones would be wives for the officers.

My parents were afraid to talk to me. I miss them. Sometimes it's like a knife inside. But after my brother went, it was like watching them die.

That fall, I had a dream where I woke up early on what I knew was a Saturday. Everyone was still asleep. I went to the mirror, clipped my hair real short and put on the tightest shirt I could get into.

Everyone always said I was built like a boy. Even Terry. I went to Dan's room. My parents kept all his stuff. His freshman baseball jacket. I'm still wearing these moccasins he outgrew. They remind me of him. He had a duffel bag and I stuffed it with any clothes that looked like they'd fit. I went out the door without looking back.

It was just dawn. Grey light. Nobody else was awake. Even the birds didn't sing. I started walking toward the water. The Piersall brothers had a dock where they rented out sailboats. The office was closed. Nobody was around.

At the end of the dock, I saw a figure like the one on the wall behind you. In nothing but a winged helmet and sandals, carrying a kind of baton. All silver. When I looked again his hair and clothes were just like mine and he was a boy, maybe a little late starting to shave. Because it was a dream, I knew he was a god.

We read *The Odyssey* in junior year. Miss Garner taught. She was bad. Everyone called her Crabs. She had this high pitched whining voice, "Class. Pay attention. Which god appeared to Odysseus as a handsome youth in the first bloom of manhood?"

On the water at the end of the dock was a skiff all ready to sail. Rigged and with a picnic basket full of stuff. You heard whispers about people escaping to Canada, where it was supposed to be better. It looked like someone was trying that. There was even a wallet with I.D. papers and a bag of silver coins.

I followed the kid aboard. I'd been out on the water enough with my dad that I knew how to lend a hand. He smiled and said, "Haul the canvas to the wind, steer and hold that wind. It will take you to your destiny."

Being in a dream, we skipped details. Except I remember the journey wasn't over open water. We went across ponds and down old stagnant canals, hopped from one swimming pool to another in suburbs, crossed a huge lake, went up a river against the current. Sometimes we were regular size. Sometimes we were tiny, hurtling along a rain ditch. The young guy kept one hand on the tiller, the eye on the sun or stars. Once he looked at me, smiled, and said, "We do not choose which god we serve."

Time blurred. It was night then it was day. Then we were on blue and white ocean water. Under a golden sun. A couple of hundred yards away was a green shore with trees and a lawn and meat roasting on open grills. On that lawn were golden-tanned people. In blue shirts and white pants. Blue and white deck shoes. Bare legs and arms. Throwing back their heads, moving in groups with drinks in their hands, walking down to the rocks that ringed the shore. Like a herd of magic horses.

We tossed on the water right in front of them and no one saw us. But the boy pointed with this stick and I saw a young man even more golden than the others. Smiling but impatient. Like he was bored.

He looked up, saw us, did a double take and winked like he could keep a secret. And the boy god said, "The Young Macauley." He gave me the little baton. It had silver snakes curled around it. "This will guide you," he said. And I saw that the snakes were twisting and alive.

Then I was awake in my room and it was cold because the army needed all the fuel. And it was Saturday before dawn. That's when most dreams fade. But that morning, something was on the pillow next to my head.

3

Jess pulled out of her pocket what looked like a silver swizzle stick in the form of the caduceus, the serpent wand. "The serpents were twisting and alive when I found it and I knew I'd had a true dream. I got up and did what I'd been shown."

"Straight from the Gate of Horn," Harvey breathed. "Pretty dreams, illusions come from the Ivory Gate. True dreams like yours come through the Horn."

"So, I have to decide whether I want to work for you."

"Not for me, honey. I speak as a servant of one who is a patron of communication and commerce, tricks and travel.

In other words, public relations work."

The silkscreen stirred on the wall behind him. From where Jess sat, the god's winged hat seemed to rest on Harvey's head and for an instant the man seemed big, breathtaking. Then he spoiled that illusion by arching a plastic encased brow over one eye, pointing a finger at her and saying, "Hermes, Lord Mercury, wants you! And I, his servant, need you and would like to have you work with me. Will you accept? Please?"

They both knew she going to stay. Jess gave a shrug. "I guess that's why I'm here." Then, she realized how badly she needed to talk. "The actual voyage wasn't like what I was shown," she said. "It was scary and took a long time with a lot of wrong directions and wrong worlds and the god wasn't there to help me. The wand protected me, pretty much, until I got to this New York when it went dead like it is now. So I figured this must be where I was supposed to be. But, until this morning, I couldn't figure out why.

"I had to go away without waking my parents or saying anything. I tried to find them when I got here, long distance. But the phone company had never heard of them. And when I left home it was fall and here it's spring and everybody asks if I'm a British singer. My birthday was in February. I turned seventeen someplace on the way, and..."

Jess put her head down. The god on the wall had gone back to being a slightly campy silkscreen. Harvey dropped the glass cubes and came around the desk with a box of Kleenex. She let him hold her. "Kid, cry all you need to. But when you're finished, I know a place that makes the most incredible chocolate cake. We'll have your birthday. And we'll buy you a present. Anything you want?"

It took a couple of minutes of deep breaths and sobs. Then she said. "There are these ankle boots I saw on Eighth Street that I could wear. They're meant for boys, but I want to keep dressing this way. It makes me feel... more confident."

"Considering how the boss dresses," said Harvey, "I don't see how he could object. Do you mind if we call you Jess Quick? It will make things easier. Wipe your eyes. No. Firmer strokes. As a guy, you're mad that they're watering. Want to use the bathroom? While you're in there, remember that boys sometimes 'dress,' as we say, to the right or more usually to the left. Not straight down. Why don't you adjust the handkerchief..."

"Sweatsock."

"Pardon me, the sweatsock, in your pants."

Later, opera records played in an old Italian restaurant, and the wife of the owner insisted that they order the veal. Jess had wine. Just a glass or two. But it was the first she'd ever drunk. "The stuff I said about Senator Macauley was a giveaway, wasn't it," she asked.

"On this world, Kennedy's funeral last fall is the one you'd remember and be traumatized by. Macauley is almost forgotten except among aficionados of politics. On your world he was some kind of Shining White Hope. Here he was a war hero and a bright young senator who, against all advice, died flying his own plane in bad weather. The son is a good-looking dilettante with a tendency to self-destruction. But our employer has high hopes for him. If he can be kept alive."

A couple of hours later, they walked down lower Fifth Avenue, laughing. It was a lovely night. Couples strolled. Jess was trying out the boots. Harvey carried bags full of paisley shirts and tight chinos.

"The boots give you another inch or two. You're a good height. But a boy is conscious of those things. Walk on the balls of the feet."

He glanced up, and said, "My god, this is destiny!" Jess looked and saw Tim Macauley with a different young woman than the one he'd been with that morning. The other man, flushed, grandiloquent, was still with him. Now he, too, had a woman on his arm.

Harvey stepped up to the group. "Hello, Mr. Macauley. We met last month at the NAACP rally..."

All this came naturally to Macauley. "Nice to see you again." A microsecond's pause. "Harvey Quick, wasn't it? Public relations. I have your card somewhere."

"I'm amazed that you remember. I'd like you to meet Jess, my... nephew. A great admirer of yours."

"See, I knew there had to be one!" Macauley told his friends. He grinned, looked right in the kid's eyes. The women smiled politely. The other man shot Jess a hard look.

"I felt really stupid," Jess told Harvey as they walked away.

"You were fine," he said. "Just remember that men expect to shake hands. Yours should go out as the introduction is made. I'll show you later."

"Who were the other people?"

"The young woman with Macauley is an aspiring model, one of several young ladies whom he's currently seeing. The other man is Graham Lane, the actor. He and Tim were roommates at Choate."

"He looked angry."

"Or something."

4

Next day Jess moved into a room of her own in the living space behind the Quicksilver office. She liked to sit out on the wide windowsill and watch the street which bothered Harvey.

That summer she was enrolled full-time at New York University, right around the corner. High school diplomas, SAT tests, tuition money appeared as they were needed. Her age when the birth certificate came was eighteen, not seventeen.

"Makes it legal for you to drink," Harvey said, "And do whatever else you like."

He sent her to a doctor, an older European woman, who examined Jess, commented that she was "comme un garçon," and elicited her brief sexual history. She gave an understanding nod and didn't ask more when Jess told her that the boy in question had been taken by the army. Then she explained the Pill and prescribed it.

Harvey was around most of the time if Jess needed to lean on a shoulder just a bit, or ask questions like, "What does Lord Mercury want?"

"Survival. Who pays attention to gods like him anymore except kids trying to pass school exams? And it gets worse. A few hundred years Upstream, so I'm told, there's no one whom we would call human. No people equals no gods. Mercury and the others have started doing something about that. A little late. But if you knew there was going to be a bad wreck several millennia up the line, you might decide to have five or six thousand years of fun."

"A god can do anything."

"These are old low-horsepower entities. Sending you that dream was probably what Hermes, Lord Mercury, was doing at that moment. You had to find your way here by yourself because he was busy elsewhere."

He also taught her the business of Quicksilver Promotions. Quicksilver promoted the arts. Exhibitions, avant-garde happenings, spontaneous eruptions. There was no money in it—as yet. But lots of fun.

One night Jess brought some of the kids in her English class to an old warehouse down on Houston Street. They crawled through a plastic tunnel that twisted like the belly of a snake and popped out for a moment into a tent where a woman danced on a floor covered with inflated balloons. Back into the tunnel they went and came out again in a place that was totally dark except for holy candles being extinguished one by one. Next time, the tunnel let them out where they could look down a hall and see, under an overhead light, two men in blindfolds played chess with salt and pepper shakers and pieces of cheese.

At the end of the tunnel was movie screen showing a film of a park. To a background of piano music, pigeons walked, girls with long hair stared off into space.

In the audience, Harvey sat next to a striking man with a broken nose. The man gave Jessthe once over. "Frank," said Harvey. " This is my nephew, who's staying with me. Jess, this is Frank O'Hara, a very important person in this little world. He's at MOMA, The Museum of Modern Art."

"Your nephew? Get off it, Harvey. Come to MOMA, little boy, and I will show you *everything.*" He winked and Jess smiled. Her classmates were scandalized. And jealous.

Life was an adventure. "How come nobody knows about Lord Mercury?" Jess asked Harvey. "What if we told people about him?"

"I can see the *Enquirer* headlines: 'GREEK GOD ABDUCTED ME' SAYS TOMBOY FROM ANOTHER DIMENSION."

Tim Macauley was the best adventure of all. He ran for city council. Because of his youth and his wealthy mother, a columnist called him "Childe Candidate." Macauley found that funny.

That summer, Harvey organized a benefit for the free clinic at the Judson Church. A woman played a Bach partita for cello with her breasts bare. Tim Macauley and Graham Lane were present and looking highly amused. As Jess stepped toward Macauley, Lane shot her a hard look and moved between them.

"Why does Graham Lane hate me," she asked Harvey later.

"Memories and fear?" he suggested. "Lane would know better than most how the young Macauley likes to trifle with the Fates."

Just before he won the election, Macauley addressed a rally protesting the banning of musical instruments in Washington Square Park. A sign asked ARE YOU GETTING YOUR DAILY RATION OF PASSION? A young woman with a guitar and a doleful expression sang "Maid of Constant Sorrow." A man in a beard proclaimed, "A ban on music is a ban on the heart of the people."

The old radicals were there, men in work shirts, women in dresses they'd made themselves. The horde of young people were in transition. A girl might still be in pumps and a conservative dress but have long, straight hair that looked like it had been ironed. A crew-cut boy in horn-rims might sport a flowery silk shirt. All heads turned as Jess walked by, the very embodiment of that moment when the world was trembling and changing.

Then Tim Macauley spoke and Jess was riveted. He smiled when she approached him afterwards. Bracken, his campaign manager, was the only one with the candidate. A humorless young man in glasses and a dark suit, he never even noticed Jess.

When Macauley put his arm around Jess, she twisted away, grinning. "Is Harvey a jealous uncle?" he asked.

Jess sat on her windowsill on the last warm day of autumn. "I feel stupid around Tim," she said when Harvey stuck his head out and asked her to come in. "I've got nothing to say."

"Conversation is beside the point."

So it was. The next week, Quicksilver Productions gave a party in the loft. The booze was ample. The grass was grand. Macauley was there. Lane was not. Harvey disappeared halfway through the evening. Jess sat back to the wall, knees drawn up. Her brain was opening and closing. Her eyes were out of focus.

"The rug is walking around," someone said.

"Must be the hash," someone replied, and they laughed uproariously.

Tim Macauley sat down beside Jess. After a while, he put his hand on Jess's knee. He massaged it gently. She lowered her leg. He turned towards Jess and looked right in her eyes.Jess was back in the dream and Lord Mercury guided her. She nodded. They rose and went to her room. "Look at them," someone whispered.

They were on the bed. Jess was barefoot. Tim's shirt was open. They kissed.

He unbuttoned Jess' shirt, touched her breasts for the first time, stopped for a moment. She looked into his eyes and saw what? Surprise? Disappointment? Later, he insisted he had known all along. But Jess had seen something more complex.

He had a scar along his left thigh. Jess traced it with her finger. "My war wound," he said. When Jess looked questioningly, he laughed and explained, "Naval Flight Training. Dumb stunt."

Then Jess was in touch with Tim from her head to her toes. Life ran through her. It felt like she had been frozen at the moment of Lord Mercury's dream. But now she was awake.

Tim's hair hung at a goofy angle. Jess reached out and pushed it back in place. "I sailed through a whole lot of worlds to find you," she told him.

"Must be the hash," he said and they both giggled.

Jess copied Tim's haircut. She asked Harvey about the scar.

"That hubris-ridden young man managed to have an accident almost exactly like the one that killed his father." He looked her over. "We could darken the upper lip just a shade, babyface." But she shook her head hard, went into her room and slammed the door. Harvey used both hands to raise his brows inquiringly to the silk screen on the wall.

Macauley had an apartment on Hudson Street in his Council district. On a frosty morning, shortly after he had won an easy election to the City Council, Tim and Jess came out the front door. They kissed and turned to go their separate ways. Both looked back and returned for another embrace. Then Tim rushed down to City Hall and Jess hurried to class.

It happened so fast as to be invisible and we'll never know who took the picture without their noticing. Whoever it was, it turned out, took a whole series of snapshots. One was published in the *Village Voice* as part of a collage of street photos. At the time, no one noticed.

A week or two later, Jess waiting outside a union hall where Tim was speaking, overheard one old politician remark to another, "Macauley's little friend."

"Guess he never heard," said the other, "That an office holder can survive anything but being caught in bed with a dead girl or a live boy."

On the otherwise deserted beach at his mother's house in the Hamptons, Jess turned and saw Tim looking out to sea. He had the same restless, bored expression as in her dream. Later, as they smoked in bed in the empty house, she said, "I saw you in a dream before I ever met you. Standing on that beach just like you did today."

"Must be the hash," he said and passed her the joint. Neither of them laughed.

Next morning was foggy and chill, reminding Jess of home and family. As they got into the car, she said shyly, "I could start dressing like a girl again."

"Don't," he said. "I knew as soon as I saw you. But Graham thinks you're a boy and it drives him crazy. He and I were roommates and he's afraid for his reputation as a ladies' man." He laughed for the first time that weekend.

5

Jess sat on the windowsill for one whole day. In the building across the street, women bent over sweatshop sewing machines and men hauled boxes out of elevators. Harvey stuck his head out the window. "It's January. You'll freeze."

"Tim Macauley is a self-centered prick," she said. "This thing with me is a joke on Graham Lane." Harvey said nothing. "I want to be a girl again."

Harvey raised an appraising brow. "You'll be beautiful, honey."

The return to womanhood, as happens with journeys back, wasn't as exciting as the voyage out. Only after Jess had arrived at her destination, did Harvey show her two sets of photos. They had been brought Downstream from a few years in the future.

Jess stared at them. "So, this is the whole point of what happened to me?"

"Lord Mercury intends that this world not end up the same way yours did. Keeping young Macauley viable is part of that plan. It hasn't been easy."

Not long afterwards, Harvey was gone. His work in that Time and Place done, he was sent elsewhere in the service of his master. He and Jess cried a lot on parting. But she had gotten good at saying goodbye.

Besides, the business had been left to her, and it was flourishing. Events in the arts not represented by Quicksilver Production were as trees falling without witness in a forest. A geek to whom Harvey had been kind was now Warhol, the Silver Prince.

Jess avoided Macauley. He had moved into that spotlight politicians on the rise occupy where every public moment is a performance. He married a young woman with a good pedigree.

Graham Lane went to Hollywood, as we all know. Tim Macauley became a congressman. After a few years, a senate seat came up for election. The occupant, old and well-respected, was always called "The First Gentleman of New York Politics." But it had been noticed that he wasn't as nimble as before. His tap dance away from the Vietnam War had been slow, his pirouette around Watergate, clumsy.

Once Macauley announced his candidacy, all kinds of stories about his escapades began to circulate. Though the Senator would never stoop to gossip, not all his supporters, regrettably, were so noble.

Finally, as happens, the rumors of debauchery and infidelity coalesced around a single item. A photo from ten years before had surfaced. In it, two people, one of them unmistakably the young Macauley, the other quite obviously a boy, kissed on a city street . The rest of the roll of film came to light and showed the boy as not even particularly

feminine. Not for an audience which had experienced Jagger and Bowie in full flower.

Jess waited until the pictures made it into the tabloids, when television news was straining for an excuse to show them, when The First Gentleman had said that he himself chose only to believe good about an opponent but perhaps the young man had best explain himself.

Then she sprang the trap. Complex matters often get summed up in an image. The running girl, burned by napalm, stands for the mindless carnage of war. The sailor and the nurse kissing in Times Square signify victory. The photo of Jess in her Chanel suit and silver caduceus brooch, armed with her birth certificate and medical records will always warn us not to rush to judgment.

Jess Quick's amusement and ease at the reporters' questions, her warm endorsement of Timothy Macauley, blew the scandal off the face of the earth. The First Gentleman, it turned out, was an old fool who didn't know a girl when he saw one. The young candidate was inoculated against his own folly. Through the long and scandal-riddled career, both in the White House and later, Macauley always got the benefit of the doubt.

For Jess, of course, the famous press conference was like a rerun even as it occurred. What she kept in mind as she spoke were the memories of her parents, afraid to talk in their own home; of the line of buses carrying kids away; and the hope that she was stopping those things from happening in her adopted world. Thus far, it seems she has succeeded.

And her smile remains as enigmatic as that of the trickster god whom she has served so well.

Susan Palwick

CUCUMBER GRAVY

I wasn't too happy when the knocking started on my door that morning. Nobody's welcome out here except UPS and customers, and I wasn't expecting any deliveries, and customers have to call first. New buyers have to be referred by people I know. That's a rule. I check references, too. I don't let anybody in who isn't vouched for, and even so, it's amazing I've never had cops out here. Some of my buyers ask why I didn't go legit when the medical-marijuana bill passed four years ago, but that's a no-brainer: I do not need the government crawling up my backside to regulate me, and I have a lot more customers this way, and I make a lot more money. Being legal would be nothing but a pain in the ass, even if I didn't have to worry about keeping people from finding out about the space cucumbers.

As it happened, my latest bunch of cucumbers was due to start singing any minute, which meant the last thing I needed was somebody in the house. That's another reason buyers have to call first: depending on what the cucumbers are up to, I tell people they have to wait, I can't see them today.

So when the knocking started, I thought, *shit, government,* and my stomach tied up in a knot. I'd have pretended I wasn't home, but you can get stranded motorists out here too, and the sooner you let them use your phone or whatever, the sooner they go away. So when I heard that knock and looked out and didn't recognize who was there—some bearded guy pushing forty, about my age, in jeans and a plaid shirt and hiking boots, had tree-hugging liberal written all over him—I grabbed my gun and yelled through the door, "Who is it?" Since it was only one guy, that made cops less likely, but on the other hand his car was in front of the house, a nice little Toyota, which made mechanical failure less likely, too. Maybe he had to use the bathroom, in which case I'd tell him to use the desert. If he needed water I'd give him some, though. You always give people water, out here. You'd think people would know not to drive anywhere in this state without extra water in the car, but between the dumb college kids from Reno and the morons moving here from California, the average survival IQ in Nevada isn't what it should be. This guy was too old to be in college, so I pegged him as Californian. Local folks only drive in the desert with four-wheel drive.

"Mr. Whitwell Smith?" he yelled through the door. "Welly?"

"Yeah?" Only buyers call me Welly: it's a kind of code. I'm Whit to everybody else, not that I've talked to much of anybody else since Nancy Ann left. "Who wants to know?"

"My name's Jim Humphreys." The name didn't mean anything to me. "I'm a friend of Sam Mortimer's."

That name did. Sam used to be one of my best customers, out here once a month spending big money, until he suddenly stopped coming altogether about six months ago. No call, nothing. I'd been wondering what happened to him, not that it's any of my business. I'd almost started to think of Sam as a friend, I'd known him so long; we'd even gone skeet-shooting on my property a few times. "Yeah? You know Sam, you know you have to call before you come out here. Sam knows that."

"I've been trying to call for three days, Mr. Smith. Your phone's out of order."

Shit. That was the first I knew of it. I hadn't gotten any calls for three days, but that's not unusual: you never know when business is going to be slow, and nobody else calls me. But it could still be a trick. "You wait just a minute," I hollered through the door, and ran and picked up the phone. Dead. No dial tone. Nothing. Which meant I'd have to get telephone repair people out here, but that would have to wait until the latest batch of cucumbers was gone. In the meantime, I turned on my cell phone in case anybody was trying to reach me. I don't like the cell phone; I don't like having my conversations broadcast all over hell and gone for the government to spy on. But you have to have a cell phone for emergencies, just like you have to have water. If you miss a customer call, you could lose business.

"Okay," I hollered, back at the door. "Thank you for telling me about the telephone, but I can't see you today. We can make an appointment—"

"Mr. Smith, I drove seventy miles to get here, and this is an emergency. Please open the door."

Emergency? Nobody'd ever used that line on me before. My crop isn't addictive, which is one of the things I like about it. You don't get strung-out dopeheads at your door who'd murder their own mothers for their next fix. Who needs that kind of trouble?

I checked my watch. The cucumbers were due to start singing in about thirty minutes, but sometimes they go off early. I'm never sure exactly when they've gotten here, which makes the timing tricky, and that means I wasn't about to open the door. "If it's an emergency, call 911, Mr. Humphreys. I'm not in that line of work."

"Welly, *please.* Sam's very sick. He has cancer. He had surgery four months ago and now he's having chemo and it's making him sicker than a dog, and the prescription stuff isn't working for him. He says it isn't strong enough. He says yours is the best. He sent me out here with two hundred and fifty dollars to buy some. Please don't send me back to that poor man empty-handed."

"Huh," I said. I wasn't surprised the government couldn't grow good plants. They were probably growing oregano and charging pot prices for it; you can't trust those people as far as you can throw them. I started with the best stock when I got into business fifteen years ago, and I've been refining it since then. Genetics was my favorite part of biology in high school.

I looked at my watch again. I could run and get a quarter bag and shove it through the door and pull this Humphreys' cash in, and it would all be over in ten seconds. And if the cucumbers started up and he heard them, I'd tell him it was the TV. "You wait there," I called out. "I'll be right back."

I ran and got a quarter bag and a paper lunch sack, and put the gun on a shelf near the door, where I could grab it fast if I had to but Humphreys couldn't reach inside and get it, and then I opened the door a crack, as far as the chain would allow. "Here," I said. I held up the quarter bag so he could see it, and dropped it in the lunch sack. "You pass the money through, you get this."

He held up a sheaf of bills and slipped them through. All singles and fives, Jesus, what had Sam been thinking? Come to think of it, a quarter bag wouldn't get him very far, not given Sam's smoking habits, but I was guessing he didn't have much money left over, after the cancer. He'd probably been saving up since the chemo started, the poor bastard, and insurance wouldn't pay for mine. I wondered if I should give him some extra for free—he'd been a very good customer for a long time—but in the meantime, I started counting the bills. Old habits.

While I was counting, Humphreys said drily, "Sam said you let him come into the house." I could hear him more clearly now, with the door open, and something about his voice nagged at me. He had a little bit of an accent, English or Aussie maybe. Where had I heard a voice like that lately?

"I know Sam," I said. "No offense." I finished counting—it was all there—and then I handed the bag through. As I did, I got a good look at Humphrey's face for the first time, and two things happened at once.

The first thing was that I recognized him from TV. You just don't see many preachers with Aussie accents feeding bag ladies on the news, especially when the preacher has one deformed ear, the right one, all ugly and lumpy and crumpled up like a cauliflower. I hadn't picked up on the ear before because I'd only gotten a side view of him when I looked out the window.

The second thing was that the cucumbers starting singing, all three of them at once: wails and whistles and grunts, like a cross between a porno soundtrack and an orchestra of teakettles.

Humphreys' eyes widened. "What—"

"It's the TV," I said, and tried to slam the door, but I couldn't because he'd wedged his foot in there, and he was staring behind me, goggle-eyed. When I turned to look over my shoulder, I saw that one of the cucumbers had staggered out of the den, away from its friends and the nice warm heaters, and was hopping in pathetic circles around my living room, which makes it the first time in almost ten years that a cucumber's moved from where I put it once it got into the house.

I was about to have a very bad day.

j

The space cucumbers started coming here a few months after Nancy Ann ran off. I don't know why they picked this place—it's just a ranch house out in the middle of nowhere, halfway between Reno and Gerlach, with nothing to look at but sagebrush and lizards and alkali dust, so flat that the mountains on the horizon seem like a mirage—and I never have figured out how they keep from attracting the attention of the air base in Stead. Those bastards are government, and I figure they have to have instruments that can tell if you throw a penny in the air, and the cucumbers have to come in some kind of ship, or come down through the atmosphere, anyway. And you see those air base planes and 'copters doing maneuvers out here all the time, so I don't know why they've never picked up on what's going on. I guess the cucumbers are smarter than they are. It's not hard to be smarter than the government.

I call them space cucumbers because they look like a sea cucumber I saw once—or at least, they look more like that than like anything else. My parents took me on a trip to San Diego when I was a kid, and we went to the aquarium there. They had all kinds of animals, scary ones like sharks and smart ones like dolphins and whales who did tricks, but for some reason, the one I always remembered best was the sea cucumber. It was lying in a tank of water, in this kind of petting zoo they had, and you could reach in and touch it. It was brown and very very soft, and if somebody had grabbed it and started cutting it into pieces, it couldn't have fought back. It didn't swim or do tricks. It didn't do anything. It just sat there. The aquarium lady said it ate by filtering tiny bits of food out of the water. It was a really boring animal, and I never have known why it made such an impression on me. Probably because I couldn't figure out how a creature like that could survive in the ocean with sharks and lobsters and stingrays. "I guess sharks don't think they taste good," the aquarium lady said, but you could tell she didn't know either. That cucumber was a mystery.

Which is what mine are, too. They show up two or three at a time, every five or six weeks. I just open the door in the morning and there they are, waiting on my welcome mat. They're much bigger than the sea cucumber in San Diego, about three feet tall and as thick around as a flagpole, and I can't touch them because they're wrapped in something like plastic. Like really thick shrink wrap. Or maybe that's their skin, but I don't think so: I think it's some kind of spacesuit, and the animal's the thing inside, the brown blobby cylindrical thing that hops along on nine stubby little legs, all clustered at the bottom of the cylinder, like tentacles. Hopping isn't easy for them, you can tell—I don't think it's how they usually move around, wherever they come from—so I usually pick them up to carry them inside. Wherever they're from, they've come a long way to get here, and I figure if there's anything I can do to make it easier for them, why not? They're always exactly air temperature, or the shrink wrap is, and they're not as heavy as you'd expect from their size. I can just stick them under my arm, like pieces of firewood.

When the first ones came I was terrified, of course. The cucumbers would have been weird whenever they showed up, but Nancy Ann had just left, and I was out of my mind with grief and anger, smoking entirely too much of my own crop just to get to sleep at night. I felt like I was going crazy, and having space cucumbers on my welcome mat didn't help. I didn't know what they were or what they wanted. I didn't know if they were going to kill me or take over the planet or poison the water supply, and I couldn't ask anybody because that would have gotten the government involved, and even if I trusted the government I couldn't have people tramping around my house and finding the plants and grow lights and sprinklers in the basement. I have one hell of a professional setup down there: no way I could argue personal use, even if possession weren't still a felony for anybody without an approved medical condition.

The first time they showed up and hopped into the house, I just went weak in the knees and started babbling at them, trying to figure out what they wanted, trying to find some way to communicate. Didn't work, of course. If they can talk or understand me when I talk, I haven't found any way to tell, not in all these years. Maybe the singing's some kind of language, like what whales have, but if so I haven't figured it out yet, and they never respond in any way I can tell when I say things to them. That first visit, they all hopped over to my wood stove and stood around it, shaking, and the entire forty-eight hours until they started singing, I don't think I slept a wink. I didn't know what they were going to do. I didn't dare shoot them because I didn't want to give them an excuse to destroy the planet, and anyway I could tell even then they had some kind of suit on, and if I broke through it and whatever they were made of came out, who knew what kind of plague I'd start? I never have breached one of those suits.

They didn't do anything that first time, of course, not until they started singing. When the noise started, I got into a duck-and-cover position under my coffee table because I thought they were going to attack me. And then when nothing happened and the singing stopped, I just crouched there, waiting, until about half an hour later the first one liquefied on me, and then within half an hour after that, the other two had gone gravy, too.

You know those gravy packets that come with some kinds of TV dinners? The plastic pouches you throw into boiling water and then pull out of the pot with tongs, so you can cut them open to pour the gravy out? I guess some people use microwaves, but I think boiling water works better. Anyway, that's what the cucumbers look like when they liquefy: giant gravy pouches. There's a big *sploosh*, and then all of a sudden where there used to be something that looked like an animal, there's just brown mush. If you pick up the suit then, it's like holding a bag of thick brown water, and frankly it's pretty disgusting. The first time I saw it, I nearly got sick, and then I got even more scared, wondering what would happen next.

Nothing happened. Nothing's ever happened, after they go gravy. I think they're dead, then. As near as I can tell, they come here to die. Why they'd come here, I have no idea. Don't think I haven't thought about it, but I've never come up with any idea that makes sense. The first few times it happened, I thought they'd just crashed here or gotten stranded, like motorists without water, and Earth had killed them somehow, or I had. But it's been happening every five or six weeks for ten years, so now I think they come here deliberately. Maybe this is some kind of pilgrimage for them; maybe my house was built on some kind of alien shrine, like Area 51. I just don't know. And I could be wrong, anyway. Maybe they aren't dead at all. Maybe if I opened one of the suits up, they'd come back to life.

For a while I kept some of the cucumber-gravy bags stacked out where the newest ones could see them when they showed up; I thought maybe they'd show me somehow what to do with them. They never responded at all. It was like the gravy packets weren't even there. Don't ask me what kind of animal doesn't recognize its own dead. Then I kept some of those first packets down in the basement, to see if they'd change over time, but they didn't. The suits keep whatever's inside from decomposing more, I guess.

Now I bury them. I've got forty acres here. I don't know what I'll do when my land gets filled in. Go out into the desert, I guess, and try to find places where people won't see me, places that aren't likely to get developed. Who knows what would happen if a backhoe sliced through one of those suits? None of the ones I've buried have ever gotten dug up by coyotes. I guess the cucumbers, dead or alive, are as invisible to coyotes as they are to the government. And as far as I know, the government hasn't seen me digging, either. I don't dig any time I can see or hear planes or 'copters, not that that's any guarantee.

For a while at the beginning I thought maybe the cucumbers really were invisible, thought I was having hallucinations, losing it over Nancy Ann. I drove into Reno a bunch of times to use the Internet at the library—I won't have a computer here because I don't trust the government not to spy on what I'm looking up—and did research, trying to find out if anyone else was reporting space aliens who looked like sea cucumbers. Nothing. I keep checking, every six months or so, but if other people are getting visits, I've never found any sign of it. I've read about crop circles and UFO abductions and all kinds of damnfool things, but never anything about singing cucumbers in plastic suits who turn into mush.

After a few visits, I wasn't scared of them anymore. They're nothing if not predictable. Every five or six weeks I wake up and open the door and find a couple or three on my welcome mat. I've never seen any bright lights in the middle of the night, or heard anything; I just open the door and there they are. And they hop into the house, and forty-eight hours later, give or take an hour, they start singing. They sing for three to seven minutes, and within an hour after that, they go gravy.

Sometimes I wonder what my life would be like if they'd never started coming. Would I still be living here? Would I have taken all the money I've made and moved to Hawaii, the way Nancy Ann and I always planned? Would I have taken that trip around the world I dreamed about when I was a kid? As it is, three or four times a year I take off for a week or two, always right after the latest cucumbers have gone gravy. I go someplace fancy, someplace that might as well be a different planet—New York or New Orleans or Bermuda—and I live it up. Good hotels, good food, high-class

hookers. Those women like me. I tip well, and I treat them like human beings. They don't have to worry that I'll get ugly on them, and I don't have to worry that they'll break my heart. Works out for everybody. I could use Nevada hookers too, of course, the legal ones, and sometimes I do, but it feels less like a vacation that way.

I enjoy those trips. But I always come back home, because I always know another batch of cucumbers will be landing on my welcome mat.

I've learned what they like over the years, or I think I have. They like heat: they shake and shiver less the closer they are to the wood stove, or something else warm. I don't like having them in my living room for anyone to see, so early on I covered up the windows in the den and got some heavy-duty space heaters in there, the most powerful ones I could find at Home Depot. I figure the cucumbers wouldn't move close to things that made them shake less unless shaking less meant they were comfortable or happy, so I started paying attention to what else makes them shake. I feel itchy when they shake; it's like watching someone about to sneeze. They're happier on soft things than on the floor, so I used to cover the floor of the den with pillows, but then one time I had an old black-and-white polka-dot beanbag chair and the cucumber sitting on that shook less than the ones on the pillows did. I experimented, moving them around—I felt fine picking them up by then—and all of them seemed to like the beanbag chair better, although some of them shook a little more on it than others did. They seem to have individual tastes, although I can't tell them apart to look at them.

So I went to Wal-Mart—no sense buying fancy when budget will do—and bought a bunch of beanbag chairs. One of them was a really ugly day-glo pink, and I found out the cucumbers liked that better than the other colors, so I went back to Wal-Mart, but they were out of pink ones. They had day-glo orange and yellow and green, so I got those. The cucumbers love those day-glo beanbags. They seem to have different favorite colors, so when they get here I have to spend some time moving them around to see which one likes which color. But all of them like the day-glo chairs better than anything else.

The walls are another thing. Most of my house is decorated with Penthouse Pets and some Playboy pictures. That started as revenge after Nancy Ann left, but I kept doing it, because it makes me happy. Those women are even more beautiful than the hookers I hire, who can't always arrange perfect lighting. But the cucumbers hate those pictures. Once I held one up to my favorite Penthouse Pet, as a kind of joke, and that cuke started shaking like it was about to explode. I tried it with a few others: same thing. Maybe they think naked humans look repulsive, the way lots of people would think the cucumbers themselves do.

So I drove into the library and got out a bunch of art books and started showing them pictures. They don't have eyes that I can tell, but if you hold a picture up to any place along the middle of the cucumber, it will respond. French painters, that's how they voted. Especially Matisse and Monet. So now I've got Matisse and Monet posters all over the walls of the den. I think those pictures are about as exciting as watching paint dry, and they seriously clash with the day-glo beanbags, not that I'm Martha Stewart. But when I put the cucumbers in that room now, they hardly shake at all.

Of course, there's always the chance I'm wrong about all of it. If there's anything I've learned, it's that you can't trust appearances, even in your own species. I loved Nancy Ann, and I thought she loved me. She was as beautiful as a Penthouse Pet, and she was smart and funny and taught me how to cook. I loved her even after she got religion; I loved her even after she started telling me that I was going to go to hell for cursing and growing pot and reading *Penthouse,* even when she said I was possessed by the devil. I figured she was saying all those mean things because she loved me too and didn't want me to go to hell, and even though I didn't believe in hell and never have, I tried to make her happy. I didn't shut down my business, of course, because we needed the money if we were going to move to Hawaii, which was what Nancy Ann wanted. She had expensive tastes, anyway: diamonds and perfume and a new sports car every couple of years. She cut down on some of that stuff after she got religion, I'll give her that. She said showiness was the sin of pride. Since she seemed serious about it, I tried to curse less, and I canceled my *Penthouse* subscription for a while, and I even went to church with her a couple of times, to hear the Reverend Jebediah Wilkins bellow about Jesus and Satan and hellfire and how we had to *tithe* to the *Lord* if we wanted to be *saved,* hallelujah, while people nodded and moaned and said, "Oh yes, tell it brother," all around us.

That church was the scariest thing I've ever seen, much worse than space cucumbers could ever be. But I tried to love Nancy Ann through all of it, I really did. And I thought she was trying to love me too. And then one day I came home from a trip to town, where I'd just bought her some of her favorite perfume, because it was her birthday and she deserved something nice on her birthday, even if it would have been pride any other time. And I found all her things gone and a note on the kitchen table saying she wouldn't be back, because she'd found true love with Jebediah Wilkins. She said she'd be praying for me, oh yes she would, praying that I'd change my sinful ways before the Lord struck me down and I burned in hellfire forever.

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So naturally I was not happy to have a preacher at my front door, staring at a space cucumber staggering in circles around my living room. The one time I've got unwanted company, and that's when the cucumbers have to go and do something different. I wish I could say I handled the whole thing calmly, but I didn't. I flat-out panicked. I'm not sure I've ever moved that fast before; I got the chain off the door and grabbed Humphreys and yanked him inside, and grabbed my gun off the shelf and aimed it at him. "The safety's still on," I said, raising my voice over the cucumbers' singing, "but if you do anything funny, it won't be, I'll blow your head off, I swear to God—"

Humphreys held his hands up and tried to say something, but it came out as a squeak. He was shaking worse than the cucumbers ever have, and I knew the cucumber behind me was too, although I couldn't turn around to look,

because I had to keep an eye on Humphreys. Don't ask me what I thought he was going to do: go to the government, or start raving about Satan and try to burn my house down. All I knew was that I couldn't let him leave, once he'd seen the cucumber, and I'd never killed a man before and didn't want to, but I had no idea how else I was going to get out of this one, except that Sam was expecting Humphreys back with the crop and if Humphreys didn't come back Sam would call the police and—

You can see how clearly I was thinking. About all I could figure was that I was doomed. I couldn't see any way out that didn't involve a jail cell or worse.

Humphreys found his voice, then. "Please," he said. "Welly, don't shoot me. I don't—I don't—"

It occurred to me right then that if I could get that cucumber back into the den, where it belonged, maybe I could convince him he'd just been seeing things. And he'd just bought a quarter bag from me, which made him a felon too. He wouldn't want his flock to know about that, except Sam. Preachers may be hypocrites, but most of them try to hide it. I had some leverage here.

I started calming down. The cucumber in the living room stopped singing, too, so it was a little easier to think. "Sit down," I said. "Right there. With your back to the wall." He did, just slid down that wall with his hands still up, and I said, "If you don't move, you'll be fine. Got it?" He nodded, his eyes still big, but he was watching me and the gun, not the cucumber. "Close your eyes," I said, and he did—he was still shaking, you'd better believe it—and I backed up, keeping the gun on him, and scooped that crazy lost cucumber back under my arm so I could take it back into the den.

But it picked that very instant to go *sploosh*, and Humphreys' eyes flew open at the extra noise—I guess he couldn't help it—and he saw that bag of cucumber gravy, and he turned green and gulped and whatever he'd had to eat that day came back up, all over his lap and my carpet. While he was heaving I backed up quick and opened the door to the den and tossed the gravy bag inside, and slammed the door shut again. I don't know if Humphreys saw that or not; he was busy reviewing the contents of his stomach. When he'd finished losing his breakfast he looked up at me, his face wet the way it gets after you've thrown up, and said, "I'm sorry. I really am sorry. I'll clean it up. If you bring me some soap and water and some rags—"

"Never mind that," I said. "I'll clean it up myself. You just get out of here, Reverend. You get out of here and bring Sam his medicine. You didn't see anything unusual, you hear me?"

He shook his head. "What *was* that?"

"It wasn't anything." One of the other cucumbers stopped singing, and I said, "You haven't seen or heard anything. Go on home, now." He just looked at me. The third cucumber shut up, so the house was very quiet, all of a sudden. I still had the gun trained on Humphreys; the safety was still on. I clicked it off and said, "Reverend, you need to go home now."

He swallowed. He'd stopped shaking. When he spoke again, his voice was a lot calmer than it had been before. "Mr. Smith, I've been in front of guns before. The worst you can do to me is kill me. I have to know one thing: that—that creature I didn't see, is it dangerous?"

"Something you didn't see can't be dangerous, Reverend. Go home."

He shook his head again. "I wish that were true, but it's not. What we pretend not to see is what harms us. And if anyone's in danger—"

"Nobody's in danger but you, Reverend." I was starting to panic again. This guy wasn't going to let himself be convinced that the cucumber had just been his imagination. "As far as I know, the creature you didn't see isn't dangerous to anybody. Now go home!"

He just looked at me. He looked very sad. "If it's not dangerous, then why did you kill it?"

I lost it, then. Everything piled into my head in that one instant: how Nancy Ann had told me I was evil and how she'd left me even though I tried to make her happy, and all the work I'd done over the years to try to keep those cucumbers comfortable, to keep them from shaking. Jim Humphreys didn't understand a single goddamn thing. "I *didn't* kill it! It just died! That's what they do! They die! That's how they die! They've been coming here to die for ten years and you don't know a single thing about it, but you think you know everything, don't you? You think those creatures are the minions of Satan and you think I'm going to hell for taking care of them and for having pictures of naked women on the walls and for selling pot, and you think you can come in here and—"

"Welly!" he said. He sounded like I'd hit him over the head with one of those beanbag chairs. "Welly, if I thought you were going to hell for selling marijuana, why would I have come here to buy some for Sam?"

"How do I know? So you could preach to me about it! So you could preach to Sam and tell him he's going to hell! He probably confessed that he'd been smoking because he's dying and scared for his soul, because you people have your hooks in him just like you got them into my wife. I bet you smoke yourself, don't you? I bet you stand up every Sunday and preach about how drugs are a sin and everybody has to give you their money so they'll be saved, and then you come out here and spend that money on pot for yourself. All those fives and singles came from the collection plate, didn't they? Little old ladies giving you their last dollar and then you turn around and spend it on—"

"It's Sam's money," Jim Humphreys said. "The marijuana's for him, Welly. You can call and ask him. I have a phone in the car."

"I'm not done!" I said. "You just listen to me." It felt awfully good to yell at him like that, to have a man on the floor in front of me and to be able to point a gun at him and tell him exactly what I thought of him and have him not be able to do anything about it. It felt better than anything had felt in a long time. "I know about you people! Don't think I don't! I know how you ministers act in the pulpit, trying to scare ordinary folks who are just trying to get by and do the best they can, and then you turn around and you run off with people's wives after you've had the goddamned fucking nerve to make all that noise about the devil! Your kind think they're better than the rest of the world, don't they? Don't

they, Reverend? You think you can tell me everything about who I am and how I should live my life, like you've got God in your pocket. Your people think that all they have to do to be saved is to put somebody else down—"

"My people," said Jim Humphreys, very quietly, "believe in welcoming all strangers as Christ." I squinted at him, because I couldn't believe how calm he was, and he said, "Even strangers who aren't human. I don't think I need to tell you anything about that, Welly. I think you've been welcoming strangers as Christ for—what did you say? Ten years? And if you're doing a better job with them than you're doing with me, well, that's because you think I'm not a stranger. You think you know who I am. But you're wrong, Welly. I'm a stranger, too."

I was ashamed, then, of how good I'd felt when I was yelling at him. And then I got angry again because he'd made me ashamed, which was what Nancy Ann and Jebediah had always tried to do. "High and mighty, aren't you? I bet you think I'm the scum of the earth—"

"I think you're scared," he said. "I think that if I were in your place, I'd be scared too. And I think it must be awfully hard, having to watch things die like that for ten years, without being able to talk to anybody about it."

I got a lump in my throat when he said that. It shocked me, because I hadn't cried since Nancy Ann left, and I was damned if I was going to start in front of this preacher. "It's not like that," I said. "It's not like I know them. They all look the same and they all die the same way, and I don't know how to talk to them. This is where they come and I do the best for them I can, but I don't get attached, Reverend. So don't get all sentimental."

He smiled, sitting there on the floor in his own puke. "All right. I won't. But would you mind if I cleaned up the floor here?"

Kicking him out hadn't worked. I might as well let him clean up his own mess. "Go on," I said, and used the gun to wave him into the kitchen. "Bucket and rags are under the sink." I watched while he filled the bucket with soapy water and carried it back into the living room and knelt down and cleaned up the mess. He did a good job; he was careful about it. When he was done he took everything back into the kitchen and rinsed it all out, and then he put a little clean water in the bucket and turned around and looked at me.

"Welly, I'd like to—may I visit your guests? May I see them?"

What the hell. He knew too much already; I wasn't going to get anywhere by trying to keep it from him. And I was starting to be curious about what he'd think of them, frankly. And I guess I wanted him to see that I wasn't just killing them. He'd struck a nerve there I didn't even know I had.

I looked at my watch. We had twenty-five minutes before the others went gravy, max, if they hadn't already. I didn't know what had gotten into the one who ran into the living room. Maybe it was crazy or extra sick, or maybe the cucumbers were about to start pulling new tricks on me, in which case I couldn't count on anything.

"I don't know if the others are still alive," I said. "They may have gone gr—they may have died while we were out here. When they sing like that, it means they're going to die pretty soon. So they may look like that other one, now. I'm just warning you."

"Thank you," he said. "I think I'll be fine now."

So I took him into the den. It was way too hot in there, with the space heaters, but that's how the cucumbers like it. I still had the gun with me, just in case Humphreys tried to pull something. The other two cucumbers were still solid. I'd never taken a gun into the den before and I was a little worried about how they'd respond, if they'd start shaking again, but they didn't even seem to notice.

Jim Humphreys had a plan, you could tell. He didn't pay attention to anything in that room except those two solid cucumbers. He got down on his knees right away and started muttering and waving his hands over the water in the bucket. Then he dipped his hand in the water and used it to make a sign of the cross on each cucumber—which was awfully brave, really, since it had taken me months to be comfortable touching them, but I guess he'd seen that I was okay after picking that other one up—and mumbled some more.

"Look at you," I said. I didn't know whether to be impressed or disgusted. "You talk about welcoming all strangers as Christ and here you are trying to do an exorcism—"

He looked up at me, looking shocked. "Oh, no!" Then he looked a little sheepish. "Emergency baptisms. Although it's somewhat the same thing." He rocked back on his heels and stood up and said, "Now what?"

I shrugged. "Now nothing. Now they have"—I checked my watch—"maybe fifteen minutes left."

He looked at his watch, too. "May I wait here with them? Would that be all right?"

"I don't see why not," I said. He nodded and sat down on the floor, and I sat on the polka-dot beanbag chair. "All right, Reverend. You tell me this. If all strangers are Christ already, why do they have to be baptized?"

Humphreys smiled. "You should be a theologian. That's a good question. Mainly because it's what I know how to do, and it makes me feel better."

"Huh! You think it'll do them any good?"

"I have no idea. I don't see how it can hurt them." He looked around the room, then, up at the walls, and raised his eyebrows. "Matisse?"

"They like Matisse. Or I think they do. Don't ask me, Reverend. I don't know a damn thing. I do this and I do that, and I find chairs I think they like, and I say they're dying, but I could be wrong about all of it. They're not from around here. They're not dogs or cats; they're not the same kind of animal we are at all. I try to keep them still and happy, but maybe when they're still that means they're in pain. Maybe I've been torturing them all this time without meaning to. Maybe they're invading Earth and I'm the one making it possible, and in another ten years all these dead aliens are going to come back to life and take over the world."

He listened to me, his face still and serious. "Yes. It's hard, isn't it, not knowing if we're doing the right thing? I don't think any of us ever know, not really. We do the best we can, and we pray to do more good than harm, but we

have to trust God to see it all, and to sort it all out, and to forgive us when we go wrong."

I looked away from him. "I don't believe in God. No offense."

"None taken, Welly."

"Good. What happened to your ear? I saw you on TV, feeding those bag ladies. That's how I knew who you were, when I saw your ear."

"It's a birth defect. My family didn't have enough money for plastic surgery." He shrugged. "I used to keep my hair long to hide it, but it doesn't bother me anymore. It's a help in my work, frankly. People bring their scars to church. They bring the wounds they want healed, but they're ashamed of them, too. If they can see mine, that makes it easier."

"I'll just bet," I said.

Nancy Ann had a little scar on the inside of her left thigh, high up. It was a birthmark, too, like Humphreys' ear. It didn't take Jebediah very long to see that one, did it?

The second cucumber went *sploosh*, just then, and Humphreys and I both jumped a little. Humphreys didn't puke, this time; he got back on his knees and made another sign of the cross and muttered some more. When he was done I picked up that gravy bag and put it in the corner with the other one, the one I'd tossed back into the den from the living room, and then Humphreys and I sat back down to wait for the third cucumber to go gravy. Five minutes, now.

"Why do you suppose they come here?" he asked me.

"Damned if I know. Maybe they're sick and their people send them away so they won't infect everybody else. Maybe they're dead already when they get here, and Earth's their eternal reward. Now that's scary, isn't it? Maybe when we die we're all going to land on some alien's doorstep, and we just have to hope they'll have comfortable chairs for us and find out what kind of art we like." My heaven will have Lay-Z-Boy recliners and Penthouse Pets, but I wasn't going to tell Humphreys that.

He smiled. "In my father's house are many mansions."

"What?" But the last cucumber went *sploosh*, so I never did find out what Humphreys had been talking about. He did his little praying routine again, and I piled the third cucumber in the corner with the other two.

He looked at the gravy bags, and then at me. "How do you—what do you do with them? Afterwards?"

"I bury them. I've got these things all over my property."

He nodded. "Do you need help?"

"If you're as good with a shovel as you are with a pail, I could use the help, Reverend. Thank you."

So we piled the gravy bags into my pickup, and I threw a tarp over them and loaded up a couple of shovels, and then I drove out to the next gravesite. I've been keeping track of where the cucumbers are, so I can pick a fresh place each time. I brought the gun with me, but that was in case we ran into snakes or something: I wasn't worried about Humphreys anymore, not that way.

He was good with a shovel, strong and fast. He hadn't always been a preacher, you could tell. He'd done manual labor someplace. Watching him dig, I started to get curious. When we stopped to take a break, I said, "So when were you in front of guns before?"

"In Africa." He wiped the sweat off his face. "In Zaire, back during the eighties. A group of us were rebuilding a church. Mobutu's thugs had burned it down because the clergy were speaking out against the government. And the soldiers came when we were rebuilding, and they lined us up against a wall and threatened to shoot us all. I still don't know why they didn't. They killed plenty of other people, before and after that." His eyes got far away, then, and he said, "All the people I worked with there—they're all dead now."

"That's not right," I said.

"No." He started digging again, and I let him. I know how working with your hands can help, when you're upset about something. I re-roofed the house all by myself, after Nancy Ann left.

We got the cucumbers neatly buried, one to a grave, and Humphreys said a little prayer over each one, and then we got back into the truck to go back into the house. I was worried. I had to figure out what to do about him, and it would have been easier if he'd been easier to hate. "Reverend," I said, "you were right before. I'm scared about what will happen if people find out about what's been going on out here."

"I'm not going to tell them," he said. "This is under the seal of clerical confidentiality, Welly. I take that very seriously."

I didn't know if I could believe him or not. I wanted to, but that's not the same thing. "I just hope I can trust you, Reverend."

"I hope you'll learn that you can. I can't expect you to, yet. You've only known me a few hours. Earning trust takes longer than that."

I grunted. That was a better answer than a lot of other people would have given. "Well, listen, you let me know when Sam dies."

"He may not die, not for a long time. We have to hope the chemo will work. We have to hope he'll be healed. But if he dies, certainly, I'll call you." Humphreys smiled. "He'll be having a church service, I have to warn you."

"Call me anyway." We were back at the house. I stopped the truck and said, "You left that bag inside, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did."

"Wait here. I'll get it for you. I'll be right back out."

The paper lunch sack was still sitting in the hallway, next to where Humphreys had gotten sick. It was wet from the soapy water he'd used. I threw the old sack away and got a fresh one, and then for good measure I threw another eighth into the plastic bag. I knew Sam would notice, and that kind of gesture's good for business, if you don't do it very often. I guess it was my way of gambling that he'd stay alive. And if he mentioned it to Humphreys, maybe the

Reverend would be more likely to keep his mouth shut.

I took the sack back out and handed it to Humphreys. "I have something for you, too," he said, and gave me his business card. "Call me if you ever want to talk, about anything at all. You can call me any time. Both my home number and the church number are on there."

"Kind of you," I said, although I was thinking, *when hell freezes over.* "Thank you, Reverend."

"You're welcome, Welly."

He held out his hand, and I shook it, and then he got back into his car and drove away. I watched his car until it disappeared, and then I went back into the house. I almost threw the business card away, but something made me toss it into one of my kitchen drawers instead. Don't ask me what. It wasn't like I planned on calling him. It was just a superstitious thing, maybe like what he'd said about the emergency baptisms. Having his business card probably wasn't going to help me, but it couldn't hurt, either.

I was hot, from all that digging. I opened the fridge and got out a beer and drank it down in one gulp. Then I got my cell phone and took it into the living room, and sat back in my recliner and started dialing the phone company.

About the Authors

Nancy Kress is the author of eighteen books: three fantasy novels, seven SF novels, two thrillers, three collections of short stories, one YA novel, and two books on writing fiction. She is perhaps best known for the "Sleepless" trilogy, which began with *Beggars in Spain*. The novel was based on a Nebula- and Hugo-winning novella of the same name; the series then continued with *Beggars and Choosers* and *Beggars Ride*. The trilogy explores questions of genetic engineering, social structure, and what society's "haves" owe its "have-nots." In 1996 Kress temporarily switched genres to write *Oaths and Miracles*, a thriller about Mafia penetration of the biotech industry. This was followed in 1998 by *Stinger*, about the introduction of a genetically-engineered and very nasty form of malaria into Maryland. Her most recents books are *Yanked!*, a YA time-travel novel, and *Beaker's Dozen*, a well-received collection of short stories. Just out is a new novel, *Probability Moon*. Like much of Kress's fiction, this novel is concerned with the genetic foundations of human behavior. Unlike recent work, however, *Probability Moon* takes place off-world, and includes such grand old SF tropes as aliens and a space war. Kress's short fiction has appeared in all the usual places. She has won three Nebulas: in 1985 for "Out of All Them Bright Stars," in 1991 for the novella version of "Beggars in Spain" (which also won a Hugo), and in 1998 for "The Flowers of Aulit Prison." She has also lost over a dozen of these awards. Her work has been translated into Swedish, French, Italian, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Polish, Croatian, Lithuanian, Romanian, Japanese, and Russian. In addition to writing fiction, Kress regularly teaches at various places, including Clarions East (University of Michigan) and West (Seattle). She has also taught summer writing conferences in Cleveland, Ohio; Rochester, New York; and Juneau, Alaska. She is the monthly "Fiction" columnist for *Writer's Digest* magazine, which she regards as a sort of extension of teaching. In a former life she was a copywriter for Xerox, Bausch & Lomb, and various other corporations. She now lives in Maryland with her husband, Charles Sheffield, who also writes science fiction.

Tim Lebbon was born in London in 1969, but spent much of his childhood in Devon. Unlike most writers who seem to change their jobs as often as their underwear, he's had only two jobs since he left school, the second of which still drags on day after interminable day... He has been writing seriously for around ten years, with his first story appearing five years ago in the small press magazine *Psychotrope*. His novel *The Nature of Balance* is due from Leisure Books next October, and a short story collection, *As the Sun Goes Down*, is imminent from Night Shade Books. He also has stories due in the anthologies *Year's Best Fantasy & Horror* (St. Martin's), *Best New Horror* (Gollancz), *October Dreams* (Cemetery Dance), *Children of Cthulhu* (Del Rey), *Last Days* (Bereshith), and *Outside the Cage* (Michael Matthews Publishing), as well as many others. He is currently working on a new novel, *Face*, and short stories and novellas for various markets.

A. M. Dellamonica has been an actor, rape crisis worker, guerilla secretary, piccolo diva, burglar alarm monitor, and theater technician. A resident of Vancouver, British Columbia, she is a student of ki aikido and an avid but inept gardener. Her work has appeared in *Crank!*, *Realms of Fantasy*, and a number of other venues, most recently the Canadian SF anthology *Tesseracts8*. She writes book and software reviews for *SF Weekly* and Amazon.com, and maintains a web site at http://www.sff.net/people/alyx. A member of the Fangs of God writers' workshop, she is currently at work on a novel called *Falling, at Just the Right Angle*.

James P. Blaylock grew up in southern California and, with the exception of some time spent in coastal northern California, he has lived in Orange County all his life. He teaches composition and creative writing at Chapman University; in fact, he has been a writing teacher since 1976, about the same time that he sold his first short story, "Red Planet," to *Unearth* magazine. He has written fourteen novels as well as dozens of short stories, essays, and articles. Among his recent novels are *Night Relics*, an atmospheric ghost story set in the Santa Ana Mountains and the city of Orange; *The Paper Grail*, a foggy and fantastic romance set along the Mendocino coast in northern California; *All the Bells on Earth*, a Faustian mystery that transpires in the old neighborhoods of downtown Orange during a rainy and unusual Christmas season; and *Winter Tides*, a ghost-and-murder mystery set in Huntington Beach. His latest novel, *The Rainy Season*, was published in August of 1999. Blaylock is a two-time winner of the World Fantasy Award, most recently for his short story "Thirteen Phantasms." His story "Unidentified Objects" was included in *Prize Stories 1990: The O. Henry Awards*. His first collection of short fiction will be pulished by Edgewood Press in the summer of this year.

Jeffrey Ford is the author of *The Physiognomy*—winner of the World Fantasy Award and a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year—and *Memoranda*—also a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year. These novels are the first two parts of a trilogy that has now been completed with the publication of *The Beyond* in January 2001. Ford's short fiction

has appeared in *Event Horizon, The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, Space & Time, The Northwest Review,* and *MSS.* His story "At Reparata" was selected for inclusion in the anthology *The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror: Thirteenth Annual Collection,* and "The Fantasy Writer's Assistant," which appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction,* was nominated for a Nebula award in 2001. Presently, he is working on a novel, *The Portrait of Mrs. Charbuque,* for Morrow and a collection of his short stories, *The Fantasy Writer's Assistant and Other Stories,* for Golden Gryphon Press. Both books should be out some time next year. For the past twelve years, he has taught Research Writing, Composition, and Early American Literature at Brookdale Community College in Monmouth County, New Jersey. He lives in Medford Lakes with his wife and two sons.

Andy Duncan, a South Carolina native, has published stories in *Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, Event Horizon, Realms of Fantasy, Starlight 1, Weird Tales,* and Stephen Jones's *Best New Horror* series. His novella "The Executioners' Guild" was a Nebula Award and International Horror Critics Guild Award finalist in 2000; his short story "Beluthahatchie" was a Hugo Award finalist in 1998, the same year he was a finalist for the Campbell Award for Best New Writer. His first book, the collection *Beluthahatchie and Other Stories,* was published in October 2000 by Golden Gryphon Press. He lives with his wife, Sydney, in Tuscaloosa, where he teaches literature, composition, and creative writing at the University of Alabama.

Ursula Kroeber was born in 1929 in Berkeley, California, where she grew up. Her parents were the anthropologist Alfred Kroeber and the writer Theodora Kroeber, author of *Ishi.* She went to Radcliffe College, and did graduate work at Columbia University. She married Charles A. Le Guin, a historian, in Paris in 1953; they have lived in Portland, Oregon, since 1958, and have three children and three grandchildren. Ursula K. Le Guin has written poetry and fiction all her life. Her first publications were poems, and in the 1960s she began to publish short stories and novels. She writes both poetry and prose, and in various modes including realistic fiction, science fiction, fantasy, children's books, books for young adults, screenplays, essays, verbal texts for musicians, and voicetexts for performance or recording. As of the year 2000 she has published over a hundred short stories (collected in eight volumes), two collections of essays, thirteen books for children, five volumes of poetry, two of translation, and seventeen novels. Among the honors her writing has received are a National Book Award, five Hugo Awards, five Nebula Awards, the Kafka Award, a Pushcart Prize, the Howard Vursell Award of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, etc. Her occupations, she says, are writing, reading, housework, and teaching. She is a feminist, a conservationist, and a Western American, passionately involved with West Coast literature, landscape, and life.

Kim Newman was born 1959 in London, brought up in the West Country. Educated at the University of Sussex (English). Moved to London in 1980. Weird kid, became psycho teenager, grew up into maladjusted adult. During the early '80s he was associated with the Sheep Worrying Theatre Group, at the Arts Centre, Bridgwater, and also acted and played the kazoo in a cabaret band, Club Whoopee. Newman claims: "It was wretched." Recently, Club Whoopee reformed for an afternoon and cut a CD album, *Route 666.*

Dr Shade's Laboratory: http://indigo.ie/~imago/newman.html

The Kim Newman/Eugene Byrne Alternate World Page: http://www.angelfire.com/ak2/newmanbyrne.

Steven Utley: "I was born a week and a day after Harry Truman had pulled the rug out from under Thomas Dewey, in the year of the Berlin Airlift and the first full-blown commercial television broadcasts. (For the history-challenged: 1948.) Over the next couple of decades, my parents, including my father, a noncommissioned officer in the Air Force, herded my three siblings and me from place to exotic place (England, Okinawa, Kansas) as part of the Pentagon's master plan to defeat communism. As a child I enjoyed books and old movies and imitatively worked up my own stories both prose and in comic-book form. I broke into print in the seventh grade with a poem about Hannibal (the Carthaginian general, not Samuel L. Clemens's hometown), but it wasn't until my freshman year of high school, when I discovered Mars—the Mars of science fiction's two great romantics, Edgar Rice Burroughs and Ray Bradbury—that I somehow understood that I, too, must grow up to be A Writer, or at least a rich and famous person. Ten years later, I was one! A Writer, I mean. By then (we're up to the early 1970s, in case you've lost track), my family had settled in Tennessee but momentum had carried me clear on into Texas, where I fell in with other young writers, including Lisa Tuttle, Howard Waldrop, and Bruce Sterling, and fell in love with one of them. Whichever one of them it was (accounts vary) enticed me to Austin, then a sort of bohemian paradise and still, in my heart, what every military brat must eventually seek—Home. Nevertheless, Austin having evolved into a replica of Dallas, many of us Austinians (which are not quite the same thing as Texans) are now expatriates living in exotic places such as the Scottish hinterlands and the backwoods of Washington State, or, in my own case, smack on the buckle of the Bible Belt. I lead a quiet life, surrounded as I am by my books and my cats and my dangerously inbred neighbors. All of the above is the truth or as much of it as I'm able to fabricate on the spur of the moment."

Lisa Tuttle has been writing professionally since the 1970s. Winner of the John W. Campbell Award in 1974, she has been crossing genre borders ever since, writing science fiction, horror, fantasy, erotica, and children's fiction. *Windhaven,* her first novel, was written in collaboration with George R. R. Martin and originally published in 1981; it is scheduled to be reissued by Bantam in 2001. Her next two novels, *Familiar Spirit* and *Gabriel,* were horror; *Lost Futures* (1992) was a return to science fiction (although, confusingly, published on a horror list in the US), and *The Pillow Friend* (1996) combined horror and fantasy elements with mainstream literary concerns. Short stories are her

first love. So far, she's had three collections of her own stories published, has edited two anthologies, and has at least thirty more published but as yet uncollected short stories out there. During the past five years Lisa Tuttle has been concentrating mainly on writing for children and young adults, with eight books published so far in Britain. A native of Texas (where she was a founder member of the famous Turkey City group along with Howard Waldrop, Steven Utley, Tom Reamy, Joe Pumilia, and others), Lisa Tuttle went on to spend ten years in London, and now lives in the west highlands of Scotland with her husband and daughter.

Elizabeth Hand grew up in Pound Ridge, New York, next door to the House where D. W. Griffith once lived. In 1975 she moved to Washington, D.C., to study playwriting at Catholic University, where she was expelled after three years (she was eventually re-admitted and received a degree in cultural anthropology). From 1979 to 1986 she worked at the Smithsonian Institution's National Air & Space Museum. After a brief stint with a British defense contractor, in 1988 she left D.C. for the Maine coast, buying a tiny one-room, lakefront cottage with no running water or indoor plumbing (it now has both). Her novels function as imaginary autobiographies, especially the Tiptree & Mythopoeic Award-winning *Waking the Moon* and last year's *Black Light*. Her novella "Last Summer at Mars Hill," set in the fictional analog of a real-life Maine spiritualist community, won both the Nebula and World Fantasy Awards. She is at work on a novel called *The Master Stroke*, and now lives in a bigger, older house within shouting distance of her cottage studio.

Paul Di Filippo, born in 1954, has been a fanatical devotee of the fantastical in literature ever since his early encounters with Doctor Seuss. Despite having sold over 100 short stories, many collected in book form, as well as five novels, he still hopes someday to figure out just what he's doing.

Bruce Sterling is the author of many books, including *The Hacker Crackdown*, *Holy Fire*, *Heavy Weather*, *Distraction*, and most recently *Zeitgeist*. With William Gibson he co-authored the acclaimed novel *The Difference Engine*. He has written for *The New York Times*, *Newsday*, *Whole Earth Review*, *Details*, *Mondo 2000*, *bOING bOING*, *Interzone*, and *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, and is currently a contributing writer to *Wired*. The winner of a Hugo (for the novelette "Bicycle Repairman"), he is currently working on a non-fiction book about beauty, truth, and technology which should appear in late 2001. He lives with his wife and two daughters in Austin, Texas.

Michael Cassutt has been writing and producing award-winning television since 1985. He was co-executive producer of the Showtime revival of *The Outer Limits*, which won the CableACE for best drama series in 1995. Actor Beau Bridges and director Stuart Gillard were also honored for their work in the two-hour premiere *Outer Limits* episode, "Sandkings," which was later released as a film. Among his other credits: staff writer for *The Twilight Zone* (CBS, 1986), story editor for the acclaimed *Max Headroom* series (ABC, 1987, more recently re-run on the Sci-Fi channel), and producer for the CBS series *TV-101* (1988-89), for which Cassutt won the Nancy Susan Reynolds Award of the Center for Population Options for a three-part episode called "First Love." Cassutt was also writer and producer for *WIOU*, an ensemble drama starring John Shea and Helen Shaver (CBS, 1990-91), and then for *Eerie, Indiana* (NBC 1991-92). In 1992-93 Cassutt was producer and writer for the ABC police drama *Sirens*, and also wrote the two-part premier of its syndicated version (1994). He then worked on the first season of *The Outer Limits*. Most recently Cassutt was co-executive producer for the FBC drama *Strangeluck* (1995-96) and consulting producer on *Beverly Hills, 90210* (1997-98) and *Seven Days* (1998-99). He has recently contributed freelance scripts to *Stargate SG-1* and *Farscape*, and has developed scripts based on classic SF by writers such as Arthur C. Clarke, Robert A. Heinlein, Clifford Simak, and Philip Jose Farmer, each one—for different reasons—still unproduced. Cassutt is also a writer of fiction. His historical thriller, *Red Moon*, about the dark side of the space race between America and the Soviet Union, was published by Forge Books in February 2001. His NASA novel *Missing Man* was published in September 1998, to universal praise from such diverse sources as *Publishers Weekly*, *Analog Science Fiction*, and the muckracking *NASA Watch*, which said, "This is a book about loyalty to NASA and loyalty to the truth, and what happens when these issues collide against a backdrop of the risky business of spaceflight and suspicious lethal accidents." Cassutt has published two previous science fiction and fantasy novels, *The Star Country* (Doubleday, 1986) and *Dragon Season* (Tor Books, 1991). With Andrew M. Greeley, he co-edited an anthology of SF-fantasy stories with Catholic themes, *Sacred Visions* (Tor Books, 1991). He is also the author of over two dozen published short stories, most recently "The Longer Voyage" (selected for reprinting in *The Year's Best Science Fiction, 1995*). Cassutt is also an experienced writer of nonfiction, not only contributing articles to such magazines as *Space Illustrated*, *Space World*, and books such as *Magill's Survey of Science: Space Exploration Series*, but as the author of the biographical encyclopedia *Who's Who in Space*. The third edition of *Who's Who in Space* was published in January 1999 by Macmillan Reference. The book contains biographies and photos of seven hundred astronauts and cosmonauts from around the world, for which Cassutt conducted dozens of interviews over a period of ten years. His most recent work in this field is *Deke!: From Mercury to the Shuttle*, the autobiography of the noted astronaut, test pilot, and Apollo program manager Donald K. "Deke" Slayton (Forge Books, 1994). In February 1997 *Deke!* was selected by Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Ronald Fogleman as one of the "essential books" in the library of any Air Force officer. Cassutt is currently working on a book with former Gemini and Apollo astronaut Thomas P. Stafford, and is under contract to write *Deep Black and Air Force Blue: America's Military Manned Space Programs* for the Texas A&M University Press and NASA Centennial of Flight series. Born in Minnesota and raised in Wisconsin, Cassutt attended the University of Arizona in Tucson and

graduated in 1975 with a B.A. in radio-television. He has worked as a disc jockey and radio program director and as a network television executive for CBS. He has been a full-time writer since 1985. He lives in Los Angeles with his wife, Cindy, and two children, Ryan and Alexandra. Visit Michael Cassutt's official website at: http://hometown.aol.com/cass54/michaelcassuttindex.html. His monthly column about science fiction television, "The Cassutt Files," appears on SciFi.com.

Richard Bowes was born in Boston in 1944. In his third year as a freshman, he took a writing course with Mark Eisenstein at Hofstra College. For the last thirty-three years he has lived in New York City and done the usual jumble of things. He began writing speculative fiction in the early 1980s. In 1992 he started publishing stories narrated by the character Kevin Grierson. These eventually became the novel *Minions of the Moon.* One story, "Streetcar Dreams," won a World Fantasy Award. The novel itself won the Lambda Literary Award for best Gay/Lesbian SF/F novel.

Susan Palwick is an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Nevada, Reno,where she teaches writing and literature. Her first novel, *Flying in Place* (New York: Tor Books, 1992 hc, 1993 pb), won the Crawford Award for Best First Fantasy Novel, presented annually by the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts. The Japanese translation was published in 1997 by Chikuma Shobo. Her second novel, *Shelter*, is currently under contract to Tor; she expects to complete it in 2001. Aside from the stories listed in her bibliography, she also has a memoir, "The Passing of Parents," forthcoming in the Fall/Winter 2000 issue of *The Texas Review.*

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