

The War Against the Chtorr: Book Three

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A Rage for Revenge

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David Gerrold

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for Frank Robinson, with love

Author's Introduction

I am going to break Rule Two.

Rule One is: Never bore the audience.

Rule Two: Never explain your work. Especially don't explain it, before.

I am now going to break Rule Two. Flagrantly.

This particular episode of The War Against The Chtorr includes a number of chapters of heavily didactic material. I am concerned that some of this material may need to be annotated. I would hope that I am wrong, but for reasons that should become abundantly clear long before you get to the end of the book, I choose to err on the side of caution.

This book is didactic. It needs to be didactic.

There is nothing inherently right or wrong in a book being didactic-although some critics and reviewers have taken the position that didacticism in a work of fiction is only slightly more offensive than spitting on the Madonna. The truth is that didacticism is only a description, not a judgment; it is not a quality that can be assigned rightness or wrongness. The use of the didactic technique, however, can be judged either clumsy or exquisite, and that is a judgment that is always appropriate for people who need to have opinions about other people's opinions. My dictionary defines "didactic" this way:

1. intended for instruction.

2. preaching or moralizing.

Both definitions of the word are appropriate to this work. This is your warning. This book preaches and moralizes. It is also intended for instruction.

And therein lies the danger.

(Bear with me. This is going to take some explaining.)

In books one and two of this series, A Matter For Men and A Day For Damnation, the hero of the narrative, Jim McCarthy, has encountered several graduates of a course called The Mode Training. In the context of the stories, it is apparent that The Mode Training is a well-known and somewhat respected course, though not without its skeptical observers and detractors.

In book three of this series, the book you are holding now, McCarthy participates in the six-week course called The Mode Training.

I want this to be absolutely clear:

There is no such thing as The Mode Training. It is a fictitious course.

It does not exist.

It is not based on any specific course of instruction that I know of that is available anywhere on Earth.

The Mode Training, the name as well as the idea behind it, is copyright to me, David Gerrold, 1988. It is not for sale. It is not for rent. It is not for lease. The course is not available under any circumstances. I have no intention of authorizing such a course. It is a fiction and I intend that it remain so. This is the most responsible position that I can take in regard to a totally fictitious seminar series.

I say that because I do not want anyone-especially unqualified charlatans-setting up any kind of course based on this work. I have extrapolated this "technology of consciousness" as a place for the reader to visit only so that he or she may consider its nature. By no means should anyone consider The Mode Training as a real or even as a possible event.

(I particularly do not want to attend a science fiction convention and discover to my horror that someone has appointed himself a "Foreman" and is charging \$5 a head to abuse an unsuspecting audience. Worse, I do not want anyone to think that such an experience validates them as an enlightened human being. If enlightenment were that easy-well, never mind; that's a whole other story.)

Let me also take this opportunity to discuss the source material for The Mode Training.

First, let me tell you what it is not bawd an,

The Mode Training is not based on Lifespring, Summit, Insight, Esalen, The Experience, or any other workshop, course, or seminar series. It is not derived from Dianetics, Scientology, The Rosicrucians, Silva Mind Control, Science of Mind, or any other religious study.

However, the extrapolation of such a course as The Mode Training is based on the fact that such courses as the ones listed above do exist. In fact, only a few years ago, the United States Army was investigating the possibility of adapting or including the est training as part of its basic training procedures for new recruits. That triggered this thought: What would a military version of est be like? No, forget est for a minute-that carries connotations that I don't want attached to this idea. But do consider this: What would a nation be like if its process of education was not one of indoctrination, but training? What if human beings could actually be trained to succeed-not only in their personal lives, but in their larger responsibilities to family, nation, and species? What would it be like to live among such people?

I was fascinated with the thought, intrigued by the idea of a nation training itself to be responsible. It was a remarkable question to consider. What will the next step in the evolution of human consciousness look like?

It was early in the writing of this book that I realized that it was not sufficient to extrapolate simply the alien ecology of the Chtorr; I also had to extrapolate a believable future for the Earth. It is unacceptable for a novel of the future to demonstrate only the technological advances that could occur in the next fifty years; a truly visionary novel must also explore the spiritual and psychological shifts that are possible, and how they might have come about.

I have to acknowledge that the question demanded considerable research into a number of courses, seminars, workshops, and even a couple of cults. I was looking for the underlying principles behind their ability to produce results. I became fascinated by the philosophical as well as the psychological underpinnings of many of these courses, and the astute reader may notice the occasional sideways reference here and there; however, no specific influence should be considered the sole source material or foundation for The Mode Training.

If anything, The Mode Training is nothing more than the study of Zen, as taught by a rather savage Socratic dialogue.

I make no claims that The Mode Training is anything more than the extrapolation of a possibility. That's all that it has ever been intended to be.

It is not an opinion.

It is not a prediction.

It is not a warning.

It is only an extrapolation. I like to play with ideas. I was interested in the idea of a "Mode Training" and I took it as far as I could for the sheer fun of seeing how far I could take it. Anyone who tries to read anything deeper into the Mode chapters will only be making an ass of himself.

Which brings me to my last point:

Please do not assume that because something is written in this book or in this series, that I endorse it or that it represents my personal philosophy. It may; equally, it may not. I have deliberately written much into these books that I disagree with, if for no other reason than to confound critics and academics, but primarily because you cannot have an interesting argument unless both sides get a fair hearing. In either case, armchair analysts will be on much safer ground to assert that my characters have seized the responsibility of speaking for themselves and their own concerns.

If you find the didactic parts of this book to be disturbing, troublesome, or annoying, then please consider them to be successful. They will have accomplished their job; because that is exactly what they were intended to do.

--David Gerrold , Hollywood, 1988

THANK YOU:

Dennis Ahrens, Seth Breidbart, Jack Cohen, Richard Curtis, Diane Duane, Richard Fontana, Bill Glass, Harvey and Johanna Glass, David Hartwell, Robert and Ginny Heinlein, Don Hetsko, Karen Malcor, Susie Miller, Jerry Pournelle, Michael St. Laurent, Rich Sternbach, Tom Swale, Linda Wright, Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, Howard Zimmerman.

Chtorr (ktor), n. 1. The planet Chtorr, presumed to exist within 30 light-years of Earth. 2. The star system in which the planet occurs; possibly a red giant star, presently unidentified. 3. The ruling species of the planet Chtorr; generic. 4. In formal usage, either one or many members of the ruling species of the planet Chtorr; a Chtorr, the Chtorr. (See Chtor-ran) 5. The glottal chirruping cry of a Chtorr.

Chtor-ran (ktoi in), adj. 1. Of or relating to either the planet or the star system, Chtorr. 2. Native to Chtorr. n. 1. Any creature native to Chtorr. 2. In common usage, a member of the primary species, the (presumed) intelligent life form of Chtorr. (pl. Chtor-rans)
-The Random House Dictionary of the English Language Century 21 Edition, unabridged.

Mo-die (mo de), n., (colloq.) 1. Any person who has totally immersed himself in Mode Training Seminars. 2. A member of the American Modal Movement. 3. Anyone who is dedicated to quasi-religious, personal development seminars; generally used as an epithet. (pl. Mo-dies)
-The Random House Dictionary of the English Language Century 21 Edition, unabridged.

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A limerick of classic proportion
should have meter and rhyme and a portion
of humor quite lewd
and a frightfully crude
impossible sexual contortion.

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? 1 ?

The Spider

"Design flaws travel in herds."

-Solomon Short

"Don't move!" I said it very softly.

"Huh-?" The kid came crashing through the bushes behind me.

"And don't talk!"

The spider was nearly twice as tall as a man. It looked confused. It stood in the center of a grassy clearing, turning itself hesitantly this way and that. It was a dark oblate shape poised motionless on six gangly legs. It hadn't seen us yet, but its big black eyes were swiveling back and forth in a restless, searching motion. It was looking for the source of the sound; we'd surprised it. I wondered if we could fade quietly back into the bushes. Alone, I could have done it

"What is it?" the kid blurted.

All four of the spider's eyes came jerking around to focus on us. "Shit." I touched the phonebox on my belt and punched CONTROL. "This is JIMBO. I've got a spider. I think it's rogue."

The phone spoke instantly into my ear. "We copy. Stand by." The spider unslung a torch from beneath its belly and brought the nozzle around to bear on us. Its red lights came on with an angry glare and it spoke with a hard metal voice. "FREEZE WHERE YOU ARE!"

The phone spoke into my ear again. "What model?"

I replied as softly as I could manage. "I can't see the serial number. But it's one of the big ones. A Robinson. Vigilante, I think. Industrial chassis. Looks like a riot-control model; it's armored and it's got police fixtures. And . . . yes, military ordnance."

"PUT YOUR HANDS ON YOUR HEADS!" the spider ordered. "TAKE THREE STEPS FORWARD!"

"We copy that too," said the phone emotionlessly.

"And it looks like it's been wounded. It's got scorch marks, scratches, and a couple bad dents. And it's moving slower than it should." I wondered who-or what-had put those dents in it. The phone didn't respond.

"PUT YOUR HANDS ON YOUR HEADS! TAKE THREE STEPS FORWARD!"

"Sir-?" the kid quavered. "Shouldn't we do as it says?"

I nodded. "Very . . . slowly." I took a step forward. Then another. And a third. I brought my hands up slowly. I glanced sideways to see what the kid was doing. "Don't. Try. Anything."

"Uh-huh," the kid gulped. He looked like he was about to faint. I hoped he wouldn't. It might be fatal. The spider was studying us with a full sensory scan. There was something wrong with its brain. It was taking too long and it kept repeating its movements.

My phone reported, "Be very careful! You were right. It is a Vigilante-it's one of the hypered ones. It fell out of the net three weeks ago, we don't know why. And it won't respond to recall. What's it doing now?"

"Looking us over. But it's taking too long."

"It can't make up its mind if you're friend or foe. It probably can't read your dogtags."

"Shit. Have you got an override code?"

"We're not sure when it went down, so we don't know what its codes were at the time of the event. It might still be updating-or it might have locked down when the channel broke."

"And the bad news is . . . ?" I prompted.

"You get to choose which code you want to try. You only get one guess."

There wasn't time to think. I said, "Give me the override code operative at its last contact."

"Right."

"LOWER YOUR WEAPONS SLOWLY!" the spider bellowed. The phone spoke syllables into my

ear.

"Say again?"

"LOWER YOUR WEAPONS SLOWLY!"

I unhitched my rifle from my shoulder and slid it very slowly to the grass. I shrugged out of my backpack too and stepped carefully away from it. . . .

The phone was repeating the override code a third time. "Did you get that?"

"Got it." If the spider was still talking, we had a chance.

I took a step forward. The huge machine rebalanced itself, refocusing and readying its weaponry suspiciously. I spoke loudly and clearly. "Code: Zero. Niner. Charlie. Apple. Six. Emergency override. Priority Alpha."

"STAY WHERE YOU ARE!"

I repeated the code. Louder this time. "Emergency override. Priority Alpha."

The spider beeped. It clicked. Then it requested in a more courteous tone, "Password?"

My mouth was so dry it hurt. We'd gotten first-level recognition-but that didn't mean anything, not if we had the wrong password. I cleared my throat.

"Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty."

"Password?" the spider repeated.

"Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty."

"What is the password?" the spider asked impatiently. "You have ten seconds."

Oh, God. What if its recognition functions were damaged? I stretched the middle finger of my right hand across the back of my left toward the panel on my wrist. "Eternal vigilance-" I nudged the arming button. "-is the price of liberty."

This time the spider hesitated. Thinking about it? One touch of my finger . . . and I might be able to make that spider really angry. Damn. It was too heavily armored. The rockets in the backpack might stop a worm; they couldn't handle this. The best I could do was wound the thing-and maybe buy enough time for an escape.

The question was--could I outrun a four-meter Vigilante spider in hot pursuit?

I did not feel lucky.

Abruptly, the spider beeped and said, "Password accepted."

"Command:" I said. "Disable for inspection. Now."

The spider hesitated. "What is the password?" it asked. "You have ten seconds."

Huh?

"Sir-?" asked the kid. "Is it supposed to do that?"

I shook my head. "Shut up." I raised my voice again. "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty."

Again, a long hesitation. "Password accepted."

I thought hard for a moment. The spider would accept the password. Maybe. But it wouldn't accept any other commands. To the phone, I said, "Are you getting all this?"

"We copy," said the voice in my ear. "Stand by. We're looking at options."

"Terrific. So am I." The spider had three flame-throwers, two rocket-launchers, and assorted other frightfulnesses all slung neatly beneath its belly-several of which were targeted at us.

"What is the password?" the spider demanded.

Dammit! The bloody thing was stuck! It could recognize the password, but it couldn't pass that recognition back-so it couldn't get out of the loop. How long did we have before its internal monitor realized it was stuck? Once that happened, it would go on to the next option and no password would be effective.

"Try the next password," whispered the phone.

My nose itched. I wanted desperately to scratch. I didn't dare. I shouted at the giant spider, "Hell hath no fury like a pacifist." The spider swiveled sideways and stopped to consider. "Password accepted," it said.

"What is the password?"

The kid said, "Sir-?"

"Shut the fuck up." I was getting angry. On a hunch, I shouted, "Half of being smart is knowing what

you're dumb at!"

The spider thought about that one too. "Password accepted." Right. It was worse than I thought. The spider recognized everything as a password. But when the accepted phrase didn't match up with the phrase stored in its memory, it had to start all over. It would have been funny-if there weren't two lives at stake.

"What is the password?"

An unlikely thought occurred to me. No, it was a very stupid idea. Still . . .

I called out to the spider, "There was a young man named O'Quinn-" and took a step backward.

"Password accepted. What is the password?" Maybe, just maybe . . .

"With inordinate interest in skin!" I took another step backward. So did the kid. Sideways and backward. Away from the pack. The spider swiveled its cameras to follow us, but said only, "Password accepted."

"His singular goal--" Sideways and backward. "What is the password?"

"When he found a hole . . ." Sideways-"Password accepted."

"Was to do what he could . . . to get in!" -and backward! It was working!

I glanced at the kid. His face was white. "Easy," I whispered. He gulped and nodded.

My phone asked, "What are you doing?"

I ignored it. How far back were the bushes? "There was a young fellow named Howard-" Dare I risk two steps? No. The spider took longer to accept this one. Maybe it knew someone named Howard?

And why hadn't the monitor kicked in? "Who was thought to be magically powered-"

"Password accepted."

I glanced backward. Not too much farther. "His dick was so short-"

"Accepted."

"It looked like a wart-" One more step. I looked to the kid. "Get ready --- "

"What is the password?"

"But when it stood up, it just-" And touched the button on my wrist.

The backpack on the ground exploded. Two rockets smoked straight for the spider. It jerked around to face them. I didn't wait to see if they hit-I rolled backward and into the bushes. The kid was already ahead of me. We crashed through the trees

Behind us, something went off with a roar. A hammer of air slammed us forward. I heard the sound of a torch-the spider was roasting the backpack! And then a siren! It was coming after us!

We tumbled into the Jeep and screeched backward up the hill. "Grab the heavy-launcher!" The kid was already digging in the rear. I found a place to turn around and pointed the Jeep up the road.

"It's following us!" the kid screamed.

I glanced back. The spider was staggering unevenly across the slope with an uncertain, tentative gait.

That spider should have flamed us instantly. Whoever had damaged it had bought us a chance. Its cameras were swiveling frantically back and forth, looking for a target, trying to lock on.

My phone was screaming in my ear; I pulled the headset off and tossed it aside. I put the Jeep on automatic-a dangerous thing to do; it probably wasn't smart enough to track a dirt road- swung into the back and grabbed the heavy-launcher from the kid. "Get out of the way."

I braced myself in the back of the Jeep and took careful aim at the spider. We bounced like a spring. I wished for a steady-sight laser. I had to give the rocket enough time to identify its target and lock on-I hoped to God the spider didn't find us first!

The green light came on. I squeezed the trigger.

The rocket escaped with a whoosh! It arced down the hill, zigzagging back and forth, only turning at the very last moment toward the target. The spider exploded. It disappeared in three-one right after the other-flowering bursts of orange flame, each one larger than the last, all curling into a mushrooming billow of greasy black smoke. We could feel the heat and blast from here. Pebbles and dirt and hot oil spattered down around us.

The Jeep was bumping suddenly across the grass. It had lost the road. I turned to leap forward, but the kid was ahead of me. He was already sliding down into the seat, taking over the controls and bringing us

to a bouncing, spring-banging stop.

We sat there for a moment, just breathing hard and wondering at the surprise of still being alive. The day was bright and cold. The air smelled suddenly sweet-even sweeter for the oily scent of the burning spider behind us.

"Towered?" the kid asked. "The last word is towered?"

I looked over at him.

"Get out of the car," I said.

"Huh?"

"Get out of the car!"

"I don't understand-"

I swung myself over the side of the Jeep, walked around to the driver's side, grabbed the kid by the shirt, and pulled him out of ' his seat as hard as I could. I jerked him rudely across the ground and slammed him hard up against the broken wall of some ; forgotten building. I held him there-my knee braced between his 9 legs, my wrist across his throat, and the barrel of my gun up his left nostril-and lowered my voice. "Your stupidity nearly got us killed," I said. "I told you 'Don't move,' and you came crashing through the bushes like a boar in heat. I told you not to talk and you had to ask why, what was happening? That spider was half blind. We could have faded back into the bushes if you hadn't opened your mouth."

"We got away okay, didn't we-?" he gasped. "Please, Lieutenant, you're hurting me!"

I cocked the pistol and put my face very close to his. His eyes were round with terror. Good. I wanted him awake enough to hear this. "Do you want to be my partner or my enemy?"

"Sir, Please-!"

I leaned on his throat a little harder. "Are you my partner or my enemy?"

"Part-ner," he croaked.

"Thank you." I eased my grip a little; he gasped for air. "So that means when I give an order, you're going to follow it. Right?"

He nodded. "Yes. Sir."

"Immediately-and without question. Right?" He gulped and swallowed and managed to nod. "Do you know why I'm telling you this?"

He shook his head. The sweat was beading on his brow. "Because I'm trying to save your life. I'm assuming, of course, that you are survival-driven. If I'm mistaken in this assumption, please tell me now so I can get out of your way. I promise I won't interfere. You want to die, that's fine by me. I like paperwork. It's nice and safe. But I won't have you endangering my life too."

"Yes . . . sir." His words came hard.

"You remember this and we'll get along just fine, Private. The next time I give you an order you're going to follow it as if your life depends on it-right? Because it does. Because if you don't follow my orders, I'll take your fucking head off, do you hear me?"

"Yessir!"

"And I'm not going to hear any more fucking questions either-isn't that also right? You don't have the right to ask them. You are lower than whale shit. The only answer you need is this one: `Because I'm your superior officer and I say so.' Right?"

"Yessir!"

I let go of him and stepped back, reholstering my pistol. He hesitated, then started tucking his shirt back into his pants. He glared over at me, but didn't speak. There was hatred in his eyes.

"Go ahead, try it," I said. "I know what you're thinking. Go ahead. I don't want there to be any doubt."

He dropped his eyes. He still hated me, but he wasn't going to swing.

He came up at me suddenly, swinging with a roundhouse punch that would have knocked the wind out of me if I had still been there to receive it. I was already stepping back on one foot. I grabbed his arm and pulled, tripping him as he came. He sprawled flat in the dirt and skidded.

I walked over to him, kicked him gently to roll him over on his back, and offered him a hand. He refused it and sat up.

I grinned. "Want to try for two out of three?"

He shook his head.

I offered him my hand again. He refused it again and stood up by himself, brushing himself off. His expression was still smoldering.

"What's your name, Private?"

"McCain," he grumbled. "Jon McCain."

"Well, listen, McCain-" I faced him and realized again how young he was. Sixteen? Fifteen? He really was only a kid. He couldn't even grow a proper mustache-his upper lip just looked dirty-and he needed a haircut. His scraggly brown hair hung down over his forehead, almost hiding his dark shaded eyes. He looked like a hurt little boy.

"It's like this," I said. "Yes, I'm pissed as hell at you. I always get pissed at people who endanger my life. But that's not why I put you up against that wall. That's just the fastest way I know to teach you the kind of obedience that will ensure your survival. You have to trust me, because what you don't know could kill us both. Do you know my record?"

"Yes sir, but-" he caught himself. "May I speak, sir?"

"Go ahead."

"Well . . ." His resentment faded into a lopsided, almost conspiratorial malice. "I just sort of figured you had to be some kind of colossal fuck-up for them to give you this shit detail."

"Thanks for your . . . ah, candor."

"I looked up your record, sir. You've got three Purple Hearts, a Silver Star, a Good Conduct Medal, and eighty million caseys in worm bounties. And, according to the military listings, you're one of the five best field agents in California. You're a real chopperbopper-too good for this job. So, I figured you must have really pissed someone off." His grin was infectious. "That's how I got here. "

"You're half-right," I admitted. "I made a bad guess last year. A lot of people died." I didn't like remembering; I liked talking about it even less. "Anyway, they put me here-where if I made any more mistakes, they'd be a lot more personal. Understand?"

"Sort of."

"Yeah, I don't like it either, but so what? This is the job. Let's get it done. I'll do the best I can. And so will you. Understand?" His grin faded. "And whatever else I might feel about it is none of anybody's goddamn business." I headed back toward the Jeep.

The phone was still yammering on the seat. I picked it up and put the headset to my ear. "JIMBO," I acknowledged. "All clear. No casualties. And your Vigilante has been removed from service." I answered a couple more questions, signed off, and looked over at the kid; he was standing rigidly, a respectful distance away from the Jeep. "What are you waiting for?"

"Your orders, sir," he said crisply.

"Right." I jerked a thumb. "Get in the Jeep and drive." I unclipped the car's terminal and thumbed it to life.

"Yessir."

"McCain-"

"Sir?"

"Don't be a robot. Just be responsible."

"Yes, sir." The kid dropped in behind the wheel, snuck a sideways glance at me, then dropped his rigid manner.

He headed us back toward the main road while I balanced the terminal on my lap and logged the destruction of the Vigilante. The kid waited until I was finished, then said, "Sir? Can I ask you something?"

"Go ahead."

"Well, it's about that spider. I thought those things were only supposed to kill worms."

I nodded. "That was the original programming. But then we started losing units. Renegades were knocking them out and dismantling them for their weaponry, so the army reprogrammed them against guerrillas too. All spiders now assume that any humans in a free-fire area-regardless of the clothes they wear or the ID signals received from their dogtags-are hostiles, until proven otherwise." I added, "And

are treated accordingly."

"You mean-torched?"

"Only if you refuse to be captured." I shrugged. "Some of the reprogramming must have been a little hasty. Even desperate." The kid didn't speak for a long time. He concentrated on his driving. The narrow two-lane road was twisty.

After a while, he asked uncomfortably, "Are there a lot of those things around?"

"McDonnell-Douglas is fabricating three hundred and fifty units a week. Most of those are for export-South America, Africa, Asia-there's a lot of wild country on this planet all of a sudden; but I'd guess we've got at least a couple thousand of them patrolling the West Coast. It's the highway; 101 has to be kept open. But not all of them are Vigilantes-and it's also very unlikely that the next one you run into will be a rogue too."

"I'm not reassured."

I grinned. "You sound like me."

"Huh?"

"If you knew the statistics on the spiders' effectiveness, you'd be even less reassured."

"They don't work?"

I shrugged. "They do well enough." Then I added, "And they do have one real advantage.

"

The kid glanced over at me curiously. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. You don't have to write letters to their families when you lose one."

"Oh." He shut up and concentrated on his driving.

The real problem was that the worms were already learning to avoid the spiders; and there was even a rumor that they had begun to set traps for the machines. Like elephant pits. I didn't know. There was a lot of material I wasn't cleared to see any more.

"Hey," the kid asked suddenly. "Why'd you use limericks?"

"Huh? Oh-" I was startled out of my thoughts. "It was the only thing I could think of," I admitted. "When I get bored, I write limericks."

"You're kidding."

"Nope."

The kid pulled the Jeep onto the main road and headed us west toward US-101. "Tell me another."

"Mm, okay-I'm still working on this one: There was a young fellow named Chuck-"

The kid giggled in delight. Well, it was pretty obvious where it was going. "Go on," he said.

"Who expressed a great fondness for duck. Whether gravied or roasted, pressed, sauced, or toasted-" I stopped.

"Yeah? Yeah? Go on."

I shook my head. "That's all there is to it, so far."

"That's all?"

I shrugged apologetically. "I couldn't think of a rhyme for the last line."

"You're kidding!"

"Yep."

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There was a young lady named Susie,

Who everyone thought was a floozy.

She liked boy scout troops

and Shriners, in groups;

"What the hell?" She replied. "I'm not choosy."

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? 2?

Mode: Day One

"Jesus only told us half of it. The truth will set you free. But first it's going to piss you off."

- SOLOMON SHORT

The first day of the training was about commitment. I stepped into the room-and stopped to stare. I hadn't known what to expect, but this wasn't it.

The room was very large and very empty. Larger than a college gymnasium. Only college gymnasiums don't have dark gray carpeting. The walls were pale gray. They were absolutely bare. They felt very far away.

In the exact center of the space was a broad square dais. All four sides of the dais were faced by precision formations of chairs; they were divided exactly into two squares, eight rows deep, eight chairs to a row. The aisle between the squares was three chair wide. On the dais was a podium, a music stand, and a director chair.

Hanging above the dais were four large screens, one facing each section of chairs. There were loudspeakers too.

There was a person just inside the door. She was wearing featureless white jumpsuit and a blank expression. Her name tag said SEVEN. Without taking her eyes off me, she pointed at the chairs. "Take the front-most, center-most seat, please."

"Uh, thank you." I moved slowly toward the chairs. I didn't like the looks of this.

Another assistant was waiting for me halfway there. He was equally blank-faced. His name was FIFTEEN.

"McCarthy?"

"Yes?"

"Take the front-most, center-most seat."

"Uh, okay."

"And don't talk to your neighbors."

"Yes, sir."

I found a place in the second row of the north-facing section of chairs and sat down. The sections were filling rapidly. I was between a major and a colonel. I looked around. I didn't see anyone below the rank of lieutenant.

I noticed that some of the people filing into the room were carrying light brown jumpsuits. I wondered what that meant. Perhaps they weren't in a branch of the service. They were coming into the room from all four sides. Their expressions were . . . apprehensive. I wondered what mine looked like. This didn't seem like such a good idea any more. How many of us were there anyway?

I craned my head to count the chairs. The rows were eerily precise; the blocks were absolutely and impeccably square. There were 64 chairs to a block. Two blocks to a side. 128 chairs times 4 sides of the square equals 512 chairs. The last of the chairs were filling even as I watched. There were no empty chairs that I could see. 512 trainees.

I stood up to look around. There were tables for the assistants placed strategically around the room, mostly along the walls, but there were also tables not too far behind the last row of chairs on each side of the formation. The people sitting behind the tables were expressionless. They too wore blank jumpsuits and numbered name tags. I sat down again, nervously.

I shivered. It was cold in here.

At the end of my row, two gray-haired colonels were talking quietly. Their expressions were sour. I didn't recognize either one of them, but it was obvious that they both had some reservations about being here. They were already trading their opinions. One of the assistants came up the row and stopped in front of them. She was as blank as all the others. She said, "Don't talk to your neighbors."

"Why?" demanded one of the colonels.

The assistant ignored the question and continued up the aisle. The colonel looked angry. She wasn't used to being ignored. She folded her arms in front of her chest and glared. She exchanged an annoyed look with her companion.

My watch beeped. It was precisely 9 A.M.

The Very Reverend Honorable Doctor Daniel Jeffrey Foreman, M.D., Ph.D. strode to the center of the room, stepped up onto the dais and began to look us over. He wore dark pants and a light gray sweater. His white hair floated around his head like a halo. His expression was sharp and steely. He turned slowly, checking us out individually and as a group. I had the sense that he was looking into every set of eyes in the room.

When he finished, he looked to the back of the room and nodded. The screens above his head lit up. They showed a close-up of his face. "Good morning," he said. "Thank you for being here." He smiled as if he were about to tell a joke. "You can say good morning back, if you want to."

There were a few mumbled responses, grunts that sounded vaguely like "G'mrmble." I didn't want to commit myself either. Foreman smiled to himself, as if he were the only one who had gotten the joke. He turned to us and said crisply, "All right. Let's go to work. The purpose of today's session is to create the context for the course. In your language, that means that today is about preparing you for the rest of the sessions. This is the orientation. Today, we will answer your questions." Almost as an aside, he added, "Tomorrow, we will begin to question your answers."

"The first thing that we are going to do is make certain that you belong here. The results of this course will be your responsibility so it has to be your choice to be here. If there is something you need to know, don't sit on it—because while you're sitting there wondering, you're stuck. And while you're stuck, we can't go on! Raise your hand and ask. Don't leave the room not knowing. If you have a question, there are at least a dozen other people sitting on the same question, but afraid to ask. Do them a favor and ask, so we can all go on."

Foreman stepped crisply to the left side of the dais to face the section of the room. The overhead screens cut to a new camera angle; they always showed him from the head-on angle.

"When you are clear about the purpose of this course and your reasons for being here, then we will ask you to commit yourself to completing the course. That means that you will promise to be here on time for every session, for no other reason except that you have promised.

"Therefore, you are going to have to look at your ability I make and keep a commitment.

"If you choose not to make the commitment, you will have I opportunity to leave. That will be the only opportunity to leave. So before you make the choice to stay, you need to be absolutely clear that you are going to be here until the end of the course—or not at all. Everybody got that?"

He looked around the room expectantly. Again that soulpiercing stare.

Nobody spoke. Everybody got it.

"Thank you." Foreman stepped over to the music stand next to the podium and opened the manual there. He flipped past the first few pages until he found what he was looking for. He studied it thoughtfully.

After a moment he nodded and then stepped to the third side of the dais, facing a new group again. Once more the overhead screens cut to the head-on angle; I could look at his back or I could look up and see his face. It didn't matter which part of the room he was speaking to, the effect was that he always seemed to be addressing me.

Foreman's voice was resonant. It was clear and penetrating. He had a vibrant quality, like a perfectly tuned cello. "First of all, it is no mistake that you are here. How many of you have been wondering about that?"

More than half the people in the room raised their hands. I raised mine.

"Good," said Foreman. "That's normal. Wondering about it is part of the process. Now let me tell you, no mistakes have been made. You are here because you are supposed to be here. Regardless of how you think you got here. Some of you were invited. Some of you applied. Some of you were recommended. And I know some of you think you were conned. How many of you think you were conned into being here?"

A few people raised their hands. I thought about it and raised mine.

"Good. Thank you for admitting that. It's bullshit, of course nobody was conned into being here-but thank you for being honest about what you're thinking. It's a good start. This course is about telling the truth. The truth about what you see, what you feel, what you experience, what you know. In here-unlike the real world-there is absolutely no penalty for telling the truth; on the contrary, we demand it. If you're not willing to tell the truth, then please don't be here. Don't waste your time. Don't waste my time."

"The truth is that you're here because you want to be here. Regardless of whatever stories you told yourselves about why you thought it was a good idea to be here, you're here because underneath those stories is a genuine curiosity and, yes, even the beginnings of a commitment. Not one of you was dragged into this room. I know, I saw. I stood outside and watched you arrive. You all walked in of your own volition. That was the test and you passed it."

"You have now completed the hardest part of the course. Getting here. Congratulations." He looked satisfied. He smiled at us. The effect was terrifying. "You can acknowledge that, if you wish." He applauded us, so we applauded ourselves-but not without some puzzlement.

Foreman said, "I mean it. Congratulations. It's a privilege to be here. Most of the people on the planet didn't make it. Most of them died rather than be here." He paused to let that sink in.

"There are five hundred and twelve of you. Two hundred and eighty-two women, two hundred and thirty men. In here, your job is to represent the entire human species. For the duration of this course, you are the human species. At the end of this program, when you return to your previous occupations, or to your new assignments as the case may be, you will be called upon to make choices that will affect the entire human species. So this course is about that responsibility-and the way you handle it."

A woman stood up then. She looked Chinese, but she had an African hair style. Fourth world? "Dr. Foreman," she said. "I protest."

Foreman looked at his watch. "Hm. We're ahead of schedule." He stepped off the podium toward the woman. She was one of those in a plain brown jumpsuit. "Yes, Dr. Chin?"

"Isn't it presumptuous to assume that this group has the right to represent the entire human species? I have eyes. I can see that the representation of Africans and Indians and Chinese and Arabs is well below the global percentage. How can you justify that this group should make decisions about people they are not qualified to represent? There are too many white faces in here." She spoke politely, but she looked angry.

"Mm-hm," he said. "Do you want a response to that?"

"Yes, I do."

Foreman looked remarkably patient-or was it an expression of superiority? He said, "The only answer I can give you is an unsatisfactory one. You won't like it."

"Let me be the judge of that," she said.

Foreman nodded thoughtfully. He glanced around the room, as if to confirm Dr. Chin's observation.

"Yes, it's true. There are too many white faces in here. Particularly since the Chtorran plagues were far more devastating in their effects against members of the Caucasian and Asian races than they were against Negroes. So you can certainly look at the proportion of skin colors in this room and see that as evidence of discrimination-if you want to. And if that's what you want to do, then no assertions that race was not a consideration in the selection process will satisfy you. If you're looking for discrimination, you can always find evidence."

"Is that it?" she asked. Her tone was accusatory.

He met her gaze directly. "I told you that the answer would be unsatisfactory."

He was right. She didn't look satisfied. She said, "May I ask what justifications were used in the selection process?"

"Yes, you may-but it's the wrong question. No justifications at all were used. We didn't select you. You selected yourselves." Foreman returned to the podium. He looked at a page of notes. "The only criterion that we-that is, the agency responsible for this course-established for your participation is that you speak English and that you be willing to be here. After that, it was all up to you."

Foreman stepped off the dais on the fourth side to whisper something to an assistant. When he finished, he turned back to Dr. Chin and spoke to her from across the formation of chairs, but he was no longer

speaking only to Dr. Chin. He was speaking to all of us. "You are here, you were invited to participate, because you have demonstrated your commitment to excellence. In some way you have made a contribution to your species. Whatever it was, it was sufficient to attract the attention of the agency. That was how you earned your invitation. That you have come here to this room of your own free will is the completion of the selection process. Everything else is irrelevant."

"Are you saying that you didn't choose who got to be here?"

"Yes, exactly. We put out five hundred and twelve chairs, Dr. Chin. And we declared that five hundred and twelve of the best asses on the planet would sit on them. It is in the nature of chairs to attract asses. If you'll look around, you'll see that's exactly what happened. Chairs attract asses like honey attracts flies. Yours are the asses that got caught. And yours are the best because we say so."

There was a spattering of laughter in the room. Foreman ignored it. He said to Dr. Chin, "But I suppose you want the four-dollar answer, right?"

"If you don't mind." She said it stiffly.

"Not at all. We can take all day for this if we have to. But it's really very simple. When you pour out half a cup of laundry detergent, you don't care which particles of detergent fall out of the box, do you? You just want to know that the particles you get will do the job, right? We have a job to do here, and you are the particles of the human family that we expect to do the job. That's all. Next time we pour, we'll get five hundred and twelve different particles."

He accepted a note from one of the assistants, unfolded it, glanced at it, shook his head and handed it back. He moved around to the back of the section I was sitting in. I had to turn around to see him; that was uncomfortable, so I turned forward again and continued to watch him on the overhead screen. Dr. Chin's image was also split-screened in.

She was still standing at her seat. She looked very angry. She said, "That's all very clever, Dr. Foreman. But I still don't agree with the results of the selection process."

Foreman stopped smiling. "That's too bad. But we're not here to have an election. We already had one. The bad news is you're one of the winners."

There was more laughter at this, even some applause. Foreman held up a hand to stop it. "Don't get cocky," he warned us. "What you've won is custody of the biggest disaster in human history." The laughter stopped.

Foreman added quietly, he was speaking to all of us, "Now here's the really bad news-it may turn out that you are not the very best qualified individuals to be here. You may all be fuck-ups and failures. We won't know that until it's too late to change it. But we have to start somewhere."

Dr. Chin had remained standing. She still didn't look satisfied, perhaps she never would be. Foreman looked across the rows and rows of interested faces at her. "Yes?"

"I don't know if I want to be here," she said.

"It's a little late for that, isn't it? You're already here."

"I'm having second thoughts."

"I see," said Foreman. He came around the chairs and up the aisle and stood face to face with Dr. Chin. He had circled the entire room. He spoke softly. "You're waiting to see how it works out, right? You have to know that you like it here, or that you agree with what happens here, before you'll participate. That's a good excuse to keep one foot out the door just in case it gets rough. You'll leave yourself a justification for quitting, right?"

"No!" she said, a little too vehemently. She looked as if she were being attacked. Foreman merely looked bored. "You don't know what I'm thinking!" she said. "I don't make decisions until I think things over-and I'm still thinking!"

"I see. You don't make commitments-you think about them."

"To make sure they're right!"

"Uh-huh-that's very clear. Thinking things over is one of the best forms of denial-because it masquerades as responsibility. 'I'm thinking it over' is the polite way to say no, to put someone off: You see, there's a lie in that sentence. What you're really saying is, 'I don't want to think about this at all. Please stop forcing me to.'" He looked around the room. "How many of you have done that?"

At least half the people in the room raised their hands. I raised mine.

Foreman didn't even bother to look. He turned back to Dr. Chin. "But the Chtorrans aren't going to wait for you to think this one over, Dr. Chin. Neither are we. There isn't any more time. You have to choose now. Are you going to be here or not?" He waited patiently.

"I don't like being browbeaten!" Dr. Chin snapped at him. Her eyes were blazing.

"Terrific. I don't like enemas. But what either of us likes or dislikes is irrelevant to the commitment to be made here." Foreman retained an easy control. "Now, are you going to be here, or do you just want to dither? Let me tell you, people who dither never finish dithering. They just find new things to dither about. And it really pisses off the other people in their lives."

Dr. Chin looked frustrated and close to tears. If I hadn't been so annoyed with her for holding things up, I would have felt sorry for her. She wailed, "Why does this have to be decided now?"

"Because this is the part of the course where Dorothy Chin chooses to be here. Or not. We cannot proceed until each and every one of us takes responsibility for his or her participation. That means you don't get to hide behind 'I have to think it over' any more."

"Wait-" she said, holding up her hands as if to push him away. "Just one minute."

Foreman stopped himself from speaking too quickly. He waited a moment and then asked politely, "Yes?"

"I want to know," she began slowly, "just what it is that we're doing here. I mean, what's the purpose?"

"That's a good question," Foreman said, "and I'm going to answer it. But first I want you to notice something. This is another delaying tactic." He turned around to face the rest of us, to include us. "I want you all to pay attention here. Because this is about all of us. This is a demonstration of what we do instead of making choices. This isn't about Dorothy: It's about you. Dorothy's just acting it out for you." Then he turned back to Dorothy Chin. "I'm going to answer your question now. Then I'm going to ask you to answer mine."

And then he was back up on the dais, addressing all of us again: "The government of the United States-acting in conjunction with the governments of twenty-three other allied nations-has authorized this project. Its continuing purpose is to train the members of the core group.

"The core group is not an official designation. It is not a select or a privileged group. It is a distinction applied to that class of individuals who have demonstrated their ability to produce results and who are committed to expanding that ability. The core group are those people who we expect to carry the greatest burdens in the war against the Chtorr. You do not have to do this training to be a member of the core group. It is neither honor nor burden. It is a distinction which we have made only for the purposes of large-scale project management.

"The training is designed to support you in succeeding in your various projects. You are not the first group of trainees, you will not be the last. There is no honor in your participation, only in your results.

"Let me stress that this course is not a political orientation. It is not intended to be one; it should not be approached as one. We are not interested in your various political belief systems. What we are offering here is a course in management. Personal management. Management for results. What you are being offered here is the opportunity to become a part of a continually expanding body of individuals who have, and I quote the course description, 'committed ourselves to the essential human question.'

"What is that question?"

Foreman stopped. He looked around the room, looking to see if we were following him. His eyes looked sorrowfully down from the screens. He studied us like a father. We waited for him to go on.

Foreman stepped off the dais and crossed to Dorothy Chin. "You asked, 'What is the purpose?'

"Very simply: How do we survive?"

Foreman turned outward to include the rest of us. "Sounds obvious, doesn't it? Indeed, it is deceptively obvious. But the question would be the essential human question even if our planet weren't under assault by the Chtorran infestation. The only difference is that the infestation has forced us to confront this question."

Foreman turned back to Dorothy Chin and looked her straight in the eye. "Dorothy Chin. I make this assertion-do you know what an assertion is? It's a starting point. It may or may not be true, it hasn't been

tested yet, it's just a place to start. I assert that what we as individuals, and as a species, do in the name of survival is not always what is necessary to ensure survival. I say that we do that because we, as individuals, and as a species, are confused have made false connections-as to what real survival is."

Turning again to all of us: "We have confused survival of the mind with survival of the individual. We have confused survival of the political ideology with survival of the nation. We have confused survival of the species with survival of the world-view. And the imperatives inherent in all of those various survivals have destroyed the survival of the self."

Turning back to Dorothy Chin: "The larger purpose of the core group is to explore the options for humanity. The group will be responsible for creating an operating context, so that humanity can choose directions, commit to them, and implement them. Additionally, the purpose of the core group will be to create an alignment of will throughout the scientific, political, and military branches of the human family. This course-here, in this room is your training for that responsibility.

"This is the opportunity." Foreman included all of us again. "What we are up to here is nothing less than creating the future of the entire human species." Abruptly, he looked back to Dr. Chin. "Is that a game you want to play?"

Dr. Chin looked troubled. She said slowly, "I find the whole idea preposterous. I find you, and this group-and the conception behind it-a ridiculous joke. No, a terrifying nightmare. Who gave you the right to make decisions for the rest of the human species? Who died and appointed you God?"

"You're right," Foreman said, nodding. "I am unfit. So are you. So are the other five hundred and eleven people in this room. But so what? We're the ones who already have the job. I told you that you selected yourself into this room. You-all of you in here-are already doing the job of determining the future of the human race. Whatever it is you're doing, that's part of the future we're all creating. Some of you are studying Chtorrans, some of you are trying to communicate with them, some of you are trying to control them, or kill them-and at least one of you has even spent time living among them. As individuals, you have accomplished a lot-an incredible amount. The only problem is that it's insufficient. Because it's still not enough to stop the infestation!" And suddenly, Dr. Daniel Jeffrey Foreman looked and sounded very angry.

He strode back to the dais so he could speak to us as a group, but again I had the sensation that he knew who each and every one of us was-and that he was speaking to each and every one of us individually.

"It's not the ability that's missing! We know it's there! It's the focus for the ability! We are, all of us, still unfocused! Commitment is the focus for intention!

"If the human race is to survive, we need to start kicking asses-our own!" He spoke with incredible intensity now. "We need to move ourselves up to the next level of commitment, and the next level after that, and the next level after that. And this is the place where it starts. This is what this group is for. But so far, you-the so-called movers and shakers-look like the Anarchists' football team." He paused for effect.

"The truth makes you nervous, doesn't it? But it's still the truth. You look like five hundred and twelve hysterical assholes, each one of whom is running around with his or her own ball toward his or her own goal, oblivious to whether or not you're even on the goddamn field! What is wanted and needed before we can play football is the operating context of team. You need to notice where the lines are painted on the ground and who's wearing what uniforms and playing which positions."

Foreman stopped abruptly, stepped over to his podium and took a drink of water. He looked at his notes for a moment, then continued quietly, "The Chtorran infestation has put the human species in a position that can only be described as precarious. Our language is insufficient to convey the magnitude of the disaster. The scale of it is beyond our ability to comprehend. Even our largest and fastest information-processing facilities are stumbling over the great masses of confusing and contradictory reports. We have no referents for the invaders. We have no way to assimilate what is happening, we have no way to quantify it or measure it-we have no scale for the management of the task ahead of us. And yet . . . some of us on this planet, including some of you in this room, have accepted the responsibility of the challenge anyway. "

"Because we have no choice!" interrupted a man in the opposite section.

Foreman whirled to look at him. "You think so? I say we do. I say that we have an incredible choice before us. This whole course is about that choice."

Foreman stepped off the dias toward him. "I assert that our survival is still a possibility. That assertion is the starting point for everything that will occur in here."

The man who had interrupted had nothing further to say. Satisfied, Foreman began circling back toward Dorothy Chin. "If we are to make it, then over the next few years, this species is going to have to make some incredible adaptations, many of which we will not like. But whether we like them or not, they will be necessary to our survival. It is clear that the very definition of humanity is going to be tested."

Foreman had returned to his place in front of Dorothy Chin. She was still standing. She was as rigid as stone. Foreman stood before her and spoke quietly and calmly, "It is this simple, Dorothy Chin. You know it. You don't need me to tell it to you. But I'm going to say it anyway so that the people in the room who don't know it can hear it too."

"The fundamental law of biology is Survive! If the organism doesn't survive, it can't do anything else."

"Now . . . we are going to see some of our fellow human beings, and very probably many of the members of this group, creating some extraordinary operating modes in order to do just that. Part of our job here will be to explore those modes-to see what they suggest for the rest of us. We need to know what is wanted and needed for human beings to survive on a Chtorraninfested planet. We need to know, what will human beings become in the process?."

"Here in this room, in this course, we will lay the groundwork for the job to be done. We will train ourselves in the unexpected. We will prepare ourselves for the impossible. In this room, we will begin the task of creating the future. In other words, we will not only test the definition of humanity-ultimately, we may have to redefine humanity. Not because we want to, but because that may very well be the ultimate price for survival."

"And I want you all to know something," Foreman interrupted himself suddenly. He stabbed the air with his forefinger. "We have always had the opportunity to redefine ourselves as a species-but we've always avoided the confrontation with that opportunity by squabbling amongst ourselves over mates and bananas instead. We don't have that luxury any more. The opportunity is no longer an opportunity. Now it is a mandate."

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A RAGE FOR REVENGE 27

Foreman turned back to Dr. Chin and looked her square in the eye. "So, I ask you again. Is this the game you want to play? If you want to play, then sit down. If you want to leave, the door is behind you. But be clear about your choice. There are no second chances. Once you're out the door, you can't come back." He waited. "So, what's it to be?"

"You're a very impressive speaker," Dr. Chin admitted. "But I don't think so. I don't think I want to 'select' myself onto this football team, if you don't mind."

Foreman nodded. "I don't mind at all. It's a very clear choice. You've been very responsible. You listened, you chose." He started to turn away as if he were dismissing her, then abruptly turned back as if he had just remembered something else. "I just want you to know one thing before you leave." His voice became very quiet, very calm. "When you walk out that door, you not only give up your place in the game, you also give up your right to complain if you don't like how it turns out."

"I don't agree with that either," she said, and started working her way toward the aisle. "Goodbye, Dr. Foreman." She stopped and looked at him. "I'm going to fight you and your group. I'm going to organize the scientific and political communities against you. I think you're dangerous."

Foreman turned to the rest of us. "You have just seen a demonstration of what Dr. Chin does instead of committing herself. Dr. Chin doesn't act, she reacts."

She glared at him-it rolled off him like rainwater-then she turned and strode up the aisle. TWELVE opened the door for her, and she was gone.

"Anyone else?" invited Foreman.

Three more people got up and headed for the door.

Foreman waited until they were gone. "Anyone else?" he asked. "Last call. "

I thought about it. I'd survived worse. I could survive this. I remained seated.

Foreman's expression was hard to read. It looked like a challenge. He said, "This is it. There won't be any more chances to leave. If you stay, you're committing to stay to the end. . . . Nobody else got up.

The room was painfully silent.

Foreman waited another moment. He returned to his podium and took another drink of water. He turned to the manual on the music stand and flipped over two or three pages. He studied them thoughtfully for a moment, then he looked up at us and said, "So

we're clear now? You're here because you want to be here. There is nobody in this room who does not want to be here?"

He smiled. "Good. Now, let's talk about what happens after you make a commitment: the opportunity to break your word. . . ."

?

A fellow who lived in West Perkin
was always a;jerkin' his gherkin.

Said he, "It's not fickle
to play with my pickle.

At least my gherkin's a workin'."

?

? 3?

The Dome

"The game of life is always called on account of darkness."

--SOLOMON SHORT

The day had turned gray and drizzly, and the March wind was whipping coldly into our faces.

I peered at the map on the screen. Yes, this was it. I poked the kid and pointed. "Bear to the right."

He did so. We pulled off the main highway and onto a frontage road. He handled the Jeep with an easy assurance. It was obvious that the kid liked driving.

But it bothered me that he was so young.

Everywhere I went these days, I found children handling the jobs of adults. They were getting younger every day. And less well trained. I didn't like the implications of that either.

Childhood was another casualty of the war. There wasn't time to be innocent any more. As soon as you could take your place in the work force, you did. There were six million "most-urgent" jobs waiting to be filled. Age was not a consideration.

It made me feel old.

The kids I met now didn't seem to know that the world hadn't always been like this. They carried guns instead of schoolbooks; they learned to handle rocket launchers before they learned to drive. They spent as much time at work as they did at school-and maybe that was all for the good; maybe they shouldn't know what had been lost. Maybe this way would be easier for them. Certainly it was more practical.

I tightened my windbreaker against the chill. "I thought this place was supposed to be warm," I yelled.

"It is," the kid hollered back. "This is the frozen warmth that we have every winter."

"Oh."

The Jeep bumped across a pothole and I gave up the attempt at conversation. The map showed we were almost there anyway: At the end of February, the president had signed into law the Military Jurisdiction Bill.

Which effectively finished the job of dismantling the last functioning local governments in the country, and replaced them with district military governors. This was a temporary measure, the president said, only for the duration of the ecological emergency.

Which meant anywhere from ten to three hundred years. However long it took.

The president also signed the Universal Service Bill-which effectively drafted every man, woman, child, robot, and dog in the nation into the United States Armed Forces. The long-range plan was to restructure the social fabric of the country-from polyester to khaki.

"The Chtorran invasion," the president had said, "is nothing less than a concerted attack on every single one of us; therefore, it is the responsibility of every single one of us to resist."

I remembered the speech. It was the "each and every" speech. The president had begun by quoting an obscure World War I doughboy named Martin Treptow. "I will fight cheerfully and do my-utmost, as if the issue of the whole struggle depended on me alone.' That-" said the president, "-is the kind of commitment that is wanted and needed today. Each of us must act as if the issue of the whole will be decided by our individual actions.

"What is at stake here is nothing less than the future of humanity on the planet. The shape of our tomorrow will be I determined by the course of action that we undertake today. Each and every one of us will be a part of that tomorrow, and the future will answer this question: what were we-as a people, and as individuals-willing to commit to?

"I know what the answer is. If tonight, I were able to move among you and speak to you as individuals-each and every one of you-and ask just this simple question: 'What is your commitment? What are you willing to do?' I know what your answers would be. You would tell me, 'Whatever is necessary, I will do what must be done. Nothing less than that will be acceptable.' Because that is the kind of people we are. That is the kind of species we are.

"We do not shrink from this challenge—we accept it. It is a fire in which we will forge a new strength. We will do what must be done.

"And so, my fellow Americans, let tonight be the turning point in this crisis, the moment of our resolve. Tonight, let us join together, each and every one of us—not in fear, but in pride—in the commitment to this, the greatest of all human challenges.

"Tomorrow, acting in your name, and as a focus for your will, I shall go before the Congress of this great nation and ask for a total mobilization of the resources, the technology, and especially the people of the United States of America. I shall ask the Congress to quickly and efficiently enact the legislation necessary to enable us to combat and defeat this ecological infestation!

"We shall go forward! We shall unite together under a new banner! We shall have a single national purpose: unconditional and total victory over the invader. Anything less will be insufficient and unacceptable to us—not just as Americans, not just as members of the human family, but as children of God!"

The president was interrupted forty-three times by applause. It had been a powerful speech, loaded with all the right emotional cues. And it had worked. The country had accepted the Mobilization Acts:

I'd heard there were only a few protests—not very large ones—and the organizers were quickly arrested. (That was a trial I'd be interested in following.) But I'd also heard that most people were relieved that the government finally had things under control. Or at least, appeared to.

Otherwise, I didn't pay much attention to the civilian news. Within three years, there wouldn't be any civilians. That was another of the things we were giving up. For the duration.

The kid pointed. "Is that it?"

Up ahead, almost hidden, nestled between two hills, were three gray domes. I recognized the type—inflatables, hardened with shelterfoam. They were partially shaded by a cluster of tall eucalyptus trees. The place might have looked friendly if the structures hadn't already begun to decay. There were cracks and holes in the walls. We were going to need a harder foam.

The sign said:

CALIFORNIA CONTROL STATION
SAN LUIS OBISPO DISTRICT

"That's it," I said.

The site was left over from the plagues. I wasn't sure what its purpose had been. My job was to check its suitability for our current operations.

The government's latest plan was to set up a chain of fortresses, each no more than two hours travel from the next. Each "safe zone" would be totally self-sufficient and able to withstand even the heaviest of Chtorran raids. The assault on Bismarck, North Dakota, was still too recent in everybody's minds. Those pictures were worse than the ones out of Show Low, Arizona.

Right now, it all depended on the roads. We were still too vulnerable, and we had to keep the interstates open and functioning. The northern California infestations were growing again, despite almost daily flyovers by the Air Force, and we expected the worms to start expanding south again sometime this year. The highways were going to be the backbone of our resistance; but first we had to worm-proof every useful installation on the route. We needed to establish caches of supplies and weapons. It was grim work—with grimmer implications: We were digging in for the duration.

But we'd borrowed one good idea from the worms. The domes that we associated with worm nests were really only the entrances. Once the worms established themselves in an area, they tunneled in. The greater part of the nest was always underground. We didn't know how deep a worm nest could get, but it had occurred to the Science Section that we could use the same technique. Now, we were looking for locations.

We pulled up in front of the station and I reached into the back of the Jeep for my rifle. I took it everywhere. I even slept with it. "Wait here," I said.

The first dome stood open to the weather. It looked like it had been the office.

The second dome had been some kind of processing plant, but I couldn't identify the machinery. One half of the room was sealed off by a double layer of glass. There was a loading bay behind the glass and a

conveyer belt leading into the next dome. On this side of the glass there were a lot of pipes. Two generators. Several control consoles. A bank of monitor screens. And, behind another glass wall, showers and decontamination chambers and a rack of isolation suits.

There were a lot of these hasty little structures left over from the plague years: emergency shelters, storage depots, distribution facilities, decontamination centers, and isolated research labs but this wasn't any of those.

I passed into the third dome and the answer was clear.

There were ovens here.

The realization hit me like a wave. My knees turned to water, I almost collapsed. Dammit! I thought I'd buried my grief! How many more times? Dammit! Dammit!

I pushed it down-again-and continued my inspection.

The plagues had killed more than seven billion people, more than sixty-five percent of the human race. More men than women had died, more white people than black people, more yellow people than white people. There were still hundreds of thousands of mummified bodies waiting to be discovered.

One of the continuing jobs of the aftermath years had been to clean up the dead. The bodies were deadly. They still carried spores.

There were hundreds of these stations all over the country. The fabrication of them was easy. The domes could be inflated, sprayed, and hardened in a day. The equipment could be installed and functioning by the end of the week. Some of the stations had even been run entirely by robots.

If you found a body, you picked up the phone and punched DEADBODY or DISPOSAL, or any one of a half-dozen other easy-to-remember mnemonics, and reported the location. The nearest retrieval van would be notified and the body would be picked up within two to four hours. The vans delivered the bodies to the nearest control station-an installation like this one-where they were burned.

The plagues still weren't over, but most of the dying was, so most of these stations had been shut down. I could almost feel the heat from the ovens. And the stench. And-I don't know why-but I could imagine screaming too. Women and children and men. Why was I remembering that? I hadn't been near San Francisco when they'd

Never mind.

These domes were cold and empty now.

The dust was thick on the floor and a chill wind curled it up in little puffs.

All right, so now we knew what was here. I'd recommend that we not use this site. It wasn't defensible. Hidden as it was between two hills, it was a sitting target for anything that came over either of those crests. Maybe it was a good idea to keep a crematorium hidden out of sight, but not a fortress. No, this wouldn't do. I turned around-

McCain was standing in the door, gaping. "Wow," he said softly, looking around.

I lowered my rifle and said, "I thought I told you to wait." Annoyance put an edge on my voice.

"Sorry, sir, but you were gone a long time. I got concerned."

"Uh-huh," I said. I was beginning to understand McCain's relationship with orders. He didn't think they applied to him. Right. That's why he was assigned to me.

Now he was testing me to see if I meant what I'd said. If I let him get away with this breach, he'd test me again; and if I nailed him to a wall for disobeying an order this minor, then I was a cruel martinet and he would be justified in subverting my authority whenever he could. Great game. Either way, I lose.

He stepped past me, his mouth hanging open in awe. "I heard about these," he said. "But I never saw one before." An idea occurred to him and he turned to look at me. "Is it safe?"

I didn't answer. I was too disgusted. With him. With the operation. With myself. When we got back-"Hi," she said from behind us.

We both whirled at the same time

She couldn't have been more than six or seven. She was a tiny thing, standing in the middle of the doorway. Her dress had been yellow or orange once. Now it was brown. She had the biggest eyes.

I lowered my rifle, but only a bit. "Don't do that. You scared the hell out of me."

She looked uncertainly from me to McCain, then back to me again.

"Hi, honey," McCain said. "What's your name?" He slung his rifle over his shoulder and took a step toward her. She edged backward. "It's all right. We're friendly. That's Unca Jim and I'm Unca Jon."

"Jon what?" she asked. "Do you live here?"

McCain looked over at me. "She's awfully thin, and probably scared to death. Can I give her some of our rations?" He didn't wait for my answer. "Are you hungry, honey?"

She nodded slowly. Her eyes flickered back and forth between us.

"Wait a minute," I said. We were miles from anywhere. How had she gotten here? "What's your name, sweetheart? Who're you with? You're not here by yourself, are you?"

"Is this your house? Do you live here?" she asked again. She took a few steps into the room, looking around.

"No. And you shouldn't either." I looked to the kid. "Get her out of here."

I waited till they were both gone before I lowered my rifle and let myself shake. My nerves were shot. I'd nearly shot him. Then I'd nearly shot her.

Damn.

What a mess that would have been.

No, this wasn't working. None of it. I slung my gun over my shoulder and started after them.

I'd have to . . .

I heard gunshots outside-the spattering sound of an AM-280. And then I heard the kid scream.

I was already pulling my gun off my shoulder as I ran.

?

A proctologist name of McGee

once bent over double to see;

an eyeball of glass

he had shoved up his ass,

'-so I can see one that looks back at me.'

?

? 4

?

Mode: Day Two

"Commitment isn't a chore. It's a challenge. "

-SOLOMON SHORT

The second day was about integrity, and the room was set up differently.

The 498 chairs were laid out in five concentric circles around a circular dais. There were eight precise aisles dividing the chairs into neat pie-shaped wedges. The aisles pointed toward the high dais like an altar. I felt like an acolyte at some holy ritual.

The screens over the dais were gone now. Instead there were larger ones mounted high above the center of each blank wall. As I took my seat, I wondered why they had changed the setup. It bothered me, I didn't know why. I felt uneasy.

The seats filled up quickly with the other trainees. Today we were all wearing identical brown jumpsuits. No uniforms, no civilian clothes, no identifying garb of any kind could be worn in the training room. That was part of the rules: no outside identities. All we had to distinguish ourselves were the large-lettered name tags we wore over our hearts; last names only-no first names, no ranks.

Some of the higher-ranking officers had grumbled about that. Foreman hadn't been interested. He merely pointed out that they were demonstrating an investment of identity in their ranks, and that rank was not only irrelevant in here, it would eventually get in the way. Leave it outside, he said. That's not who you really are. I didn't get that either, but Foreman wouldn't explain it.

I wished I had my watch, but we'd had to turn those in too. I was certain that it was already past time for us to start, but not all the seats were filled yet. I wondered what the holdup was.

I craned around to look. People were still filing in. I recognized the two gray-haired colonels who had sat at the end of my row yesterday and who seemed to think they had special permission to chat about the proceedings. Finally, because their chatter was such a nuisance, they had been asked-no, told to sit apart. They came in now, still talking; but instead of moving directly to their seats, they stopped just inside the door and continued their conversation. I decided they were a couple of rude old ladies. Finally, two large male assistants came over to them and took each of them by the arm and guided them to their seats-on opposite sides of the outer circle of chairs.

But there were still empty chairs. Where were the rest of us? I counted twelve empty chairs. What was going on? Where were the missing trainees?

The minutes stretched.

The assistants stood quietly at attention, all around the perimeter of the room, at the logistics tables, at the doors, and at the heads of the aisles. There were at least fifty of them, all blank-faced and emotionless. Across the circle from me, a large heavysset man got up and strode angrily to the table at the back of the room where the Course Manager sat. "What's the delay?" he demanded. His face was ruddy, and he looked upset.

She looked at him blankly. "Go back to your seat." Her voice could be heard all across the room.

"I want to know what's going on."

"Nothing is going on. Go back to your seat."

"We were told that all our questions would be answered," he snapped.

The Manager stood up and faced him. He was much larger and wider than she was, but she met his glare with an impassive expression. She said, "What you were told was that all of your questions would be handled appropriately. This is not appropriate."

"Why not?" he interrupted her. "Tell me!" He put his large ham-shaped hands down on the table between them and leaned way forward. He looked like he was used to bullying his way to results. He was a hulking mountain of flesh, and the way he leaned, he looked like he was threatening her.

It didn't work. The Course Manager was unbending. She could have been looking at a recalcitrant child.

"This isn't the time," she said. "You agreed to follow the instructions, didn't you? Your instructions for this morning were to enter the room and take your seat. Have you done that?"

"But nothing's happening-!" His technique wasn't working. He looked frustrated.

She looked at him blankly. "Are you going to keep your agreement and follow the instructions?"

"I want to know what the delay is!" He was getting loud and belligerent. Every trainee in the room was watching.

I had to admire the Manager's composure. She remained unruffled by the man's anger. She said, "All of this was explained yesterday. The session doesn't begin until everybody is in his seat. There are thirteen seats empty. One of them is yours. You are the delay."

The big man looked angrier. I could see his fists clenching. But he didn't know what to say. It was as if he could already see all of the answers he might be given. There was nothing for him to do but return to his seat.

He exhaled loudly, scowled in annoyance, shook his head and shrugged as if to say, "You can't fight these tyrants," then turned and headed back toward his empty chair. He clumped loudly and resentfully all the way. The gesture said it all: "Fuck you too." He sat down with a righteous expression and folded his arms across his chest.

Then, for a while, nothing happened. We sat and waited.

We got bored.

And after we were through being bored, we got angry. We sat and stewed. We glared at the assistants-and each other. We hated the ones who hadn't shown up yet, who were keeping us waiting for them.

I wanted to get up and protest, but I didn't. I was afraid to.

There were other people sitting in the room who were afraid, too. I turned around in my chair and looked. Some of the people wouldn't meet my eyes.

One woman was crying quietly. She was weeping into her hands. Nobody went to her aid.

I started hating the assistants. And then I was bored again.

And then, suddenly, I realized something! I knew what was going on! This was a test! We were supposed to sit here and wait. We were supposed to discover something in the waiting.

I began to pay attention. I started looking around to see what everybody else was doing. I wasn't the only one. There were a couple of other trainees looking around with interest. They recognized me and smiled. I-grinned back. We'd figured it out! This was about the way we waited!

Somebody started giggling. Pretty soon, the whole room was laughing. I looked back at the Course Manager. She was sitting stony-faced. Or was she? She covered her mouth with one hand, and coughed, then turned to face the wall.

As the giggling began to die away, one of the doors opened and six of the missing trainees were ushered into the room. Two assistants led them to their seats.

A moment later, Foreman strode into the room. He came straight up the aisle opposite me and stepped onto the dais. Today he was wearing a copper-colored tunic and slacks. "Good morning," he said. He looked at his watch. "It is ten forty-five. We are starting an hour and forty-five minutes late. The instructions were that no session would start until everyone was in their seats. There are six of you still missing. Forty-two of you were late this morning. That's forty-eight people who didn't keep their word, almost one out of ten! That's the integrity of this group! Ten percent of the time you can't be trusted! And you wonder why you don't produce results?"

He was angry. Or was it a performance? I wasn't sure. He stepped off the dais and strode straight back to speak to the Course Manager. They conferred quietly together for a few minutes, then he came back to the dais and looked us over again.

"So, you're probably wondering about your missing six members. It's this simple. They're out of the program. They quit when they didn't show up this morning. They failed the test. They're untrainable. Their commitment to failure is larger than their commitment to success.

"There are no grades here. There's no right way, there's no wrong way to do this course. The only way to fail is to not show up. Show up, and no matter what happens, you automatically succeed. It's like life.

The only way to fail it is to be dead.

"So we asked you to make a commitment to be here and in your seat, on time, every day for six weeks. And each of you gave your word. This is how you kept it. One out of ten of you can't be trusted. This is not an impressive start.

"I want to demonstrate something," he said. He looked around the group as if he were looking for someone. "Who were the people who were late this morning? Would you stand up please?"

About thirty people stood up.

"There were forty-two people who were not in their chairs at nine A.M. If you were not in your chair as you agreed to be, would you stand up please?"

A few more people stood up, then another and another. Finally, forty-two people were standing at their places.

"Good, thank you." Foreman circled the dais, looking them over. "Would you come up here please? And you? And you? Stand in a line please." One of those he picked was the large red-faced man who had made such a scene with the Course Manager, another was one of the gray-haired colonels who never stopped talking.

"The rest of you can sit down please. Thank you. Now, before we do this, I want all of you to know that it could be any of you up here. I'm going to ask them some questions. I want you, in your seats, to look at your own answers to these questions."

Foreman turned to the line of trainees. They looked nervous. "Can you keep your word?" he asked them. They looked uncertain. Should they answer?

Foreman started at one end of the line. It was the chatterbox gray-haired colonel. He asked her, "Can you keep your word?"

She said, "Yes, I keep my word all the time."

"That's bullshit. You didn't keep your word this morning. You weren't in your seat at nine A.M. No, the evidence is that you don't keep your word. What I want to know is if you're able to keep your word. Are you?"

She hesitated, then nodded.

Foreman looked at her. "That's what you'd like me to believe, isn't it? Well, we'll find out in a minute." He looked to the back of the room, and signaled to the Course Manager. "Would you bring me the integrity tester please?"

The Course Manager came up the aisle carrying a flat wooden box. Foreman opened it and took out a deadly-looking black .45 caliber service revolver. "Can you all see this?" he asked, holding it over his head. He circled the dais, so everybody could get a look at the gun. The overhead screens zoomed in for a close-up. Out of sudden curiosity, I looked for the cameras. They were mounted behind glass slits at the top of the walls.

I turned back to Foreman. He was pointing the gun at the gray-haired colonel.

"If I pulled this trigger, would you die?"

She couldn't take her eyes off the gun. "It's not loaded," she said. "You're just trying to scare me."

"I'm not trying," said Foreman. "Really." He turned away from her and faced the distant wall of the room.

He stepped forward and took a stance. He spread his legs slightly and gripped the gun in both hands, raised it high and aimed for the farthest corner. He squinted and pulled the trigger. The gun popped like a cannon! The bullet spanged off the ceiling, thwacked off the wall, spattered a small explosion of plaster and dust, and then clattered to the shiny hardwood floor. The sound of the shot still echoed back and forth across the room.

Foreman turned back to the lady. "Now, then," he asked her again, "if I pulled this trigger, would you die?"

"You wouldn't," she said. She didn't look certain. The other trainees beside her looked nervous.

"You don't know that," said Foreman. "Are you willing to bet your life on it?"

"You're just trying to make a point," the woman guessed.

Foreman turned to face the rest of us. "As a matter of fact, I have the written permission of the President of the United States to take any actions I deem appropriate-up to and including the termination of any

trainee in this room." He glanced to the back of the room. "Would you put the authorization up on the screens, please? Just in case anyone is doubting."

The screens flashed to display an official-looking document. I recognized the presidential seal and signature. "Thank you," said Foreman. "Now, I would prefer not to exercise that authority, for obvious reasons, but that is one of the options available to me." He turned back to the gray-haired colonel. "So you might be right that I'm only trying to make a point. The question is, how far will I go to make that point? You really don't know if I would pull this trigger or not, do you?"

"Uh, I would hope not."

"I didn't ask what you hope. Do you notice that you don't answer questions? You comment on them. That's how you avoid responsibility. All I'm asking from you are simple yes or no answers. Can you handle that?"

"I think so--"

Foreman looked annoyed.

"-I mean, yes," she corrected, hastily.

"Thank you." He pointed the gun at her again. "Now, if I pulled this trigger, would you die?"

"Probably."

"Probably. . . ?" Foreman said it with as much amusement as startlement. He looked around at us to share the joke. There was nervous laughter in the room.

"Well, it depends on where you hit me."

He looked at her again. "You see-you can't give me a simple yes or no answer, can you?"

"Well, you're not being precise. The chances are pretty good that I would die if you shot me--"

"I'm not being precise-?" Foreman gaped at her astonished. "This is a .45 caliber service revolver. The chances are one hundred percent if I shot you at point-blank range you would die. Do you see that?"

The lady still looked defiant. "Well, that's what you say."

"All right," sighed Foreman. "Let me make it even more precise for you-so that there is absolutely no doubt." He stepped abruptly forward and placed the barrel of the gun firmly in the colonel's mouth.

Several of the men in the room were suddenly on their feet, shouting--

Foreman turned around, bellowing. "Sit down! You agreed to follow the instructions! If you don't follow the instructions, you won't get the results! Now, sit down!"

They sat.

I started shivering. I knew what was going to happen next. Foreman turned back to the colonel, put the gun in her mouth again and said, "Now, then-if I pulled this trigger, would you die?"

The colonel's eyes were wide. She stared down the barrel of the gun and there was terror in her face.

She nodded her head as best she could and managed to get out a muffled, "Umh-hmh."

"Good. That was a very clear answer. So now we're clear about the consequences, right?"

"Umh-hmh. "

"Good. Now-if I told you that you had to keep your word and be in your seat on time every day, or else I was going to blow your brains out, would you keep your word?"

The woman hesitated. I was trembling for her.

"It's a simple question," said Foreman. "But take your time. I want you to be certain of your answer.

Because that may be the agreement I'll ask you to make." He repeated it carefully. "If you knew that you had to be here, in your seat, on time, every day-or else I was going to blow your brains out-could you do it?"

The colonel nodded and said, "Umh-hmh!"

"Sure, you could-and you would too. You'll do whatever is necessary to ensure your survival. If you knew that keeping your

"Umh-hmh!"

"Good. Thank you." Foreman took the gun out of her mouth. "So now we know that you can keep your word. The real question is will you?"

The woman didn't answer. She collapsed in a faint.

Foreman went down with her. He said quietly, "That won't work either, Colonel Irving! You don't get to hide out in here. The question is, will you keep your word?"

Colonel Irving was sobbing loudly. Two assistants started up the aisle toward the dais. Foreman held them back with a hand. "You agreed to follow the instructions. If you don't get up right now, Colonel Cop-out, I will blow your brains out!" The sound of the hammer cocking on the gun was loud in the room.

Colonel Irving scrambled to her feet so fast she looked jet-propelled.

"Thank you," said Foreman. He turned to the rest of us. "Do you see what it takes to get some of you to keep your word? Are you beginning to see what some of you do instead?"

I was shaking so hard now, I could barely stay in my chair. Foreman put the "integrity tester" back in the box. The Course Manager returned to the back of the room. Foreman turned to face the rest of us. "Do you get the point? You can keep your word-and you don't! You'll only keep your word when your survival is at stake. You think so little of the words that fall out of your mouth that you'll say anything, you don't care, just so you'll look good. Well, this course is not about looking good-"

"I thought this course was supposed to be about the nature of humanity!" someone called out.

Foreman turned to face the man. "You have an agreement not to speak unless you're called on. And this course is about the nature of humanity-but we can't even begin to have that discussion while you're still functioning at the level of chimpanzees."

"I was here on time!" the man insisted. He stood up. I craned my head to see. The man was on the opposite side of the room. He was thin and red-faced. And very angry.

Foreman looked unimpressed. "So you think your integrity is handled because you were on time? Well, it's not. Because there's another whole level of it in here that you're not experiencing. It's no accident,"

Foreman said to him, "that you're in a group that

A RAGE FOR REVENGE 43

! can't be trusted ten percent of the time. That's you-that's your integrity on the level of group."

The thin man protested, "But I don't see how any of this relates to the war."

"It's very simple," Foreman said. "If we're going to defeat the Chtorr, then we need integrity at the level of species. Nothing less. We will not stop the Chtorran invasion by accident! If we do stop them, it will only be by concerted, direct, single-minded intention. Results only come from integrity. Pay attention now.

This is so simple that most of you chimpanzees are going to miss it! Integrity is nothing more than keeping your word-and supporting the people around you in keeping theirs."

He let that sink in for a moment while he returned to his podium and put a throat lozenge in his mouth.

When he turned back to us, his voice was easy again. The stridency was gone.

"So," he said brightly. "This part of the course is about telling the truth. Most of you don't know how to tell the truth-because you can't recognize it. There's a difference between what you believe and what's so in the physical universe. You'll have the opportunity to experience that difference in here. For most of you, that will be a revelation. I mean that; literally a revelation-"

And that's when I came out of my chair screaming. "No! Oh, no-not again!"

They grabbed me halfway to the door. It took six of them to pin me to the floor. And even then, I didn't stop fighting-

?

Bart has a singular penis

for his wife who is built like a Venus.

He awoke with a fright

last Saturday night:

"Hey! Something is coming between us!"

? 5?

Jason Delandro

"A man is known by the enemies he keeps."

-SOLOMON SHORT

I came out of the dome at a run--

--and nearly skidded into a worm, a small one. Bright red. There's no such thing as a small worm! This one was three meters long, only waist high-

Something tripped me-my gun went flying-I skidded flat on the ground-

Somebody was firing a machine gun, right over my head! I covered my head with my hands and lay as flat as I could, but the worm still hadn't come down on top of me.

But then, maybe it hadn't been attacking. Every worm I'd ever seen had raised itself up high before attacking. I had a theory about that, but I'd never tested it.

Suddenly, there was silence. And I was still alive.

Maybe an upright stance was a challenge to a worm, the last opportunity to back down. Maybe because human beings stood upright, the worms saw us as always challenging, always on the brink of attack.

Maybe that's why the worms almost always attacked human beings on sight. Maybe that's why I was still alive.

I lay there face down on the ground, afraid to look up. What was the worm doing?

I heard it move. Toward me. I felt something brush against my hands. Fur? It tingled. I could hear it breathing. Its breaths were long and slow and deep. I could feel the heat. It smelled . . . spicy?

Something was tapping me lightly along the back. Its antennae. No-its fingers, its claws.

I was laying there flat, my face tightly scrunched, waiting for death-and still completely curious about what the creature was doing. I wanted to look.

If I lifted my head, would it kill me?

I was still trying to summon up enough courage to look when something trilled at it and it backed away.

A human voice said, "Get up." Huh?

"Get up!" it repeated. I lifted my head.

There were six of them. Four men. Two women. And the worm. The worm was blood-colored; it had pink and orange stripes rippling slowly down its dark red flanks.

They were grouped in a rough semi-circle before me. They were all carrying weapons. All but one of the men were bearded. One was a huge monster of a human being. One of the women was pregnant. The other was thin and dark and looked familiar.

I didn't see McCain. Or the little girl.

The leader of the group looked mid-thirtyish, but he could have been older. He was the one without the beard. He wore hornrimmed glasses and he had long sandy hair with just a hint of gray at the temples. He wore an oversized white sweater, khaki pants, and heavy boots. He looked like a college professor on vacation-except for the machine gun he had slung over one shoulder. He would have looked friendly-if it hadn't been for the worm beside him.

He gave it a hand signal. "Stay." He nodded to me. "Get up. Orrie won't hurt you."

Orrie?

I started to get up slowly. I got as far as my hands and knees when the thin woman said, "That's far enough."

I stopped.

I couldn't take my eyes off the worm. Had they tamed it? How? That was supposed to be impossible.

The man with the sandy hair nodded to the giant. "Search him." The giant lumbered over to me like Frankenstein's monster. He was 600 pounds of animated meat. He stepped behind me, hooked his hands into my armpits and yanked me to my feet. He started pulling things off me.

He unholstered my sidearm and tossed it aside.

He lifted my pant leg and pulled the knife out of my boot. He pulled the pack off my back. And my utility belt. He patted my waist and my pockets. He emptied them and tossed the contents to one side. I thought about the pack. If I could reach my watch-I probably wouldn't survive, but I'd take most of them with me.

Now Frankenstein began to frisk me; so slowly and methodically that I wondered if he were mentally retarded. First he took my right arm between his two huge hands and patted and felt it all the way down to the wrist, then the left; he pulled my watch off my wrist and tossed it onto the pile with the rest. He repeated the process with my legs. His hands were the size of shovels, it was like being pummeled by beef.

He slid his hands up around my torso and around in front of me and all over my chest. He emptied my shirt pockets. When he found my dog tags, he grunted and broke the chain. He tossed the tags onto the pile. He felt my crotch dispassionately.

I ignored his touch and stared sideways at the leader. He met my gaze directly. Yes, definitely a college professor. I wondered what subject he'd taught. Probably something flaky. Like American Jargon. I shifted my eyes back to the worm. Deliberately.

Frankenstein finished searching me then. He seized my shoulders in his gigantic hands and pushed me back down to my knees. Then, carefully, almost like a child, he placed my hands on top of my head. Prisoner of war position. And then he backed away behind me. I heard him cock his rifle.

The leader of the group was still studying me. Debating my fate? His expression was unreadable. The sweat trickled coldly down my side.

The worm was cocking its eyes curiously back and forth to look at me, like a madman's big pink hand puppet. The effect would have been comical if it hadn't been so terrifying.

The worm began twitching its mandibles anxiously. It looked like a nervous tic, or a tremble of anticipation.

Were they waiting for me to beg?

I thought about it for half a second. Would it make a difference? No.

The man with the sandy hair came over and kicked through my belongings. He picked up my dog tags and looked at them. "United States Army. Too bad."

"Kill him," said the thin woman. She looked familiar, but I couldn't place her.

He ignored her. He saw how my attention was riveted on the worm. "Orrie," he said to it, "patrol." He waved at the creature. It whistled in response and dipped its eyes; then it wheeled about and flowed off sniffing at the ground.

The sandy-haired man waved at the other two men. "Go with him. See if there are any others."

The man turned back to me and jingled my dog tags. "Ladies," he said to his companions. "I'd like you to meet Lieutenant James Edward McCarthy of the United States Armed Forces." He paused for effect.

"Recently retired." He dropped my dog tags to the ground.

He looked down at me speculatively. His eyes were very blue. "The question before us, Lieutenant McCarthy, is simple. Isn't it?"

"Am I supposed to have an opinion here?"

The sandy-haired man scratched his neck thoughtfully. He used the backs of his fingers and made quick upward strokes toward his chin. He asked abstractedly, "Why do you people always make things so complicated?"

Then he took a step forward. He folded his arms thoughtfully in front of himself, bunching up the thick material of his sweater, and focused hard on me. He was uncomfortably close; I had to crane my neck to look up at him. The bastard was doing it deliberately.

"I am going to ask you a question," he said. "You can answer it yes or no. I don't want repartee. Any statement other than yes will be considered a no. Do you understand that?" His gaze was uncomfortably direct.

"Yes," I said.

"Good." He studied me thoughtfully. "Here's the question. Do you want to live?" He cocked his head and waited for my answer. I licked my lips. My throat was suddenly dry. I could hear the blood pounding in

my head. This was no casual question. The man was mad. If I said anything but yes, he would kill me.

"Yes," I said. My voice sounded like a croak.

"Good." A flicker of amusement crossed his face. He turned to the women. "It's always so difficult for them to state the obvious, isn't it?"

The women tittered.

The man turned back to me. He was abruptly crisp and businesslike. "Those are your only options. Live or die. Do you understand that?"

"Yes." I hated him. "I understand that."

"And that it will be your choice-no one else's?"

I hesitated, then somehow managed to get the words out. "Yes . . . I understand that too."

"Very good, Lieutenant McCarthy. Former Lieutenant McCarthy." He squatted down before me and faced me eye-to-eye. "My name is Dr. Jason Delandro. And I am in charge here. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"You have been liberated from your previous condition of servitude. Do you understand that?"

"Uh, no."

He picked up my dog tags and held them up in front of me. "There is a group that calls itself the United States Government-"

"I've heard of them," I said.

"Don't be cute," Delandro said. "Too much cute can make a person dead. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"This group-the United States Government-claims to represent the people of this continent. Have you had an education, James Edward McCarthy?"

"Yes."

"Did they teach you that a government must be accountable to its member population?"

"Yes."

"Did they teach you that if a government is not, then the people have the right to replace that government?"

"It's in the Declaration of Independence," I said.

"Did you learn it?" he asked with elaborate patience.

"Yes," I said.

"Did you learn that as a fact?" Delandro repeated. "Or as a responsibility?"

"Uh . . . a responsibility."

"I doubt that," said Delandro, "I doubt it very much."

"Maybe some of us interpret responsibility a little bit different than you," I offered.

"On that we are in absolute agreement," he said, smiling for the first time. "There are people on this continent who are no longer willing to allow the so-called government of the United States to claim to represent us or act in our names. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Do you?" He looked at me as if he could see into my soul. "Or are you just saying yes to avoid hearing what I'm really saying?"

I took a breath. I returned his stare. "Yes," I said. "I understand." My knees were beginning to hurt. My arms were beginning to ache. The sweat was carving a river down my side. And I wanted to know what had happened to the kid.

"Can I get up?"

"In a minute. First we need to establish the ground rules." He stood up and pulled a pistol out from under his sweater. It had been stuck in his belt. "Do you know what this is?" It was a silver-plated Walther PPK. I wondered whose body he'd taken it off of.

"It's a gun."

"Do you know what it does?"

"It kills people."

"Very good." He brought it up very close to my face, so close I couldn't focus on it. He held the end of

the barrel under my nose. "Smell the gunpowder?"

I managed to say, "Yes."

He shoved the end of the barrel into my mouth. "Taste the metal?"

I tried to nod. My heart was banging in my throat. "Want to feel the bullet?"

I shook my head, very slowly. My eyes felt like hard-boiled eggs. I was afraid to blink.

"Good. James McCarthy has chosen to live. Now you're ready to hear the ground rules. I'm going to ask you to give me your word. If you break your word to me, I'll kill you. I'll blow your fucking brains out.

Do you understand?"

"Mm-hmh!"

"What was that again?" He took the gun out of my mouth.

"Yes!" I nearly shouted it. I was terrified. I gulped and added, "I understand. If I break my word, you'll kill me."

Delandro grinned toothily. "Very good, James. There may be a chance for you after all." He started to turn away, then suddenly he turned back and squatted down in front of me again. His face was very close. He looked me straight in the eyes and his expression was icy. "You don't fool me for a minute, you slimy motherfucker. You'd kill me in a second if you thought you could get away with it. You're just waiting for the opportunity, aren't you?"

I didn't answer. I just glared at him.

He held up his pistol meaningfully. "Tell the truth, James."

"Right," I said. It was the truth.

"Thank you." He smiled disarmingly, as if we were longtime friends. "You see, there's no punishment for telling the truth, James. You can tell me anything you want. I can take it."

"You're right," I said; I didn't care if my hatred showed. "That's exactly what I've been thinking."

"Thank you," Delandro said. Suddenly, his voice took on an intensely earnest quality. "I appreciate your honesty. It's a very good beginning."

"You see," he added, "it's only your military programming that wants to kill me. You've been brainwashed. Your mind has been turned into a nasty little military machine. But I don't listen to what that machinery spits out. Because I know where it comes from. And I also know that there's a real person under all that programming. The truth is, you don't really want to kill anyone at all."

"You're right. I don't want to kill," I said very carefully and very evenly. "But I will kill you if I get the chance."

"That's very courageous," Delandro grinned. "That's a perfect example of how a military mind works." He patted me on the shoulder. "You can be proud of yourself. You told me off."

"I meant it," I said. "I will kill you."

He studied me quietly. "Do you see how you're stuck in that?" he asked.

"It may take me a while," I said. "But you can count on it."

Delandro straightened up. He was unimpressed. "If I felt that was true," he said, "I wouldn't even bother continuing." He reholstered his pistol in his belt and pulled his sweater down over it again. "Did you get the ground rules?"

"Yes."

"What are they?"

I said it acidly. "If I break my word, you'll kill me."

"So, therefore . . . ?" he prompted.

"Whether I live or die will be my choice."

"Very good! Say it again, please. All of it."

My lips were so tight I could hardly speak. The words came out like bullets. "The choice between living and dying is entirely mine. If I break my word, you'll kill me."

"Very good, Jim. You may stand up now. You may put your hands down."

I did so.

"Now," he said. "I am going to ask you to give me your word that you will answer my questions truthfully, that you won't try to escape, and that you will cooperate to the best of your ability."

I hesitated.

"If you're thinking about your name, rank and serial number, forget it. I already know those things. And you're not a prisoner of war, Jim. Quite the contrary. You've been liberated. But you don't see it as liberation, do you?"

"No, I don't," I admitted. "If it's really liberation, you shouldn't have to threaten me."

"Quite," he agreed. "Do you know how to train a mule?" I shook my head. "You hit it with a two-by-four. Then, after you have its attention, you can begin to train it. Do you understand the analogy?"

"Yes."

"Good. You don't see it as liberation. Not yet. Don't worry, you will. Until that time, I want your word." Still I hesitated.

Delandro looked confused. "Is there some problem James? Didn't we make ourselves clear?" He put his hand inside his sweater-on his pistol butt.

I gulped. "You have my word."

"Thank you," he said. He waved to someone behind me. "All right, relax."

I looked to my rear.

There were two more worms there. Bigger than the one they called Orrie.

They had been there the whole time.

?

A lady who lives in New Delhi
has habits disgusting and smelhi.

She likes to eat feces
of various species.

(The recipe is tattooed on her belhi.)

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? 6

? Mr. President

"A lot of what I say comes off as political satire. In that, I have a lot in common with Congress."
--SOLOMON SHORT

There were fourteen of them altogether, eight men and six women. And three worms. And a scattering of dogs, sniffing and growling. I noticed that the dogs kept their distance from the worms.

There was also . . . a bunnydog. A bunnydog-thing.

But it wasn't fat and cute and pink and it didn't look friendly. It was a meter high, thin and weasely and brownish red. It looked like a little naked thing that had lost its bunnydog suit; its hands were bony like a rat's and its eyes had a reddish cast. It moved freely among the dogs and the worms and the humans, sniffing and chittering like a squirrel, occasionally pausing to examine objects on the ground; rocks, plants, whatever it chanced upon. Its curiosity was insatiable. It hop-waddled up to the pile of my belongings and began sorting through them. It picked up my dog tags and sniffed and bit at them. Delandro leaned over and took the dog tags away from the naked bunnydog thing. "No no, Mr. President. Not good."

Mr. President looked annoyed, but chittered an acknowledgment and returned its attention to the rest of my things. "James, come with me." Delandro led me away from the dome, leaving Mr. President and the others. As we passed the Jeep I noticed there was a lot of blood all over the ground, but no bodies. Not McCain. Not the little girl: Worms don't leave bodies. Delandro let me look, but he kept me moving. He had his hand firmly on my elbow.

We circled around to the back of the station. Incongruously, there was a picnic table nestled under a grove of tall eucalyptus trees.

Delandro nudged my arm. "Sit down," he said. I sat.

Delandro sat down opposite me. "All right, James. Where do you keep the food, the weapons, the gasoline, the medical supplies at this camp?"

I shook my head. "I don't know."

"James . . . I thought we had an agreement."

"Honest," I said. "I don't know. I was exploring it myself when you arrived."

Delandro put on a thoughtful expression. Was he trying to decide whether to believe me or not?

I added, "My job is to check out abandoned sites like this one. This is a crematorium. There's nothing here. Not even fuel."

Delandro considered the information. "You have a map?"

I nodded.

"It shows the other sites in this state?"

I hesitated.

Delandro's expression tightened. I nodded.

"Thank you."

I said, "According to the map . . ." I stopped and swallowed and cleared my throat. I was having difficulty speaking. "According to my map, there are supposed to be local stations of one sort or another, all up and down the coast. Some of them are supposed to be distribution facilities, but not this one."

"Where's the nearest?"

"I don't know. The records are incomplete. There might be a couple near Atascadero. I know there are three around San Luis Obispo, and one in Buellton-but I don't know what condition any of them might be in. They were only supposed to be temporary, just until the plagues were contained."

"Hm," said Delandro. "Would any of these be heavily guarded? The one in Buellton, for instance?"

"I don't know. Buellton's a ruin--mostly abandoned. The station might be mothballed, or robot-maintained." I didn't like doing this. My throat hurt with every word.

"Would there be anything of value left?"

"Maybe. I don't know. It's hard to say. They're moving everything they can into the bay area, behind the wall. They might have cleaned the station out, or they might have overlooked it."

"Hm. Very interesting," Delandro said. He scratched his neck again, that same gesture with the back of his nails. He got up and walked away from me, leaving me sitting there alone.

I looked around.

Nobody was paying any attention to me at all. Delandro's people were systematically exploring and looting the camp. There was no sense of urgency in their movements. They were as calm as if this were a trip to the local supermarket.

Every so often someone would step out of the office dome and holler, "Look what I found!" Usually it was some domestic item. Apparently there were living quarters in the back of the building. Once it was one of the men holding up someone's pink negligee—there was a lot of sniggering and good natured bantering at that. "Take it out and get it filled." Another time, it was a food processor that one of the women had discovered.

They had forgotten all about me.

My throat still hurt. I swallowed and looked around.

The three worms were snuffling around like dogs inspecting a strange yard. Orrie was the smallest and had the clearest markings. Its stripes were ripples of pink, purple, orange, and red. The other two had similar patterns, but nowhere near as distinct or as variegated.

I was about twenty meters from the trees; nobody was watching me. Suppose I got up and casually started strolling . . .

No. This was a test. Delandro wasn't stupid.

Somewhere, somebody was watching me to see what I would do—to see if I could be trusted.

I looked around again. More carefully this time.

There was a lookout on top of the roof. But he wasn't looking in my direction. If there was somebody watching me, I couldn't see him.

I had to think about this.

The renegades began to stack their booty on the picnic table, or on the ground beside it. I guess I qualified as booty too. Nobody asked me to help.

The pregnant woman strolled over then and tossed her machine gun on the table between us. She sat down sideways, pulled a package of cigarettes out of her shirt pocket and lit one between her cupped hands. Her hair was a dull sandy color; it looked stringy; and there were tiny age lines around her eyes; but she looked hard. I didn't want to fight her. She noticed me studying her and offered me a smoke.

"Want one?"

I slid a cigarette out of the pack. I leaned toward her so she could light it with the same match. I could have grabbed the gun...

I leaned back and puffed on the cigarette. I blew smoke at her. She looked back at me. She grinned and said, "You're not so stupid, are you?"

"Not terminally, anyway." I shrugged, I waved a hand to indicate the people moving around us. "Just because I don't see him doesn't mean somebody doesn't have a gun pointed at my head somewhere." She smiled and blew smoke to one side. She studied me. One of her front teeth was missing. She said, "There's nobody watching you. You overestimate your own importance if you think that. You can get up and walk away if that's what you're thinking of doing. In fact, I know that's what you're thinking of doing. So if you want to, do it."

"I wouldn't get ten meters, would I?"

She shrugged, puffed on her cigarette, and said, "I don't know. You might. You might even make it to your Jeep. But Orrie hasn't eaten yet. Not today. And he's sitting in your Jeep, waiting for you. Or anybody. He's been given permission to eat anyone who gets near it. So if you're going to rabbit, you'll have to do it on foot."

"And for sure I wouldn't get far that way. I hear worms are better trackers than dogs. Is that true?"

"I know how you can find out." She laughed. "My name's Jessie."

"How long have you been with Delandro?"

"Almost a year now. Jason is the best. He's a genius, you know."

"No, I don't know."

"He is-you'll see. But he's also something more than that, something special. He's an Alpha. Do you know what that means? It means power. Jason is a Source. I know you don't understand that. It's all right. Just let the experience of him flow into you." Her eyes were very bright. "You'll find out."

"You think very highly of him, don't you." It was as noncommittal a statement as I could think of.

She turned to face me. She took a drag on her smoke. She said, "Listen, when Jason found me, I was one of the walking wounded. You know about the herds, don't you?"

I nodded. "I've seen the one in San Francisco."

"Yeah. But that one's artificial. They gather all the walking wounded into one place, because they think that's the easiest way to handle them-two thousand at a time. I was in, one of the real herds," she said candidly, "down in Los Angeles. There were only thirty or fifty of us-that's the best size. We were a loose pack, just wandering around like a dazed bunch of zombies. I don't remember much about it. I remember being hungry and I remember feeding on whatever there was to feed upon. And then, there was Jason-and he wouldn't let me be a zombie any more. He brought me back to life. I'm alive now. I'm part of the future." She patted her belly proudly. "I have a job to do."

"Congratulations," I said dryly. I took a last puff on my cigarette and flicked it sideways across the compound. A shiny black millipede darted across the dirt, grabbed the butt, and ate it, glowing ember and all. One of the worms slid over, grabbed the millipede and popped it into its mouth.

Jessie stubbed her cigarette out on the bare table top. "Let me tell you something-" She was suddenly deadly serious. "We represent a new order, a new way of operating in the universe. We live in a totally different domain of human experience than you. We want to bring you up to that level-and we will too, eventually. But right now, you still think you have an allegiance to the robber barons, and you'll kill for that supposed allegiance. Therefore, you represent a danger to us. We need to neutralize that danger. We don't want to kill you. But we will, if it's necessary."

"Yes, of course," I said flippantly. "It's part of your survival programming, right?"

She looked surprised. "As a matter of fact, yes." And then she added intensely, "But the difference between us and you is that we're in control of our programming. That's Jason's gift. Real freedom. We're not trapped inside the false allegiances and inaccurate connections that you think are your life. You want to live, Jim? We'll teach you to live-and more than that: we'll give you a freedom that you've never experienced before! But the joke is this: everything that's going to happen to you-especially everything we do to destroy your inaccurate allegiances and false connections-is going to look like a threat to your survival. Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

I looked at her. "You're not just a chatty little mad lady, are you? You're the political indoctrination officer. Right?"

She didn't blink. "I asked you a question," she said. "Do you understand?"

"Oh, yes. I do understand." I could feel my hostility rising again. "Maybe more than you think."

"Bullshit," she said. "You don't understand anything. You're still part of the unawakened."

"Unawakened?"

"You're a zombie too," she said. "You're walking around in your own kind of trance. You think you're alive? You don't know what living is. Yet."

I looked away from her. I looked at the sky, the trees, the distant buildings. Anything but her. She waited patiently. Finally, I met her gaze again. "May I have a drink of water?"

She handed me her canteen. The water was warm. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"No," I said. "Did you expect me to be?"

"Are you scared?"

I took another drink. I looked at the ground. I shook my head. I wasn't answering her question, though she must have thought I was. No, I was thinking: Oh, Mamma McCarthy, what has your baby boy gotten himself into this time?

Without looking at her, I shoved the canteen back in her direction. She took it from my hand and said, "Don't worry. You'll get over it." And then she got up and walked away.

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A daisy chain isn't a riddle,
just some folks who are happy to fiddle,
by twos and by threes,
on their backs or their knees,
and it's fun getting caught in the middle!

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? 7

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Loolie

"Paranoids tend to persecute free men."

-SOLOMON SHORT

They had three motorcycles, two canvas-topped army trucks, and a van. And, now, my Jeep.

"Do you want to ride in the van with us?" Jessie asked. "Or in the truck with Orrie?"

I thought about the choice. At least I knew what kind of a danger Orrie represented. "I think I'll ride in the van, thank you." I climbed into the back of the van. The little girl was sitting there, quietly working on a coloring book. She looked up as I climbed in. "Hi," she said. "Are you coming with us?"

"He's our guest, Loolie," said Jessie, climbing in after me. "Sit there," she pointed.

"Oh," said Loolie. "Would you like a sandwich? Would you like something to drink?"

"Uh, no thanks." Suddenly, I was feeling very very bad. I'd been stupid. Loolie was the decoy.

"I made the sandwiches myself," she said.

I gave her a weak smile. "No, thanks."

It wasn't her fault, I told myself. She's too young to realize. How old was she anyway? I couldn't tell.

Never mind. That didn't matter. McCain was dead. She must have known. How could she have not known what she was doing? I forced myself to unclench my fists. I wanted to grab her and shake her as hard as I could. Till her eyes bulged and her tongue gagged and her bones broke

Goddammit! I flung myself back against my seat and stared forward, arms folded angrily across my chest. I was going crazy. No. I was already crazy. I was going crazier.

One of the men climbed into the front of the van to drive. The very thin girl with the dark brooding eyes climbed in beside him. She had my gun on her lap. I wondered if she still wanted to kill me. I realized why she looked so familiar.

I had to know. I swallowed my anger. I leaned over to Loolie and whispered, "Is her name Marcie?"

I pointed at the girl. "Uh-huh. "

"I thought so."

"Do you know her?"

"I did once."

Marcie had been in Denver three years ago. She'd lost her dog. Rangle. An unkempt-looking, shaggy, white dog-he'd whined and tried to escape; he screamed when the worm came down on him. She never knew. I never told her. Instead, I slept with her. Did she remember? Was that the source of her anger toward me?

Loolie was flattered by my attention. She asked, "Would you like to see my zoo?"

"You have a zoo?"

"Uh-huh! We got a porkly-pine, and a vampire, and a baby got p-,"

"Loolie!" Jessie interrupted sternly. She was just climbing back to join us. "You know the rules about talking to guests."

"Yes, Jessie. I'm sorry." Loolie turned toward me and solemnly put a finger across her lips.

The driver started the van then and the convoy formed up. I turned to look out the window; maybe I could memorize where we were going.

Two of the cyclists took the lead; obviously, they were scouts. The truck with the two bigger worms followed, then the van, then the truck with Orrie and Delandro followed after. Frankenstein's monster followed with my Jeep, loaded with the loot from the camp, and Mr. President riding in the back. The naked-bunnydog thing was peering curiously into the wrong end of my binoculars. The third cyclist brought up the rear.

I looked at Jessie. "Can [ask you some questions?"

Jessie was rummaging around in the cooler. She pulled out a fresh apple. "You can ask." She crunched

into it. "I don't promise to answer."

"How did you-or Jason-tame three worms?"

"We didn't. There's no such thing as a tame worm."

"Uh, but . . ." I glanced back at the truck following us. "You've got three of them."

"Orrie did it. He enrolled the other two."

"Oh?"

She nodded proudly. "Orrie's very special. He's a young god."

"Well, how did Jason tame him?"

Jessie looked at me coldly. "You don't tame a god, James."

"Sorry."

"That's all right. That's your inexperience talking. I suppose it looks like he's been tamed, if you don't know any better. I could just as easily use your dog tags as evidence that you've been tamed."

I didn't answer. I didn't want to encourage her to explain. She went on anyway. "In order to tame something, Jim, you have to disrespect it-you have to see it as a thing or an animal; and that will diminish you even more than it, because it's one more denial of the god in all of us. But if you can learn how to look deeper, how to see the soul inside, then you can form a partnership with any soul on the planet-any piece of God regardless of what kind of body it's living in. You don't tame a partner, Jim, you train a partnership."

"I'm sorry. I don't see the difference."

"You will," she said. "After you finish your training."

"My training?"

"Mm-hm." She said over a mouthful.

"Um . . . what if I don't want to be trained?"

"You've already made that choice," she said. "Or rather, your machine did."

"I'm sorry, I don't understand that either."

She reached over and tapped my forehead with one finger. "That's your machine. In there. You've been programming it since the day you were born. You didn't know you were programming, but you were. You've been making connections, decisions, judgments, analyses, and evaluations-and all without any regard for accuracy beyond the boundaries of your own skull. The only criterion you've ever used for the appropriateness of any connection was whether it hurt you or not. Up till now, all that programming has been unconscious-and unconscious programming is always about survival. You've already demonstrated it. But if you could be awakened, Jim, you could see how all that survival-based programming keeps you trapped."

"And you're going to awaken me?"

"No. You're going to awaken yourself. Or you won't." She chewed her apple thoughtfully. "Jason gave you the only choice you're capable of right now. Do you want to live or do you want to die? You said you want to live. That was your choice."

"And what if I'd said I'd rather die? What then? Would Jason have killed me?"

"James," she said patiently, "listen to yourself. If you were truly awake, survival would not be an issue for you. You flunked the test."

I thought about that. I said, "I'm sorry. I find that hard to believe."

Jessie shrugged noncommittally. In fact, she seemed emotionally detached from the whole conversation.

"What you believe is irrelevant. "

"Not to me," I said. She didn't reply. "Okay. So, what happens next?"

"You'll be our guest. We'll give you the opportunity to contribute whatever you can. And after that, we'll give you the opportunity to be awakened. And after that, you'll have the opportunity to join the Tribe. Or not."

"And what happens if I fail somewhere along the way?"

"You fail."

"That's it?"

"Uh-huh. "

I was confused. "There's something you're not telling me, isn't there?"

"Nope. "

"Nope?"

Jessie stroked Loolie's long brown hair. She kissed the child affectionately. Then she looked up at me.

"You see, you think failure means something. It doesn't. Failure isn't death. If you fail, we'll give you another chance to succeed. We'll give you as many chances as necessary. We want you to win."

"What about the threats on my life?"

"We haven't threatened your life at all, Jim. Nobody has. We asked you to give your word. You gave your word: Jason told you the consequences of breaking your word, so you gave your word. Since then-haven't you noticed?-nobody has held a gun on you, nobody is guarding you, nobody is threatening you at all. That's all in your mind."

"But if I tried to run away, you'd kill me, wouldn't you?"

"If you ran away, you'd be breaking your word, wouldn't you?"

"I wasn't given a choice-" I was starting to feel a little frustrated and annoyed.

"Yes, you were."

"But there was a gun at my head!"

"So it wasn't a real choice!"

"Yes, it was! The gun made it very real. And you're the one who chose-you chose to run your program. You're upset now because you think you didn't make that choice, but you did." There was no arguing with the woman. I shut up.

She continued. "The frustration you're feeling now is the very first step in your awakening. You're beginning to recognize the trap of being stuck in your own program. That's what that annoyance is."

She was wrong. I wasn't annoyed. I was positively hostile. I'd given my word, she said-but it had been under duress. And the law doesn't recognize contracts that are made under duress. All right, yes, it had been my "survival programming" speaking. So what? That still didn't give them the right to hold me prisoner. Except they weren't holding me prisoner, were they? I'd given my word I'd stay. I could just walk away, but that would be breaking my word-and the agreement was that if I broke my word, Jason could blow my brains out. So: if I followed my survival programming, I would have to stay. Or: if I chose to keep my word, I would have to stay.

I was confused. And I was angry. And I was lost in my own admiration of the neat little philosophical puzzle they had trapped my mind in. I could almost feel the circuits locking up in endless loops, hopelessly looking for a way out. Just like the spider.

And this time I knew that dirty limericks wouldn't work.

?

A lad with a marvelous bend
has no need of a lover or friend.
What he does to himself
would fill up a shelf,
but alas, he has come to his end.

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? 8?

Live or Die?

"It's easier to believe in God than to accept the blame ourselves."

-SOLOMON SHORT

They held me down while I screamed at them.

I raged and roared and struggled to break free. I wasn't going to let it happen again. Never again! I cursed at them until I was incoherent. An elephant was sitting on my chest, two grizzly bears were holding my arms. Godzilla was cracking my legs like a wishbone. I broke free one arm and punched at one of the bears. It said "Ooff." and fell back. I clawed at the elephant, and I was trying to reach Godzilla when the mountain collapsed on top of me again. I still didn't stop struggling.

"I'm not going to be brainwashed again! I'm not going through that another time!" I clawed my way upward. "I'll kill you! I'll kill you all, you mindsuckers!"

The rage turned red and I disappeared, screaming into it . . .

. . . and came out the other side, gasping for breath, too weak to move, tears streaming down my cheeks, crying in failure.

"That's good, Jim. Bring it all up."

"Fuck you."

"Good. Keep bringing that up too. All that anger. Get it all out."

For some reason that enraged me even more. I called him everything I could think of-in three different languages. I couldn't get him angry. He just stared at me impassively and waited. I gasped and croaked and gave up. I was defeated. Again. Too limp to move.

The mountain got off of me. Godzilla and the bears let go of my arms. The elephant got off my chest. They knew they didn't have to worry any more. I didn't have enough energy left to hate them. They'd won again. What would they turn me into this time?

I looked up and there was Foreman, kneeling over me. I couldn't read his face.

His expression was neutral, but his eyes were sharp and penetrating. Like Jason Delandro's had been.

Foreman waved away the assistants who stood gathered and waiting around me. He said softly, "What's the matter, Jim."

"I'm not going to be brainwashed again!"

"Why do you think this is brainwashing?"

"Because-I've been brainwashed!"

"And that makes you an expert?"

"No-Yes! I don't know! But I know what's going on inside my own head! And I don't want to be here any more."

"The door's not locked," said Foreman.

"I can go?" I sat up and looked.

"Any time." His expression was unreadable. "Except you gave your word that you'd complete the course."

"I gave my word to Delandro, too-and I know how that turned out. "

"Yes, I know all about that. May I work with you for a moment?"

I wiped my nose with the back of my hand. I looked to the doors. I knew this trap. "You're going to anyway, no matter what I say. That's how this works."

"Was that a yes or a no, Jim? I need your permission."

"I don't want to be worked with," I said.

"All right." Foreman stepped back away from me.

"Huh? Is that it? I can go?"

Foreman nodded. "All I want to do is ask you some questions, Jim, questions that might help you see what's going on here. But if you don't want to, then you shouldn't be here."

I thought about it for a moment. This was very confusing. Part of me wanted to head straight for the

door. And a part of me wanted an answer.

"Can I leave when we're through?"

"If you still want to," Foreman said, "you can leave." I decided to go for the answer.

"All right," I said. "Yes."

"Thank you. Would you come sit up on the dais?" He offered me his hand. I didn't take it. He didn't seem to notice the slight. He just pointed toward the high director's chair and patted my shoulder. "Just go on up there and sit down. Do you need a tissue?" He handed me a box of tissues, then turned to whisper something into the ear of the Course Manager who was waiting quietly to one side. I took the box with me up to the dais and sat down in his tall director's chair.

Five hundred people stared at me. I ignored them and wiped my eyes. They were a distant wall of faces. Foreman came up to the dais and stood beside me. He took the box of tissues off my lap and put it on the podium.

"How do you feel?"

"Limp," I said. Then I added, "I'm fine. Just a little . . . weak. "

"Do you want some water?" I nodded.

Foreman turned to the podium and reached inside it for a pitcher and a plastic cup. I took the water and drank it thirstily. I handed it back. "Thank you."

"All right, Jim," he began. "What we're going to do here is demonstrate something. I'm going to ask you some questions, and all I want you to do is answer them truthfully. All right?"

"Yes, fine."

"Now you said that you don't want to be brainwashed again, right?"

"That's right."

"Where were you brainwashed before?"

"You know where. I was captured by renegades last year."

"Yes, I do know. But I want everybody else to hear this too. There's a point to be made here, Jim, so you need to tell the absolute truth about everything. Understand?"

I nodded.

Foreman paused to phrase his next question carefully. "Is this course the same as the Tribe training you had with the renegades?"

"Uh-parts of it are."

"What parts?" "Well-the gun in Colonel Irving's mouth. And the choice."

"What choice?"

"You offered her a choice. Didn't you . . . ?"

"No, I didn't. Think back. What did I do?"

I thought back. I replayed the moment in my head. I started to tremble again. "You . . . asked her if she could keep her word about being here on time."

"Right. But I never told her that I would kill her. The point of that whole demonstration was to find out if she was physically able to keep her word. Not if she would, just if she could. And we found out that she can. If her survival was at stake, she could be here on time. She said so. That was all we wanted to know. Did you follow that?"

"Yes."

"So there wasn't any 'choice' in the matter at all, was there?"

"No, there wasn't."

"Good. You're doing fine. Now what was the choice you were given by the renegades?"

"Live or die."

"Live or die?"

"Uh-huh."

"Nothing more."

"No."

"So there was survival involved in it, wasn't there?"

"Yes."

"In fact, there was nothing but survival involved in it, right?"

"That's right."

"And you chose to live?"

"Yes."

"There was `choice' there-and survival was connected to that choice-and you chose to survive, right?"

"Right. Yes."

"And thereby demonstrated that you would do anything that was necessary to guarantee your survival, right?"

"Uh . . . right."

"So you gave them control over you, didn't you?"

"They already had control over me. They had the gun."

"You could have chosen death. That would have put you beyond their control, wouldn't it?"

I shrugged. "It, uh . . . didn't occur to me."

There was mild amusement in the room. Smiles. Chuckles. The wall of faces shifted and became a roomful of people for a moment, then they retreated again.

"Of course not; you were in survival mode." Foreman said, quietly. "But you did give them control over you, didn't you?"

"Uh . . ." I didn't want to admit it.

"Tell the truth, Jim," he prompted.

"Yes."

"Thank you. That's very good: Honest." He turned away for a moment, poured himself a glass of water and drank it. I had a moment to look out at the room. The faces weren't hostile. They were . . . with me. This was their question too. I was them. I realized I wasn't as scared as I had been before.

Foreman replaced his water glass and came back to me again. "So now I want you to look and see, Jim. That choice you were given-was that the same as the demonstration I did up here a while ago?"

"It looked like it."

"Yes, it looked like it. Wasn't it the same?"

"It looked the same . . ." I started to say, ". . . but no, it wasn't." I was clear about that.

"Thank you. Now, was Jason's `training' the same as this?"

"I don't know."

"Look and see, Jim. What's the same? What's different?"

I was remembering the taste of Jason's gun in my mouth and I felt angry. The words came haltingly at first. "Jason cheated . . . because he didn't explain it-at least, not until afterward." I had to stop for a moment, there were tears welling up in my eyes and I didn't know why. My throat hurt. "What Jason said was this: there's no point in explaining the choice between life or death when you're trapped inside your survival programming, because you can't see it. So-so . . ." My voice brake then and I couldn't continue. I wiped at my eyes.

Foreman handed me a glass of water and I drank it quickly. "It's all right," he said quietly. "You're doing fine."

I handed him back the glass; I wanted to go on. I wanted to get it said and out of my head. "He lied! It wasn't the choice he said it was! The choice that Jason was really giving me . . ." I could see it clearly now; I felt so lightheaded I was almost giddy. "He was asking me if I wanted to survive so much I would let myself be reprogrammed. Only, he didn't ask it clearly!"

"Of course not," said Foreman. "You'd have rather died than been reprogrammed-and he wanted you alive."

"Yes, I see that now." I rubbed my hands across my forehead, all over my face. "But it was still dishonest." I looked up at Foreman. "Wasn't it?"

"Not by their rules," remarked Foreman. "By their rules, only the `awakened' are capable of understanding real choice; `guests' need to be handled-that is, manipulated. You stepped into a philosophical bear trap there, Jim. But that's another discussion, for another time. How are you feeling

now?"

"I'm fine," I said. "I really am."

"Good." Foreman looked satisfied. His white hair floated in a halo around his head. "You're doing fine. We're almost to the end now. Just keep telling the truth."

"I will," I said.

"So: are you clear that what we're up to here is not the same?"

"I don't know." I looked to Foreman, confused. "Jason had a vision too. And he was just as passionate about it as-as you are about this core group. And he talked about commitment and responsibility too."

"Mm-hm," Foreman nodded. "What you're seeing, Jim-what you're realizing-is that the technology to produce results can be used for good as well as for bad. And that the judgment of good or bad is very often nothing more than the amount of agreement people can create for a specific position. Jason said he was creating a partnership with the worms. You saw how that worked out. We're not looking for a partnership with the invaders here. A few years ago, I interviewed you about another choice-do you remember? I asked you what you wanted to do. Do you remember what you told me?"

"I said I wanted to kill worms."

"Right. Is that still true?"

"Yes. Now more than ever."

"Good. Very good." Foreman put a hand on my shoulder and leaned close. When he spoke again, his tone was calm and straight forward. "Now, listen to me. It doesn't matter if this training is the same as Jason's. It may very well be. I don't know what he did, and I really don't care. And ultimately, it's irrelevant-because this isn't about the training at all; it's about what you're going to do with it after we're done. So, here's the real question: Is the purpose the same? Is our purpose here the same as Jason Delandro's?"

"No."

"It's not the same. You're clear about that?"

"Yes."

"Absolutely clear?"

"Yes."

"Then why did you react as if it were?"

"Huh-?"

Foreman's voice pressed in hard. "THEN WHY DID YOU REACT AS IF IT WERE THE SAME?"

"I . . . I . . ." I could feel my throat constricting painfully. There was pressure in my chest. I couldn't breathe

"It's all right," said Foreman. He touched my shoulder with his hand. "Tell me what you're feeling."

"I can't breathe. It hurts."

"Where does it hurt?"

"In my--chest." I touched my breastbone. "There's pressure."

"Like you're being squashed?"

"Yes."

"Mm-hm. I want you to notice something, Jim. I asked you a question-and instead of answering it, you came up with a lot of strong physical feelings. There's something going on here that you're not yet telling the truth about, but it's still trying to communicate itself. You're trying to hold it in and it's trying to get out, so it's being expressed as a physical pressure. So this time, when I ask the question, I want you to let the answer out, all right?"

I gulped and nodded.

"Why did you react as if this training were the same as the other one?"

"Because it looked the same and I was afraid I would end up the same way-" I blurted it out so fast, the words stumbled over each other. It was easier to say than I thought. "I was scared. I don't want to give up control of my mind again."

"I have bad news for you," Foreman stage-whispered in my ear. "You can't."

"Huh?"

"It's your mind. Can anyone else but you be responsible for what it does?"

"Uh, no. Are you telling me I was never brainwashed?"

"I'm not telling you anything. I'm just standing here asking questions."

"You're saying there's no such thing as brainwashing, aren't you?" I could feel my panic rising again. I was on a roller coaster. I felt trapped. "I know what you're suggesting. You're going to tell me that I'm copping out-that my saying I was brainwashed is how I avoid being responsible for what I did, isn't it?"

"Is it?"

"That's what you're saying!" I was shouting now. "At least, you're implying it! But I was there and I know what happened! And I didn't know how else it could be worked out! All I know is what happened last time. This looked the same! And I got scared!"

"That's perfect," said Foreman. "That's absolutely perfect."

"Huh?" I was suddenly confused. "What is?"

"What you just said. Say it again."

"It looked the same and I got scared."

"Right." Foreman seized on it. "It looked the same to you-so you reacted as if it were the same situation, even when it wasn't. Do you see that?"

"Oh, yes."

"It was all automatic, wasn't it? Your button got pushed and your machinery went off, didn't it?"

"Uhh . . ." I sagged in the chair. "Oof." I put my hands over my eyes.

"What's on that tape, Jim?"

"Uh, anger . . . ?"

"Are you asking me or telling me?"

"Anger," I said. "I'm telling you."

"There's something else, Jim. That wasn't just anger. What else was there?"

I swallowed, lowered my hand and said quietly, "Rage. I mean-I wasn't human for a while, I was an animal. I wanted to kill. I would have killed then. If I could have."

"Uh-huh." Foreman nodded. "That rage came up very clearly. Can you see how automatic it was?"

"Yes," I admitted. He was right. I felt like I wanted to tremble and cry, but at the same time I was feeling lighter too.

"That's a very old tape, that one-you inherited it from your umpty-great grandfather-you know, the one who climbed down from the trees. It's called fight-or-flight. It's part of your operating system. It's always watching, judging, and burping up reactions. This time, it burped up the concept that your survival was threatened and it plugged in the appropriate response. You went into fight-or-flight mode, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I did." I felt embarrassed.

"How long have you been carrying that rage around?"

"Uh-at least a year."

"Oh, no; much longer than that. How about, most of your life . . . ? How old are you?"

"Twenty-five "

"Uh-huh. It takes a long time to build up that much rage. At least three billion years. That rage is your whole evolutionary history; you've been angry since the day you got kicked out of mommy's nice warm baby-maker. Only you just don't let yourself admit it. Do you let your rage out often?"

"Um, more now than I used to."

"Mm-hm. Does it work?"

"What do you mean?"

"When you go into fight-or-flight mode, you plug into your rage. Does it handle the situation that triggered the fight-or-flight mode?"

"Oh, I see." I had to think about this one. "No . . . not really. "

"Mm-hm-but you've kept on doing it, haven't you?"

"I . . . I didn't know what else to do."

"That's right. You didn't know what else to do. That rage was one of your primary operating modes. You shift into it very easily-because you don't know that there are any other modes available to you, do you?"

You'll spend your whole life trying to find the right operating mode; the one that can handle every situation you fall into. What's driving you crazy is that there isn't one.

"There isn't a right way, Jim. There's only appropriate and inappropriate. When the renegades captured you, what you did was appropriate. You surrendered. You shifted into another mode, another operating state, that's all. Your problem is that you don't like knowing that mode is part of your spectrum of operating modes. Right?" He fixed me on the point of his stare. "Right?"

I nodded. I swallowed hard and admitted it. "Right."

"Good," Foreman said quietly. He patted my shoulder again. "Thank you, Jim." He turned around to include the rest of the room again. "Listen up! This course is not about finding the right mode. It's about the person who makes up the operating modes it's about mastering the technology that operates the piece." He patted the top of his head to indicate what "piece" he was talking about. "So here's how it works. It's very simple. In this course, you are going to experience as many different operating modes as you can make up. We will keep doing that day after day after day after day. We'll do it for as long as is necessary-until you get the joke."

Foreman started to turn back to me, then caught himself. "Oh-one more thing. Jim raised some points here about brainwashing. Let me handle that right now." He completed his turn and looked me straight in the eye, again. "Jim, do you know the difference between brainwashing and training?"

I shook my head. "Obviously not."

"It's really very simple. You get to choose to be trained. You don't get to choose to be brainwashed."

Foreman turned back to me and said, "Did you choose to be a part of Jason Delandro's tribe?"

"It looked like it-but no, not at first. Not at the beginning, I never did."

"Right. Did you choose to be here?"

I looked at the memory. "Yes, I did. I want this training. I signed up because I thought it would help me-get better."

"Yes, I know," said Foreman. "Now, then: you said you wanted to leave. Do you still want to?"

"Huh?"

"Remember? You were on the floor, screaming at me. You said you didn't want to do this any more."

"Oh," I said. "But I didn't mean it. I mean, I did-but I don't any more." I had to laugh. "That really was fight-or-flight, wasn't it? No, I want to stay."

There was loud laughter now. And applause. The wall of faces suddenly disintegrated. I wasn't alone any more. And this time, the tears in my eyes were tears of happiness.

I didn't know why, but I was happy. Again.

?

There was an old bastard named Jason,
whose horrible death I would hasten.

I'd feed him to worms

just to see how he squirms---

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? 9?

A Rhyme for Jason?

"A limerick is a primitive art form; it starts with a pair o'dactyls."

-SOLOMON SHORT

The problem was, I couldn't find a second rhyme for Jason. Basin? Pacin'?

Just south of the Dixon and Mason?

No. This was obviously not going to be one of my more noteworthy efforts.

Disgracin'? Maybe:

- but I doubt that he would be chastened.

Dammit. Why couldn't Delandro have been named Chuck? Chuck, I could rhyme.

This was the worst part of being captured. The waiting. The boredom. At least Loolie had a coloring book to keep her occupied.

I had given up trying to keep track of where we were going. We had wound around through so many twisty back roads, up and down so many rumped brown hills, that I was beginning to wonder if we were still in California-or even on Earth. Large patches of ground were covered with red ivy-like creepers and purplish vines hung from many of the trees we passed. Blue and white tufts of something furry clustered in shady patches. The higher we climbed into the spiny mountains, the more pronounced the Chtorran vegetation became. There were stiff black spiky things, growing tall and slender; their trunks were smooth and naked-looking; I couldn't name them. There were tall puffy mounds dotting a mottled pasture-nests of nerve-burners; bright red insect-things the size of crabs. There were fields of mandala bushes and broad slopes of tall gray grass. There were curling hedges of purple and orange thorns. And there were bat-like things the size of eagles gliding high in the sky. We were leaving the human world behind.

It almost could have been pretty, except-somehow, the Chtorran life forms looked stark and malevolent; their growth was malignant. Cancerous. Where the infestation was at its thickest and reddest, the landscape looked diseased; it looked sick. The alien ecology leeches at everything it touched: the purple vines encircled the trees with spiky tendrils and sucked at the life within, the red ivy on the ground was bordered with brown patches of dying grass, and there were dead cows lying in a field of rust. Pink puffballs the size of tumbleweeds rolled across the hills, bounced across the highway.

The disaster was complete. The sky was yellow and smoky. Even the clouds were tinged with blood. The air smelled sulfurous---except when it was worse. As we climbed higher, the pungent and cloying odors that came in through the windows of the van were so thick as to be nauseating.

After a while, I couldn't look any more.

I closed my eyes and tried to make up limericks. They might control my body, but I was still in control of my mind.

There was an old witch, name of Jessie
whose crotch was all smelly and messie.

Um....

Jessie was even harder to rhyme than Jason.

No. I had to find a rhyme. I wouldn't be defeated. My sanity might depend on this. I had to have a way to resist.

She enjoyed a good squirm with an alien worm

But if I used that, I'd have to make up something else for Jason. Jessie. Jessie. What rhymes with Jessie?
- and got stains all over her dressie!

All right, so now what could I do with Jason? : What I really wanted to do was kill him, Painfully. With my bare hands, if I could.

I thought about that for a while.

It was much more satisfying than limericks. For a while.

The convoy jolted off the pavement onto a dirt road that twisted impossibly through dirty black brush. It was almost dusk. We'd been traveling half a day.

"We're almost there!" said Loolie. My gut began to tighten again.

It was the not knowing that was driving me crazy. Were they going to torture me? Feed me to the worms? Put me in a sensory deprivation tank? I'd heard stories about the Tribes.

We rattled across a wooden bridge over a dry gully, up an incline and down into a sheltered bowl of land, shadowed by leafy willows and black oaks. The only obvious sign of Chtorran infestation were purple and red veils hanging from some of the trees. They looked like cobwebs, or silk. They had a shimmery look where the sunlight still sparkled off of them.

As we circled down into the clearing, I could see that the camp itself was a ragtag collection of vehicles, motor homes, trucks, trailers, and collapsible dwellings scattered around the parking lot of an old abandoned motel. Some of the buildings showed signs of recent repair work.

The Tribe was already pouring out of the woods and the buildings, shouting and rushing to greet us. It was joyous pandemonium! I heard someone calling, "Come on! The young god is back!" A pack of children and dogs came scrambling and running out ahead of the rest, all screaming and yelping like wild baboons-and there were chattering bunnydogs, and those other naked-bunnydog things too, bouncing and careening along with them-followed by at least thirty or forty adults and teenagers, many of them carrying weapons.

The children were dirty, and many of them were naked, but none of them looked hungry or unhappy; they varied in age from toddlers to pre-teens. They came charging like warriors, the dogs barking and yapping around them. The dogs were a mixed assortment of unpleasant-looking canines; they looked like leftovers from the pound, the dregs of the species.

The various bunnydogs and bunnydog-things were just as varied; there were at least a dozen of them caught up in the rush, waddle-hopping like crazy as they tried to keep up. They bounced across the ground like an avalanche of rats and rabbits, yipping and squealing and gobbling like the children, but no two of them shared the same size, shape, or color. They ranged from a deep ruddy brown to a pale, almost-white shade of pink; there were even a couple of blue-purple and orange-yellow bunnydogs. Some were as small as toddlers; others were at least as large as six-year-olds, a meter or more. Most of them looked like parodies of the bunnydogs I had met last year. There were several small weasely-looking ones and a couple of very fat drunken-looking ones, and one in particular-a ghastly red, ratty-looking creature, half the height of a man-looked like a cat's nightmare.

And the humans too were just as assorted: tall, short, fat, thin, black, white, yellow, old, young.

Even before the convoy had come to a full stop, the chattering people and animals-and things-were already surrounding the vehicles, clustering excitedly to help unload and hear the news. All of them were abuzz with questions-but first they backed up politely to give Orrie room to dismount. The back of the truck slapped down into the dirt to make a wide ramp and Orrie flowed down and into the cheering crowd. They surged in close, oohing and aahing and patting at him affectionately.

"Whhhhhrrrr!" said Orrie. "Whhrr-whhhhhrrrrrr!"

It almost sounded like a purr. I'd never heard a worm make that sound before; but then, I'd never seen a worm that had acted like this one either. Delandro jumped down out of the truck next and the crowd surged in to hug him and kiss him too, men and women alike. Loolie and Jessie and Marcie burst happily out of the van to join them. I stayed where I was, trying as hard as I could to be invisible.

"All right, all right," said Jason, caught up in the crush, laughing with delight at being the center of so much attention, "let's get some of this gear unloaded first, okay!" But his words were swept away in the roar of greetings.

The younger children were all squealing in delight. I heard cries of "What did you bring us?" and "Did you get any candy?" The adults were also shouting back and forth, exchanging greetings and good-natured jibes.

I wanted to be afraid, but I couldn't. Mostly, I felt-left out. Most of the people here looked disappointingly mundane, and they acted as solid as a community of New Christian farmers. Many of the men wore beards, and most of the women had their hair pulled back in neat efficient ponytails, or

close-cropped like the men. They all wore jeans and T-shirts, or jeans and flannel shirts, or jeans and sweatshirts, or jeans and no shirt at all-but all the adults looked clean. For some reason, that seemed important. The other two worms were climbing down from their truck now. The crowd greeted them enthusiastically too. Their affection and respect was obvious; but it was equally obvious that Orrie was held in special regard.

I could understand their enthusiasm. Orrie may have been one of the smallest worms I'd ever seen, but he was also one of the brightest. I couldn't take my eyes off of him. It had been my previous experience that the older and larger a worm was, the brighter and more distinct its stripes would be, but Orrie was just a baby and already his colors were vivid. His stripes were more sharply delineated than I'd ever seen before on a worm. His proud patterns shifted back and forth across his sides like the letters on a billboard. The crowd pressed in closer.

And the worm seemed to like the attention! He even lowered his eyes, so the children could reach up and scratch behind the thick fleshy stalks that supported them. Two of the smaller boys were trying to climb up on his back.

I could feel my fists clenching in my lap: I felt naked without a weapon. A flame-thrower.

A couple of the teenagers noticed me sitting in the back of the van then and started calling to the rest of the crowd. "Look, look-Jason brought back a new guest! H'ray!" They started waving affectionately to me. "Hi! Come on out! What's your name?"

They climbed in and took me by the hand and pulled me out to join the crowd. The people gathered around me like I was a long lost cousin. I was hugged and kissed by all of them, male and female, young and old, everyone who could get to me. "Welcome, welcome home! What's your name? We're so glad you came! Welcome!" They dragged me out in front of the vehicles where a large, raucous, and informal gathering was coming spontaneously together. Everyone was linking arms in a huge circle. The bunnydogs and naked-bunnydog things were joining the group too, but they did not link arms; instead they squatted attentively just inside the line of humans.

Just before the last few individuals linked up, Orrie flowed into the center of the circle, purring loudly. He swiveled his eyes around to look at everybody. People cheered and applauded and hollered with good-natured whoops of encouragement.

I found myself between a skinny adolescent girl and a nervous looking boy, but they seemed proud to be next to me.

And then Jason Delandro stepped into the middle of the circle.

He turned around slowly, so everyone could see him laughing and smiling and waving, and the wild cheering broke out again. What were all these people so excited about? Did they do this all the time?

They applauded, they screamed, they stamped their feet and hollered.

Delandro grinned and raised his hands high. "Hello!" he shouted.

"Hello!" they shouted back.

"I want to share with you!"

Another burst of wild enthusiasm. My military mind decided they were mindless idiots. But I knew these people weren't stupid. There was something else going on here.

"As you can all see," Delandro pointed, "we have a new guest with us tonight!"

They looked at me and cheered again.

"His name is James Edward McCarthy. Until this afternoon, he was a lieutenant in the United States Army."

Faces turned to me. More smiles. People looked and waved and hollered, "Hello!" and "Welcome!"

"He's our guest," Jason continued. "We gave him the choice and he chose to be our guest. I know I don't have to tell you to give him all the love you can, because I know you will; but I want you to make a special effort to cherish Jim because he's still carrying a great deal of fear and he needs to know that there's nothing in the world to fear here, is there?"

They hooted and stamped and clapped again. The girl on my right put her arm around my waist and gave me a squeeze. The boy on my left-he wore thick glasses, he looked half blind-patted my shoulder warmly.

"All right now, I've got a lot of other news for you. There are some very exciting things happening! And I know you want to hear all about everything!"

"Yeah, Jase!" someone shouted. "Tell us!"

"But if I started to share all of it tonight, we'd be here till tomorrow!" He looked ecstatic. He said, "But I will tell you the big surprise right now."

"Do it, Jase!"

"Go for it!"

"I want you all to look at Orrie! Doesn't he look terrific! Orrie is very very pleased! Because we did good."

"Yeah!"

"Yay, Orrie!"

The cheering and stomping started to become a steady roar. I wondered if these people were about to erupt into a fit of collective hysteria. They were delirious with joy!

Orrie was circling and turning in the center. He was almost writhing. His excitement was growing with the crowd's.

"We did good!" Jason was hollering now to be heard. Someone shoved a microphone in his hand. He took it and shouted into it: "We did very good! We found what we were looking for!"

The crowd went crazy. They started jumping up and down, screaming and yelling, hugging and kissing each other.

Jason was screaming now. "We are going to add the fourth corner!"

And they screamed and cheered again. They started hollering, "When, Jason? When?" It turned into a chant. "When, Jason? When?"

Jason held up his hands and waited for silence. The crowd hushed quickly. As Jason lowered his hands, he was abruptly illuminated by two bright spotlights. They were mounted on the cabs of two of the trucks. Jason had to squint his eyes against the glare. Orrie's eyes went sput-phwut. Jason lifted the microphone to his mouth and whispered dramatically into it, "That's the big news. It looks like it'll happen before summer!"

This time, screaming wasn't enough. The circle broke ranks. They charged Orrie to hug him. They charged Jason to hug him. I was left standing and watching.

Suddenly, people were grabbing and hugging me. "Jim, it's great for you to be here!"

"You're so lucky! What a privilege!"

"I know this is confusing for you, but it's an incredibly joyous time. Not just for us, but for all humanity!" Somebody turned me. I was looking into Jessie's face. Her eyes were glowing. She was wreathed in smiles. She hugged me and kissed me. She said, "Jim, this is bigger than Christmas! Something is happening here that is going to transform the human race! And you're going to be part of it!" She kissed me again. I stared at her.

I stared at all of these people. I was too dazed to be horrified. "Please! Everybody!" That was Jason, screaming into the microphone. The sound was deafening. "Everybody, listen! I know you're happy! This is what we've been waiting for! But there's still a lot of work that has to be done. We need to build a birthing pen, and we'll need to lay in a lot of supplies because we won't be able to travel for a while, and we're going to have to be very careful; we'll have to set up extraordinary security measures-and all the other day-to-day things that have to be done. But, I know I can count on you to get the job done. I just want to caution you: now that we're this close, we can't get careless! There's too much at stake. Right?" "Right!" They roared back.

Jason beamed. "Now I know you all want to celebrate Orrie's return tonight. And our triumph! And we will! We'll celebrate in the biggest way possible! But we still have a lot of work left to do, so let's get it done just as fast as we can, and at midnight tonight, we'll gather together for the biggest damn Revelation we've ever had!"

Oh, my dear God in Heaven. Revelationists.

With three tame worms.

?

A lady who favors coition,
has invented the spaceship position.

She lies down with ease
and pulls up her knees,
and hollers, "Lift off!" and "Ignition!"

?

? 10?

Valerie

"A gentleman is one who doesn't demand a lady prove that she is."

-SOLOMON SHORT

"This will be your room," they said. It was an ordinary motel room except for two things. There was no terminal. There was no Bible.

They apologized for not letting me participate in the revelation. "It wouldn't be appropriate." And then they left me alone.

I wondered if they had locked me in. Probably not. I was a guest, remember?

I opened the door.

A big fat worm sat there like a gigantic crimson meat loaf. It opened one of its eyes and stared at me.

"Prowrt?" it asked. "Uh, just checking. Sorry. Go back to sleep." I backed into the room and closed the door. "Jeezis, who needs locks?"

So that answered that.

I took a shower. At least they hadn't forsworn the pleasures of hot water. I stood under the steaming spray and let it run down through my hair, down my face, down my shoulders. I stood there and let the sobs well up in my throat. The fear choked at my heart. How could I keep my guard up in an environment like this when everybody around me was continually trying to seduce me into relaxing? This was insidious.

I could only admire the beauty of it.

There was no defense. They would be so nice to me that I wouldn't be able to work up even a good sulk without feeling like an ungrateful bastard.

And one day I would get tired of greeting joy with hostility, just tired enough to let my guard down just a tiny bit, that's all it would take-and then they'd have me. I could already imagine how it was going to happen. . . .

"No, goddammit! No!" I pounded on the tile walls of the shower. "No! No! No! No!"

And when the rage had passed, I stood there and let the water run off of me again. My silent tears washed down the drain. When the water went cold, I turned it off and stood there dripping Dammit.

There had to be a way out! Somehow. No. I had to stop.

I was driving myself crazy with this. I stepped out of the shower, slowly toweled myself dry, and padded off to bed.

She couldn't have been more than sixteen. She was sitting cross-legged on the bed waiting for me. She wasn't wearing any clothes. She had small pretty breasts. Very tan. Her nipples were large and dark. She had long brown hair and soft gray eyes. She looked friendly.

"Uh-" I lowered the towel strategically. "Hi?"

"Hi," she said back.

"Um . . . am I in the wrong room or you?"

"No, this is the right room. I'm here to sleep with you."

I scratched my nose. I looked at the floor. I looked at the door. I looked back at her. "Uh, there's something I'm missing, right?"

"I don't think so. Lift that towel and I'll have another look."

"Uh, that's not what I meant. Why are you here?"

She got under the covers then and slid over in the bed to make room for me. She turned back the blanket so I could get in. I didn't move from where I stood. She said, "You're going to get cold standing there."

"I'm already cold. Uh, listen-I don't know what your name is..."

"Valerie." She stroked her hair down over her breasts. It was very distracting.

"Valerie. Well, listen, Valerie, I don't need anyone to sleep with, thank you. I appreciate the thought, but

you can go."

"Would you prefer a boy?"

"No, I would not prefer a boy, thank you."

"There's nothing to be ashamed of. Billy thinks you're cute, I could call him-"

"I'm not ashamed. And you can thank Billy for me in the morning. I just want to sleep alone."

"Oh, I'm sorry. You can't."

"I can't?"

"Well . . ." she looked apologetic, "no."

"Why not?"

"Because Jason says so."

"Jason says so."

"Yes."

"I see." I stood there indecisively. I was shivering.

"Will you get in bed please?"

Part of my mind was racing. This was exactly what I used to fantasize about in high school-and ever since: to have a beautiful and friendly and very naked girl encouraging me to join her in bed. The obvious thing to do was yell, "Banzai!" and leap.

I took a step back and looked for the bear trap. "I don't trust this situation," I said.

She shrugged and slid under the covers, then studied me with an absolutely innocent gaze. "So? What's the worst that can happen?"

I thought about it. The best that could happen would be that I'd have a terrible time. The worst that could happen would be that I'd have a terrific time and lose my individuality. I thought about the alternatives-there really weren't any-and got into the bed. Slowly.

We lay there side by side, not touching. I studied the ceiling. She studied my profile.

"Do you want to talk?" she asked.

"Do I have to?"

"No. Do you want to sleep?"

"Uh--I did, but I'm wide awake now.

"Should I turn out the light?"

"All right."

She rolled over and touched the switch on the nightstand. The room was left shaded in moonlight. The venetian blinds made lavender streaks on the wall. The night felt silent.

She rolled back toward me. The bed squeaked with the movement.

Somewhere in the distance, I could hear yelling, a great many voices all yelling together.

"What's that?" I asked.

"That's the Revelation. It's just starting. It gets louder. Don't worry about it. Around here, celebrations can get pretty rowdy."

"Oh." I turned on my side to look at her. "Valerie," I said. "How long have you been here?"

"Here? You mean this place? Or do you mean with Jason?"

"With Jason."

"Um, let me see-it'll be eleven months in May."

"Where were you before?"

"In Santa Barbara."

"And how did you . . . join?"

"The same way everybody does. I wanted to be here, so I created the opportunity for them to find me. Nobody gets here by accident. I didn't know I wanted to be here. I didn't know I was creating my opportunity, but that's how it worked out-and now I know that there aren't any accidents; this is the way it's supposed to work out. Jason says it the best way. He says, `God doesn't make mistakes.'"

"Of course not. If he did . . ."

"She."

"Huh?"

"She. God's a she."

"Oh."

"What were you going to say."

"Uh, I was going to say, if God did make mistakes, she wouldn't be God anymore, would she?"

"That's very good."

"Thank you. What did you do before?"

She shrugged. "Same as everybody else. I survived." She looked at her fingernails. They were short, like a man's. "That's what the ordinary world is about. Survival."

"Uh-huh. Well, uh, let me ask it this way. How would I have known you in the ordinary world?"

"I was a whore." She said it matter-of-factly, as if she were describing what she had had for dinner.

"At sixteen?"

"At thirteen."

"Uh. I see."

"I did it to survive. I didn't know that I didn't need to do it to survive. Jason gave me the space to find that out." She turned on her side to face me. "See, Jim, when I sold myself for money before, I wasn't selling my body. That was the form of it, but what I was really doing was selling pieces of my soul. Jason told me I didn't have to do that. Now, I only give myself to people who are willing to give themselves to me. So I get back what I give away. Only now it's-oh, I wish I were better with words-now, when I share myself with someone, what happens is that I transcend myself. When two people trade pieces of themselves, they're transformed."

"I'm sorry. I don't understand that."

"It's all right," she said. "It took me a long time to understand it too." She reached out and touched me. Her hand was warm and gentle. She let it slide down to my hip. I stopped her hand. I held it in mine.

"You'll probably hear this as an insult," I said, "even though I don't mean it as one; but is that why you're here to sleep with me? To seduce me? I mean-are you whoring for Jason now?"

She pulled her hand back. "Oh, that's not an insult. And the answer is no-and yes. No, I'm not whoring for Jason. But, yes-I was chosen to sleep with you first, before anyone else, because I've had the experience. I know how to use myself to reach you, to give you the opportunity to reach back. That's all. Do you understand? It's a skill. I can use it-I can use it to be selfish, or I can use it to share. I want to share myself with you tonight. "

"I guess I'm old fashioned, Valerie. I don't understand it."

"There's nothing to understand. I don't want to be alone either," she whispered. "Will you share yourself with me?"

I looked at her face. In the moonlight, all I could see was the soft gleam of her eyes against the paleness of her skin.

"I don't know," I said.

"You have to let go of your mind," she whispered. "Let yourself be the animal."

"The animal?"

"You're an animal, Jim. A male animal. I'm a female animal." Her touch became a caress. "Let go of your mind and just experience the physicalness of it. Is that so hard to do?"

"I don't . . ." But I did. I knew exactly what she meant. And I wanted to do it.

I moved toward her, just a bit. I realized I was still scared of her. But she smelled good. Let go of your mind, she said. But how? Her hand came back to me again.

Her fingers strayed. I let them.

Even though I knew it was a mistake.

And then . . . oh, hell, I stopped resisting. I told myself I could handle this. Really.

I let it happen.

She was good. So was I.

She was frenzied, almost out of control. And after a while, so was I. She smelled good.

The male animal mounted the female. We did it. And my mind was lost.

?

Isaac the famous seducer,
will meet a young lass and conductor
to let him get fresh
with her quivering flesh,
but if there isn't the time, he'll just gucer.
?

? 11?

Falstaff

"Onions don't cause heartburn; they only make it interesting."

-SOLOMON SHORT

Someone was singing to me.

When I woke up, Valerie was already gone. But I could still hear the singing

I opened the door.

The worm was still there. It was facing away from the door, toward the morning sun. Its fur glistened pink.

It was the worm that was singing-humming, really. The sound was coming from deep inside its throat. Was it brooding, or what? The creature's eyes were closed and it looked preoccupied. The trilling was softer than a purr, but it had the same kind of deep satisfying rumble.

I stood in the doorway and listened. The worm crooned and warbled quietly to itself. Its song was tuneless and ethereal; it sounded like an expectant banshee-like a distant murmuring chorus . . . like the echo of someone weeping. It was one of those just below the horizon sounds, and it was as ominous as a hot desert wind. I felt uneasy. I felt like an invader just for listening.

But I was transfixed. It was beautiful. I must have moved or made a sound.

Abruptly, the worm stopped its trilling and swiveled its eyes around backward to look at me. They were the size of searchlights. It blinked. Sput-phwut. Then it turned to face me. It yawned. It looked like it had three million teeth. "Grrp?"

"Uh, good morning." I gulped.

"Wrorr?" the worm asked.

"Uh, yeah, I slept okay-thanks for asking."

The worm blinked at me-and blinked again, refocusing its eyes to study me. It was a fat, pink, blimp-shaped creature, with pale stripes of purple and red and pink flickering along its sides. It huffed and it puffed and it made ruminative noises deep within its gut. "Platt!"

"Gee-thanks for sharing." I waved the stench away from my face. My eyes were watering. "Uh, listen, what does a person do about breakfast around here?"

Sput phwut.

"Food? You know, food?"

"Brurrrp!" said the worm. It backed away, swiveled, turned and flowed down toward the center of the compound.

I shrugged, swallowed my heart, and followed.

The creature moved with a rustle and swoosh that made me think of an asthmatic elephant carrying a steam engine on its back. I hadn't realized that Chtorrans might have respiratory problems in Earth's atmosphere. Maybe they were biologically suited for a thicker, heavier soup.

Breakfast was a great communal meal served under a spreading canopy of oak trees. There were pink shrouds hanging from the branches; they looked like festive curtains. There were thick strands of blackvine too, just starting to blossom with bright blue flowers. I could smell the rich perfume from here. It was all too gay-in the middle of a war zone, it made me think of the mad tea party.

Adults, bunnydogs--cute ones as well as the bigger skinny-ugly ones--and children, all sat chattering and gobbling together at six huge tables arranged in a broad U-shape under the shrouds. Only small children and bunnydogs sat on the inside of the U, everybody else sat on the outside of the tables. They cheered when they saw us coming; I didn't know if the cheers were for me or for the worm.

The worm flowed off in another direction then, off on some business of its own. Somebody called my name and waved, a baldheaded man with a full beard and a bright red lumberjack shirt. He stood up, grinning and waving, then bounced gladly up the slope to meet me.

"Welcome, Jim. I'm Ray." He grabbed my hand and shook it; he clapped me warmly on the shoulder and guided me down to the table. "Here, we saved a place for you. Loolie wants you to sit by her."

I smiled weakly, nodded to Loolie-the little girl looked ecstatic-and slid sideways onto the end of the bench. Somebody handed me a plate, somebody else handed me a fork and a spoon.

"Would you like to come and see my zoo today?" Loolie asked.

"Your zoo? Uh, sure. If it's all right with . . ." I looked around, "-whoever."

"Oh, it's all right," Loolie said. "I already asked."

"Here," said Ray, "have some of these; and try this; it's Jessie's new recipe!" He raised his voice and called, "Hey, Brownie-" One of the kids came bouncing up to the front of the table. "-We have a guest here. Let's have some of those hot plates passed around."

"Right." Brownie bounced off. Service was provided by several of the older children and several of the larger, skinny bunnydogs. Loolie called them bunnymen. The children carried in the full platters; the bunnymen carried off the empty ones-often pausing to lick them thoroughly first. Sometimes they had to compete with the dogs, or with three or four pig-like creatures that were snuffling around, looking for garbage. They were a dark reddish-brown color and looked like tapirs-or giant libbits, a sausagey Chtorran rodent.

I filled my plate cautiously. I didn't recognize some of the foods and even the familiar ones looked and tasted different. The bread was pink, and sweeter than I was used to. The jam was almost a fluorescent shade of red and I didn't recognize the flavor. The eggs had an orangey color, but the flavor was rich and full.

A little brown sparrow landed on the edge of the table in front of me. It had something pink and fleshy in its bill, something that looked like a chubby little naked man-it squirmed and peeped. Ray poked me.

"The birds love the finger-babies. And for some reason, we get a lot of 'em around here." The bird cocked an eye at its surroundings, decided it didn't like the company, then took off again, up and past my shoulder..

Almost immediately, there was a frantic rustling behind me. I turned around and looked upward: the little sparrow was caught and struggling wildly in the folds of one of the velvety pink shrouds. The more it struggled, the more it wrapped itself up tight. A glittering haze of sparkling fairy dust flurried up around it, and then a fat red hairy claw-shaped thing came scuttling down the curtain from above.

The sparrow peeped once and was silent. "You'll see that a lot," said Ray. "We call it evolution in action." "It's not evolution-" I started to say, "-it's an invasion!"-but shut up quickly instead. No, I wasn't going to argue with these people. Not about anything. I wasn't going to give them the opportunity to . . . explain things to me.

I turned my attention back to my plate, pushed my fork into a gold-colored mash of some kind and took an unenthusiastic bite; it tasted a little bit like mashed potatoes and a little bit like fresh bread, but it was crunchy and it had a warm buttery aftertaste. I studied a forkful; it looked like some kind of grain, but I couldn't be sure.

"We try to use as many new foods as we can," Ray said. He put a bright red tomatoey-looking thing on my plate. "Here, you'll like this."

I took a cautious bite. It was sweet and fruity and tasted almost alcoholic. I looked at Ray, surprised.

"It's Chtorran," he nodded. "And no, it's not alcoholic. Not quite. But it will give you a very pleasant glow."

Brownie returned then, carrying two serving dishes. "Uh, no, thanks." I passed on the fried finger-babies. The other plate was piled high with hot sizzling strips of . . . I didn't recognize the meat. It was redder than I was used to. "What is this?" I asked. "Those pig-things? The big libbits?"

"Try it first," Ray grinned. He forked a couple of strips onto my plate.

"My mother used to say that. What is it?"

"Take a bite and I'll tell you."

"My mother used to say that too."

"And you hated her for it, didn't you?"

I didn't answer that. It was none of his damn business who I hated or not. Or maybe it was his business. I knew what they were doing here; trying to get me to lower my guard.

"Go ahead, Jim. Try it. We don't poison our guests any more." I wasn't reassured, but my knife and fork

were already slicing off a piece of the red meat.

It looked like it should be as crisp as bacon, but it wasn't; it had the chewiness of beef jerky, but it wasn't tough-and it had a rich, sweet flavor. I cut a second bite. "Reminds me of lamb," I said, chewing.

"Nope. Bunnydog. Good, huh?"

I gulped---and swallowed in spite of myself. "You mean, like Mr. President?"

Ray turned to the woman on the other side of him. "Is this Mr. President?" He pointed at the plate.

She shook her head. "Oh, no; that's Pinky. Orrie ate Mr. President last night, at the Revelation. We're going to pick a new president tonight."

"Again?" asked Loolie, chewing loudly.

"Loolie, don't talk with your mouth full," Ray cautioned her, then turned back to me. I must have been looking a little green, for he said, "I know, Jim. I went through the exact same thing just a few months ago. Look . . ." He put his hand on my arm and his expression went serious. "We're designing the future of humanity here. Change causes upset. But we're willing to have upsets along the way, because the changes are so important."

I swallowed hard. I took a drink of purple juice. It wasn't grape, but it was sweet and it was cold-and it gave me a chance to choose my words carefully. I looked at Ray and said, "What if I don't like the changes? What if I don't want to be a part of the process?"

He shook his head. "You're already part of the process, Jim, because these changes are inevitable. The only choice you get is what part you want to play. You can be a part of the process that resists-that is, you can be one of the pebbles that gets rounded smooth by the action of the stream-or you can be part of the stream." He patted my arm. I thought about decking him, but it wouldn't accomplish anything. "Jim, let go of everything you think and know and look and see what's really so. You might be surprised."

I didn't answer him. I didn't look at him. I stared at my plate and wondered what else I had eaten. The orange mash, for instance? Crushed insects? I pushed my plate away. I wasn't hungry any more.

"Can I be excused now?" Loolie asked. One of the bunnydogs was already taking her plate away. "Jim, you want to see my zoo now?"

"Jim's not through eating yet, honey."

"Yes, I am." I handed my plate to another of the bunnies. It sniffed at the strips of meat, then gobbled them enthusiastically and scampered off.

I stood up slowly. I felt like I was walking on razor blades. I chose each word carefully. "Yes, Loolie-please show me your zoo."

I had to get out of here. Now.

?

An old man of Texas named Tanners
was notorious for his bad manners.

When he noticed the start
of an imminent fart,

he'd announce it with bullhorns and banners.

?

? 12

? The Zoo

Never trust a grapefruit
-SOLOMON SHORT

Five steps from the table and I had a worm on my tail. Two more steps and it was at my side.

Sput-phwut; it blinked. Its eyes were huge. "Grruppt?" it asked.

I looked at Loolie. I looked at the worm. I looked back at Loolie. "He's my bodyguard, right?"

She nodded solemnly. "His job is to keep you from getting hurt. "

"Why am I not reassured by that?"

"Huh?"

"Never mind." Sarcasm was not meant for six-year-olds. "Come on, Wormface, Wormfoot, Wormtongue, whatever your name is."

"His name is Falstaff," said Loolie.

"Falstaff?"

"Uh-huh."

"Why is he named Falstaff?"

"Jason says it's 'cause he farts a lot."

"Oh really?" I looked at the worm.

The worm blinked and made a noise from its nether orifice: Platt!

I took a step back and waved my hand in front of my face. "Jeezis-!" My eyes were watering. "That's incredible!" I said. "That could blister the paint off a wall."

"Yeah," grinned Loolie. "His are the stinky kind."

"Whyn't we just call him Wormfart?"

"I wouldn't call him that," Loolie said, her eyes round.

"Why not?"

"He doesn't like it." There was something about the way she said it.

"Oh." I looked at the worm again. "Uh, well . . . all right. Come on, Falstaff."

The worm chuggled and humphed and followed after us.

As soon as the worm saw where we were headed, it settled itself peacefully on a sunny patch of blue lawn and became a big purple meat loaf. It would watch from there.

Loolie's zoo was inside a building marked Shangri-La Recreation Room. It was set apart from most of the other buildings. As Loolie started to open the door, one of the libbits pushed its way in past me. It was a large, pig-like thing; most of its face was snout. It snuffled around the room like a vacuum cleaner, ignoring both Loolie and myself.

"That's Hoolihan," said Loolie. "She goes wherever she wants and does whatever she wants. She doesn't listen to anybody. She likes to come in here and sweep the floor. Come on."

The zoo filled the recreation room. It was obvious that these people revered everything Chtorran. There were three long worktables supporting a row of unmatched terrariums. There were also two rows of potted plants and shelves with wire cages along two of the walls. Somebody had spent a lot of time setting this up.

Loolie turned on a light and I moved from cage to cage, peering in curiously. There were three furry blobs in one of the cages. One was purple, one was brown, one was red. They huddled together in one corner of the case.

"If you put your ear close, or if you put your hand in, you can feel them purring." Loolie put her hand against the case.

"I know. They're called meeps."

" 'Cause they go `meep meep'-right?" Loolie asked.

"Right."

"They don't do anything," said Loolie. "Just eat and sleep and purr. They eat lots of everything. They're not real fussy. They don't taste real good, but you can eat 'em if you put ketchup on 'em. You gotta cook 'em first. They make lotsa babies though-like mice. We feed 'em to Orrie and Falstaff and Orson. Orson's the biggest. He eats everything, but he likes meeps best."

"Of course. They're bite-size."

Loolie laughed. She thought that was a funny joke.

In the next cage were several night-stalkers of various sizes. They looked like little vampires, the old-fashioned Dracula kind, not the Chtorran kind. "We keep 'em here till they get big enough," explained Loolie. She held a hand off the ground to indicate how high they would stand. Knee high. "That one's Bela, and that one's Christopher, and that one is Frank. Once they're em-printed, Jessie says, they'll stay real close to here to hunt. Jessie says we need to have more night-stalkers than we have 'cause they're good at catching rats and gophers. They like meeps too."

"You said you had a vampire?"

"Oh, yeah; but you'll have to wait and see it at night. It sleeps in the day. Maybe you'll be lucky soon and you'll get chosen to feed it." She said it as if it was an honor.

I'd heard about vampires. I hadn't seen one yet. They were shroud-like creatures-silken veils that floated on the wind. They dropped from the sky onto cattle and horses and attached themselves to the poor creatures' skins to feed. Somehow, they became part of the animals' circulatory systems. They would feed for a while and then, when satiated, would float off again into the night. In return for the meal, they would leave the victim's bloodstream full of alien parasites and organisms. Cattle usually sickened and died within a week of a vampire attack. Vampires had been seen as big as bedsheets.

"This is just a little one," Loolie said, holding up her hands. Little? Loolie was holding her hands about a meter apart. "We gotta grow it bigger afore it can be any real useful. I got to feed it once," she bragged.

"What an honor," I said drily.

Loolie didn't hear me. She was pointing. "And over here, we got a baby gorp. He eats garbage." She wrinkled her nose. "He stinks, doesn't he?" It was hard to tell what the gorp looked like; it was curled up in one corner of its pen, sleeping, but Loolie was right: the creature had a stench like an outhouse.

"And we got some toe-hoppers and lollapaloozas and screaming meemies and hair-pullers. . . ." These were all insectlike things. The latter looked like moths with claws. The screaming meemies were noisy little insects with air bladders. They sounded like cockroach-sized fire engines. "They pop real nice if you step on them," said Loolie.

"Ugh!" I said, pointing. "What's that?" It looked like a piece of red slime with a bad cold.

"Those are fugglies. The red one is a female."

"The species is doomed," I said, shaking my head. Or maybe they mated in the dark. No. Nothing could be that desperate to reproduce.

"They don't taste very good either," said Loolie. "We don't know what they do yet, but Jason says it's got to be important. Otherwise they wouldn't look so awful."

"Right. It makes perfectly good sense to me."

"And over here, we got some wormberry bushes and mandala flowers-have you seen mandalas?"

I nodded. I'd seen them in the wild, dripping from the forest like a crown of gaudy jewels.

"Jason wants to cover the whole camp in mandalas someday. Only it can't be for a while yet, 'cause there's still too many people who still believe in the You Ass of Hey."

"Uh-huh." I was mastering the art of the dry, noncommittal response. It would be stupid to do anything else. Loolie's loyalties were obvious. So was her enthusiasm. I didn't know whether to feel sorry for her, angry at what Jason and Jessie had done, or jealous because she at least knew what her life was about.

"Oh-and,over here, Jim, over here. Have you seen this? We got a baby shambler bush. Soon's we can build a corral, we're gonna put it outside; but Jason doesn't want it wandering off yet, 'cause it might get eaten. Or raped. Or worse."

The bush was standing in a large, square, wooden enclosure; it was two meters to a side, nearly a meter high, and filled with earth. The bush itself was rooted near the center. It wasn't much larger than a potted geranium and it looked very small and out of place sitting in such a big pot of earth. It looked harmless.

Hell! It looked cute!

When they grew bigger, shamblers could be as tall as eucalyptus and as leafy as willows; in fact, most shamblers looked like tall hulking clumps of walking ivy. They were dark silhouettes of fear, dripping with clusters of wide, purple-black and midnight-blue leaves; their branches were streaked with pink and white and blood-red veins. They were terrifying to see even when they were standing still.

But this one-it just looked silly. Its leaves were still fuzzy pink clusters. The little bush looked like it was wrapped in fluffy feather boas. It looked like a geranium playing dress-up in mommy's best furs and rhinestone shoes.

I'd seen shambler bushes from a distance. We'd also seen pictures of a shambler colony exploding, or swarming-or whatever it was they did. We'd seen what happened to the men that had been attacked as well. We'd found their remains with the cameras. And Jason wanted a tame shambler!

For what? A weapon?

Why bother? If you had tame worms, you didn't need anything else.

Besides, how do you train a walking tree? For that matter, how do you train a worm?

Loolie was saying, "Jason thinks this shambler will be a tall one. The tall ones are best, they can go as much as a killo-mere a day. But this'un's just a baby still. It doesn't even have any tenants yet. Jason says we gotta get it outside soon. It's okay, you can come closer. It won't hurt you."

She pointed. "See here? The leaves'll get bigger and darker when it gets bigger. We saw a herd of shamblers once, but Jason wouldn't let us go near 'em, 'cause they didn't know who we were."

"Mm," I said. I squatted down low to see if I could see the roots of the bush, see how it balanced itself, walked, took nourishment from the ground-anything. I wished for a video setup. We could have made time-lapse studies of the shambler to see exactly how it walked.

I realized I was jealous of Loolie's zoo.

"Jim?" Loolie was calling me. I turned to face her and nearly jumped out of my skin. She was holding a very large, bright red-bellied millipede. It was crawling all over her, up her arm, across her shoulders, down her other arm and back up again

"Uh, Loolie," I held my voice calm. I didn't want to alarm her or startle the millipede.

"Don't worry, Jim. It knows me. But you shouldn't come any closer. Not yet. You still smell like Earth. In a few weeks, though; after you've been eating tickleberries and softcorn and everything, you'll smell right. This is Gimmee. We call him that 'cause he always wants more. Jason says he's a gimmee pig, so that's how he got his name."

"Ah, I see. Yes. You're making me very nervous with that, Loolie. Would you put it back?"

"Okay. " She returned Gimmee to a large wire cage. There were several other millipedes in there as well. She paused to let them sniff her fingers and then she stroked them and called them by name. "They're really very friendly, once you get to know them," Loolie said.

"Uh-huh," I nodded nervously. No problem. I could change my shorts later.

There was a sudden rustling and grunting noise at the far end of the room and Loolie went to investigate.

"Ah ha!" she said. "I caught you!" She was waving her finger at something.

I came up behind her to see one of the skinny red bunnymen energetically mounting Hoolihan and pumping away at the libbit like a frenzied little sex fiend. Its-his?-eyes were glassy.

"Lennie!" Loolie shouted. "You're disgusting! You're a pig! Don't you ever stop?" She looked to me and made a gesture of great exasperation. "Lennie fucks everything he gets near."

"Maybe he's training to be a lawyer," I said.

"What's a lawyer?" Loolie asked.

"Never mind. They're big and ugly and mean and they don't have any friends." Hmm, maybe this was paradise.

Loolie wasn't paying attention. "Lennie, you stop that!" She stamped her foot. "Lennie! You remember what happened to Casanova, don't you?"

Lennie was beyond hearing. He was having too good a time. The libbit didn't look all that unhappy either.

Loolie sighed loudly, "Now, I'm gonna have to tell Jason, so he can decide."

"What to do about Lennie?" I wondered if Lennie was going to be elected president soon.

"No. What to do about Hoolihan." Loolie pointed at the libbit. "We gotta decide whether to mate her again so she'll have baby bunnies, or whether to keep her corralled so she'll have baby libbits."

"Excuse me?"

Loolie looked impatient. "Don't you know anything? Bunnydogs like to fuck each other, but some of 'em grow up to be bunnymen and then they like to fuck libbits. If a bunnyman fucks a libbit, it makes baby libbits."

I was still trying to pick up my jaw when Loolie added, "Well, that's not actually correct. Jason says I gotta speak correctly. If one bunnyman fucks a libbit, it makes a baby libbit; but if two bunnymen fuck a libbit, it make baby bunnies."

"Oh," I managed to say.

I wished I were in Denver. I wished I were in Oakland. I wished I could talk to Dr. Fletcher right now and tell her what Loolie had just told me.

How stupid we'd been!

We'd been keeping all the creatures separated from each other. No wonder they'd never reproduced-bunnydogs and bunnymen and libbits were all the same species!

Libbits were females and bunnymen were males-they were such disparate animals, they couldn't possibly be related, but they were!

How did Jason discover all this?

How much more did these people know? And how could I get them to teach me?

And-how could I get out of here to get the information to those who most needed to know it?

?

A woman who wanted to see,
if she stood up, how far she could pee;
had pardon to beg,
when it ran down her leg,
and formed icicles off her left knee.

?

? 13

?

Definition of a Monster

"I've known for years that I have no humility. It's a virtue, to be sure, but I can live with it."

-SOLOMON SHORT

Ray told me I had the freedom of the camp. I could go wherever I wanted, look at whatever I wanted. The only constraint was a simple one, but effective. Falstaff, the Chtorran who sat by the door was my constant companion. He was a fat flabby creature, even for a Chtorran, with an annoying tendency for ruminative noises and questioning chirps. He followed me everywhere, grunting and wheezing, blinking and farting; he was a symphony unto himself, a movable feast of dark intestinal noises and incredible purple smells. I hoped to God that wasn't his language. Some of those smells could uncurl your hair. To his credit, though, Falstaff was a remarkably patient monster. He stayed with me all afternoon while I prowled the range of the camp.

My explorations were not entirely random. I was trying to estimate how many people there were in this camp, how many vehicles, how many weapons and what kind. I didn't like the numbers I kept coming up with. This was too well organized a band. And there were too many references to other bases of operation and hidden caches of supplies and weapons.

I guessed that there might be thirty or forty adults here and maybe half that many children. Bunnydogs? I wasn't sure. I'd seen at least thirty. And at least a dozen bunnymen: Vehicles? Two more jeeps, at least, and another couple of trucks and a bus.

Wherever I went, people waved and smiled to me and asked me how I was getting along. I felt guilty for hating them and gave them cautious waves and token smiles.

The weird thing was that none of these people seemed to have any intention at all of reprogramming me, or awakening me. Or whatever it was they called it. They just wanted to befriends with me.

I just didn't know what their definition of friend was.

I was sitting under a tree, watching two millipedes chewing at what looked like a hambone-something left over from the last president?-when Jessie waved to me from across the yard and called, "How're you doing, Jim?"

I didn't know whether to answer or not. It was probably rude not to, so I shrugged and waved halfheartedly back. She came over to me then and put her hand on my shoulder. "Relax, Jim. I promise you, nobody wants to hurt you."

"Mm-hm. Sure. You're not going to hurt me. You're just going to reprogram me."

Jessie sighed and rolled her eyes heavenward. "Jim, we're not going to do anything. You're going to do it. We can't make you do anything you don't want to do."

"I don't want to be reprogrammed."

"That's the army talking, that's not you. When you know what's available to you, you'll feel like a jerk for having waited so long to take the plunge. And we don't reprogram people here, Jim. We unprogram them. But you're going to have to be willing to let go of all that old programming before anything can happen." She patted my arm and let go. "Don't worry about it-and don't be impatient. It'll happen when you're ready for it to happen. You'll let us know when you're ready. You'll ask to join the Tribe."

"Not bloody likely," I said.

Jessie laughed. "Obviously, you're still not ready yet. Why don't you go and help Valerie and Loolie pull the weeds out of the garden. At least you can make yourself useful that way."

"What if I don't?"

She shrugged. "If there's no food, we all go hungry."

"I've seen what you eat. That's not a threat."

"Try being hungry-really hungry-for a while, Jim. Then we'll see how you feel about it."

She was right.

I went and pulled weeds. Falstaff followed me. At one point, Orson joined him and the two of them spread out across the grass like big fat hairy water balloons. They crooned and farted and waited for me to do something stupid.

I was just starting on the second row of weeds when Jason came looking for me. "What are you doing that for, Jim? You're a guest. "

I straightened up, brushing the dirt from my hands. "Jessie said if I don't work, I don't eat."

Jason shook his head, frowning. "I doubt she said it that way, Jim. But I'm sure that's the way you heard it. Forget that for now. Come take a walk with me."

He took me by the elbow and we walked along a shaded lane that circled the main part of the camp. Falstaff followed grumpily behind at a distance.

"I know this is rough for you, Jim. It's always roughest on the military mind-set. Ask Ray about it. He used to be in the service. Let him tell you how he came to the light."

I shrugged. I probably would talk to Ray. How could he violate his sworn oath to uphold, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States?

"You have a question, Jim?"

"No," I said.

"Don't be a liar, Jim. You have a lot of questions. Listen to me. All we have-the only thing we have-is our language. If you use the language with precision, you'll be astonished at the results you can produce. If you use the language for imprecision-to hide behind, to befuddle, to confuse, to justify, rationalize, or excuse-then what will happen will be frustration and upset and hurt, for yourself as well as everybody around you. Of all the ways to misuse the language, lying is the most obscene misuse of all." He looked at me with intense blue eyes. His expression was very hard and very cold. There was no place to hide from that look. "Please, don't ever lie to me again."

I didn't answer. I forced myself to meet his gaze.

"Don't worry about hurting my feelings, Jim. I don't have any. If you have anything at all to say to me, ever, then all I ask is that you tell me the truth."

I nodded. "All right."

"So, what's your question?" he probed.

I looked around, I looked at my shoes, I looked back at Falstaff, I looked back to Jason. I shook my head. "I don't like being held prisoner. "

"You're not a prisoner. You're a guest."

"If I'm a guest, then I should be able to leave whenever I want, shouldn't I? What would happen if I just started walking away from here? What would Falstaff do?"

"Try it and see," said Jason. "Go ahead." He pointed toward the road. "Go on."

"Okay," I said. "Come on, Falstaff. Let's go to the road."

Falstaff said, "Browr, " and followed me. His body humped and flowed.

We got halfway up the sloping dirt drive when Falstaff decided that was far enough.

"Nrrrt," he warned.

I kept walking.

"Nrrrr-Rrrrt," he warned me again.

I glanced back at Delandro. He was watching with an amused smile. He waved. I waved back and kept walking.

Falstaff said, "Brrrrattt," and flowed up beside me. One of his long gangling arms unfolded from his body, reached up and over toward me. The claw at the end of it came down and clamped gently, but firmly, around my shoulder. Still being gentle, Falstaff turned me around to face him.

He held me before him. I could have reached out and touched his face. He cocked his eyes, one up, one down, in a half-familiar, lost-Muppet expression. It would have been ludicrous if it hadn't been so terrifying.

He said, "Nrrr-Rrr-Rrrt."

I didn't understand the phrase, but I sure understood the tone. He was telling me no.

He slid his claw-hand down my shoulder. I thought it would feel cold and metallic, but it didn't. His hand

felt like the soft pads of a dog's foot; a little rough and leathery, but warm.

I said, "I got it, Falstaff. Thank you."

I reached up to my arm and took his claw-hand in mine. He let me. I looked in his eyes, then I looked at his paw. It was a remarkable piece of biological machinery. I touched the soft part of it with my finger. There was pink fur growing between the pads, just like on a dog's paw. I spread two of the pads and looked at the dark flesh between. It was smooth. Falstaff giggled.

At least it sounded like a giggle.

"I beg your pardon?" I said. I looked at him. His eyes were huge and black and remarkably patient. He was a fascinating creature. If I had ever doubted it, there was no question about it now; the Chtorran gastropedes were far more intelligent than any of us had given them credit for. The best guess of the scientists at Denver was that the gastropedes ranked just above apes or baboons or dolphins. I suspected we'd been underestimating them. Again.

Falstaff took my hand then. He turned it over between his two claw-hands and examined the pads of my palm the same way I had examined his. He stroked the sensitive part of my palm with a touch as gentle as a feather-and I giggled at the softness of it.

I almost wanted to hug him. He smelled spicy.

And then the moment was over and I realized I was playing handsy-footsy with a half ton of man-eating worm, and I pulled back. "Come on," I said. "Let's go back."

Falstaff burped and purred and followed me.

At the bottom of the hill, Delandro was smiling proudly. "You did good, Jim. The very first step is the hardest, but it's the most necessary. You have to stop seeing the worms as your enemy."

I said, "And see them instead as my jailers?"

"Oh, no. Falstaff stopped you for your own protection. There are wild worms out there. They don't know that you're friendly. They'd kill you. Falstaff would let you go if he thought you'd be safe, but he knows you're not. His job-and Orson's too-is to protect the camp from marauders. You're our guest, so that protection includes you. You should talk to him more often, Jim, like you just did. Tell him thank you. He likes it. Good job, Falstaff. "

Delandro turned to the worm. "Gimme five," he said, and held out his hand. Falstaff slapped it gently with his right claw. Delandro laughed and hugged him fondly. He began scratching the beast vigorously just ahead of his brain-bump. Falstaff arched his back and made a rumbling sound.

"Go ahead, Jim, he loves to be skritch. Try it." He stepped out of the way.

I stepped up beside Falstaff. He looked as big as a horse. I began scratching his back gently. One of the claw-hands unfolded then, took my hand and moved it forward, just to the base of the eyestalks.

"He's showing you where he likes it," Delandro said. "He likes you, Jim."

"I'm-uh, flattered." I started scratching again.

"Harder. You can't hurt him: He likes it hard."

I was skritchng Falstaff as hard as I could. He rumbled and burped. I recognized the sound as one of pleasure. Falstaff's flesh was thick and firm and felt like corded muscle. I began working my way up the eyestalks. The skin here was a loose furry envelope enclosing the two eyestalks-thus the silly hand-puppet effect of the eyes as they swiveled back and forth. I could feel the thick cartilage and supportive musculature like a framework beneath the skin. Both of the eyestalks were enclosed in this warm pillowcase of fur. There was an almost sexual feeling to the strength and stiffness of them, the way they were enclosed in this silky wrap.

One of Falstaff's eyes turned sideways and looked straight down at my hand. I had the feeling he approved. The eye turned and looked at me, studying-memorizing my face. Falstaff's arm unfolded and wrapped around my shoulders. It rested there while I skritchd.

"All right, Falstaff!" Delandro slapped his flank. "That's enough; next you'll be wanting to climb into his bed, and I don't think he's ready for that yet." Falstaff unwrapped himself from me and pulled himself back to form a big pink meat loaf. He said something that sounded like "Barruuupp."

"He likes you, Jim. You should be complimented."

"I am," I gulped. "I'm hysterical with joy. Or something."

"I know," Delandro said. "It's confronting at first. There's a lot of beliefs you have that you don't want to give up. You've got a lot of survival invested in those beliefs. It's not easy to discover that everything you know is wrong."

"Well, if somebody had told me that it's possible to play huggy-face, kissy-body with a Chtorran I sure wouldn't have believed it. I don't know how I could tell this to anyone else who hasn't seen it and have them believe me."

Delandro nodded. He put his arm around my shoulders then and began to lead me down toward a sheltered clearing. Falstaff huffed and puffed and followed us. "Jim," he said. "I know that a lot of what we do here is confusing to you. Because you're trying to filter it through a belief system that doesn't allow for the possibilities you're actually seeing. Look, I want you to understand just one thing." He stopped and looked into my eyes. His gaze was direct and penetrating. I felt impaled. "What happens out there-in what we call the real world-that's ordinary. People live ordinary lives. And what they call communication-that's like two TV sets yammering at each other. Both are making noise, but neither is hearing what the other is saying. What we're up to here is functioning on the extraordinary level. Do you know that results are produced only by functioning on the extraordinary level?"

"No, I don't know that."

"You go through life, from day to day to day, and you live your life in an ordinary way. Will you produce results? No. You'll just get older. But if you take a stand, if you commit yourself, if you create a context out of which to operate, then results are inevitable. That's the extraordinary level, a level that most people hardly ever reach, except in rare moments of anger and even rarer moments of joyousness that some people call love. What we're up to here is keeping ourselves committed to the deliberate and continuous creation of the joyousness of life. That's the level out of which extraordinary results are produced."

He was incredibly sincere. I couldn't hold onto my anger and hostility in the face of such sincerity.

"I guess . . . I don't know," I said.

He looked delighted. "That's good. Because that's honest. Most people don't admit it when they don't know. They make something up instead. You just crashed that program. Listen, here's what you need to know. You're already functioning at the extraordinary level. Ordinary people don't have this kind of conversation. Ordinary people don't talk about extraordinary experiences-so even talking about it is an extraordinary experience."

I was beginning to see what he meant. And something else. I was beginning to realize that I was going to have to become a part of this group if I wanted to learn the secrets they knew about the Chtorrans.

Jason must have seen the shift on my face, for he said, "Jim, I've been waiting for you for a long time. I didn't know who you'd be when you showed up, but I knew I'd recognize you when you did. I'm so glad that you're here now. You can make an incredible contribution here. I know it takes time to give up that filter of beliefs. I can wait. Time is on our side, the side of the new gods. Here's what you need to know. You're responsible for yourself. Nobody else. You probably learned that in Global Ethics, right?"

"Right."

"You believe that, don't you?"

I shrugged. "Sure."

"Of course. Here, Jim, we don't believe it. We simply experience it. There's a difference between belief and experience. You'll see. Once you can experience your own responsibility that you are the source of everything that happens in your experience-then you will begin to demand results from yourself.

Incredible results.

"That's what's happening here. We've upped the ante on ourselves. We've increased the gradient. We've made the challenge harder, so that the satisfaction can be that much more profound. When you can begin to recognize that what you believe is irrelevant, that the universe doesn't care what you believe, then you have the opportunity to put aside those beliefs and actually begin to live out of your natural ability to experience living. You see, belief--Of any kind-is a lie. It's like an out-of-date road map. And using your beliefs as a set of rules by which to operate is like insisting that the road map is still true, even when the road is no longer there."

"What if the road is still there?" I asked.

He grinned. "You know the answer to that one already. The map is not the territory." He put his hands on my shoulders. "I have an invitation for you. Every evening, we have a circle. Sometimes it's a seminar, where we go over data. Sometimes we play games or do exercises or processes. Sometimes we share ourselves. All of these circles have only one purpose: to keep us functioning at the extraordinary level. I'd like to invite you to join the circle tonight."

My natural reaction was to resist. I could feel my body beginning to stiffen under his grip. Jason didn't seem to notice. He kept looking into my eyes. It was as intense as if he were making love to me. And in fact, I wondered if . . .

"Do you want to join us?" he asked.

I hesitated. "I'm a little scared."

"Uh-huh. You have fear. What's underneath that?"

"I don't think I can trust you."

"Thanks for being honest. Anything else?" I might have told him he had two eyes for all the reaction he showed. He didn't seem to react to anything. It was as if all of his instinctive reactions had been somehow disconnected. It was almost mechanical, the way he maintained that unfailing good nature. It was annoying. And it was terrifying.

"You're-too smooth."

"Uh-huh. Good. Thanks for acknowledging that too. Anything else?"

"I've seen what Chtorrans can do."

"The wild ones?"

"Yeah."

"So you have a belief about what all Chtorrans will do, right?"

"Uh, yes. I'm scared of the Chtorrans. I hate them."

"Yes, I know. Anything else?"

"No. I think that's it."

"Good: Thank you. Do you want to join the circle tonight?"

"I thought I just told you all my reasons why not."

"Yes, you did. You told me all your reasons. Now, listen carefully. I'm not asking you if you will join us. I'm asking you if-in addition to having all those reasons, all those fears and considerations-you also have a curiosity or a desire to participate? You still don't have to, but I want to know how you feel about it. Do you want to?"

"Uh, yes; I'm curious:"

"Good. Curiosity is interest. It's the mildest form of want."

"Oh. So, you're saying I sort of want to?"

"No, you said it. Tell the truth. Do you want to?"

"Yes."

"Good. So there's your choice: You can sit in your room tonight and practice all your reasons, all your fears, all your considerations, all your excuses, all your explanations, all your beliefs, all your rationalizations, all your justifications, and play patty-cake with all that bullshit until you bore yourself to death. Or you can get off your ass and come down to the circle-which is what you want to do anyway-and find out the truth."

"Do I have to answer now?"

"No. I'll know your answer when you show up. Or not. Let me just give you this one question to consider. What's the worst that can happen?"

"I could die."

"You could die anyway, and your curiosity still wouldn't be answered, would it?"

"Yeah." I had to laugh. He might be a scoundrel, but he was a charming one.

He said, "I know you still have the thought that I'm some kind of a cult leader, some kind of a Manson, don't you?"

I admitted it with a nod.

"You think that underneath all my wonderfulness, I'm really a monster, right?"

It was hard to look at him. He glowed. "Uh, right," I admitted.

"Let me tell you the truth, Jim." There was an honesty in his voice that was undeniable. "I am a monster. By any human standards. I don't fit into any of those old belief systems, so you can't help but see me as something inhuman. I'm a threat-not to you, but to what you believe. Your mind has so much identity invested in the belief system that it has to destroy any threat to that system. That's me. I am that monster. And I know it.

"Do you know what makes me a monster? The fact that I'm committed to excellence. Most of the people on this planet are still committed to survival. They'll do anything to survive. That's what's monstrous: the things that people do to survive. There's a dreadful conspiracy for mediocrity in the world; the unwritten agreement is that mere survival is enough. But it's not enough, Jim. It's insufficient. I'm committed to excellence. I'm committed to human godliness.

"Jim-look at me. Can you honestly tell me that in the world you were living in yesterday, you were surrounded by people who were committed to the next step in human evolution? Or were they simply committed to survival? Come on, Jim; don't fade out on me. Is your experience of the United States Army that they are committed to human godliness?"

"Uh . . ." This hurt. My throat tightened painfully. "Some of them are very good people!"

"That's not what I asked you. I'm not denying that they're good people. What I asked you about was their commitment. What are they committed to?"

"The eradication of the Chtorran infestation from Earth." "Right. Survival."

"Uh."

"Right?"

"Right."

"Think about it, Jim. Have you been treated like a god in training? No. I'll bet my right arm that you haven't even been treated like a human being. You've been treated like a machine, haven't you? Admit it. You've been abused, betrayed, lied to. You've probably been put in life-threatening situations a few times, without anyone taking the time to explain why it was necessary. You haven't been allowed to be responsible for yourself. You haven't been allowed to do your best or live up to your potential, have you?"

"How do you know that?"

"Because that's the way they treat everybody." He laughed. "But you took it personally, didn't you?"

I laughed right back. "Doesn't everybody?" Two could play at this game of enlightenment.

Jason clapped me on the shoulder. "Look; you're our guest, Jim, like it or not. Let's make it easy for all of us. Here's the deal. You stay with us for a while; see what we're up to here. I promise you, no one will hurt you or force you to do anything you don't want to. We'll treat you as lovingly as we know how."

"But I can't leave."

Jason looked sad. "Under other circumstances I'd let you go in a minute, if I could. If I thought you really wanted to. And if I thought I could trust you not to betray us. But we can't move for a while, and we both know that you'd be back here with choppers and flame-throwers so fast, it'd just prove everything I've been saying about the army mind being committed totally to survival. But I have an equal responsibility to the survival of this Tribe. So, we really can't let you go right now; not until we're ready to move to our next location. When we do, you can choose if you want to stay with us, or go back to that old mind-set."

"How long?" I asked.

Jason considered it. "Two, maybe three months. That should give you more than enough time to discover for yourself what we're really up to here."

I thought about it. I frowned.

"Annoying, isn't it?" Jason asked. "You're trying to see me as a villain, and I keep refusing to cooperate, right?"

"Do you read minds too?" I snapped, but it was hard to stay angry at Jason.

"After a fashion. Besides, yours isn't that hard to read." He grinned; he made it sound like a joke between friends.

"I want to know about the worms," I said, finally.

"I know," he said. "I've seen how you watch them." He looked off into the distance for a moment, then looked back to me again. "Jim, I invite you to test me. I invite you to test yourself. I invite you to use this place to find out what you're up to. This is about our humanity, Jim. Yours, mine-all of ours."

"Then why the Chtorrans?"

"The Chtorrans are part of it."

"I don't see that."

"I know you don't. That's all right. Here's all you need to know right now. There's an incredible amount of love available to you. All you have to do is let it in. If you let in the love, you can let in all the other answers too." He studied my face with interest and compassion and dedication. He was totally with me. His hands were still on my shoulders. I allowed myself to reach up-and put my hands on his and look back in his eyes. We looked at each other for so long that time stopped. We just stood there, being with each other. I felt myself disappearing. I felt myself dissolving into him. I felt the tears welling up in my eyes. I wanted to trust this man. I had this sudden sense that he really did love me. I wanted to let go of myself and let the rush come.

And it did. It started as a tickling sensation in my groin, that swept up my spine like fire, growing and exploding out my eyes in tears.

He took me into his arms and held me and let me cry.

And when I was finished crying, he dried my tears with his handkerchief, and he smiled at me and kissed me. He said, "I know the truth about you, Jim. It's the same truth for all of us. All you really want is to contribute. All you really want is to love and be loved in return. So, I want you to know that I love you. All of us here love you. Test us. See that it's so. Because we know that underneath all that other stuff, you want to love us too."

I nodded. He was right. All I really wanted was to be a part of the right family. I gulped and thanked him-then impulsively, I grabbed him and hugged him. Hard.

"Thanks," he said.

I went back to my room confused. I felt wonderful. I felt terrified. My thoughts didn't make sense. I was going crazy here. I wanted to know what was happening to me. I loved Jason and I hated him for making me love him.

The Chtorrans were my enemy. Weren't they?

Outside, Falstaff burped and rumbled. Weren't they?!

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A promiscuous sort was dear Laurie.

(Yes, this is that kind of story.)

She did it with Joe

and Larry and Moe

and Curly and Howard and Morrie.

And Johnny and Richard and Pritchard and Kerry

and Lonnie and Horace and Boris and Barry

and Donald and Harold

and Ronald and Gerald

and Tommy and Dicky and Harry.

And . . . Peter and Paul and Teddy and Todd

and Matthew and Mark and Simon and Rod

and Brucie and Mark

and Bobby and Clark

and she still isn't finished! My God!

And David and Dennis and Huey and Ken
and Dewey and Louie, then David again,
and Willy and Ben
and David again
and again and again and again.

And Danny and Manny and Gary and Fred
and Mackie and Jackie and Dougie and Ned
and Harvey and Len
(then David again)
and-hold on just a second, she's dead!
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The Circle

"If 'Thou art God,' then praising the Lord is an act of conceit. And praying is just talking to yourself."
-SOLOMON SHORT

I went to the circle that night.

And every night after that.

We did three things in circle.

First, there was Definitions.

Jason said that we didn't use our language as much as we were used by it. "Your language channels your thinking. The way you use language demonstrates how your mind works. A skilled observer will be able to make such pertinent observations about you that you'll suspect he's reading your mind-and in a way, he is. He's reading the way your mind is expressing itself." Jason then said that the way to break out of the trap was to learn how to communicate beyond language; but unfortunately, because that was impossible for most of us (so far), we'd have to do it the hard way. We'd have to learn how to make our language serve us.

That is, we'd have to start learning how to use our language with precision. "Learn the precise concepts that the words represent. Learn the true definitions of the words, and language will be transformed. So will your communications. And so will your thought processes."

So the first part of the awakening was definitions. We'd spend hours, sometimes whole evenings, discussing what various words really meant, what was behind them, underneath them, inside them. What were we trying to say-and what were we saying instead? Amazingly, most of the discussions were a lot of fun, although one or two, particularly the discussions of want and need and love, were very uncomfortable.

And once, we spent a week just talking about integrity. "Integrity is total," Jason said. "You can't have a hole anywhere in your integrity or you don't have any integrity at all. It doesn't matter how good the rest of the balloon is, the air still goes out the hole."

The second thing we did was Exercises.

There were all kinds of different exercises. Sometimes we sat in a big circle and closed our eyes and Jason would tell us to imagine things; or think about things; or not think about anything at all, just notice how we were reacting to what was happening. That was the point of the exercises-for us to become conscious of our reactions to phenomena. What memories or emotions came floating up to the surface? "Don't try to figure out what it means," Jason would say. "It doesn't mean anything. Just notice that's how you react. That's the memory you came up with. Notice the emotions you have connected to that memory."

And so on.

Sometimes the exercises were done with our eyes open. The exercises were always about the way we experienced ourselves and our lives, or as Jason put it, "Before you can flush out your head, you have to know what kind of shit is floating around in it first. "

Yuck.

But he got the point across.

One of the most frightening of all the exercises was the one about being naked. Jason divided us into groups. One at a time, each group had to stand up before the rest of the Tribe-naked. We were supposed to notice how uncomfortable we were being naked in front of other people.

The first time we did the exercise I thought I'd pass out. Later on, it got easier.

Jason said that clothes were the way we lied about our bodies; we presented ourselves to each other as a package of clothes and hair and makeup, instead of presenting ourselves as beings who lived in bodies. I didn't get the distinction, but I sure got the panic.

"The point is," Jason said, "most of you are afraid of other people's disapproval of your bodies." And after we worked our way through that, Jason told us, "And what's underneath that is your own disapproval of your body. You're angry because you have to live inside that body. You don't want to live inside that body; it's too old or too fat or too short or thin or too ugly or too light or too dark or too something. So you resist living inside your body; you won't let yourself experience your own body. That's why people do drugs and alcohol. That's why you turn into compulsive eaters and compulsive fuckers and compulsive anythings-because you're afraid to come out and simply be with the other members of your own species. You disapprove of your body, and you know that everybody else will too."

That was an angry evening. I didn't know exactly what had triggered it; apparently one of the little boys had been modest in front of one of the girls and Jason had seen. Modesty angered him.

For a couple of weeks after that, Jason had us all go naked. A lot of us got sunburned, but the point was made. After a while all tits and asses and cocks and pussies all looked the same. Different, but the same. Variations on a theme.

Never mind. You had to be there.

The third thing we did was Feedback.

Jason said, "Most of you are unconscious to the effect you have on the people around you. You have no idea what you are doing to everybody else. Or, let me put it another way: you are pissing on each other, you are shitting on each other, you are bludgeoning each other to death with your words! All the lies! All the bullshit! All the language games! All the rationalizations, excuses, justifications, explanations-all the things you do instead of simply telling the truth. The cost of it is your aliveness.

"That's why we do feedback. It's a chance for you to share what's going on inside your experience, and discover the effect you're having on the people around you. Look out at the group and see how they react-that's what you're putting out into the world."

There was so much. The funny part is that most of it was joyous. We almost always left the circle feeling fulfilled and inspired and enthused about the next day's work. Even when Jason yelled at us, it was only until we got the joke. There was always a joke. "Life is a joke we've played on ourselves," Jason would say. "What makes it so tragic is that most of us refuse to get the joke, so we go around letting life be a burden, a chore instead of an interesting challenge."

He didn't talk about the worms very much. That wasn't the point of the circle. The circle was for the people. The Revelations were for the worms.

There was a lot I didn't understand. I kept asking for explanations. People laughed when I did so. Jason said, "No, don't laugh. There's no such thing as a stupid question. The only stupid question is the one that isn't asked. And, Jim, what you need to know is that they're not laughing at you. They're laughing because they remember their own confusion. They're laughing because they're on the other side of the question now.

"What you need to know is that the explanation is irrelevant. True understanding only comes after you have experienced something. I could explain how to ride a bicycle all night, but that wouldn't teach you how to ride a bike. That wouldn't even give you the experience of it. But once you learn how to ride a bike, you don't need the explanation. Do you see that the explanations are irrelevant?"

"Uh . . ." I blushed. I was embarrassed. "Yes." I sat down. Everybody applauded. We applauded everything and everybody. We created our own excitement, Jason said. "Life is not what happens to us; it's what we create it to be. Here, we create our own enthusiasm."

I wished they wouldn't. It seemed so artificial. I didn't want to sit with it. So I stood up and announced, "I'm upset."

The circle cheered. "H'ray! Jim's upset." Jason said, "Thanks for acknowledging it."

I said, "What are you going to do about it?"

"Nothing. It's your upset. You handle it."

I said, "Don't you even want to know why?"

"No, not really. But you feel a need to share it, don't you?"

"Yes, I guess I do."

"So, go ahead. We have space for you to share your upset."

"I don't like all this cheering and yelling and hollering. It feels phony."

"I got it. Anything else?"

"No." I sat down. Everybody applauded. I felt foolish. But the upset was gone. Somebody leaned over and clapped me on the back. Other people smiled their love at me.

Jason said, "I want to talk about transformation tonight." Everybody cheered. This was a favorite subject. He said, "Actually, I need to talk about experience first. Because I'm going to use the word experience a lot and we need to be clear what we're talking about. When I talk about your experience, I'm not talking about your history. I'm not talking about the rules and the beliefs and the stories you carry around. That's all bullshit. That's all over. That's the past. This is today. Now." He snapped his fingers to illustrate the point. "Now, now, now, now, now-and so on. Now is always now. That's where you live." He paused and grinned at us. "Now, now, now, now." Almost instantly, the whole circle was chanting with him, "Now, now, now, now-" until he raised his hands and cut us off laughing. "Right. You got it. That moment of now-that's who you really are. You are the place where the experience of now occurs. You are not the ideas or the judgments that you create. And you are not even the raw experiences. You are the place where it happens, nothing more. You are not your body. You are not your name. Get it! You are not a thing. You are not your attitudes, you are not your judgments, you are not your beliefs. Those are just concepts that you create and that you hold and have. But you are not your concepts. You are simply and only the place in which all of this occurs. You are the place where you create your life.

"We're going to do an exercise now, to give you the opportunity to experience your ability to create yourself as a being. This is a game where everybody wins. There's no way to do it wrong. So don't worry if you're doing it right. You are. The purpose is to experience yourself playing. It is in your play that you create yourself. So let yourself experience whatever comes up for you. It's all right. Everybody stand up. Now, first, we've got to shake you out of your heads. You're all with your thoughts, so we're going to shake you into consciousness. So everybody find a partner. . . ." He waited till we had done so. My partner was Frankenstein. "Now, grab each other's hands-and start jumping. Up and down, up and down, around and around . . .

It was a shock to see Frankenstein's monster smiling and grinning and laughing and jumping up and down. I had to work to keep up with him-I was afraid he was going to rip my arms out of my sockets if I didn't.

Jason kept calling. "Come on, jump! Jump! Jump! Dance with each other! Dance! Shake yourselves loose! Shake yourselves awake." Everybody was laughing now. I couldn't keep up with Frankenstein, so he grabbed me in a big bear hug and held me to him like a child and started bouncing around the circle. Everybody was hooting and pointing. We collapsed in a silly heap on the grass and Frankenstein kissed me and told me he loved me and I felt so happy that I kissed him back and told him I loved him too. And then we got up and did the next part of the exercise.

"All right," Jason said. "You need to start getting in touch with your breathing now. Everybody put your hands on your knees. Lower your head. Close your eyes and just breathe in slowly. Hold it. Breathe out now. Hold it. Breathe in slowly. Let yourself experience your breathing. Just concentrate on your breath. Hold it. Breathe out now. Let yourself be your breath. Hold it."

At first I was annoyed: Then I was frustrated. After a while, I was bored. How long was this going to go on? I started concentrating on my breathing. I stopped listening to Jason's words and just let myself count and breathe, count and breathe, let myself live in my lungs. After a while, the rest of the universe disappeared. I could hear Jason's voice as if from a distance. He was my guide back, if I wanted to come back. I didn't.

"All right now, good. You're doing fine. It's time to stretch. Reach up and touch the sky. Everybody. Come on, Jim, reach up and touch the sky. As far as you can."

After we stretched, he had us sway. He transformed us into trees. We swayed in the wind. We felt the breeze move through our leaves. We stood there, a grove of human pines, turning to face Jason, the sun, as he circled around us. There were small trees, clambering to see his face. There were tall trees, stately and calm. There were male trees and female trees. There were stiff trees and supple trees, brittle trees and quiet trees. We breathed in and out. We swayed. The days passed. The seasons. It was spring and

we blossomed. We showed our sex in our flowers.

And then we were birds, gliding above the trees. We sailed on the currents. We watched our leader and sailed with him. We caught the updrafts and rose lazily. We circled and dove. We wheeled and coursed across the blue and white ocean of air.

And then we were water. It was cold and we were snowflakes drifting softly onto the grass. We tumbled gently down, one on top the other. We melted where we fell. We rolled into each other, we became one another.

And finally, we were monkeys, naked and squatting and bouncing and making monkey noises at each other. We huddled together against the night: There was no language except pats and grunts. Words hadn't been invented yet. We were apes again. We were animals, being animals. The puppies were already curling up and falling asleep. Two of the monkeys had begun to quietly copulate. The female was old enough to be thick in the waist. She had pendulous breasts. The male was an adolescent. He mounted her eagerly and enthusiastically. I watched in appreciation.

I was sitting next to a young female with large breasts. I reached over and patted her. She patted me back. We nuzzled. It was nice. I thought about mating with her. It would have been nice. I patted her some more. I started touching her breasts. She laughed and pushed my monkey-hands away. I shrugged and turned and looked at what was happening on the other side of the cluster. The tall monkey, our leader, was making sounds. Oh, he was inventing words. "All right, now, it's time to come back. Let's invent centuries. Let's invent a lot of them. Let's invent this one, the twenty-first one. Let's invent human beings. Let's be human beings for a while."

I looked around. We were a group of naked human beings sitting on the grass. Some of us were too fat or too skinny. Some of us were dirty. Some of us looked unkempt. A boy with pimples on his ass was pumping away at an older woman who had no shame. I felt embarrassed. I invented embarrassment. I didn't like being human. I wanted to go back to being an ape. I stood up and shared it. Everybody laughed and applauded. Jason grinned proudly. "You see what happened. You went back into your judgments, your attitudes and opinions-and it automatically separated you from the rest of your family. So, what's more real: the experience of the monkey colony or the judgment about this group of human beings?"

"They're both real," I said. "Aren't they?"

"Inside your head, yes," he said. "But one is experience and one is the story you made up about your experience. Which gave you the most satisfaction?"

"The experience."

"Right. Judgments and beliefs do not produce satisfaction. So, I want you to notice, Jim, that what we are here is a colony of monkeys who have invented language and technology and a whole bunch of other stuff, including judgments and beliefs. Now, we have the choice to stay true to our experience or get lost in the machinery of our inventions. What do you want to do?"

"I think I'll be a monkey." I jumped up and down and scratched my side and made grunty noises through my nose to emphasize the point.

Jason laughed and led the applause. I sat down, satisfied. "That's perfect," he said. "That's a perfect example of the point I want to make here. Experience produces transformation. Look at Jim's face. He's not the same person. See the aliveness there? The self that is home is now more available to us." They cheered and applauded and I felt good.

"That's a transformation, Jim-and you can feel it, can't you?" I nodded enthusiastically.

"So, you see: the experience of yourself playing, creating yourself-that's the experience of yourself as cause. You have each of you now experienced yourself as the source of your own experience. That experience of source is that source of transformation. Is there anyone who doesn't get that? Because we need to talk about transformation, and until you are clear about the source of it, we can't go on.

"So, here's the abstract. Experience of self as source produces transformation. That's how you can create your own transformations all day long. When you are the source of the experiences you create, you are the source of your transformation, and you can create any transformations you want.

"Now. Let's talk about creation for a moment. Is there any way to control creation? In one sense, no.

You can't start it. You can't stop it. You are always creating-until you stop. And when you stop, you also stop doing everything else too. We have a technical term for someone who has stopped creating. We call him a corpse.

"But what you do have control over is what you create. You can create joy and enthusiasm every bit as easily as you create misery and despair. But most of you are experts in misery and despair and you've made it up that joy and enthusiasm are beyond your reach. Something has to happen outside you before you can have joy and enthusiasm. You say that, so you can be happy being miserable and depressed.

"Listen," Jason said. He was totally alive and on fire now, "You are creating even when you don't know it-and that's unconscious creation, and that's creation that's separated from source. Get to your source and transformation follows naturally. It is a natural condition. It's the natural function of experience, to transform, transform, transform-and that's how you live at the extraordinary level.

"Look, people: I'm talking about the quality of your lives. You can be like the unawakened-the people out there-or you can be like gods. Gods are responsible. Gods are sources. When you forget who you are, you know what happens? You sink. You stop transforming. You go southward!" He pointed down.

"Toward anger, grief, and despair, right?"

"Right!" we cheered back.

"And when you're being responsible for what you create, you will transform yourself upward-toward joy. Right?"

"Right!" we screamed joyously.

"That's all there is," Jason said. "Joy and despair. And all the stations in between. You're either headed toward one or the other. You're either creating your life, or destroying it. So which do you want to do?"

"Create it!" we whooped and hollered.

He held up his hands to stop us. "Great," he said. "I got it!" We applauded and yelled and made monkey noises in appreciation.

"Enough!" Jason screamed. He was laughing too. "I got it, I got it!"

We calmed down.

"All right. Now, we're getting to the punch line." "Yay, punch lines!" someone called.

"We need to have a conversation about creation here. We've all just said that we want to create our lives, right? We want to create joyousness? Well, why?"

I raised my hand. "Because it feels better."

Everybody laughed. Jason said, "Yes, it does, Jim, but that's not all of it. You see, joy and despair are not just feelings. If this was all about our feelings, then we'd be nothing more than the victims of our own feelings. We'd do anything just to feel good. And in fact, a lot of people out there-in what we call the 'real world' . . ." Laughter at this. ". . . function in exactly that way. They do whatever they have to just to feel good. They use their feelings to justify a lot of very selfish and shortsighted actions-like drugs for instance.

"Let me give you the bad news. Your feelings are not really feelings. That's just the way you experience them. Your feelings are really the points on your spiritual compass. Do you know that?"

"There's a condition-we'll call it absolute truth. We can experience it as human beings. We can't always comprehend it. In fact, we can't ever comprehend it. But we can experience it. Now: what's the word for absolute truth? Anyone?"

"God," said Frankenstein quietly.

"That's right. God is truth. I'll give you a very simple piece of logic. It doesn't matter if there is a God or not, by the way. If there is a God, then God would be absolute truth, wouldn't she? Right. And if there is an absolute truth anywhere in the universe then it would be congruent with God. We would experience it as God, wouldn't we? So when we have an experience of absolute truth, it's also an experience of God, isn't it?"

I found myself nodding in agreement. It all made perfect sense to me.

Jason went on. "And whether God exists or not doesn't matter, because in that moment, in our own experience, we are creating God, aren't we?"

I picked my jaw up and kept on listening. This was important. "Such an experience-the experience of God, of absolute truth-would be the most joyous experience possible, wouldn't it?"

Yes, of course.

"So, you see, your feelings, your emotions, are your barometer of your relationship with God, or with the truth. Whatever word you want to use is fine. This isn't a religion. It's a discovery. You choose how you want to experience it. You're the source of your own experience, aren't you?"

Right.

"So, when you are creating joy, you are moving yourself closer to God-closer to the truth. The more joyous you get, the more truth you are creating."

People were cheering now. I wanted to cheer. I started cheering.

"And that," Jason finished with a flourish, "is why we celebrate the Revelation! Truth is the source of joyousness. Joyousness tells us when we are getting close. Despair tells us when we are moving away. Despair is the result of a lie. It is the acknowledgment of the lie. Find the lie. Acknowledge it. Tell the truth about it. It may be confronting. It may be uncomfortable, but remember: the truth is always uncomfortable. Never mind! Tell it anyway-on the other side of the discomfort is the joy. Most of us are so afraid of being uncomfortable that we pile lie on top of lie and we can't understand why we just get more and more uncomfortable.

"Bite the goddamn bullet and tell the truth! The more truth you tell, the more joy you'll experience. The more joy you have, the closer to truth you are. We move to truth and we create ecstasy! That is the Revelation! That is the Revelation!"

We were all standing now, a8 cheering, all hollering, all yelling, all hugging and kissing, tears streaming down our faces. We were all joyous. It was the truth. It was a revelation. I loved Jason. He was sharing the truth and he was God.

God, I loved him.

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There was a young man from St. Loo,
who gave his dear sister a screw.

Said I, with aplomb,

"You're better than Mom."

Said she, "That's what Dad told me too!"

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Conversation with the Monster

"The minute you start to analyze why sex feels so good, it stops feeling good and starts feeling silly."
-SOLOMON SHORT

Each night, I slept with a different person, sometimes a woman, sometimes a man. Sometimes an adult, sometimes a child. Sometimes we had sex, sometimes we didn't. There were no secrets. We were supposed to share ourselves totally.

If there was ever a question about it, the answer was, "Jason says we should, so we can find out how we feel about it." That didn't always make sense to me, but it was something I couldn't question either. It was clear to me that Jason was doing something right and I wanted to know what that something was.

I guessed I wanted to be a lot like him. Respected. Understanding. Compassionate. In control. Loved. And something else.

Jason had a way of looking at things, looking underneath them or inside them-or maybe from another dimension. Jason said that he wasn't just looking at the thing, he was looking at the context around it as well. "Look at what's happening, Jim. Not what you think is happening, but what's happening. The way people behave demonstrates what game they think they have to play to win. Most people play to win, not to play; that's why they're not having any fun."

Right. That was me.

Jason spoke with a level of insight and certainty that was terrifying. I felt blind by comparison-and very jealous of his skill-and at the same time grateful that I was being allowed to learn from him.

So, if Jason said, "Go ahead. Do it. Find out why it makes you uncomfortable. Find out why you're afraid of it," we did it. So, when Jason told us to go naked, I went naked. And learned about clothes. And when Jason told us to trade clothes with each other, I traded clothes with Sally for a week. And learned about nudity. And when Jason told us to sleep with each other. . . . Jason said I was afraid to let people love me, so I held them at arm's length with a combination of belligerence so they wouldn't see who was really inside, and self-pity when they did. Jason said that I was a racketeer, a snake, and a rip-off artist; I was cheating the people around me by not letting them discover how wonderful I really was and how much love I really had to offer. I wanted that to be true, so I followed his instructions.

I wondered if Jesus had been like this. The real Jesus, not the one in the fairy tales. If he had been, I could understand how all those religions grew up around him.

There were no marriages here. Marriages were from the old system. "That kind of pair-bonding," said Jason, "is invalid in the game we're playing now. It works against the cohesiveness of the Tribe. For the Tribe to be a unit, we must be each and every one of us bound to each and every one of us."

As the days passed, I began to see what he was talking about. Living with the Tribe was the chance to step outside of that other agreement-the one called The United States of America and experience a very different agreement. It became the opportunity to discover how much of my thinking was really me, and how much of it had actually been the culture I had been immersed in expressing itself through me. A startling realization, that one. And very uncomfortable. It hurt to find out how much of what I thought was me really wasn't anyone I knew at all. I hadn't made those agreements, but they were there in my head anyway.

"Those agreements could be you," Jason said. "If you want them, own them. But consider what the cost of those agreements will be. Consider what you will have to pay for the privilege of owning those agreements. How much of your aliveness will you have to give up? Do you really want to be an American, Jim? I don't think so.

"You say that you want to be that thing that you think an American is supposed to be. But you don't really know what that is, do you? What is an American, Jim? No, don't play the tape. I've heard it. I helped write it. See, you've bought into a reality that's impossible to succeed in. You hold this idealized

image ahead of you like a donkey holding his own carrot in front of his nose. You keep it out of reach and won't ever let yourself have it. You'll only let yourself have just enough of what you want to be miserable. You and I both know it.

"What you really want, Jim, is larger than any nationality. You've got a whole bunch of words connected to it, like God and brotherhood and freedom and justice and peace and love-but you don't really know what's at the center or how to get there. You just keep flubbing along in all directions at once, hoping you'll stumble into it.

"The only part of it, Jim, that any of us can ever get right is that we can recognize that place when we do find it. But the only way to recognize it is to stop trying to fit it into our pictures of the way we think it has to be. You have to let go of what you know to find out what you don't know. So, let go, Jim, and find out what's available here."

Jason was right.

There was something going on here. I had never experienced a context of such total love before. I had never experienced a society of human beings that was as nonjudgmental as this one. Anywhere else in the world, you were reviled for being different. Here you were applauded for taking the chance, for expressing yourself. Think of it this way. Silliness is an art form. And there are no experts in it.

You have to invent it fresh every day. It was a startling discovery.

I loved it.

And I discovered. . . .

Look, you take a person out of one set of agreements and drop him in another and then another and another, and it's like washing a dish. The agreements become transitory; you get to see the person underneath much more clearly. And once you can recognize the transitory nature of cultural agreements, you're free to reinvent those agreements in your culture that support you in the results you really want to produce.

Myself, I began to see how I had been trapped inside the whole military mind-set.

Old news: The mind is a computer program. Part of the program is hard-wired into the cortex; the rest is self-programmed, starting just about the time daddy rolls off mommy and falls asleep.

There's no instruction book. Baby has to figure it out without help.

And you wonder why we're all so screwed up?

Most of us can't even communicate with each other clearly. You don't hear what I'm saying, you hear what you think you hear. I hear what I think I hear. And then we bludgeon each other to death for our misunderstandings. And because we've all worked so hard to program ourselves, we're convinced we're programmed right and everyone else is wrong.

No wonder most of life is one long argument.

Jason said, "What we're doing here is tuning. We all have to agree on the language we're using, we have to learn how to hear what we're really speaking. We have to agree on our larger purposes. We have to, each and every one of us, willingly be a part of the larger whole."

We were taking a stroll around the perimeter of the camp. Jason took a meditative walk every afternoon.

It was a privilege to be invited to accompany him. Today, he had asked me. Usually, it was an honor.

Today it wasn't. At least, I didn't think it was. I'd done something terrible.

Everybody knew.

And now I was going to find out what happened when you did something terrible.

Orrie followed thoughtfully behind, stopping occasionally to chew on a tree or examine a bush. Jason would turn around and study Orrie, or sometimes just admire him. He was filling out beautifully.

Sometimes, you could hear him singing all over camp.

It made me feel ashamed.

I wasn't worthy of this attention. And at the same time, I was angry. He didn't have the right to punish me. I hadn't done anything wrong.

"Jim." Jason put a hand on my shoulder and turned me to him. "What are you afraid of?"

"Nothing. "

"That's your military mind again, Jim. Now talk to me honestly. Do you want to talk about what

happened yesterday?" I'd had a tantrum yesterday and had refused to attend the circle. It didn't matter what the tantrum had been about. What mattered was the fact that I had been unkind to Ray and Marcie and Valerie. I shook my head. "No." I stared at the ground.

Jason put a finger under my chin and lifted my face.

"Jim, I'm not your daddy. I'm not going to punish you. That's not what we do here. Intelligent beings don't use fear and pain and punishment to motivate results. It's counterproductive. Punishment is evidence of the failure to communicate."

"Well somebody failed to communicate with me then. . . ." I stopped myself. I sounded like a bigger asshole than usual when I tried to justify myself. I shut up.

"This is not a question of right or wrong, Jim. It's a question of being appropriate to the situation. What you did was inappropriate; something happened and your mind triggered an inappropriate response. So what? Don't beat yourself up for it. We all do that. The appropriate thing to do is apologize and get on with the real job." If en took me by the elbow then and began leading me up the garden path.

"Jim," Jason began quietly. "Do you know what the condition of life for most people is?"

Unconsciousness. I'm not talking about coma or catatonia; I'm talking about simply not being aware.

People walk around this planet in hypnotic trances. They go through the motions. They eat, they sleep, they watch TV, they make love, and they do it like they're on rails. They're unconscious to the passion in their own lives. So what happens when something disturbing happens? Your mind gives you an uncomfortable reaction, and the automatic response is fight or flight. You know what happens when you wake people up? They get angry. You get angry.

"Guess what? We're in the business of waking people up here. It's a dangerous business. You know why? Angry people use their anger as an excuse to kill. You can get blinded by your own rage and do terrible things. Or, you can learn to recognize that the rage is a signpost that you've been unconscious about something.

"Jim, when you let go of the rage, what's left is what you've been resisting. If you're willing to confront the uncomfortable things, something wonderful will happen. You'll start to experience all those things that you've been resisting so hard-anger, fear, boredom, grief-and that's when you get the joke. You find out that resisting them hurts more than experiencing them. And then they disappear. And you get larger and more alive.

"So all that uncomfortableness that you're experiencing here, Jim, shouldn't be seen as a formidable barrier, but as an exciting challenge-because on the other side of it is your own life."

I didn't answer that. What he was asking me was to stop being mad. And I thought I had a damn good reason to be mad.

I just couldn't remember what it was.

"I guess I'm having a hard time adjusting," I said. "The rest of you make it all look so easy."

Jason laughed. "You're doing fine, Jim. Really, you are. You're right on schedule. This is part of the process too. We all love you."

"I don't know how I can look anybody in the eye again. I'm so embarrassed."

"Just go up to them and hug them, that's all that's necessary. And then you can all laugh together. You'll see."

I knew he was right. These people never let any hurt last very long. But how did they get this way? Sometimes it felt like an impossible job to me.

"Jason," I asked. "You brought in three new guests last week. Obviously, you want the Tribe to grow. But toward what? What's the vision? How can I tap into it too?"

He smiled. He put his arm around my shoulder as we walked. "I don't have a vision-and I do. I know, that sounds confusing. Let me tell you, Jim, when people speak of their visions very often they're talking about the pictures that their belief systems produce. Listen to me: your standards and ideals are your ego in disguise. Your belief system is your ego in disguise. So, to talk about that kind of vision is to not talk about what's truly possible, but about the way you think it should be done. I don't have that kind of vision.

"When I talk about my vision, I'm talking about what I've seen in the Revelations. The new gods, Jim, are

a message to us." He stopped and squatted to the ground to examine something. He stood up and held out his hand. "Have you ever seen one of these before?"

I looked. He was holding out a tiny red marble of a creature. It had eight tiny legs and two black eyes. I shook my head. Jason put it back on the ground carefully. "It's a Chtorran insect. Have you ever noticed what perfect little machines insects are?"

I shrugged. "Yeah. I've always been fascinated by insects. They're so alien."

"Mm-hm," he said. "They don't have any choice, do they? They're just little biological machines. Their functioning is determined by the pattern of DNA in their chromosomes, right?"

"Right."

"Have you ever noticed what perfect little machines human beings are?"

"Uh, well, biologically, yes."

"But not mentally?"

"That's a loaded question, Jason, isn't it?"

He grinned and clapped my shoulder. "Well . . . ?"

"Jason, you know this is the stuff that makes me angry. Every time you insist that my mind is a computer program, I just go crazy."

"Wrong. You don't go crazy. Your mind does. Don't get confused, Jim. You're not your mind. You're just the place where it happens. And that 'craziness' is one of the things your mind does to keep you from hearing the bad news. It's a programmed response, Jim. Your mind is a computer program that likes to insist it's not a computer program. Very boring. And not very productive either. The only difference between you and that insect is that you are a complex enough machine that you have some choice in your programming. You are a machine that programs yourself. The insect isn't. But you have to know what you are before you can be it."

We started walking again. I wasn't sure where he was going with this train of thought.

"Think about this, Jim: everything that human beings know is a product of human experience. The human machinery only knows those things about itself that the human machinery can discover. We can't know anything that we can't know. Do you follow that?"

"Just barely."

"All right, let's try it this way. Suppose you wanted to know what was on the other side of that hill, but you couldn't go there to see. What would you do to find out?"

"Um, I don't know. Look at a map?"

"You don't have a map. You're trying to make one. That's why you want to know what's on the other side of the hill. What do you do?"

"Try and figure it out?"

"You're guessing. Figuring it out is another way of making something up. You might just as well write 'Here there be Dragons' in the space. You know that's what people do when they don't know something. They make something up instead. What's the responsible thing to do when you don't know something?"

"Ask. Ask someone who knows."

"Right. You see, there's the opportunity here. We can only know what human beings can know. That means that all our gods are human gods. They are reflections of ourselves. God in this world is a mirror of our own flaws.

"The Chtorrans know things that we can't know. We're trapped in our own physiology. We're apes. We always will be. All we can know is ape stuff. We can never escape the trap—we'll always be apes. But we can know what's beyond apeness if we will take advantage of the opportunity that the Chtorrans represent. They know what the world looks like from their side of the hill. They can share that with us.

"Do you see? They bring us new gods—new mirrors. The opportunity is for us to get beyond our own humanity, for us to transcend the machinery of our biology, and to finally discover those things that we could never discover by ourselves. The new gods can be our teachers, Jim. I've seen things in the Revelations that I cannot explain because our language doesn't have the words for it. We don't have the concepts. We don't have the paradigms. We have no models. We don't even have any contexts in which to construct the paradigms, models, and concepts.

"I have had experiences that I cannot share yet because there is no one else on the planet who can receive the message. Do you know how lonely that can be?" He put his arm around my shoulders and held me close while we walked. "What I want to do here is share the vision. Every time we have a Revelation, the whole Tribe advances. Do you know what a god really is, Jim?"

I shook my head. "I always thought a god was beyond human comprehension. "

"That's one of the aspects, of course. But let me give you the simple definition. A god is anything you use as a power source. Before the worms, before the plagues, people used money and sex and possessions as gods. That's where they found their identities. We've found a new power source in the Chtorrans, and a new domain of identity for the human machine. The question of validity-or right and wrong-that's all irrelevant. The important thing is that this new domain produces results. It works. You can see it in the faces of the Tribe. Already, most of them are more awake than I was when I first let Orrie into my life. Do you know what his full name is?"

"No."

"Ouroboros." He waited to see if I would react.

I knew the reference. "The worm who eats his own tail."

"You're literate, Jim. I'm surprised."

"My dad was a fantasy-programmer. He wrote a game called Ouroboros. I helped with the research. Ouroboros is the great worm of the world; he symbolizes the eternal process of death and renewal. It's a good name for a god," I added.

Jason shook his head thoughtfully. "It's a human name. Eventually, Jim, we're going to have to abandon human names and human language and human identities."

"And replace them with . . . ?"

"If I knew, then we'd already be doing it," Jason said. We walked on for a while.

A question occurred to me and I voiced it. "Orrie is different from Falstaff and Orson," I said. "In fact, Orrie's different from all the other worms-Chtorrans-I've ever seen. Why is that, Jason? What is it that makes Orrie so special?"

"Orrie's not special," Jason said. "But he's different and that difference makes him seem special. The truth is, he's really the first one. He's the first Chtorran to be raised by human beings: He's the linkage. Or maybe we should say that we're the first human beings to be raised by the new gods and we're the linkage. So are you. Either side of it is only half of it. The point is, this is the place where the linkage is happening. The other two-Falstaff and Orson-they were wild. Orrie brought them in."

"But, they're bigger than he is. I don't understand how ."

"Size doesn't have anything to do with it, Jim. The Chtorrans are not a species where bullying determines who's in charge." Jason took me by the arm. "Come with me, Jim. Let me show you something. Orrie is building a family. After you build a family, then you build a tribe. Then a nation. But you start with the family." He led me toward a part of the camp that Falstaff had never let me explore before. "Orrie can't build a family with Falstaff or Orson. They're older than he is, so the bonding wouldn't work. He wouldn't be the head. Also, they're all males now. "

"Huh-? What do you mean now? How do you know that?"

"Orrie told me. I don't know what it means. He doesn't have the language yet to handle the concepts. But we'll get there." Jason led me down a slope to a little hollow. There was a burned-out building here and an old, abandoned swimming pool. As we approached the pool, I could see that one end of it appeared filled with refuse. "Our camouflage," Jason explained.

He led me to the edge of the pool and made a chirruping sound. Orrie came up beside us and peered down into the pool and said, "Chtrrrppp!"

The rubbish at the bottom of the pile shifted, then pushed aside, and two of the tiniest Chtorrans I'd ever seen-they were pink and fat and cute-came flowing out to greet us. They were like little teddy bears. They were each the size of a large dog, less than a meter in length. They were small enough to pick up and cuddle. They stretched up the sides of the pool, waving their arms and trying to reach us.

Jason made me take a step back. "Careful," he said. "They're hungry, and they may not recognize that you're not food."

"These are Orrie's babies?"

"Not biologically, no. But in a Tribal sense, yes. The new gods don't make families like we do: But they do build families. When these babies get bigger, they'll be Orrie's mates. We need one more to make a fourth corner for the family. That will be happening almost any day now. It'll be quite a cause for celebration."

Orrie flowed down into the pool and began to curl up with his babies. Jason took my arm and steered me away from the edge. "Let's go back now," he said.

We walked in silence back up the slope. Orrie did not follow us. I could hear a deep purring rumble from the pool.

Jason said, "Jim, it's time to talk about you. You've been given the opportunity to discover what we're up to here. We've shared everything with you-our food, our beds, our visions, our Revelations. You know about the goals we've chosen, our plan to find a safe place to live. A place where we can build our Tribe. You know what we're up to here; you've met the new gods and you know what the opportunity is. They bring us the opportunity to transcend ourselves.

"Now, it's time for us to talk about your participation. The bottom line is this, Jim. You're either a guest on the planet, or a host. Most of human history, the apes who were our ancestors have been acting like they were guests. Most of the human species still acts like they're only guests here.

"The opportunity for us is to be the host. Do you know what that means?"

I admitted I didn't. My survival mind offered a few disgusting possibilities, but I didn't voice the thoughts.

"To be a host is to be responsible for the guests: Guests eat. Hosts serve. To be a host is a higher state.

What I'm building here is a Tribe of hosts. We will be responsible for our guests on the planet-our human guests and our Chtorran guests. The question that you need to answer is this? Do you want to be a host?"

A long moment passed between us before I answered. I said, "Jason, you have told me never to make a commitment unless I'm one hundred percent willing to complete it. I don't know all of the commitment yet. I have to look at this and see."

"That's fair," he said. "I didn't expect you to jump in immediately. And if you had, I'd be suspicious of your ability to keep the commitment. What you're demonstrating here is how important you hold the choice. That shows that you recognize the size:of it. That's good. But let me give you this question, Jim. This is the question you need to answer. When you have the answer to this, you will know what your commitment is: What is your life about? What do you want your life to be about?"

He took me in his arms and hugged me. I hugged him back. He kissed me, I kissed him, and then he dismissed me to do my daily chores in the vegetable garden.

?

A lady who didn't like flies
managed to hide her surprise,
when she opened up one
and found it was fun.

Now she willingly widens her thighs.

?

? 16

?

The Gun

"Guns don't die. People do."

-SOLOMON SHORT

When he put it that way, there was no question what my life was about.

I mean, it was that old thing that everybody used to say when I was a kid. "I want a world that works for everybody, with no one and nothing left out."

The only question was what could I do to bring it about? I had to do some serious soul-searching here. Maybe there had been lies told about the renegades.

It made sense. The old order is always threatened by the new. The people I had met here weren't renegades. They were committed and joyous. We weren't renegades, we were family.

I knew what my problem was. I still wanted to test Jason. That was my programming. I had to test everything. I was looking for that one little thing that would prove to me that this whole thing was some kind of con, some little piece of damaged integrity on the part of Jason that would allow me to justify my disloyalty.

But even as I looked at that, I knew that it was my responsibility to create my participation, not anybody else's. And even Jason had to be given the same space to make mistakes as anybody else.

But-I was still a guest here. Not a host. Not a member of the family. Not a member of the Tribe.

Jason said I'd have to ask, and he also said I'd know when it was the time to ask.

I wasn't the only guest. There were several of us; the nervous looking boy who'd stood next to me my first night in the circle, his name was Andy; a quiet woman called Deese; most of the children; and surprisingly, Ray and Valerie.

Ray explained it to me, "Being a member of the Tribe means you get to-have to-participate in the Revelation. I have a heart condition and," he shrugged apologetically, "I still have too much investment in survival. I'm afraid I'll die in the Revelation. Jason says that I can't be a member of the Tribe until I'm willing to put its survival over my own. I'm not afraid to die, but I think I can be of more value to the Tribe this way. Jason says one of these days I'm going to have to get off it." Valerie was Ray's daughter. She didn't want to join without him. And that was that.

In my own case, I still felt terribly uncertain. I wanted to talk to Lizard.

There once was a lady named Lizard,
who got lost in a pink candy blizzard,
with a fellow named Jim,
who wanted to swim . . .

I couldn't think of a rhyme. Wizard. Gizzard? I couldn't think of a last line.

Did it matter?

Yes, in a way, it did.

I didn't like leaving things unfinished. Incomplete.

But then, I'd never finished the limerick about Jason either.

I'd feed him to worms,
just to see how he squirms . .

But I didn't want to do that any more either.

I wanted to know what he knew. I wanted to learn everything I could from him.

Did I really need to finish those limericks?

Probably not; they didn't matter. They were leftovers from another time and another Jim McCarthy. Sometimes though, at night, I'd ask myself why I was trying to learn so much so fast. Was it because I wanted to sneak away one night and report back to Oakland what I'd learned about the worms? Or was it because I wanted to stay here and be with Jason? I thought about Oakland.

Had they come looking for me? They probably thought I was dead.

Had Lizard mourned me?

I felt sad about that. I didn't want her to be unhappy. I wanted her to be here with me, so I could share this with her. I could feel the difference in myself. I wanted her to feel it too. She would be able to stop being so damned angry and hostile all the time and let some of her joyousness out.

That was a funny thought. If Lizard Tirelli ever let loose a real smile, she'd probably break her face. But it'd be worth it. If she let out even the tiniest piece of the joyousness inside her, she'd probably blind half of California with the glow.

But she'd probably hate me if I tried to bring her to this. She wouldn't understand.

Her survival mind would go crazy, gibbering like the ape it was descended from.

Just the same, it was fun to think about. No, it wasn't. I'd go crazy when she started to sleep with the others. I'd only want her to sleep with me.

But that was my survival mind. The hell with it.

She wasn't here and I couldn't have her.

And maybe I shouldn't have her anyway. Most of the time when I was around her, I was crazy. Or she was. Or everybody else was. Jessie and Frankenstein stopped me after breakfast one morning. They needed my help. Would I explain to them how to use the AM-280?

I shrugged and followed them up to the main building. "What's the problem?" I asked. "Are the bikers back?" We'd been hearing motorcycle noises on the road for a week, not very often and usually late at night; but all three of the worms had become very agitated, prowling and sniffing and listening very alertly. Falstaff and Orson disappeared into the forest almost every evening.

"Just taking precautions," said Jessie. "That's all." She unlocked the weapons and began laying them out on the table. "Better clean them first, Jim. Nobody's touched them since you arrived. "

My survival mind twinged at that. Was this a test?

"What's the matter?" asked Frankenstein.

"Huh? Nothing. Why?"

"Your face just clouded for a minute. Did the guns remind you of something?"

"Uh, yeah-it wasn't important." I turned away to cover my doubt. Maybe it was important.

Behind me, I could hear Jessie and Frankenstein exchanging a loud glance. They had to know.

One of the guns was covered with . . .

"I wish you'd cleaned this," I said.

. . . Jon's blood.

I reached for a rag and a can of oil. "And we should recharge the laser-sight."

I worked the mechanism to pop the magazine out.

It was a full magazine. This gun was still loaded.

I slid the magazine back in. It clicked satisfyingly into place.

The thought occurred to me: I could be out of here tonight.

Jessie and Frankenstein were still sorting through the other weapons. They weren't paying any attention to me at all.

I could kill them right now, if I wanted to.

My survival mind said I should.

But-I didn't want to kill them.

I just wanted to leave.

This had to be a test. Where were the worms?

Damn!

My survival mind wanted to leave. I didn't know what I wanted.

I slid the safety off quietly, thought for a second, then slid it back on.

Jessie turned around to me. "Can we use it?"

I was studying the controls. "I wish you'd left it plugged in, but it's still got half a charge." There was something wrong here. I started to dismantle the weapon. "Why'd you leave it like this? Don't you know how to take care of a gun?"

"Sorry," said Jessie. "You're the one who's got the military mind. "

Frankenstein just grunted.

"You're awfully trusting, Jessie," I said, handing her the magazine. "You handed me a loaded gun."

I peered down the barrel--

"No, we know who we're dealing with, Jim," she replied.

--it was clogged with something. I poked at it with a cleaning rod.

Chewing gum.

I held it up for both of them to see. "But you had your doubts, didn't you?" If I had tried to fire the gun, it would have exploded in my hands. It would have been very messy and I would have been very dead.

Jessie shrugged. Frankenstein grunted, "Everything is a choice. "

"Cute," I said. I was annoyed. "I thought I was worthy of your trust. "

"Jason trusts you," said Jessie. "That's his job. My job is to distrust. I'm in charge of defense. I have to be a skeptic."

My expression must have said what I was thinking, because Jessie added, "I know. It feels wrong. We have so much love in this camp and so much passion for the future that to talk about weapons and defense and killing is a terrible mind-set. It's a long sour step south, and the cost of it is a terrible burden on all of us, Jason included. But the alternative is to put the new gods in jeopardy, and that isn't very good service at all. So, we do what has to be done and we try to forgive ourselves as well as those who would destroy us. It's an unhappy position, Jim; but it's the cost of survival."

I nodded. "You don't need to explain it to me. I've heard the speech before. I've even given it myself.

Just drop out the line about the new gods and put in 'The United States' instead."

"Good," said Jessie. "Then you don't need to hear it again." She picked up the other rifle and began to expertly strip it and clean it.

I thought so. She'd lied about that too. I concentrated on cleaning the weapon in my lap and didn't say anything else. Frankenstein slid the magazine across the table to me. I ignored it until I had finished checking every single mechanism in the rifle.

Finally, I picked up the magazine and clicked it solidly back into the gun.

If I wanted to kill them, now would be the time.

Instead, I popped the magazine out again and put both it and the rifle back on the table.

"It's fine," I said. "Only, you'll want to replace the propellant regulator before you try to use it. If you fire it without a propellant regulator, you're running the risk of blowing your head off."

Jessie and Frankenstein exchanged pleased glances. "I told you he was smart."

Frankenstein grunted and tossed me the PR-96-A regulator. It had been in his pocket the whole time. I disassembled the rifle again, clicked the assembly into place and reassembled the weapon.

"I suppose you'd like the access codes now?" I grinned.

"If you don't mind."

Maybe I hesitated. Maybe I didn't. I was betraying a United States secret. I don't remember. I just did it.

"No problem at all," I said. I picked up the gun and set the code keys; I passed it across for both of them to see.

Somewhere in that moment, I made up my mind. These people didn't love me. Not really. Therefore, I would be justified in leaving.

As soon as possible.

They could probably see it on my face. I forced a stupid grin and held it. Not much better than a frown, but it would have to do. I finished the job without saying much else, and after that we went to lunch.

I didn't say much to anyone during lunch, I was still thinking about what I had decided-wondering if that was what I really wanted to do, or if that was just my survival mind reactivating an old channel. Maybe I

should talk to Jason about it, but I knew what he would say. "Handle it yourself, Jim. It's your head." Sure. I wanted to love. I wanted to be loved. These people talked love. They demonstrated love. But they didn't trust me with a loaded gun.

I always thought trust was the foundation of love. Maybe it wasn't; maybe these people could love without trusting. I couldn't.

But if I left, that would prove that they were right, I wasn't trustworthy. To prove that I was trustworthy, I would have to stay and be trustworthy.

Damn! Everything around here was a paradox. Or a trap. After lunch, Jason pulled me to one side. "Jim, can you spare a moment?"

"Of course."

"Jessie says you're pretty good with the weapons. You've come a long way. She trusts you. I want you to start carrying a gun and do some perimeter patrols with Falstaff."

"I thought the patrols were a Tribal responsibility."

"They are; and you can say no if you want to, because you're still technically a guest. But we're shorthanded and this is a very delicate time. Orrie's teaching the babies. He has to spend a lot of time with them. And we really could use your assistance."

"It's that bad?"

"We found some tire tracks and some footprints. We think someone has been spying on us. That's why we've been keeping the Chtorrans out of sight as much as possible. Jinko and Gregory-Ann are out looking for a new campsite right now. As soon as they find something, and as soon as the babies can travel, we're moving. I just hope it's not too late. We've got to take care of the children too."

"Okay, Jason. When do you want me to start?"

"Ten minutes ago. I should have had you patrolling last week. I'm sorry that we took so long to trust you. Get the keys from Jessie and go get your gun and some ammo."

"You'll find Falstaff at the shady end of the gully. If anybody's going to come up that way, they'll come up the gully; it's the easiest path. Follow it down as far as you can. Probably to the power lines. Watch for footprints or evidence that somebody's been scouting the area. Then I want you to go check out the crest of the hill above the gully; there's an old firebreak that runs along the top that could be used as a road. Check it for tire tracks."

"Now, listen, let Falstaff take the point, and don't let yourself be seen. One worm alone doesn't attract attention. A man with a worm does. Listen to me, Jim, this is imperative. Nobody can know we're here, so I want you to absolutely avoid all contact if you can. If you can't-even if you run into somebody accidentally-you'll have to kill them. I know you; you're going to want to save their lives. Don't. Don't try to enroll anyone; that's my job. Obliterate that alternative. Just take them down quickly and forgive yourself later."

"Don't go into survival mode on this, Jim. Nobody is the enemy; we're all just martyrs to evolution. That's why I want you to stay out of sight, so you don't get put into a situation that'll drive you crazy. I don't want you firing on anybody or anything unless you personally are attacked. Even if somebody attacks Falstaff with a torch, don't go to his aid; it's more important that you come back and warn us. Don't try and be an army. Ray will come up and relieve you just before dinnertime. Got that?"

"I got it. Do you really think there's someone up there?"

"Probably not, but the Chtorrans have been jittery for a week, so let's see if we can find out why."

"Right. Oh, and Jason . . ."

"Yes, Jim?"

"Thank you for this opportunity."

He grinned. It was one of his world-famous, crack-open-the-sky-and-see-the-face-of-God, smiles.

"You earned it, Jim."

?

There was a young lady named Nancy,
who liked having sex, plain or fancy.

With lightning and thunder,

and a profound sense of wonder,
But not with a partner-much too chancy.
?

? 17

? The Broom

"Cleanliness is next to impossible."

-SOLOMON SHORT

I approached the gully cautiously. I didn't want to startle Falstaff. Jason said that Falstaff had made himself a nest in a bed of purple coleus. "We told him to be invisible. Most likely, all that you'll see will be his two big eyes sticking up out of the purple growth." Falstaff wasn't in his nest.

I stepped into the cool shade enveloped by the thick, sweet, spicy smell and looked around. The nest was still warm. He'd been here only moments ago. Where could he have gone?

I backed out of the nest cautiously.

Falstaff wouldn't leave his hiding place without a good reason. That meant . . .

Abruptly, a giant pink and purple Chtorran rose up from underneath me, making a deep rumbling, whirring sound as he did. "Hey-what!" He toppled me backward, I had to leap and catch myself. I fell back against the side of the gully, tumbling sideways and falling on my ass. The worm rose up above me, and then made a high-pitched, giggly noise and came down lightly at my feet. He'd been hidden so deep, I'd been standing on him.

I jumped up, annoyed. "Jesus H. Christ on a bicycle! Don't do that, Falstaff! You scared the hell out of me!"

Falstaff giggled again. It was an eerie sound. I wanted to slap him. But I didn't. He was so proud of himself. He was playing with me.

"You asshole," I said. "Come here,"

He flowed forward. I reached up and hugged his side, then reached up high and scratched his eye-stalks as hard as I could. Falstaff farted appreciatively: Ph-aatttt.

"I love you, too," I said. What the hell, I could hold my breath for a couple of weeks. That wasn't too much to ask for the privilege of climbing all over the mountains with a creature that demonstrated an occasional affinity for the taste of human flesh. "Come on, Jason wants us to patrol. You want to go hunting?"

"Whrrr. Rhrrr."

"Right. Me too. That way, first."

We headed down the gully together, side by side, a boy and his worm. When we got to the narrow part, Falstaff surged ahead and took the lead. It was steep and narrow, carved by years of uncontrolled erosion. I followed Falstaff down. He knew the gully better than I did. He flowed down through it. Underneath all that blubber, he had several hundred little feet. That made him much more sure-footed than me.

We went all the way down to the old power-line towers-they were black and tilted at an angle; they'd been abandoned for years-and even a little bit beyond.

We spotted a couple of wild bunnymen. They were naked and ugly and hooted rudely at us. One of them grabbed his penis and jerked his pelvis in a very suggestive manner, but Falstaff just yawned. He wasn't hungry. He responded with a bored chirrup and the bunnymen hopped back into the underbrush.

And that was all the excitement we had in the gully.

There wasn't anything up at the crest of the hill either to worry about. We followed the firebreak as far as we could and it was overgrown with weeds and strewn with rubble almost its entire length. Nobody was maintaining this area.

We probably should have maintained the firebreak for our own protection, but we'd be moving soon, so it wasn't worth worrying about any more.

We were almost ready to turn back when Falstaff burped. It was a funny kind of burp, so I walked over to see what he was chewing on.

A broom.

It had been hidden under the brush that Falstaff was munching on. He'd eaten half the bush and part of the broom as well. I grabbed it and pulled it out of his mouth; he didn't look annoyed.

"Sorry," I said. "Let me see. You can have it back in a minute."

It was just an old plastic broom-but it wasn't weathered. It hadn't been left outdoors for very long.

Now why would someone leave a broom here? I walked a little ways farther on.

Footprints. Leading down the opposite side of the hill. Right.

The broom was for brushing them out, but whoever had been here had gotten lazy. He hadn't expected Falstaff and me to come this far.

I'd have to tell Jason.

But should I go back now? Or should I wait till Ray relieved me? I looked at my watch. Five o'clock. I could wait an hour. We could scout around a little bit more, then be back in the gully by six.

The footprints led down the hill toward a loop of dirt road, an old logger's trail.

Hm.

It seemed to me that somebody had been deliberately scouting the camp. And very carefully too.

Of course, that was a lot of supposition to hang on the evidence of a single plastic broom; but if they had been as careful as I would have been, we wouldn't even have found the broom.

That's why I didn't think it was the army.

The army would have come down on the camp with choppers and napalm and fire-balls. This had to be somebody else.

At least, that was how I saw it.

Falstaff and I headed back toward the gully. We were late getting there. It was 6:40 before Falstaff was settled back into his nest. He went as deep as he could-he was going to play the same joke on Ray, if he could.

I was a little annoyed. Ray should have been waiting for us; Jason said that most people didn't take punctuality seriously, as if being late wasn't the same as breaking your word. He could get real angry about people not being on time or completing a job when they said it would be done.

Jason said that integrity starts with the littlest things, because that's what you build the big integrity out of. So, for someone to be even ten minutes late was unusual. Ray wouldn't have been late unless it was important. He'd explain to me when he got here.

At 7:00, I started to get annoyed.

They could have at least sent one of the kids up here to tell me what was going on.

At 7:10 I got worried.

I had the paranoid thought first.

Maybe they'd decided to kill me. Maybe I was supposed to wait here with Falstaff until he got hungry.

No, that was stupid. I knew better. Worms didn't need meat every day. Once a week was fine. A healthy worm could go several days without eating, and could last indefinitely just grazing on the countryside, eating nothing but trees.

No. Maybe something else had happened.

Maybe Jinko and Gregory-Ann had returned; maybe they were packing the camp to move. In that case, Ray wouldn't need to come and relieve me until the last truck was ready to roll.

But still, somebody should have come to let me know.

By 7:20, I'd made up my mind. If no one came by 7:30, I'd head over the hill and find out why they'd forgotten about us. Me. At 7:35, I left my post. I broke my word, I abandoned my responsibility and I headed over the hill. "You better wait here, Falstaff."

The worm chirruped and disappeared into his hole.

The old motel looked quiet as I approached. Just as I thought. Everything was normal. I could hear them partying from here. They'd forgotten all about me. I had the right to be annoyed. Jason put such high emphasis on people keeping their word to each other, and nobody remembered to tell Ray he had to come and relieve me.

One of the bunnydogs came scampering up to meet me. He flubbered his lips and goggled at me with big silly eyes. "Hi, Bozo. Did you leave me any dinner?"

Bozo made gobbling noises and fell into step beside me. He picked up a stick and carried it like I was carrying my gun.

I sighed and slung my rifle over my shoulder; I came around the corner of the garage and-nearly tripped over Ray's body. His head had been blown open. A pool of dark red blood stained the ground.

Army reflexes took over and I was back behind the corner, with my back to the wall and my rifle cocked and ready, before I had even finished registering the fact that Ray was lying on the ground dead. Bozo imitated me, flinging himself back too.

I listened to the noises. Partying?

The sounds were motorcycles, and men hooting and whooping. I could hear children screaming. And women too.

I peeked cautiously around the corner. Just a quick glance. Bozo started to peek too, I kicked him back. No one was in sight.

A longer look. A dead bunnyman. Some scattered clothing. A motorcycle roared past, circled and headed back. The rider was laughing.

I pulled back. I took a deep breath. There wasn't time to go back for Falstaff. I was going to have to do something now.

I needed to know more about what was happening.

I edged around the garage and up to the next corner. Bozo followed along behind me, tiptoeing in exaggerated parody. "Keep it up," I muttered. "That's how people get elected president."

Bozo stopped and gave me a hurt, sulky look. I didn't care. Where was Orrie? Where was Orson? They wouldn't have let the camp be overrun.

Were they dead?

I could hear the motorcycles louder now. And the screams were more definite. And the laughter. And the crying.

I peeked around the next corner of the garage. Just the quickest glance, and then pulled back again. Just enough to catch a fast glimpse of the bikes, roaring and circling around a small huddle of frightened women and children. I kicked Bozo away and took another peek.

I thought so. There were only a few of the Tribe members in that huddle. Where was everybody else?

There were a few dead bodies on the ground, mostly men. I recognized Jinko's body, and

Gregory-Ann's as well. Well, that explained how the bikers had found us.

Bikers. Big and ugly and dangerous. The gangs had been roaring up and down the coast for months. The army had ignored them; they weren't worth the trouble. The official position was: Let the worms take care of them.

Now, I saw how stupid that policy had been.

The bikers must have been here a while. Most of the girls had been stripped naked; they were trying to cover themselves with their hands or they stood shamefacedly hanging their heads and made no attempt to cover themselves.

I wondered how many of them had already been raped. Damn me for being so cautious.

All right, I'd make up for it now. I had two advantages.

I had the element of surprise.

And I had an AM-280 and plenty of ammunition. Mr. Mayhem. I didn't have the helmet, but I didn't need it here. This was going to be point and shoot.

But I'd have to be fast; there were at least twenty of them and there was only one of me.

I wasn't going to give myself time to think about it.

I stepped around the garage and started firing toward the oncoming edge of the circling bikes. Bozo ran out behind me and made gobbling noises, pointing his stick. Three of the bikers went down almost immediately, and it was a couple of seconds before any of the others realized what was going on. Two bikers skidded into the toppled ones and went crashing and tumbling. They were dirty, hairy, broad-chested animals.

Two more bikers came around the far edge, saw me, and charged. Their bikes were armed with missile

launchers. I didn't wait to give them a target. Bozo was bouncing up and down, but he followed after as I ran back to the first corner of the garage and waited until they came skidding around-knocked one off his bike and took the other's head off; then whirled around to fire at the three who were coming at me from around the other side of the garage. The gun buzzed and burped and the belly of one of them erupted in red. One of the others skidded sideways and crashed; I hadn't shot him, he'd just lost control. The third guy was trying to turn around-I got him in the back.

Dropped and rolled and came up firing; took down the one who had just come around the corner of the garage behind me-whirled again and went after the one who'd skidded out of control. Got him before he could get up. Bozo was already bouncing up and down on one of the fallen bikes.

And then there was silence.

No, not quite. There was the sound of motorcycle engines running unattended. There were six bikes lying on their sides in the dirt.

The thought crossed my mind. Grab a bike. Get the one with the missiles. Counterattack. I started for the bike Bozo was pretending to ride

It blew up.

Knocked me flat on my ass. Skidding backward, I had a quick glimpse of orange flame, a wall of heat, a tower of greasy smoke. It had been booby-trapped.

It flung little pieces of Bozo the bunnydog in all directions. The dirt was still pattering down around me.

That could have been me. My head was still ringing. Never mind. There were still bikers.

No, I didn't know how many there were; but if there were any still alive, I had to take care of them now.

Headed around the other side of the garage at a run--came skidding around the corner ready to fire.

And stopped.

My help wasn't needed.

Valerie was just slicing open the throat of the last biker.

She stood there, naked and grinning and covered with his blood. She looked triumphant.

?

There was a young lady quite tearful.

Of sucking a cock, she was fearful.

In a moment of dread,

she just turned her head.

And, boy! Did she get an earful!

?

? 18

? Aftermath

"People do not hire lawyers because they want justice. People hire lawyers because they want revenge."
-SOLOMON SHORT

I sent Loolie up to the gully to bring Falstaff down immediately. We didn't know if there were more of these bikers or if these were all there were. We couldn't take chances.

I sent the other children out looking for everybody else. Apparently, Jason had been posting a lot of people on perimeter patrols to guard against just this kind of attack. It hadn't worked.

But at least most of the younger children had been moved out of the camp. Every day, Jason had moved a few more people into emergency hiding places. I knew where one of them was. There were some overgrown fields on the other side of the swimming pool; at the far end had been three large billboards. We'd knocked them down to make a quick lean-to; it looked like a pile of rubble, but it was actually a fairly well-stocked shelter. I sent children scattering to all of the others as well, to call everybody back. Valerie took charge then. Yes, Valerie. When I looked at her questioningly, she simply said, "I don't have time for the drama now."

She was amazing.

She put some of the girls to work searching the bodies and gathering up all the weapons; but nobody was to go near the bikes. We didn't know if any of the others had been booby-trapped. After that, she had them start dragging the dead bodies off to one side. The bikers-well, they were food. Ray and Ted and Gregory-Ann and Jinko and Danny and Billy-well, they were food too; but we would honor them first and we would use their bodies to feed the new babies.

Falstaff was back by then and Valerie and I set him circling in a close patrol. He wanted to eat first, but Valerie insisted that he patrol. He went off with a sulky rumble.

With Falstaff's return, most of the bunnydogs and bunnymen also began to come out of hiding. Nobody knew where Jason or Orrie had gone to. Jessie and Jan were absent too. Also Orson and Mr. President and Libby. And Frankenstein and Marcie. Most of the bigger men had gone with them too.

All right. We'd make it work without them. Valerie called a circle.

A Circle of Screamers, she called it.

She said, "We don't have time for a proper grieving, so let's everybody do as much anger and grief and rage and upset as we can. Let's see how much noise we can make. Everybody now. Nobody gets left out!"

And we did.

We howled, we stamped, we raged. Valerie had been raped and she wanted revenge. Three of the other girls were howling for the same revenge as well. It made me embarrassed to be a man. I felt as if I had been raped too. I screamed with them. The children screamed and shrieked. I roared. Falstaff roared. The circle roared. We grabbed hold of all our emotions and shoved them out through our eyes and ears and throats and did it until we had no strength to do anything more--and then we held onto each other and we hugged. And we cried. And we kissed each other and laughed and petted each other's hair and reassured each other that it was all over and we were going to be all right again.

And then Valerie stopped us, brought us back down.

"All right; that's a good start. Now, we've got work to do. I know we didn't get all our screaming out yet, but we will when Jason gets back. Let's finish cleaning everything up and let's give ourselves a little dinner as well. All right?"

Valerie started dinner preparations and put everybody to work and we managed to get all the children cleaned and fed, bathed, and tucked into bed by ten.

And still Jason hadn't returned. Valerie and I looked at each other. Could something have happened to him?

No.

That was unthinkable.

Falstaff came back, his stomach rumbling and we let him eat several of the bikers. His farts were probably going to be awesome for the next few days.

Jason and Jessie and all the others, including Orrie and Orson, showed up after midnight. They looked exhausted.

They listened patiently as Valerie and I explained what had happened, and what we had done afterward. Jason blew up then.

He was furious that we had brought back everybody from the emergency hiding places.

"You stupid, damned fool! I decentralized this camp for a purpose. I didn't want everybody here, exposed like bait! What do you think would have happened if the rest of the biker family had come in?"

"The rest of them-?" Jason nodded.

My stomach clenched. My heart dropped to my feet.

"This gang had over a hundred members. You had thirty of the worst ones here, but the rest of them were based down at Little Creek. They were going to come up here later tonight. They wanted this camp."

"Were? Past tense?"

Jason turned away from me, shaking his head. "It was a nasty, dirty job, Jim. You don't want to know. There were too many of them. We couldn't take any guests."

Jessie added, "There were fifty women and children and twenty warriors. We took them all down. The warriors first. Then the others. They forced us to. They wouldn't surrender."

"If we had failed," Jason said, "you would have had everyone and everything all in one place and totally defenseless." There was real anger in his voice.

I felt just as betrayed. "So, you really didn't trust me. Otherwise, you would have included me in your planning."

"I did include you," Jason said. "I put you in the right place for the right job."

"Yeah, you put me off in the far corner of nowhere, a place where I couldn't get into any trouble." I was fuming. "You should be thanking me, you asshole. I saved lives here. I did good here."

"You didn't follow instructions, Jim. I was depending on you to follow instructions. There was a purpose to my plan."

We were at the center of a circle. I didn't care. I said, "Jason, when I was in the Special Forces Warrant Agency, nobody ever gave me an order that I couldn't ask for the explanation behind it. That was a rule. My job wasn't to follow orders; it was to take responsibility for the result. There's a difference. Now, are you telling me that all you want me to do is follow orders, or do you want me to take responsibility?"

"Don't hand me that jargon, Jim! I made it up!" He caught his breath. "Of course, I want you to take responsibility. But you don't realize what you did here, do you? You endangered lives. Do you also take responsibility for that?"

I threw my gun down at his feet and started to walk away. Frankenstein grabbed me by one arm and turned me around to face Jason. "I should have walked away from here when I had my chance," I said. "I thought I was part of this Tribe."

Abruptly, Jason's face changed. "Jim," he said quietly, "you never asked."

"I thought it was obvious."

"But, you have to ask. That's the rule." Jason's eyes were incredibly blue and patient.

I didn't know what to say to that.

"Guests don't get responsibility, Jim. They're guests. Hosts get responsibility. Is that what you want? Is that what you're demanding? To be a host? Because if that's what you want, the answer is yes. We've all been waiting for you to ask for it."

He waited for my reply.

I took a breath, I looked at my feet, I looked at the gun, I shrugged my arms away from Frankenstein's hands. I looked at my anger. I was stupid. Jason was right. I hadn't followed orders. And I did want responsibility. And I did want to be treated with respect and love. Yes, I did want to be an equal partner.

I was just afraid to ask for it.

"Why?" Jason asked. "Why not?"

"Because . . ." I looked up at him again. "I was afraid you'd say no."

"Oh, you poor stupid fool. Who hurt you so badly that you walk around through life believing you're not entitled to be loved?" He stepped over to me and wrapped me up in his big friendly arms and held me as hard as he could. Jessie wrapped her arms around us then, and Frankenstein, and everybody else as well.

"Jim," he held my face in his hands. "Around here, the answer is always yes. We never turn anybody away. We love you. We love you for your courage and strength and for everything you did right today. We even love you for what you did wrong, because we know why you did it. You did it because you care. I know you understand what I'm saying, Jim. I can see the tears running down your cheeks."

"Jason." I managed to gulp it out.

"Yes, Jim?"

"May I join the Tribe?"

"Yes, Jim. I'd like that." And he kissed me. They all kissed me.

It was one of the happiest moments of my life.

?

A mathematician named Boris
had a wife with a wondrous clitoris.

He charged a small fee
for his colleagues to see
that it was made in the shape of a torus.

?

"Truth never tranquilizes. The defining property of truth is its ability to disturb."
-SOLOMON SHORT

I lost count of the days.

It didn't matter anymore. I no longer marked time by what day it was, but by how the room was set up. Every day, the chairs and the dais were arranged in a totally new pattern. We never saw the same arrangement twice.

One day, there might be a wide aisle down the center and the chairs all turned facing each other as if ready for a parade. The next day, all the chairs might be facing the blank wall toward the east. On the following day, there might be no dais at all and the chairs would be laid out in concentric circles around a wide arena. And the next day again, the arrangement would be different again.

At first, it had been confusing. I wasn't sure what the purpose was of rearranging the chairs every day; but after a while I had stopped being startled by the changes and begun being curious to see how many different variations they could run on the theme of chairs and a dais.

Today the room was set up with a high platform where the dais had been. It looked like a runway for a striptease show. The chairs were set up on both sides of the platform; they were divided into three sections on each side.

The platform looked a little too high and a little too uncomfortable. All that was missing was the gallows. I sat down in the middle section of chairs and tried to get comfortable. Two women came in together. One of them asked me to move over one seat so they could sit together. I did it without thinking. Something felt weird in the room, but I couldn't figure out what.

Foreman came in, exactly on time, as always. Today, he was wearing a white suit. He looked almost cheerful as he climbed the steps up to the platform and looked us over. His eyes were shining.

"Good morning," he said. "Today- all day, for as long as it takes-we are going to do a process called The Survival Process. The purpose of this process is for you to discover what survival really is-and what your investment in survival is." He grinned again. That was an ominous sign. I was beginning to recognize that Foreman's grins were always dangerous. "Survival," he said, "is not what you think.

"Let me say that again. Survival is not what you think. It is what you do. That's all you need to know about survival. Survival is what you do. But it's probably going to take some of you a while to get that, so that's why we do The Survival Process."

He circled along the edge of the platform, looking us over. "Now, I need two volunteers. No, put your hands down. We have to do this differently. If you are willing to do The Survival Process, please stand up."

He waited. There was a shuffling of shoes and chairs. A third of the trainees in the room had risen to their feet. It looked like a forest of brown jumpsuits.

Foreman shook his head unhappily. His voice became harder. "Every single one of you should have stood up." He lifted his hands and showed his palms as more people began to rise from their chairs. "No, no! Stop! Do not stand up because I told you that's what you should have done! That's being a robot! You are not robots! Or are you? Wait a minute; let's find out. All the robots, go to the back of the room and see the Course Manager! Go tell her that you're a robot and need to be lubed and oiled." He waited. Nobody moved.

"Good. No robots. At least none who know they are. I suspect that there are more than a few of you who don't know yet that you're robots. But, we'll handle that too before this course is over." His grin was terrifying.

He strode around the edge of the platform again. "So, listen up now! Listen to the instructions very carefully this time. I'm going to say it again. If you are willing to do The Survival Process, please stand up."

There was more shuffling of shoes and chairs. About thirty more people stood up. Foreman's expression was unreadable. He said, "I want you to notice what's going on inside your heads now. Some of you stood up to volunteer just now because you thought I was making it wrong to remain sitting. Some of you are sitting because you've learned that it's dangerous to volunteer. Some of you stood up in the first place because you think that makes you look good. Some of you stood up because you think volunteering is the right thing to do, or because you think this exercise might be fun, or because you wanted to be the one that everybody looks at. All of those thoughts-and all of the thoughts I haven't mentioned as well-those are the votes that your survival mode is trying to cast on this process. Don't worry. Before we're through today, we're going to do major damage to your survival mode. We might even destroy it in some of you. You might have to reconstruct it in a whole new way. No, I won't explain that. Put your hand down." He stopped circling and looked out at us-at me? I couldn't be sure.

"Now, I want you to be clear: there are only two options here. Stand up or sit down. You can do either. What you do is an expression of your willingness to do The Survival Process. That's all we want to see right now. Whether you're willing or not.

"Now we haven't told you yet what the process is, or what may or may not happen here. That's part of the exercise, that it's unknown. All I will tell you about it is that it will take us all day and I need two volunteers. Now, I will repeat the instruction. If you are willing to do The Survival Process, then stand up. If you are not willing, then sit down."

Several people who were standing, sat down. Several more people stood up. I thought about it. I was beginning to get a sense of what Foreman meant. I stood up.

Foreman waited while we sorted ourselves out. "Anyone else want to change their mind?"

One more person sat down. Two more stood up.

"Some of you are trying to figure this out now. You're trying to outthink me. You're trying to look good. Notice that you're doing that. Notice that whatever you're doing, whether you're standing or sitting, you're doing it because you think that's the thing to do to survive this exercise. Notice that your survival mode is in full control of your mind, right this minute.

"Listen to me!" Foreman bellowed suddenly. "You are in The Survival Process whether you are willing to be here or not! We are going to do The Survival Process today. You don't get a vote about that. What you're expressing here is not if you will do it. You will do it. There's no question about that. What you are expressing is how you feel about doing it. Are you willing to do it?"

Several more trainees jumped to their feet. And just as many sank back down into their chairs. Foreman noticed, but didn't stop talking. "That's why I said that every single one of you here in this room should be standing up now. If you're not willing to be here, then what the hell are you doing here?"

He looked at us as if he were reading our minds. He peered down at us like an inquisitor. There was an uncomfortable silence in the room. Was he daring us to speak? What did he want us to do?

Another trainee stood up then, cautiously. Foreman whirled to face her. "No! Don't stand up now. It's too late. Now you're doing it because you know what the right answer is. That's being a robot again.

Listen, I don't do this course for robots!

"I asked you if you were willing. I didn't say it was wrong to be unwilling. If you're unwilling, then that's what you are: unwilling. The point is, if you are unwilling, then why are you here? You need to look and see what you've got going on about why you're here and why you're doing this course. Are you doing this course to look good? Because it's the right thing to do? Because it will make you somehow superior to the people around you, or give you an advantage? That's your survival mode talking. Those are the wrong reasons to be here, because this course has nothing to do with survival. It's about something beyond mere survival. No, I'm not going to explain that yet; because most of you are still tied up in survival mode and until we bust your investment in survival, we can't talk about anything but survival."

Foreman stepped down from the platform then and began to walk among us. He lowered his voice and spoke to us like a friend.

"The fact of the matter is that all of you are willing to do The Survival Process. You indicated that by walking into the room this morning. You made that commitment when you said you would stay with this course until it was completed.

"The point of this little demonstration was to give you some sense of how you, as a group, are approaching this course. I wanted you to see how you express your willingness. You see, some of you still aren't here; your bodies are here, but in your heads, you've still got one foot out the door-and we cannot go on until that's handled.

"It's very clear that some of you have figured out how to survive this course. You're going to sit in your seats and not call attention to yourselves. You're going to endure whatever you have to until it's over, and that's how you'll survive. That's what you're up to-survival. That's the highest expression of your humanity. Survival. And that's all that can be expected of you. Each and every one of you expresses it in a different way, but right now, this minute, the only thing we can count on you to do is whatever is necessary to guarantee your survival or the survival of those things you have a significant investment of identity in.

"Let me explain that. Some of you might sacrifice your lives for the survival of your wives or husbands or children; but that's still survival. It's the survival of your family. Some of you might sacrifice yourself for your country or your flag. That's survival of the country, or the flag. I'm not making any judgments here. It's neither right nor wrong; it's only survival. Some of you in this room might even sacrifice yourselves for the survival of the species. And that's still survival. It's all survival. It's only survival. You will fight for the survival of anything that you have invested your identity in.

"Let me show you something. Everybody sit down." He waited until we had resumed our seats. "I say that you have a significant investment in survival. I'm not making a judgment about this. It's not right or wrong. It's just an observation. I say that you have a significant investment in survival. Now, if that's true for you, stand up. If you've got a lot of attention on surviving this course, stand up."

At least three hundred of us stood up. Maybe more. A few of us exchanged embarrassed smiles. There was even a little nervous laughter in the room.

"Good," laughed Foreman. He looked around the room. "These are the courageous cowards: They know how bad it's going to be, so they'll jump in to get the worst of it over with quickly." He looked out over the group. "Anyone want to join the courageous cowards? Where are the hiders? Those of you who know you belong in this category, but you don't want to stand up yet?"

About two dozen people stood up to join us.

"You want to notice here that the hiders hide because they think that's the way to survive. They think that when the shit hits the fan, they can hide and it'll miss them. Too bad. In this course, the hiders always get the worst of it. You have all been warned." There was friendly laughter in the room. The mood was getting lighter now.

"All right. Now, those of you who are lying about it-you know you should be standing, but you're not-you stand up. Good. "

A few more people stood up. They looked embarrassed. More good-natured giggling.

"You want to notice that these are the people who think they have to lie to survive. Ladies especially take note. These men are very poor marriage risks. You men, you want to watch out for these ladies. No, don't sit down. I'm not through.

"Anyone who isn't sure, stand up. I promise you, you're worrying about your survival too. Your way to deal with the issue is to worry about it. It lets you look responsible without having to take a stand. Go ahead, stand up."

There were only a dozen people left sitting.

"Now, I want you all to notice the ones who are still sitting," Foreman said. "They're the ones who claim they don't have any energy invested in surviving. That's called a position. They have a lot of survival invested in that position. These are the holdouts. They don't participate. That's their way of participating. That's their way of surviving.

"So, let me tell you what you think survival is, so you can recognize it. You think survival is being right. You think survival is looking good. You think survival is doing the right thing. Everybody sit down."

Foreman waved us back down into our seats. "Listen, this is the point of The Survival Process. You will do whatever you think you have to do-whatever that is-to survive. Let me say that again. You will do whatever you think you have to do to survive. In fact, that's all you can do. You can't do anything that

isn't a function of survival.

"So, let's discuss that for a bit; I can see that some of you don't agree with that. Good. That's fine. I'm not going to ask you to agree with it or disagree with it. We're just going to look at it and see if it's true. If it's true, it doesn't matter whether we agree with it or not, does it?" Again the grin. I wanted to check and see if there was a trap door under my chair. Or an exploding whoopee cushion.

"All right . . . we'll start with biology. Any biologists in the room?"

I raised my hand. So did several others.

"Good. You should already know this. Let me work with someone who doesn't. Any nonbiologists here?"

More hands. He pointed at a Latino man. "You. Delgado. What is the most important thing a living creature must do?" "Reproduce?"

"That's part of it, but that's not all of it. What's the most important thing a living creature must do?" "Eat?"

"You're guessing. Stop trying to figure it out. Someone else? What's the most important thing a living creature must do?" He pointed at a young woman.

She stood up. "Survive."

"Right. See, sometimes the answers are easy. If a creature doesn't survive, it can't do anything else, can it? Without survival, there isn't anything. You all know that; if not consciously, you certainly know it viscerally. You definitely know it on a cellular level. Every single cell of your body has only one single purpose-to survive. It is the fundamental law of biology."

Of course. I knew that. Tell me something I don't know. I folded my arms and leaned back in my chair. Foreman stepped up the aisle to come face to face with the young woman. Her name was Ozalie. Her hair was a crown of shiny black curls that fell in ringlets about her face. She looked like a little girl.

"Okay, now it gets hard. What's the purpose of life?"

"U h."

"I said the purpose, not the meaning."

"The purpose of life . . . is to survive, isn't it?"

"Is it?" He looked at her as if daring her, as if it were a secret that he knew and wasn't going to share.

Ozalie shook her head. "I don't know."

"Right. Only God knows." Foreman winked at her. "You're making this too easy, you know." Ozalie looked pleased with herself.

Foreman looked around to the rest of us. "God chooses what the purpose of life is. That's God's job. And we're not going to be so presumptuous as to preempt that responsibility, not until we're willing to assume the responsibilities of gods. If we were gods, however, then we could choose for ourselves what the purpose of life should be. For myself, I'd choose that the purpose of life should be to make a difference on the planet. Some of you might choose to have a good time; play hard, die young, and leave a good-looking corpse. But then, that's not the kind of choice a god might make, is it?"

"Okay, never mind that for now. We're not gods yet, and that particular discussion is beyond your ability to comprehend. Let's keep this on the level that even the average chimpanzee will be able to understand.

All right, Ozalie, you don't know what God's purpose is for your life, do you? Do you know what your purpose is? Wait . . ." Foreman abruptly headed toward the back of the room for something. ". . . before you answer, let me read the definition of purpose from the dictionary." He snatched one up off the table at the back of the room. "An intended or desired result. An aim or goal." He handed the dictionary back to an assistant and returned to Ozalie. "Think hard. I promise you that your life depends on this. What is your purpose for yourself?"

Ozalie stopped looking so pleased with herself and looked uncertain instead. She shook her head and admitted, "I thought it was . . . I guess it's . . ." She looked very unhappy with herself and when she spoke again, her voice was almost a squeak. "I guess, I'm committed to survival, aren't I?" she admitted. "That's my only purpose, isn't it?"

Foreman nodded thoughtfully: "Terrifying realization, isn't it?" he acknowledged. He turned to the rest of us. "Ozalie gets the irony: Do the rest of you? Survival is the wrong goal. You are destined to lose. If not

today, then tomorrow. If not tomorrow, then the day after. If not the day after, then someday, I promise you, you will die. Count on it. Your life is a finite experience. But you-even though you've known that unconfontable fact all your life--continue to pretend that you can win the battle of survival. You can't: All that you can do is postpone your defeat. And that's what you call victory."

Foreman looked angry. "Do you get how stupid that is? Postponing a defeat is not a victory. It is still a defeat! You're just stretching out the whole tragic exercise. And you call that a life? Yes, some of you are beginning to realize the cost of a lifetime

= dedicated to survival. There's no life at all in that kind of a life." For some reason, Ozalie was in tears now. She stood beside Foreman, weeping quietly; the tears were running down her cheeks.

Foreman handed her a tissue and waved her back into her seat. He crossed to the opposite side of the room. "All right, I said I needed two volunteers. You've already selected yourselves. Everybody check the bottom of your chair. You will find an envelope taped to the bottom of it. Don't open it yet."

I felt around under my seat, expecting to find nothing-and for a moment, I did. Then my fingers brushed the edge of the envelope and I pulled it off and brought it out and looked at it.

The people around me were finding envelopes of their own. We glanced at each other's, but they all looked the same.

Foreman was looking around the room. "All right, here's how it works. Don't open your envelopes yet. I'll tell you when. All of the envelopes have cards in them. All but two of the envelopes contain blank white cards. The two remaining envelopes have red cards in them. The assistants do not know which envelopes contain the red cards. The envelopes were shuffled for fifteen minutes before they were taped under the chairs. Nobody knows, not even me, where the two red cards are. And you know that you selected your seats at random, the same way you have every day for the past six days.

"Now, everybody's going to go through this process, but two of you are going to go through it up here on the platform as a way to demonstrate it for everybody else. The two of you who have volunteered to demonstrate this process have volunteered by the simple act of sitting down in the chairs that have the envelopes with the red cards in them taped to the bottom. You may now open your envelopes."

I fumbled with my envelope and dropped it. While I was picking it up, a woman on the other side of the room gasped. She stood up, white-faced. She was holding a red card.

"Where's the other one?" demanded Foreman. "Who hasn't opened their envelope yet?"

The woman next to me nudged my shoulder. I looked down. I'd opened my envelope and taken out the card, but I hadn't looked at it yet.

It was bright red.

And on it, there were plain black letters that spelled out:

You are going to die.

I looked up to Foreman, confused. Hurt. Angry. This was a nasty trick.

I looked at the woman next to me, resentfully. This was her card. She had asked me to move over one seat. This wasn't fair. And even as I was thinking all of those thoughts, I was standing up slowly.

I held the card up for Foreman to see. "I have it," I said.

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The ladies all had to agree
that Murt's penis was too small to see.

A whore named Louise sniffed, "

Who will that please?"

Mort proudly submitted, "Just me!"

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The Fourth Corner

"A sane environment is one in which there is room to be crazy. A crazy environment is one in which there is no room to be sane."

--SOLOMON SHORT

And that's how I joined the Tribe. It was that easy.

The difference was simple. Instead of waiting until I was told to do something, now it was my job to invent my own responsibilities. If I saw something that needed doing, it was my job to see that it got done.

For example, about a week later I went to Jason and said, "I think we need weapon drills, Jason. I think everybody over the age of fourteen should know how to use a gun. I'm prepared to start teaching the classes twice a week."

Jason nodded and replied, "That's fine, Jim. We'll announce it at circle tonight." And then he thought a moment. "Let's make it an honor; you'll teach two at a time. That way we don't pull the rest of the camp off purpose. You choose who you want to honor, check it with me, and I'll announce it at circle. All right?"

"That's it?"

"You look surprised."

"I thought you might be a little concerned about teaching the children how to use guns."

"No," said Jason. "You've obviously thought it out, you think it's necessary-and for what it's worth, I agree with you. That business with the bikers proves you right."

And that was that.

I fell into the routine without question. I worked naked in the gardens for an hour every morning. I enjoyed singing to the plants; I liked to see their long spiky black tendrils unfold to the sun each day. I helped prepare dinner three days a week, and I herded bunnydogs the other four.

Hoolihan had given birth to several hundred libbit-babies. We culled out the fattest and pinkest and put those in cages to grow, at least twenty or thirty. The rest we ate.

Every other week, we went out scouting. I didn't go every time, but I went along often enough to not feel left out when I wasn't invited to join. Jason thought we might be able to move the camp within a month; he had an idea we might be safer higher up in the mountains, and everybody agreed with him.

In the evenings, we circled and danced. And we slept with each other. Loolie and Jessie and Marcie; and Jason and Danny and Billy. Frankenstein was the most tender lover I'd ever known. Loolie was the most playful of them all. I'd been wrong about her age; she was almost eleven, but so small she still looked like a baby. Sex to her was not a serious business, but a silly one, and not about penetration as much as it was about being naked and tickling.

I should have been happy. And I was. But, at the same time, I felt troubled. It bothered me.

Because I thought that I shouldn't be feeling so troubled. I should have been as joyous as everybody else, shouldn't I?

This was a place of happiness and love. Even the Chtorrans were more affectionate to me now. Once, when we were all in circle, Orrie came up behind me and gave me a friendly bump and a purr.

Everybody laughed. Including me. I liked Orrie. He was a person.

Finally, there was nothing for me to do but tell Jason of my conflicts. He only said, "You're asking me for help, Jim. I don't help people. It takes away their opportunities to be responsible for themselves. This is one you have to create yourself. Let me know what you want to do." Then he sent me back to my chores.

I knew I was marking time. I was waiting for something to happen, something that would answer the question for me; and I knew that was dangerous. Jason had this to say about waiting: "There are two

basic conditions in the world of the unconscious. One is waiting for Santa Claus. We're all like that when we're kids. One day we figure out that Santa Claus isn't coming, that's when we slip into the second condition: waiting for rigor mortis. Around here, we've given up waiting. We don't wait. We create. We can't afford to wait, can we?"

No, we can't.

I understood exactly. I realized that I was not the same person anymore. I was experiencing the truth of what Jason said. It wasn't that hard to create myself as an extraordinary being, not when I was surrounded by other extraordinary beings, all of whom were also committed to functioning at that level. If I forgot, there was always someone there to remind me. If they forgot, then I was there to remind them. We supported each other in staying extraordinary. We were all flushed with enthusiasm for our lives. It was an exciting and exhilarating time.

And then, one afternoon, a wave of excitement swept across the camp. "It's happened!" One of the little girls came running across the main field. "It's happened! The new god is born. We have a fourth corner!" All over the camp, people looked up from their work. A woman crawled out from under a car, grease on her face. Two more, hanging laundry on the line, put down their baskets. Two men with rifles came running down the hill. Those of us who were working in the garden put down our hoes. Jessie, nursing her baby, came out of the women's enclosure. Marcie came out of Jason's office, a surprised look on her face. It was the first time I'd seen her smile. Already, people were moving in the direction of the nursery, a small tent that had been set up near the pool. I saw two children riding on Falstaff's back as he flowed eagerly down.

As we approached, Orrie reared up as if in challenge, but instead of issuing the shrill cry of warning, he made the most amazing whooping sound I'd ever heard a Chtorran make.

Almost everybody in the Tribe was gathering around in eager anticipation. I was acutely aware of the enthusiasm, and my own curiosity as well. There was so much about the Chtorran biology that I wanted to know. I wanted to see what a Chtorran egg looked like-or were they born live? Jason had never said. Abruptly, the tent flap opened and Jason stepped out, carrying a tiny pink bundle. The pink bundle had two big black eyes that swiveled and stared at the world with incredulity. What kind of a place was this? it looked like it was asking.

There was awestruck silence from the crowd. Nobody dared make a sound louder than breath.

Jason had a big silly grin on his face. He was ecstatic. He held the baby out for all to see. He raised it high. The little creature was maybe half a meter long. It couldn't have weighed more than ten kilos, probably less. Its little arms reached out and grabbed Jason's big hands for security. "Awwww," said the crowd.

Jason lowered the baby back into his arms. He stroked it reassuringly and made cooing noises. He moved toward Orrie and held the baby worm out for Orrie to see. Orrie goggle-eyed the tiny creature. The baby Chtorran goggle-eyed him right back. Orrie reached out with his long arms and gently touched the tiny pink worm. The baby claws reached up and touched Orrie's bigger hand. They wrapped around his bony black wrist and pulled it down in front of the tiny eyes. The baby made a whimpery sound and reached toward Orrie. Orrie repeated his whooping cry from before, only now it was a lullabye. Jason allowed the tiny Chton-an to flow into Orrie's arms. Orrie took the baby and held it up before his eyes. He burped and chirped at it. He held the creature up high and looked at it, as if he were holding it up to the light and looking for the secret message, as if he were deciding, whether to kill it or keep it. He chose.

He raised the baby high, then brought him down onto his back, nestling him in the hollow between his eyestalks and his brainbulge. The baby grabbed huge handfuls of Orrie's skin and settled in with a loud happy purr.

Everybody cheered. We had a fourth corner. We were a family. Jason raised his hands high. "Everybody come to circle tonight. We shall revel and revelate!"

Jason turned to Jessie and gave her some quiet instructions, then turned back to Orrie. Orrie lifted the baby off his back and handed it back to Jason. Jason stepped inside the tent, and Orrie raised up and whooped for us all. We all cheered and hollered with him.

Jessie handed her baby to one of the girls and started breaking up the crowd then. When she came to me, she said, "Jim, I want you to go down to the cookhouse and bring up five pounds of fresh burger. Tell Judy to round up all the loose dogs if she has to. And do it double quick. Chop chop."

I ran.

Judy complained when I told her what we needed, until I told her that it was for the new god. Then she shut up. She turned to her refrigerator and handed me a large wrapped package. "Here's three and a half. I'll bring up the rest myself in a little bit."

When I got back to the tent, there was no one there. I halloood and Jason's voice called softly, "Come on in, Jim. You'll find this interesting."

I entered the tent cautiously.

Inside, there was a wooden floor and a plastic tarpaulin. The new baby was on the floor and Jason was wiping it down with a towel. "Being born is hard work," he was saying to it. "Isn't it?" He didn't even glance up at me. "Put the burger behind me where I can reach it, Jim. Unwrap it."

I fumbled with the package, opened it and laid it down behind him. I didn't know if he would want anything else, so I waited. Off to one side, I noticed the pieces of a large brownish shell. So, Chtorrans came from eggs after all. That was nice to know.

Jason reached back behind him and broke off a chunk of the ground meat. He rolled it into a meatball and put it on the floor just in front of the baby. The baby's eyes widened with interest. It moved forward slowly, its tiny antennae waving in the air. It came right up to the meatball and cocked its eyes down and stared at it, not knowing what it was or what it was supposed to do with it. It lowered its antennae almost until they touched the meat. It swiveled its eyes to look at Jason, then at me, then at the meatball again.

"Chrrp?"

"Go ahead, baby," encouraged Jason.

The baby tapped the meat with its antennae again.

"This is a crucial moment, Jim. If he can't recognize Terran food, he'll starve to death. We lost our first two babies because they didn't know to eat."

"Could you help him? Couldn't you put it in his mouth?"

Jason shook his head. "He has to do it himself."

The baby looked up confused. I felt my heart sink. This baby meant so much to everybody. It wasn't going to eat.

The baby turned back and stared at the meat for a long, long moment. "Chrrrrppppp," it said.

Please, I prayed. Eat.

The baby opened its mouth and slowly engulfed the meatball. It chewed softly, almost ruminatively-Jason and I held our breaths-then it looked up at both of us and said, "Brup?" Jason and I exchanged triumphant looks! The baby was going to make it.

Excitedly, Jason broke off another chunk of meat and rolled it into a bigger ball. The baby watched with interest as he put it down on the floor.

This time, the baby didn't hesitate as long. It tapped the meatball twice with its antennae, just to check; then pounced on the gobbet and ate it quickly. "Brrrpity?"

Jason split the rest of the meat into three lumps and put them out on the floor. The baby moved from one to the next and ate each of them with enthusiasm.

"He's going to make it," Jason said proudly. "We really are a family now. There's a lot of work to do, but we're on our way now, Jim." He looked to me. "Thank you. You've made an incredible difference, just being here. This is an historic moment, you know. You'll be sharing this with people for years." He wiped his hands on a towel, then began wiping down the baby again.

The baby grabbed one of Jason's fingers and tapped it curiously with its antennae. "Frrp?" it asked. It pulled Jason's hand toward its mouth.

Jason freed his finger gently. "No," he said. "No. Not frrp, or anything else." He said to me. "You'd better go now, Jim. There'll be a lot to do to get ready for tonight. And I need to stay here until then."

I went back to the camp feeling curiously jubilant. I made a difference. Jason said so.

?

There was a young fellow named Fisk
whose comings and goings were brisk.

He hid things that were stolen
inside his colon,

and said, "Hey! It's my own*."

*asterisk.

?

"A man of God should be identifiable as a man of God in spite of his religion, not because of it."

-SOLOMON SHORT

A circle of torches obliterated the night. Orange flames sent gray smoke sputtering into the air high above our heads. The breeze pulled the flames sideways. There was no moon. There was no world. Beyond the circle, nothing existed.

We gathered outside the circle and waited.

Jason moved among us, greeting each one of us with a hug and a kiss. He spoke quietly to each person. When he came to me, he looked into my eyes and said, "Thank you, Jim. I'm glad you're here with us tonight. We love you." And then he added, "I love you."

I lowered my eyes, I couldn't meet his gaze-he was too beautiful to look at-but he tilted my chin upward and forced me to look at him. "Let it in, Jim. You are loved. You make a difference." He stared into my face until tears of joy and gratitude welled up in my eyes. I hugged him and kissed him and thanked him for letting me participate.

Jason stood before us then. He still hadn't stepped into the circle. He said, "For those of you who have not been to a Revelation before, I welcome you. For those of you who have, I welcome you back.

"All that you need to know tonight is that every Revelation is a different experience. If you have never celebrated the Revelation before, there is no wrong way to celebrate. If you have, then you also know that there is no right way to celebrate.

"The form of every Revelation is different-except when it's not. But regardless whether the form seems the same or different, comparison is a trap. Every Revelation is a different experience, no matter how many times you have celebrated. Tonight will be the same, and it will be different.

"What you see before you is a circle of light. We are going to create this as a sacred circle. What will make it sacred? Our agreement that it is so. If you are not willing to hold this circle as sacred, then do not enter it. If you are not willing to celebrate the Revelation then do not enter here. If you are not willing to commit yourself to the truth, then do not enter here. If you are not willing to experience yourself as the source, then do not enter here.

"If you are not willing to give up your expectations, then do not enter here.

"Tonight may be joyous. It may not. It may equally be despairing. Tonight may be intense. And it may not. Whatever expectations you have, leave them behind. What happens here will not meet your expectations.

"The space is fragile. And it is powerful. We, each and every one of us, must take responsibility for the creation of the space. We must leave behind our worldly concerns. We must leave behind all things that are not extraordinary. That includes the world of thoughts and concepts. We must leave those behind. Experience is not found in thought or concept. Joyousness is not found in explanation. We must leave that behind."

He raised his hands high. I became aware that Orrie and Falstaff and Orson were sitting quietly beyond the fringes of the crowd. "I will ask the new gods to protect the space tonight. I will be responsible for the space inside the circle. I ask the new gods to be responsible for the space outside. Let no one violate the sanctity of our Revelation."

Orrie chirruped a low rumble. The other worms agreed with him.

Jason lowered his hands. His tone was immediately conversational. "I say this to you in the clear. No matter what happens tonight in the circle, do not leave it. Once the celebration begins, no one will enter the circle and no one will leave it. The circle is sacred. It must not be broken. The new gods do not protect us-they protect the circle. The new gods will kill anyone who crosses the circle of light. That is their agreement. It will be your 'crosses Do not break the agreement.

"If you damage the integrity of the space, you will destroy it. This space is too fragile-and it is too

powerful. If you damage a space of this much power, the consequences could be dreadful. The physical universe will strike back. The physical universe always attacks where integrity is weakest. Understand this. You must not enter here unless you are willing to operate in a space of total, unconditional, absolute integrity. Look for yourself now and see if you are willing.

"When you step into this circle, let yourself step into a space of pure joyousness and absolute truth. When you step into this circle, you step beyond the universe, so that you may look back and observe. That is the declaration we make tonight.

"This circle is sacred because we say it is. So, before you can enter here, you must leave behind the ordinary. You must commit to the extraordinary. You must be willing to live tonight as if this will be your last night on the planet. It is possible for some of you that it will be your last night. People have died celebrating the Revelation.

"That willingness to live on the edge of death-that is the extraordinary level.

"If you are not willing to die, then do not enter here.

"It is neither right nor wrong to participate. It is a gift and an opportunity. If you are not willing to be responsible for yourself and your participation, then do not enter here.

"If it is not appropriate for you to be here, then do not be here. Now is the moment to stand aside." He waited. We waited. We looked around.

"There is no shame in walking away," Jason said. "Look and see inside yourself if it is appropriate for you to celebrate tonight." I wondered if I should stay.

One of the older men abruptly turned and walked away from the gathering. A moment later, a sad-looking lady followed him. They stopped a few paces and looked back.

Jason acknowledged the two with a nod, then he looked us over and said, "I know that there are those among you who are wondering now if you should leave too. I do not ask you to be certain. I only ask you to be willing. So if you are willing to be here, stay and participate." That was what I needed to hear.

Jason continued, "But be clear: once you are in the circle, you are in the circle until the Revelation is complete. You cannot quit in the middle of a Revelation."

I was scared, but I was willing. I would stay.

Three more people separated themselves from the crowd and pined the two who stood apart. The crowd separated so they could see Jason and he could see them. He said, "Thank you for your honesty. I respect it and I love you for your courage. It takes a lot of courage to acknowledge that you are not willing to celebrate. You may celebrate with us at any time in the future. Now, please go to your beds and stay there until morning. For your own safety, do not leave your rooms tonight."

They smiled regretfully and turned and walked off together. The crowd closed the gap and faced Jason again.

His voice carried across the gathering.

Jason said, "How many of you are frightened?" I raised my hand with the others.

"Thank you. How many of you are angry?" Others raised their hands.

"Thank you. How many of you are eager?" He glanced around, taking it all in. He was beautiful. "Thank you. All you need to know," he said, "is that it's all part of the process. The process can't be complete without you going through your part of it. So whatever you're experiencing now is what you're supposed to be experiencing."

He stepped to the edge of the circle. This was it.

"This circle is sacred. I am willing to experience myself as source. I declare that I am ready to enter. Is there anyone here who objects?"

No one objected. "Thank you."

He stepped out of his shoes. He unbuttoned his shirt and discarded it. "You must leave behind your identity," he said. "For the truth is, you are not what you think. You are not your name. You are not your clothes. You are not your thoughts. You are not your body. You are the experience of these things. But you are not these things. So you must leave these things behind if you are to experience anything beyond them."

He stepped out of his shorts. He had a beautiful body. The orange flames of the torches sent flickering

reflections up and down his skin. He seemed to glow in the smoky light. He was tall and trim and his muscles moved like silk. He stepped into the circle and stood just inside the ring of torches like a guardian. The firelight had a peculiar effect on Jason; it made him look almost as pink as Orrie. He even looked a little furry, as if he were covered with a fine pink down.

Jason grinned infectiously. I fell in love with him. Again. "Come on in," he called. "The enlightenment is fine." The tension broke. We laughed.

"All right," he called. "Who wants to enter?"

Jessie stepped forward. "I do."

Jason faced her. He spoke quietly with her. "Are you complete with the physical universe?"

Jessie thought about that for a moment. She said, "No, I am not."

Jason asked, "In what areas are you not?"

"I was unable to procure enough food supplies for the new gods for the rest of the week."

Jason nodded knowingly. "Are you willing to have this be complete? No matter what it takes?"

Jessie nodded.

"Good. Is there anyplace else in your life where you are incomplete?"

She shook her head. "Then you may enter."

Jessie stepped out of her clothes and into the circle. He hugged her and kissed her.

Frankenstein's monster stepped forward then. He loomed above Jason.

Jason quizzed him the same way he quizzed Jessie. "Are you complete?" he asked. Each of the revelators had to be clear. Jason asked about relationships or tasks or experiences. The person would answer yes or no. If yes, Jason would bid them enter. If no, Jason would tell them that they could not enter the spiritual world while they were still attached to the physical world. The incomplete things would pull them out. "The way to complete an incomplete thing is to acknowledge its incompleteness and have it be all right just the way it is. Are you willing to have it complete itself tonight? No matter what? Are you willing to surrender to the process of your own life?"

I began to understand. Really understand.

I am not my circumstances. I can step out of my circumstances. Let them take care of themselves. They will anyway, no matter what I do. If I am detached from them, they cannot control me. And I cannot be the author until I am detached.

I am the source of my own life. I stepped forward.

Jason asked me, "And you, Jim-are you incomplete?" He looked deeply into my eyes and I felt as if I were being questioned by my lover.

I said, "I have things that bother me. And I am willing to leave them behind."

"However they work out?"

"However they work out."

"Step out of your clothes, Jim. Leave them behind."

I did so. Jason hugged me and kissed me and welcomed me into the circle.

When the last person was accepted into the circle we all sat. We purred for a bit, tuning ourselves to Orrie's sound, and then when we were all at such peace that death could have come quietly to any one of us without fear, Jason said quietly, "Loolie," and Loolie stepped into the circle carrying a small wooden tray. On the tray were two small mounds of pink and blue sprouts. She walked slowly around the circle, offering the tray to each person.

Each person took one pink sprout and one blue one. We held them, one in each hand, and waited.

Loolie completed her circle and offered the tray to Jason. He took a sprout of pink and a sprout of blue as well.

He held his hands up high, so all of us could see. He twisted the two sprouts together so that their skins broke and their juices mingled.

Then he ate them. And we did likewise.

The flames reached up. The night turned purple and blue and white.

The gods sang to us.

And we were revealed to the truth.

?

A stunning young lady named Joan
thought a penis was made with a bone.

She just didn't know

'twas her sexual glow

that turned parts of men into stone.

?

? 22

? "You are going to die"

"No one is afraid to die without first being afraid to live."

-SOLOMON SHORT

I stood on the platform next to Foreman. I was still holding the red card in my hand. The woman with the other card was named Marisov. She looked Russian; maybe she was. Not everybody in the class was American.

Marisov stood on the other side of Foreman; she was trembling. She looked like she was in her mid-forties and a career officer. Her hair was clipped very short and she wore a single tiny gold skull earring. United Nations Marine Corps? Maybe-but the trembling was out of character.

Of course, then again, the marines only had to deal with rebels, terrorists, insurrectionists and occasional bands of mercenaries. This was not them. This was Daniel Jeffrey Foreman, one of the source-workers of The Mode Training.

Given a roomful of United Nations Marines and one Reverend Foreman, I'd bet on Foreman. He'd have them surrounded in no time.

Three assistants came up on the stage carrying folding canvas chairs. They set up one behind me, one behind Foreman and one behind Marisov. They looked like the kind of chairs movie directors sit in. They were tall and surprisingly comfortable.

The assistants took the red card from my hands; Foreman told us to sit down. We sat.

Foreman sat down in his chair and nodded to one of the assistants at the back of the room. On the screen behind us appeared a copy of a document. The seal of the president of the United States was on the document.

Foreman began. He put on his glasses and began to read quietly from the manual in front of him, "The first part of The Survival Process is this. We are going to review the charter of this training and the circumstances under which it is conducted. We do this in order to establish the legality of the circumstances you are in. We do this now, because later on some of you are going to raise this issue. You will raise the issue in an attempt to negotiate a loophole for yourselves. There are no loopholes. We will handle the issue of legality now. Nonetheless, I am certain that the issue will be raised. When it is, I will refer you to the document that has just been flashed on the screen behind us. If necessary, we will put it back on the screen behind us and review it again."

Foreman looked up, he looked out over the room, he peered over his glasses. "We have seen this document before. I don't mind showing it to you again. I will show it to you as often as you need to see it. This is the written permission of the president of the United States to take any actions I deem appropriate-up to and including the termination of any trainee in the room. Please notice the date on the document; it was signed the day that this training began. We have, on file, a separate document for every training. The president is aware of the circumstances of this particular procedure and has elected to authorize it only on a case by case basis. Are there any questions, so far?"

There were none.

"Good. So, then I may assume that everybody in the room is satisfied as to the legality of this procedure?" He waited.

A fat man in the back of the room raised his hand. Foreman pointed. The man stood up and said, "You're laying down a lot of preparation for something, but we don't know what it is; so how can we question any of this appropriately?"

"Good point. Obviously, you can't. However, this is not the first time we've done this process, and we do know what kinds of questions always come up. We are answering those questions first to minimize the amount of time we will have to spend on them later: Anything else?"

The man shook his head and sat down.

Foreman turned the page of the manual. He looked to the back of the room again. "All right, now we're

going to show you the entire procedure of putting the cards in the envelopes, shuffling them and taping them to the bottoms of the chairs. We always record it, we always show it; this is so that you can be absolutely certain there was no chicanery in the process of selecting the two volunteers. "

Impishly, Foreman looked at me and grinned. "Getting a little worried, aren't you, Jim?"

"Uh-yes," I admitted. I glanced over at Marisov. She looked like she was ready to faint. Foreman looked at her too and patted her hand. "Relax. I'm right here."

She muttered something in Russian, then translated, "That's why I'm nervous."

The room went dark and the video started then. Most of it was shown at triple speed, which produced a few chuckles from the audience. Everybody in the pictures moved in quick jerky steps.

First we saw the assistants holding up a deck of blank cards and a stack of empty envelopes. They all sat down within camera range and began quickly, jerkily stuffing the cards into the envelopes. When that task was completed, Foreman stepped into the camera angle and held up two red cards for everyone to see. He slid the cards into the last two envelopes and then slid the envelopes randomly into the middle of the stack.

The stack of envelopes was then put into a transparent rotating drum with a clock mounted next to it. The drum was set turning; the clock sped up and we watched fifteen minutes of furious churning pass by in ninety seconds.

Then the camera pulled back-this was all done in one take-to a very wide angle; the entire room was included. The drum was opened, the assistants each took a handful of envelopes and we watched as they taped them under the chairs at super-speed.

When they finished, the doors were opened and the screen showed us filing into the room. The video was slowed down to one-and-a-half-times normal speed for this. I saw myself enter the room and sit down, and I felt anger and fear and betrayal in my gut without knowing why.

Foreman touched my arm. "What's all that about, Jim?"

"What?"

"That look on your face."

I met his eyes. "You know what I've been through. I think that you or the universe or God or whoever's in charge is a goddamned practical joker with the morals of a malignant thug."

Foreman nodded. "You don't know the half of it." And then he turned away to Marisov, leaving me even more frustrated and angry and afraid than before.

The screens went dark and the lights came back up.

"This record was made to verify that the selection process was not influenced or controlled by any human agency. The entire running of this process will be recorded and a copy of the recording will be submitted to the office of the president for review. That is your guarantee that this process will be conducted as fairly as is humanly possible."

Foreman closed the manual. He stood up.

He looked at me. He looked at Marisov. He looked out over the room.

He nodded to the Course Manager.

She strode to the front of the room, carrying a small wooden box. She handed the box to Foreman.

He opened the box and showed what was in it to Marisov, then he showed me. There was a gun in the box. And two bullets. He held up the box for the roomful of trainees to see. The screens behind us showed a close-up of the gun.

Foreman took the gun out of the box and handed it to Marisov. "Marisov, will you please examine that weapon and verify that it is indeed a standard-issue device? Thank you."

She nodded.

Foreman took the gun from her and handed it to me. "Now, McCarthy, will you please examine the gun and verify that it is indeed a standard-issue weapon? Thank you."

It was a real gun. I handed it back to Foreman.

Foreman handed the two bullets to Marisov. "Will you please examine these bullets and verify that they are, in fact, two real bullets, identical in every way? Thank you."

He handed the bullets to me.

"McCarthy, will you please examine the bullets and verify that they are real bullets? Thank you."

They were real. I handed them back.

"Thank you. Now, pick one of them, either one." He held them out in the palm of his hand.

I pointed at a bullet. "Hand it to Marisov." I did so.

"Good."

Foreman handed the gun to Marisov. "Will you please load the gun?"

She did so. To give the lady her due, the first thing she did was check that the safety was on. Then she loaded the bullet into the chamber. Her hands were trembling, but Foreman waited patiently. When she finished, he took the gun from her carefully.

"Are you satisfied that this is a real gun with a real bullet?" She nodded. She looked pale.

Foreman turned to me. "McCarthy, are you satisfied?" I nodded.

"Good. Thank you both."

Foreman stepped to the edge of the stage. He clicked the safety off, then held the gun up for everybody to see. "This gun is loaded. You all watched the process in close-up on those two screens. Does anyone doubt that this gun is a lethal weapon?"

No one did.

"Just to verify . . ." Foreman turned abruptly, pointed the gun at the far wall and fired. The bullet thwacked into the wall, spattering a small shower of plaster.

"Anyone who would like to verify for himself that there is a bullet imbedded in that wall is free to go over and look. We'll wait. No talking. Just go and look, then return to your seats."

Quite a few people went to look. I wanted to go and look, but I knew what I would see.

For some reason, I wasn't wondering any more what we were building up to. Somehow, I knew.

When everyone was back in his or her seat, Foreman handed me the gun and the remaining bullet.

"Reload it, please."

Funny. My hands trembled too. I checked the safety six times and handed the gun back to Foreman.

"Thank you." The man was remarkably calm.

He put the gun on the small table behind him. Then he produced a gold American Eagle coin from his pocket. He held it up for everybody to see, turning it this way and that, so the camera could show both its head and its tail. He asked Marisov to examine the coin; he asked me to examine the coin.

"Call it," he said. "Heads," I said.

He caught the coin in his hand and slapped it down on the back of his wrist.

"Heads. You win, McCarthy."

I grinned weakly. I didn't like the sound of that.

"Here. You can keep the coin. Obviously, it's your lucky coin."

It felt heavy in my fingers. I started to pocket it.

"Wait-" said Foreman. He handed me a second Eagle. "You're going to need two. Hang onto them."

Two coins? I didn't get it, but I slid them both into the pocket of my jumpsuit.

"All right," said the Honorable Reverend Dr. Daniel Jeffrey Foreman. He stepped to the edge of the platform and addressed the entire room. "We have established the following: We have the legal authority of the president of the United States. We have selected our two volunteers by an entirely random procedure, first by cards under your chairs, and second by the toss of a coin. We have produced a gun and loaded it and demonstrated to the satisfaction of everyone in the room that this is a lethal weapon. We have recorded all of this in nondestructible memory, two copies. Neither copy is on the premises and neither copy can be altered. Both copies are available for review by appropriately authorized personnel, including the president of the United States of America."

Foreman stopped.

He looked at me. He looked at Marisov. He looked at the room. "Are there any questions?"

He waited.

From the back of the room, someone called, "Yes! What is the goddamn Survival Process anyway?"

Foreman looked at his watch. He looked at the assistants in the back of the room and grinned. "Right on schedule. Did I call it or did I call it? Who wins the pool?"

The Course Manager answered. "You do. Again."

Foreman looked satisfied with himself. He turned his attention back to the roomful of trainees.

"All right," he said. His voice was oddly calm. "The process is this. I am going to tell Colonel Marisov of the United Nations Marine Corps to shoot Captain McCarthy of the United States Special Forces Warrant Agency. This process will continue until Captain McCarthy is dead."

"Excuse me?" I said. "It sounded like you said . . ."

"I will repeat it." Again, he spoke in that very odd tone. I listened as hard as I could. I was certain I was missing something. "I am going to tell Colonel Marisov to shoot Captain McCarthy. If Colonel Marisov refuses, I will begin selecting people at random until we find someone who is willing to shoot Captain McCarthy. The Survival Process will continue until Captain McCarthy is dead."

I hadn't missed a thing.

There was an incredible drumming in my ears. I heard myself saying, "That's what I thought you said- "
And then I passed out.

?

A midwife named Flo from Arabia

often enjoys giving baby a

forty-volt shock

to the base of the cock.

(On a girl, she goes for the labia.)

?

"A baby is the human race's way of insisting that the universe give it another chance."

-SOLOMON SHORT

All of us were a little dazed after that.

For days afterward, we moved around the camp glassy-eyed and stunned. Sometimes we forgot to dress or eat. We didn't see Jason for three days.

So much happened in that circle.

All of the circles before had merely been practice., Like an orchestra. tuning itself, we had been rehearsing this part of the Revelation and that part of the Revelation, not knowing how all the parts would fit together until the moment when the whole was revealed.

I remember flashes and visions. I remember thoughts. But I remember most clearly a single experience; I remember realizing, "Oh, yes-this time, we're wearing naked ape bodies, and doing ape things."

I realized why Jason had allowed us to spend so much time experiencing ourselves as physical animals. Not because we were physical animals, but because we weren't. We were gods playing at being physical animals. That was the game, and he wanted us to play it one hundred percent. "If you cannot completely experience something," he said, "you will get stuck in it. We must complete our experience of our physical bodies so we can move beyond them." It didn't make sense to me at all, but I became an ape with Jason until I realized I had been an ape all along, pretending not to be.

And then I wasn't an ape any more. Then I was a god like Jason. And I was revealed.

I remember realizing that what we were doing here was something unprecedented on the planet. We were the first human beings to live as Chtorrans. We were taking the Chtorran experience and bringing it home. It was an incredible shock and I fell to my knees, crying with joy and terror.

Jason too went farther than he had ever been before.

He was shaken by the experience. He tried to share it with us, but it came out as babbles. He held up a hand and said, "We don't have the concepts yet." And then he buried his face in his hands and cried, "I don't have the concepts yet!" He began to sob. "I saw it, I saw it. I broke beyond my limits and saw. But the experience is so far beyond concept that to try to conceptualize it is to channel it and narrow it. It would be like calling a symphony a sound. . . ." He wept into his hands, and the rest of us wept with him. We didn't see Jason for three days after the Revelation. He was recuperating, Marcie said. He had taken such energies into his body that he had injured himself and needed to rebuild his strength.

The camp was not the same afterward. Everything looked different to me. I had never seen the world this way before. Everybody looked different to me. I could see things inside them that I had never known were there. I could see things inside myself.

By the glow on others' faces, I knew that they too were transformed by the Revelation.

I was told I would be assigned new chores. But for now, to make myself useful to Marcie, Jessie, and George-who I still thought of as Frankenstein's monster.

I was still walking around confused. I finally went to-of all people-Frankenstein, and after I told him how much I loved him, I told him how confused I was.

He told me that was normal. "It's part of the process. Cherish it. The greater your confusion, the farther you're moving from the level of ordinariness."

He spread his big hands wide to encompass the whole world. "Confusion is the doorway to the extraordinary level. You can only get there by being willing to not know anything. Confusion is the recognition that what you think you know is not what you really know. The more confused you are, the farther you're moving. Jason says that we're always on the threshold of the extraordinary, but as soon as we assimilate it then we've fallen back into the ordinary. So we have to keep pushing ourselves into the extraordinary, over and over."

He had picked up a large carton. He handed it to me to hold, while he gathered up puppies from the

floor and put them in the box. They were four weeks old and so fluffy they looked like little mops. They squeaked and yipped and tried to climb out of the box.

"So, this will wear off eventually?" I asked.

"Yes and no," he said. "You are transformed by the experience. You will always be transformed by it. Can you not have experienced something you've already experienced? Can you make it not have happened? Of course not." He put the last puppy in the box and took it from me. I followed him across the camp.

"Assimilation is normal," he said. "It's the mind figuring out and explaining and conceptualizing the experience. It's a necessary step. Because once you've assimilated an experience, you've completed it. Then you're ready to go on to the next. You're ready to push yourself into not-knowingness again. You're ready for the next breakthrough. Being at the extraordinary level is impossible. You can get there, but you can't stay there. All you can do is get there and get there and get there. Breakthrough after breakthrough after breakthrough."

I followed him down the slope toward the pool where Orrie was building his family. Orrie spent a lot of time with the two younger Chtorrans these days. There was a lot to teach them. Soon, the baby would join them too.

I said, "There's so much to learn. And I guess I'm too impatient. Thank you for being so understanding." Frankenstein rumbled with quiet laughter. "Jim, we're all still learning here. Even Jason. Especially Jason. But you've already got the one quality. you need-you're willing to open yourself up to find out the truth. It's been a real pleasure watching you grow. When you first came here, I thought I was going to have to kill you. You were all pinched up like a prune. You wore your hate on your face like a mask. Now, you're always smiling and joyous. I'm glad you're here with us. Have I told you today how much I love you?"

I felt the tears starting to well up again. "I . . . I'm always on the edge of tears," I admitted.

"That's good," Frankenstein said. "That's a sign of how close you live to the extraordinary level."

I recognized he was right. I said, "Can I share something with you?"

"Sure."

"Since my transformation-God; it feels strange to talk about it."

"Does it?"

"Yes. It's like saying it makes it real all over again. I can feel myself recreating the experience and I know I really am transformed. It's this surge of power and joy; it comes up almost automatically every time I remember that I'm transformed by the Revelation. I mean, I know so much more now than I ever knew before. What I want to share with you is that I don't feel human any more. Do you know what I mean? I mean, it's like this body is a tool that I use, but I know I'm not the body. It's just where I experience myself. But I'm more than it. I'm beyond it. I'm a god. I have this detachment from this body. I know that it's not me. I know, I must sound like I'm babbling . . ."

"You're making perfect sense."

". . . and I know that I need this body to play in this world; but I know this body can die and all that'll happen will be that I'll move on to the next place. I may not be me any more-not the me that I think I am. In fact, of course, I won't be-but that's all right. It's part of the job of being a god, isn't it?"

I stopped myself when I realized what I'd said. In a much softer tone, I added, "That's terrifying. I mean, for me to realize that I'm a god . . ."

Frankenstein rumbled good-naturedly. "Let me tell you what Jason says. Gods create. You create.

You're a god. You can't help it. You can even create yourself as being not a god. You do that by not creating-except then all you're doing is creating 'not-creating.' Got that?"

"Uh-huh."

"And all that 'not-creating' is, is not being responsible for what you are creating. You can't help it. You're always creating. You are a god whether you want to be one or not, so you might as well be a god and enjoy yourself."

I laughed with him.

We arrived at the pool then. Marcie was waiting for us. Orrie flowed up and out over the edge and

bobbled his eyes in greeting. "Brrdp, " he said.

Frankenstein handed the box to Marcie. "Give me a hand, Jim?" She handed the box of puppies to me, then climbed down into the pool. "Come on down. It's safe. They know about people now. "

I balanced the box on my shoulder and climbed down after her. We squatted down on the pool floor and the two young Chtorrans came squealing out to greet us. They were each over a meter long now and they were as cute as little grizzly bears. They bobbed their eyes with excitement. They examined Marcie's boots, my hands, and the box of puppies with equal interest-but the puppies fascinated them. They were fat little gobbets of waddling flesh. And they moved!

"Help me feed them," Marcie said.

"Sure," I said. "How come the puppies?"

"Oh, there was a screw up. Jessie was supposed to arrange a pickup of some beef, but it never happened. It's just as well. We're going to be moving on soon. Just as soon as we find a new place. " She took the first puppy out of the box and put it down on the gray concrete surface of the pool. "Go ahead, girl." The puppy's hind legs were splayed outward. It wobbled a few steps toward the nearest Chtorran and yipped at it.

"They're cute," she said. She glanced at me. "Are you going to help with the scouting?"

"I really don't know this part of California that well. I know that some of the artificial peninsulas are supposed to be very nice. My mom's at one of the new communities outside of Santa Cruz, I think. I haven't talked to her in over a year. But it's got it's own natural defenses, it's almost impossible to get onto. That's the kind of place we should look for. A place that's almost completely inaccessible."

The two Chtorrans turned to face the puppy. The nearest one reached out with one hand and poked at it tentatively. The puppy fell over on its back and wagged its tail. The Chtorran picked it up. Apparently it squeezed too hard with its claw, for the puppy squealed in pain. The Chtorran popped the puppy into its mouth. There was a startled yowp, muffled by the sound of chewing and then the Chtorran said, "Chtrrrr."

Marcie took a second puppy out of the box and handed it to the other Chtorran. It grabbed for it eagerly, like a piece of Christmas candy. The puppy disappeared just as quickly.

"Give them a moment to digest," said Marcie. "Their systems are still young. They can't handle too much at once." She reached over and skritchd one of the Chtorrans at the base of its eyestalks.

"You don't remember where we first met, do you?" I asked her.

"Sure I do. We found you north of here."

"No, before that. I remember you from Denver. Do you remember Denver at all?"

"I was unconscious then," she said. "I don't remember much of anything. "

"You were with a fat colonel . . ."

"Oh, yeah." She laughed. "Him. Colonel Buffoon. That's what everybody called him. He's dead, you know."

"Oh?"

"It was funny-I mean, the way we arrived here. It shows how powerful I am. I created a situation so inevitable that fifteen people died to get me here. I wasn't even supposed to be on the bus, but the colonel took me everywhere. I was for the entertainment of his guests. They used my body. I wasn't in it most of the time. I was just-there. You know? You know how it is before you really wake up to your own life. I don't remember where we were going, but we were on a bus. We took a wrong turn. The sign was changed or something. We ran into a roadblock. There were Chtorrans, three of them. There was some shooting; and then everybody was dead. No, not everybody. George and . . . and, um, the colonel-you know, I don't remember his real name any more-and myself . . . and I think there was a secretary. We weren't killed. Jason gave us the chance to live."

"So what happened to the colonel?"

"Oh, he tried to escape. And the secretary too. Both of them. They told George and me. They wanted us to come with them. George said no, it wasn't safe. They said they were going to try anyway, while they still had their minds left. Isn't that silly? Can you imagine anyone wanting to protect their mind?"

I laughed with her. We each pulled another puppy out of the box and gave them to the Chtorran cubs.

One of the Chtorrans ate his puppy immediately. The other examined it curiously. He was fascinated by the puppy.

"Don't play with your food!" Marcie slapped his flank, and he ate the puppy.

"Anyway," she said. "I told Jason what they were up to, and he said not to worry about it. They tried to escape and Orrie and Falstaff ate them. That's what happens when you break your word. So you knew me in Denver? That was when you were still in the army, right? Were you one of the men I fucked?"

I nodded. Then shook my head. "Well, not exactly. Do you remember your dog? Rangle?"

For just the barest instant, she looked uncomfortable. It was just a flicker of annoyance on her face. "Uh, yeah. I used to feed him scraps."

"Well, I was the one who told you he was dead. Remember that night outside the cafeteria? And you screamed at me, and cried on my shirt? And then we made love- "

"Had sex," she corrected. "That wasn't love."

"Sorry, you're right. I know that now. And then I had to leave, and you were pissed off at me."

"Oh, yeah! I remember. That was you? God, that's really funny! See how powerful you are? You did come back."

"I never thought of it that way. But, yes-you're right."

"God, I thought you were a jerk then."

"I thought you were crazy."

"I was; I still am. But at least this kind of crazy contributes. I can use my craziness to make a difference. We all can. That's what Jason says, and he's right."

"Do you want to know the rest of the joke?" I asked.

"What?"

"I lied to you that night."

"Oh."

"About Rangle. I told you he was hit by a car."

"I remember, I cried all night long after you left. I even thought about killing myself, but I didn't have enough pills. Do you know that dog was the only person in the world I could talk to then?"

"Yeah, you weren't too sociable. In fact, you were a nasty bitch."

"I still am," she grinned. She reached into the box. "There's only two left. One for you . . ." She put the first puppy down on the floor of the pool. "And one for you." She put the second puppy down in front of the second Chtorran.

She looked to me again with honest curiosity. "So what did happen to Rangle? Did somebody shoot him? I was always afraid that would happen to him. There was a lot of that going on at Denver. The big macho military boys were always going out to shoot stray dogs."

"No, it's even funnier than that. Remember the wild Chtorran they had there?"

"I heard about it. The one that got loose?"

"Uh-huh. They were scared silly of it. People would go over to the lab every night for the feeding sessions to give themselves nightmares. Jillanna took me the night before I met you. They were feeding it dogs. Rangle was one of them?"

"Really?" Marcie looked delighted at the joke. "That's funny. That was just what that dumb dog deserved." But when she looked up, there were tears welling up in her eyes. "I'm so stupid. Look at me: my machinery is still working. An ape feeds a dog to a worm and then cries about it." She wiped at her eyes. "I had a lot of identity invested in that dog. Stupid of me. Real stupid."

"No it isn't," I said. "It's part of the process. You have to complete that before you can move on to the next thing. You were way down there, Marcie. You were a zombie. You were underwater. You've got a lot of stuff left-we all do-it's just part of the job. It's all right to cry."

"I know. But I'm annoyed now-because I thought I'd finished all that stuff long ago. Boy, just when you thought it was safe to go back in your head . . ." She stood up, I stood up with her.

The two little Chtorrans looked at us curiously and squealed with dismay.

"I'm sorry," Marcie said. "That's all there is."

They didn't believe her. They wagged their eyes at us. They bounced and flounced. They humped and

pumped. They squeaked and squealed.

Marcie held her hands out for them to see. I did likewise. We turned the box on its side so they could see into it. One of them poked its face in and snorflled around for a moment. When it pulled out, the other examined the box with equal thoroughness. "Brrroooot," it said.

"You little monsters!" Marcie scolded. "How many puppies can you eat in a day anyway. Give me a break. How do you expect anyone to treat you like gods if you insist on acting like stomachs? You guys got a lot to learn."

They lowered their eyes in shame. But they weren't ashamed. It was part of the act. They began sniffing the floor of the pool, examining a few spurts of blood curiously.

Murcie and I left them to their explorations. We climbed out and started heading back toward the camp. "Are we going to get more food for them soon?"

"Oh, yes. That's being handled. We sent the truck to Sacrawcnto. But it'll be close. The big ones can go a week at a time without eating, but the babies need to eat every day. And Orrie-we need to force his growth, so he has to eat more often too. But they should be back tonight, so we'll be okay."

"Oh, so that's where Jessie is. Who's taking care of the baby?"

"Didn't you know?" Marcie looked at me surprised.

"Know what?"

"Well . . . at the Revelation, Jason asked her to be responsible for her commitment to the new gods. You know, she didn't get their food on time. We can always make do with the dogs-but that wasn't the point. We're responsible for Orrie's well-being, and the well-being of his family. That's the agreement. If we don't keep them fed, they have the right to feed on us. Jason asked Jessie to honor her commitment."

"You mean she gave herself to Orrie?"

"No. She gave her baby to Orrie."

I stopped where I stood and stared at Marcie. "She gave her baby to . . . ?"

"Jim!" Marcie said warningly. "Get out of your mind! That's your ape machinery reacting! You've got to give that up or it'll get in your way."

"Uh . . ." I flustered for words. "Puppies are one thing. I mean, they're supposed to be food. But . . ."

"Jim-don't you know what Jason's Revelation was? No, guess not. He hasn't shared it with everybody yet. This is it. We're supposed to be their food. Us-the apes. That's why we're here. We're supposed to feed the gods-with our bodies if necessary." She touched herself with her hands. "This thing-this is god food. We're supposed to breed lots of nice fat healthy meals for the gods. There's a lot more than that, but Jason hasn't shared it yet. He says we have to get that very basic level before we can move on to anything else."

I was too shocked to react. I said, "I thought we were supposed to be partners with the gods!"

"We are! Our partnership so far is on the physical level. We supply what their bodies need so they can build their families. To ask for more than that is not only presumptuous it's as silly as those puppies asking to be people. At best, it's cute. At worst, it's tragic. For us to really have a partnership, we have to give up our ape machinery and recognize that the job of being a god's partner is to be of absolute service to the god, delivering whatever is wanted and needed, absolutely and totally---even if it means being at detriment to oneself."

"I thought. . . . Now I'm really confused. I thought we were going to experience our own godhood."

"Of course we are-and we'll experience the Chtorran godhood, too. But remember, it always gets filtered through the ape machinery. What does it matter if a Chtorran eats a puppy? Nothing. So what does it matter if a Chtorran eats a baby ape? It means nothing. It only means something if you invest it with identity. Identity is a product of all that mind machinery. Give it up."

The tears were rolling down my cheeks. I hadn't realized I'd come so far. I could see exactly what she meant. And I hated her and I hated myself-because I hadn't come far enough yet to stop caring.

Marcie let me cry until I was finished. Then she took me by the hand and led me back up the slope.

That night she came to my bed and we made another baby. Another meal for the gods. If necessary.

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A limerick is best when it's lewd,

gross, titillating, and crude.
But this one is clean
unless you are seen
reading it aloud in the nude.
?

? 24

?

Second Thoughts

"Discretion is the better part of survival."

-SOLOMON SHORT

Jason looked weak. He asked me to walk with him. I realized I didn't want to.

I said to him, "You taught me to tell the truth, Jason. Always."

His eyes were as sharp as ever. "What's the matter, Jim?"

"There's something wrong somewhere. I've got a nugget of doubt. Part of me still isn't committed. It's still testing. And I don't want to test any more. I just want to do my job."

"You are doing your job, Jim. Truly." He put his arm around my shoulder. "Part of your job is to test. Do you know that? Your job is to test the truth. Always. That's how you know it's true."

I shook my head. "It sounds good, Jason. I mean, the funny thing is, it's all so logical. I mean, it's a perfect logical trap. You led my mind down a primrose path and it stepped in the bear trap. It's caught. I can't do anything any more without knowing that it's my mind doing what it has to do so it can survive."

"Yep," he agreed. "Annoying, isn't it? How do you think I felt when I came to my first Revelation?"

"I never thought about that."

"I was pissed as hell for a month."

"Oh. I'd have thought . . ." I felt foolish. "Thanks," I said.

"Now, let me ask you. There's something specific that you're concerned about? Right?"

"Jessie's baby. Why did you let her do it?"

"I didn't let her, Jim."

"Huh? Then you disapprove?"

"I didn't say that either. Listen carefully. It was her responsibility, Jim. She didn't ask for my permission. She didn't ask for my approval. I asked her to look at what was appropriate. After the Revelation, she came to me and told me what she thought was appropriate. She didn't ask me to do anything about it. She just told me."

"But you agreed with it?"

"Agreement is irrelevant."

"You could have stopped her."

"And that would have diminished her, Jim. She'd had her own Revelation too-just as you did-about her relationship with the new gods."

"I guess . . . I guess I'm looking for some sign of humanity."

"You're looking for what you think humanity is, Jim. But remember, all you have as a definition of humanity is the old mode of being human. What we're up to here is creating a new mode of humanity. And what Jessie did may very well be a part of it."

"It hurts," I admitted.

"I know," he said.

"Doesn't it hurt you too?"

"Yes. I have feelings of pain and sorrow, very strong ones. I'm the baby's father."

I stared at him. He nodded. He touched my shoulder and we kept walking. I didn't know what to say.

Jason said, "Just remember, Jim. You're not your feelings. Your feelings are never valid justifications for your actions. If you get angry, does that justify your being violent? No. It only explains it or rationalizes it. But it doesn't let you off the hook. You are still responsible. I'm responsible for Jason over here. Jessie will be responsible for Jessie over there."

I said, "I guess there's still too much I don't understand. It feels wrong to me."

"I know. And it will probably continue to feel wrong for as long as you keep identifying with your old standards of human lachavior. You're going to have to give those up if you're going to live with the gods,

Jim."

I stared at the ground as we walked. "I don't know, Jason. It keeps getting harder."

Jason clapped me on the back. "Of course it does. That's because you're getting bigger, more powerful-so you keep needing heavier loads to bear. You're growing up, Jim. Just remember this: God never gives anyone a heavier burden than they can carry."

"How convenient."

"Are you ready for your new job, Jim?"

I shrugged. "I'll find out when I do it, won't I?"

Jason laughed. "You'll be all right. Listen, we're going to be moving out before summer. We need to arrange a convoy. We need to find a new location. We've got some places in mind, but we really need to access a terminal and see what's available. What we want is a secluded ranch somewhere. We'll need fuel for the trucks, we'll need to replenish our store of rations. We'll need some frozen meat for the babies. We've just about used up the dogs. "

"Jason?" I interrupted.

"Yes?"

"I know the Chtorrans are omnivorous. They can eat trees and plants and shrubs and vegetables and just about anything else. Why do we have to have meat for them?"

"It forces their growth, Jim. Meat is high-energy food. Plants aren't. Plants are lower on the food chain. The new gods would have to spend all day foraging, all day eating, and pretty soon the countryside around here would get pretty bare. And that would show up on the satellite scans. By feeding them meat, we keep them fat and happy and that buys us enough time for us to school each other. Meat gives us the energy surplus we need to stay at the extraordinary level with the new gods."

"Oh," I said. I was trying hard to figure out the biology of the situation-without the overlay of philosophy. It was getting harder and harder.

"We could have a dozen babies if we had the resources to feed them. But we don't. That's why I want to find a place where we can start a food-breeding program. I think sheep or goats. There's so much we have to do. You're going to be a valuable part of it, Jim."

"Me?"

"Mm-hm. I'm thinking about your military background. You could access a military terminal, couldn't you?"

"Sure."

"Well, I'll bet we could find a lot of the information we need from the central military banks, couldn't we?"

"I'm certain of it."

"And supplies?"

"Sure. The army cached supplies all over the country during the plagues. Especially in the aftermath year, when everybody was trying to put things together. The army had substations all over the place. Some of them are just sitting there forgotten. When the government started to recentralize, a lot of stations were just locked up and left. It'd be easy to list them."

"There's a station near Atascadero. You mentioned that one once. Would that be a good place?"

"No. That's a Special Forces base. I sort of lied about that. I wanted you to attack it, because I knew the kind of force they had there. They'd have clobbered you. No, stay away from the Atascadero base. What you want is something like . . . oh, let me see. Not Diablo. Too much radiation. Hm, Stockton's too populated still. Livermore might work. But I think the best bet is to hit one of the numbers on Interstate 5. I'll have to check the maps. "

"Could you do it by Thursday?"

"The day after tomorrow?"

"Mm-hm. What we want to do is target the most likely area, and as soon as we get to a public terminal, update our maps and make a final decision."

"I'm going with?"

"Uh-huh. "

"You trust me? Even with my doubts?"

"Jim, you'll always have doubts. We both know that. So what? I'm not interested in your doubts. I'm interested in your results. Are you going to produce results for me?"

"Of course."

"Terrific. Then there's nothing to worry about, is there?"

"No. I guess not."

"You guess?" Jason smiled wryly.

"No, I don't guess at anything anymore."

?

I know of a lass who's for sale.

She's really a nice piece of tail.

From June to September,

she'll devour your member,

but the rest of the year, she's in jail.

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? 25

?

Denial

"The moment in which you confront your own death is the moment in which you are most totally alive."
-SOLOMON SHORT

At least, now I understood what the two gold coins were for. They were to be placed on the eyes of my corpse.

An old tradition. The coins were to be used by the recently deceased to pay the ferryman's toll. The assumption was that Charon, the boatman who plied the river Styx, did not give freebies.

So I thought about that for a while.

The traditional view of the ferry was the one derived from the Gustav Dore illustrations for Dante's Inferno; a hooded, cloaked figure standing dourly in the stern of a grim-looking gondola, poling his way across the dank, fetid Styx with dispassionate gloom.

That was the traditional view.

But I expected something more modern.

With the traffic crossing the Styx these days, a Hovercraft would be far more appropriate, or maybe one of the superferries that ran between Calais and Dover. For that matter, why not just put in a toll bridge and be done with the whole tawdry business of ferries and boatmen and pennies on a dead man's eyes?

But there would probably be an interminable wait in the customs line.

I wondered if there would be duty-free shopping.

What kind of souvenirs would you find in hell anyway?

I wondered if anyone would be waiting for me. Dad? Shorty? Duke? Or, maybe . . .

Never mind. I'd find out soon enough.

Foreman had stepped off the platform. He was conferring quietly with the Course Manager. She nodded and returned to the back of the room. Foreman climbed back up the steps and looked at me. "You don't believe this yet, do you?"

I blinked back to the present.

I was still sitting in the canvas chair. I was still on the platform. I was still in The Survival Process.

"I-I'm sorry. I was thinking."

"Yes, that's right," Foreman agreed. "You were performing an activity or a learned behavior which you have connected to survival."

Foreman turned to face the room. "Here's what's going to happen, I'm going to explain some things about how the mind works. Then we're going to talk about them. And we're going to *avlk* about this process. Talking about this process is the main part of the process. It will demonstrate just how firmly connected to survival all of you really are."

My mind was wandering again. I was trying to visualize Hell. What kind of tortures could I expect? What kind of tortures did I deserve?

My dad had once defined hell in a game, but nobody took it too seriously. It was just a game. But once, in an interview, he admitted that his vision of hell was "to be trapped forever in the Small World ride at Disneyland."

Foreman was saying, "One of the first things that happens when the mind is confronted with information that it doesn't want to hear, or doesn't want to believe, is that the mind retreats. It goes unconscious. We saw that rather dramatically demonstrated when McCarthy here passed out.

"But there are other kinds of unconsciousness too. Daydreaming, for example. Here's the joke. You want to notice when you go unconscious-if you can-because that thing that your mind is trying to block out is very likely the one thing you most need to hear. McCarthy, are you paying attention? Remember, this process continues until you are dead."

I snapped to attention. There was a little laughter from the room. Had I been daydreaming again? Yes.

"Good. McCarthy is a textbook case. But don't feel superior. It doesn't matter who we put up here on the stage: any one of you would be a textbook case. The point is, you need to stay conscious today. This may be the single most important day in your training. It's certainly the most important day for McCarthy. Right, James?"

I was beginning to hate him. How could he talk so calmly about my death?

"Remember when we were in Africa?" asked Foreman. "Living in trees, scratching for fleas? Remember all those millions of years of evolution that are hard-wired into your cerebral cortex? No? Well, no matter-it's there anyway. The problem is, you think because you're not conscious of it that it's not there, that somehow you can be a human being independent of your evolutionary history. I say that's bullshit. You can no more be free of your evolutionary history than a fish can be free of water. You swim in your history-and it's as transparent and invisible to you as the water is to the fish."

Foreman grinned abruptly, as if remembering a joke. "The only difference between you and the fish is that the fish doesn't spend half his life making explanations for the other half. That's right, laugh. Laughter is another way of avoiding the issue. Reality evasion. Pretend that this doesn't have to be taken seriously. Yes-remember how we used to joke about Chtorrans and the people who claimed to have seen them?" "This is different!" shouted somebody.

Foreman didn't even look up. "Raise your hand if you have something to say." He looked and pointed. "Yes? Rodman?"

A man near the front stood up. He had long, shoulder-length hair. He looked like a Navajo Indian. Maybe he was. "This is a stunt," he said. "A very carefully prepared stunt, I'll admit. It's very convincing. But you're not really going to kill McCarthy, it'd be a waste of a good officer."

"Those are assumptions on your part: one, that we're not going to kill McCarthy, and two, that he's a good officer. Frankly, I've heard he's a terrible officer."

"He's still a human being!" A woman stood up without waiting to be recognized. "You can't just kill a human being."

"I can, I have, and I will," said Foreman. "Let me demonstrate something. Every single person in this room who has ever taken a human life, regardless of the circumstances, please stand up." At least a hundred people stood up.

Foreman nodded. "All right, remain standing. Now, if you have ever been present when a human being was violently killed, please stand up."

At least another hundred and fifty people stood.

"You're talking about combat situations--that's different!" The woman protested.

"That's an assumption," Foreman replied quietly. "We don't know that those deaths occurred in a combat circumstance. It's a probable assumption because most of you think this course is filled with military officers, but it's just as possible that most of the people in this course are murderers, granted conditional reprieves from Death Row. Don't make assumptions." He waved the people back down into their seats.

"You're horrible!" said the woman.

"Yes, I am. So, what?"

"You shouldn't be making jokes about it! This isn't funny!"

"I agree with you. This isn't funny at all. There's a human life at stake. It was never meant to be funny. I apologize if it came off that way. The point is that violent death is not an uncommon or unusual occurrence to most of the people in this room; so the notion that there is something uncommon or unusual in what we're doing is invalid."

"We're talking about a human life!"

"I know that," said Foreman calmly.

"You can't just kill him!"

"I can. And I will-if that's what it takes to convince you that I'm serious about this process."

"It's illegal!"

"No, it's not." Foreman pointed to the screen where the president's order was displayed.

"Well, it's still wrong."

"Ahh! It's wrong. Yes: Life is right. Death is wrong. Therefore, killing is wrong. That's your survival mode

speaking. If the truth be told, you personally don't give a shit whether Jim lives or dies-you're just terrified that if we establish the precedent of taking lives without apparent reason, you might find yourself in front of the gun next. Right?"

The woman didn't answer immediately. After a bitter pause, she snarled, "You're awfully glib. What if it was you in front of the gun?"

"It's not me in front of the gun. The question is irrelevant. This process isn't about my survival. It's about yours. And McCarthy's." Abruptly, Foreman noticed that Rodman was still standing and waiting patiently. "Actually, Rodman had the floor-you're interrupting; sit down. Rodman, do you have anything else to say?"

"No. I just wanted to say that I don't believe you. I think the gun is some kind of psychological trick to make us angry or scared. You're trying to get us to jump through your hoop. And it's already starting to work. Your conversation with her shows you scared her silly." He sat down, pleased with himself.

"Thanks for sharing that," said Foreman. "But what you think has nothing to do with what's actually going to happen. We have a loaded gun up here. I intend to use it before the end of the day." To the rest of the room, "Rodman doesn't believe that. He thinks it's a trick. Let's see, what was it Samuel Johnson said? Oh, yes," Foreman read from the manual, " 'Depend on it, sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully.'"

"It's still very early in the day," said Foreman. "At this point, I'm sure that most of you are still thinking that this gun is only a prop to help you 'concentrate your minds wonderfully.' Well, yes-that's part of the purpose; the gun does focus your attention; but I should also remind you what Chekhov said. That's Anton, not Pavel," Foreman frowned his annoyance at the presumed illiteracy of the group and turned the page of the manual. "If somebody places a gun on the mantel in the first act, it must be fired before the end of the second. I promise you that we will use this gun today."

Foreman stopped himself to make a tangential point. "What we are doing here is demonstrating the first part of the process of dying. Denial. Most of you in this room-including even McCarthy-are refusing to accept that I am serious about this process. We will remain in the denial phase until everybody in the room is satisfied that this is not a trick. I am going to tell Colonel Marisov to shoot Captain McCarthy. This process will continue until Captain McCarthy is dead. The denial of this process is part of what you think you have to do to survive. That's why you do it. Now, where was I?" He strode back to the stand with the manual on it. "Oh, yes-I was talking about our evolutionary history.

"When we were still living in the trees, life was a lot simpler-and so were our brains. Is this a good banana or a bad banana? Monkeys that could recognize good bananas survived. Monkeys that couldn't, didn't. The evolutionary history of this species has served to put a premium on the ability to make appropriate decisions. Every time one of you chimpanzees pops out a baby, you are passing along not only your genes, but your vote on the hard-wired programming of the species. Because of our billions of years of evolutionary history, we are hard-wired to be decision-making machines. Whatever circumstance we are presented with, we make a decision about it. The decision is always reduced to its simplest level: 'Is this a good banana or a bad banana?' Yes or no? Is this a threat to my survival? Or not? If something unknown presents itself, we are hard-wired to treat it as a threat until proven otherwise. Everything that your mind does-that whole conversation in your head, no matter what it's about-that's the mind considering its decisions for survival.

"Now, you want to notice here pay attention!-that this places an incredible burden on the mind to be right. Because in the mind's view, the alternative to being right is being dead. The mind equates rightness with survival and wrongness with dying. This is hard-wired into us. We, as individuals, have to be right whatever we do. That's why we have so much trouble with the concept of death-because Death is wrong. By the way," Foreman added, "the purpose of this process is not to change that orientation. We can't. It's hard-wired into you. The best we can do is make you conscious of it. Notice that most of you are now in denial. Notice the attempts to find the loophole, the escape, the fine print in the contract. " Foreman sat down in his chair and looked out over the room. "Feedback?"

Several hands went up.

"What's to prevent McCarthy from walking out that door in the back of the room?"

"The door is locked and will remain so until I tell the assistants to unlock it."

"What if Marisov refuses?"

"We'll pick someone else." Foreman was emotionless.

"What if we all refuse?"

"Then I will fire the gun. Nothing will change the fact. The process continues until McCarthy is dead."

Foreman pointed to a woman in the front row.

"I'm not going to argue with you," she said. "I just want to ask why? Why is it necessary to kill McCarthy for this process?"

Foreman considered his words carefully. "Remember what I told you at the beginning? We don't explain anything here. That's the mind trying to sidetrack the purpose. You want to bring a centipede to a crashing halt? Ask him in which order he moves his legs. In here, we concentrate on results. The only explanation you will ever get is: because that's what is necessary to produce the result."

"But isn't this a rather severe and heartless way to make a point? Couldn't you just tell us what we're supposed to realize?"

Foreman gave her a look. He gave her the look. "Don't you think we've had this discussion ourselves? If there were any other way to achieve the result, if there were an easier way, don't you think we'd take it?" She sat down.

Foreman looked out over the room. "Do you see the denial at work? Do you see how you are trying to deny the circumstances of the situation? You're still not taking it seriously." He pointed at another raised hand.

A man this time. "Sorry, but I don't believe that the president of the United States would authorize this kind of bullshit. I don't believe it. If you're serious, then you're a murderer and you're asking us to be co-conspirators. And if you're not serious-if this is some kind of a trick, like Rodman said-then this is still an outrage. I'm going to take this up with Senator Brodie. When this is made public . . ."

Foreman held up a hand. "Excuse me, but Senator Brodie is one of our graduates."

"Then I'll find another senator. I still don't believe this . . ."

Foreman looked at him calmly. "I acknowledge your disbelief. Are you willing to take McCarthy's place up here on the platform?"

"Uh . . ." The man hesitated. The roomful of people laughed.

Foreman grinned. "That's the first sign that any of you in this room are taking this seriously. Does anyone want to trade places with McCarthy? Does anyone really and truly disbelieve?"

No hands were raised.

"Hm," said Foreman. "Suddenly, we have a roomful of hidlers." He resumed his analytical tone. "I think most of you are still in denial. You want to notice that denial at least pretends to be a rational process."

He grinned. "Wait till we get to anger. Anger is terrific. There's no pretense at all in anger. You'll see.

Does anyone else want to deny the circumstances of this process? McCarthy?" He looked at me.

I shook my head slowly.

Foreman looked at me oddly, then he looked to Marisov. "What about you?"

Marisov spoke in carefully measured tones. She said, "I won't fire the gun. I can't. I won't. McCarthy has committed no crime. He does not deserve to die."

"Agreed: he has committed no crime. He does not deserve to die. But he's going to die anyway. We are all going to die someday. So what? Will you fire the gun?"

She whispered, "Nyet."

"Thank you. You may resume your seat."

Marisov climbed down off the platform and found her way back to her chair in the audience. She put her face in her hands and began weeping quietly.

Foreman waited until an assistant had verified that she was all right, then he turned back to me.

"Unfortunately, McCarthy, you don't get off so easily. What's going on with you?"

I shook my head again.

Foreman turned to the rest of the trainees again. "All right. Marisov won't fire the gun. Who will?"

No hands went up.

"Oh, come on!" said Foreman, annoyed. "We're going to be here all day! There must be some one of you blood-crazed baboons who wants to get this over with."

Three hands went up.

"I thought so. Morwood, you had your hand up first. Do you want to blow McCarthy's brains out?"

Morwood stood up, grinning. "Sure. I never liked him anyway."

Foreman looked sideways at me. "You want to notice, McCarthy, Morwood has an excellent justification." He turned back to Morwood. "Justification is what we use to avoid being totally responsible for our actions. Sit down, Morwood. You're enjoying this too much." Foreman pointed to a black man.

"Washburn?"

Washburn nodded. "I'll do it."

"Why?"

"Why not? Washburn shrugged. "You say it has to be done. Somebody's got to do it. I'll do it."

"Interesting," said Foreman. "Remain standing." Foreman pointed to the angry-looking woman.

"Takeda?"

"What if I take the gun and shoot you?" she asked. "Would that end this silliness?"

"No, it wouldn't," answered Foreman. "Miller, the Course Manager would take over and the process would continue. You can sit down. I'm interested enough in my own survival that I don't feel like testing your ability to follow instructions." There was a little laughter at Foreman's candid admission. "All right, Washburn. Come on up and take Marisov's place."

Foreman turned back to me again. "You see, James, the universe has no shortage of executioners." He stopped and studied me. "Okay, what's going on with you? It's all over your face. What's that about?"

"You lying, supercilious, manipulative, cock-sucking, shit-eating, morphodite!" I exploded. "You asshole! You motherfucker! You know what I've been through! You know this isn't fair! You made promises to me! Your promises are worthless! You want us to keep our word, but you can't keep yours! You're a goddamn, lawyer-loving liar! You make Jason Delandro look like a fucking saint! If I had the gun, I'd kill you! You scum-sucking, son of a bitch! You-you . . .!" I stopped only for breath, and only because I couldn't think of anything else to call him.

Foreman was still grinning at me. He shared his grin with the room. "Now," he said. "Now, we're at anger."

?

Miss Wilkerson thought it her duty
to maintain her conjugal beauty.

She mixed up a paste
of industrial waste,
and applied it to her sweet patootie.*

?

*The facts about beauty are known,
and well-learned by those who are grown:

beauty is thin,
it lies on the skin;
but ugly goes down to the bone.

?

? 26

? Atascadero

"If this be reason, make the most of it."

-SOLOMON SHORT

There were fourteen domes, two rows of seven out of shelterfoam, and enclosed by the familiar chain link fence. The gate was locked. A sign on the gate said

UNITED STATES ARMY

EMERGENCY SUPPLY DEPOT #CA-145

WARNING: NO TRESPASSING PATROLLED BY ROBOTS

Jason looked at the sign with interest. "What are the robots armed with, Jim?"

"If they're standard, then they'll have modified 280's. They might also have rockets and grenades. If they have a working service bay, they're getting regular maintenance. They could be trouble. "

Jason nodded. He looked to George, "What do you say, George?"

George rumbled, "Jim speaks true."

"All right," Jason made a decision. "Have everybody move back. We'll blow the fence and see who comes running. Let's have Falstaff and Orson be the welcoming committee."

George said, "If the robots have grenades or torches, we could lose them. Or if they've been programmed to aim for the soft spot at the base of the eyestalks."

Jason nodded. He looked at George. "Do you have a better idea?"

"No. I just want you to be aware of the possible consequences."

"Thanks," Jason sounded annoyed. He nodded to Marcie. "Blow up the gate."

She nodded back and began unpacking her explosives.

Jason walked over to the truck with Falstaff and Orson in it. He chirruped, and they poured out of the truck and meatloafed up in front of him. Orrie flowed over too.

"All right, boys," Jason said. He began to talk to them. He used English sentences, interspersed with chirps and signs and gestures. The Chtorrans bobbed their eyes.

Marcie had six gobbets of plastic explosive. She stuck them to the hinges of the gate and its base. She stuck a tiny radio-detonator into each glob. "All right," she waved. "Everybody move back."

George came up carrying two rocket launchers. He handed one to me. "When the robots come, try to take them out before they can do anything to the worms."

"No problem."

George moved off a bit and began setting up. I did likewise. Marcie stepped toward us with a cheery smile. "Everybody ready? Jason?" she called.

Jason nodded, put his hands in his pockets and waited expectantly.

Marcie pulled the detonator out of her pocket and unlocked it. She punched in a code number, then looked around one last time. "You might want to hold your ears," she warned. "Three . . . two . . . one." She pressed the last button.

The gate exploded inward, toppling flat on the ground. Almost immediately, an alarm went off and six flat rolling tanks came bursting out of two nearby domes. Their laser beams whirled and pointed. They focused on Marcie, on George, on me, on the Chtorrans-but they didn't fire. They wouldn't fire unless we entered the fence. We had maybe thirty minutes before the choppers arrived. If that.

We'd picked this base because there was an empty warehouse nearby. We'd be gone in twenty minutes and hidden in the warehouse by the time the choppers were overhead.

If necessary, we could take the choppers out. We had twelve ground-to-air missiles, but we didn't want to use them. It was too dangerous to call that much attention to ourselves.

I targeted on the first robot's treads and launched. The explosion toppled the beast and it was helpless. We could finish that one with the torch.

George launched a grenade at the second robot. The explosion rocked the machine, but it remained upright, its turret swiveled and targeted. It began firing back. Immediately, the four remaining robots also began firing at George. He dove into the ditch, gobbets of earth exploding all around him.

The robot turrets swiveled to focus on me. I didn't wait to see if they would fire or not, I dove after George. I was smart. The ground exploded behind me. Apparently, they'd programmed these monsters to be more aggressive in the past few months. The bastards. We were only trying to liberate some supplies. It wasn't like we wanted to kill someone.

Falstaff and Orson flowed into the camp then. The robots twirled their turrets and opened fire on them. Orson shuddered as the laser beam touched the base of his eyestalks, but he raised up in a challenge and took the burst of machine gun fire in the belly. He came down hard on the robot and toppled it. He rolled away, bleeding profusely. I wasn't worried. He came up charging the next robot. Yay, Orson.

Falstaff went banging headfirst into the same robot. I saw the torch nozzle coming out of its side and screamed. We were going to lose both of our attack-trained worms. Orson hit the robot sideways and the flame missed Falstaff by a hair, scorching across his back. Falstaff leapt and pushed on the robot and it toppled like a fat chess piece. Its turret swiveled back and forth, sending a spume of flame arcing across the compound.

The last two robots were trying to shoot at everything in sight, but they were confused by the flames of their fallen comrade. Apparently, they had infrared detectors. I rose up from the ditch and hurled a grenade. George came up beside me and hurled one as well. We threw ourselves flat-

The blast went over our heads, spattering us with clods and rocks, and when we looked up one of the robots was twirling in a circle, its target beam waving drunkenly. The other one was smoking and still. Falstaff came up and toppled it. He had lost half his tail in the blast. He waved his arms and screamed his rage over the fallen robot.

Marcie screamed. "Orson!"

Orson was aflame. He'd been torched. He writhed across the ground, enveloped in fire. He screamed and shrieked in agony. "Falstaff! Watch out!"

The robot that was still upright was laboriously trying to target on him now. Apparently, its gyros had been damaged by the blast but its weaponry was still working. Given enough time, it would lock onto him. It wheeled in his direction jerkily.

Someone was firing at it-Marcie! George hurled a grenade. I threw myself flat. There was another blast. And then it was over. The robot was still.

Falstaff chirped at it, plowed over and toppled it. Then he whirled around and raced toward Orson, still writhing-skidding to a halt halfway there. The heat of the flames held him back. He hesitated, tried to reach Orson again, then backed away. And then he screamed. He raised up and wailed. It was the most incredible sound of anguish I had ever heard from any living creature. I had never known before this that a worm could mourn a companion. Falstaff came down on the ground and beat himself on it. He raged. He raced back and forth from one robot to the next, charging at them, beating on them, rolling them across the compound like toys.

"Don't go in there-" George grabbed my arm. Marcie was standing now. So was Jason.

Jason stepped forward. "We may have to kill him."

"No . . ." I put my hands to my mouth.

"Orrie!" Jason pointed.

Orrie started for Falstaff, then hesitated. He looked back toward Jason questioningly. Jason pointed again. Orrie didn't look happy. He moved toward Falstaff.

Falstaff saw him and raised up in a challenge. "Chtorrrrr!" he screamed. "CHTORRRRRRRRR!"

Orrie raised up in front of him and hurled the challenge back. He screamed even louder. All his purple fur stood out from his body as if he were electrified. His eyes bulged from his skin.

"CHTORRRRRRRRR!"

Falstaff clacked his mandibles at Orrie and then, still raging, he threw himself flat on the ground before the

other Chtorran. He made a sound that was neither a scream nor a sob nor a whimper, but had the feeling of all three at once.

Orrie came back down to the ground in front of Falstaff. He flowed forward. He rolled up and over Falstaff, and then the two of them were rolling together across the ground, writhing as if they were wrestling or copulating or fighting-then they stopped and held for a long moment. The tension in the two bodies was incredible.

And then-abruptly-they relaxed and a moment later, parted.

Falstaff chirped softly, almost lovingly at Orrie. Orrie chirped back at him.

"Good," said Jason. "Let's go. The clock is running."

We charged for the compound. My job was to find the main dome, access the computer-I would use Colonel Buffoon's code, Marcie had taught it to me-and dump onto disk the latest maps of California and the locations of all safe enclaves not presently claimed.

Falstaff came charging with me. "You okay, boy?"

The worm chirruped at me as happily as if he'd just opened a bus full of Boy Scouts. I shrugged and kept going.

The main dome was locked. No problem. I pointed at the wall. Falstaff flowed up to it and began munching; within seconds he had chewed open a hole large enough for both of us. Shelterfoam was good, but it had its limits.

Falstaff backed away from the hole and I dove in. He followed. "Lights," I commanded, and they came on brightly. I'd forgotten. There were three desks and terminals. They smelled military. I'd forgotten so much.

The wall facing me was twelve feet high. It was a mural of the Constitution of the United States. I was frozen facing it. I could hear my own voice reminding me: "I vow to uphold the Constitution of the United States of America." I'd made that commitment before I'd made my commitment to Jason.

Which commitment counted for more? I took a step toward the wall.

No.

I wasn't in the army any more. That commitment had been made before I'd been awakened, before my transformation. It didn't count.

Or did it?

I turned away and sat down at a terminal with my back to the mural. I logged in, punched in the code of a dead man, and accessed the central banks. This probably wasn't going to work, but I had a whole list of identities to try: people who'd disappeared recently in this region. I hadn't asked about that. I presumed they'd failed the "Live or Die?" test.

Colonel Buffoon first. The terminal hesitated. SORRY. ACCOUNT INACTIVE. PLEASE CONTACT SYSOP.

Next, I tried the code for Colonel Buffoon's aide-de-camp: SORRY, etc.

Uh-oh. This might turn into a problem.

On impulse, I entered my own code. This time the hesitation was longer. Abruptly: CALL HOME.

UNCLE IRA MISSES YOU. And then, just as abruptly, the screen cleared again. "What the hell?"

Falstaff Chtrpled. "Never mind," I said.

I had an idea. I punched in Duke's code; the one he'd given me a year ago. The terminal hiccuped and reported: READY.

I blinked. Oh, really? The army still thought Duke was alive? Never mind. I'd figure it out later. I slid a blank memory-card into the reader and started typing out a long list of dump commands.

The reader light blinked on. The card was recording. This would take a minute.

I turned around and looked at the wall. We the people of the United States . . . It was an agreement.

I remembered Whitlaw. "You don't get to vote on this agreement. You already did." I never understood what he meant. Until now. This was the agreement here-whether I acknowledged it or not.

I'd broken this agreement. I'd promised to uphold it.

My mind said, "Jason forced you to break the agreement. You don't owe him anything."

And I replied; "But I can't use the breaking of one agreement to justify breaking another one. Jason loves

me!"

My eye fell on Article XIII. Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude . . . shall exist within the United States. . . .

But I'd made my own choice. I wanted to serve Jason.

Or did I?

I knew how we all supported each other. You didn't get a choice. You got pushed to the extraordinary level whether you wanted to be there or not.

I looked at Falstaff. He goggled his eyes at me. He didn't understand. He saw marks on the wall.

I couldn't help myself. I moved to the wall and touched it. This meant something.

I knew something about this wall. My fingers moved across it, touching here, here, and here . . .

The wall slid sideways, revealing a narrow passage.

Falstaff chirped curiously. He didn't know that this passage wasn't supposed to be here.

I stepped into the passage. The wall closed behind me.

I heard Falstaff's surprised chirp. I heard him slide up to the wall, snuffling through his mouth. "Chirrup?" he asked.

The domes were decoys. The real base was hidden underground.

If I could find the main control, I could open the hidden ramp. We could move the trucks and the Chtorrans down here, and when the choppers came, they'd see only the evidence of a hit-and-run raid.

I climbed down the ladder to the underground level. The lights came on as I dropped the last few feet.

The room was large and high-ceilinged. This was no tiny base. This was a major supply depot for the area.

There were tanks and Jeeps and trucks, at least a dozen of each. There were six choppers. There were large containers of fuel against one wall. There were row after row after row of shelves, filled with weapons and ammunition and food and clothing and blankets and medical supplies and tents and canteens and missiles and silverware and knives and bandages and. . . .

You could outfit a small city with the supplies in this base. We were rich.

This was exactly what Jason was looking for.

Above me, I could hear his voice, "Jim?" He had entered the dome. He was calling me. "Jim?"

I hesitated at the base of the ladder. Where was my loyalty anyway? What was my life about?

I could feel the indecision like a physical thing in my body—a brick in my throat.

I ran for the main console and punched it to life—tried to punch it to life. The terminal asked,

"Authorization code, please?"

"Uh—" I punched in Colonel Buffoon's number.

"Sorry, invalid code. Authorization code, please?"

Through a speaker, I could hear the sounds of the camp above. I could hear Jason's voice calling, "Jim! Come on, Jim! The clock is running out! We've got to go!" He was using the bullhorn. "Come on, you slimy motherfucker!"

I punched in Duke's number. The terminal rejected it.

I tried my own Special Forces code. I didn't expect it to work, and it didn't.

All I had to do was get that door open. But why?

Why did I want that door open?

For Jason, of course.

But why?

I had another notion. A stupid one, but I tried it anyway. I typed, "Uncle Ira."

The terminal flashed. "Authorization accepted." All I had to do now was open the ramp.

I thought of puppies. And Jessie's baby. And my ape mind. And Jason had said that we were the food of the gods.

I didn't want to be food. I wanted to survive.

I could hear Jason talking to me. "Don't buy into your programming—that's what keeps you from being a god."

"Oh, God—" I choked on my words and collapsed in front of the console, crying. "Why me?" I curled up

in a ball, sobbing hysterically. "No-goddammit. No, no, no, no, no!"

"Jim! If you don't come out, you'll regret it bitterly! Jim! If you can hear me, come out now! Jim! You have thirty seconds, or I'll have Falstaff rip your arms off!"

"You bastard! You lying bastard!" I stood up and faced the console. I picked up the microphone and punched for Oakland Air Base. "This is Major Duke Anderson," I said. "Priority message. Supply depot CA-145 has been attacked by renegades. Their main base of operations is . . ." I hesitated only a second, then gave the exact aerial-coordinates. I described the camp in detail, and its armaments. I knew how long it would take the trucks to get back there. "Recommend an air strike at eighteen-thirty hours tonight!"

"Who is this?" a harsh male voice cut in. "How do you know this?"

I cut the connection.

I heard the sound of trucks above.

I waited. A few moments more and I heard choppers.

I wondered if they'd gotten away.

It didn't matter.

I sat down in the chair and stared at the console. I reached out and switched it off.

I'd betrayed my country, and I'd betrayed my family. Who else was left for me to betray?

All I wanted now was to sit here and die. I wouldn't, of course.

I'd been too well trained. But that was what I wanted.

?

The punctual Cynthia Rolan

missed a period, (or it was stolen)

She looked up her ass

with a tube made of glass,

but found only her own semi-colon;

?

? 27?

Anger

"Death is the best part of life. That's why they save it for last."

-SOLOMON SHORT

"I did not lie to you," Foreman said quietly to me. "I did not mislead you."

He had one hand on my shoulder and he was looking straight into my eyes and I wanted to believe him more than anything else. I wanted to believe him as much as I had wanted to believe Jason Delandro.

I didn't answer.

"James-if I ask you to trust me, I know you'll be hearing echoes of Jason Delandro. So I won't ask you to trust me. I know that everything that's happening in here looks like a betrayal of the trust you've already given."

I lowered my eyes and tried to figure this out. "This isn't fair," I said.

"Yes, it is," Foreman answered. "If you were sitting out there, knowing that the worst that was going to happen to you was that you would have to watch someone else get his brains blown out, you'd think this was fair. The only person who ever says that this isn't fair is the one who wins the toss."

"So, fuck you. So it's fair-so what?"

"That's right. So what? You're going to die. This process is going to continue until you die. So what?"

"What am I going to do about it? Is that what you're asking me?"

"No." Foreman shook his head. "I'm asking you, 'So, what?' Hang out with it for a while. 'So, what?'"

"It's not going to change anything though, right?"

"There's nothing to change, Jim. The process continues until you die. I can't change that. Once the process begins there is no way to stop it. So, all I can do is ask you to be willing to go through the process. Are you?"

"I'm here."

"No. Your body is here. Your mind is still raging. You passed through denial quicker than most; but, knowing your background, I can see why. Now, you're in anger. And you'll stay in anger until you're through being angry." Foreman's voice was low and careful and patient. "That's fine with me, Jim. You should be angry now. It's normal. It's healthy. It's even right. The point is that there's something that has to happen before the process can end-and that something is that you have to be willing for the process to happen."

"Why? So you can alleviate your guilt?"

"No." It was odd, but Foreman was totally detached from my anger. He didn't react to it at all; he responded to my words, but his emotional tone was dispassionate. "Guilt is not an issue with me. This process isn't about me. It's about you-and when you see that, then you'll also begin to see how appropriate it was that you won the toss. I think you see the irony in it already."

"Irony is not the word I would use," I said. "This is not my idea of a good time. "

Foreman put his hand firmly on my shoulder again. "James, stick with the process."

I don't know why I did, but I nodded. I guess I wanted to see how it ended.

I guess I still wanted to trust someone. Anyone.

Foreman turned to the rest of the trainees in the room. "Who else is angry?" he asked. "Stand up if you're angry."

More than half the room stood up. Foreman waited.

While he waited, a few more people rose. And then a few more. And a few more after that. They just kept on standing.

"All right, let's see how fast we can work this through," he said. "Here are the instructions. Without leaving your seats, I want you to tell me how angry you are. Just shout it out. All at once. Let's hear your anger about death. Not just Jim's death-most of you will get over that so quickly it'll be embarrassing for you and insulting for McCarthy-but for your own deaths. Let's hear it. How angry are you about your

own deaths?"

They started slowly. Some were muttering. Some were screaming. Some were raging. Several started calling out curses.

I looked up. I looked out over the room and noticed that there were assistants stationed in the aisles to keep the trainees from hurting themselves, or each other.

Many of them were furious now and unafraid to let it show. Some of them yelled and screamed; others wore hate stares hard enough to blister the paint on the walls. Several were stamping their feet. I noticed a couple banging their chairs up and down, until the assistants came over and made them stop.

"Just scream it out," coached Foreman. "You don't need any props. Just scream out how angry you are." It sounded like Auschwitz. It sounded like Hiroshima. It sounded like Show-Low.

It sounded like hell. The anger. The anguish.

"I don't want to die!" from all those throats at once, over and over and over and . . .

. . . then it was over. And nothing had changed. The process will continue until McCarthy is dead.

"McCarthy, what are you angry about?"

I told him. "Why do you have to draw this out into one long incredibly annoying drama? Why not just shoot me and get it over with?"

"Because, as tempting as that may be, that's not the way the process is done. First, there was denial; we've done that. Now, we're doing anger, and after anger. . . ."

After anger, came boredom.

I was bored with being angry. I was bored with Foreman. I was bored with Mode. And I was tired of having my life threatened. "Let's cut to the chase," I said, letting my annoyance show. "What do you really want of me?"

"Nothing, Jim. Nothing at all."

"No, maybe I didn't make myself clear, Dr. Foreman. There's something you want me to realize, something you want me to say

"No. However you do this process is up to you. The way you do The Survival Process is the way you do The Survival Process. You do it until you're through doing. The process continues . . . "

"-until I'm dead." I finished the sentence for him. "I got all that. But after all the other head games you've played on us, I'd be pretty stupid not to expect another one of your stupid tricks here."

"They aren't stupid tricks, Jim-they're exercises, designed to bring you through the experience of how your mind works. The purpose is to have you become conscious of the operating modes of the mind, so that you can move beyond your present condition of operating in an unconscious mode to one in which you can create truly appropriate operating modes."

"Huh"

"Let me say it again. The purpose of The Mode Training is to have you become conscious of the operating modes of the mind. That's all. You can't change the operating modes. The best you can hope for is to notice when you're in a mode. That, at least, allows you to own it-to be the source of it, to be responsible for it. "

"Okay, I got that."

"Good. Operating in the domain of ownership will allow you to create new modes, as necessary. Right now, you can only operate in your unconscious modes, all those modes you've been programming into your head for the last three billion years. Only when you start to become aware of the modus operandi of your mind can you start creating new modes. That's the mode that the training is about: the mode of no modes at all; the mode that allows you to create modes."

I thought about that for a while. Foreman waited patiently. "So, how do I do that if I'm dead? Wouldn't it make a lot more sense to keep me alive?"

Foreman turned to the rest of the trainees. "I thought so. We have now achieved a new state. Bargaining. Negotiation. `Don't take me. Take my mother. She's old. She's useless. Take anyone but me. Take a lawyer.'" Foreman gave me a look. "Sorry, but Hell has a full quota of lawyers already."

"This doesn't make sense. Why should I get enlightened if I'm only going to die?"

"Why not? Why die stupid?" Foreman laughed. "Why do anything at all if you know you're going to die?"

It doesn't matter, Jim. Bargain all you want. The Survival Process continues until you're dead."
Foreman sat down in his chair and stared at me. "Are you getting any of this yet?" he asked.
"No;" I admitted. "How much longer does this go on?"
"Until you're dead, Jim. Until you're dead."

?

A short-organed fellow named Kevin
used a vacuum to stretch it to seven. then to eight and to nine,
and though ten was divine,
there will be film at eleven.*

?

*If you think that our boy's now a stud,
you've been fooled by the size of his pud.
Although twelve inches soft,
when it rises aloft,
he just faints from the sheer lack of blood.

?

"When you pass the buck, don't ask for change."

-SOLOMON SHORT

After a while, I got up. I walked down to the far end of the hangar and found a Jeep. I powered it up and began driving slowly up and down the aisles, loading it with supplies.

I issued myself a new uniform, new underwear, a new helmet. I gave myself a new torch, a set of grenades and a launcher, three AM-280's and a case of ammunition. I took three weeks' worth of food, a first-aid kit, three canteens, and two gallons of distilled water. It was Christmas. New binoculars.

New dog tags. New ID's. I stopped at the security console and invented six new identities. All the way from Lieutenant to General. I doubted I'd ever use the General, but it would be nice for clearances. I gave myself clearances. I wondered how much of this stuff would actually work. I made a new set of ID's for Duke, but with my picture. There were a lot of valuable things I'd learned in Special Forces.

I had to get out of here quickly. There would be a recon team dropping in here any minute.

I looked through the security cameras: There were no choppers around. No trucks. No worms.

I opened the ramp and drove like hell.

I drove in the opposite direction of Jason and his goddamned Revelationists, and the tears began streaming down my face.

I was confused, I didn't know what to believe and I hated the entire human race!

I wanted to be safe again. I wanted to go home. And there was no safe place, no place on the planet. I was dead. I might as well be.

I wanted my mind to stop chattering in my head. I wanted absolution.

Finally, I drove the Jeep into someone's living room, crashing through the picture window, taking out half a wall and crunching furniture on both sides.

I fell out of the Jeep onto the torn-up carpet and sobbed into the floor. Why was I so crazy? Why was I crying? Jason was right. Jason was wrong. I was crazy.

I pried open the medical kit and hypoed myself into insensitivity.

I did that for three days, I kept myself sedated and zombied. I hardly moved. I lay in my sleeping bag and shivered and wept and trembled in fear. I knew they had followed me. I knew they were looking for me. I knew they would find me. I knew I was dead.

I forced myself to eat. I turned on the radio and listened to the news. The election returns were coming in slow, but the president was going to be reelected. There'd been a satellite receiving station failure. No details. The army had wiped out a major infestation of renegades in California. The red sludge had reached the coast of Virginia. The puffball clouds in Texas were easing up, but local air traffic would not be resumed for at least a week. The Zimmerman child had been found alive.

I listened to music. Beethoven. The fifth symphony. The sixth. The seventh. Brahms. The first symphony. Mozart. A Little Night Music. Dvorak. The New World Symphony. Bach. Toccata and Fugue in D minor. All the familiar pieces that would bring me back. '

I turned on the TV and watched I Love Lucy reruns. I remembered the episodes as if I'd never seen them before. "I know this one . . ." And then I'd watch to see how it turned out. I forced myself to wallow in the world I'd rejected.

I powered up the terminal. There were games here. Inferno and Brainstorm. I knew these games. My father had written them. You couldn't lose in Inferno-because you had already lost. The game started when you died and went to hell. You had to find your way out. It was filled with devilish traps.

Brainstorm took place inside the human brain. You had to find the room with the secrets of the mind.

There was a key here; you could use it to unlock the monsters from the id. It had been a game filled with old jokes and startling surprises. My dad's games were usually very serious, but this one had been written for outright silliness. If you weren't careful in your choices, the program gave you a prefrontal lobotomy,

and then all the judgment circuits switched off. The program wouldn't give you any help at all in your decision making.

I sat before the terminal, shaking.

Nobody would give me any help in my decision making any more.

Not my father, he was dead.

What was it Jason had said? Oh, yeah. Help diminishes a person. It rips them off of the opportunity to grow. You have to handle it yourself.

I was truly alone.

And here was the question that Jason had left me with: What was my life about?

Killing worms.

Except-what if worms weren't a threat any more?

It was only that we insisted on seeing them as a threat. But-that's not true, Jason. I'm not making the worms a threat. They are a threat. They eat people. You, yourself, said it, Jason. We are their food.

And I don't fucking want to be food.

There is only one law in biology. It is the fundamental law. Survive!

If you don't survive, you can't do anything.

Goddamn you, Jason Delandro-what did you do to me? How do I deprogram myself from your madness?

I climbed back into my sleeping bag. I masturbated myself into unconsciousness. I awoke and ate and cried for no reason at all. I stayed there in that ruined house waiting for it to be over, waiting for Santa Claus, waiting for rigor mortis

I was tired of waiting.

I thought about killing myself.

No. Not until after I put a bullet through the brain of Jason Delandro.

That was what my life was about. No.

I didn't know. It didn't matter. The Chtorrans were going to take over the planet anyway. Gizzard.

That was the rhyme I was looking for.

There once was a lady named Lizard,
who got lost in a pink candy blizzard, with a fellow named Jim
who wanted to swim,
up her legs to visit her gizzard.

It wasn't a good one, but it was a start.

I never had found a rhyme for Jason. That was what had stopped me. If I could find a rhyme for Jason, I'd be free. He wouldn't be in my head any more. I could put him down on the paper and rip up the paper and burn the pieces, and put the ashes in a jar and seal the jar and put the jar in a lead box, and seal the box in concrete and drop it down to the bottom of the ocean where an undersea volcano will swallow it up, and if that isn't enough, I'll have a comet strike the goddamn planet to obliterate the last trace of that scumbag son of a bitch

Comet. Vomit. Not the best rhyme, no.

There was a young fellow named Ted,
who had a radio put in his head.
Long wave or short,
he did it for sport
- and to improve his reception in bed.

Okay. But what rhymes with Jason? Basin? Maybe.

There was a young lady from Venus,

whose body was shaped like a penis.
A fellow named Hunt
was shaped like a cunt,
so it all worked out fine, just between us.

It made no sense at all, but I loved it. It rhymed and it was filthy as hell. I wanted to stand up in church
and recite it aloud. Nascent? No, bad rhyme, and too obscure.

Jase?

Trace. Face. Place. Disgrace.

He said, with a trace
of the stuff on his face,

No, not the internal couplet. And not Jase. It would have to be Jason.

Disgracin'? No.

The problem gnawed at the back of my brain. I could hear a thousand little voices scrabbling around for
answers; but I had to solve this one myself to be free.

There was an old bastard named Gene,
impotent, selfish, and mean.
His dick was so shamed
by what the man claimed,
it pretended that it was a spleen.

That one was easy.

Probably because I didn't know anyone named Gene. Jason.

There once was a fellow named Jason,
whose horrible death I would hasten.

That was it.

Jason had left me incomplete.

No. I had let myself be incomplete with Jason. Incomplete-meaning there's stuff you haven't said. You
need to say it to be complete; but you haven't said it, so you're walking around carrying all this stuff you
haven't said and need to say-and you're going to say it to the first person you meet who looks like Jason.
Heaven help them.

So what did I want to say to Jason anyway? Fuck you?

It was a start.

No. I knew what I wanted to say.

I'd say, "I don't like being cheated and robbed and manipulated and lied to."

But Jason wouldn't see it that way. He'd just see it that I'd betrayed him. He wouldn't see it from my side.
He wouldn't see it the way I'd experienced it.

"Fuck you," would have to do.

Except he wouldn't squirm. He'd see it as an honor. I wondered how the worms would feel about it.

That made me smile. Then it made me laugh. Out loud.

That would be the ultimate irony-if everything Jason said about the worms was bullshit.

What if Jason was wrong? What if the worms didn't care? What if he was just one more piece of
food-but useful food because he kept the rest of the food from running away.

Ha ha. Oh God.

With a French lass, it's unwise to trifle.

They have urges they simply can't stifle.
A woman of France
will pull down her pants
at the sight of a towering eye full.

I didn't know where it was coming from; once it got started, I couldn't stop-but I didn't care.
I'd write them and I'd laugh and feel pleased with myself. It was so satisfying to be able to do something
that didn't have to mean anything at all.
The rest of the world could go to hell.

"My God!" screamed devout Mrs. Pike,
as she fondled her stableman's spike.
"This is quite out of place,
and a great loss of face
- but I think I have fallen in like!"

I'd feed him to worms,
just to see how he squirms
but they'd vomit his crap in a basin.

I made up my mind. I will never be food again. I took long thoughtful baths.
I masturbated and thought of Lizard.
I left the TV to babble about shuttle launchings and lunar ecology projects. I turned on all the machines in
the house and surrounded myself with music and words and pictures and smells. I went from one house
to the next, all of them abandoned, looting through the shelves for discs and tapes and books and games.
I got angry. I got afraid. I cried.
I screamed. I did a lot of screaming.
I slept and ate and shivered and after a while I didn't cry as much, and I didn't rage as hard, and one day
I even found myself laughing at something somebody said on the TV because it was silly and stupid and
funny, and I marveled at myself.

A well-endowed fellow from Ortening
prepared for an evening of sportening,
with a boy from a disco,
till he lubed up with Crisco,
and discovered, alas, it was shortening!

I was learning how to be ordinary again. I felt terrific. I could be ordinary!
And then I felt sad again for a while, I didn't know why. But now I knew what was happening. I was
getting better. Something bobbed up to the surface of my mind. Something I'd heard about the
Revelationists, from way back before the first plagues appeared in Africa and India. Somebody had left a
Revelationist tribe and written a book about his experiences. He'd said that he'd lived at such an intense,
incredible peak of emotional activity, day after day after day, that when he was finally free of that kind of
continual stimulus, he went into a profound physical and mental depression.
That was what was happening to me now. It was all right. It was part of the process.
When I finished being depressed, I would be me again. Whoever that was.
But at least, now that I knew what was happening, I could begin to be really responsible for myself again.
I walked outside for the first time in days. The sky was drizzly. Cold droplets spattered into my eyes. It
was beautiful. For the first time in months, water rolled down my cheeks that didn't have salt in it.
?

A lady who read Sigmund Freud,

thought her genitals underemployed;
so she put in a stand
for a seven-piece band,.
and held dances that we all enjoyed.
?

? 29?

Family

Misery only likes company. It prefers loneliness.

-SOLOMON SHORT

I should have headed north. To San Francisco. I turned south.

I didn't know where the place was exactly-I wasn't even sure why I was going there-but it was someplace to go and I knew I could find it.

Highway 101 was a long straightaway of tall trees and burned out buildings. The people of San Francisco had fled south along this road, spreading the dreadful plagues they were fleeing. Every burned-out building or abandoned automobile was a monument to someone's death.

The highway was empty now.

The abandoned cars had been pulled off. Many of the burned buildings had been bulldozed flat. Some new greenery was beginning to creep into the war zone, but still the highway seemed carved down the center of a bleak scar of rubble.

All the roads in America were like this.

There had been no escape from the dying, but people had fled anyway. The very act of fleeing had only hastened the spread. The National Science Center at Denver-had still not identified all of the different diseases. Not all of them had attacked human beings. Animals and plant species had suffered too.

At San Jose, I turned west across the mountains. There had been fires here. There were blackened tree stumps dotting the hillsides. The new growth would take a long time to cover the wounds.

I noticed that some of the new growth was pink. Not a good sign.

The Chtorran plants were more aggressive than Earth ones. If the native plants were already established, that was enough advantage for them to survive; but given an area where they had to compete on equal terms, the Chtorran plants would take hold every time. Burning out the Chtorran growth wouldn't work.

It would just come back over and over. That was another problem that would have to be addressed.

I came out on the coast road. The Pacific Ocean was bright with reflected sun. The highway looped across green fields and along the shore. I stopped the Jeep and stood up to look over the windshield.

The wind came stiff and cold across the grass, carrying the smell of raw salt air. High above, a seagull wheeled and hawked across the sky, spreading seagull screams as it went. I could smell seaweed on the beach.

For a moment, I almost forgot there was a war. For a moment, I almost forgot the confusion in my head.

Jason. . .

He wasn't going to give up.

He'd keep his word. I could depend on that. He'd find me and he'd kill me.

If he was still alive.

Maybe I'd gotten him first. And maybe not. There was no way to know.

No.

I had to put him behind me. Logically -I had to be logical about this-there was no way for him to find me. Logically, I wasn't worth the trouble.

Forget him. It's over.

Go somewhere quiet and figure out what to do next.

I released the brake and let the Jeep ease forward. South.

A few kilometers down the road there was a sign that read, "New Peninsula Turnoff. Next Right." I took it.

Twenty-three years ago, a development company had sunk five gigantic turbines into the ocean current off the coast of California. They had been supplying most of Santa Cruz's power ever since. But during the off-use hours of midnight to six A.M., their power was diverted into an underwater shoal of metal and junk. The reaction of electricity and seawater produced an accretion around the metal: a growth like

coral, but with the strength of concrete.

Over a period of years, an entire peninsula was grown. Tons of landfill were deposited on the concrete shoal. Solid waste from all over the state was transported to the site. A landscape had been constructed along the length of it, and a private little vacation village had been constructed at the tip.

The village had been built to be a model of technology. It had free electricity from the ocean turbines. That power was also used to distill fresh water. The extra heat was used to heat every building on the peninsula and provide hot water as well. There was an underground-underwater network of service tubes and access bays.

I knew all this from the articles I'd read in the Sunday Features. I came around a curve and I could see it in the distance. It was almost an island. A mountain had been constructed where the peninsula touched the shore.

The peninsula was a southward-pointing loop. A long concrete bridge curved around a huge recreation lagoon and touched the peninsula on the westward side. This was the only access to the village.

As I turned onto the bridge, I realized just how effectively this whole thing had been designed. I wondered if the Disney people had been involved. For just a moment, I had the impression that I was driving straight into the ocean, then the bridge began to curve and I was coming across the water toward a glimmering seaside fantasy. The village shone in the midday sun. There were domes and towers and clustered places of arches and arcades, all flashing shades of pink and gold and white. The effect was dazzling. I knew how it had been done; they were made of a kind of foamed glass concrete; it hardened to a shiny stucco-like surface with the albedo of tile; even if you could chip it, all that you would do would be to reveal more of the same shimmering surface, but even knowing how the effect was done did not diminish its magic.

The drawbridge was down and I rolled across it slowly.

The gateway to the village was a simple arch; I suspected that it was also a frame for security devices, but it was so elegantly designed it looked more like a friendly welcome.

I rolled past wide lawns. Three robot gardeners were trimming hedges. Two more were trimming the grass with laser-mowers. You could land airplanes on this field.

Directly ahead of me was a forest, and all the plants were green joyously, verdantly green. There were tall palm trees with green fronds waving in the air, gnarly Monterey pines curling like dragon claws, and sparkling yellow aspen with leaves glittering like golden petals in the bright noonday sun. Slender eucalyptus trees stretched against the crisp blue sky. There were graceful elms and thick-trunked oaks and sheltering willows lining the streets. Every building seemed to be nestled within a garden or a pool or a shady nook. Huge ferns cascaded over walls. There wasn't a red or pink plant in sight. The Chtorran infestation hadn't touched here yet. If you had the power, you could do anything.

I felt as if I'd found Paradise, a tiny piece of it at least. Even the air smelled green.

Except-the streets were deserted. It couldn't be Paradise without people. But I didn't see any other vehicles. I eased the Jeep forward.

The roadway turned. It formed a loop around the entire peninsula. The center of the loop was a lush green wilderness, a kilometer wide and seven kilometers long: the village had been constructed around, and probably under as well, a deep sheltering park. A shallow stream fed down from the mountains, filling the park with a network of freshwater ponds. Here and there, I could see ornate Japanese bridges arching high over the brook. Each area of the park seemed to have its own separate personality. Here was a wide field, there a sheltered copse, here a rocky outcrop. It beckoned the onlooker; it invited you to explore.

The south end of the loop led past what had once been a mall of restaurants and theatres and community buildings. As it turned back north, these gave way to hotels, condominiums, and apartments, two or three blocks of them. These gave way to clustered houses and finally estates.

The north end of the loop paused at the base of the man-made mountain, the hiking ridge, and then turned south again, through another residential district to a hospital, a courthouse, and a sheriff's office. Here the road turned back out onto the bridge. Traffic here was intended to be all one way. It took less than ten minutes to circle the entire village.

Abruptly, a gaggle of naked screaming children burst out of the bushes ahead of me; they were charging happily across the street. I stood on the brakes and brought the Jeep to a screeching halt. Some of the children stopped and stared. Others darted around the vehicle and kept going.

Three teenage girls in dripping wet bathing suits came out of the park after the children. They looked like they were trying to herd them, and not doing a very good job of it.

A fourth girl, dressed in blue jeans and carrying a bullhorn, followed after. She started calling the children back to her. "All right, now: form a circle. Everybody. Come on, quickly now."

She had dark hair, dark eyes, dark skin. She glanced up once and saw me watching them. An expression of annoyance flickered across her face, then she turned back to her job. "All right, I don't think you're being noisy enough, kids! Let's see how much noise you can make!"

The children were delighted at the opportunity. They started screaming and hollering.

"Oh, boo-I can hardly hear you. I thought you said you were going to make some noise!"

The children laughed and screamed even louder. They jumped up and down and waved their arms in the air and hooted and whooped like Indians. I figured there were at least forty of them. They were all sizes, all ages, all colors. Less than half of them were white. I'd heard the plagues were hardest on Caucasian and Asian people.

"Come on, kids! Let's make some real noise now! B-Jay can't hear you yet! Let it go! Let's hear some real screaming! I can still hear myself think! Come on, let's make the biggest noise in the whole world!"

The girl was good.

For a moment, I thought of Delandro and his Revelations. This looked almost the same. She was coaching those bobbing little bodies into a frenzy. The children screamed like geese and steam whistles. They whooped and hollered until they collapsed laughing to the grass.

The circle broke then and they all ran over and fell on top of the girls, tumbling into a big happy heap of hugs and giggles.

"All right-let's go now!" The girl handed her bullhorn over to one of the other teenagers, who began herding the children down toward the community center.

The girl in the jeans turned toward me now. Her expression turned as dark as her skin.

"All right," she said, walking up to the Jeep. "Who the hell are you? And how did you get onto the peninsula? Did you get an eyeful? Did you see everything you wanted to?"

"I drove across the bridge." I pointed back over my shoulder.

"The bridge was down?"

"Yeah."

"Dammit! I'm going to kill that Danny! Well, listen you, you turn that Jeep around right now and head on back the way you came. "

"Is this place called Family?"

"Yes, and you're on private property."

"I'm looking for Juanita Wise," I said. I had to give the twerp credit. He'd married her anyway.

"She's not here. Who are you?"

"I'm Lieutenant James Edward McCarthy of the United States Army. And this country is still under military jurisdiction. So I'll ask some questions now. Who are you?"

I had to give her credit. She didn't back down. She said, "They call me Little Ivy."

"When will Mrs. Wise be back?"

"She's not coming back. What do you want with her?"

"Do you know where she went?"

"She's dead."

Suddenly the sun was awfully bright. And I felt dizzy. This day wasn't real. I could feel my gut tightening.

"Are you sure?"

"I assisted with the autopsy." Her tone was matter of fact.

"Her name used to be McCarthy-?"

"I don't know. I guess so. Listen, if you're still looking for her son, we already told you, he was never here."

"I am her son."

"Huh? Oh, my God-" She looked as if I'd hit her with a shovel. Her face went gray. "I-I'm sorry."

I couldn't hear her. "What did she die of?"

"A millipede bit her. On the mainland. We don't have any on the peninsula."

I felt a cold chill in my belly. "Was it the blood thing, where all the red cells just explode?"

She shook her head. "No, nothing that fancy. A staph infection."

"Staphlococcus? Staph? But that's-stupid!"

Little Ivy looked flustered and embarrassed. "That's what Birdie said-she's our doctor. But we don't always have all the medicines we need. Uh, listen, Lieutenant. I'm awfully sorry. About the way I treated you. I didn't know. We used to get a lot of strangers coming in here and . . ."

"Spare me your excuses." I held up a hand. I was trying to think. I couldn't think. There was a terrible pounding in my head. She couldn't be dead. That was stupid. Not like this. People don't die like this any more.

But even as I tried to tell myself it wasn't true, I knew it was. But I couldn't cry. I wouldn't cry.

There were tears rolling down my cheeks, but it wasn't me. I wasn't there. I wasn't crying. Not me. Not yet.

?

A lady named Shirley was mellow
as she said to her eager young fellow,

"I prefer bagels and lox

to sucking off cocks,

Or even a nice dish of Jell-O!"

?

? 30

?

Bear

"People who live in glass houses might as well answer the door."

-SOLOMON SHORT

I should have gotten back in the Jeep and driven away somewhere. But I didn't have any place to go. And besides, Betty-John had told me to stay as long as I needed. They had the room. They didn't mind. But there wasn't all that much to do around Family. At least, not for me. They had a hundred and seventeen kids to take care of, all various ages from six months up to the age where they stopped being kids and started being assistants. There were thirty-one adults in the town-well, actually, nineteen adults and twelve teenagers, but the teenagers still counted as adults because they were doing adult jobs. Sixteen women, three men, eight girls, four boys; that was the core around which Family revolved. Three of the women were the mothers of the three youngest children, but it wasn't readily apparent. All the babies seemed interchangeable, regardless of parentage. No one here, either adult or child, acted as if they belonged specifically to any other person. All of the children responded to all of the adults as if they were all their parents. But, of course, that was the whole purpose of the settlement: to parent as many orphans as possible.

I felt as useful as a third nostril.

I tried to keep out of the way. I pattered around the library for a day or two, at first just looking for something to read; somehow, I ended up stacking and shelving and organizing-the place was a mess-but there is nothing that can erode the love of books quite like having to move and sort kilos and kilos and kilos of dusty hardcopies.

I hung around the mess hall for a while, trying to find someone to play dominoes with, but it seemed as if everybody had something else more important to do.

Like I said, I should have gotten back in the Jeep and driven away somewhere.

But this was the last place my mother had been, and . . .

. . . that was odd. I didn't really miss her. I mean, I missed her, but there wasn't an aching hole in my heart that twinged every time I thought of her.

What I did feel was guilt-that I didn't feel more pain. No. What I felt was anger.

It was the divorce, of course. She'd disowned me-a fact that I had conveniently refused to believe. I'd gotten in the Jeep and I'd come looking for her. I didn't know why-and I did.

Sort of.

I wanted her to welcome me with open arms, hug me, and tell me that everything was going to be all right.

Instead . . . she'd disowned me again. This time for good. This time there was no chance of apologizing. Ever.

Goddamn her for leaving me!

And goddamn me-for everything!

I didn't know what to do. All I knew how to do was keep on keeping on. So that was what I did.

I lurched from one day to the next, doing odd chores for Betty-John and the others and waiting for things to sort themselves out.

Of course, they didn't. They never did. Jason had always said

Fuck Jason.

So, mostly, I hung around the mess hall. I ate their food, there wasn't any shortage of food here. I swept their floors. I washed their dishes. Maybe I could stay here for a while. I could lose myself in books and sandwiches and videodiscs and games. I'd been pretty much that way as a kid.

But there had to be something else, something more. Betty-John came striding through the mess hall on some busy errand or other. I tried to flag her down, but she hardly noticed me. She was involved in some

uproar concerning committee schedules. She was yelling into her phone

"Betty-John?" I touched her sleeve.

"Oh, Jim-look, I'm awfully busy right now. Can it wait? Thanks. Look, be a love and go down and watch for the bus. We've got some new kids coming in. Okay?"

"Yeah, sure." I felt grumpy, but one thing about Betty-John. If she said, you did. You couldn't really argue with her; the more you talked to her, the more jobs she laid on you.

Kids. They were an annoyance; underfoot, loud, and messy. Runny noses, scabbed knees with red stains of Mercurochrome, dirty faces, small clammy hands-and it was hot outside too.

I went anyway. I was wearing shorts and a T-shirt, and I must have looked like somebody's idea of a camp counselor. Clean and scrubbed. And it's hard to look impressive in shorts. Especially if you have knobby knees. Probably I looked younger than I had in months; I'd always looked younger than my age. One of my many vanities had been to fantasize that the armed services would make a man out of me. But I couldn't see that there was any difference in the mirror in the morning, and had reluctantly come to the conclusion that whatever it was they were supposed to do for me, it hadn't taken. I'd always heard that those who had been through combat came back with an extra little hardness around their eyes, a kind of mysterious glint that women could somehow sense and respond to. All I saw in myself was my usual unfriendly scowl. If I had somehow taken on a "bloody aura of danger" I couldn't see it.

Never mind. I parked myself under a tree near the lower barricade and began to wait.

I was awakened by a horn beeping and the tired wheeze of a dusty yellow bus. It reeked of methanol and its brakes complained loudly as it rolled to a stop before the sawhorse that kept traffic off the main street of Family. Anxious faces of children peered out of closed windows. The driver-he couldn't have been more than sixteen himself-climbed down with a clipboard. "Hey!" he called imperiously.

I stood up and walked over.

"Who's in charge here?" he demanded.

"Who're you looking for?"

"You know someone named . . ." he checked his clipboard. "Tremaine?"

"Yeah. She's up there somewhere." I gestured vaguely.

"Oh, shit. Hey, can this barricade be moved? Or knocked down?"

"Uh-uh. We've got children running around. You'll have to hoof it."

He groaned and went back to the bus, opened the door and called in. "You kids stay here, or else! I'll be right back."

I watched him. He had about as much empathy as a slug. And just as much sense. The kids started piling out of the bus within seconds-I would have too. He hadn't inspired much trust, and these weren't trusting kids anyway. They were wide-eyed and suspicious. Curious, but very cautious. The oldest couldn't have been more than fourteen, the youngest were two bundles in blankets, held by two of the girls. They looked tired.

I sighed to myself and walked over. Somebody had to keep an eye on them. "Hi," I said.

They all froze and stared at me. There were seventeen of them, counting the two babies. They had large round eyes, and looked like a cage full of hungry puppies who'd been beaten instead of fed.

I hunkered down to look at one little boy, about four or five. Sandy-haired, he looked a little like Mark. (Mark? Oh, yeah, my nephew. Had I really forgotten?) "What's your name?"

He just stared back at me with the roundest eyes of all. "My name is Jim," I tried. "What's yours?"

Still no answer.

I pointed at the almost shapeless hunk of stuffed animal he carried. "What's your bear's name?"

He murmured something. Very tentatively. "Huh? I didn't hear you. What's his name?" This time louder.

"Bear."

"Mm, that's a good name. Is he a good bear?" Round-Eyes shook his head slowly.

"He's a bad bear then . . . ?" Again he shook his head. "But he's your bear, isn't he?"

Slow tentative nod. The child wasn't sure what to make of me. Grown-ups were supposed to be good people, but I was a stranger to him. And God alone knew where he had come from and what he had been through. I wanted to stroke his hair or give him a hug-to show him everything was going to be all

right now-but Betty-John had warned me, some of these kids were funny about being touched. Don't touch any of them unless you ask their permission first.

"Will you shake hands with me?" I held out my hand, but not too far. He'd have to reach for it.

He looked at it. He looked at me.

Most of the kids were watching us. They were watching me more than him. A little girl opened up then.

"I'll shake hands with you." But there was a "What's in it for me?" implied in the way she said it.

"Okay," I said. I held out my hand to her. She was wearing a faded brown dress-where had I seen her before? She'd been skipping, hadn't she? She must have been seven or eight, or maybe even nine, but she was so gaunt it was hard to tell. She could have been older.

She shook my hand gravely, never once taking her eyes from mine.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Holly," she said solemnly.

"Well, hi, Holly. I'm Jim." I tried to coax a smile from her. I'd been told that if you keep smiling at a kid, they'll smile back, because they haven't yet learned how to smother an almost instinctive response. But apparently this bunch had learned, because it wasn't working. They were regarding me like a used-car salesman. They were skittish, and obviously frightened; what would this towering grown-up want from them? I wondered what some of them must have been through to have learned a reaction like that.

"I had an Uncle Jim once . . ." Holly offered. It was a wary comment, as if she wanted to know if I was going to try to be the "official" replacement.

I tried a different tack. B-Jay had warned against dredging the kids' memories, especially in inappropriate circumstances. First they had to experience that they were in a truly safe place before they could confront their past experiences.

I said, "Good. Will you be my friend?"

She stared. "Don't you have any other friends?"

I shook my head, slowly and very deliberately. I'm sure she suspected me for a liar, but adults never lied.

Well, hardly ever. "Not any?" She was horrified. "But you must . . ."

"Not even a bear," I insisted.

That convinced her I was telling the truth. If grown-ups insist on something, it must be true.

"Well . . ." She thought about it. This was a pretty big commitment, even more than getting married. She hesitated, then decided. "I'll be your friend."

"Okay." I looked back at little Round-Eyes. "Do you have a friend?"

He had been watching the exchange between Holly and me with the most intense stare I'd ever seen on a child. Now, when I turned back to him, he merely hugged his bear tighter and tried to shrink away. I wanted to pull him closer to me, but instead I just shifted my position. All this hunkering down and squatting to talk to three-foot people was hard on my back.

"His name's Alec," offered Holly.

"Alec what?"

"I dunno."

A third child stepped forward, a boy, maybe twelve or thirteen, maybe more; most of these children were small for their age. He'd been watching me a little harder than the rest.

"Who're you?" he demanded suspiciously. "Are you the boss here?"

"My name's Jim."

"I know. But who are you?"

"I'm Holly's friend." I tried to sidetrack him. I offered my hand.

It didn't work. "Uh-uh. What do you do here? We're not supposed to talk to strangers?"

"You weren't supposed to get out of the bus either."

He ignored that. "I'm thirsty."

"What's your name?"

"Why do you want to know?"

I shrugged, shifted position again, gave up, straightened and leaned back against the bus. The metal was still warm and felt dusty. I knew without looking that I'd just gotten this T-shirt very dirty. "So I'll know

what to call you." I looked down at him. The advantage that height gave me was more than psychological, but I sensed this wasn't the moment for "I'm bigger than you are" games. Instead, I grinned. "You don't want me calling you, 'Hey, you,' do you?"

He wrinkled his nose, turned to the other kids, ignoring me completely. "Come on, let's get back on the bus before Ollie gets back." He reached out to drag Alec, but Alec pulled away. The boy grabbed Alec again, and again Alec pulled away, this time with a little whine of resistance. The boy stepped forward, raising his fist.

I grabbed-his wrist slapped into my hand. I caught it and held it. I held his arm up high over his head, not too high, but high enough and hard enough to be uncomfortable. And embarrassing. "Hold it," I said quietly, but firmly. "There's not going to be any hitting around here."

"Who says?"

"I do. "

"So what?"

"Well, I'll tell you what-" All right, so I would play the game if I had to. I picked him up by the front of his shirt. It was heavy enough material to support him, his feet left the ground nicely; this could turn into quite a power trip. "I say so-I'm bigger than you." I held up my fist-gently, very gently now-in front of his face. "A lot bigger. So, if there's any hitting to be done, I've got first dibsies."

He muted his belligerence, he had no choice, but not his resentment or distrust. I couldn't take those away from him. He bit his lower lip and looked away. I'd won.

I lowered him to the ground, put my hands into my pockets and grinned.

He socked me in the stomach.

I deserved it; I'd let my guard down.

The problem with hitting a kid that size is how do you do it without looking like a bully? The answer is you don't. Fortunately, the question didn't even cross my mind until I'd finished clobbering him. Gently, of course.

First, I cuffed him up one side of the head; then, as he reached up to protect himself, I poked at his stomach with four stiff fingers. He sort of doubled up, and that's when I walloped his behind with the flat of my hand. Then I held him-at arm's length, the little bastard was still trying to kick me-and I slapped him once more. I had him by the throat then, one hand wrapped firmly around it, and he stopped; he had to if he wanted to keep breathing.

I tried not to show that I was out of breath too. He fought like a tiger. "Let's get one thing straight, stupid," I said. "Don't ever try that again."

He glared. "Well-Alec is mine."

"Your what? Are you two brothers?"

"Not exactly."

"What does that mean?"

"It's just . . . we stay together. Wherever we go."

"Oh," I said. I had to think about that. I eased up on his neck. "Can I trust you?"

He nodded.

"All right." I let go. "Nobody's going to separate you, if that's what you're afraid of. But you don't have to hit him."

"He doesn't talk much. And if you don't hit him a little, he doesn't move either."

I wondered if Alec was autistic. Maybe; but then again, maybe not. Maybe he was just as withdrawn as the rest of us who had walked into the sledgehammer, which was just about everybody. Sometimes insanity is the only sane response to an insane situation; hadn't Foreman once said something like that?

"Well," I said, putting a hand on Alec's shoulder-he had huddled up next to me for protection, I hadn't even noticed until I put my hand down-"Well, around here, it's all right if you don't talk." I leaned down close to Alec. "If you don't want to say anything, you don't have to. Okay?"

He didn't answer, but he never took his eyes off me. Betty-John Tremaine came hustling up then, a collection of freckles with strawberry-blond hair; it couldn't decide whether to be yellow or red, so settled instead on an unholy pale pink color that floated around her face like a glowing corona. Her

attempts to tan had turned her into the source of all freckles; they sometimes called her complexion Mother-Of-Freckle, but never to her face. She had been pretty once; she still was, but now in a leathery sort of way. "Oh, hi, Jim; I'm glad you're here. The kids okay?"

"Just fine."

Ollie, the driver, was frowning. "You kids were supposed to stay on the bus."

"It was too hot for them," I said. "I told them to get off."

"Well . . ."

B-Jay ignored him. She had sized him up as accurately as I had. "Come on, kids. We've got some cold lemonade and baloney sandwiches and cookies and peach ice cream all waiting to be eaten up. Oh, who has to go potty?" She began herding them toward the mess hall. "Then we'll get you some clean clothes and--oh my, look at how dirty some of you are. Well, we'll all go swimming and wash off all the dirt in the creek--hi, what's your name, peanut?--and then we'll give you your own rooms to stay in, and--who likes movies? Let me see your hands. Okay, we'll show a movie too."

"I've got a couple too small to walk," Ollie said, obviously annoyed at something, her--or me, probably.

"So, I'll carry one and Jim . . . ?"

"Oh, sure," I said. "I don't mind. I was making friends anyway. "

One of the older girls--maybe twelve or thirteen, but as gaunt as the rest--piped up. "I can carry one. I've been carrying him all week. I can carry him a little farther. I don't think he's feeling too good though. He's all hot and . . ."

"Well, let me see . . . you're right, we'll get him to the infirmary right away. What's your name, honey?"

Susan? Okay, you carry him. I'll carry this little lady in pink here, and--oof, she's heavy! Okay, kids, see that yellow building up there, that's where we're going."

I started to follow, bringing up the rear, watching for stragglers, or escapees, when I felt a tug at my arm. I looked down, and round-eyed Alec silently slipped his hand into mine.

"Well," I said. "You want to walk with me? Okay, let's go." I guess I felt kind of proud. Maybe I could be trusted after all. Or maybe he just felt he ought to try to get along with someone who'd just proven he had the right to hit. Either way.

Holly took my other hand, because she was my friend now, and the older boy, whose name was Tommy, tagged carefully along on the other side of Alec. He made a point of taking Alec's hand, possession being nine points of the law.

I wondered if I could win him over. "Where are all of you from, Tommy?"

"I don't know. We all came from the center. That's in Sacramento. Alec and I are from Klamath and Holly's from Orinda. "

"I know Orinda," I said. "That's where the big Jell-O Foundry used to be."

"I never saw it," said Holly, blankly. So much for jokes.

Tommy added, "I don't know where all the rest are from."

"It doesn't matter, you're all at Family now."

"Family? What's that?"

"This is Family. That's the name of this place."

"That's a funny name." That was Holly.

"So is Holly a funny name."

She pouted. "It is not."

"Well then, neither is Family."

"I thought a family was a mommy and a daddy and all their children. "

"That's right. Only here, we have a lot of mommies and daddies and children. It's all one big Family. So that's what we call it."

She eyed me with curious suspicion. "Are you a daddy?"

"Nope. "

"Then what are you?"

"I'm me. I help out."

"Doing what?"

"Oh, I get to spank all the bad kids and kiss all the good ones."

"Oh." She edged a little bit away, even let go of my hand. A minute later, she grabbed hold of it again. Apparently, she figured I was safe after all. She said, "I guess that's okay. I'll even help tell you who all the bad ones are."

"Oh, I think I can tell without any help."

"I'll help anyway, okay?"

"Okay."

We got to the mess hall then and followed the rest of the crowd in. B-Jay was sitting the kids down at long tables, propping the smaller ones up on cushions, snapping orders at Daddy Potts and the other cooks and assistants, even as she kept up a running patter with all seventeen of the kids simultaneously. "Get Doc over here fast, and Nurse Ivy too; some of these kids have infections, but I want to get some food in them first. Daddy, let's get some big bowls of soup on the tables. And then we promised them all sandwiches and lemonade-no, you can't drink your lemonade until you finish your soup-and have we got any of that peach ice cream left? Well, so we won't have it for dinner tonight. The kids are more important-what's that? No, you won't have to get a shot. Unless you need it; Doctor Birdie-yes, that's her real name-is a very good doctor. She doesn't like to give shots. Jim, will you help out here please? Sit down at that end and help those three you brought up."

"Come on, Alec and Holly and Tom--can I call you Tom instead of Tommy? We'll sit over here."

I lifted Alec onto a chair. Too short. I looked around quickly, grabbed a cushion and slid it under him. He was holding onto his bear with both hands. "Hey," I said seriously. "It's going to be hard for you to eat unless you put Bear down. Nobody's going to take him." Something told me not to try taking the bear away from him myself. He had to surrender it on his own. In fact, I wouldn't even touch that bear without his permission. That possessiveness was a signal.

I got up and went over to the steam table, snagged a tray, put some soup and crackers on it, some bread and butter, some celery, carrots, what else would be attractive to a hungry, dirty child? Sandwiches? Definitely-and apples too. I went back to the table and started distributing the goodies.

Holly had already made up her mind that I could be trusted. She started eating immediately. Tommy checked me out first, sniffed his soup, then began eating slowly, with manners even. Alec just stared.

I looked around the room. The other kids were gobbling up the food as fast as it was being dealt out to them by Daddy Potts and his helpers and B-Jay and just about every other available man, woman, and teenager in the area. Just about every kid had someone fussing over him, it seemed, but it was really just an illusion of motion, there weren't that many adults available. These three apparently were mine for the moment. I sighed. Okay. Turned back to Alec.

"You're going to have to put Bear down." He shook his head.

I considered the situation. He trusted me. A little bit anyway. But he was shy and he was scared and he was in a terrifying new situation. I reached over and stroked his hair. It was very fine and soft, even though it was matted with dirt. There is something about stroking a young child's head that is intensely sensitive. Not just the trust it requires, but the actual sensation itself-something, I think, that harkens back to animal roots and instincts.

Then I had an idea, something from my own childhood. I leaned over and kissed him gently on the forehead. And then I leaned down and kissed Bear too.

His eyes went as wide as they could with surprise.

I ignored the look, shifted the bowl of soup directly in front of him, picked up a spoon and offered it to him.

He eyed the soup. And me. And the spoon. And Bear. Shapeless old Bear. And then he did it all again.

"Well, if you don't want any, let's see if Bear does." I offered Bear the spoon. "Mmmm, there, you see-Bear likes it. Isn't that good? What's that, Bear? More? Well, wait a minute, let's see if Alec wants some. We have to take turns here." I dipped the spoon in the bowl and held it out to Alec. "Your turn." Alec's mouth opened almost before he could think about it. I popped the spoon in quickly. "That's the way." His eyes widened slightly in surprise. The soup was good. I gave him a second spoonful, then a third, before he realized he'd been had. He almost started to pout, but there was a fourth spoonful of

soup staring back at him. With a piece of meat in it.

He made up his mind. He very carefully kissed Bear and held him out to me. "Will you hold him?"

I started to reach, then stopped just short of touching. "You're sure now? You're sure he'll be okay?"

He bit his lip. Maybe I shouldn't have asked that question. "He's very scared," said Alec. "You'll have to hold him and tell him he's a good bear."

"Okay. " I took Bear carefully into my lap. A torso and one arm. No head. But there was still enough to love. How much of a bear did you have to lose anyway before you lost the soul? Probably a lot more than a head and three limbs.

Alec took the spoon from me and insisted on feeding himself. He pulled the bowl as close to his face as he could and hunkered down over it and spooned the hot vegetable soup into his mouth quickly, looking around all the while as if afraid someone were going to take it away from him. He kept looking over at me and Bear. Bear especially. I made a big show out of stroking Bear and feeding him crackers-to his neck hole. That seemed the most appropriate aperture. Alec was working on his second bowl of soup before he remembered that it was Bear's turn again, but Bear wasn't hungry any more, he'd been filled up on crackers, so Alec had to finish the soup himself.

"Good, huh?" I asked.

Alec was too busy eating and Bear had his neck full of cracker. I took that as answer enough.

Half a table away, someone spilled a glass of milk and started crying

"Oohhhh, we had an accident!" That was B-Jay, already rushing up with a towel. Daddy Potts was right behind her with a fresh glass of milk. "It's all right, honey, don't cry. There's lots more milk where that came from. Jim?" She looked over at me. "We'll need a mop."

I started to get up, but Alec's sudden start stopped me. "Uh I can't. "

"Huh?"

I held up Bear. "I'm Bear-sitting."

She looked puzzled, almost ready to get mad; then she saw Alec and caught it. "Oh, okay."

I was beginning to catch on. The kids were all-important. Whatever else, save the kids. We didn't know what they'd been through, and we didn't have the time to dig into their personal histories. We had to feed them, bathe them, play with them, hold them, kiss their hurts, physical and psychological, and do whatever else they needed right away-because these kids needed one thing more than anything else: assurance that they were safe. Their every need had to be met now, not next week, or an hour from now, or some indefinite later. These kids didn't know later, they only knew now. And these kids were scared. Whatever they'd been through, they were all of them terrified that it wasn't over, not yet; that this . . . this illusion we called Family was only a temporary and unreal Oz and that they would be sent back to Kansas and the desperate hunger of reality all too soon. They were

grabbing hungrily for whatever we could give them because they were too damned scared that it wouldn't last and they would have to go hungry again for days at a time, or that they might get beaten, or might have no warm place to sleep or even to hide. Most of all, they were scared that there would be no one to hug them and tell them that they were good and that everything would be all right, even when they knew it really wouldn't. These kids were smart, all kids are. They knew when things weren't all right, but they still needed a parent to tell them that things werebecause it's the existence of that parent that makes everything all right, someone strong they can depend on. What they needed most was someone else who cared and would be responsible for them. For a little while, anyway. A kid isn't ready to be responsible for himself; it makes him old before his time, makes him forget what laughing is for-so if that meant sitting and holding a stuffed piece of bear that was falling apart even as I held it while milk, which was selling at KC 3.23 a gallon, dripped onto the floor, well, that's what it meant. Milk could be wiped up any time. But Alec insisted that Bear had to be held. And that meant now. And I had a hunch about that, too--he

wasn't talking about Bear. He was talking about Alee.

What was the word? Projection? Never mind. That was textbook, this was people. Alec couldn't allow himself to show weakness. Not ever. So it was Bear who needed the hug. I sat there and hugged Bear. Holly and Tommy were working on sandwiches. Alec was having trouble with his, but he refused Holly's help. I put it back together for him—he was willing to accept my help—and placed it firmly in both hands. Tuna salad. Very messy. But good. I licked off my fingers. It was only recently that tuna had come back from being a delicacy to a staple. I'd missed it. Some of the side effects of the Recede weren't all bad. Alec was staring at me. "You weren't supposed to eat it, only fix it."

I put the sandwich together for him again, and this time wiped my hand surreptitiously on my shorts. I'd have to sneak down to the kitchen later and feed my own bear.

B-Jay was standing and counting quietly. "Seventeen," she muttered. "Three down in the infirmary, fourteen beds . . . damn. All right, Betty-John, let's figure this one out by eight tonight. Baths.

Right—down to the creek. We'll take 'em swimming and sneak some soap up behind them; probably leave a ring around the whole reservoir. We'll need underpants, sandals, shirts, shorts, definitely Band-Aids. . . .

A RAGE FOR REVENGE 249

Someone screamed, one of the little girls. She was standing on her chair and pointing at the door.

"Oh, that's only old Wag," said Betty-John. "She won't hurt you."

Wag was a mangy-skinny, scrawny, count-the-ribs-fromtwenty-meters, old yellow dog with a tongue that lolled halfway to the ground. She was a collection of haphazard pieces of dog: a cockeyed grin; knobby legs; splayed feet; large brown eyes that rolled this way and that, looking for a handout or even a friendly pat; and a gangling, ungainly way of walking that made you wonder why she didn't keep stepping on her ears—her head dipped and bobbed. Dr. Frankenstein must have started out by experimenting with boneless animals.

The little girl was almost hysterical now. Most of the other children were upset and disturbed too, probably thinking, Is this the proper response? Should I be screaming too?

Wag lolled her tongue, rolled her eyes, did her clown act, left out the juggling though, and gangled into the room. The child screamed.

B-Jay was already swooping her into her arms. "Wag's okay, she's just a dog."

"A dog!" cried the girl. "A dog!"

Uh-huh. Right. The kid didn't think of dogs as friendly animals. Dogs were large, vicious things that bit you and stole your food. I'd bet money on what this kid had been through. "She won't hurt you."

"Let me shoo her out, B-Jay." Little Ivy.

"No! Wag is a member of this family too. We're all friends here. Patty and I will go eat in the back room, so Wag can meet her new friends." Still talking, she started walking. "Come on, Patty."

"No—I don't want to go!" "Then we'll stay here!" "No!"

"Well, then what do you want?"

"Make it go away!" She pointed at Wag.

"Uh-uh." Betty-John was firm. "No, honey. Wag is part of our family. She won't hurt you, not any more than I would or ugly old Jim would or anyone would. You can't ask us to push anyone out of the family. We wouldn't do it any more than we would let someone push you out."

The girl looked at her, a funny expression on her face. "Do you want to finish lunch?" B-Jay was firm.

"Uh-huh." The girl nodded.

"In here?"

"Uh-huh."

"If I promise you Wag won't hurt you, will you sit and eat quietly?"

"Oh . . . kay. . ."

Wag lolled around the room, sniffing and licking and gladly accepting handouts from tentatively lowered hands. She inspected the floor as she went, licking stray scraps into her mouth. Rule number K-9: Anything that falls on the floor is legally mine. She almost managed to chew with her mouth closed, too;

for a dog, she had exceptional table manners. She even came up and sniffed Bear a friendly hello. Alec stiffened, and when Wag slurped Bear-actually a tiny goblet of tuna salad-he looked very suspicious.

"Did he bite Bear?" To Alec, all dogs were he, and all pussycats were undoubtedly she.

"Nope," I said. "She only tasted him. I think she likes Bear."

"Is he going to bite him now?"

"No. Wag doesn't bite. He-she only slurps. Like this." I leaned over and slurped his cheek. "Mmm, good. Soup." Alec giggled and wiped with the back of his hand.

Holly looked surprised. "Hey, he laughed!"

I turned to her. "What's so surprising about that?"

"He doesn't talk much. And he never laughs."

"Not even if he's tickled?" I said it seriously.

She tilted her head back and eyed me. "You can't tickle us."

"Betcha I can."

"You're not allowed to."

"Who says?"

"Uh . . . I says."

"Well, we'll just have to see about that . . ."

She could too be tickled. And so could Alec. And even Tommy, a little. Not only that, they could even laugh-a little. Even Bear looked a little happier-at least for someone without any head, he looked happier. It was hard to tell.

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There was a young man from St. Helens
afflicted with shrinkin's and swellin's.

His dick was so small

it was not there at all,

but his balls looked like honeydew melons.

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? 31

? Bargaining

"Nobody ever died badly. They got the job done, didn't they?"

-SOLOMON SHORT

The bargaining part of the process seemed to stretch forever. But it wasn't I who did the bargaining; it was the rest of the trainees in the room. I'd already made up my mind that I wasn't going to bargain. I was too proud.

It was like all those scenes in all those movies where the killer is going to shoot someone and the victim begs for mercy-and then gets shot anyway. All that the victim ever accomplishes is the loss of his or her dignity.

I didn't want to be like that.

I had decided that I would not beg or plead or try to negotiate. Maybe that was the point of the process: to have me reach a state in which survival was so unimportant to me that I would cease to care. Well, if so, then I was well on my way.

But I wasn't going to beg. Not after everything I'd already been through. Uh-uh. Sorry. Not me.

Instead, I sat and listened.

The rest of the trainees bargained.

Theme one: This is a waste of a human life.

Foreman's reaction:

"Agreed. This is a waste of a human life. I agree with you. But this is the way we do this process."

"But every human life is precious."

"Is it? Before the plagues there were ten and a half billion people on the planet. The best estimate now is that we're down to three, and still dropping. But even with only three billion people on the planet, what difference does one more or one less make? We're all going to die. Why does it make a difference whether it's today or next week?"

Et cetera.

Theme two: This is cruel and unusual.

Foreman's reply:

"Unusual? No. The statistics don't validate that position. Death by gunfire is unfortunately very usual.

Cruel? I doubt it. It's instantaneous. It's painless." Foreman added, "I admit it'll be messy to splatter McCarthy's brains across that wall, but cruel and unusual? No."

Theme three: This is unnecessary to the success of the training.

Foreman: "Are you a certified Mode Trainer?"

"No."

"I am. There's a copy of my certification on the screen. I will decide what is necessary to the success of the training. You don't get a vote on it."

Theme four: Isn't there another way to accomplish the same result?

"No."

Theme five: What is it that you want us to say or do to prevent this outrage?

"Nothing. Nothing at all. There's nothing that I want you to get. There's nothing that I want you to do.

There's nothing that has to happen. But you might want to notice the philosophical equation underneath that statement. It's obvious that you think communication is about getting someone to do something.

"If that's all that you think that communication is, then that reduces irrevocably to 'Get a gun and threaten to use it on someone to get them to do what you want.' And in fact, when someone does point a gun at someone, that's what you think is happening-that I'm trying to get someone to do something. Wrong. I don't care what McCarthy or anyone else in this room says or does. The process will continue until McCarthy is dead. But you want to notice that you are stuck in a state called 'Bargaining' and you will say anything or do anything in order to achieve the goal that you have decided is right. Life is right. Death

is wrong. Therefore, you are stuck in the paradigm that you must bargain, negotiate, plead, wheedle, beg, implore, demand, protest-you will do anything you have to do to keep alive."

Foreman turned to me at this point.

"It's obvious that McCarthy has chosen a stoic silence as his response. This is called 'passive aggressive' behavior. It is also a form of bargaining, because he thinks that by doing it he will be able to get me to do something that will be more appropriate to his survival." Foreman studied me thoughtfully for a long moment, then announced to the entire room. "No, I don't think so."

The way he said it, we all laughed, even me. But we were still bargaining.

Theme six: Isn't McCarthy more valuable alive than dead?

"This isn't about McCarthy's value. This is about McCarthy's death."

Theme seven: Well, if you're so committed to killing McCarthy, then why haven't you gotten it over with already?

"Because we haven't finished going through all the stages of the process. There are five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. They're not always as clear and distinct as we see them here, and they don't always occur in the same order. Sometimes there's a lot of overlap too. Sometimes you'll flip back and forth between two stages for a while. Sometimes you'll go through one of the stages so fast you won't even notice it. But in here, the way this process is conducted, you will experience all five stages of the process. Whoops, there's a little anger now. . . ."

Theme eight: This is unfair.

"So? What's your point?"

Theme nine: What is the point of killing just McCarthy? Who's going through this process? McCarthy or the rest of us? If the process is about all of us, as you say, shouldn't you be threatening all of us?

This particular argument triggered no small amount of consternation in the room. "Don't give him any ideas!" someone shouted. Others took it more seriously; they were afraid that Foreman might feel it necessary to expand the focus of the exercise.

Foreman waited until the room quieted down before he answered the question.

"The process is about all of us. Everybody in this room is doing The Survival Process. You are doing the process. I am doing the process. The Course Manager is doing the process. McCarthy is doing the process. As for how many people should or shouldn't die today-McCarthy is the focus for this exercise. There is no need to expand the focus. The truth is, everybody dies alone."

I noticed something now, something about Foreman, something about the way he was talking, something about the training and the way everyone was responding now: we had all become deadly serious. There were no more jokes, no more clever remarks, no more entertaining tangents.

Now we were talking seriously about death. It was a reality in the room.

The process would continue until I died.

That's when the red-haired boy stood up. He was only eighteen. Foreman looked over at him. "Yes? Parent?"

"I volunteer to take McCarthy's place."

"You do?"

"Yes, I do."

"Why? What do you hope to accomplish?"

"McCarthy doesn't want to die. I don't care if I do or not. Everything I have to live for is gone."

"There's an assumption in there that McCarthy doesn't want to die-but it's a fair assumption. However, it's irrelevant whether McCarthy wants to die or not. He doesn't get a vote in the matter. Neither do you. And you'll get your turn to die when you get your turn. Sit down."

Parent didn't sit down. "You, yourself, said that it didn't matter who was the focus. I insist that you use me instead. I'm willing to die. McCarthy isn't. That's at least a lot more fair, isn't it?"

"This isn't about fairness. What's your point?"

"My point is just that. You've agreed that this isn't fair, that life is precious, that every human being is special and unique. Well, that means that the responsibility falls on each and every one of us to do whatever he or she can to make it all a little bit less unfair. This is something we can do something about."

This is something we do get a vote on."

Foreman nodded thoughtfully. Parent's words had apparently touched something in him. He acknowledged, "You have part of it. You're getting there. First, I never agreed that this is unfair. Death is very fair. It takes everybody. Young. Old. Rich. Poor. What's fairer than that?"

"As for how precious life is, on this planet life is abundant. Nature wastes lives. Life is abundant so it can feed on itself. Nothing lives except by feeding on the death of something else; so death is just as abundant as life. The myth that each life is precious or unique is a misunderstanding of nature. The uniqueness of each life is merely an effect of nature's need to spawn life in infinite variety; the fact that a life is unique guarantees it no special favors or privileges. Every life has to compete against the same hostile universe. Only those that win the competition win the right to pass on their genes. That's the short version; I won't go into detail about the various games that life plays on itself to guarantee that this or that set of genes will be given the opportunity to reproduce; that's another seminar. But if you must look at this from a sociobiological point of view, even this is evolution in action. We're just removing the carrier of some very unlucky genes from the gene pool." The way he said it, it wasn't a joke.

Parent remained standing.

"Every man's death diminishes me," he quoted.

"John Donne. 'Therefore ask not for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee.' So, what?" asked Foreman.

"So, if you're going to kill McCarthy, you have to kill me too." Parent was resolute.

Somebody applauded. And then somebody else. And then abruptly, the whole room was applauding.

A woman near Parent stood up, still applauding. Then a man. Then two more men.

And then, the whole room was standing and applauding. It went on and on and on.

They were applauding Parent. They were applauding me. They were applauding themselves.

I was moved beyond words. The tears ran down my cheeks and I couldn't begin to tell you what the emotion was. Maybe it was joy, but nobody ever felt joy like this in the face of death. It was . . . unity.

I stood up and began applauding too. Foreman was wrong.

I wasn't going to die alone.

And then finally, after several exhilarating centuries, the applause began to die away.

Foreman had waited until we were through. He had made no attempt to stop us or slow us down. He let us expend our energies in a gaudy release of all our pent-up feelings.

"Thank you," he said. He did not tell us to sit down. "Thank you for that display of unity. But . . .," he spoke thoughtfully now. "How am I supposed to interpret this demonstration? Is it a vote of agreement for Parent's stand? Or mere approval that he's letting the rest of you off the hook?"

Foreman counted off on his fingers. "I see three possibilities here. One, that you don't care. You only took advantage of the opportunity to applaud as a chance to get out of your chairs and stretch."

There was some laughter at this remark.

"I think not," Foreman said. "Second possibility: that you are impressed with Parent's courage, his willingness to take a stand. He gets to be a hero and I'm appointed the villain by default. A nice ploy on Parent's part. He gets to be right. I get to be wrong. It doesn't change anything. Parent gets to look good. You get to stand up and applaud and vote on it. But nothing is changed. We're still in the process. McCarthy is still going to die. And I think we're far enough along that you all know that. I think Parent knows it too. I think Parent is absolutely serious and totally sincere in everything he has said here. So, I'm going to discard this possibility too; because it diminishes us. All of us.

"That leaves us with the third possibility. That all of you are standing because you think a display of unity will change the results. I am impressed with the display. It will not change the results."

Parent said, "I repeat, Dr. Foreman. If you kill McCarthy, you have to kill me too. That's why I'm standing."

"Me too," someone else said, I didn't see who. "And me-"

"And me too-"

And then the whole room was shouting it. "Me too!" Foreman waited patiently.

He stepped back to his table and took a drink of water before he continued. For just the briefest of moments, I wondered at the incredible physical demands that this job must make on him-and yet, he still

looked like the most alive person in the room.

He turned around and faced the trainees again. They were still shouting.

After a while, Foreman held up a hand. He did not look concerned. In fact, he grinned. "I appreciate the clarification." He sighed, long and loudly. "But it would be excessive, not to mention counterproductive. It's not the way we do the process. You can all sit down."

They remained standing. All of them. Every single one. It was a wonderful disobedience.

Foreman did not look displeased. Somehow I had the feeling he'd seen this response before.

"Look," he said. "There's no glory in dying en masse. In fact, it's a rather stupid thing to do. The logical, rational thing to do would be to make it as hard as possible for someone to kill you-that's survival. But, you want to notice that what you're doing here now is something that most of you would call 'defending a principle.' Most of you, if we found the right principle and the right circumstance, would die to defend it. We call this 'being a martyr.' It's a great way to be right. Your body may die, but your principle lives on.

"This is what happens when your mind gets confused, when it starts making false connections, when it invests a significant part of its identity into family, nation, or species. It's especially true when the mind identifies itself with noble ideas and principles. Suddenly, the survival of the concept is more important than the survival of the individual. This is called a 'moral victory.'

"So, here we are. You're all willing to die to be right. You should be laughing right now. Don't you get the joke your minds have just played on you? You're so invested with survival of your identity that you as an individual will die to guarantee the survival of your identity. Talk about confusion. . . ." He gave us all that sideways skeptical look; it was the kind of look that made you wonder if your philosophical fly was open.

"So, you're saying that principles and family and nation are the wrong things to die for?" someone hollered accusingly.

"I said nothing of the kind. I said that your mind has such an investment in the survival of your identity that you will die rather than let that identity be destroyed. You have invested your identity in principles and family and nation and species. Whether it's right or wrong is totally irrelevant; you'll do it anyway. You did it before you came in here. You'll do it when you leave. The only difference is, you'll know you're doing it. You won't be doing it unconsciously-and that will affect the decisions you make. You'll consider your choices in a totally different context."

"Just the same," said Parent. "If you kill McCarthy, you have to kill me too."

"That's not the way we do the process," said Foreman quietly. He picked up the gun, opened it and withdrew the round. He held it up for all to see. "We have only the one bullet. That's all." He looked out over the roomful of trainees. "You can sit down now. You've made your point. But, you don't get to vote on things that you don't get to vote on, no matter how often you vote on them. The universe doesn't care. Rocks are hard. Water is wet. So what? Life is hard. Then you die. Then they throw dirt in your face. The only choice you get is whether or not you're going to accept that this is the way the universe works. "The process continues until you die."

Parent sat down, reluctantly-and I was alone again.

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A woman who once faked a lettera
reference by which she could gettera
job much improved,
regretted her move
when they asked her to show her et cetera.

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? 32

?

Parents

"Even Murphy's Law doesn't work all the time."

-SOLOMON SHORT

Later, after we'd bathed them and tucked them away for naps, Betty-John, still damp from the creek, came up and leaned on my shoulder, momentarily exhausted, but exhilarated too.

She looked up at me. "Are you beginning to get it now, Jim? I mean, about working with their psychoses?"

"Yeah, I guess so. I don't know. Maybe."

"Come on," she said. "Bar's open in my office. I'll buy you a drink. You looked so silly trying to give that lump of teddy bear a bath without really getting him wet."

"Yeah, well, I had to. You saw how Alec trusted me." I followed her up the hill.

The drink turned out to be lemonade. I should have known. "I would have had iced tea," B-Jay said; with one foot she kicked shut the door of the tiny refrigerator she kept next to her desk, "but the prices are ridiculous." She sighed and ran one hand through her fading hair, then realized what she had done and patted it back into place. "Stupid, isn't it? I should care how I look." She went back to muttering about prices as she pushed some papers around on her desk. "On the black market we can get bread for only ninety-five cents a loaf-can you believe that? And even beef. I know we shouldn't, but we haven't had roast beef here for . . . you know, I can't remember how long it's been, but other things, like tea and coffee and sugar, we just can't afford them any more, white or black market."

"Is it that serious?"

"It is if you're accustomed to those kinds of things. The kids won't miss it. God knows what most of them have been surviving on. I mean, this is a step up. We've got milk and potatoes and bread and what vegetables we can grow ourselves, so we're okay. We were supposed to get a truckload of canned goods salvaged from Sacramento, but it never arrived. Probably hijacked; we'll be able to buy the stuff on the black market next week." She sighed and sank back in her chair. The chair sank back too. It creaked and squeaked and swung so far backward that for a moment, I thought she was falling, but she was only putting her feet up on the desk. Both shoes had holes in the bottoms.

"You need new shoes," I pointed out, sipping my lemonade.

"I know. I need a lot of things." She rubbed her forehead tiredly, and for just a moment, she looked old. I didn't know what to say. I said, "Pretty good group of kids, aren't they?"

She grunted.

"I mean, they're not as bad as I thought they would be. I mean, you were telling me about their psychoses. I expected them to be pretty screwed up."

B-Jay shook her head. "No, not this bunch. Most of these kids have been under some kind of human guidance. They're still human, at least. But just barely."

"Oh." I finished the lemonade and put the glass down on her desk. "Where exactly did all of them come from? This little boy, Alec, for instance, the one with the bear."

"I don't know. Orphans, like everybody else, I guess. When you kill off three-quarters of the human race, all you have left are orphans. Who has relatives any more?" She sniffed and wiped her nose. "Their papers haven't come over the wire yet. God knows when they will. It would help. Supposedly a team of caseworkers have worked these kids; we're supposed to get their reports. Don't hold your breath. In the meantime, we'll just have to start figuring them out from scratch all over again." She looked over at me.

"There's something going on with every single one of these kids, Jim, don't ever doubt it, no matter how good they look. They're just as badly damaged as the rest of us, probably more so, still reeling from the plagues and the aftereffects. We're all going to be living with it for the rest of our lives, and so will the next umpteen generations until the world gets back to normal-if ever. The wounds may not always show,

and maybe not in ways we can easily recognize, but they're there; that's why we've all got to be super-careful. We might be rubbing salt in them without ever knowing it. That's why I didn't insist on washing hands and faces this morning before lunch; it was more important to get them to trust us by giving them food than to confuse them by giving them another set of rules to learn. They could have seen washing as a condition necessary to having lunch, and we had to show them that lunch-and our love-has no conditions attached. You'd better keep an eye on that Alec kid, by the way. I'm surprised they sent him up here."

"Well, Tommy and Holly have been pretty good at watchdogging him already."

"Mm, yeah, that's probably it. He's obviously one of the walking wounded, but they sent him up because they couldn't risk taking him away from Tommy and Holly, and hurting them. They weren't thinking of Alec, they were thinking of the other two. Damn! I wish we had those papers."

"Say, can we get that bear away from Alec long enough to clean it and stuff it with fresh foam? Maybe sew it up, put a new head on it for him?"

"I wouldn't try it," B-Jay said.

"Why not?"

"What would happen if you put a head on it he didn't recognize? It might not be his bear anymore. Better leave it alone for now-at least until we see how important it is to him. He's pretty badly damaged, Jim; we'd better be prepared to separate him if we have to."

"Separate?"

"Send him back."

"Back?"

"Jim," she said quietly, "there are kids who've gone catatonic, autistic, or worse, gone wild. You've seen them. Those are the ones we can't reach; we don't even have the time to try. I think your Alec might be one of them."

"We can reach him," I insisted. She didn't say anything. "Well, we've got to try."

"And ignore the other sixteen we can reach? Not to mention the other hundred and seventeen we've already accepted responsibility for?"

"Well, no, but . . ."

"We only have so many hours a day, Jim. There's only so much we can do. We can't afford to waste a single minute. These kids need to be fed, bathed, clothed, sheltered, doctored-and most of all, hugged a lot. They need to be reassured. We can't show favorites, we can't . . ."

"I've heard this sermon before, B-Jay," I interrupted her. "You're forgetting something. Alec is already a factor in the social equation. Holly and Tommy have adopted him. He responds to them. He responds to me too. You're going to have to fight Holly, Tommy, and me if you try to send him away."

"Okay," she said. She said it too easily.

"Huh?"

"I said, okay."

"Aren't you going to argue with me?"

"No."

"Aren't you going to list all the reasons why?"

"No. You said he had to stay. I recognize that we've got to live with these orphans' psychoses. That includes the big ugly orphan sitting in my office, drinking up my lemonade. I can work with your psychoses too. You want to take responsibility for him, it's all right with me."

"Yeah," I said. "I do."

"All right. I'll have the adoption papers ready next week. I don't think there'll be any problem getting Birdie to approve."

"Hey, wait a minute-I never said anything about adoption."

"Sure, you did-you said you'd be responsible."

"But that doesn't mean-"

"Yes, it does. We're both speaking English, aren't we?"

"Now, wait a minute, B-Jay! You're trying to railroad me into something I'm not ready for."

"Well, make up your mind, Jim-what do you want to do?"

"Uh . . . , I stopped in mid-word. "I don't know."

"That's what I thought." She dropped her feet to the floor with a klunk. She refilled both our lemonade glasses, the ice clinking like chimes. She pursed her lips in an acid frown. "God, I wish we had sugar."

"Stir it, the honey's probably settled."

"It's not the same." She drank and frowned again, then came back to the subject. "Listen, Jim-I'm not forcing you into anything. I just wanted you to understand what taking responsibility for the kid means."

"All right . . . "

"No, let me finish. I'm not sending Alec away. Not yet, anyway. I just don't want you getting too attached to any of these kids. Unless you mean it. And don't let them get too attached to you either. You may just want to play house for a while, but it'll be more than a game to them, and when you get tired of it, you'll be doing worse damage. A kid can survive the loss of one set of parents, I doubt if he can survive the loss of two and still have any reasonable chance of being healthy. So, don't come messing around my kids unless you mean it."

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize."

"Let me tell you something, Jim. Most of the time, you're in the way. You don't really do anything useful around here, and you eat a lot of food. And there are a lot of people around here who resent you. Sometimes I do too. That's when I have to remind myself that you're one of our children too, another lost soul that needs a family. Just another bloody orphan like the rest of us. So we put up with you. We pamper you. We try not to notice all that emotional baggage you're dragging around. We're doing it as a favor to the memory of your mother. We don't owe anything to you, Jim; this is just the only way we can pay back some of what we owe her. Okay, today you decided that you want to be a parent. Well, that's okay too. But not unless you mean it for keeps. I'd be delighted to have one less kid and one more parent, but it's a one-way trip. Once you accept responsibility for any of these kids, you can't abrogate it later on. Which means, Jim, nobody around here will watch out for you any more; we'll be too busy watching out for the real children, and you'll have to cope with life without our help."

"I've been doing okay."

"You think so. Around here it doesn't count unless I think so too." She paused, studied me thoughtfully. Her eyes were sharp. "Anyway, that's the way it is. Do I make up adoption papers or not?"

"I didn't think you allowed adoptions here."

"Why?"

"I don't know just the way the place seems organized. Like one big commune."

"If you had known that we encouraged adoptions, would you have volunteered?"

"Uh, probably not. It isn't really necessary, is it?"

"You tell me," she said.

"Look," I said slowly. "What I thought was that I could sort of watch out for those three kids, Holly and Tommy and Alec, for a while, and take some of the load off the rest of you. I didn't realize you wanted it to be such a deep commitment. I was thinking more in terms of being a big brother than a daddy."

"But they're not looking for a big brother, and they don't need one as much as they need a daddy." She sniffled and wiped her nose again. "Shit. I hope I'm not coming down with something. Look, Jim-the extended family isn't enough. God, how many times I've wished it were, but it's been obvious from the start that it isn't enough and never could be. Every child needs his own parent; just one special person he can rely on. We have them here-don't look surprised-we don't confuse parenthood with ownership, so it may not be obvious; but look around. There's Jack and Dove, Nurse Ivy and Little Ivy and Katy-boggin, and Birdie and Tina and Mouse. And there are others. The kids need all of us. And most of us give our all, and a little more besides."

"I don't think I'm ready for that," I said slowly.

"Neither do I, but I wouldn't stop you if you insisted. I might be wrong."

"Okay, you tell me. What should I do?"

"How many rooms in your apartment?"

"Three bedrooms, a den, a living room-"

"That's perfect. All right, do this. We're short on beds in the dorms. You take Alec and Holly and Tommy over to your place. Run them on the same clock we use down here. Don't try to be a big brother or a father for a few days, just see what it means being responsible. Tell the kids it's only temporary, until we can work out a more permanent arrangement. That'll give you a taste of it, and an out. These kids know about temporaries, they won't get attached to you until you tell them it's all right. At least, not permanently attached. Within a week-two at the most-you'll know whether you can parent or not. I don't think it'll hurt the kids, and I'm pretty sure it won't hurt you."

"I'm not committing myself to anything, am I?"

"No, you're not. But if you decide to stay, you will be committing yourself. Then you'll be expected to adopt them."

"If I decide to stay?"

"Jim, if you decide you can't parent, or don't want to, then there's no reason for you to stay on at Family, is there? I mean, that's what we're here for. We've been waiting for you to shape up. Here's your chance. Otherwise, ship out and make room for someone else, okay? I like you, but this job is more important." That last one hurt. I looked at my shoes for a while. They needed polishing. Ouch. "Okay," I said.

"Want some more lemonade?"

"Uh-uh, the honey's too cloying."

"Don't stir it."

"Hey, B-Jay?"

"Yeah?"

"If Alec had to be sent back, where would they send him?"

She sucked her teeth thoughtfully. "They have a place for the kids who can't be reached. The feral ones." "Feral?"

"The ones who've gone wild. Tarzan was a feral child, so was Mowgli--only they were lucky: Tarzan was raised by apes, Mowgli by wolves-but then it's always prettier in fiction, it's glamorized. In real life, of the feral ones don't get that much guidance-nothing-so there's not a lot left of their humanity. They're animals in human bodies. They've never learned to speak and never will; that learning window is permanently closed. They can't walk erect, their bodies have lost that potential. Their ability to reason is permanently impaired; they won't trust human beings; often they're suffering from serious bone deficiencies, malnutrition, and so on. They don't usually live very long." She sucked her teeth again. "Then, of course, there are the catatonic ones, the autistic, the deranged, the permanently damaged, the shocked, and all the other impairments and dsyfunctions."

"They don't keep them in a Bedlam, do they?"

"No, Jim, they don't." Her voice went very strange. "They take care of them."

"Oh, that's good. . . ." And then the strangeness of her tone sank in. "Wait a minute. How do they take care of them? If we're short of manpower here . . . ?"

"They take care of them, Jim." She paused, went softer. "Remember when they closed the San Diego and Los Angeles zoos, and the wild animal preserves too?"

"Yeah, that was a shortage of manpower, but . . ."

"What did they do with the lions?"

"They put them to sleep, they had to--"

"Right. Because there was no one to take care of them, and they couldn't be left to fend for themselves." She put down her glass on the desk, stood up and put the lemonade back in the small refrigerator. "It was the kindest thing they could do," she murmured. "The bastards."

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A lady of South Madagascar
wears a bag on her head; it's to mask her.

A bottle of scotch
might loosen her crotch.

Wait here, I'll go and I'll ask her.

?

"Children are the only minority who grow into their own oppressors."
-SOLOMON SHORT

I was watching when Holly fell and skinned her knee. She choked back the tears, trying very hard not to cry. She stood up quickly and pretended that nothing had happened. She hadn't seen me. She wiped at her nose and kept going, limping slightly.

"Hey, Punkin'," I called.

She saw me and looked startled. She hadn't known I was there. "Are you all right?"

"Uh-huh," she said. She brushed the hair back out of her eyes. Her expression was that frozen one that children wear while they're putting up with adults, while they're waiting to be dismissed back to their own pursuits.

"Oh," I said. "'Cause B-Jay said there was some fresh strawberry ice cream left over and I thought you might want to share some with me."

She shook her head. Her eyes were brimming with tears. I had a sense that she wanted to cry, or at least wanted to be hugged, but she was too proud to let anyone know.

I put down the hoe I was working with-loosening the soil around the tomato plants-and hunkered down in front of her. "What's the matter, sweetheart?"

"Nothin'."

"You got a hug for me?" She shook her head again.

"Okay." Sometimes the best thing is to just let it be. "Would you like to help me?"

She sniffled and nodded.

"Good. Okay, go get yourself a hoe, just like this one." I picked up mine again to show her.

"Where is it?"

"In the shed over there."

She turned and looked. "Uh . . ."

"Go on and get it." She hesitated. "Well, go on." She started to say something, then shook her head. "Are you okay?" I asked.

She didn't answer. She began hobbling toward the tool shed, but as she got closer to it she began to slow down. She stopped in front of the open door and stood staring into it. She was trembling visibly.

"What's the matter?"

"It's dark in there!" she said. The way she said it, I knew that it was more than the dark.

I was starting to get annoyed. I almost snapped at her, then caught myself in time; something wasn't right.

"Holly?"

She didn't hear me. She was staring into the shed like a paralyzed bird. What kind of snake did she see?

"Holly?"

She was starting to shake all over.

My army reflexes took over-I dropped to a crouch and came running at a sideways angle, carrying my hoe as a weapon, just in case.

There was nothing in the shed. I didn't know whether to be relieved or disappointed.

I turned to Holly. She was almost catatonic. I threw the hoe aside and dropped to a squat in front of her; I grabbed her by the shoulders-she had gone rigid. "Holly?"

No response. What the . . . ?

I swept her into my arms and held her tight. I picked her up and carried her away from the shed, carried her around the corner of the house so it was completely out of her sight. She still didn't relax.

"Come on, Holly, it's all right now. Jim is here." I sat down on the low brick fence that divided the paved part of the patio from the rest of the yard. I held her on my lap and hugged her close and started talking

to her as gently as I could. "It's okay, sweetheart, it's okay. Big Jim is here. Everything is all right."
She sniffled something.

"What was that?"

"I'm sorry," she sniffed. "Please don't hit me."

"Huh? I'm not going to hit you."

"I won't do it again. I promise."

"Hey, baby . . . It's all right. This is Jim, remember?" She was still rigid with fear. I held her out in front of me so she could see my face. "It's Jim, big ugly Jim. Remember me?"

She blinked at me and looked startled. And then she did break down and cry.

She climbed back into my lap and I held her tightly the whole time and stroked her hair and hugged her and told her everything was going to be all right. I hugged her and loved her and let her cry all over me. She sobbed quietly and steadily, only occasionally hiccuping. She didn't try to hold it back. Once she wiped at her eyes and looked as if she were trying to choke it down, but I hugged her again and told her to let the rest of it out. "Let it all out, sweetheart. It's easier than carrying it around. Come on, Holly, that's my girl."

Gradually her sobs began to lessen and she lay limp in my arms, a tiny rag doll of a person, so thin, so very thin and small.

How fragile she was.

I shifted my position on the fence ever so gently, and her arms tightened around me. "It's all right," I said.

"I'm not letting go." We sat there for a long time, me holding her and she hugging me.

Finally, she said, "I was so scared."

"I know," I said. "I saw."

"But I'm not scared any more."

"You're a good girl." I stroked her hair.

"Not while you're with me, I'm not scared."

"Mmm," I said. "Well, you don't have to be scared ever again."

She sniffed, wiping her nose against my shirt. "I thought you were going away."

"No, I'm not going away. Not while you need me."

"But I thought . . ."

"Shhh," I said, hugging her. "How could I leave someone as pretty and sweet as you?"

And even as I said it, I knew I was lying.

How could I promise to stay with this child when I hadn't kept every other promise I'd ever made?

I was a deserter from the army. I'd betrayed Jason and his Tribe: Not a good track record. I would probably betray these people too, before I was through. And I'd have a good reason for it too.

Holly rested her head against my chest then and held one of my hands in both of hers. She believed in me. The poor dumb kid, she believed in me more than I believed in my own self.

Oh, hell.

I stroked her hair and remembered how much we'd loved the children in Jason's Tribe. Or had we really? Hadn't we just used them as little slaves? We'd had them serve the meals and clear the tables and wash the dishes and do the laundry and sweep the floors; and we'd justified it all by calling it "teaching them responsibility."

I couldn't deny that they were happy children. They laughed and sang and played so joyously, it almost made me forget that humanity was an endangered species.

There was no doubt that those children were loved, but-
-that was the problem.

Some of the ways they were loved.

I guess I was guilty of that too.

I hadn't wanted to, I really hadn't, not at first, but they were so insistent, all of them, even the children said they liked it, there wasn't any shame in it, you had to let go of stupid things like shame before you could play together in bed, and after a while, it just became the easy thing to do, to be one of the Tribe. And after a while, it didn't feel wrong at all.

But what if they were wrong? And if they were, what did that make me'? A deserter. A renegade. And a child molester.

It made me uncomfortable to sit and hold Holly so close. I wanted to hug her because children need hugging; but I was afraid to hug her because . . .

. . . because Jason and his Tribe believed that it was all right for children and teenagers to have sex with each other and with adults if they wanted, and I was afraid that I might forget where I was and who I was with. I was afraid that I would hurt one of these children, and they'd already all been hurt enough.

It was this simple. I was the wrong person to be entrusted with the care of these children, no matter how much I loved them. And I couldn't tell Betty-John, because they needed me here more than they needed to know the terrible truth about me.

Neither Holly nor I had said anything for a long time. I had just sat there, thinking and stroking her hair and making cooing noises and occasionally kissing the top of her head.

I guess I knew it already. I was going to have to leave here. It would be best for everybody.

"Jim?"

"Yeah, Punkin'?"

"I love you."

"I love you too."

"I'm sorry about the . . . the tool shed. I got scared."

"That's all right, honey. I get scared too sometimes. There're some pretty ugly tools in that shed."

"Uh-uh." She didn't amplify what she meant.

For some reason, I thought of Dr. Davidson and his calm, patient voice. He could ask you anything and you wouldn't be afraid to answer him. You wanted him to know everything. You wanted him to understand.

I wished I could talk to him again.

I wished Holly could talk to him. Hell, I wished Holly could talk to me. I put on my best Dr. Davidson voice.

"Who hit you?" I said.

"Mommy did," she whispered quietly.

"Mommy hit you?" I sounded surprised. "Why did Mommy hit you?"

"Because I wouldn't stay in the closet. Mommy told me to hide in the closet and be real quiet and I did-for a little while; but then I got all scared and . . ." She stopped to wipe her nose on my shirt again. She sniffled hard, and for a moment I thought she was going to start crying again, but she didn't. She blurted quickly, "I opened the door and started to ask Mommy if it was all right to come out, if the game was over yet, and she slapped me hard and pushed me back into the closet as hard as she could and told me to shut up and then she slammed the door and locked it or pushed something in front of the door, because I couldn't open it to get out, and I tried, real hard, I screamed loud as I could too, but nobody heard me or came-and then . . .," Holly gulped, hard, ". . . and then I heard Mommy screaming. Real bad, mister. Mommy was screaming like she was being hurt real bad. And it went on for a long time. And the other thing was screaming too, the big red thing-and I pounded on the doors and hollered to let me out so I could help my mommy, but nobody did. And I couldn't get out of the closet. It was all broken anyway. I was in the closet for so long-I think two or three months, I don't know for sure. It was so dark in there, mister. Please, is my mommy all right? Can I see her now?"

"Shh, sweetheart. Shh." I held her and stroked her hair and rocked her in my lap and said, "Shh, Jim is here now. Jim is here."

So that explained Holly and why she was afraid of the tool shed, and the closets in the house, and all of the other dark enclosed places in the world.

Abruptly, she looked up at me. "You're not going away?"

"I love you, sweetheart." And it was true. I did.

And even if I didn't, how could I leave her now?

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Chuck is weird, let the whole world know it.

He brought in his bucket to show it.
We all had a fit
when we saw it was shit.
We didn't know he was planning to throw it.
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Bait

"A friend is someone who likes you in spite of yourself."

-SOLOMON SHORT

Forty-three days later (it would have been sooner, but Betty-John had to be sure), I was a father. It was one of the fastest gestations in recorded history, and one of the most fruitful: Tommy, Holly, Alec and Bear. That's what the papers said; three children, one stuffed animal.

Birdie administered the oath while B-Jay glowed proudly. The kids, scrubbed and shiny, stood solemnly by my side in new shirts and shorts (B-Jay had splurged for this occasion), not quite understanding what was going on, simply that it was important.

I had explained it to them very carefully. What it meant was that they were going to be living with me permanently now, and that I was going to be their Daddy and take care of them. Tommy nodded gravely at this, he accepted it without comment. Holly asked if that meant she was going to be the Mommy. I asked her if she wouldn't like to be the little girl instead, but she said no, she wanted to be the Mommy. I sidestepped that for a while. Alec, who didn't say anything at first, finally managed to gulp, "Bear too?" "Of course, Bear too." And that was how Bear got adopted. Getting the papers approved hadn't been hard. Betty-John had begun preparing them after the third week, and Birdie had already, very surreptitiously, completed her interviews (and I thought she'd been honestly curious about the kids). The only one that caught me by surprise was the anti-dowry release; even though Congress had already approved the Inheritance Act, the rest of the bureaucracy hadn't yet caught up. I still had to swear that I wasn't marrying the kids for their money; even if they didn't have any now, they might inherit some later. Etc., etc.

I was already familiar with the adoption oath, but looked it over again for loopholes, zingers, hooks, and bear traps. Didn't find any and took it proudly. My "I do," was one of the gladdest things I have ever done in my life.

Only two things marred the day. One a little one, the other-well, it almost wrecked the adoption.

The little one first.

During a quiet moment in the afternoon, Betty-John came to me carrying a small box. She didn't look too happy.

"What's up, Fairy Godmother?" She didn't smile.

"These are for you and the kids."

"More presents?"

"Not exactly-"

I opened the box. There were four little leather sacks, on neckstraps. "What are they?"

"Good luck charms." She wasn't smiling.

I tried to open one, but it had been stitched shut and further sealed with some kind of plastic glue.

"You'll be seeing them on all the kids before the day is over. They came in yesterday."

"Isn't this a little much-what with beepers, dog tags, medical records, trouble whistles, and all? I mean, haven't those kids got enough to wear around their necks? Why don't we get them flea collars too?"

"This isn't my idea, it's the government's. These are the worm charms I was telling you about."

"What's in them?"

Betty-John shrugged. "Top secret." Then she added, "Ground glass, cyanide, and sporulated bacteria, I'm not sure what kind."

"Huh? How do you know that?"

"One of them came open. Fortunately it happened in the medical lab while Birdie was looking at it in a steri-field."

"Oh," I said, then. "Hey, won't you be one short?"

"No, they sent extras. In any case, that was the one for Billy Jamieson."

Billy had died a month and a half before. He'd been one of the two babies on the same bus that delivered Tommy, Holly, and Alec. Pneumonia. There hadn't been any medicine available to save him.

I bounced the charms in my hand. "They're sealed awfully tight. I don't see how they're going to do much good."

"They're not for the kids, Jim."

"But the cyanide-?"

"Do you know a kid who'd take it? Uh-uh, I'm not giving L-pills to any kids. I certainly am not even going to try to explain to one why he should have an L-pill. We've got enough troubles already with boogey-men up in the hills-I don't want to have to deal with nightmares about Chtorrans too. The cyanide is for the worm, same as the bacteria and the ground glass. Any worm eats a kid wearing one of these, it'll be the last kid he eats. We hope."

I looked at her. I looked at the tiny pouches in my hand. I looked at her again. "It seems awfully callous .

..

"It's orders. If we want to receive government funding, then we have to protect our children. Someone in Denver suggested that we give them worm charms. The theory is that Chtorrans are not naturally man-eaters, but like tigers, occasionally one of them gets the taste. This is the 'Take one of them with you' theory. The kids are the bait."

"I, uh-I can see the logic behind it."

"You don't like it, do you?" B-Jay said.

I shook my head. "I'm not crazy about the implications."

She nodded. "Neither am I, but put 'em on your kids anyway, will you?"

I did, and then I went to my terminal and patched in to Central. I dug around until I found some of the preliminary reports on the charms. The material was classified, but I still had my Special Forces passwords. Whoever or whatever was supposed to be handling security wasn't doing a very good job, because the computer dumped it all onto my screen.

The worm charms had more in them than ground glass, cyanide, and tailored bacteria, but that was close enough. The theory was that the Chtorrans had awfully tough flesh, inside and out. The ground glass was to tear up the tissues. The tailored bacteria would then have a chance to get into the bloodstream and kill the beast.

But Betty-John had been wrong on one thing. It wasn't cyanide, it was nerve gas-and it was for the kids. Nerve gas doesn't have the same effect on Chtorrans as it does on human beings, it only makes them sick; but a Chtorran crunching into a kid's chest would release enough of the poison to put the kid out of his pain fast. They'd thought of everything. Now all we needed were Chtorrans considerate enough to make sure they bit the charm when they bit the kid.

There was a serious flaw in the logic of the report. Man-eating tigers had been roaming in India and Pakistan for years, but neither of those governments had ever had people start wearing tiger charms. There weren't enough man-eaters to justify it. The number of deaths per year was "acceptable." But that was the same comparison that our government was making about the Chtorrans: they aren't man-eaters and there aren't enough of them to be concerned about.

But then, why the charms?

Why charms on all military, civil, and government-supported personnel as mandatory regulations? And why charms sold at cost to civilians? That said an awful lot about how serious the government considered the Chtorrans to be. And because the government was always at least two years behind the times, that said an awful lot about how serious the Chtorran infestation really was. The number of deaths per year was "unacceptable" and this was obviously a last-ditch desperate weapon.

The appendices were interesting too. The coiled springs with enzyme dissolvable binding threads had been discarded as possibly dangerous to the wearer. Likewise, the radioactive elements and the poison vectors. The old-fashioned methods, it seemed, were still the best. Although there were not enough live Chtorrans in captivity to test the charms on, the government expected that using a large segment of the population as a test lab would show which charms were most effective. Family was considered part of

the Northwest Region. We'd been issued Formulation DSX-13. Terrific. I hadn't adopted three kids. I'd taken custody of bait.

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"Which partners are best? Sixty-niners.
And better than that? Try the Shriners."

These are the results
of consenting adults,
(and occasional like-minded minors.)

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Tommy

"Let sleeping dogma lie."

-SOLOMON SHORT

The other thing happened that night.

I tucked Alec and Holly into bed-they shared a double bed in the room next to mine-and then put Tommy in his. Because he was so much older than the other two, I felt he deserved a room of his own. Look, if I'd been more worldly, I'd have recognized the signs on the first night when I set up the accommodations. Tommy had insisted on having Alec with him. When I asked why, he said only, "Cause he's mine."

But I'd been naive. I'd said, "Well, I know you've been together for a long time. Nobody's going to take him away from you. But I just thought that it was time you had a room of your own. "

He seemed to assent, but the next morning, I found that he'd joined the other two in their bed. I didn't think anything of it at the time, I figured it was just one more sign of what they'd been through.

So I didn't argue with it. I just let it be.

But now that I was their legal father, it was my job to support them in growing up. So, I put Tommy in his own room again and told him that he couldn't sleep with Alec all the time, and I wanted him to sleep in his own room from now on.

Then I went to bed myself.

I lay there for fifteen minutes, trying to relax-trying to force myself to relax-listening to the sound of the air conditioner, and wondering how it was possible to have a family without a wife. I had just about figured it wasn't important, the kids needed me, when somebody came pad-padding into the room.

"Tommy, is that you?"

The bed creaked as he slipped under the covers. "Tommy?"

"I want to sleep here."

I didn't turn on the light. "What's the matter?"

"Nothin'. I just want to sleep with you." He slid up close and put his arms around me. Tight. He was pretty strong for a thirteen-year-old. "You're my Daddy now."

"Uh-huh." I hugged him back and stroked his hair. "But you're a big boy now, and-hey!" I pulled the covers back and sat up. "What the hell are you doing-?"

I immediately regretted yelling. I could see his dim silhouette trembling in the dark. His voice quavered.

"You don't want me?" The bottom dropped out of my gut as I realized what he was talking about.

"I thought you wanted me. Isn't that why you adopted me?"

"I adopted you because I love you, Tommy."

He sniffled.

"I do love you," I insisted. My mind was racing, trying to figure the best way to handle the situation. "I really do." He seemed almost to relax, and started to move closer again. "But-this isn't what I meant.

Tommy, do you love me?"

"You won't let me!"

"That's not what I'm talking about. There are lots of different kinds of love . . ."

"What do you want?" he cried. He wasn't even listening. He was crying now, sobbing like a little girl. I began to realize: he'd offered me the only thing he had, his body, and I'd rejected it. How could I really love him if I wouldn't let him return the feeling?

"Tommy . . ." I wanted to take him into my arms and hold him, but I didn't dare.

Instead, I got out of bed. "Stay there," I grunted. I padded into the living room and punched the phone to life. Betty-John was awake-at this hour?-she caught it on the second chime. "Who is it?"

"Jim. I've got a problem."

"Can't it wait till morning?"

"No, it can't. B-Jay, did those papers on the kids ever come down?"

"No, why?"

"Tommy just tried to climb into bed with me. I want to know where-"

"Is that all?"

"Maybe I didn't make myself clear, B-Jay. He wanted to do more than sleep."

"I got it the first time. I said, is that all?"

"B-Jay-!"

"Jim, we've had to deal with this before. In fact, it crops up so often, I'm surprised you didn't know. I thought you did. You should have recognized it in the way he treats Alec."

"Well, I didn't. And this is no time to hash it over. What I need to know is what to do?"

"Get back in bed. Tell him you love him."

"I tried that. It didn't work."

"I said, tell him you love him. Tell it to him in a way he'll understand. "

"Betty-John-"

Her voice rose sharply. "I'll tell it to you in words you'll understand. Most of these kids we're getting have been found in small towns, or other situations where there hasn't been a lot of organization, not a lot of social structure. They've survived not by any inherent survival skills-these aren't feral children, they're socialized just enough to be very very vulnerable. These are the kind of children who are the first to die in a population crash, and the ones we're getting are the ones who've learned that their survival depends upon the good graces of other human beings. Sometimes there's a price on those good graces. I'm sorry to shock you, Jim, I thought you knew.

"A lot of these kids have survived only by whoring. It's part of the rules of the game as far as they're concerned. You can't change the rules on them overnight, because they won't understand what you're trying to do. It cost them too much to learn the rules this way. When you pushed that kid away, you were telling him that he's unlovable."

"That's not true-"

"But that's what he thought, because he doesn't know how to think anything else. Jim, think of this. We're seeing the best of the kids who've survived. What do you think happened to the unattractive ones, the ones who weren't cute enough to whore?" I didn't answer.

Betty-John said it straight out, "Jim, you just told Tommy that he's got to die because you're not going to take care of him."

"But he should know better than that," I protested.

"Should he? He's had three years to learn it the other way. Can you erase that in six weeks?"

"I-I guess not. But I thought. . ."

"You adopted those kids for better or worse. Well, this is part of the worse. He's trying to pay you in the only coin he has. You've got to do one of two things. Either accept this payment, or teach him that there are other ways to pay back the debt. If you can't do the second tonight, and I don't think you can, you'll have to do the first. And spare me the arguments about morality or humanity. Not at this hour-they can all be shot down by the first thing anyone here at Family has to learn. We have to deal with the kids on their terms if we're going to reach them." She stopped for a moment. "Perhaps I owe you an apology for not warning you in advance, but I thought you had the situation under control."

"You knew?"

"Since day one. Birdie had to treat Tommy for the clap. Alec too."

"Alec-?"

"Alec caught it from Tommy. Holly was okay. Whatever kind of freako they were with, he didn't touch her."

I sat down on an icy hassock. "I-I don't know what to do. Or say. Maybe we'd better call this whole thing off."

"Over your dead, still warm and quivering body, you will. I told you there was no backing out."

"I don't want to back out-but damn it, I can't handle this!"

"Yes, you can. I've read your chart. Your sexual identity is skewed all over the map. Your latency threshold is so low-well, never mind. At least you have a sexual identity; that's better than nwst people these days."

"Betty-John," I lowered my voice. I was pleading. "You don't know what I've been through-"

"You're right. I don't know-and I don't care. I only care about the children. Jim, quit wasting my time. I know what's going on with you. You want to do the right thing. Everybody does. Your problem is that you're always worried about what other people will think. Jeezis! You can't possibly realize how annoying that is. Of all your terrible bad habits, that's got to be the worst."

"I'm sorry- "

"And that's the other one. Listen to me, I know you can handle this or I would never have signed your papers. The important thing is that Tommy gets enough loving and nurturing and caring so that he has the raw material out of which to build a real human being. And I don't really care what flavor that nurturing comes in any more, as long as Tommy learns how to be a person in his own right. At least that way he'll still be a whole lot better off than all those walking wounded who are going to have to be taken care of all their lives. You know what to do, so get off your goddamn ass, go in there and parent."

"B-Jay, I hear what you're saying, but I don't know where to begin. I don't know how . . ."

"Yes, you do. I've watched you with the kids, Jim. You treat them like little human beings. Why do you think they love you so much? You're already doing the one thing they need the most. So, forget all this grown-up versus child bullshit; that's one of the ways we alienate ourselves from our own species. Stop thinking of them as property, or even as a great responsibility. Just treat them with the same respect that you would any other person-like you do anyway-and you'll do fine, because that's the only thing they really need from you.

"Go in there and talk to him," she said. "Just talk to him-or better yet, let him talk to you. Let him tell you what he wants and needs. You'll see for yourself what's appropriate. It'll be obvious. Start by admitting that you need someone to hug too and it'll be a lot easier."

She hung up. I know it's impossible to click off an electronic phone angrily, but her closing chime still sounded harsh.

I went back into the bedroom. Tommy was gone.

He wasn't in his bed either, nor in Alec and Holly's. They were curled up together around a freshly stuffed and cleaned (but still amputated) bear.

He wasn't anywhere in the apartment.

I thought of running back to the phone, calling B-Jay again-no, there wasn't time. Besides, I might still be able to catch him. I grabbed a robe and went barefoot out into the night.

I didn't have to look very far. The moon was almost full and he was sitting on the patio, his arms around his knees, his thin nightshirt almost transparent in the glow. He was crying quietly. I sat down next to him.

"Tommy," I said. "What are you doing?"

"Nothin'." Then, "I'm trying to decide where to go."

"Go?"

"Can't stay here any more."

"What about Alec and Holly?"

"They're yours now."

"They belong to you too."

"Not any more. You 'dopted them."

"Don't you think they care about you too?"

"It doesn't matter. I guess I'm too old now. Like Mikey."

"Who's Mikey?"

"My brother. My real brother. He was . . ." He frowned, trying to remember. "He was older than me, but I don't remember by how much. But when he got too old, Foster didn't love him any more, so he had to go away."

"Who was Foster?"

"Our last Daddy."

"Did he love you?" Tommy nodded.

My throat was dry. "How did he love you?"

"He let us sleep with him, and things . . ." Tommy looked up. "He was really okay, even if sometimes we didn't like what he did. He made us wash regular. And he never let us go hungry."

"What happened to him?"

"He died. I guess. One day he didn't come back. A few days later, the other people found us and sent us here."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"I did. I mean, I thought you knew. We told the ladies at-at wherever it was, and they said they'd tell you."

"Do you want to come back inside?"

"No."

"Why not?"

" 'Cause."

I sat down next to him and put my arm around his thin shoulders. He stiffened.

I said, "Tommy, I'm sorry. I didn't know you needed me to love you that way. Where I grew up, I was taught that was wrong-that men don't do things like that with other men."

"Foster said they do." His voice was high and innocent. "He said it was noble and-and platonic, and a lot of other things." Without ever having met him, I could have cheerfully killed the man. Consenting adults is one thing; impressionable children. . . .

"Well," I answered slowly. "I guess some places they do and some places they don't."

"What kind of place is this?"

I opened my mouth to answer, but something stopped me. A distant sound perhaps. A feeling. I said, instead, "What kind of a place do you want it to be?"

He thought about it for a moment. I found myself listening for that sound again, something very faint and far away. Finally, he said, "Sometimes, it was nice. Foster said he loved me. He said he loved me better than anybody. I liked that. He said I was his pretty little boy, and he always brought me toys and things and lotsa times, pretty clothes to wear. Those were nice times. He liked me to be pretty for him, and I wanted to make him happy, 'cause that's when he made me happy."

I didn't say anything to that. I didn't know what to say. I wasn't even sure what I felt any more.

Revulsion-not at Tommy, but at the man who'd used him-sorrow, pity, anger, empathy; yes, a lot of empathy. All Tommy wanted to do was please the people around him. I could certainly understand that.

"You don't love me any more, do you?" Tommy asked.

I put my arm around his shoulder and pulled him close to me. "Actually," I said, "I love you a whole lot more now, because you've been so honest with me. Now, I understand a lot that I didn't understand before. I'm glad you told me."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Mm."

We sat in silence for a moment.

After a bit, Tommy said, "I want this to be a place where I can be loved."

So. That was the answer.

"All right," I said. "I guess we both have to do some growing up. You're going to have to help me too." I pulled him closer, he didn't resist. "Do you want to sleep next to me tonight?"

"If you want me to." He said it indifferently.

"No," I said. "Only if that's what you want. Let me tell you the rules about sex. They're very simple. Sex is about having fun with someone you like. You don't do it with people you don't like. You don't ever do it with anyone unless you both want to. That's the most important thing. If you don't want to do it, you can say no."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Oh, okay," he said.

He had accepted the information; but whether or not he'd really gotten it-well, it was a start anyway.

"Yes," he said, suddenly.

"Yes, what?" I wasn't sure what he was talking about.

"I want to sleep with you tonight."

Maybe he just needed the reassurance, I told myself, because it was the only reassurance that he could understand; and maybe he did understand and maybe he really wanted to sleep with me. And maybe . . . I could make up reasons all night long. It was time to stop listening to all the little conversations about what I should w shouldn't do.

"All right." I picked him up-he wasn't too big for that yet. And I hugged him and I said, "I love you, very, very much, Tommy. And it's all right for you to love me any way you want. Just remember that you don't have to do anything that you don't want to, except wash regular. Understand?"

He looked me straight in the eye; his cheeks were wet with tears. "I want to. I want to make you happy. Okay?"

"I'm happy already."

"I want to make you happier."

This was an argument I couldn't win. "Okay," I said, and let the subject drop.

"Can we go back to bed now?"

"Sure." I thought about everything I'd said and wondered if I'd left anything out. I said, "Tonight I just want to hug you a lot, and we don't have to do the other thing, is that all right?"

Goddamn that Foster. Tommy looked disappointed. But he nodded.

I started to get up, still carrying him, but that was awkward, so I let him walk. He put his arm around my waist and I put mine around his shoulders, feeling very strange and uneasy, and a lot less sure of myself. I felt as if I'd stepped into some strange new territory, and all my maps were wrong.

At the door, I stopped. There was that sound again. And this time, I recognized it.

Chtorrans. Hunting.

I fingered my worm charm in response. I stopped long enough to check all the doors and windows-as if that would make a difference-and then we went to bed.

I held him close because that was what he wanted and after a while it was what I wanted too. And everything I'd said to Tommy was just as true for me too. I didn't have to do anything I didn't want to.

The hell with everybody else. They weren't in this bed.

I was lonely and scared and I wanted to be loved too. I wanted to.

And so did Tommy. But I couldn't let myself, not because it was wrong, I didn't know what was right or wrong any more, but because I didn't want to be like Foster. So we didn't.

In the morning, I found Tommy in bed with Alec again, and Holly had moved to the other room. Over breakfast, she said it was because she wanted to sleep. I didn't pursue the matter. The ice was thin enough already.

?

A lady's iambic pentameter is
thirty-two inches diameter.

The breadth of her scansion
is due to expansion
in the pants of a critical amateur.

?

? 36

?

Birdie

"The universe has its own cure for stupidity. Unfortunately, it doesn't always apply it."

-SOLOMON SHORT

I told Birdie about the Chtorran calls I'd heard in the night and she went gray. "Okay," she said. "We'll talk about it at Council on Sunday."

"We ought to do something now," I insisted.

Birdie lowered the specimen slide she was peering at. "Like what, for instance." She picked up another one and squinted at it. "We already have the worm charms. By the way, where's yours?"

"Oh, I took it off when I showered this morning."

"Don't bother. The artificial leather is waterproof."

"I really doubt that a Chtorran is going to catch me in the bathtub."

Birdie went on to the next slide. "Oh?" she asked. "When did they start making appointments?"

"Anyway," I said. "The worm charms aren't going to be enough, and frankly, I'd rather have an earlier line of defense."

"You're right, of course. Worm charms don't do the wearer much good. Do you have something in mind?"

"A worm fence."

She grunted. "The subject was discussed nine months ago and tabled."

"Nine months ago there weren't Chtorrans foraging in the hills."

"Hand me that frame, will you?" She slid the last slide under the microscope. I waited for her to return to the subject, but she concentrated on adjusting the contrast on her screen instead. She switched to ultraviolet, then back to pseudo-white laser source. "Normal, dammit. Thought I had something."

"Well, what about a fence?"

"Fences are expensive. And we don't have the manpower."

"Three lines of razor-ribbon and punji-barriers would buy a lot of security, Birdie. You've been lucky here. This is a regular Chtorran smorgasbord, without a cover charge."

"Winter's coming on soon, Jim."

"All the more reason why we have to do something."

"I thought worms hibernated. "

"Sorry, it's summer when they're torpid. And not so's you'd notice. They lay low in the heat and come out at night. But they still eat the same amount."

Birdie was placing another slide under the lens, adjusting the focus. She dialed a greater magnification and nodded to herself. "That's not what I read in the papers."

"The papers are wrong. I was in Special Forces for nearly two years. We burned worms in their igloos. January was the most dangerous month. I don't know why the government continues to listen to that international collection of bunglers who're living so high in Denver, but their analysis of the habits and life styles of the Chtorr is ninety degrees off axis."

Birdie tapped at her keyboard, storing the image on the screen in memory, and switched off the microscope. As the room lights came up, she looked at me, wiping her hands on a towel. "Jim, I understand your . . . ah, concern about the worms, but-

"You mean psychosis, don't you?"

"If you wish. The point is, Betty-John and I think it's more important that you concern yourself with your kids." She eyed me carefully. "By the way, how are you getting along with them?" It was not a casual question.

"We're still making adjustments," I said guardedly.

"What does that mean?"

"Nothing."

She searched my face. "I doubt that. You're so transparent, Jim, I can read fine print through you. Tell me the truth."

"Tommy's got a . . . problem."

"Obviously. And you're not content to let him have it by himself, are you?"

"Huh?"

"You have to have a problem about it too." She asked, "What's the problem?"

I took a breath. What was the best way to say it? "Spit it out, Jim."

"I love that kid. But he's-I don't want him to be a queer."

"So? What's the problem."

"Birdie!"

"What?"

"He climbs into bed with me, and I hate pushing him away."

"So don't."

"I'm not a faggot!"

She flinched. "Please, Jim-nobody around here has ever called you 'nigger,' have they?"

"I'm only one-fourth black, and it doesn't show," I said.

"No, it doesn't," she agreed.

"You can't even tell from my gene charts," I added.

"Or from your mentality," she finished. "That's probably what saved your life during the plagues.

Statistically, Caucasians have the least resistance to the Chtorran bacteriology. Negroes have the highest.

You ought to be grateful your grandfather wasn't a racist."

"Thanks for the sermon. But we were talking about Tommy."

"We still are. The point is, around here, we don't use negative indices."

"Huh?"

"Epithets. Bad names. For one thing, some of our local faggots have short tempers." She indicated a chair and I sat. "For another, language determines thought. You channelize your thinking with the words you use. Negative indices are a barrier. They keep you from experiencing the complete picture."

I made an impatient waving gesture with one hand. "I know all that, Birdie. Let's just cut to the chase, all right?"

She turned her chair to face me, pulled it close and leaned in close. She said, "What I'm getting at is this: for someone who has seen as much and done as much in the past two years as you have, you are one of the most pompous, arrogant, and unlikable bigots it has ever been my misfortune to deal with. I like you, but it doesn't change the fact that you have the very bad habit of not really listening to people. You're not really listening now. You're more concerned with boogey-men up in the hills than in dealing with the children you've supposedly accepted responsibility for. At the first sign of trouble, you're ready to disown the kid. So what if he's homo? That's when he needs your love twice as much because he'll have to deal with all the other uncured bigots running loose."

"All right, all right-I don't need the sermon."

"No, you don't," she admitted. "You need the same kind of hugging Tommy does. You need to know that it's all right to love."

"Not that way!" I realized how loud I was and lowered my voice.

She cocked an eyebrow at me. "Who hurt you?"

"Huh?"

"You heard me. Who hurt you? Sometime in the past, you made a decision about something. What was it? Didn't your father ever hug you?"

"What does that have to do with it?"

"Nothing at all-except he's the only one you might have learned fathering from. Did your father ever hug you?"

I thought about it. I tried to remember. I wanted to say yes, but I couldn't find any memories of him hugging me. Not ever.

I remembered one time . . . I had been leaving on a trip. It was my first real time away from home on my own. I felt proud that my parents trusted me. I hugged my Mom and she hugged me back, but when I hugged my Dad, he had just stiffened.

He hadn't hugged me back.

Birdie was looking at me. "What's that about?" she asked.

"What?"

"That expression on your face. What were you remembering?"

"Nothing. "

"Uh-huh. He didn't hug you very much, did he?"

I said, "Not ever. Not that I can remember." I added, "He loved me. I know that. It's just that he wasn't a hugger."

"Uh-huh." She nodded. "So, don't you think that has something to do with how you're handling Tommy?"

I felt angry. "Are you telling me I can't raise my own kid?"

She grinned. "Yeah. I am. And you know something? I could say the same thing to ninety-nine percent of the people I meet. Anyone can make a baby, it doesn't take a hell of a lot of skill. Little Ivy made two of them. Does that qualify her as a skilled parent? You tell me."

I shook my head.

"Very perceptive. But she thinks she's doing okay, because she doesn't know any better. The truth is, she's doing the absolute very best she can. So are all the other parents in the world. That's the joke. The commitment of a parent is so total, so absolute that they give one hundred percent of themselves, one hundred percent of the time. I've seen whole families mortgage themselves into bankruptcy to buy an extra year of time for a child with an incurable disease. This is it, Jim: you do everything you know how to do, because you can't do anything more. My job is to let you know that there's more to know. There's always more. When you know what it is, you do it."

I folded my arms across my chest. "Cute," I said. "I have to tell you, I really hate this kind of stuff. It's always so glib."

She looked upset. "You really are well defended," she said. "There's not a lot of space there even for yourself-so how could there be any space left for Tommy." She held up a hand to cut me off. "No, I'm not going to explain that." She rubbed the bridge of her nose, then ran her hand through her already rumpled hair. "Jim, I don't know what's going on with you or where you came from, and you don't have to tell me if you don't want to; but you've got a lot of big fat red buttons sticking out all over you, just waiting to be pressed. And every time someone presses one, you go off like a skyrocket."

I wanted to tell her about Jason and the Tribe. If she'd have asked me the right question, I would have-but she didn't. And I didn't volunteer it.

Why not?

I didn't want anyone to know what I had been or what I had done.

She must have seen it on my face, because she changed her tone abruptly. "All right, let me come at it this way. You think you know quite a bit about the Chtorrans, don't you?"

I nodded.

"And it's your considered opinion that the teams in Denver don't know as much as you do, isn't it?"

"Yeah." What was she leading up to?

"That's because you have firsthand knowledge that things are very different than they believe, right?"

"Damn straight," I said.

"Good. So why aren't you willing to give your own adopted son the same benefit of a doubt that you're giving the worms?"

"Huh?"

"Don't you think you ought to examine the human race's tentacles and strange habits with the same kind of unbiased observation? You've saddled yourself with the exact same kind of arbitrary judgments that you condemn the men and women in Denver for having."

"Birdie, I was raised old-fashioned . . .

"Good. That's a great excuse. That'll keep you stuck for a long time. You won't get results, but you'll

always have a wonderful reason why not."

I opened my mouth. I closed it. I felt frustrated. I wanted to punch her. I wanted to cry. How did I get into this anyway? "Dammit, Birdie! I thought the job of a parent was to help a kid grow up to be a good human being."

"Who said it wasn't?"

"Well, then what are we arguing about?"

"I'm not arguing, Jim. You're the one who's raising his voice." I sat down again. She was right.

She said, "Look, Jim, you've got this whole thing confused with programming. Do you think your job is to make a duplicate of yourself? Don't be stupid; you'll just be condemning the kid to a lifetime of failure. He'll never be able to be as good at being you as you already are. See, here's the joke: you have no voice in how that kid turns out. It's entirely his responsibility."

"I'm sorry, Birdie, I don't get that."

"Good. So, let me ask it another way. Did your parents have anything to do with how you turned out?"

"Uh, not really."

"Right. They only provided the space for you to grow. You were in charge of the growing. Pretty lonely, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, it was."

"Yeah," she agreed. "That's the essential human condition, loneliness. Remember that. That's why we do everything we do. So, look, if your parents had nothing to do with how you turned out, why do you think you have anything to do with how your kids are going to turn out?"

"I hear what you're saying, I get what you mean, but I don't. I mean, it doesn't make sense."

"No, it doesn't. So, just remember what it was like for you as a kid. Do you get it, Jim? You can't teach your kid anything; he can only learn it for himself. All you can do is provide the opportunities for him to learn. Being a parent doesn't mean you own the child; it means you're entrusted with the responsibility of teaching him responsibility. Nothing more. You're performing a service for an adult who is still in the process of getting there-and that service is the creation of continuous opportunities for selfactualization and empowerment. What he does with them is up to him. The best you can do is be an example. He'll learn from what you do, not from what you say." She smiled. "That's the annoying part. You have to take care of yourself."

"It sounds selfish."

"It is," she agreed. "Listen, the only thing you can ever give your kids is your own well-being. They're going to look to you as the source of all well-being in the universe. If they don't see it in you, they're not going to know it's possible. You know, most parents go crazy with that. They think their job is to sacrifice and sacrifice and sacrifice for their kids. Don't do that, Jim. You'll just drive them crazy, particularly when you start thinking that they owe you something for all that sacrifice. Don't expect it, because you're not going to get it. Growing up is a full-time job. They're not going to have much attention for anything else for a long time to come. Let them be the way they are, because they sure as hell can't be anything else."

"So, you're saying that it's all right if Tommy is . . . that way?"

She shrugged. "He's thirteen, maybe fourteen. Do you know how to change him?"

"No."

"Neither do I."

"So what do we do?"

She looked at me with a blank expression. "Nothing. We do nothing at all. Tommy's fine just the way he is." She went on, "See, this isn't about Tommy at all, it's about you. It's about your judgments. They're getting in the way of your willingness to express your commitment. The problem isn't with Tommy. Tommy doesn't have a problem with being gay-if he is. Maybe he isn't, we won't know until he's ready to tell us; but whatever he is, he's already handled it in a way that works for him. You're the one with the problem. And if you're not careful, you'll give it back to Tommy. Right now, you're telling him you don't love him."

"But I do!"

"I know you do. Or we wouldn't be having this conversation."

"But you're telling me there's nothing I can do!"

"That's right. You've already done enough. Now it's time to stop doing and start being."

"Huh?"

"You're carrying around a whole bunch of pictures about what's the right way to be a Daddy. They're getting in the way. You're already a Daddy. But those pictures you've got about the right way to do it—that's really your ego in disguise. You've got some stuff going on about your manhood, right?"

"Uh . . ." That was the large part of it.

"Right?" she pressed.

"Uh, yeah."

"Do you know most men have that same stuff going on? You're normal. You're just as crazy as everyone else. Now, try not to take it out on Tommy."

"I see your point," I said.

"Thanks. Listen, your commitment is real clear. You've taken on a big responsibility, and this conversation is about that responsibility. It's about the fact that you want to do the job right, don't you?"

"Yeah. "

"Good. So let me tell you this. You won't. No matter what you do, you're going to screw it up. Your kids will blame you, just like you blamed your parents, and probably still do. The only way to measure your success as a parent will be the speed with which your kids forgive you."

"That's really reassuring."

"That was the good news," she said. "I don't think I want to hear the bad."

"You don't have a choice. Listen, Tommy's all right. He'll figure things out fast enough. He'll work it out one way or the other. He's a survivor, he's already proven that. Now, he's ready to go beyond just surviving. Teach him how to contribute to the people around him and you'll have done your job. No, it's Alec who I'm really concerned about. He needs to learn how to be independent. Neither you nor Tommy will be around to take care of him forever; he'll have to be on his own a lot sooner than you think, it always works that way. He's your real problem, Jim."

I hadn't even thought about Alec in all of this. He was so passive, so accepting of everything, that I tended to take him for granted. If he didn't say anything, then I assumed everything was all right. Except Alec hardly ever said anything.

"What do you mean?"

"That kid needs to learn how to interact with other people. He's very withdrawn."

"You're right about that. I just haven't had the time to . . . "

"And you never will. There's never enough time, Jim."

"Okay." I threw up my hands in a gesture of surrender. "What do you suggest?"

"I recommend that you put yourself and your kids into the Living Game at least three times a week."

"You're kidding."

"Not at all. If you want, I'll make it an order. I'll prescribe it as necessary to your mental health, and you'll have to be there. I want you and your kids to participate in this community. At least one of those nights, I want you assisting in the management of the Game."

"I don't need that cr-stuff."

"Neither do I. Neither does B-Jay. And we play every night. It makes a difference for the kids, Jim."

I sighed. "You play real dirty, lady. What time should we be there."

"Yep," she agreed. "And I get results. Be there at seven-thirty. Wear comfortable clothes." She turned back to her keyboard, then stopped and looked at me again. "Oh, you still want to put up worm fences, don't you?"

"Huh? Yes!"

"All right, look. Betty-John and I were discussing the idea again last week, when the charms came down. I agree with you that it's a good idea, but B-Jay doesn't want to spare the manpower; but if you're willing to put them up yourself, I'll talk to B-Jay and we'll push it through at the next Directors' meeting."

"Birdie, one person alone can't install a worm fence—"

"I was getting to that. I can probably talk B-Jay into letting you have one and a half helpers."

"One and a half?"

"Jack Balaban and Dove. Don't make a face. Dove can be your gofer. And Jack's a good worker. Take Tommy out to help you. He needs some strong role models anyway."

"But Jack and Dove?"

"Your bigotry is showing, nigger."

"Uh, sorry. I'll give it a try."

"You do that. You might do some growing up."

I walked away from Birdie's office feeling better. Not a lot, just a little.

Because she was right about almost everything she had said. She had only missed one point.

I wanted to make love with Tommy as much as he wanted to make love with me. But I was ashamed of the wanting. And I was ashamed of my shame.

If I wasn't a part of Jason's world any more then I couldn't follow its ways. But I didn't know if I could be part of this world either.

I wondered how long I could keep holding him off before one night I gave up and gave in.

?

There was a young fellow from Norwich

Who liked having sex with his porridge.

With sugar and cream

and a buttery scream

(The leftovers went into storage.)

?

? 37

?

Life is but a scream.

"A taboo is someone else's rule about what you may or may not do with your own body."

-SOLOMON SHORT

The Living Game was something Betty-John had invented for the children. And for the rest of us too. The assumption was-as B-Jay explained it-that because of the plagues and everything else, we had all forgotten how to live. We were all so busy lost in our various griefs and trying to survive at the same time that we were everywhere else but here. "Some of us are lost in the past and some of us are just lost. And some of us are elsewhere, but damned few of us are living in the present."

It was B-Jay's theory that we needed to relearn, that we had to be retaught. Only there weren't any classes in how to be a human being, in how to be alive. "It's like the instruction book that you didn't get when you were born. Except you did-only everybody else has piled so much bullshit on top of it, you can't tell what's real and what isn't any more."

She sounded a lot like Jason in that moment, but I knew what she was trying to say, so it was all right.

"The way we learn things as kids is by playing with them, trying them on and seeing if we like how they fit or not. These kids haven't had a chance yet to play at life. They've been too busy living to learn how to live." B-Jay's idea was to ease the kids into the larger responsibilities of the world by turning it all into a game.

In a way, it wasn't that much different from some of the exercises we'd done in the Tribe, in the circles. And at the same time, it was very different. Jason's games had been about playing. B-Jay's games were about winning.

For example, Jason had once said, "Everybody hug. Hug everybody else. The job isn't finished until you are complete with every person in the circle. You must start hugging and you can't stop until you feel at peace." That exercise went on for hours. It's possible to hug someone and still not be with them completely. Jason's instructions were to hug each person until you could be with them completely. But Betty-John played the game a different way: "Okay, let's divide into teams, and let's see which team can give out the most hugs. The team that gives the most hugs wins."

I suppose that comparing them like that makes it seem that B-Jay's way was the wrong way, was somehow more mechanical and obligatory-a kind of prostitution of the act. But Jason was working with people who were alive and awake and ready for the next step. Betty-John was working with children, some of whom bordered on the catatonic; she was still trying to wake them up into their own lives.

Jason's people knew how to communicate. B-Jay was still trying to establish communication and for B-Jay, at this moment, hugs and kisses were the most powerful and direct form of communication.

Quantity was more important than quality, because she was trying to overlay some very powerful anti-survival programming with a new set of responses, particularly the all-important competitive ones.

Winning was everything and repetition was the way you stamped the lesson in. There weren't enough adults to take care of all the children, so the children had to be taught to be their own adults and take care of themselves, and they had to learn it fast. The compassion and the lovingwell, they could learn it later. If there was a later.

There were too many children and not enough resources and never enough time. We had to make it work anyway, because there wasn't any alternative. Looked at like that, Betty-John's approach seemed the only rational and appropriate one. So what if it was hard and competitive and mechanical? It worked. Sort of. It let us survive.

Anyway.

We played the Living Game.

Sometimes it was about how many dishes we could wash or how much laundry we could fold or how

much litter we could pick up. It was never about doing chores. If some of it didn't get done, nobody said anything. It wasn't about chores, it wasn't about work. It was about winning. It was always about winning. Sometimes Betty-John or Birdie would talk to us about "winning the other war, the grown-up war."

"Nobody ever won a war by accident," Betty-John would say. "Winning isn't a habit. It's a commitment. It's a way of life. Everything you do-whether it's washing the dishes or sweeping the floor or picking up litter-is a game to be won. It's not a problem. It's not a chore. It's not a burden. It's an interesting challenge, with a definite goal. When you accomplish the goal, you win. This is the game: get yourself addicted to winning. That's the only way we're going to win the big war. We have to learn how to win all the little battles between here and there. I promise you, washing the dishes and picking up after yourselves and cleaning your plate and raking the leaves-all of it is all part of winning the big war.

"It's this simple," said Betty-John, "I will live every moment of every day as if the whole outcome of the war depends upon my commitment to victory. Everything I do shall produce a victory over chaos of every kind."

The kids ate it up. Of course.

So did I. It became mantra. Don't stop. This is part of the game.

Every so often, Big Ivy would hold a special game for the girls and Jack Balaban would hold a special game for the boys. When I asked, Betty-John told me that those classes were about bodies. Their own and others. And shame and curiosity and fear. Yes, there was some nudity. Later, they would be about masturbation, if necessary, and even about sexual expression, if necessary. I didn't ask the details. What I did ask was, "Are the kids that far gone?"

B-Jay nodded. "Some of them are. I'm hoping that appropriate role-modeling will help them find an avenue back, and I'm not above using whatever tools are available." She must have seen the look on my face, because she said, "Don't worry about it, Jim. Most of this is pretty innocent stuff. The girls need to be taught about menstruation and personal hygiene. The boys need to learn that an erection doesn't mean you're going to die. Remember poor Marty Christian?"

Marty Christian would have been funny, if he hadn't been so pathetic. He was a perfect example of how the mind makes inappropriate connections between one fact and another.

I participated, at first reluctantly, then with a kind of alacrity that was as much performance as anything else, and finally with a real enthusiasm, because I could see the difference the games meant to the kids.

One day, B-Jay asked me to lead the next night's game. I tried to beg off, but she insisted. "Jim," she said meaningfully, "first Thursday is when we have the Directors' meeting, remember?"

"Uh, right."

"You may not have noticed, but this is still a corporation, and we do have a budget and expenses and taxes and a lot of other paper concerns that need to be addressed." She didn't mention the worm fence. She didn't have to.

Just the same: "B-Jay, I don't know how to do this."

"Yes, you do. You just don't know it."

"I don't know what to do!"

"Make something up. That's what everybody else does. Just have a clear goal in mind so that when you win, everybody can experience a victory. But don't make it too easy. It isn't a victory unless you have to work a little for it. Or a lot."

Sigh. I thought of my worm fences. This was another test, wasn't it? "Okay." I gave in.

I spent most of the afternoon clearing the brush from the base of the peninsula, where I wanted to install the worm fence. It wasn't quite the narrowest part; I would have preferred to work at the very base of the peninsula, but it was too rocky. There was no easy way to get onto the rocks, let alone anchor the fences. No, we'd have to do it higher up, where we had enough good soil to anchor the spikes. If I could get a gas-hammer we could shoot the spikes right into the ground and the job would be a lot easier; otherwise, we'd have to use the screw-in kind and do it by hand.

While I worked, I tried to figure out what kind of a game I would have the children play. I wanted to do something more than just wash dishes or pick up litter; I wanted to give these kids something that they

weren't getting anywhere else-hell, even a chance to scream out their frustration might be a welcome break.

It was while I was working on a particularly well-rooted bush that I noticed a little boy watching me. I didn't recognize him immediately; there were a lot of kids around I didn't know; but he shouldn't be out here alone either.

This was a continual problem with some of the kids, they weren't socialized enough to be bonded to any specific person or place. Some of them were near-feral and wandered off a lot. We knew who most of our problem children were and we kept them on tight leashes; but this must have been one of the new ones.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi, back," he said.

He was about eight years old, maybe ten. Hard to tell. Short pants that didn't quite fit him, a bulky sweater. Needed a haircut. Black hair. Missing a tooth.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Clearing the bushes."

"Why? Don't you like the bushes?"

"I like the bushes fine. We just don't need them here."

"Oh. How come?"

"We're putting up a fence. A big strong one. To keep the worms out. That's so we can sleep well at night."

"Oh," said the boy. He watched me silently for a while, then he said, "You're really scared of worms, aren't you?"

"Everybody is," I said, without thinking.

"I'm not," he said.

I gave him my best indulgent smile. Childhood bravado. I wanted to say, "Wait till you see one up close," but Betty-John wasn't particularly fond of scaring the hell out of the children for no reason at all.

For no reason at all. Hm.

An idea occurred to me.

To the boy, I said, "You'd better get back. You don't want to wiss lunch. I think Little Ivy is making Chocolate Disaster for dessert today."

"I don't like chocolate," he said. "What's your name?"

"Jim. What's yours?"

"Jim who?"

"Jim McCarthy. And you're really not supposed to be here now. Somebody is probably looking for you. Come on, I'll take you back." I held out my hand.

"I don't need your help." He backed away.

"Okay." I held up my hands to show I meant no harm. "Have it your own way." I bent back to the task at hand. The kid looked skittish enough already. When I looked up again, he was gone. No matter. He couldn't go far.

Just as well. I wanted to think.

I had an idea for a game we could play.

Maybe one of the reasons we were having so much trouble making contact with these children was that they were so terrified. Dogs, darkness, people, worms, their own bodies-these kids were psychological disaster areas. The ones who knew what they were afraid of were the lucky ones; the rest of them were afraid of things that could only be found in a catalog of Nameless Horrors. (How do you alphabetize a catalog of Nameless Horrors anyway?) Or worse.

It wasn't just that our kids were afraid; it was worse than that: they were afraid to be afraid.

If we could get them to acknowledge how scared they really were, that would be the most honest experience in their lives. It might be the start of real communication.

That was it. We had to get them talking. I knew what I wanted to do.

It was one of Jason's exercises.

Jason always said, "What you resist, persists. Your resistance is the energy it feeds upon."
Right. If you resist your own fear, what you get is the terror of fear compounded. If you resist your feelings of anger, you get rage. If you resist your grief, what you get is unending despair.
"Give in," Jason always said. "Let yourself be angry, afraid, or sad, or whatever else comes up. The experience hurts a lot less than the resistance to it. Once you let it out, it leaves you. Let go of it, it disappears."

I knew the exercise would work.

It had worked for me. Over and over and over. Dammit.

I knew what the real problem was.

I missed the circle. I missed the loving. I missed the good things about the Tribe.

I didn't want Family to be a Tribe-but I did want Family to have some of the family feeling of the Tribe.

When I finally came back, later that afternoon, I must have had a thoughtful expression on my face because B-Jay stopped me and asked, "What's that about?"

"What's what?"

"The look."

"Huh? Nothing. I was thinking about tonight?"

"Did you figure out what you're going to do?"

I realized then that she was testing me-no, pushing me into larger and larger responsibilities-the same way we pushed the children. The same way Jason had pushed me. The same way Duke had pushed me. And everybody else. It annoyed me. I wanted to ask, "Why can't I go through life at my own speed?"

But I didn't. I just nodded. "I'm going to have a screaming contest. We're going to see how much noise we can make."

"Sounds like a perfectly horrible idea," Betty-John grinned. "The kids will love it." I wanted to tell her the rest, but she shrugged me off. "I don't have the time right now, Jim."

"I really want you to hear this, B-Jay. I think there's the possibility of a breakthrough here."

"Jim, I mean it. I don't have time." She shoved me away. "I trust you. Go and teach the kids to scream."

So I did.

After dinner, I walked the kids over to the main hall. We were all dressed in shorts and T-shirts. The heat of the day still lingered and it was a warm, slightly muggy evening.

Inside my head, I was experiencing a bit of stage fright. Second thoughts. Maybe I wasn't qualified to do this; but then, I argued with myself, if I'm not qualified to do this, nobody is.

The hell with it. Let's just do it and find out.

We pushed into the well-lit hall. Alec and Holly and Tommy and me.

There were only two or three of the older kids to assist me, Little Ivy and Trisha and Mike; everybody else would be at the Directors' meeting; but these three were experienced. We shouldn't have any real trouble. I took them aside and explained to them briefly what I was going to do and what they should watch out for. "You're probably going to need some boxes of tissue. Some of the kids will start crying. I'm going to explain to them that it's all right to cry. The way you win this game is by seeing how much screaming and crying you can do. So don't try to help them or comfort them. Let them just all have a good scream and if they cry, they cry. They'll be fine. You'll know if someone's in real trouble."

I stepped to the center of the room. The children quickly formed themselves into a large circle. The games always started with a big circle.

"Okay," I said to them, "tonight's game is about noise. All kinds of noise. Big noise, little noise, happy noise, even unhappy noise. So, let's start by practicing. Let's see how much noise we can make. Let's see who can scream the loudest." And we were off.

The kids began to scream like banshees and wild Indians and air raid sirens.

Little Ivy grinned at me above the uproar. The little monsters loved the idea. Everybody else was always telling them to keep quiet; here was a grown-up telling them to roar like a madhouse. Most of them did.

"You must be talking to my deaf ear!" I shouted. I had to holler to make myself heard. "I can't hear you!"

That upped the level of noise by at least ten decibels.

"I almost heard something that time-but Alec wasn't shouting." I waited till the noise level began to ebb a

bit and went down on one knee in front of him. "You don't have to shout if you don't want," I said. "But Bear can't make any noise without your help, so would you shout for Bear?"

He shook his head. "Not even for Bear?"

Alec looked very uncomfortable. I didn't want to push him too hard, but I did so want him to make a noise, any kind of noise at all.

"Tell you what," I said, deliberately casual. "You ask Bear if he wants you to make a noise. And if he does, then you make a noise. And if he doesn't, you don't have to. Okay?"

Alec nodded.

"Go ahead. Ask Bear."

Alec turned away and bent his face down to Bear's neck hole. I waited, but he didn't turn back. Well, maybe Bear was a slow talker.

"All right," I straightened and spoke again to the rest of the children. "That was a good warm-up. Now, let's do it for real. Now, let's make some real noise. Let's have them hear us in the big house."

This time, they put their hearts into it. Once they realized it was all right to shriek their lungs out, they began to be willing to really let loose. I noticed that the paint had shaken off some of the walls and the bark was starting to blister on some of the trees outside.

I waved my arm in a big circle as if I was winding them up and they kept up the noise as long as they could. Their faces were shiny and red. All of them were very excited now. They were jumping up and down and screaming as hard as they could. Good. I needed them to reach that peak just before exhaustion. One more good scream ought to do it.

"Okay, this is it. This is the last one," I said. "Let's make it count."

When I looked back in Alec's direction, I noticed that he had his mouth open and he was screaming as hard as he could. At first, I thought it was good. I'd finally gotten him to make a sound.

Then I realized that he had dropped Bear on the floor before him, he was screaming out of sheer panic. Uh-oh

Instinctively, I grabbed him in a gigantic hug. I pulled him close to me and let him scream into my chest. He was rigid-and he couldn't stop screaming. He just raged and raged and raged. He couldn't hear me and he couldn't stop.

The other children were slowing down now, turning and looking at Alec and me. They were puzzled, uncertain. Was this part of the game or not? I made a signal to Little Ivy, I wagged my fingers in a circle in the air-have them make some more noise-and I walked out of the room, carrying the still screaming Alec. I strode across the dark lawn to the big swimming pool, kicking off my shoes as I walked, and then stepped right off the edge and into the deep end, Alec and all.

We came up gasping. I was still holding him with my right arm and dog-paddling and treading water like crazy. Alec still wanted to scream, but he had been caught totally off guard and he was coughing and spitting out water.

"That was good, Alec. That was very good. I love you, sweetheart. You did that just right. You just have to remember to stop screaming too."

He glowered at me, but I just hugged him and kissed him close. Anger was real. Anger was good. It was much better than indifference. Anger, at least, was alive. I headed for the shallow end and the stairs.

We came back into the big room, both dripping wet, me laughing, Alec trying to retreat into himself and not succeeding. He wanted to be angry at the same time. And he didn't want to let go of me. And he wanted to scream again, but he didn't want to be walked into the pool again.

Little Ivy was already wrapping towels around the both of us. This was not the first time one or another of the kids had gotten the swimming pool treatment. The proximity of the pool was one of the main reasons why we held the games in the main hall.

We stripped Alec's wet clothes off of him and had him sit down, wrapped up in three big warm towels. Somewhere there were terry cloth robes, but Little Ivy couldn't find any of them, and it was more important that we continue with the game.

I had all the children sit on the floor now, still in a large circle and Little Ivy dialed the lights down low for a spooky effect. I pulled Alec into the safety of my lap.

Okay," I said. "Now, for this part of the game, we have to think of the saddest things in the world. I'll start. The saddest thing in the world is good old Wag going without any supper. Isn't that sad?"

Some of the children nodded and looked serious. They thought that was very sad. A lot of them liked old Wag.

"Can anyone think of anything sadder?" I asked.

One of the little girls raised her hand. "What about everybody going without any supper?"

"Oh, that's a good one," I said. "That's much sadder. Is there anything sadder than that?"

One of the older boys, said, "How about everybody going without supper because there isn't any food?"

"And nobody knows where Mommy is," added one of the smaller boys, Toby-Joy Christopher.

I had to be careful with this exercise, I didn't want them accelerating into the next stage before they'd finished with sadness. I said quickly, "Oh my, yes, that's terribly sad. Oh, goodness, that's so sad, I want to cry." And I pretended to weep into my hands. Alec looked up at me oddly.

"Let's think of some more sad things," I prompted. "Who can think of something even sadder?"

"My mommy went away," said Toby-Joy.

"I never had a mommy," said one of the little girls. "My mommy died," said another.

Good. Now, they were comparing sadnesses.

"My mommy said she'd come back to me. I'm just waiting for her here," said one little girl in an almost haughty tone. The way she said it, she was setting herself above the game: I'm not one of you. I'm just visiting.

Several disbelieving looks answered this declaration. These children weren't stupid. Everybody knew that if you were here it was because you didn't have anywhere else to go and nobody was coming back for you. That was even true for most of the adults. Popular rumor had it that Jack Balaban was wanted for murder in Ireland. Not true-it was something more like a hundred and forty-seven parking violations in Chicago-but the rumor was more fun than the truth.

There was abrupt silence in the room. All of the children were abruptly alone with their own griefs.

I said, "Okay, everybody think of something sad. If you can't think of something sad, make something up; but think of the saddest thing you can. Now, let's all think real hard about how sad we feel. Close your eyes if you want." Most of them buried their faces in their hands. We'd played lots of imagining games before: This one wasn't so different, just more intense.

"Gosh," I said. "I feel so sad. I feel so very very sad. I think I'm going to cry. Let's everybody cry because we feel sad. If you can't cry, it's all right to pretend. Just make it up. Just let yourself be sad. See how sad you can feel. It's all right to miss Mommy and Daddy and all your friends from school and your favorite teacher or your dog or your cat or your favorite doll or toy or TV show or Gramma and Grampa-anything. Just think of something you miss. Even your favorite food is fine. Now feel real sad about it. Oh, my goodness. I'm starting to cry. . . ."

I put my own face into my hands and made weeping noises. Around me, some of the children began to weep too, some of them pretend, some for real. One or two giggled while they pretended, some of them peeked out between their fingers; but when they saw that we were serious, they went back behind the safety of their hands. In a minute, most of them were crying softly to themselves.

Alec sat in my lap and looked up at me. I looked down at him. Very gently, I took his hands in mine and kissed them, then I placed them over his eyes and wrapped my arms around him. We made little weepy sounds together. His were almost imperceptible, but I could feel them in the cradle of my embrace and it made me feel warm. I couldn't remember Alec ever crying before.

"Everybody cry," I repeated as gently as I could. "Everybody think of the saddest thing you can and just let the tears come out. You're doing fine. Just cry until you're through crying. Just like me. Just like Little Ivy."

One or two of the girls were still giggling. They still thought this was all make-believe; they didn't realize how serious this was about to get.

After a while, the crying ended and Little Ivy began working her way around the room, wiping eyes and noses. We all looked at each other; the children had such solemn expressions on their faces, I had to smile. "Listen. It's all right to be sad," I reassured them. "It's part of missing things. It's all right to miss

things and then when you're through missing them, it's all right to smile again. Okay, everybody hug everybody else now," I said. "Don't stop until you've given everybody in the room a big hug."

The children liked hugging games, and in a very few minutes, they were all giggling again. And then they all jumped on me in a big wet cluster-hug and we collapsed in a pile of laughter with me and Alec on the bottom.

After a bit, we continued.

The next part of the game was the scary part.

I had them resume their places on the floor and we began again. "When I was a little boy," I said. "We used to go out in the woods at night and tell the spookiest stories we knew to see how much we could scare ourselves. Who knows a scary story?" I looked around the room. Nobody raised a hand. "Oh, come on-am I going to have to tell the story about the leprechauns and the penguin?"

Little Ivy groaned. "No, no-" she said in mock horror. "Anything but that. Somebody think of a scary story."

"I know one," said a small voice. A little girl we called Crystal because she seemed so delicate and fragile.

"Do you want to tell it to us?" She hesitated.

"Well, when you're ready." I let her off the hook. "Little Ivy, do you know a scary story?"

Little Ivy nodded enthusiastically. "I once saw a great . . . big . . . purple . . . and red . . ." She held up her two fingers about ten inches apart, but her eyes were looking directly into mine. Her expression was impish.

"Ivy!" I started to say

". . . hippopotamus!" she finished, spreading her arms out widely, laughing at me.

"That's not scary," said Tommy. "Besides, there aren't any hippopotamuses any more. Now, if you'd seen a great big hairy red, purple furry catty-pillar, that woulda been scary."

"Have you ever seen one?" He nodded quickly. Somberly. "Was it scary?"

He nodded even quicker. As if he didn't even want to admit it. I lowered my voice and looked around the room. "Who else has seen big hairy red, purple furry catty-pillars?"

A few of them raised their hands. Some of them were probably lying or making it up, it didn't matter.

"Okay," I said, holding Alec firmly in my lap. "Let's make some noises to show how scary we think big hairy red, purple furry catty-pillars are. Now, wait-this isn't about making the loudest noise you can, just the scariest; fraidiest noises, okay? Make the noise you would make if you were really scared."

It was a chilling sound, the sound of fifty children moaning and screaming and weeping. Even pretend-moaning and weeping and screaming was eerie.

"Good," I said. I was beginning to wonder if this was such a good idea. But once started, we had to go through to the end. I couldn't leave these kids stuck in the middle of a scary place. The experience had to be completed. "Okay. Who has another scary story. "

"I'm scared of the dark," said Holly, a tiny voice beside me. I reached over and patted her hand. I was surprised by her presence. I had thought she was sitting next to Little Ivy.

"Who else is scared of the dark?" I asked. Almost all of the hands went up. I raised mine too. In my lap, Alec moved. He raised Bear's one paw.

"That's a good scary one. Okay, let's make some 'fraid of the dark noises."

This was a different quality of noise, but no less chilling. Little Ivy was losing her grin. She wasn't sure where I was going with this.

"I'm not scared of the dark," said Davey Holmes. He and Chris I lynchley were sitting side by side. Chris looked a little pale and he was holding Davey's hand tightly. "Uh-uh," said Chris. "It's the things that hide in the dark."

"Big hairy men with long dark hair and bushy beards," said Davey. "That's who hides in the dark. I don't like them. I don't want to grow up if it means being like that."

"Little round fat men with bright red faces," said Chris. "I don't like little round men who say nasty things."

"Big mean women who yell at you," said Toby-Joy. "That's who I'm scared of."

"I'm scared that my mommy won't come back," said a little round girl we called Hobbit.

"I'm scared that my mommy will," said Crystal. "I'm scared of my mommy."

The room was suddenly quiet. This was a new dimension in mirror and the children were clearly uncomfortable with it. As if she sensed this wasn't enough explanation, Crystal added, "My mommy tried to hurt me. She had a big knife, but I ran away and hid from her."

"My mommy locked me in the dark closet," offered Holly. It seemed a pitiful offering compared to Crystal's, but to Holly it was a major one. "My mommy slapped me and locked me in the dark."

Crystal was unimpressed. "My mommy said she was going to hurt me real bad when she found me. She said it wouldn't do me any good to hide. B-Jay says she won't let her find me, but I know she's still looking for me, and my mommy always finds what she's looking for."

This thought made some of the children look around nervously. Hell, I wanted to look around myself; but I suppressed the urge. My guess had been right. These kids were good at frightening themselves. Hell, they were frightening me.

Kim-the one we called Kimmy-Winkles-spoke up then. I noticed she was holding Nic's hand very tightly in her lap. "I'm scared of strangers," she said. "Especially strange children. Especially Richard."

I didn't pursue that one. I didn't know who Richard was. We didn't have any Richards here in Family. Behind her, though, I noticed that Little Ivy was scribbling furiously on a notepad. She had a look of grim satisfaction. A lot of things were coming to the surface here. There would be a lot of follow-up.

"Foster," said Tommy quietly. "I don't want to go back to Foster. He held me down on the bed and hurt me. In the ass. I cried and he cried and he promised he wouldn't do it again. But he did."

Alec didn't move, but at the same time, I sensed that he had become more rigid, more attentive. I looked down at him in my lap. He was hugging Bear close to his chest in a miniature version of the same embrace I had him wrapped up in. Was he hiding inside himself again? I realized how tightly I was holding him and loosened my arms to give him more space. Maybe then, he could loosen his hold on Bear. I wondered if we were all crowding him too much. Maybe we needed to give him space to come to us? I didn't know. What if we did the wrong thing? I stroked his hair and kissed him gently on the top of his head.

"That's all so scary, those are the scariest things I ever heard of," I said, and I meant it. Nothing I could have made up could possibly be as scary as the things these children had been through. And I was sure we hadn't even scratched the surface. This was only what they were willing to admit.

"Okay," I said. "I want you to know it's all right to be scared. Sometimes scary things happen. There's nothing wrong with being frightened of scary things. But sometimes we carry around the fear long after the scary things have gone away. And you know what? We forget to scream. So, now, here's what we're going to do. When I tell you, but not before then, we're all going to scream and make all the noises we want to make when we get scared. We'll all make scared-to-death noises, okay? Everybody ready? Does everybody have something scary to think of? Okay; close your eyes if you want to and make all the scary noises you can."

A low moan. A sob. A high-pitched weeping. A shriek. A scream. A whimper.

A symphony. A cacophony. A chorus of mangled, anguished cries.

The sound was hideous. The emotions were exquisitely dark and furious, churning and swirling like a maelstrom. The fear came roiling round and round, all red and cold and fiery. It was an icy spike ramming up the spine and through the heart and into the base of the skull, and it came out as a moan, a scream, a gasp, a shriek-

It just kept on getting louder and louder, until I thought we would all go mad

And then, just as quickly, the uproar leveled off, hesitated, gathered for a moment more, and then-sated, satiated, spent, exhausted-it began to ebb. The shrieks and screams died away first, leaving only the crying; then as if terrified of its own sound, the crying too began to ebb, leaving only a few small whimpers here and there around the circle.

I looked around at them. They looked shocked, stunned, horrified, haggard.

And at the same time, they seemed more alive than before. As if some of the walls of impassiveness they hid behind had been shattered.

"I don't want to play this game anymore," Holly said. "This isn't fun."

"We're almost through," I reassured her. "And I promise you that the next part is much more fun than the last part."

The kids looked very nervous. I had to move fast.

"All right, listen. We're almost through now. There's just one more thing to do. I want you to close your eyes again and pretend again. But this time, I want you to pretend that you're the scariest thing in the world; that everybody in the world is scared of you, all the monsters and mean people and things in the dark are scared of you! Close your eyes and watch them run away from you; but you have to make the kind of noises that will scare away all the scary things, okay? Is everybody ready? Let's all be big and strong and mean and scare away all the bad monsters in the world, right now!"

This sound was the loudest of all-and the most joyous. Beethoven would have envied the spirit of this chorus. They were discordant and beautiful and hideously loud, and I loved every jangling decibel of their defiance.

"Get angry at the monsters!" I shouted. "Tell them what you think of them. Tell them to go to hell! Tell them to go fuck themselves!" I got a little carried away myself, but the kids didn't mind. They laughed and screamed and cheered and soon they were jumping up and down-and dissolving into laughter and happy tears and hugs and kisses and silly-sad smiles, and it was okay, and it was good, and for just a little while, they almost looked like normal children again.

They even looked happy.

We hugged and laughed and ended up all jumping naked in the pool and had the biggest water fight in the world and it was the best summer night of my life. And theirs too.

I was grinning like a crazy man, I was so pleased. It had worked. I had done good.

?

There was a young fellow named Jim
who liked to get naked and swim
with plastic sex toys
shaped like pubescent boys,
'cause he'd rather be gay than be grim.

?

"A waist is a terrible thing to mind."

-SOLOMON SHORT

Of course, Betty-John gave me hell.

"Just what in God's name did you think you were doing?" she demanded. "Kimmy-Winkles is still having nightmares. Simone can't stop crying. Allie and Dave are afraid to go to bed alone. And trust me, you don't want to hear what little Jim Pauley did!

"You've turned half the kids into Weeping Willies and the other half are so jumpy, Birdie is thinking about sedating the whole camp for a week. Have you seen what's going on? The ones that aren't bursting into tears every two minutes are having such an attack of the sillies, it's got to be a psychotic reaction; everything we say to them, they burst out giggling, as if it's all some colossal joke. They're running around like deranged gargoyles, making faces and trying to scare the shit out of each other-including the ones who are still so skittish, they're back to wearing diapers. Jesus, Jim! Is this how you repay a favor? I was in there, fighting for your goddamn fences and you're out here, playing psychotic head games on the children. Most of them are so hoarse they can't talk; six of them have sore throats, and three are in the psych ward today for observation."

I listened to it all without comment.

There really wasn't anything else to do. This was something else Jason had taught me, taught all of us. When people give you a communication, you don't have to do anything with it. Just hear and acknowledge that you heard it. "Answer the question, acknowledge the statement, that's the basis of true communication. Don't do anything else. That isn't communication."

So, I let Betty-John say whatever she had to say knowing inside that it didn't have a thing to do with me. It was her upset, not mine. I listened. I empathized with her anger. But I didn't have to accept it as a personal attack, because-I could even hear Jason explaining it to me-her anger wasn't about what I did, her anger was really about her fear. What I did only triggered it. So, now my job was to let her have her anger so she could get past it.

If I were to argue with her, she would stay angry. If I were to try to justify what I did, she would have to do something to prove herself right and me wrong. She would have to punish. So I should do nothing except listen. When she was through being angry, her anger would disappear and she would have nothing left to say or do.

It took a while, but she finally ran down.

"Okay," she said. "What? I'm waiting. What was the point of that little exercise in hysteria?"

"The children are fine," I replied as calmly as I could. I wanted to project certainty. It was very important that she be reassured. I would have to explain this very carefully. "What you're seeing right now is a release of energy. It's very normal. It's very natural. It's healthy. It's a good sign. I know it looks like upset; it is, but it's upset pointed in the right direction, not the wrong. Trust me."

B-Jay gave me her most skeptical look. "I've heard that same kind of bullshit before, Jim, from confirmed child-molesters: 'But the child enjoyed it too.'"

I didn't want to argue with that one. That brought up too many memories of Loolie and-there was just too damn much knotted up in that conversation. I needed to bring the discussion back to the issue at hand.

"B-Jay," I said carefully. "These children are little walking timebombs. The day I arrived here, you told me some of what they've been through, and you've been reminding me ever since that these kids are desperately trying to do whatever they have to do to survive. Do you think I haven't been looking at them? I see that everything you've said is right on the money. Most of these little monsters have walled themselves up so tight that nobody's going to get at them. God, B-Jay, it's terrifying how right you are."

There's very little chance that any of them will ever be fully human, let alone sane. But we have to try anyway, because if we don't civilize the next generation while we still have the chance, then there isn't any point in fighting the other war either. That's what this is about. I wanted to do something that would make a difference for them."

B-Jay's expression relaxed only a little. It was hard for her to argue with her own words.

"The only thing that's really going to help these kids," I said, "is if they learn how to . . . how to reach out to us from their own side. They've got to learn that pain and fear and grief are normal, and they've got to learn how to let it out. That's what all that screaming was. A safety valve. They needed it. Otherwise, they're just going to keep on building up intolerable pressure until they explode and do something dangerous and stupid and selfdestructive."

B-Jay was frustrated and angry and disbelieving. "Who made up this shit, Jim? Where did you get this idea?"

I wanted to respond angrily, I wanted to reach her so badly. "B-Jay. I made it up. I've done this all my life; whenever I get so frustrated and crazy with other people's inability to hear what I'm trying to say; whenever I get so crazy that I want to put my hands around their throats. I go and lock myself in a dark closet, or I get in the shower and turn the water up full, and then I scream and scream and scream as hard as I can and as long as I can until I'm too weak to even stand up any more. I mean it. It works. It's like blowing off all the rage and fear and grief in one great painful orgasm. If I can't let it out, then I have to carry it around inside of me-and if I do that, then I'll die. Or worse, I'll do something terrible and other people will die."

B-Jay's eyes were still hard. "Maybe it works for you, but these kids . . ." She shook her head.

"Okay, yes. What I did was extreme; but it looked to me that something extreme was called for. Most of these kids are still robots. They're only going through the motions. Yes, you're making progress here; but oh, so slowly. It's so frustrating, because I know what's possible for children. So do you. These kids are still doing whatever you want them to, like machines, because they don't know there's anything more. It's just another set of rules for survival. Their lives are going to be about finding the right set of rules and nothing more. They won't be alive. No-hear me out: Do you think I don't know what these kids are feeling? I've been there, dammit. And I hurt so badly for them that I had to do something."

"So you taught them to be crazier?"

"Give them a week, you'll see the difference. They're starting to play with each other in a whole new way. They're starting to relate to each other instead of at each other. Please, B-Jay, don't be so quick to judge."

"Jim, I believe that you believe what you're saying. But, you should have checked with me first. You should have waited until-"

"Goddamn it, B-Jay!" It was my turn to be angry. "I tried to check with you, but you never have the time to listen to anything, and you're always asking people to put off their plans so you can get yours done, and then you have the nerve to wonder why everybody's always pissed off at you and why people are always doing things without your permission. I don't know about everybody else, but I'm sick and tired of waiting for you to have the time to sit and listen. And please don't give me that story about how much you have to do. I've heard it already, ten times over, and I can probably give as good a performance of poor B-Jay as you can."

"These kids were hurting, and I had a tool that I thought would help them. This is only the first step.

These kids need to be trained, given the tools to handle their own emotions, their own reactions, so that they can cope with the rest of the bullshit that life is going to throw at them. It all comes down on all of us before we're ready for it. The least we can do for these kids is give them some tools for fighting back. I gave them permission to scream at the universe. Now they have a way to express what they're feeling, where before all they could do was bottle it up. Now they won't be pressure cookers or timebombs. They'll scream it out, and then there'll be a little bit of space for them to try to be rational, or as close to it as they're ever going to get."

"You think this is an improvement?" Betty-John demanded. "Have you even looked at your own kids today? Alec has turned into a babble-box. We can't shut him up. He finds a word he likes and repeats it

over and over and over until he gets bored with it, then he finds another word and starts all over again." "He's playing, B-Jay, in the only way he knows. But notice that he's playing with language now, instead of resisting it. He's interacting with his mental landscape. And I'm so glad to have him babbling anything, I don't care. He's got a lot of energy to discharge."

"He's not a goddamn battery! Christ on a pancake! Where did you pick up this psychobabble?"

"Uh . . .," I hesitated.

"What are you, Jim? An unreconstructed Modie?"

"I've never done the Mode training," I said, vaguely uncomfortable.

"Well, you sure as hell talk like it! Where have you been, Jim?"

I shook my head. "I don't want . . ."

"Uh-uh. No way. If you want to teach the kids to open up, you'd better start with yourself. Just who the hell are you anyway, mister?"

"You know who I am."

"No, I don't. For all I know, you could be a renegade spy yourself."

I felt my blood turn cold at that. I almost rose from my chair. "I'm not. Not that; I know what renegades are like, B-Jay. Better than you think. I'm not one of them. I don't ever want to be like them again-"

"Again?"

I hesitated. Then I admitted it. "Yes. Again. I was captured. Brainwashed. I lived with a Tribe of Revelationists-"

"Oh, shit!"

". . . for almost a year. I finally escaped. But not before I saw what they were capable of." I had to stop for a moment. I had to wipe my eyes before I could continue; I hadn't realized how much it still hurt. "I learned a lot from them, yes. Okay, I admit it. Not everything they said was totally off the deep end. But I know who they are and how dangerous they are. And I broke their brainwashing on my own."

"You think so? You still look a little glassy-eyed to me. If I'd known . . ."

"You'd have turned me away, right? That's the famous BettyJohn compassion."

She hesitated. "No-but I wouldn't have trusted you near the kids either."

"Oh, come on, B-Jay! You're talking like a goddamned reactionary. The breakthrough exercises work no matter who applies them."

"Don't be stupid, Jim! Do you think this stuff is new to me? Give me a break! Most of the crap you're repeating is leftovers from the Technology of Consciousness Movement of the last century! Shit, you guys are all alike; you think you just invented enlightenment last week."

She pointed a finger at me, jabbing me hard in the chest. "Let me tell you something. Personal enlightenment seminars were the big fad when I was in college. They called them Effectiveness Training and Power Sourcing and Jargon Blasting. And everybody was doing Mode. You weren't alive until you'd done Mode. I had a lot of friends who disappeared into that black hole; some came back, some didn't, but while they were under the influence, it was always the beatific smile and the patronizing 'You have to experience it to understand.' I understood what was going on then, and it hasn't changed any now. Every day, you have to have a new transformation, a new breakthrough in possibility, a new level of bullshit and psychobabble!

"Hell, I didn't even do any of the seminars and I got sucked in for a while. I was one of the ones who was going to prove I could be just as enlightened without doing any seminars; I was too stupid to see that made me just as much a proselytizing evangelist as everybody else. And all of us were redefining our language every day, so we could map out the diverse new landscapes of responsibility. It was rabbit-hole city. Oh, we had conversations about conversation and learned about the possibilities of possibility. We got so good at it, we bludgeoned people to death with our enlightenment. We played caseworker with all of our relationships: parents, teachers, friends-and we couldn't understand why they were so repulsed when all we wanted to do was give them the gift of seeing how impoverished their lives had been. Oh, we were a self-righteous bunch of assholes.

"We handled each other's cases all day long. We scoped each other. We handled rackets and busted numbers. We metered and bench-marked and state-mastered. We did it all. And you know what? Our

lives were fucked up even worse, because now we had a new level of bullshit to explain why they didn't work. I finally got wise, when I realized the cost to my soul.

"I didn't trust the Modies then. I trust them even less now that they're taking over the government. But most of all, I don't want Modies or neo-Revelationists or anyone else playing with these kids' heads, because these kids already have enough problems."

She finished with a look of finality, as if there was nothing more to say on the subject. And maybe there wasn't. Her mind was made up and nobody was going to change it. Her expression was tight, as if she was daring me to respond.

I realized something abruptly. Something I should have known all along. Betty-John was just as crazy as the rest of us, in her own charmless way.

Of course, I wanted to believe she had it all together. I wanted to believe that someone somewhere knew exactly what they were doing and why. I wanted to know that it was possible, because if it was possible for anyone else, then maybe it was possible for me too. But maybe it wasn't possible here.

"Well? Don't you have anything else to say?"

I shook my head. "It wouldn't do any good. Your mind is made up. I did what I thought was right. You don't think it was right. We both want what's best for the children. We each have different ideas. But you're the one who's entrusted with the responsibility. Not me. So it's your word that has to count, not mine." I thought for a moment longer, then added, "I wanted to be of service here. I still do. I'm sorry that you don't appreciate some of what I have to offer."

She opened her mouth and closed it just as suddenly. She looked surprised. She hadn't expected me to say what I just did. "Well," she said. "Well, I'm glad you realize it."

I nodded. I realized it. I realized a lot more than she knew. Family was just as much a cult as Jason's Tribe was. A different philosophy, a different leader, a different purpose, a different head game-but a cult nonetheless.

And either I wanted to be a part of it or I didn't.

The truth was, I wasn't sure what I wanted any more.

"I just want to help the kids," I said. And that much was true. She sighed. She ran a hand through her graying hair. She looked very tired. She shook her head in resignation. "Go do something where you can't get into any more trouble. I got your worm fences approved last night. Go put them up." Then she added, "Just stay away from me for a while. And stay away from the kids too. Even your own. I don't know how I'm going to clean up this mess. . . ."

?

A lady who jogged in the breeze
had bosoms that flapped to her knees.

Said she, "They're quite warm,
they keep me dry in a storm,
and when it snows, I use them for skis."

?

"Good neighbors make good fences." -SOLOMON SHORT

It's impossible to build a fence that will keep a worm

Actually, out.

A full-grown Chtorran is like a Patton-6 tank with a mouth. A half-grown worm is the mouth without the tank attached. The best you can hope to do is slow the worm down-or at least make it so painfully uncomfortable for the creature to go over, under, or through the barricade that it looks for a way to go around instead.

The idea is to make the price of lunch higher than the worm is willing to pay.

That's what Jack Balaban and I were doing.

Using Duke's name and number again, I requisitioned enough worm fencing to cordon off the narrowest part of the peninsula with multiple rows of razor-ribbon and punji-barriers. Sooner or later, I knew, one of Uncle Ira's accounting programs was going to catch up with me; but in the meantime, I seemed to have an unlimited credit account; that is, Duke did.

A good fence would be tricky to install, yes, but if we were thorough, we might be able to buy ourselves a reasonable degree of safety. First, we would lay down a strip of razor-ribbon, several long coils of it, firmly anchored every half-meter by a spike in the ground. The razor-ribbon alone wouldn't stop the worms, but it would certainly stop any human beings working with worms. We needed to keep the renegades from getting to the punji-barriers; renegades had been caught hammering down breaks for their extraterrestrial partners.

Then, the first row of punji-strip would be installed just behind the razor-ribbon. Punji-strip came in huge rolls; you unrolled it where you wanted it and spiked it into the ground. What you got was a wide strip of aluminum spikes, unevenly spaced, pointing in all directions, mostly upward. The spikes were sharp and nasty looking and coated with microencapsulated bad news: poisons, ucrve jellies, and various forms of bacteria that seemed to like the vsides of a Chtorran.

A human being might be able to pick his way across a punji-barrier, if he were careful, but a worm could never make it. Too many clumsy little feet. The worm would rip out its belly. The average Chtorr didn't have the leverage to step over these spikes; its feet were tiny little stubs that didn't lift its weight as much as helped shuffle it forward. Punji-barriers were nasty.

The barrier alone wouldn't kill the worm, just injure it badly; hut the stuff on the spikes could give a worm a bad case of the cold rullywobbles. And someday we'd find something that would kill them a little quicker.

The worms knew about the barriers, of course. Most of them stayed away from them. Only a very young and inexperienced worm would willingly make the attempt to cross one, and then only once; the value of the barriers was more as deterrent than as weapon.

Behind the first punji-barrier, another row of razor-ribbon. Behind that, another punji-barrier. Behind that, more razorribbon. The theory was that the combination of the two would discourage most worms and renegades.

The army generally recommended nine lines of razor-ribbon, separated by eight rows of punji-barriers; the army also recommended trenches and mines where possible, plus robots and field sensors. I didn't have a trench digger and I didn't want to risk planting mines. A robot would be useless here, and sensors are useless if there's no one to watch the monitors.

So far, the statistics showed that the fences worked; even small installations, like this one, were effective enough to justify the expenditure. Some pessimists said that it was only because there were enough other good places to feed that it wasn't yet worth a worm's trouble to plow through the barriers.

The pessimists were probably right, but I'd vote with the statistics for now.

Fortunately, just beyond the hiking ridge the peninsula shrank to a very narrow strip of land, only thirty

meters wide. Indeed, the peninsula was only a peninsula because of politics. Family had been designed and built as a long crescent island. It was also supposed to have its own independent government; but the county fathers, fearing the loss of millions of lovely tax dollars had passed an ordinance requiring that all utility cables be accessible above ground. This meant that the builders of the island would have to lay down a connecting strip to the mainland, a narrow connecting tongue of rugged, ugly rocks, and in so doing, would also put Family firmly under the jurisdiction of the aforementioned county parentage. Before the Chtorr had come, the joke had been that the people of Family wanted nothing more than to be orphans. Now the Chtorr had given them their wish. Sort of.

My thought was to put the worm lines down just behind the rocks and hope that no worm would want to cross the rocks and the fence. The rocks were pretty nasty just by themselves. On the other hand, if a worm was determined enough to make it over the rocks, then it probably wasn't going to be stopped by the worm fence either.

Maybe Betty-John was right. Maybe I was being paranoid. And maybe I still woke up in the middle of the night, shivering and thinking of Jason and Orrie and Jessie.

No. I had to vote with the statistics.

I voted with three rows of razor-ribbon and two of punji-that was all we could afford to install-and a heartfelt prayer that it would be enough to deter.

Now, if only the worms would agree with me. We started early in the morning. Tommy and me, Jack and Dove.

Jack Balaban was a dour looking man with a Welsh accent so thick he was nearly incomprehensible half the time. He had a slight stoop to his body, as if life had been beating on him for several decades, but he was surprisingly tender toward Dove.

Dove was a year older and half a head taller than Tommy. He wasn't exactly mute, but preferred to speak in sounds, whistles, and noises instead of words.

When Dove saw a car, he would point and make the shrill whine of a turbine. If he saw a plane or a chopper, he would make appropriate engine sounds. He could describe floaters, boats, jet skis, motorcycles, and off-road vehicles this way. He was also fond of imitating the electronic chime of the telephone, startling people to their feet, until they realized it was only Dove again. His repertoire also included an astonishing range of explosions, warbles, wheeps, and whistles.

Apparently, this skill had rubbed off on Jack, because the two of them had developed their own language of sound effects and conversed not so much in words as in noises.

When I was around, however, both of them shut up. I finally confronted Jack with it.

He shook his head and denied it. "I don't dislike yeh, Jim. I don't like yeh much, but I don't dislike yeh either. Just don't care much either way, I don't."

"Is it something I've done?"

Jack thought about it a moment, stroking his mustache. "Na." He pulled on a pair of thick gloves and picked up a coil of razor-ribbon he had been laying out. He resumed uncoiling it across the grass.

I picked up the gas-hammer and followed him. "Well then, what is it?"

"Do yeh have to be liked by everybody yeh know?" he asked.

"If someone doesn't like me, I'd like to know why," I said. "If I'm doing something wrong, I'd like to know, so I can stop doing it."

"You're just like all Americans," he said. "You're too worried about who likes you, and not enough concerned with gettin' the job done."

I thought about that.

Maybe he was right. But maybe not. I thought I was more concerned with results than with making friends. Certainly, I'd had my share of arguments to prove it.

"I don't think that's so," I said. "We're out here doing this job right now because I pressured Betty-John. And I don't think she likes me very much anymore because of it."

"Yeh," he acknowledged. "That's the other side of it. When yeh do finally decide to work for results, yeh don't care who yeh walk over."

I decided that Jack didn't have a very clear-cut philosophy behind his argument. He was just going to say

whatever he needed to say to justify his dislike for me, and if the facts disagreed with his opinions, he wouldn't alter his opinion; he'd alter his justification.

We worked in silence for a while. It was hard work shooting the anchoring spikes into the ground; even with the gas-hammer. Abruptly, Jack said, "Yeh never properly mourned your mum, did yeh?"

"What's it to you?" I snapped.

Jack shook his head. "Nuthin'."

And then, the nickel dropped. I straightened and looked across at him. His expression was dark and unpleasant.

"You were sleeping with her, weren't you?" I asked.

He didn't answer. He was wrestling with the coil of razor-ribbon. But I knew it was the truth by the way he ignored me. There was something Jason had said, something about how to get the truth out of people.

"Most people don't tell the truth, not really," Jason had said. "They've been trained not to. If you want to get the truth out of them, you have to startle them or get them angry. Most people only tell the truth when they get angry. So if you want to get the truth out of someone, you have to upset them first. It almost always works; the only drawback is that you'll have a really angry person on your hands for a while."

Hmm.

I said to Jack, "Did she give you a bargain rate? She did that for steady customers." I said it with deliberate calm.

Jack didn't flinch. I had to give him that much.

He laid down the roll of ribbon, straightened, brushed off his hands, and looked around for the boys.

Dove and Tommy were a ways away, carefully unpacking the rest of the spikes.

Jack turned back to me. "Did yeh have to study to be an asshole or does it come naturally to yeh, Jim?"

Colored by the musical lilt of his Welsh accent, the words were as pretty to listen to as they were mean.

"She was a whore!" I said.

"Mebbe so," he agreed, startling me. "We've all done some terrible things since this whole bad business began." He pulled off a glove and ran his hand roughly through his wavy hair, as if he was puzzling out the best way to say what he thought. "But there's still a difference between doin' terrible things and bein' a terrible person. Your mum was a fine lady, but she was lonely for your dad, and if she took her comfort where she could find it, who're yeh to sit in holy judgment? Your mum had a lot of love for these children here, and she did a lot of good things for them, and I don't much like listenin' to you spittin' on her good name."

"You think she was good? I can tell you stories-"

"Sure, and so can I. For every bad story yeh tell me, I could probably tell yeh six good ones to counter it."

"You know why she had so much love to give these kids?" I could feel the blood rushing to my face.

"Because she sure as hell didn't waste any of it on her own. I'll tell you how much love she had! My sister moved off to Australia, she couldn't stand my mother's silence. And I was so pissed off at finding a different man in her bed every time I saw her, I finally stopped going to see her. You know she divorced me."

"You divorced her. She needed you, lad."

"That's what she said, too. She needed. Didn't you ever notice that everything was always about her and her loss, and what she needed now. She needed us to take care of her now. That's what she said. But who was going to take care of us? She wouldn't. All she did was demand. She screamed at me, every day-it was all my fault that nothing worked anymore, why couldn't I be a better son? She wouldn't leave me alone. She was driving me crazy. Why do you think I went into the army? I could have pleaded exemption, but it was the fastest way I could think of to get away from her."

"She was grievin', lad-"

"So was I! And she wasn't there for me, so why should I have been there for her!"

"It's not the same, lad. You lost your dad, and that's a hard one to handle for anybody. But what she lost is so much greater than what you lost that there's no comparison. She lost her lover, her mate, her friend, her companion, her partner. You lost your dad, but she lost her whole reason for living. Everything she

ever did, she did for your Dad. She was so alone without him-yeh never noticed that, did yeh? The poor woman was in such pain."

"How do you know all this?" I demanded. I was holding one of the spikes like a club.

"She told me, she did," Jack said. "And no, I never did sleep with her. I could have. Lots of men did. She was a lovely lady-and a lady in every sense of the word-but they'd get up in the morning and they'd leave her. And she'd be alone again. Nah, it wasn't good. But they never sat with her and listened to her, never let her say all that she had to say. She reached out for yeh, Jim. Yeh and your sister. But Maggie was mourning the loss of her children and yeh were so wrapped up in yourself that neither of yeh were hearing. She needed yeh, that's why she plucked and pulled so hard. She was goin' down without a life jacket. And then, when she needed yeh the most, yeh ran away from her. What was she to do? She started grabbing for any man who would hold her, if even for a little while. The same way any drownin' person grabs for any piece of flotsam. Yeh only saw the grabbing. Yeh never saw the person drownin'." He snorted. "Probably, because it would have meant yeh would have had to stop worryin' about your own drownin' for a while."

"You son of a bitch," I said coldly. "You don't know what I've been through."

"You're right. And I don't rightly care to know, either. I think you're a selfish spoiled brat and I don't care to spend much time with yeh. I'm puttin' up these fences because Betty-John asked me to help yeh; that's the only reason." And then he added, "And mebbe a little out of respect for your mum. Now, are yeh going to hit me with that spike in your hand, or are yeh going to put it in the ground and get on with the job?"

I threw it down at his feet. That was stupid.

Jack just looked at me.

So I picked it up again and jammed it into the ground, anchoring a loop of razor-ribbon. I drove the spike in hard with the gas-hammer. And the next six too.

Jason was right. Getting a person angry was very enlightening. And then I stopped in frustration.

"What's the matter, son?" Jack asked abruptly.

"Nothing," I snapped back at him. "Everything. Dammit, I hate being wrong." I stood there with the gas-hammer poised over the seventh spike and I didn't have the strength to squeeze the trigger. I felt suddenly exhausted and sank to my knees. "I keep trying to do my best and it's never good enough for anybody."

I stopped myself from saying more. My throat hurt. My eyes hurt.

I looked out across the bay, waiting for the frustration to pass. The water was dark and gray and dirty looking. Red sludge? Probably. I looked over at Jack; he was waiting for me to say something. It was hard for me to speak. "Okay, I never had the chance to say good-bye to her. At least, my dad and I . . . well, that was complete. But . . .

"I was right. Yeh haven't done your cryin', have yeh?"

I glowered up at him. "Go fuck yourself. Leave me alone."

I levered myself back to my feet and strode off away, just to be alone for a while. Just to cool off for a minute.

Dove came pushing through the dry brush and made ticktocking noises at me.

"I don't understand that talk, Dove. Why can't you speak in English?"

Dove looked hurt and retreated quickly, and I felt like an even bigger asshole than I already was. That's right. Take it out on the kid.

Except-everything Jack Balaban had said was right. I had abandoned her when she needed me the most, the same way I'd abandoned everybody else when they needed me. That was the pattern of my life. Get close, get close enough to hurt-and then betray.

But always make sure that you have a good reason first. A good reason always lets you off the hook.

The funny thing was that I couldn't cry.

I couldn't cry because I couldn't remember her. I couldn't remember her face.

What I kept seeing was the enigmatic smile of that Japanese fellow at dinner that night. I kept seeing the smarmy greediness of the man she was sleeping with, Alan Wise, or whatever his name had been. I

remember wondering about worms in Santa Cruz. I remembered everything except why I should care. All I could remember were all the things I resented: the time she did this to me, the time she did that. I was glad to be free of her. No. Jack Balaban was a stupid old Welshman, who made noises to children. How could I be mourning someone I was so angry with?

Damn.

I pushed through the brush, in the direction Dove had come from.

I'd called Dr. Davidson in Atlanta once. He'd actually answered his own phone. I'd wanted to ask him a question. "Is it possible to grieve for a whole planet?"

He hadn't said yes, he hadn't said no. What he'd said was, "You don't think it's possible, that's why you're asking." And I'd had to admit that was the truth.

"Jim," he'd said. "The Earth is a part of you; the cool green hills of Earth are a part of all of us, and they always will be. We haven't lost them. We just have to look for them in our hearts for a while, and hold them there as a vision of what once was."

"And will someday be again," I added. Dr. Davidson didn't respond to that. "You don't agree?"

"I don't know." There was something about the way he said it. Flat. Unemotionally. He really didn't know. It was chilling. The voice I depended on for answers didn't have all the answers.

"If we can't grieve for a whole planet," I said, "how do we do our grieving?"

"A piece at a time," said Dr. Davidson. "You can't do everything at once. Do it one part at a time. Grieve for the great elephants. Grieve for the verdant grass. Grieve for the shining dolphins and the laughing otters and the dusty grasshoppers. Cry for the golden butterflies and the fat wrinkled walruses and the silly-looking duck-billed platypuses. Weep for the red roses and the tall ficus and the sprawling green ivy. Sorrow for the highflying eagles. Even the scuttling scorpions and the ugly-tough crabgrass and all the tiny diatoms. Grieve for the purple mountains and the silent icebergs and the deep blue rivers. Grieve for them all, one piece at a time, one day at a time. And in your grief, let them live in your heart.

"Yes, miss them-but in your sorrow, also cherish them." It made sense. Of a sort.

At least it was a way to continue. But . . . my mother.

I couldn't grieve, because I couldn't forgive.

And I couldn't forgive her because I couldn't forgive myself. For Jason.

I was the person my mother used to warn me about. She would have to forgive me first before I could forgive her. And she couldn't do that, because she was dead.

So I couldn't cry.

I could only be angry.

I was staring at what I was seeing without seeing it at all. And suddenly, Dove's tick-tocking noises made sense. He had been imitating the sound of footsteps.

There were footprints here in the soft dirt. Cleated footprints. Neither of the boys, and neither Jack nor I, were wearing cleats on our shoes.

In fact, I couldn't think of anybody who wore cleats. Strangers had been prowling the base of the peninsula. I forgot about my mother.

She was going to have to wait until I had the time for her. Again.

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There was an old voyeur named Zeke,
who liked to hide in the closet and peek,
then jump out with loud cries
of "Aha!" and "Surprise!"
and point out your flaws in technique.

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"This is as safe as it gets."

"No man is an island, but some of us are pretty good peninsulas."

-SOLOMON SHORT

"Make it quick, Jim," B-jay said. "I've got enough problems already. We've got kids missing again. I'm afraid that they're going feral on us. You're going to have to put off finishing your fence. I want you in the search party."

I shook my head. "Joey Donovan's been missing over a week. That's not feral, that's something worse."

"We've had this conversation before, Jim. I'm tired of hearing about Chtorrans . . ."

"B-Jay, listen to me! There are renegades in the hills and they're scouting Family."

I told her about the footprints, and the boy in the hills. "I should have realized it before. They use children as scouts. B-Jay, I've got to have some help finishing the fence. You've got to call Santa Cruz for military protection."

"I am not going to put myself under the authority of the military government, dammit! I fought too hard to get out from under their thumb."

"Don't be stupid! We have no defenses here. We have two hundred kids and less than twenty adults. A truly determined assault will devastate this place. They could be on us tomorrow. Or tonight!"

B-Jay pushed a hand back through her hair. "Jim," she said. "I've heard the speech. You've got your fences. There isn't anything else you can do and there isn't anything new you can tell me."

"Do you know how renegades use children?"

She held up a hand. "Spare me the horror stories. I have an imagination. Jim, you've spent the last two weeks putting up those damned dangerous fences. Now, you're telling me they're not going to work?"

"Those fences will stop worms. They won't stop truly determined renegades."

"Jim, stop it!" Betty-John screamed at me. Her face was red. "I am sick and fucking tired of your Chtorran paranoia! So is everybody else! We've got children missing and you want to arm for war! Give the rest of us some credit too! Let us be right once in a while!"

"Okay, be right!" I shouted right back. "But you'll end up just as dead as if you're wrong! You're living in a dream world! You don't know what's out there!"

"And you do?"

"Yes, dammit, I do!" I was screaming in her face. "Christ, B-Jay, I'm trying to save lives!"

"So am I!"

For a moment, we both just stared at each other, both breathing hard and glaring angrily, neither backing down, neither willing to concede an inch.

Betty-John spoke first. "I have done everything I can for you, Jim. I really have. I went out on a limb for you, so you could build those worm fences, even though you're the only one who seems to think we need them. Nobody else does. We've never been attacked here, we've never even seen a Chtorran in this district. This is one of the safest counties in California. But not a day goes by that you don't worry about Chtorrans and renegades. Considering your history, Jim, don't you think that's a little, um . . . derivative? Symptomatic?"

"You think I'm off the deep end, don't you?"

"Yes, I do. I think you're just as crazy as the rest of us. But at least your craziness is specific. Jim, you've been hypersensitized to this issue to the point where you can't see anything else."

"I don't feel safe here," I said it very quietly.

"I got that. This is as safe as it gets."

"No, it isn't. There's more we can do."

"We don't have the resources."

"We can't afford not too."

"I'll be the judge of that."

"Why don't you listen to someone who knows more about it than you do?"

"Jim-" Betty-John's expression hardened. "This conversation isn't getting us anywhere. I'm not going to authorize any more fences or put guns in the hands of children or ask the military governor for assistance or anything else. And if you want to stay here, you had better get used to the idea that this is the final word on this subject."

"If that's the final word, B-Jay, then maybe I can't stay here anymore!"

B-Jay looked as if I'd slapped her. The room was suddenly cold. She said slowly, "I think you'd better go now, Jim. And maybe you'd better reevaluate what kind of contribution you can make here."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I don't think we should talk anymore right now."

"No, tell me!"

She said slowly, "Jim, if that's how you really feel, then perhaps you'd better look at moving to someplace where you do feel safe."

"For the sake of my children, I may have to."

"No," she said. "The children stay. You go."

"They're legally mine."

"I can fix that too."

"Huh?"

"The well-being of the child, Jim."

"You need grounds."

"I have grounds. You're sexually abusing Tommy."

I sank back into my chair as if I'd been slammed with a brick and just stared at her. "I don't believe this," I said. "You're a goddamned hypocrite."

"You'd better believe it. I mean what I say. I'm tired of hearing about the Chtorr. I've busted my ass to get this place working. A lot of us have. And we're all getting pretty annoyed with you coming in here and telling us how it has to be instead. You're wasting a lot of our time and a lot of our resources, and we're all pretty much fed up with you. If you're not willing to be a part of the solution, then please don't be a part of anything here."

"Fine," I said. I stood up. "I hope to God you don't one day walk out the door and see Chtorrans coming down that street, because then it'll be too late to change your mind."

"I can live with myself, Jim. Now I want you to learn how to live with yourself."

"I'm doing fine, lady." I strode out of her office and headed for home.

The kids and I could leave for San Francisco right after dinner, and I could probably have us a plane for Hawaii in the morning.

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Rick promised to gently deflower
a maiden who lived on South Gower.

(The truth is, he spread
her legs wide on the bed,
and finished her off in an hour.)

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Day of Blood

"Violence is the last word of the illiterate. Also the first."

-SOLOMON SHORT

But what if she was right?

What if I had fallen off the deep end?

That's the problem with being crazy-you have to take other people's word for it, because it doesn't look crazy from inside. I strode up the street. Some of the kids were playing a game, the object of which seemed to be to see how much noise you could make while moving a soccer ball up and down the road.

I crossed to the park to get out of their way. I could smell honeysuckle and pine and roses.

Maybe I should trust B-Jay. I didn't want to leave here; I liked it here.

But it was a trap. There was no place to run to. If someone was determined enough to come over the hiking ridge, they could surprise the whole village. A pride of Chtorrans could sweep the length of the peninsula in minutes.

What would it take to make this place safe?

We could mine the hiking ridge, we could bury booby traps the whole length of it. But that still wouldn't be sufficient. Nothing short of blowing up the isthmus would work. And we couldn't do that, because all of the service cables for the phones ran through the isthmus, as well as the power cables that fed electricity to Santa Cruz. Somewhere out there were five great turbines, churning silently in the ocean current.

What else could we do? We could evacuate.

Betty-John wouldn't even consider it.

And she was right. Where else in the world could she find facilities like this?

No, the only alternative was to move everyone to the south end of the island and establish very tight security, constant patrols, and hold regular classes and drills for every person on the island. We should start teaching the teenagers how to use grenade launchers and torches.

But B-Jay didn't want the kids growing up in a police state. "That kind of stuff creates an atmosphere of fear and paranoia." Behind me, I could still hear the children screaming and hollering. They sounded happy. B-Jay was right, they didn't need fear and paranoia.

But was I wrong? They needed to be safe! That was where the argument had started. Dammit. I couldn't get it out of my head. The sentences replayed themselves in endless loops.

And all I wanted was for us to be safe!

I knew what was happening inside my head.

It was that survival mind that Delandro had talked about. The mind is a computer. It wants to survive. It will do whatever it perceives as necessary to survive. There are no limits to what it will ask for. The more you think you have to protect, the more vigorously you will try to defend it.

It's neither good nor bad, it's just the way the mind works. And I wanted to protect my kids.

I realized I was walking down to the hiking ridge again. I wanted to see if any more of the worm lines had been disturbed. I wanted to see what else I could do. Every problem has a solution. There had to be one here.

Behind me, the screaming grew louder. And suddenly took on a shrill sound. I whirled around to look.

The children were shrieking and scattering in all directions. I heard it before I saw it.

"Chtorrrr! Chtorrrrr!"

Three Chtorrans broke out of the park, a squad of men and women running with them!

Huh-?

And even before I asked, I knew what had happened.

They'd come over the ridge and gone straight into the park. Not down the street, they'd have been seen

immediately. They used the park as cover and went to the heart of Family.

The Chtorrans plowed into the children like bulldozers. I yelled. I started running toward them-then zigged into the park and started heading for home. And the Jeep.

The alarm went off as I was running. It was a flat double-note wail, rising and falling. I hurtled down a grass slope, over the little Japanese bridge that crossed the brook, and up the opposite side. There were children standing confused, trying to figure out what the siren meant.

I pointed ahead. "Run for home! Get out of the park! Get out of the streets! Do it as fast as you can!" Where were my kids?

As I came charging out of the park, I saw Holly standing in front of the house staring down the street. There were sounds of rifle fire coming from the village. Dammit.

I scooped her up in my arms and went charging through the front door.

"You have to hide, sweetheart. This isn't a game anymore!"

"No, Daddy! No!"

I went down on one knee and grabbed her by the shoulders. "Listen to me, I love you! And you have to hide!" God forgive me. I shoved her into the closet and locked the door. I grabbed my torch and ran.

The Jeep whirred to life and leapt forward. I swung it around in a tight turn, going up over the curb and ripping out a bush as I headed south. I would meet the Chtorrans at the plaza. The rifle fire had stopped now. But I could still hear that dreadful purple screaming.

As I headed toward the south curve, one of the Chtorrans came flowing around to meet me. It stopped in amazement. It hadn't expected to see a Jeep coming barreling down toward it. I stood on the brakes and came screeching to a halt a hundred meters away from it.

"Come on, you big red slug! Come to Poppa! I'll give you a one-way ticket to hell!" I was standing on the seat now, just hulling the torch tanks onto one shoulder. I unlocked the safeties and double-checked the charge. "Come on, you slimy red bastard! "

The worm cocked its eyes at me, one high, one low. It chirruped a question. It hesitated. It probably wanted to back up, but it didn't dare. It had been sent this way as a scout.

Its behavior was atypical. This was no ordinary worm. The wild worms would have screamed and charged. This one could recognize the threat I represented to it. This one wanted to survive. The question came up in the back of my head: did Chtorrans have minds too? Or was it only the tame ones?

"Come on, you bastard!" I challenged it again. It was still out of range. I couldn't drive and fire the torch at the same time. The worm couldn't attack. It was a standoff.

It couldn't last. Sooner or later, the others would come around that curve. I didn't think I could burn three worms at once.

I heard footsteps behind me. Before I could turn and look, Little Ivy was sliding into the driver's seat of the Jeep. "Move over," she said.

I grabbed hold of the top of the windshield and braced myself. "Go slow," I said.

She eased the Jeep forward. The Chtorran began backing up. She increased our speed. I steadied myself and braced the torch. I would only get one shot here.

The worm reared up abruptly, issuing its challenge. "Chtorrrrr! Chtorrr!" Then, it came down flowing.

I burned it before it hit the ground. The jet licked out and touched the purple and red horror. The flames exploded around its body. The creature raised up again, whirled in the air and came down writhing and twisting across the road. Its screams were horrible. It was like watching a man die!

And then it wasn't alive anymore, just a burning thing, greasy and rubbery and sending huge clouds of black smoke into the air. "All right, let's go!" I pointed to the road beyond the worm. Little Ivy backed up so she could go around it-and saved our lives. The grenade carved a hole in the street where the Jeep had been. I saw the flash-was slammed down in my seat by the concussion-felt the Jeep lift off the ground, then drop back-felt the gravel and pieces of road spatter down from the sky.

Four men and three women were just running around the curve. Two Chtorrans were moving with them. They were a perfect skirmish line. For a moment I could only admire the military beauty of the operation. Humans and Chtorrans together-the effect was devastating.

Then-moving automatically, I was standing again with the torch-I was still too dazed from the grenade to

be conscious. They saw me and scattered sideways.

Another Chtorran came around the curve then, and four more humans. I recognized the Chtorran. I don't know how I knew-whether it was his shape or his coloring or the way he moved-but it was Orrie. And the humans. I recognized Marcie. And Delandro.

Marcie was carrying a rocket launcher. She went down on one knee

Little Ivy was already backing the Jeep. She swerved and the burning Chtorran was between us. Our view was obscured by the cloud of greasy smoke.

Ivy put the Jeep into forward and pointed it into the park. She stood on the pedal and we leapt over the curb and down the slope. Something exploded behind us. I had a glimpse of trees splintering and flying through the air. I hung on for my life. We bounced and skidded across the grass and into the stream, then up the opposite side. I looked back; I couldn't see them any more.

I pointed ahead. "Head for the road. We'll come around behind them- " I scrambled around to try to reach the grenade launcher in the back of the Jeep.

We bounced up onto the pavement again. There were bodies lying in the street. There was red blood flowing in the gutters, pooling into dark puddles. There were children standing, dazed or crying. There were people running. We skidded around them and kept going, around the south loop, around the curve, past the burning Chtorran again.

They were heading northward-up toward my house-where Holly was locked in a closet! I fired the first grenade at the fat Chtorran in the rear. The explosion sent it flying, tumbling, rolling across the lawns. The explosion scattered the humans. Two went down. The others broke for the trees and the park.

They were met by a hail of gunfire. I saw Jack and Dove step from the trees, each carrying an AM-280. The laser beams stabbed and pointed. The guns burped molten fire and carved holes in the men and Chtotrans they touched. Two more renegades fell.

And then Orrie was upon them. He fell across Jack and leapt for Dove. I didn't see what happened next. The renegades charged into the trees after Orrie.

The last huge Chtorran was just whirling around to charge toward me. He raised up for a challenge. I fired the second grenade, but the shot was low, the explosion went off in the street. The concussion hurled the Chtorran backward, knocking it ass over teakettle and slamming it into a house. My house. Windows shattered.

The first Chtorran was getting up now. Black blood was flowing from its wounds. It was limping across the street toward the safety of the park. I fired the third grenade; it imbedded itself into the Chtorran flesh and there was a muffled thump. For just a second, the Chtorran seemed to puff out, then it disappeared in a ball of flame.

There were two more grenades. I sighted on the last Chtorran again, it was peeling itself off the wall. The Jeep hit a blast hole in the road and the grenade went wild, exploding the roof off the rear of the house. The Chtorran charged for the trees and was gone.

"Go after them!" I pointed. Little Ivy said something I didn't catch. I looked at her. Blood was dripping down her face and shirt. When had that happened? "Go on!" I screamed at her.

She gulped and drove. We bounced up and over the curb and down into the park again. We slid and skidded down the slope, carving up the grass and trees. Two robot gardeners were trying to mow across a path of chewed up ground where an injured Chtorran had dragged part of itself. We careened into one of the robots and sent it spinning across the grass and into the stream. We slid to a halt

"Which way?"

I pointed ahead-

The Jeep lurched and slid. I saw something purple. I fired the last grenade-the explosion was a ball of orange that toppled trees and left a smoking crater that we had to swerve around-I'd missed the worm.

They plunged down the slope ahead of us-Oh, God!-there were children still at the swimming hole. They were clustered together, naked, by the big rock, all huddled and scared looking.

Orrie hit them like a torpedo. The bodies went under him like kindling wood. Their screams were horrible. I held my fire. The humans went charging after Orrie, leaping over small bloody bodies. Little Ivy was swearing next to me, a stream of invective that would shatter glass. Still I held my fire. The

second Chtorran disappeared over the rocks after its companion.

Little Ivy let the Jeep slide to a halt before the carnage. She leapt out and ran to the children. Shit. Just when we had them. I slid over into the driver's seat and stood on the pedal. The Jeep skidded out and I went around the big rocks. Something exploded behind me. I came around the rock to see Marcie just standing up, the smoking launcher in her hands.

I aimed the Jeep directly at her. She leapt sideways, the rocket launcher went spinning. The Jeep plunged into the water. I put it into reverse and tried to back up. A spume of water sprayed out from the wheels. I had to ease it out. I started swearing. Marcie was getting away. "Come on, Jeep!" I banged the dashboard. It leapt backward. "Thank you!"

But the renegades were gone. The Chtorrans were gone. They'd disappeared into the thickest part of the park, where the Jeep couldn't follow.

No problem. There was only one way out. And I was going to be waiting for them. I backed up, turned the Jeep around and headed for the street. I wasn't through. Not yet.

The Jeep banged out of the park and skidded and swerved across the road. I pointed it north. There were people running toward me and pointing behind them. I couldn't hear what they were saying. I must have been deafened in one of the explosions. I recognized Birdie. There was blood streaming down her face. I waved her out of the way. I moved the Jeep ahead.

There were more bodies here. My God-what had they done? It looked like there had been a killing rampage here-but I had seen those Chtorrans. I saw how they moved and reacted. This was no feeding frenzy. This had been deliberate. This had been punishment.

This was the worst thing I'd ever seen.

North-to the north end of the loop. They had to come out of the park there. And I'd be waiting for them. I couldn't hear the siren any more. Was it still going?

I switched on the Jeep siren. There were more people heading south toward me on the road. I didn't want to slow down-I swerved to the right and headed past them on the sidewalk. Then hack down on the street and around the curve.

-and there they were, just disappearing over the crest of the hiking ridge! I hadn't been fast enough.

I fired my rockets anyway. I blew the top of that hill away. I didn't know if I hit anything. I wasn't going up to look.

And then there was silence.

It was over. And there was no such place as Family any more.

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These poems have come out of my forehead.

The subjects are all fairly torrid

-except for the few

that will make you say,

"Pugh!" And those are the ones that are horrid.

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Pavane for a Dead Infant

"There is no such thing as a holy war."

-SOLOMON SHORT

I sat there in the Jeep until dusk. The day grew dark. The sun tipped into the ocean and lit the sea with yellow flames.

I waited in the Jeep at the north end of the peninsula. I sat below the hiking ridge and listened to the sky. Anything that came down that hill tonight was going to die. If they realized how badly they'd really hurt us, they'd be back.

I was ready for them.

I sat and watched the sun melt into the sea, spreading a film of fire across the oily water.

What was it Delandro had said? Why couldn't I get him out of my head? Oh, yes-transformation. He'd spoken of the process of transformation. He said it looked like fire. Energy flowed, it became unfocused. The old pattern had been destroyed. Now, we create a new pattern. We choose the pattern and create it. Creation is the act of pointing to what's possible, and by the act of distinction, it becomes an experience. The experience is the creation; everything after that follows as inevitably as the cars of a train follow the engine.

Why did I remember that? Because I knew what he meant by transformation now. I'd transformed myself this afternoon. Delandro wasn't going to like this transformation. No, he wasn't.

He was going to regret it bitterly. I promised that. The street lights glowed to life.

The moths flickered around the lamps. Bait.

Those lights were one more way we'd announced our presence to the world. To the Chtorrans.

"Jim?"

I looked up. It was B-Jay.

"We need you. Come on down."

I shook my head. "I have to stay here. Someone has to stand guard. "

"It's all right, Jim. I called Santa Cruz. The military governor's been informed. They're sending out a Red Cross team. And soldiers are patrolling the road. Nothing else is getting on the peninsula tonight. You don't have to stand guard any more. You've been relieved."

I looked at the torch in my hands.

"Come on," she said, climbing into the Jeep. "Drive me back." I reached around and stowed the torch in the rear of the car. I turned the key and the Jeep whirred to life. There were a thousand things my mind wanted to say to B-Jay. But I didn't want to start it. I knew how that loop would go.

We coasted slowly down the avenue. There were stains on the road. There were fallen trees. There was a house that had been blown apart. My house.

I brought the Jeep to a stop. I climbed out.

I moved like a zombie into the rubble. I went to the closet and unlocked it.

Holly was curled into a tiny ball on the floor. She was surrounded by coats and sweaters and blankets, as if she had made a nest for herself.

"Holly," I whispered. "I'm back. It's all right now. Come on, you can wake up." I pulled her into my arms and held her. She didn't uncurl. She was in a fetal position. Her eyes were tightly shut. Her face was curiously blank. I stroked her hair, smoothing it. I kissed her. "Come on, sweetheart. Wake up now."

She didn't respond.

I stood up and carried her out to the Jeep. I put her into B-Jay's lap. I climbed back in the driver's side and eased the Jeep back into the road again. There were more stains, more fallen trees. There were craters in the pavement. The air still smelled of cordite.

B-Jay pointed and I pulled the Jeep up in front of the gymnasium. It had been turned into a hospital. I

took Holly from her and carried her in. I laid her down upon a wrestling mat. One of the other girls came up and put a blanket over her. I leaned down and kissed- my little girl. "I'm right here if you want me." I said to the girl who had brought the blanket. "Call me if she wakes."

B-Jay took my arm then. "This way." She led me outside. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine."

"You sound dead."

"I am dead."

She stopped me and looked into my face. "Jim, stop being a zombie. "

"No. Let me be a zombie. It'll get me through this."

She looked like she wanted to cry. She looked like she wanted me to grab her and hold her and give her a safe warm place to have her grief.

I couldn't do that. I hated her too much. I hated all of them. They'd told me I could be safe here. And they had lied. Everybody lied. I couldn't be safe here. I couldn't be safe anywhere. How dare they lie to me! I couldn't forgive that easily. B-Jay sniffed and dabbed at one eye. She said, "We have a morgue in the assembly hall."

"Tommy?"

She shook her head. "He's still missing."

"Alec?"

"We have a body that could be him. The identification is still uncertain. "

"Show me."

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

"He's my son." I started across the lawn. B-Jay gulped and hurried to follow.

I stepped into the assembly hall. The chairs had been stacked hastily against the wall. In the center of the room, plastic tarpaulins had been laid out. Three rows of bodies had been laid across the plastic. White sheets draped the bodies.

I stood there for a long moment. The reality of the moment pounded in my brain in waves of dizziness.

A black boy, a teenager named Joe-Mary came up to us. "Who . . . ?" I managed to gasp and point.

B-Jay said, "Jack and Dove. Little Ivy."

"Little Ivy! But-I left her at the creek! With the children!"

"The bastards threw a grenade at them."

"Oh, God. Who else?"

"Rita, Daddy Potts, Old Wag, Danny, Ida-George, Melanie."

She stopped herself. She couldn't go on. She started weeping into her hands.

I couldn't pity her. I walked away. I said to Joe-Mary. "Show me the one you think is Alec."

He said, "You sure you want to see?"

"Show me."

He led me to a small white bundle. He pulled back the sheet. There was a torso. No head. One arm still attached. He'd been dismembered. The pieces had been ripped off of him like off a doll. Like a bear.

Just like Bear. No head. Alec and Bear. Even to the last. I felt the burning come up in my eyes, the ache come up in my throat.

"It's Alec. I recognize the birthmark on his side." The words came out like a croak. I couldn't speak any more. I ran for the door.

I barely made it outside. I fell to my knees on the lawn and let my stomach heave. My chest spasmed, my throat convulsed, my back arched. I brought up nothing but bile.

Betty-John came up behind me. She put her hand on my shoulder. "Jim, I'm sorry . . .

"Fuck you! I don't want sympathy! Least of all yours!" I struggled to my feet and headed for the Jeep.

"Jim! Where are you going?"

"I'm going after the bastards who did this!" I said. I climbed into the Jeep and pointed it at the bridge.

The tires screeched as I roared off toward Santa Cruz.

?

Juanita, the subject of scandals,

used to use unscented candles,
but now thinks it nice
to use a device
with batteries, buzzers, and handles.
?

"Lightning is one hell of a murder weapon-and the best part is, it can't be traced."

-SOLOMON SHORT

I drove to the first public terminal I could find and logged on as Major Duke Anderson. I had his code number and I had his password.

Duke still had a clearance. Amazing. I accessed the West Coast Satellite Eyeball Reconnaissance file. I ordered a complete set of frames covering the last twenty-four hours.

Maybe Jason was right. Maybe Jim McCarthy couldn't lift a weapon against the Tribe. But Major Duke Anderson certainly could. I just asked myself how Duke would handle this and bent to the terminal.

I studied the wide-angle shot just long enough to locate Monterey Bay, then dialed down to the Santa Cruz area. Using the joystick, I centered on Family. The peninsula was a tiny dagger sticking southward. I dialed down on it, then moved forward in time to this afternoon. As the screen flashed through the frames they had been taken one minute apart-the shadows shortened and pivoted and lengthened. Their angles changed as the Earth turned before the sun.

There.

At the north end of the peninsula, just below the hiking ridge, walking distance from the unfinished worm fence, a Jeep was parked. A man was sitting in it holding a torch.

That was me. Guarding the barn after the horse was stolen.

I moved back in time to the beginning of the attack.

Four worms and thirteen humans came across the rocks, around the end of the fence, along the ridge and down the slope, where they entered the north end of the park.

I moved the joystick and followed them through the park. Here on the west side was a group of children.

There I was, just walking past them.

There. The worms burst from the park. I paged through the frames.

The worms plowed through the children.

And I turned and ran for my Jeep. The worms turned south-

- I moved forward in time.

Someone in a van was battering at one of the worms with it. Three of the worms piled on the van and peeled it open.

The fourth worm was already moving around the south curve, and facing a Jeep. There I was. There was Little Ivy. We burned the worm.

I moved through the frames.

The rest of the worms came around the curve. We fled through the park. There-we came out on the opposite side and turned around to attack the worms from the rear.

There. I blew a worm to pieces against my house.

There. The worms dashed into the park, flowed over Jack and Dove.

There. We followed.

The worms were lost in the park. I couldn't see all of what happened.

I saw the explosion that killed Little Ivy. I saw the Jeep come barrelling out of the park. It turned north toward the hiking ridge. There-I saw two worms come out of the park and flow up the slope. There were people running with them.

There. The Jeep took its position. Where was the last worm?

There was still one worm on the peninsula. Three worms had dashed into the park. Two had come out. My God.

It had been on the peninsula with us all afternoon long. Maybe it was still there.

I reached for the phone. No, wait.

I moved forward in time. There was B-Jay getting into the Jeep. There was the Jeep moving off.

And there was the last worm and one human being moving across the road and up the slope.

The whole time I'd been sitting there, they'd been in the park watching me. Jason and Orrie.

They could have killed me.

No, they couldn't. I'd been sitting there with the torch in my lap, ready to fire.

It had been a standoff. I'd cut off their escape and hadn't known it. Shit.

But I knew something now. I knew they'd been on the peninsula until sunset. That meant they couldn't be far.

I moved back in time until the Jeep appeared to back away from its position. There were two bright red smears moving across the road. There were people with the worms too. I began moving forward in time again, this time following them up the slope and over it. I moved northward on the peninsula with them, one frame at a time.

They moved down the opposite side of the hiking ridge, across the wide plateau, through the rough and crumbled area, and across the rocks to the coast highway. I followed them from above. They couldn't know I was watching from sixteen hundred kilometers above and six hours away.

They moved northward on the road for a half-kilometer to a place where it bordered a wide field. They went inland then, two worms and thirteen humans. They were still moving on foot. Where were their vehicles?

Once they were out of sight of the highway, they turned north again. I flashed through the frames and watched them jump from moment to moment; the effect was of a strobed and jerky movement. The meadow they were on ended at a belt of trees bordering a narrow canyon road. They turned up the canyon road. And then they were gone.

The slopes of the canyon were heavily forested. The road showed through only in patches.

I moved forward in time and widened the angle. No, they hadn't come out at the bottom end of the road where it met the main highway.

I superimposed a state map on the frame and followed the road inland. No, nothing here.

They were gone. "Shit."

I leaned back in my chair and stared at the screen in front of me. It was an industrial high-resolution monitor, with 5,000 real lines of video information and another 5,000 lines of extrapolated data, all repeated 120 times a second. There were 25 million pixels of data per frame. The system could be used for anything from the most sophisticated kind of military reconnaissance to finding lost golf balls.

But I couldn't find two worms in a leafy canyon.

If they couldn't be seen from the sky, they couldn't be tracked. I leaned forward again. I typed in a search program. I ID'd one of the worms as the target and set parameters. A ten-kilometer radius, from this moment until dusk. I hit ENTER and let the program scan through the frames for me.

Nothing.

The computer couldn't find them either.

All right. So that was that. They weren't visible from the air, not as worms.

I went back to the moment where I'd lost them at the canyon road.

I followed the road north and east as it wound upward through the canyon. It came out on the crest of a ridge and joined up with a ridge road that headed mostly north.

If they were traveling by truck, it would be dusk before they got this far. They wouldn't show up on the video.

All right. No problem.

I moved back through the frames, back in time to the moment of attack. I saw the worms-four of them now-coming down the slope with their human companions. I followed them backward across the same course, up the hiking ridge, across the plateau, across the rocks, up the road, across the field, and into the trees. And of course, they disappeared.

Now, I had the time. They had been moving into position at the very same moment I had been arguing with B-Jay.

I moved to the place where the canyon road met the ridge road and scanned backward in time. No traffic up here-until a convoy hacked out of the canyon road. Three motorcycles, three trucks, and two vans.

Bingo.

I tracked with them, moving backward through the day.

The ridge road wound northward for miles. A couple of times I lost them in the foliage, but I just moved farther north and waited for them to show up again on the frames. There they were. I followed them backward until morning.

I almost missed the turnoff. I thought I'd missed them and kept going north, but then I hit Interstate 5 and I knew I'd gone too far.

Jason didn't like to use the Interstates. Too much traffic. And certainly not during the day.

I moved back to the ridge road to the first moment that the trucks appeared on it. Ahh, I see. They turned onto it from this side canyon. I followed them back up the side canyon. It dead-ended.

A narrow road wound up a hill to . . .

There. Some kind of base. No, that long building was a row of motel rooms. That had to be a lodge.

That was a corral and a barn opposite. Yes. Jason liked to find little lost places like this. This looked like some kind of a ranch. Smart.

So now I knew where they had come from. But they were safe there.

So why had they attacked Family?

It didn't make sense. Family was too vulnerable. Today's attack proved that. Jason wouldn't put his people in a vulnerable place. Unless there were something about Family that required his special attention.

Oh, my God.

They'd been after me.

In fact, I'd even told them where Family was. That afternoon with Marcie and the puppies.

No-I hadn't told them where Family was. I'd only suggested one of the new peninsulas as a good place to relocate. That was part of the information I'd dumped for Jason. He'd picked up the disk and studied it.

Oh, God. This was even worse. Family was still listed as a private-access area. B-Jay had refused to list it as open-access because she didn't want refugees moving in.

And I'd told Jason to look for a private-access area. But why this peninsula?

Oh. Now I knew.

We had an extensive network of underground service tunnels and facilities. The worms could be hidden from the sky. The aboveground uses of the village would look perfectly normal.

Jason hadn't been after me at all. And yet it was exactly as he had said over and over: There are no accidents in this game. He'd found me after all. And he'd been right. I regretted it bitterly.

I was still staring at the screen.

Jason's camp was three hours away. At least. At night, driving with the lights low, the trucks might take four or more hours. They were probably still on their way.

My guess was that they would have waited for Jason and Orrie for as long as they could.

Let's see-yes, there they were. All the vehicles except one truck and one van were moving back toward the camp. I looked at my watch. They'd left around five. They should be arriving there any moment.

But they were paralyzed without Jason. What was he going to do?

Even if he followed them as soon as he got to the last two vehicles hidden in the canyon road, he couldn't be back at his camp before midnight.

A thought occurred to me. It probably wasn't possible. But it was worth a try.

I picked up the phone and punched for the Santa Cruz District Military Governor. A woman answered the phone.

"This is Major Duke Anderson, Special Forces. I need to speak with the governor."

"I'm sorry, she's not available."

"Perhaps you didn't hear me. I said I'm Special Forces."

"I heard you. Colonel Wright is not available."

"Who am I speaking to?" I asked.

"Lieutenant Gail Beeker."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. I have a message for your Colonel. If she doesn't get it tonight, you may end up as Private Gail Beeker. Does the name `Uncle Ira' mean anything to you?"

"Uh-stand by."

A moment later, another voice came on the phone. "This is Colonel Wright. Who am I speaking to?"

"This is Major Duke Anderson. Special Forces. I'm investigating the worm infestation in this area. I saw the attack on the peninsula this afternoon, and I've located the renegades' base camp. We have very little time, Colonel. We have to hit them tonight. I know this group. They're Revelationists. They'll be on the road before morning if they think their cover's been compromised. Can you mount a night mission?"

"Major," Colonel Wright said, "my troops are not trained for this kind of operation."

Right. A desk battalion. Leftovers from the Teamwork Army. They make the software run on time.

"Do you have pilots? Do you have choppers? Do you have men and women who can hold a weapon and point it in the right direction?"

"I have three teams that are used primarily for rescue operations."

"They'll do. Scramble them, please."

"Major, I appreciate the urgency . . ."

"No, Colonel, you don't. These people have taken children as hostages. What you don't know is that when they break camp, they don't take their hostages with them. They feed them to their worms, so the worms can go a week before their next meal. These are the children from the peninsula. There may be a chance to save them, but only if we act now. All I ask from you is that you ask the men and women in your command if there are any volunteers for this particular rescue mission. Let them know that there may be some shooting involved. In fact, you can count on it. I'll personally assume responsibility for the planning and execution of the operation. And I'll lead it too."

There was silence from the phone for a moment. Then Colonel Wright said, "I'll assume the responsibility, Major. But you can lead the mission. Where are you? I'll have a car pick you up."

"Don't bother. I have a Jeep. Just have someone meet me at the gate of the airfield with a clean jumpsuit."

"I'll meet you myself," she said. And switched off. The lady was okay. Regular Army always delivered.

I hit the keyboard and dumped to disk. I'd need this for the briefing. While the drive whirred, I picked up the phone and called B-Jay.

I had a hunch there might be something she'd want to do tonight too.

?

There was an old prune name of Ginty
who only ate muffins and thin tea.

Thinking of sex

gave her the blecchs,

and left her all dried up and squinty.

?

"The best thing about war is that it makes it all right to hate."

- SOLOMON SHORT

Colonel Wright was a small lady with long black hair and a mean expression. She looked at me disapprovingly as I pulled up to the gate.

"I don't like this," she said. She handed me the jumpsuit. I started pulling it on over my clothes. There were major's bars on the sleeve. "Thanks," I said. And prayed that I'd have a chance to kill Delandro before anyone found out the truth.

"I'm not doing it for you," she said. "I'm doing it for my people here."

"I know. So am I."

"You're younger than I expected," she said. "You look too young to have served in Pakistan."

Oops.

I shrugged. "You looked up my record."

She nodded. "I looked up somebody's record." She said, "I don't think it's yours."

I stopped in the act of pulling on the jumpsuit. I waited for her to go on.

"I know who you are," she said. Urk.

"You used the name 'Uncle Ira.' That tells me that you're a worm-killer-and that's all that I need to know. You burn worms. That's probably all you do. I suppose you're very good at it. But I want you to know something: there's a lot more to this army than just burning worms. I know you probably have a low opinion of those of us who sit at desks and coordinate logistics. That's usually the way of the military. But if it weren't for me keeping the Santa Cruz and San Jose districts operating, you wouldn't be able to do your job."

"Colonel," I said. I straightened, zipped up the suit and saluted her. "I don't know what kind of a bug you've got up your ass, but I think you really need to deliver this speech to the person you're pissed at. I know that it takes twenty-three support personnel to put one man in the field. I've never yet gone on a mission without praying that all those support people have done their job right. To the good credit of the United States Armed Services, I've yet to be let down. You know how I know? I'm still alive. That's how I know. So I truly appreciate that you've marshalled your resources on such short notice. I promise to take the best care of them."

"I'm coming with," she said.

"All due respects, ma'am-if you insist, I won't argue. But it isn't going to be very nice."

"I know. As I said, I've read your record. I assume that some of it actually represents your own experience. Let's go."

To give the colonel credit, the choppers were warming up on the field. "Through here," she pointed. We stepped into a briefing room. Forty men and women were just settling into their seats.

"Ten-hut!" someone shouted. The colonel waved them back into their seats. "Major Anderson will brief you."

I slid the disk into the terminal and punched up the appropriate frames. I put them on the overhead screen. I took them through the entire sequence of frames. I showed them the attack on Family. I described it in the most graphic detail possible, every death, every child.

I glanced up a couple of times. Their faces were gray. Good. It was working. I wanted them to know what they were up against. I went on. I showed them what I'd discovered about the base camp of the renegades. "See here-that's me, sitting in this Jeep. Now, watch. When I leave, this worm crosses the road and goes up the hill. Notice, there's a human being riding on its back. That's the Tribe leader.

"Now, here-if we backtrack from this morning, you can see where their camp is. I have my own suspicions why they attacked the peninsula, but we won't know until we interrogate. My guesstimate is that the trucks carrying the attack party won't get back to their base until sometime between midnight and

one. Even if some of their trucks went ahead, the last one--the one that would have certainly waited for this worm here--can't possibly get there before then. We have just a little less than two hours to get into position.

"What I want to do is put the choppers down here--on this field about five miles away. We'll split the team into two parties. One team will circle around and come in from the north, the other will come up from the east. I want to put a Jeep with a torch here on this road to the south, and that should box them in neatly. Squad leaders, you'll fly with me. We'll go over details in the air."

I looked up, and realized these men and women were terrified. I'd done my job a little too well. I needed to bring them back now. "How many of you have ever seen a worm first hand?"

A few of them raised their hands, not many.

"How many of you have seen a worm in combat?"

Two hands.

"All right, look--I'm going to tell you some things you need to know. First of all, you have the advantage. You'll know what's going on. They won't. There's going to be a lot of confusion out there tonight, but you'll have the night goggles, so you'll be able to see clearly. You'll have the torches and the AM-280's and the grenade launchers. Any one of those alone would be enough to do this job. I know. I've killed worms using all three of those weapons.

"Next, I want to tell you something about this particular tribe of renegades. They're terrified of the United States Army. I know. I was with them for almost a year." That sounded wrong. "Under cover," I added. "I needed to find out how they tamed their worms. And I found out. What I also found is that they did the job a little too well. Their so-called tame worms are also afraid of battle. They'll run from you.

"Now--who's terrified?" I looked out over the room.

Three hands.

"Bullshit. I know there are more of you than that who're shitting in your pants. Let's see some hands."

Four--no, five more hands went up.

"Good. Thanks for being honest. All right, now--who wanted to raise his hand but was afraid to look like a fool?"

More hands went up.

"Who isn't sure if they should raise their hand or not?"

Some more hands went up. More than half the people in the room.

"Good. Okay, now those of you who still haven't raised your hands, all those of you who should have raised your hands and haven't?"

A few more hands. We were getting there. There were some smiles now. Good. They were starting to relax.

"Now all the rest of you who haven't raised your hands--who's lying about being afraid?"

Two more hands popped up.

"If you haven't raised your hand yet, raise your hand." The last four hands went up.

"Good. Look around." I raised my hand. Colonel Wright raised hers. "Everyone with their hand raised is terrified. You're supposed to be terrified tonight. If you're not, you shouldn't be going on this mission. I don't want your death on my conscience.

"Listen up: I don't want you to be brave. I don't want you to be heroes. I want you to do your job. It'll be very easy, if you follow instructions.

"So here's the mission objective: burn the worms.

"That's the job. The worms must die. Now, I know there's probably some value in capturing a tame worm. What I want you to know is that I'm not interested in capturing these tame worms. These worms are to be burned, no matter what.

"Now, let me put that in plain English. It is very likely that some of these people may stand between you and the worm to keep you from burning it. Don't hold your fire. Take them both out.

"What we are dealing with is a Tribe. Their identity is completely and totally derived from the worms.

They perceive the worms as gods. Their gods must be destroyed if we are to destroy the Tribe. Yes, you have your hand up?"

A tall black man stood up. "Sir? How are we going to handle prisoners?"

I met his gaze coldly. "Easy. You're not taking any."

"Sir?"

"Lieutenant, are you familiar with Paragraph Twelve?"

"Uh, yes sir. It specifies the conditions under which the military may invoke the Termination Act."

"That's correct."

His expression turned thoughtful. I could see him realizing the impact of the moment. Very likely, he and his companions would be executing enemies of the human race tonight-including a number of two-legged ones. He didn't look happy. "I got it." he said. He sat down.

"Thank you. Any other questions?" There were none.

I checked my watch. "Forty minutes. It'll be close. Colonel Wright says I can depend on each and every one of you. Good. Follow your orders and you'll do fine. Colonel?"

She shook her head. "I have nothing to add. It's your show, Major."

"Thank you. All right, move out-"

She nodded to me, and we followed the troops out to the choppers.

?

I have written some limericks quite fateful,

malicious and vicious and hateful;

but I've torn up the jokes

that would sicken most folks,

and humanity ought to be grateful.

?

"Purity is almost always toxic."

-SOLOMON SHORT

There were eight Jeeps in all. Each one had a torch mounted on its nose. Each one had a man with a grenade launcher and two more with AM-280's.

The rifles were a viable weapon against the worms only from head on. You needed to drop down as low as possible and shoot upward through the mouth. The bony brain case of the creature was not as thickly shielded from below. It was possible to destroy the cerebral cortex with a well-aimed shot. The laser-sight of the rifle made a well-aimed shot possible. It was not recommended for those of dubious courage.

There was a full wing of twelve choppers. Every qualified person on the base wanted to be in on this mission. Colonel Wright, concerned about unpleasant surprises, had authorized the expansion of the mission. I wasn't unhappy about that.

The choppers unloaded the ground teams and the Jeeps at the landing site, then moved off to wait until we were in position. They would come in from the sky with spotlights and skyball flares. It was going to be very bright here, very soon. Colonel Wright was also on the phone to Denver, trying to get a solar mirror pointed our way on short notice. It would give us a tiny local sun.

Mine was the last Jeep to move into position. Colonel Wright looked to me. "It's your show, Major. Give the word."

I picked up the microphone. I said, "Thunder and lightning." The Jeeps rolled out. The lights were off.

We crept along the winding road as quietly as we could, moving to our advance position.

The Jeep lurched ahead, picking up speed. I could hear the other machines moving into position now too. I picked up the microphone from the dash, and thumbed the PA channel to life. Every speaker on every vehicle blared as I spoke, "We have you surrounded. Do not attempt to escape. We have you surrounded."

The walkie-talkie squawked. "Sir? Don't fire! They've already surrendered."

"Huh?" Colonel Wright and I exchanged a glance. "Everybody hold your position," I ordered. I motioned to my driver. "Move in."

The camp was an old dude ranch. There were a couple of battered buses here and nothing else. There were five teenagers and twelve sleepy children standing in the headlights of two Jeeps.

Suddenly, there were choppers overhead-their spotlights came on, stabbing the ground, illuminating the night

I climbed out of the Jeep. I pulled a torch out of the back and shrugged into a harness. Colonel Wright watched as I did so. "You think that's going to be necessary?"

"I don't trust anyone." I squinted against the glare of the spotlights. Lord, those choppers were loud. And they were raising dust. "Send the choppers out. Have them start searching the roads."

I walked over to the kids. I recognized several of the children from Family. They were huddled together in a frightened, trembling group; none of them was over ten years old. The other children, the ones from the Tribe, stood arrogantly apart. Tommy wasn't in either group.

The children from Family were too frightened to be coherent. I went down on one knee in front of little Crystal. "It's all right, sweetheart. We've come to take you home. Do you know where any of the others are?" She shook her head. She didn't know.

I gave her a quick hug, then straightened. I pointed, "You, Corporal, get these children out of here." I knew what I was going to have to do next and I didn't want them to see what was going to happen.

I waited until the kids from Family were herded away, then I strode over to the other group. I grabbed the tallest of the teenagers; a skinny boy with a big nose and a weak chin; and yanked him forward. He looked scared. I pushed my goggles back off my eyes so he could see my face. "Jeffrey-yes or no: Do

you remember me?"

He blanched. "Uh, yes."

"I'm going to give you a choice. Live or die?"

"Live."

"Good, Jeffrey. Where's Delandro?"

"I don't know. He didn't come back."

"I know that somebody came back, Jeffrey. Where did they go?"

"I can't tell you! I gave my word!" He was shaking.

"You made an agreement?"

"Yes, sir!"

"You have an agreement with me. Which one are you going to keep?"

I unholstered my pistol. I knew that there were men and women looking at me. I knew what I was about to do.

"Jeffrey," I said. "I'm going to blow your fucking brains out."

"Please, Jim-" He started crying.

"I don't want to do it, Jeffrey. Turn around." I placed the cold metal gun barrel against the back of his head. "Talk to me, Jeffrey."

"They'll kill me."

"I'll kill you if you don't."

For a moment I thought he was going to break. Then he sniffed. "I'm sorry-I can't."

"I'm sorry too." I squeezed the trigger. The top of his head disappeared. He toppled forward into the dirt. The other Tribe children stared in horror. I knew I was a monster. I didn't care.

I stepped sideways and pointed my pistol at the next teenager, a pear-shaped girl with a dirty face. She looked angry. Somebody grabbed my arm and whirled me sideways-it was Colonel Wright. "For the love of God! What are you doing?!" I came up with my pistol in her face-"Don't get in my way, Colonel!"

"These are children!"

"Don't you believe that for a second! I've seen these monsters in action. That one-" I pointed at Jeffrey's body, "that one is personally responsible for the deaths of seven men and women, four of them members of the United States Army."

She opened her mouth to say something. She realized my pistol was still pointed at her. She looked at me coldly and stepped aside. "There's going to be a hearing."

"I look forward to it. I know Paragraph Twelve."

"Yes. I understand you're an expert on it!"

"While we're arguing here," I said, "the Tribe leaders are getting away." I turned back to the girl. "Sandra, I'm going to give you a choice. Live or die."

"Die." She looked triumphant. She turned around and offered me the back of her head. "Go ahead, asshole," she said. "Do it."

I closed my eyes. God forgive me. I did it.

I stepped sideways to the next teenager.

Before I could offer him the choice, he pointed-toward the barn. I reached behind me and motioned one of the Jeeps forward. Its headlights peered into the gloomy darkness of the huge old structure. There were rotting piles of hay tumbled here and there. An ambush?

I pulled the boy away from the others. They were glaring at him angrily. "Watch him," I said to Colonel Wright. "He wants to live."

I stepped over to the Jeep pointed at the barn. "Stand by with that torch. Everybody else," I called, "keep a sharp eye out." It didn't make sense.

Delandro wasn't stupid. Neither was Jessie or Marcie. They wouldn't hide in the barn.

There might be something in the barn. There might not be. Probably, the only thing in the barn would be what Delandro wanted me to see. No, there was something else going on.

Then why had the boy pointed?

I turned and looked at him. He wasn't shaking any more. He had a hint of a smile.

He'd been told to point.

Delandro had been prepared for this.

He'd told the boy to point at the barn. He'd even told the first two children to die-to make it look like a real confession. And of course, they would-to protect Orrie.

It was that goddamned survival mind. Delandro had taught them that their identity was Orrie. They would die to save that identity. Their survival minds had given them death. The deaths of those two children was only to validate the lie. This boy's information was given credibility by the deaths.

Delandro had known what I would have to do. He'd outthought me.

Or had he?

He wouldn't have planned this so carefully if he were trying to escape. There was something here he was trying to defend.

Why?

He cherished his mobility. It was his only defense.

Obviously there was something here that wasn't easily movable.

I had a hunch. . . .

I tried to remember what the layout of this place was from the Eyeball frames.

There was a main lodge building, two clusters of bungalows, a swimming pool, and the barn.

They wouldn't have had a lot of time. They hadn't expected to still be here tonight. They thought they would all be on their way to the peninsula.

I lowered my night goggles over my eyes again and dialed for infrared. There was nothing, not even on the distant hills. There was some residual warmth in the buildings. The barn showed some interesting hotspots, but they were too small even to be children.

I wanted to go into that barn and look, but not until I knew the trap that had been set. I had the eerie feeling that I'd already walked into it, that it was just a matter of time until I realized how completely caught I was.

I turned to Colonel Wright. "Have your teams search every building. Then torch them."

I knew they wouldn't find anything though.

No, I had to look at this from Delandro's point of view. Or Jessie's. She'd probably made it back and set this up. Or Marcie. That was it. Marcie.

She'd know exactly what kind of weaponry I could call down on them. She wouldn't dare meet it head on. Her only hope was to find some weak point.

Where would we be vulnerable? And then suddenly, I knew.

This was a decoy. We were supposed to spend half the night searching this place, then give up and go home.

I turned to Colonel Wright. "I'm taking six of the Jeeps. I know where the renegades are." I pointed to my driver. "Call the choppers. Tell them to stand by to return to the landing site. But whatever they do, don't approach it."

I rounded up four squads and we scrambled.

The trip back down the mountain was faster than the trip up except for the last half mile, when we crept again.

"All right," I said to the radio. "Everybody hold your positions until the sky lights up, then come across the landing fields fast and drop a wide spray of concussion grenades!"

"Got it!"

"Stand by," I whispered to my driver. "When the lights come on, I want everybody ready to head on down. Fire on sight. Take no prisoners!"

I signaled Colonel Wright. "Any time, ma'am."

"Check."

I dialed my night goggles up to maximum. I couldn't be sure, but it looked like there was something moving around down there on our landing site. I'd guessed right. They were going to booby-trap our pickup.

Well, we'd handle that.

Suddenly, the sky lit up with sunlight. The west coast solar mirror, fifty kilometers across and 1,600 kilometers above the surface of the planet, had just been turned to create an artificial spot of daylight on the west coast of California.

Our landing site was nearly as bright as day.

There were four worms there. And nearly every adult member of the renegade band. And two truckloads of Claymore mines. They had enough of them to knock down a fleet of choppers.

Almost immediately, the choppers were zooming in overhead. The renegades were already running for the ditch at the south end of the field and diving into it. Most of them wouldn't make it.

As the choppers passed overhead, they began dropping sprays of concussion grenades. They popped in the air like fireworks. They went off like popcorn, scattering bright flashes in all directions.

The ground began to explode--

The Claymores had been triggered. Each one triggered the ones around it. It was a chain reaction. The bombs spewed fragments. Two of the worms were shredded where they stood. A third was writhing in pain. The fourth was racing up the hill toward the lead Jeep. I nudged my driver. We started moving down to meet it. I grabbed the controls of the torch.

But the girl in the lead Jeep was already working. She brought the torch around and aimed it at the beast. The flames licked out and it exploded and died.

We went down to the field and torched the worms there. Most of the renegades were dead. Their own bombs had killed them. Some were injured. I invoked Paragraph Twelve again. We caught the last few survivors at the bottom of the ditch. They were too stunned to put up any resistance.

I was almost disappointed. This was too easy.

I walked down the hill. I had the survivors lined up. There were five of them. I gave each one a choice. Live or die. "Where's Delandro?" They chose to die. I wasn't surprised. Paragraph Twelve.

Neither Jessie nor Marcie was among them. Too bad. The last one tried to tell me that it was his choice to die.

"Uh-huh," I said. "Dead is still dead." I pulled the trigger. God help me. It was getting easier every time.

?

Here's the tale of Benjamin Sneed:

Where others were two'd he was three'd;

and when they unmasked it,

(three balls in his basket),

he was voted "Most Likely to Breed."

?

? 46

?

The Secret of the Barn

"Expect the worst. You'll never be disappointed. "

-SOLOMON SHORT

I drove back by myself. I needed to think. Halfway back to the Tribe's camp, I made a decision. I counted to ten. It still felt right. I picked up the phone and made a call. "Birdie, Jim. Don't ask questions. Just listen-" I hoped that for once, she would believe me.

Colonel Wright was already waiting for me in front of the barn. She hadn't burned it yet.

Most of the other units had moved out. The children had been loaded onto one of the buses and also moved out. We had passed it on the road.

Colonel Wright was standing in front of the huge open doors. "I think you ought to see what's inside here."

I strode inside.

There was a corral made up of hay bales. The walls of it were eight feet high. I had to climb up a stairway of bundles to look into it.

There were five little worms in the corral, the smallest worms I'd ever seen, small enough to hold in your arms like a baby. And something else.

The floor of the corral was dark and wet with blood.

There were some fragments of clothing scattered about, but it was impossible to identify it as anything more than scraps of cloth. Here were the missing children.

The baby worms looked up at me and trilled. "Prrt?" they asked. One of them made as if to climb up the hay, but it was still too unsure of itself. I realized I was smiling. Baby creatures-of any species-are adorable. Even worms.

How old were these? A week at the most.

This was what Delandro was willing to abandon here. His liabilities. He could always raise more worms, he didn't need these. And he could always find food for them. No, they'd abandoned this place by the time we got here.

But he-or Marcie-had known what I would think; that the renegades considered the worms too valuable to abandon. Except they were wrong.

I knew one thing. If a fanatic is willing to give his own life for a cause, he sure as hell isn't going to have much regard for anybody else's.

I unshouldered my torch. "Everybody out. Once this barn goes, you'll have less than thirty seconds."

Colonel Wright looked at me. "We could take these specimens back with us . . . ?"

I shook my head. "They've already been imprinted. We'd get nowhere with them."

"Imprinted?"

"Uh-huh. You'd better get out of here now." I waited until she was gone. I looked at the baby worms one more time. I said, "I could almost learn to like you little sonsabitches-if only you didn't have such lousy eating habits."

And then I burned them.

They died quickly. I was glad of that.

The fire leapt up the walls and exploded. The roof of the barn was just erupting into flame as I came dashing out the door. I turned around just as it hit the flashover point. A moment later, the top fell in.

I turned to Colonel Wright. "Thanks. You done good, lady. Let's go."

"Will you be wanting anything else, Major?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact. Can you have a mobile reconnaissance van waiting for me?"

"Any particular reason?"

"There's still one worm unaccounted for. I want him."

She nodded. "Find him fast. Burn him." After what she'd seen here, she didn't need a lot of convincing. "And the Tribe leaders," I added.

She frowned. "I thought we got them."

"There's at least four of them that weren't among the dead or missing. I don't think they got back here. I don't think they were planning on coming back." I climbed into the Jeep beside her. She eyed me sideways. She knew that there was a lot more going on here than I had told her, but she wasn't going to ask. She turned forward again and put the Jeep into gear.

As we pulled away from the burning buildings, she said quietly, "I want to say something."

"Go ahead. You can't hurt my feelings. I don't have any, anymore."

"I didn't like you when you set this up. I didn't like your briefing. I didn't like the way you handled this mission. Understand this, Major Anderson, or whoever you are-I don't like you. I don't want you in my district. I don't want to ever have to deal with you again. Is that clear, Major Anderson?"

"That's real clear, Colonel. You'll be glad to hear that we're in total agreement. "

"Thank you, Major."

"You're welcome, Colonel."

The van was waiting for me at the edge of the airfield. I tossed the torch in the back, climbed into the driver's seat, and headed back toward Family.

?

A maiden who had a third breast
always kept her hand close to her chest,
and I promised her well
that I never would tell.

(Write me privately. Name on request.)

?

"Everything is connected to everything else. That's why it's so hard to keep a secret."
-SOLOMON SHORT

I turned off onto the canyon road.

Three clicks up, there was a sharp curve. Hidden in the bend, out of view of anyone who might be coming down the road was a roadblock of two schoolbuses.

Betty-John, Birdie, Big Ivy, and a handful of teenagers were there. All of them were carrying weapons. I pulled the torch out of the back of the van and joined them.

Birdie had listened. Good.

She came up to me and asked, "How did it go?"

"We got almost all of them."

"What about the children?"

I nodded. "There were seven of ours that I recognized, and three more from I don't know where." I named the ones I knew; Birdie didn't look happy. "Colonel Wright is taking care of them tonight in Santa Cruz."

Betty-John asked, "What happened to the renegades?"

I said it without emotion. "We didn't take any prisoners."

"Good," she said. She started to turn away, then she turned back to me. She looked haggard and broken. "You were right, Jim. "

"I would have rather been wrong."

"What I'm trying to say is that I should have listened to you before."

"Yes, you should have." This was hard for her, and I wasn't making it any easier.

"I-I'm so sorry. I should have believed you, but-I never thought-well, I'm sorry, that's all."

I knew what I was about to say and I wasn't going to stop myself from saying it. "I'm sorry too, B-Jay. Because sorry isn't enough. It never is. I'm the expert on sorry. I can't find Tommy. Alec's dead. Holly might as well be. You want to know something? I'm more angry at you than the renegades."

"I'm trying to apologize-!" she blurted. "Do you have to beat me up too?"

"Yes, I do! Goddammit! Because I don't have anyone else to take it out on!"

She started to protest, then she realized what I'd said, and stopped herself. "Go ahead," she said. "Let it all out. Let me have it then."

I hesitated-

"Go on . . . "

-and then I couldn't help myself. I let it out. I let it all out. "You narrow-minded, thoughtless, stupid, inconsiderate, self-centered bitch! My kids are dead! And how many others? They'd be alive tonight if you'd have just listened to me. We could have had the fences up by now! All I wanted was to save the kids, but everything had to be done your way. You had to analyze it, you had to have meetings about it, you had to think it over! And then you had the gall to tell me that I was acting paranoid and psychotic! Well, look who paid the price!"

She looked shaken. "Is that all?"

"No! You got what you asked for! This is it, lady! Dead children all over the street! The children paid for your stupidity!"

The tears were streaming down her face now. "Is there anything else you have to tell me, Jim?"

How could she stand to listen to me like this? I'd have decked me. I should have stopped, but I couldn't. I had to say it. "I hate you, B-Jay. I'll never trust you again."

She was sobbing. She choked and said, "Go on, Jim. You're the only one who'll tell me the truth. I betrayed Family. You're right. I don't deserve anyone's trust. Not ever again." She was crumbling before

my eyes.

In the middle of my anger, I wanted to grab her and hug her and tell her that it wasn't true, she was still worthy of our love and trust and respect. But God, I hated her so much! I wanted to kill her. I wanted to get even with somebody. Anybody.

Poor B-Jay.

She'd done her best. She just didn't know. If only she'd listened to me-the confusion was driving me crazy!

I didn't know what I was feeling any more. "I don't have anything else to say."

B-Jay turned away from me, she fell into Birdie's arms and started crying. Birdie gave me a foul look. Big Ivy cocked her rifle loudly and glared at me. I turned away from them all.

Big Ivy came up to me. "You're an asshole," she said.

"Tell me something I don't know."

"Don't you think she feels bad enough?"

I wheeled around to fix her with an angry stare. "Don't handle my case! You don't know what I had to do tonight. You don't know anything! At least B-Jay can cry it out now. I can't."

"Maybe this wasn't such a good idea, after all . . ." Birdie started to say.

One of the teenagers called. "Douse your lights! Everybody!" He held up a walkie-talkie. "Lookout says there's a van coming." B-Jay pulled away from Birdie, wiping her eyes. "Everybody: positions!"

I walked around one of the buses and stood in the blind part of the curve. I unshouldered the torch and waited.

It wasn't long.

We heard the engine growling down the canyon. We heard a screech of tires. We saw the beams of the headlights

It was a minibus. It came barrelling around the curve too fast to stop. The driver saw the roadblock too late and tried to turn. The van slid and skidded and slammed sideways into one of the buses, knocking it into the second bus.

Almost immediately the van tried to back up-I laid down a swath of flame across the rear.

The door to the van popped open and the driver hopped out, holding his hands in the air. He was only a boy.

"Lie down on the ground," I ordered. He threw himself flat. I stepped away from the tree I'd been hiding by. I waved toward B-Jay. Someone switched the headlights of one of the buses on. Other people were moving out from the bushes now, their guns pointed at the van.

"Come out slowly," I ordered, "with your hands over your heads."

There was no response.

I went to the van and pulled open the door and peered in. They hadn't been wearing their seat belts.

There were six of them. Two were unconscious. Delandro was cradling Jessie in his arms. Marcie had a rifle pointed toward me. Frankenstein looked like he had a broken arm.

I pointed my torch at Marcie. "Drop it, stupid. Or this whole van goes up in flames."

She looked to Delandro. He nodded. She put the rifle down. "Everybody out," I said. "Hands over your heads." I turned and called to Birdie. "We're going to need a couple of stretchers!" B-Jay came up to me then. She peered at the renegades as they climbed out of the van. I made them lie down on the pavement next to their driver.

"Which one is their leader?" she asked. I pointed at Delandro with the torch. "I'm going to burn him," I said.

B-Jay stepped in front of me. "No, you're not," she said.

"B-Jay-he killed my kids."

"He's going to have a trial first."

I stared at her. "You've got to be kidding! After what he did today-?"

"I'm not an animal, Jim! Sure I want revenge-but not so badly that I'm willing to throw away what little humanity I have left! I haven't fallen as far as you yet!"

I lowered my torch. I stepped close to her. I said, "I know these bastards. You go ahead. You think you

can have a trial? You try and I'll tell you exactly what's going to happen. You won't be able to. You're going to end up giving them back to me. And then I'll burn them. I can wait."

Betty-John didn't answer. She started directing the cleanup operation. I went back to my van and tossed the torch in the back. I drove back to Family alone.

?

Skydiver Daniel McDopp

used to masturbate right from the top.

Whenever he fell,

he jerked off like hell.

He was good to the very last drop.

?

Jason Makes a Choice

"For every action, there is an equal but opposite critical analysis."

- SOLOMON SHORT

I finally went to see Delandro in his cell. After several private centuries of indecision, I went to see him. I didn't know what I wanted to say to him-and I did. A thousand different speeches raced through my mind. I discarded them all as being inappropriate.

Part of me wanted to say, "How? How did we end up like this? I almost believed in you. I wanted to believe in you!"

I knew what he would say. "Good for you, James. You get to be right again. You're running your righteousness machine." And if I believed that, then he would be right again-and I didn't want to give him that opportunity to be right, because I was as tired of his self-righteousness as I was of mine.

What I wanted, very honestly, was revenge.

Total revenge. He had to see it for himself-that he had failed and I had won.

But of course, that was just me wanting to be right again. It was a neat little trap Jason had constructed around my mind. There Was no way out of it. I couldn't be right without automatically being wrong.

I guess what I really wanted was an apology for the damage he'd done to me.

Except he'd say that nobody can damage you except yourself. Everything he said put the blame on me and took it off him. All he was, was the delivery boy. It was my fault for accepting the package.

I unbuckled my gunbelt and left it with the guard. She unlocked the steel door and let me enter.

Delandro was laying on his bunk, his hands on his stomach, staring at the ceiling thoughtfully. "I've been waiting for you," he said.

There was a chair. I sat down facing him. "You have a speech prepared, don't you?" I shook my head.

"No?" He hadn't moved. Now he turned his head and looked at me. "You're not telling the truth, Jim."

And there was that great, warm grin again. He laughed. "You do have a speech prepared, pobably several speeches. And you've probably rehearsed them all. But you've decided not to deliver any of them. Is that the truth?"

"You've always been good at reading minds, Jason. Why should I argue with you?"

"You didn't come down here just to gloat," he said. "I trained you too well for that."

"Why am I here then?"

"Jim," he said, shaking his head. "Don't pretend to be stupid. Someone might believe it. You're here because you need to be complete with me before tomorrow. You know what's going to happen in that courtroom and you know what's going to happen afterward. And you know who's going to have to do it. "You're going to kill me tomorrow, Jim. But you want me to forgive you first. Or you want me to beg for my life. Or you want me to give you some justification for killing me. Too bad. I'm not going to cooperate. You have no power over me, except what I'm willing to give you. I give you nothing."

I replied very quietly, "But I can give you something."

"Ah," he said. "Now, we get to the offer." He sat up opposite me. His eyes were still the most penetrating blue I'd ever seen. "Go on." He scratched his neck distractedly. I knew that gesture.

"I can give you a choice," I said. "The same one you gave me. You can live or you can die."

"You have a contribution you can make to the war effort. You know things about the worms. The army needs to know what you know. An arrangement can be made. You and your people will still be prisoners, but you'll live. Or . . ." I shrugged. "We'll have a trial."

"And you'll kill us."

"Do you want to live or die?"

"My survival mind wants to live, of course-but I think I'll choose to die. That way, there is nothing you can do except serve me again. You can carry out my wishes for me, Jim. You see, I may be confined,

but I'm still in control. You can't even have revenge."

"In other words, you're not going to let me be complete, are you?"

He shook his head. "No. Why should I?"

"I don't know. I thought-I guess I was wrong, but for a while, I believed you were so enlightened that you loved all humanity."

"No. I never said that. I never did."

"My mistake," I acknowledged quietly. I met his gaze again. "Now, let's talk about your mistake."

"Yes?" He waited.

"It's the way you handle your . . . enrollments. You give people a choice between life or death. But you never had the authority to do that. You didn't have a real contract with the people you captured. The agreement was invalid. I never asked you for the opportunity. I never gave you the right to give me the choice between life or death. You assumed an authority you never had."

Delandro asked, "Do you want me to respond to that?" I nodded.

"I never had to ask your permission. I already had the authority. I was acting on behalf of the young god."

"That authority isn't recognized here," I said. "As long as this is a planet of human beings, you're under the authority of the government of human beings."

"And I don't recognize that authority."

"Too bad. Because that still leaves the question of disposition unresolved. What are your fellow human beings to do with you?"

"Jim, there's only one possible outcome for tomorrow's hearing. You know it and I know it. We both know what's going to happen and how it's going to happen. If you want, I'll even write out your dialogue for you."

"No thanks."

"My choice has already been made," Jason continued calmly. "It was made at my first Revelation and everything I have done has been the continuation of the process that began on that day. I serve the new gods. Whatever I have said and done has been part of that service."

"Your gods can't help you here," I said. "Not in this court. Like it or not, you're going to be judged by the members of your own species."

"The human race is incapable of judging itself-and I promise you that there are no human beings on this planet who can judge our actions, because we are no longer operating in a human context. We are beyond your experience. You don't realize it yet, Jim, but your authority has become irrelevant to the future."

"This is getting tiresome," I said.

"You can leave," Jason replied.

"I came down here to try to save your life. Not because I have any affection for you. I don't. But I want to know what you know about the worms."

"I don't want you to save my life. And if you want to know what I know about the worms . . . well, there's only one way you're going to learn it."

He studied me calmly. He's just a man, I told myself, but I couldn't quite bring myself to believe it. I'd seen him in the circle. I'd seen him at the Revelation.

"There's so much that you don't know, James. You shouldn't have fled the Revelations. You'd understand. You can no more fight the Chtorr than you can fight yourself. There is no victory down the path you follow."

I stood up. It was time to go. "It's over, Jason. Ended. You failed. The Tribe is gone. The children are dead. The babies are dead. The new gods are dead. All of them. Every one."

Jason stood up and looked me straight in the eye. His eyes were the sharp blue of the noonday sky. He came very close to me. "Jim, look at me. I'm not the man you think I am. I never was." He was unbuttoning his shirt.

"You need to know this. I see so much that is so far beyond your understanding. . . ." He stepped back so the light could hit him fully.

And then I saw.

There was fine pink fur all over his chest. He glistened with purple and orange patterns. I stared at him, horrified.

The fur was thickest in a line up his belly, all the way up from his groin to his breastbone; it thickened and stretched across his chest like a great red tree. It was almost beautiful. Jason shucked out of his pants and I could see how the fur was spreading down the inside of his thighs. He turned around and I could see that it was growing across his back. I saw pink and white strands peppering his hair as well.

"Touch me," he commanded.

Despite myself, I reached my hand out. The fur tingled like worm fur.

It was worm fur.

He turned around to face me again. "Jim-I can see you with my eyes closed. I can smell you and taste you. You smell of salt and fear and blood. You taste of loneliness. I can hear what you're thinking. You radiate in colors that you don't even know you have."

He stopped and looked at me oddly for a moment, peering curiously at a spot behind my eyes. And then he started laughing. "You really don't know, do you? You really are a victim."

And then he stopped himself and said, "You're right, Jim. I'm not human any more. I've transcended humanity. I've grown beyond it. I would have shared this gift with you, Jim. I wanted to, but you wouldn't let me, would you? You never understood how we all loved you. No. Because you won't let yourself be loved, by anyone. You're doomed to go through life putting turds in your own punch bowl and wondering why everything tastes so shitty. You poor damned fool, I feel so sorry for you, for what you've lost. You're a Judas, Jim. You've betrayed the living gods."

There was a lot I could have said to that, but I couldn't find the words. What I said instead was almost simplistic by comparison with Jason's vision. I just shook my head and said, "You made a terrible mistake when you attacked Family."

Jason was rebuttoning his shirt, tucking it back into his pants. He looked up at me with a hard expression. "I keep my word, Jim. I told you once, that if you ever broke your word to me, you would regret it bitterly. And that is exactly what has happened. No matter what you do in the future, you will always know that you broke your word. And you will always know that you had reason to regret it. There are people dead today who would not be dead had you kept your word."

"You can't put that blame on me."

"Jim, you know what your responsibility in the matter is. You know where you failed. There's nothing I have to say or do at all. You'll do it all yourself, far worse than I ever can."

"I'm not going to play word games with you any more, Jason. I came down here. I gave you a chance. My conscience is clean."

"That's bullshit and we both know it."

"You're no god," I said to him. "You know what your failure is? You wanted revenge on me. You may wrap it up in beautiful fancy language, but underneath it all, somewhere in there, it's still nothing more than revenge, isn't it?"

"I kept my word, James. As I said I would." He returned to his bunk and sat down. He was dismissing me.

I didn't move. "You know, you were right about something you said to me once. I don't want to kill. But I kill. I don't want to kill you. But I will. If I have to."

"I've told you my choice. I think I'll die now."

"Unfinished? Incomplete?"

He laughed. "I'm not incomplete, Jim. I'm fulfilled. I've come farther than any human being before me; but this isn't the end of the process. Oh, no. There's still so much more to come. This is only where I stop, Jim, not the work.

"Nature is abundant. She'll keep spawning prophets until one of us accomplishes the transformation of the species. It was never important that I be the one to complete the work, only that the work gets completed. And what I've done isn't wasted either. I've helped pave the way, helped make it easier for the next prophet.

"In that regard, I envy you, Jim; because it's very possible that you will live long enough to see the work

completed. I promise you that it will be. Nothing you or anyone can do can stop it. The work will be finished. If not by me, then by someone else. Perhaps . . ." He smiled, and the effect was terrifying.

"Perhaps, Jim, you might even be the one to someday finish what we started here."

"I'll burn in hell first," I said.

"Yes, that's the other possibility." I closed the door behind me.

He would not let me be complete. The bastard. His skill was at keeping people off balance. He'd done it to me again.

And tomorrow, I would have to do it to him.

?

A necrophile name of Ned Schultz,

often brags of his deed and exults,

"Tis legal, it's said,

to make love to the dead,

if performed by consenting adults."

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? The Trial

"If you build a better mousetrap, you'll catch a better class of mouse."

-SOLOMON SHORT

I walked in and stopped and looked at them.

There were only seven. They were in a row along the side of the room.

Marcie, Jessie, Frankenstein, three whose names I didn't know, and Delandro.

They were on their knees, hands on top of their heads. Prisoner of war position.

There was one guard in back of each one of them, with a rifle pointed directly at their backs. None of the guards was over sixteen years old.

They were impassive. Guards and prisoners both. We almost looked civilized.

I knew what was going to happen here. And they knew it too. They were going to say what they would say. We would say what we would say. But the result would be the same.

I turned away from them. I nodded to the two young men at the back of the room. They opened the doors and the rest of the people of Family filed silently in. They took their seats quickly and with a minimum of noise.

I was startled by how few of us were left. Less than fifteen adults.

When they were settled, I nodded to the guard at the side door. He opened it and Betty-John and Birdie came quietly in. They stepped up to the podium and sat down at the table there.

Betty-John arranged some papers in front of her, poured herself a glass of water, and took a drink. She put the glass down and put on a pair of reading glasses. She peered at the papers in front of her. She picked up a gavel. She tapped it three times on a small wooden block and said, "This court is now in session."

She glanced around the room for the first time. She looked grim. She looked over her audience as if renewing herself. Then she looked at the prisoners.

"A fair trial," she said, "presupposes that the defendant is a responsible human being, capable of understanding the difference between right and wrong and able to gauge his actions and their consequences on that basis." She looked at the prisoners. "Do you understand this?"

Delandro said, "We do not recognize your authority to try us."

"Do you understand the question?" Betty-John asked.

"We do not recognize your authority."

"Yes, I know. You don't recognize my authority. Be that as it may, I still have the authority. Do you understand the question? Let me repeat it. A fair trial presupposes that the defendant is a responsible human being, capable of understanding the difference between right and wrong and able to gauge his actions and their consequences on that basis. The outcome of this hearing is dependent on your ability to deal with the circumstances of the physical universe. Do you understand this?"

"We do not recognize your authority."

I looked at Betty-John. "With your permission?" She nodded to me.

I walked over to Delandro. "I am acting as a friend of the court here. Do you understand?"

"We do not recognize the authority of this court."

"Yes, I understand that. I get your communication. You do not recognize the authority of this court.

That's too bad, because you're here anyway."

"You do not have the authority to judge us."

"That issue is irrelevant. We've already begun the process, whether you think we have the authority or not."

Delandro didn't answer.

"Last night, I offered you a choice. Do you wish to accept it?" His face remained blank. I knew what he was doing. "Refusal to answer is still an answer, Delandro."

He answered by not answering.

So. We were going to act out the entire charade. Here is where it starts-and proceeds inexorably to its terrifyingly logical conclusion.

I spoke my line. "You realize, of course, that you are effectively signing your own death warrant?"

He looked up at me. At Betty-John. At all of us. "I'm not afraid of death," he said. He looked at me again. "If you put the gun in my mouth, James, and offer me life or death, I will not make the same choice you did. If I choose death, then there is nothing you can do to me, nothing you can threaten me with. I am the source of my own choices, I always will be. Any power you might have over me would be only the power that I give you. I give you nothing. We give you nothing."

Right.

I looked at the whole line of them. All of the prisoners were impassive. I'd have been disappointed if they hadn't been.

I looked to Betty-John. She looked to me. She was as annoyed as I was. I crossed to the bench.

"I told you this was going to happen. I know these people."

"A little too well," Betty-John remarked acidly. "All right." She picked up her notepad. I stepped back.

"Before we proceed, I want to make your options clear to you," she said to Jason and the others. "First of all, there is the nondiscriminatory option; for those of you who are smart enough to request the court's guidance, the question of guilt or innocence will be set aside in favor of social service.

"James McCarthy informs me that you all possess information about the nature of the Chtorran ecology, information that could prove valuable to the United States war effort. If any of you choose to make that information available, I am prepared to enroll any or all of you into an appropriate national service program.

"Let me make it very clear that a social welfare program is not a prison term, but neither is it an escape or a parole. These national service programs are intended to provide a way for those who are, for one reason or another, incapable of accepting the full responsibilities of citizenship to still meet their obligations to the society they live in. It is an entirely voluntary program.

"If that option is not acceptable to you, then this trial will continue and you will be tried for crimes against humanity. Unless any of you request otherwise, you will be tried as a group."

None of them spoke. I hadn't expected them too.

Betty-John asked, "Do any of you wish to accept the national service option."

She waited. We waited.

"I see," she said. She scribbled something on her pad and passed it sideways for Birdie to initial too. "Do any of you wish to be tried as individuals?"

Again, silence.

Betty-John ran her hand through her hair in annoyance. She knew what had to come next. She didn't like it either. She steepled her fingers in front of herself and pursed her lips and looked unhappy.

Finally, she picked up her gavel and said, "Let it be noted that the prisoners' silence has been interpreted as a refusal to both questions. Therefore, we must continue with the trial." To Jason, she said, "The court is prepared to provide you with the services of an attorney. "

Jason shook his head. "We do not recognize the authority of this court."

"Mr. Delandro, I'm going to give you one more chance. I strongly recommend that you take it. Do you wish the services of an attorney?"

Jason repeated his statement. "We do not recognize the authority of this court."

Betty-John looked frustrated and angry. "Let it be recorded that the prisoners refused to recognize the authority of the court." She looked at her notes. She found the place in the civil orders I had marked for her. "All right. The court recognizes James Edward McCarthy as an expert witness on the state of mind of the prisoners." She looked across to me. "In your opinion, are the prisoners capable of recognizing the authority of this court?"

I stood up. "No," I said. "In my opinion, they are not presently capable. The operative word is presently. Under other circumstances, perhaps."

"We are dealing with the present," Betty-John said.

"I concur. "

Betty-John moved her finger down the page, pursed her lips into a frown. But instead of reading the next passage, she motioned me over to the table. She lowered her voice, "You're certain?"

"It went exactly as I told you it would, B-Jay. They're not operating inside the parameters of what we recognize as responsibility and you can't proceed with the trial. And yes, they clearly know what's at stake. This is what they want."

"Do you think they're trying to force the issue-embarrass me into compassion?"

I shook my head. "On the contrary. I think they want to die."

"That's why I hate this law," B-Jay said. "It makes too many martyrs."

"There's no way that any of them are going to cooperate with the system."

B-Jay said, "Jim, let me remand them to the custody of the San Jose Authority."

I shook my head.

Birdie said warningly, "Jim . . . "

I cut her off. "They're too damned dangerous."

"That may be true, but this is too damned close to revenge."

"Birdie!" I forced myself to whisper again. "Is there a single person in this room who doesn't want revenge?"

"That's the point, Jim. B-Jay's right. We should send this whole thing to San Jose."

I shook my head. "No. Listen to me. Your authority ends at the point at which the prisoners refuse to cooperate. You have no choice. The responsibility for disposition passes to the acting officer in charge of the district. And I claim that authority."

"I'm not arguing that. I'm arguing about the humanity of it!"

"So am I. I say we need to complete this here. If it goes to San Jose, it'll go on for months-or worse, they'll kick it up to Oakland, and it'll go on for years. Delandro isn't stupid. He'll tie the legal system into knots. If he can stall his trial for three years-and he can-the odds get very very slim that he'll ever be brought to trial for his real crimes. They'll come up on reduced conspiracy charges. If it leaves this district, he'll be back in five years."

"Besides," I lowered my voice to add, "I'm not willing to have him be a notorious celebrity. The kind of garbage he's spreading is infectious. I know."

"Jim, I ask you one more time to reconsider. There may be another way."

"Birdie, I've given this a lot more consideration than you know already. Maybe I've seen too much. But that makes me the expert. You're the expert on medicine here. If you see a cancer, you cut it out. I'm the expert on Chtorrans. I see a cancer too."

Birdie sighed. "All right, Jim." She looked unhappy.

I looked to Betty-John. "Go on to the next page," I said. I stepped away from the table.

Betty-John read:

"After expert examination, this court finds that the accused are presently incapable of understanding or cooperating with the legal process. The accused will be remanded to the custody of the United States Army."

I was watching Delandro's face when Betty-John read that last. His eyes widened in surprise. Then he looked at me, and smiled in appreciation.

Betty-John continued. "Lieutenant James Edward McCarthy, acting commander for the Santa Cruz Peninsula District, will you accept custody of the accused?"

I turned to Betty-John. "I will."

"Thank you. Court is hereby adjourned."

I walked back over to stand before Delandro.

"Like a clock, James. Like a clock," he said. "The machinery works. Tick tock. Tick tock."

I didn't reply to that. I was considering my next words. There was something I wanted to know. I turned back to the prisoners. Very softly, I asked, "Where's Loolie? She wasn't at the camp." No answer.

I raised my eyes to see Jason studying me.

I let my glance slide sideways, to Jessie. She looked bitter and angry-and triumphant.

"Where is she?" I asked.

Jessie snorted. "You wouldn't understand."

"Try me."

"She had a Revelation."

"And-?"

"And she gave herself to Orrie."

"She what?!!!"

Jessie smiled. "I told you that you wouldn't understand."

"You're wrong," I said. "I understand all too well. Revelationists eat their young." I turned away from them quickly.

I walked over to Big Ivy, acting commander of the guards. "Take them outside," I said.

The prisoners were taken in a single file line out the side door and onto the parking lot. A wide area had been roped off on the lawn. "Line them up there," I pointed.

The people of Family were coming out of the front doors of the auditorium now, coming around to the side to join us. The children were being herded away. Only the adults and teenagers were lining up to watch.

The sun was high overhead. The day was warm and clear. It was a beautiful day.

I waited until the prisoners were down on their knees again. I picked up a hand mike, tested it by tapping on it, and spoke. "Twenty-eight months ago, Congress passed the Emergency Euthanasia Bill. The bill defines specific circumstances under which the termination of human lives that have been damaged beyond rehabilitation may be authorized."

I nodded to Big Ivy. "Will you please read the text of the relevant sections?" I handed her the microphone.

She took it. She unfolded a piece of paper from her shirt pocket and began to read the text of the law.

While she did, I looked at the faces of our survivors.

They were grim.

This was ugly, but necessary.

Big Ivy finished and handed me back the microphone. "By the authority vested in me by the Congress of the United States of America and the Commander in Chief of the United States Armed Forces, I hereby assume the responsibility for the decision of termination." I turned to Big Ivy. "Do you have the papers?"

She motioned to one of the younger girls, who came up with a clipboard. I signed all seven documents.

"Jim!" I looked up. It was Marcie. I walked over to her. "Yes?"

"I'm pregnant. You can check with your own doctor. She knows. She examined me, last night."

"So?"

"The baby-it deserves a chance, doesn't it?"

"Are you asking to have your case reconsidered?"

She glanced once at Jason. His face was still blank. She looked back to me. "Yes, I am," she said. "It's your baby."

I looked at her eyes. She was terrified. "I'm sorry, Marcie. It's too late. You already chose. I don't have the authority to reopen your trial. All I have is the authority to determine whether or not you're terminally damaged. You had your chance inside."

"But I didn't know you were planning this-"

"Yes, you did. You knew the choice. We made it clear."

"It's your baby!" she repeated.

"No," I said. "It isn't. Whatever it is, it's a monster. And you're using it to manipulate me. It won't work."

"Jim, please-"

I leaned in close. "Marcie," I said softly. "Shut up. That's your survival programming talking. I'm not going to listen to it, because I know that's not who you really are."

"You son of a bitch," she said

"I had a good teacher."

I walked away from her and thumbed the mike to life. "I want to stress something here. When an animal

is sick, you put it out of its pain. A human being deserves the same courtesy. What we are up to here is not vengeance. Vengeance is a crime against ourselves. What we are up to here is a cleansing. It will look brutal. Think of it as the removal of cancer. Those of you who feel you may not be able to cope with this are requested to leave. Those of you who are here for vengeance are requested to leave. Those of you who are here to mourn the loss of another bit of humanity are welcome to remain and share the grief." I turned to the seven surviving members of Jason Delandro's Revelationist Tribe. I thought for a long moment. No. There was nothing else I wanted to say to them. It had all already been said.

Jason looked at me. "Do we get any last words?"

"This isn't an execution. It's a termination. No purpose will be served. But if you want to babble, no one will stop you."

He shut up.

I unholstered my pistol. I walked around behind the line.

I stepped up to the first one. I didn't know who this man was. He had red hair. I thought about Holly.

Bang.

I took a step sideways. The woman's hair was neatly combed and pulled back in a bun. I thought about Alec.

Bang.

Another step sideways. George. Frankenstein's monster. I felt sad for him. The monster had always been a figure of pity. Too bad.

Bang.

A step sideways. A nervous looking boy in thick glasses. He'd stood next to me the first night in the Revelationist camp. He'd welcomed me to their tribe. I thought about Tommy.

Bang.

A step sideways. Marcie. "Jim, please-" she whimpered. I leaned forward and replaced her hands on top of her head.

"You surprise me." I said. "I had no idea you had so little faith." I lowered my voice to a whisper, so only she and I could hear what I said next. "My babies are dead. Why the hell should I give a fuck about yours?"

Bang.

A step sideways. Jessie. A woman who gave her baby to a worm. There was no human being here.

Bang.

I stopped to reload. I slid a fresh magazine into the butt of the gun.

I stepped around to face Delandro from the front. I pointed the gun at his face.

"I feel sorry for you, James. You're going to live to see your mistakes. I forgive you."

"To hell with you." I closed my eyes and squeezed the trigger.

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Have you ever met Jamie McBeezis?

He does any damn thing that he pleases.

Says Jamie, undaunted,

"if you've got it, then flaunt it!"

But he's referring to social diseases.

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Orrie

"Jesus had it coming. The self-righteous always get nailed."

-SOLOMON SHORT

There was one last thing to do.

It was a three-hour drive. Not as long as I'd thought.

The old dude ranch was a burned out ruin. Some of the trees and shrubs in the area had also burned, but the fire hadn't spread.

I pulled into the big dirt clearing that served as a parking lot and killed the engine.

I switched the PA system on.

"Prrrt?" I said into the microphone. "Prrrt?" The day was silent.

I opened the door of the van and climbed down out of it. I went mound to the back and got my torch. I came back toward the front of the vehicle.

Orrie was just coming up past the ruins of the barn. I knew it.

He'd come back here because he knew this place.

He was looking for his babies. He was looking for his family, his tribe.

"Orrie!" I shouted. "It's Jim! Come here!" I had to get him in range.

He stopped and looked at me. He cocked his eyes suspiciously. They swiveled independently of each other. They were large and black.

"Come on, Orrie-I'll take you to Jason!"

"Prrrt?" He asked.

"Prrrt," I answered. I went down on one knee. "Come on, baby. Come to Jimmy."

It worked. Orrie slid toward me.

At the last moment, he hesitated. "Prr-rrrt?"

"It's all right, baby. I know. They all went away and left you alone. You're hungry, aren't you?"

He started to half-raise himself off the ground. A challenge? No, it was more of a question.

He lowered himself again. He decided he could trust me. He slid forward.

For half a moment, I was tempted-to put the torch down and go over and hug him and skritch him behind the eyes. For half a moment, I loved him again.

And then I brought the torch up anyway-and sent him straight to hell.

He gasped. He screeched in surprise and anger and betrayal. The flames enveloped him. They roared.

He screamed. He writhed and rolled and shrieked and died. For a moment, his cries were almost human.

For a moment, I almost regretted what I'd done.

But the feeling passed. The debt was paid.

I still hadn't found out what had happened to Tommy. I didn't think I ever would.

I put the torch in the back, and got back in the van. I backed away from Orrie's burning body.

I was on the main highway in twenty minutes.

I drove for two hundred miles before I finally pulled off to the side and stopped and let the tears come to my eyes.

I sat there and cried and was sorry I didn't have the courage to blow my own brains out.

After a while, I stopped crying. There were still more tears to come, a lot more, but there would be time.

It didn't matter. I knew what I was going to do for a while. I was going to drive and kill worms, drive and kill worms-until one of them killed me first.

It was something to do.

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There once was a nearsighted gynie
whose glasses were sparkly and shiny;

but they stayed in the drawer
while he worked on a whore
and tied up the tubes of her hiney.
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Grief

"Immortality is easy. It's wearing your watch that makes you grow old.
(Also, cut out spicy foods after age one hundred and seventy.)"

-SOLOMON SHORT

And after we were through bargaining, we did grief.

Depression.

This was the most structured part of the process. Foreman had us move our chairs up against the walls; then he started us milling in a big circle in the center of the room. I was sent down from the platform to join the rest of the trainees for this part.

Some of them patted me as they passed. Others wouldn't look at me. Ashamed? Afraid? I didn't know. We walked in a slow circle. Around and around and around. There was no sound but the sound of our moccasins on the floor. That was the instruction. Just walk. Don't try to figure it out. Don't think. Don't talk. Just walk in circles for a while and let your feelings come up to the surface.

I noticed that the lights were dimmer. Not a lot dimmer, but the room was no longer bright, no longer as clear.

"All right," said Foreman. "You can start letting some of it out. There're no prizes any more for holding it in. All the rage. All the grief. All the upset." He kept on talking.

"Remember all the times someone said to you. 'You're not good enough?' Or, 'I'm sorry, you came in second.' Or, 'Couldn't we just be friends?' Remember how you felt? Bring that up."

What was the point?

"Think about all the opportunities you've missed in your life. The girls or the boys you didn't proposition. The chances you didn't take. The stock you didn't invest in. The money you didn't save. The classes you cut, the tests you failed, the promotions you missed."

Some of the people around me were crying. A couple were wailing. Was that the point? To walk in circles and have a good cry?

"This is your life," said Foreman. "Let it out. Let it all out. Think about all the people you know who've died and left you behind. How do you feel about that? Don't you feel betrayed? Mommy died and left you alone. Daddy went away. Grandpa and Gramma. Or maybe it was your brother or sister, or somebody you loved who left you. Maybe it was that one special person, the one you loved more than anybody, and after he or she left you, you knew that you would never love anyone again as much. No, you made that decision a long time ago. You're not going to let yourself get hurt again. You're going to hold it back so they can't get to you, right? Well, you win! Nobody can get to you now. You're all in this alone together. What's that feel like? What's the cost?"

The words bored into us, and we circled, and we cried. The tears were running down our cheeks. The sobs came choking up in my chest. I saw faces from my past. Kenny who killed himself and nobody ever knew why. Steve, who died in his car. Mike's dad, who was found on the patio. Ed, who was murdered. Gramma, who died in the nursing home. My dad--

I noticed they were all men. Well, not Gramma. But all the others. What did that mean? That I really didn't care about any woman enough to mourn her death?

I thought about my mom. Oh, God.

There were all those trips to the hospital when I was little, because of those constant ear aches. And my teeth. My mom used to point to my braces and brag, "Look, there's my new Cadillac." That was before Dad's first best-seller.

Goddammit!

I never had the chance to say goodbye-not to any of them! God-your universe is so damned unfair! I don't mind the dying. I mind the incompleteness of it all! I never had the chance to say goodbye!

All of them

I fell to my knees. I couldn't go on. It wasn't fair. I never had the chance to tell my mother how much I really loved her.

-and all the ones since. Shorty. Larry. Louis. Duke. Jon. Tommy. Alec. Holly.

I bawled. I raged. I sobbed. I choked.

Somebody was helping me to my feet. "Come on, Jim. Keep going. It's all right. Let it up. You're doing fine. Just keep walking."

There were two somebodies walking with me, one on each side. I leaned on them both.

"This is it," said Foreman's voice. He was omnipresent. "This is your life. This is how it turned out. It's written all over your face. Your whole body is an expression of who you are. Everything. How you walk, how you talk, how you carry yourself, how you present yourself to everyone else.

"This is you. Let it in. This is it! This is how you used your potential. This is what you did with it.

"Get it!" Foreman was shouting. "You are not going to be crowned king, after all! You are not going to be president. You are not going to be a movie star. You are not going to marry Prince Charming. And who the fuck cares anyway? This is it!"

It was horrifying.

And then, Foreman's tone shifted. He was no longer shouting. Somehow, he had become compassionate.

"You carry your grief around with you everywhere you go. You drag your dead bodies with you all through your life. So what? What do you get for it? Nothing. So why do you do it? Look at the cost to you. Look at how it pushes you into anger and revenge. Look at how it keeps you from getting close to the people you really care about. Look at how it keeps you from being complete with them."

Foreman's voice became a comforting presence.

"The only thing you can do that way is survive. And you can't even do that all that well, because all that energy you have tied up in grief and anger and revenge is energy you don't have for anything else. You certainly can't win a war that way. Listen to me. There's something on the other side of survival. There's something so much bigger than survival that mere survival becomes irrelevant in the face of it-and no, I can't tell you what it is. You have to find it for yourself. And you will. I promise you.

"Keep or. letting go of the grief. It's like an anchor holding you down. Let it out. Give it up. Give it away. You don't need to carry it around any more."

And then, after a while, the last of the grief had been shed and we sat down on the floor or leaned up against the walls, We were exhausted. Some people hugged. Some continued to weep quietly, but there were smiles on their faces now and the tears were tears of comfort and joy.

And then, after that, it was time for dinner. After dinner--

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A shepherd named Jimmie Fitzhugh,
said to his sweetheart, "It's true.

Nothing is moister
than a fresh oister,
unless, of course, it is ewe."

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Afterburn

"Nobody is ever really ready for anything. If they were, there would be no point in living through it."
-SOLOMON SHORT

I was tired.

Tired of fighting. Tired of running. Tired of living.

I was looking at a concrete bridge abutment as it raced toward me. I was thinking how easy it would be to just end the pain once and for all. A quick twist and it would be over.

Or would it?

With my luck, I would live.

I'd probably just knock a bridge down on my head; army vans were supposed to be as strong as tanks.

But then again, maybe not . . .

And while I was frowning over the crashability of the van, the bridge abutment raced past-
-and I realized how close I had come to actually jerking the wheel sideways.

I pulled off the road.

No, not here. The highway was too open. Too unprotected. I wanted a place to stop where I could feel safe.

I couldn't stop here-and I couldn't keep going. Who was it who had once said hell was an endless highway? Everybody, probably. It was too easy.

Twenty minutes later, the highway narrowed to four lanes and curved up into the foothills.

There.

A shaded rest area on a rise. I could turn on the detectors. Nothing could approach without setting off the alarms.

I pulled the van onto the dirt and pried open the door. I almost fell out onto the ground. My hands were shaking with exhaustion. I lay there with my face in the grass, just smelling the greenness of it. And the pinkness. That smelled good too. Like cotton candy.

And then I focused and I saw the little pink sprouts coming up here and there. And the blue as well.

That's what I was smelling. I sat up and looked around. Next year, there wouldn't be any green on this hill at all.

I got up. I walked around the van. I walked away from it. I started to feel nervous. I walked back to it. Maybe I should get my rifle. No, maybe I shouldn't. If something was going to eat me, let it eat me.

I didn't know if I wanted to live or die.

"Do you know how a Chtorran likes to be burped?" I said.

"No," I answered. "How does a Chtorran like to be burped?"

"From the inside," I said.

It wasn't funny.

I shoved my hands in my pockets. I took them out. I felt restless. I wanted something to eat and I felt nauseous. I wanted to run. I wanted to hide. Was this me or was it the effect of all the pink and blue and red and orange I was seeing around here. Did all those Chtorran plants put something into the atmosphere that made people crazy?

That was as good an explanation as any. I walked away from the van, just for something to do.

"Did you ever notice," I said, "that people always have to have a good reason for being crazy. There's always a justification. Something is doing it to you. If it isn't your parents, it's the army, w the government. Or the Communists. Now we have the Chtorrans to blame it on. The Chtorran ecology is making me crazy. Shit! Doesn't anybody ever go crazy because they want to? Just for the fun of it?"

"I mean, being crazy is a great way to get attention without having to be responsible. They come and get you and put you in nice padded room arid take care of you forever after. Being crazy is a great way to

escape. I think I'll be crazy."

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. I was already crazy. I'd been crazy for years.

"We're born crazy," someone had told me once.

"We spend all of our lives trying to get sane. That's what keeps us crazy. If we'd just relax and be crazy, we'd be all right."

"Huh?" I said.

The voice went on. "Trying to prove that you're sane is crazy. If you're crazy, be crazy. That's sane."

It didn't make sense. "Shut up," I said to the voice. "This neurotic pursuit of sanity is driving me bananas."

"You got it."

"I got nothing."

"Right. You got it. There's nothing to get."

"Shut the fuck up!" I shouted at the sky. "Leave me alone!" I remembered something I had seen once, a long time ago. We had been visiting my grandmother in Los Angeles. We had been driving west on the Ventura freeway one evening at dusk, when suddenly this bright, bright light appeared in the sky. It looked like a star, only it was too brilliant for that. As we watched, it started to spread streamers of glow through the hazy atmosphere. Wider and wider. Traffic around us slowed. "What is it?" my mother had asked. My dad hadn't said anything.

I said, "It's too steady to be a missile. Missiles move."

"Are we at war?" asked Maggie.

Dad said, "If it were incoming, we wouldn't see it like that. If it's a launch . . . but it doesn't look like any launch I've ever seen."

I said, "Maybe it's a nova."

"Too bright," said Dad.

"A supernova then-?"

He didn't answer, and I knew for a moment I'd guessed right. I was absolutely certain. Oh, my God. We'd been reading about supernovas in school. They exploded and put out great scouring waves of radiation. For us to see one this big and this bright meant that it was close enough to destroy the Earth. I was certain of it. I was looking at the end of the world.

We were probably already being bombarded by lethal radiation. We were already dead. I remember feeling cold and alone and totally helpless as I stared at that light in the sky. I wanted to cry.

And then the light puffed up, exploded and disappeared, leaving only a few glittering twinkles like fireworks.

I was glad I hadn't said anything. I would have looked like an idiot.

Dad said, "It has to be a missile launch. Vandenberg is just up the coast. But it sure was a weird looking one, wasn't it?" He switched on the radio, and a few minutes later the announcer confirmed that a test missile had been fired and destroyed when it went off course.

Why did I remember that now?

The feeling in my gut—that I was caught in the end of the world, that feeling of smallness and helplessness. That was it. I was carrying that feeling around with me every day now.

I walked without purpose. It didn't matter any more.

There was no escape. The green grass had pink and blue threads in it. There were puffballs everywhere. They blew across the ground and stuck to your hair, your clothes, your eyebrows. You were always sneezing from them.

There were worm trails everywhere. There were millipedes everywhere. Sometimes you couldn't walk without stepping on a pipe cleaner bug. They were so stupid. The Chtorran cleanup machinery was everywhere. There was no escape.

It was going to take longer than the hard radiation, but it was going to happen. I was a witness to the end of the world.

First the plagues. Now the infestation. What next? Suicides? Oh, yes, we were already seeing a suicide plague. One out of ten people could be expected to die of self-induced causes within the next three years. That was supposed to be a secret, but it wasn't. It was, they said, the reaction to an environment

gone out of control.

I felt like once, in school, we had done dust. We weren't afraid of the side effects. We could handle them. I had sniffed it. And the walls of the room had begun to bulge and wobble and vibrate. Reality threatened to shred all around me. I had started to scream in terror. Because I knew that I was all that was holding the universe together. And if I let go, the universe would let go--when was that?

Just before the plagues, wasn't it? I'd let go and the world had come to an end. It was my fault.

Where was I anyway?

My life was blurring. I didn't remember who I was or what year it was? Had we conquered the Earth yet? Oh, yes, we already had. We just hadn't found out yet.

What did that mean? What did anything mean? I blinked awake. Where was I?

I didn't recognize the area. I turned around slowly.

The van was on a distant hill. Somehow I had walked down the slope and away from it. I was a good half-mile away. The green had faded away; the other colors ruled here.

They smelled so . . . interesting.

I got down on my hands and knees to look.

There was still grass here. Underneath the other things. I guess they were plants, maybe they weren't.

They looked like silvery little threads crawling up each blade of grass. Where they touched them they leached the color out of the grass stems, leaving the grass a peculiar bleached white color and brittle to the touch. The grass crunched like old leaves.

The threads were almost shiny. The thinner threads were white. As they grew older?--yes, older--and thicker, they turned pinkish. Where they had established themselves completely, the ground looked like a pastel tangle. The pink stuff fed on the green. And the blue stuff fed on the pink.

Naturally.

Where the pink threads were smooth and clean like noodles, the blue threads were scraggly and barbed. They looked like little insect legs encircling and leaching the flesh of the pink spaghetti. I wondered how many levels of evolution I was looking at.

A parasite that fed on grass. Plant or animal? Or something that was a little of each, but not enough of either to be one or the other. And then another parasite that fed on that one. Was there still another and another beyond that? When would we see those life forms? Just how vicious was the Chtorran ecology anyway.

Wait around. You'll find out.

Shut up, little voice. Get out of my head. Am I going mad again? No, I'm still mad. Is that me or the plants?

Stop and look. No, that's just me. I recognize my own craziness. How long have I been crazy, anyway?

All my life.

The pink stuff had roots. It could survive by itself. But it ate the green out of the grass when it was there. Smart. If it had to earn its own way it did. But it preferred to freeload.

What about the blue?

I pressed the ground with my fingers. It felt spongy. My head felt suddenly cavernous. I was hearing echoes of my own thoughts again.

I straightened up, blinking.

What had happened? I'd gotten out of the van. . . .

I'd been hallucinating. Or something. I was tired and--I'd fallen down on the grass. There was something in the grass. Yes, the pink and blue.

I recognized the pink. I knew the blue. I'd seen them before. Jason had showed them to me.

I knew what they were.

Candyland.

All the prettiest colors of sugary pink and spicy lavender bobbed in the summer sun. The air was thick with their sweet, sharp scent. There were tufts of cloud-white blue and marshmallow white, there were stalks of candy-cane red, there were tuffets of frosting and puddles of pudding--everything stretched and rolled out to the horizon, which was lost in the dust of yellow infinity.

The air was so sweet, it was like standing on top of a giant angel cake. I imagined I was-and that the stalks were candles and that all the sparkling colors were the candy sprinkles on top of a three-meter layer of caramel frosting. And underneath that-you could dig through the richest, thickest, sweetest layers of pure white cake until you hit the deepest layers of rich chocolate fudge . . .

But you had to be naked.

You had to take off all of your clothes and roll around in the candy and get good and sugary, and then when you had grown a big corkscrew snout, then you could start digging.

I laughed as I kicked off my shoes, and giggled as I pulled off my shirt and peeled out of my underwear.

This was going to be fun.

Yes, I knew the pink and blue. Jason had showed them to me, just before the Revelation. And now, here I'd found a whole field of Revelation plants, all to myself. I wasn't just going to meet god here. I was going to be god.

The sun was a big red rose in a fat yellow sky. All the plants were singing on the tufty fields. I laughed and burred. I skipped and sang across the field.

Until I stopped.

I stopped to stare at the giant pink gumdrop.

It was too big to eat. I'd have to live in it instead. I didn't think the worms would mind.

Their candy cane was out front, all sugar and melty. It said, Vacancy. Inquire within.

?

There's a reason why Barton is queer.

When you meet him, the reason is clear.

A goddess named Venus

gave him a penis,

but Mother Nature filled up his brassiere.

?

"How did the Wicked Witch of the West take a bath?"

-SOLOMON SHORT

The gumdrop was a very pretty gumdrop. The door was open, so I went in.

I knew which room would be mine. I hoped I wasn't too late for dinner. The worms would be annoyed. I started down the tapioca tunnels.

The walls were covered with the finest blue fur I'd ever seen. It grew down in long, velvety strands. You could brush your hands through it as you spiraled downward. It tingled and twinkled and rang like little bells. When you touched it, it sparkled with bursts of pixie dust. Why hadn't I ever noticed that before? If you didn't touch it, it just glowed happily to itself.

There were big buttery nodules here too, all over the walls. They were thick and chewy looking, but I wasn't hungry yet. Two fat red-bellied millipedes slithered up the tunnel past me, chittering about their bellies; I said hello, but they were too busy to answer. They had to grow up big and fat first.

I was pleased to see that the circulation vines were spreading throughout the gumdrop. They were thick with moist red syrup. So sweet-smelling too. This was going to be one of the great gumdrops of the world.

Everything was here.

I hoped the worms would like me and would let me stay. I could tell them gumdrop stories.

The worms were in the big chamber of the left ventricle. I knew, because that's where all the circulation vines were pointing.

For now, anyway. Later, they would point toward the real main chamber. That would be much deeper. And much larger.

There were four worms here in the gumdrop. They were very beautiful worms. All of them were well striped. Their markings were very clear and clean. I was glad of that. I liked the certainty. Their sides were bright with fierce orange and gentle pink and then a bit of brooding dark purple.

I knew their names, even though I couldn't pronounce them, so I said hi the best way I could and just waited politely for them to notice me. They were communing. The big one was (Aristotle). He was the big one even though he wasn't the biggest. The worms always have a big one who does most of the knowing for the others, and being the big one isn't about size, it's about knowing. (Aristotle) had the most purple on his sides.

(Beelzebub) was only recently male and was still trumpeting and posturing; his orange stripes blazed. The others all thought he was very beautiful. (Aristotle) was very eager to mate with him. So was (Gargoyle); she kept flashing pink with her orange.

(Delta) was too young to have a personality yet; she just wanted to carry the eggs. She wanted to be rolled over on her back and tickled until she was fat with eggs. You could see it in her stripes, all proud and raspberry pink.

They were dancing.

It was the dance of (restlessness until we rest). They curled in and out of each other, sliding and stroking and tickling the sparks off each other's fur. I wanted to join them. I wanted to grow pink fur of my own.

But I could wait. I knew that my own fur would come in time. And then I could link with the worms too. There was so much they had to teach me. And I, them.

They had to know what to watch out for. The world outside the gumdrop was still too raw, too wild, not yet awakened.

They (rested). They (linked). They (sang).

The (song) included me. I could feel myself in the (music). I would descend into it like a well, deeper and deeper, and as I did, I stopped being me and began to become (myself).

I (hugged).

I (tingled). All over. (Linked).

"Come on, Jimbo."

"Huh?"

"I said, come on. It's time to go."

I sat up, rubbing the sleep from my eyes. We were still in the worm nest.

He put his hand on my shoulder. It reminded me of that time in the shower. I climbed to my feet. I was cold.

"Where are the worms?"

"They're gone," he said. "And now it's time for us to go too. Come on. We found out what we needed to. Let's get out of here."

"What did we find out?"

"You don't have the words for it any more. Come on." He sounded impatient.

"I'm cold."

"I know. This way. It'll be warmer in a minute." He grabbed me and started pushing me toward the tunnel. I staggered and fell; he said a bad word and helped me up again.

"Sorry."

"Just keep walking. I can't do this all myself. You're going to have to help me." He ducked under my shoulder and pulled my arm across his back. "Hang on," he said, and half-carried me up the tunnel. We were both naked. Why was that? There was something about a naked man--

The nest seemed a lot darker now. As if someone had turned out all the lights. The vines weren't pumping any more either. Was the nest dying? Or just turned off?

Outside, the sky was black and the ground was bright. The stars were pink. The sun was cold. The clouds were complete. They swirled and billowed upon themselves; they were a massive ceiling to the world.

"Where are we?"

"Same place. Just keep walking, Jimbo. It's very important. Just keep walking."

All the plants were flat and blasted. They glowed in death as if they were lit from the inside. The shadows floated upward. The dust drifted up and away. Our eyes were lit from within too. But I couldn't see the pixies any more.

"Easy boy-close your eyes if it helps."

"I wanted to go back to sleep."

"You will in a minute. First things first."

"Who are you?"

"Jim boy, you know me. I'm you. You're me. We're us. Now, just keep walking. Keep walking and I'll teach you how to flame."

"Uh-uh. You can't teach me how to flame. You said it can't be taught. "

"I lied."

I stumbled and fell. The ground was very hard. I decided to rest a bit. I could get up later.

"Jim-come on, get up!"

"Later. I need to sleep a bit first."

"No, Jim. Now!"

"No," I said and curled up.

"Poppies!" Someone was cackling over me. "Poppies."

I opened my eyes in annoyance. "What? Are we that close to the Emerald City? I don't even have any ruby slippers. Leave me alone. That's somebody else's story. Why is that old bitch picking on me?"

"Because you're ugly and your mother undresses you funny. Good, Jim-come on. Hold onto my hand. Step into the light, you're out of the night-you know how it goes. One foot in front of the other."

"I don't want be crazy any more," I said. "I'd rather be dead. I'd rather be Ted. I'd rather be led-"

"Okay, I'll lead you." He pulled at my arm. "Come on. I'll be Peter Pan and you can be one of the lost boys-"

"Can we fly?"

"Yes, we can fly."

"Really? We can really fly?"

"Yes, we can."

"Then why do we have to walk. Let's fly--"

"You'll have to concentrate."

"I will. I wanna fly."

"Lift your arms. Hold onto my hand now. Up, up, and away--"

"Are you Superman, too?"

"I'm anyone you need me to be. Anyone you want me to be."

"Are we flying now?"

"Look down."

I looked. We were rising up gracefully, up over the field, the nest, the van--

I giggled.

"Good, Jimmy boy. That's real good. Keep it up. Just a little bit longer."

"This is hard work, flying."

"I told you, you'd have to concentrate. That's it, flap your arms. Move your legs a little too. Yeah, just like you're walking." We were drifting sideways. The glow across the ground was the reflection of our light. The van looked like it was melting. We were sinking toward it.

"I can't keep it up," I said.

"It's all right, we're almost there. Just lower your wheels for a safe landing and you'll be just fine."

"And put up the tray tables and bring your seat backs to a full upright position," I added. We bumped across the ground and collapsed against the door of the van. I slid it open and fell halfway in. He helped me lift my legs up. We closed the door together and climbed, staggered, fell into bed and rolled into each other's arms and held onto each other as hard as we could while the night roared around us with loud sweet purple noises.

He smelled so good.

?

Then there was Benjamin Bright,
a contestant on "What's My Delight?"

They guessed at his habits
with little white rabbits,
but were stumped by his mouse and his kite.

?

"The lights are most likely to come back on at the precise moment you find the flashlight."

-SOLOMON SHORT

The bright sunlight glaring in my eyes woke me up.

I was lying on a rumpled blanket on the floor of the van. I was alone. The sunlight slanted in sideways through the front window. I sat up. I was naked. My skin had an oily feel to it, and I felt a peculiar light-headedness. I wasn't dizzy, but I felt like I was floating two inches in the air, drifting rather than sitting.

I rubbed my eyes and looked around for-what was his name?-he was gone. He hadn't even kissed me goodbye. What the . . . ?

I remembered some of it.

The gumdrop. The nest. The glowing blue fur on the walls. The worms. The (names). The (song).

The-that part, I couldn't quite identify.

And then somebody had come and lifted me up and walked me out of the nest. I remembered it. We had gone to Emerald City. And then we had flown back to the van. That was the clearest part of all. And then we had made love.

I really was crazy.

My hallucinations were more real than reality.

I got out of the van and padded around naked, examining the ground. The only footprints were mine. The only tire tracks were mine.

No.

This was stupid.

He was real. Hallucinations don't get that intense. We'd made love. I remembered the feel of him and the smell of him too vividly.

What was going on inside my head? Was it actually possible to have delusions that realistic?

This was-very confusing.

Shit.

I gathered up what few of my clothes I could find and tossed them in the back of the van. I pulled on a jumpsuit and slippers and wondered what I should do.

"I could still kill myself," I suggested.

"Nah," I replied. "That doesn't sound like anywhere near as much fun as it did yesterday."

"Hmm. . . ." I said.

This was interesting. I didn't feel quite so crazy any more. I was having terrific hallucinations, but at least I didn't feel crazy. Actually, I felt-sort of like me again. Not so bad, really.

I could remember Family. I could remember everything, but it was all on the other side of a wall and I couldn't feel the hurt. I could see it clearly. I just couldn't feel it any more.

What I felt instead was . . . sore.

I rubbed my neck tenderly. I ached all over. Were these bruises on my body from the acts of passion?

Or was it just from falling down the hill? It didn't matter. The weird thing, the thing that was so down-deep disturbing, was that despite the soreness, I actually felt good. Like you always do after good sex with someone you love.

Even if it's only a hallucination. I started laughing.

Whatever that pink stuff was, it stayed with you for a long time. I'd probably be grinning all the way to Colorado. Maybe I should take some with.

No.

That was the wrongness. The temptation.

It would be too easy to hide out in the world of hallucinations. And as beautiful as they had been, it would be a dangerous mistake. It would only be the illusion of escape.

I climbed into the front of the van and clicked on all the systems. All the boards showed green. Good. I hadn't done anything too stupid last night. I punched for coffee-well, it sort of tasted like coffee-and a ration bar and waited while both heated up.

Eventually, I felt well enough to ease the van back onto the road and put it on autopilot.

I hardly watched where we were going.

My mind was still trying to figure out the impossible.

Out of curiosity, I switched on the autolog and scanned the record. The motion sensors had triggered recordings only twice during the night. The first recording showed me prancing around naked on the hill, alone.

At least I looked like I was having fun.

The second recording showed me staggering back alone. I looked like a zombie, jerking and twitching as if somebody else were pulling my strings.

Well, that settled that.

Either the pink was an incredible hallucinogen-or I was as crazy as a loon.

Probably both.

Whatever. It made me too crazy to die. I had to keep going.

?

There was a young man from St. Lutz,
who had a remarkable putz.

It would sniff; it would hunt,
for it only liked cunt.

Absolutely no lips, hands, or butts.

?

? 55

? The Chopper

"Of course, kick a man when he's down. It's the best time. If you're not willing to kick him when he's down, then don't kick him when he's up either."

-SOLOMON SHORT

The radar beeped.

The screen said, "CHOPPER AT 6:00 HIGH."

I stretched over and tapped the button marked "ID?" The screen said, "NEGATIVE."

I tapped the button again.

This time, the screen said, "HUEY VALKYRIE 111. STEALTH RETROFIT." Then it added, "UNITED STATES INSIGNIA."

"Uh-huh. That doesn't mean anything any more." Without taking my eyes off the road, I tapped the button again.

The screen said, "CHOPPER IS HEAVILY ARMED." It began to list the aircraft's armament.

I tapped another button and the screen cleared to show the chopper itself. The image was jittery at first due to the motion of the van, then the logic switched in; the screen grabbed clear frames and held them for four-second intervals. Someone had painted a fierce grin on the nose of that ship.

"Well, whoever you are up there, I'm not going to argue with you. You're packing enough artillery to level Detroit." She carried a full load under each arm. She looked like a maddened harpy.

But just the same, I unlocked the laser guns and powered up the anti-aircraft missiles.

The computer said softly, "We're being scanned. Shall we identify ourselves?"

"Don't bother. Either they know who we are, or they don't care." Then I added, "And they probably wouldn't believe our ID any more than we'd believe theirs. But thanks anyway."

"You're welcome."

I looked at the screen again. The chopper would be on top of us any moment now. I let go of the steering wheel. "Take control!" and slid out of my seat. The computer locked in. I climbed for the turret.

"Unlock all weapons. Stand by for evasive action." The chopper roared low overhead even before I had finished belting myself in.

It came in at treetop level. I could see the rocket launchers on its belly. I could read the numbers on the fins of the missiles. "Jee-zus!"

The chopper had buzzed us like a hornet-like a hawk! The van rocked with the force of its passage. The noise was like the inside of a garbage disposal.

It pulled up into the air ahead, turning as it did, sliding backward in the air while the pilot got his bearings. I knew when he had sighted me again because he dipped and drove straight toward the van.

"Show-off!" I yelled.

Again the chopper came in low, strafing like a banshee. For a moment I thought it wasn't going to clear-I had my hands to my ears-and then it was past and pulling up and . . . the road behind the van exploded with a roar! The air turned red! The van skidded sideways on the pavement, sliding before the shock wave! The computer grabbed control again and we swerved around a rocky curve. The tires screeched.

I just had time enough to look behind and see the fireball. It was the size of a hangar, a blimp, a mountain, and still growing as it climbed into the air! What was that chopper armed with? That warhead must have had phosphorus in it. Bright fiery streaks were still coming out of the explosion, igniting fires all over the woods.

"Holy shit!"

"Missiles locked on target," said the computer. "Return fire?"

"No!" I shouted. I slapped the safeties down, locking them into place before I dropped out of the turret. I pulled myself back into the driver's seat. "I'm taking over," I said.

"Not advised," the computer said. "You don't have the reflexes."

"Stuff it!"

I stood on the brake pedal as we came around another curve and into a long straightaway down a hill. I could hear the sound of the chopper coming in behind us. Then it was overhead, and then it was climbing again ahead of us. Something fell from its belly.

I just had time to close my eyes before the blast went off, but even through my eyelids I was blinded. I could feel the heat through the windshield. The van was lifted off the ground by the shock wave. I could feel the bang of the chassis as we crashed back into the ground and skidded backward with a screech. The wheels were still locked.

All the alarm bells in the van were ringing. All the sirens were screaming. All the buttons were beeping. All the screens were flashing. "Damage report," said the computer. "Damage report," it repeated. "Damage report. Damage report."

I heard it all from a distance, from a thousand miles away. There was a roaring in my ears that wouldn't quit. I worked my mouth convulsively. I couldn't swallow. I felt nauseous. My throat kept tightening and I kept trying to throw up-but I couldn't.

Then the computer said, "Autocontrol locked in!" And the van lurched. Amazing! We were still operative! We were rolling backward. Away from the climbing fireball.

I blinked the tears from my eyes, wiped at my face with my sleeve. It looked like the windshield was scorched and even melted inward a little.

The van was still rolling backward; it went bump and banged into something. It stopped. It hesitated. Then it began rolling forward again. Toward the fire!

I slapped the panic button and shouted, "All stop!" The van clattered to a halt. Something underneath went bang and the van hissed and sighed and fell silent. I could hear my heart banging in my chest. I practically fell out of my seat. I kicked the door open and fell out onto the ground, gasping.

The chopper was just settling down onto the highway about twenty meters away, its blades stropping the air slowly.

I wanted to punch that pilot's lights out. And I would-as soon as I could stand up again.

The door to the bird popped open and a trim figure in flight suit and helmet dropped out. "Are you all right?" She was running toward me with a first-aid kit.

"No!" I said. I wished I was wearing my gun.

"Where are you hurt?"

"I can't breathe!" I choked out. "I can't see! I can't hear! I can't move-" I started to get up, but she pushed me back down with a gentle tap on my chest. She touched a hypo to my arm. It buzzed softly.

"What was that?"

"Preventive maintenance." She peeled back my eyelid and shined a light into my pupil. "You're okay. Stay put for a minute. Anyone else in the van?" She was already heading for it, unholstering her pistol just in case.

She disappeared into the vehicle, then reappeared with her pistol reholstered and carrying the van's log cartridge and my duffel bag. "Can you walk as far as the chopper?"

My knees were still weak, but I could manage. I felt a little dizzy. "Wait a minute!"

"Jim! Stop being an asshole." She pushed up her face plate.

"Lizard!"

"Colonel Tirelli to you!" She was angry. Her face was flushed. "You're still a commissioned officer in the United States Special Forces, remember?"

"I'm dead. I resigned."

"You can't resign. It's a lifetime job. You're being recalled to active duty-"

"Like hell I am!"

"-or a firing squad," she said. "I came to get you, one way or the other. Your case is closed. It isn't a matter for discussion. I'm not going home empty-handed."

I reached over and took my duffel from her. "Wait a minute. It's in here somewhere. Ah, there it is." I pulled out my own gun and pointed it at her belly. She didn't blink.

"Colonel, you're a beautiful woman. And sensible. So why don't you get back into your bird and fly away

nice and we'll both forget this whole thing happened. Okay?"

She took a breath. She said calmly, "Cute, Jim. Very cute."

"I mean it!" I said, waving the pistol. I wondered if I really did.

"You won't get far."

"I'll take my chances!"

"I've blown up the road ahead of you and behind you. You've got maybe a quarter-mile of concrete stretched between two craters. By the way, those craters will be burning for three days."

"Then I'll walk! I'll still be in better company!" This was stupid. I shoved the gun into my belt, hefted my duffel, and started to push past her.

"Jim, you'd better hear this--"

"Not interested," I said, still walking. Both my legs hurt, but I wasn't going to let her know.

Something in the woods chirruped purple. It wasn't far. It sounded too loud.

"It's the explosions," said Lizard. "They've come to see if there are bodies."

"I thought worms didn't scavenge."

"They do now. They're demonstrating a whole new range of behaviors." She added, "I thought you'd like to know."

"No," I said stubbornly. "I wouldn't."

The thing in the woods chirruped again. It was getting closer. There was a torch in the van. I wondered if I had time.

"Better get to the chopper," she said. She wasn't moving either. She was waiting for me.

I looked at the chopper, at her, at the van, at the tower of smoke just down the road and its twin behind us. I looked at the forest. "Shit," I said. "That's what I love about the Special Forces. All the exciting opportunities!" We ran for the chopper.

Lizard grabbed my duffel and tossed it in ahead of me; then she had to help me up the ramp. I fell into the first empty seat. Lizard didn't even wait for the door to finish closing. We popped up into the air just as the first worm slid out of the trees. She peered forward over her console to look down at it, and at the two more which came right after. They were raised up and waving their arms at us. "Just babies," she remarked, and touched a button on her board. Something went Ka-whump! and the ground beneath us turned scarlet. I didn't bother to look.

She swung the chopper around then, pointed it at the van. We hung in the air like a question mark. "Did you get everything you wanted out of that van?"

"Yeah, why?"

"I'm gonna blow it. Wanna watch?"

I staggered to my feet. "What for?"

"It's too well armed to leave sitting around." She was checking something on her board. "You don't travel light, do you? I guess we trained you a little too well." She touched the red button. The van exploded as if it had been stuffed with dynamite. Then, the secondary explosions began.

"Your armaments," Lizard noted. She swung the chopper away quickly. She pulled us up into the sky and turned into the west.

"Hey! I thought we were going to Denver!"

"We are! There's something I want to show you first. Come sit up here!" She thumped the seat beside her.

I levered myself into it. She was punching something up on the main screen. It was centered so both pilot and copilot could see it easily. "There," she said. It was a terrain map. "We're here--" She pointed. "That red mark is where we left the van. Got that? Good." She touched the bottom of the screen and the image began expanding to include the surrounding terrain. The original screen was a square of lighter color in the center. It shrank steadily as the map kept expanding. When it stopped, Lizard said, "There, that's the next four hundred clicks. You want to see how infested it is?"

"I had access to the same maps. They're on the satellite channel."

She smiled; it wasn't a pleasant expression. "Uh-huh. Here's what the satellite told you, right?" She tapped and tiny blotches of red appeared all over the map. "Localized pockets of infestation. Do not

approach. Right?"

"Uh, yeah. . . ."

"And here're the areas where they say infestation may be possible. Travel only in armed convoys." She tapped again and every red blotch took on a wide pink border. Some of them overlapped. Colorado looked like a bad case of measles.

"Now," she said, "do you want to know the truth?"

"The truth?"

"Your Uncle Sam is a chicken-hearted liar. He doesn't want to scare the civilians. Thinks it'll demoralize 'em. Here-this is what they're not telling you. This is a map of the known areas of infestation." She tapped and the red and pink blotches expanded to become red swathes across most of the western half of the state. "Oh, shit," I said.

"That's what most people say. Now, let me show you the areas where we suspect infestation. And this is probably a conservative estimate. . . ." The western half of the map went pink. The eastern half was streaked.

She pointed at the tiny square indicating where we'd left the van. "And that's where I picked you up, right in the middle of it." I started shuddering.

"It's the mountains," she said. "We can't patrol the mountains with any certainty. Wait, you'll see."

She looked at me. "My only question is this: how did you get as far as you did? You should have been eaten several hundred kilometers ago. God must be saving you for something awfully special." She turned back to her controls, adding, "Probably hanging."

I didn't answer. I was still shaking. Still staring at that bright pink map. My hands were trembling in my lap. I started to cry soundlessly. I could feel the tears rolling down my cheeks. I couldn't tell if they were tears of terror or relief.

"Oh, shit," said Lizard. "Here-" She handed me a tissue from a dashboard dispenser.

I mopped at my face with it, till it shredded in my fingers. Lizard said, "There's beer in the cooler. Want one?"

"No. Thanks anyway."

"Get one for me, will you?"

"Uh, okay." I went into the back of the ship and pulled out a can of beer for her, hesitated half a second, then pulled out one for myself. I climbed back into the copilot's seat, opened one and handed it over. I opened the second. The beer was cold. It tasted good. I'd forgotten.

She grunted, "Thanks. You okay now?"

"I'm fine. Considering."

"Then don't consider. If that's what keeps you from being fine, don't do it."

"I'm fine," I said.

"Good. 'Cause I'll need your assistance on weapons when we get there."

"Get where?"

"Where we're going." She pointed to the map, to the largest, darkest red spot. "I want to show you what an infestation looks like today."

?

Sally's sex life was carefully planned.

Said she, "I prefer to be manned.

Things that are anal,

are always so banal,

but things that expand are just grand."

?

? 56

?

Colonel Tirelli

"Malpractice makes malperfect."

-SOLOMON SHORT

I watched the ground slide past beneath us. The countryside grew ever more rugged. The rolling hills turned into rocky crests and Lizard kept pulling the chopper higher and higher above each advancing ridge. Soon, we were swooping and swerving through steep canyons of brush and pine. The slopes were dry and brown, and close enough to touch.

"Why are you staying so low?" I asked.

"I don't like being tracked."

"Tracked? Worms don't have the technology-"

"Hmph." She just grunted.

I didn't pursue the subject. After a moment, I said, "I suppose you want me to thank you."

"You suppose wrong. I don't care what you do."

"Well, you came after me."

"No, I didn't. You were just a stopover." We lifted up to the crest of a ridge, then dropped down the opposite side. It was like riding a roller coaster. My stomach was about two loops behind. "This is what I came to do. I do this as many times a week as I can get fuel and armament."

She said, "You still have an inflated idea of your own importance, Jim. You think we care about you.

Truth is, you're not worth the fuel to make a special trip." She looked at me. "Really."

"Then why did you bother?"

"You had one of our vans. I was curious. Who were you? How did you get it? Where were you going with it? According to our satellite tracking, you were headed straight into the thickest worm infestation on the North American continent. We had you figured for a renegade. We almost pushed the button on you a week ago."

"Huh? How?"

"You have to ask?" she said. "Those vans have satellite phone links, right? Your computer was always in constant communication with the network. The network always knew where you were."

"I thought I disconnected the links."

"You did. But that's a military van. It just switched over to one of its backups."

"That's not possible! I disconnected every link on the schematics."

"That's right, you did. You got every transceiver that shows on the schematics. That's one of the reasons we thought you were a renegade, delivering arms to worms."

I didn't notice the second part of that statement, I was still realizing the implications of the first. "Those vans have secret channels?"

Lizard grinned at me. "Do you like secrets?"

I shrugged. "Not particularly. All my experience with secrets is that they're a damn nuisance."

She said, "You're right. They are." Then she asked, "Do you want to know the greatest American military secret of the past twenty years?"

My impulse was to answer yes, then I thought about it. That took about ten seconds. I said, "I don't think so."

"Actually, it doesn't matter," Lizard said. "Because it's not a secret any more."

"All right, I'll bite. What isn't?"

"This: every piece of military equipment manufactured in this country in the past twenty years has been a Trojan horse."

"Huh?"

"It's in the microchips. There are certain extra circuits—a piece in this chip, a piece in that chip—they look

like they're supposed to do something else. Most of the time they do. Except every so often, they emit a random piece of low-level electronic noise. It's a spurious thing, nearly impossible to trace."

"I remember reading about that. The Israelis noticed it. They said the electronics were flawed. And we acknowledged that there was a problem with spurious signals."

"Right-except the problem wasn't the signals. It was the fact that they weren't supposed to be detectable. Those signals were coded responses to high-level electronic queries from stationary satellites. For twenty years, we've had the ability to scan the entire planet, querying the weapons we've built to let us know where they are. Not only weapons we've built, but weapons other people have built that we've supplied parts for. We've been doing it almost since the very first serial number was coded into a chip. The day that it became possible for chips to identify themselves, the technology became practical. The weapon listens for its own serial number or its category code. When it hears it, it responds within twenty-four minutes. It gives a distinct electronic beep or buzz, on one of several hundred randomly chosen microwave channels. Most receivers tune out those signals automatically. Most technicians have never even heard our noises except as static. "

"But-why? I mean, I can see that there is some value in tracking our own equipment, but it seems such a cumbersome way."

"Actually, it's all automatic. And you're looking at it from the wrong angle. It wasn't to track our own weaponry as much as it was to track weaponry we'd manufactured or supplied parts for. Do you know that the United States was the number one supplier of military hardware for over sixty years? It's an incredible intelligence advantage to know where all your weapons are."

"That's unbelievable!"

She grinned. She looked absolutely delighted. "That's its virtue. The whole idea is too outrageous to believe. The one time we had a security leak, the other side's intelligence refused to accept the validity of the information. They thought it was some kind of ploy, because there was no confirming evidence at all." I was a little confused. "But if we had that kind of power, that kind of advantage, why did we still lose the war in Pakistan? The other side was using captured weapons, as well as equipment they'd purchased third- and fourth-party. Didn't the system work?"

"The system worked perfectly," Lizard said. "We were able to track whole divisions of the enemy by nothing more than routine queries of the field weapons in the hands of the infantry. It was a flawless demonstration." She looked positively cheerful as she recounted. "The problem was, we couldn't use the intelligence without the risk of exposing the whole game. So we never released any of that intelligence except when we had confirmation from an additional source, say a satellite photo. And most of our spy satellites were being knocked down as fast as we were putting them up. So we couldn't use that intelligence. It was too big a secret," Lizard said. "We had to save it for a war that directly endangered the existence of the United States. It was that powerful a strategic advantage."

"Um," I said. Then, "You said it isn't a secret any more. What happened?"

"Oh, about three months ago, some of our Fourth World allies tried to land some divisions in the Gulf of Mexico. Near Houston. They called it an army of Economic Liberation."

"Huh? I never heard about it."

"Not too many people did. A very funny thing happened. Their rifles blew up. Their boats sank. Their planes came apart in the air. Their missiles exploded. Their tanks melted. Their communications failed. There weren't too many survivors."

"Huh?"

"That was the rest of the secret. If you can program a chip to identify itself when it receives a specific signal, you can also program it to destroy itself when it receives another specific signal. We've had the ability for twenty years to disarm or disable at least a third of-the-world's military equipment-any individual weapon or any category of weapon, worldwide or limited to a specific area.

"We didn't dare use the system offensively before, because we couldn't risk damaging our national reputation for zero-defect weaponry. We didn't dare risk our intelligence advantage either. But this was the first time that foreign troops were landing on our shores, and that was what the system had been designed for. It worked perfectly." She looked as proud as if she'd designed it herself. I wondered just

how important she really was. Was her rank of colonel just another cover? I didn't know what to believe about the United States government any more. Nothing in it was ever really what it was supposed to be.

"So my van . . . ?"

"Right. I had your code all along. We could have blown you up any time."

I said, "Oh, shit."

She said, "Uh-huh."

I said suddenly, "Why didn't you?"

"We were giving you a chance to surrender peacefully."

"You knew it was me?"

"Oh, no; you could have been any jackass. I was going to pick you up for questioning and find out why human beings were delivering weapons to the worms. When I saw it was you, I hit you with the wake-up hypo instead of the sleepytime one."

"I could have blown you up! I had my finger on the button! I had antiaircraft missiles!"

"But you didn't fire, did you?"

"No. I didn't know who you were, but I knew you didn't miss by accident. You could have hit me if you'd wanted to. So I knew those had to be warning shots. You wanted me to stop. My daddy used to say, never argue with a loaded gun. Of course, he was talking about the realities he used to write-there's always a better solution-but the same principle applies in the real world. At least, I hope it does."

"It does. Your daddy was real smart. It's a good thing you listened to him. If you had returned fire, using any weapon system in that van, you'd have blown yourself up. I'd already sent a coded signal from a hundred kilometers away. You were the trigger. The self-destruct was armed and waiting. Whether you returned fire or not determined if it went off. I've seen three vans blow up that way. I have to admit, I expected to see yours go off too."

I remembered just how close I'd come to pushing that button. I'd been terrified of that chopper when it buzzed me. For half a second, I'd considered hitting the button and sending a Sidewinder-6 up her tail. What I'd told Lizard hadn't been entirely accurate. I hadn't held my fire because of any rational assessment of the situation. There hadn't been time to stop and realize that she'd missed deliberately. I'd held my fire because . . . I'd held my fire. I looked at the memory and all I could see was myself holding back and saying, "No!" I didn't know why I'd held back at all.

I wondered for a moment if it was that I just didn't have the nerve. Had I been that rattled? Or that scared?

No, that wasn't it either.

I could still see the van exploding in a ball of flame, the frame instantly buckling, breaking in half, walls blowing outward, pieces of metal tumbling upward and skittering sideways, hurled by the force of the blast. Then the blossom of flames exploded again as the armaments went off, and the pieces disappeared inside a larger, still-growing fireball-that could have been me!

I went back to the beginning of the memory: the chopper coming out of the sky behind us, strafing low over the van-me pulling myself into the turret, doing something with the controls, automatically, almost like a machine myself-my finger poised over the fire control-the explosion behind me!-the computer asking, "Shall I return fire?"-"No!". . .

I held onto that moment and looked at that "No!" as hard as I could. That was it, there! Why had I shouted no?

I kept on looking at the moment, recreating it, replaying it over and over in my head, obsessively examining it. This was the answer that I needed, right here-inside this memory.

And suddenly it popped into focus. I knew why I hadn't fired. I grinned with the surprise of it.

"What's so funny?" Lizard asked.

"I am," I said. "Do you know what a jerk I am?"

"Yes," she said. "But you can tell me anyway."

"I've been running because I'd thought I'd fallen off the deep end. I'd thought I'd lost all perspective on human life."

"If you mean that little incident at Family," she said quietly, "I know all about it. No court in the country

would convict you. You were very careful. Everything you did was legal." She glanced over at me. "Are you all right?"

"No," I said. There was a terrible buzzing in the space between my ears. "I don't want to talk about Family. It makes my head hurt. It makes my stomach hurt." The wall between me and my memories was starting to crumble. I was starting to feel the pain again. I ground the heels of my palms into my eyes, trying to rub the visions away.

She looked at me, curiously.

"I have this noise going on inside my head." I tried to explain. "It's all mixed up again. As long as I don't think about what happened at . . . as long as I talk about other things, I'm okay."

"You were telling me why you didn't pull the trigger on the chopper," she prompted.

"It's all part of the same thing." It was hard to say, and it was easy too. Once I got started, the words babbled out of me as if of their own volition. "I don't know who I am, Lizard. And I'm so afraid that I'm starting to turn into . . . something like somebody I used to know. That's why the incident at . . . That's why I-I drove out here to die, but I didn't want to die; but at the same time I couldn't think of anything else to do. I was so sure that I'd become someone who's lost all sense of the-the what?-the sacredness of human life.

"But-this is the good part. What I've just realized is that I didn't fire at the chopper because I couldn't. I mean, I wouldn't. I almost did. For a moment there, all I saw was the chopper, and I almost pressed the button-but I didn't. Somehow, I knew that you really didn't want a firefight. I just knew it. You didn't want to kill me. So you weren't my enemy. That's why I didn't fire. I didn't have to. That's what's so wonderful. If I had really turned into some kind of monster, I'd be dead now. I mean . . ." I started giggling. "This is terrific! I feel a thousand years younger! Because I've found out that I'm not quite as bad as I was afraid I was. That's very important for me to know. Really!"

Lizard was smiling gently. She reached over and patted my knee. It seemed almost an affectionate gesture. "That's quite a thing to learn," she said. "For some of us- " She stopped herself in mid-sentence. "No, go on!" I said.

She shook her head. "It's not important." Then she looked at me. "Just know this, Jim. You're not the only one who has to carry these questions around with him."

I thought about it. "No, I guess not. I guess I've been kind of stupid, haven't I? I thought it was just me." Lizard sighed. For a moment, she sounded tired. "There's a whole operation at Denver aimed at keeping us sane. You can't make the decisions we have to make day after day after day and remain human. But somehow we have to-or we'll lose what we're fighting for. We're just beginning to get a sense of the size of that problem now, Jim. It's the biggest problem we've got. If anything's going to defeat us, it'll be our own failure to take responsibility for what's going on inside our heads."

"Um," I said.

"What's that about?" she asked.

"It's nothing."

"That was a very loud nothing."

"It's just that . . . taking responsibility for what's going on inside my head is how I got into this mess."

Lizard was studying her controls. I thought she hadn't heard me, but abruptly she said, "Well, think about this. How big a mess would it be if you hadn't taken responsibility?"

Yes. There was that.

We flew in silence for a while. There was something else, she'd said

In fact, she'd said it twice! "Wait a minute! You said, 'weapons to the worms.' "

"Uh-huh." She indicated the map on the screen, tapped one of the color squares on the bottom. "See those blue spots? Those are the locations of United States military equipment-inside known worm infestations."

"How long has this been going on?"

"Oh, we've had some scattered cases for over a year, but suddenly in the past two, three months, it's been exploding all over the map. As near as we can tell; there are renegade humans cooperating with the worms. It's as if somebody somehow made a treaty. We want to know how-and why. That's why we

want to capture a renegade alive." She frowned. "Maybe next time."

I studied the map. There were too many blue spots speckling the red swatches. "Why don't you just blow up the weapons?" I asked.

"Oh, we will," she said. "You'll see in a few minutes." She pointed to the spot of light that indicated the chopper. It was very close to the target. "We're almost there."

?

Sally-Jo was exceedingly vexed,
when they said she was quite oversexed.

She said, "That's not true,

I just like to screw.

Now, please take a number. Who's next?"

?

? 57?

The Colorado Infestation

"Bad luck is universal. Don't take it personally."

-SOLOMON SHORT

Lizard reached overhead and unlocked a red cover marked CAMERA. There were three bars in the panel. She pressed the first one, and something in the belly of the chopper went rrrrr-THUNK! It sounded heavy.

Lizard pointed to the second bar. "See that? When I tell you to, hit that button."

"Right. Anything else you want me to do?"

"Enjoy the ride. I should warn you though, it's going to be a little bumpy."

"What is all this anyway?" I gestured to indicate the chopper controls and included some of the equipment stashed in the back. "I don't recognize half of this."

"Okay," she said, "that first cabinet is an industrial memory. We've got four high-speed, high-res stereo cameras hanging from the belly of this ship. We've got enough memory there to store about five minutes of input. We're shooting five times normal speed, so that uses up bytes in a hurry."

"Oh, "

"Those two big tanks-those'll release a spray of hot metal shavings to confuse any tracking devices on the ground or in the air. Actually, it's mostly a decoy, because we'll be detonating everything that's carrying a U.S. chip. We're putting out an angled beam. Only those weapons in an arc directly behind and beneath us will go off. That way, any observers will assume it's the result of some direct-action weaponry we're carrying.

"Those other two tanks are carrying bug spray. It's a pretty potent mix, with a six-day half-life. We still don't know what kind of vectors it'll produce though, so we're limiting its use to heavy infestations like the one we're about to hit.

"Hanging under the wings and belly, I've got thirty-four cluster missiles. Incendiary warheads. They'll come apart in midair and scatter every which way. Have you ever seen a Madball-VI in operation? No? Well, you will. Those things bounce and skitter like water on a hot griddle, leaving fires everywhere they touch. We're carrying five thousand of them."

"Sounds like the army isn't missing a trick."

"You haven't heard it all. That radar chaff we're dropping-it includes all kinds of things that will make this area unpleasant for days. There are these little nerve-gas tipped burrs which will kill anything that steps on them. No matter how they fall, there's always a point sticking up. Really cute. The bug spray-that's laced with isotopes. If the spray doesn't stop 'em, we'll know by the isotope concentrations in any worms we kill later on which sprays didn't work. Oh, yeah; we're also spraying napalm." She pointed at a locked switch on her board. "That's the master fire control. We hit that and it starts the whole party. It knows when to fire or release every single piece of ordinance this ship is carrying. The whole job will take less than thirty seconds. We fly directly across the worm camp only once and we leave a swath of destruction a kilometer wide. At least."

"That wide? You'll take out the whole encampment."

"Hmp," she said. "You think so?"

A warning chime went off, and the computer said quietly, "Three minutes to target."

She looked at me. "Strap yourself in, Jim."

I fumbled with the harness, adjusted it, and clipped it shut across my chest. Lizard was looking at me oddly.

"Is something wrong?"

"I'm wondering if I can trust you."

"Huh?"

"The thought has crossed my mind that you might actually have turned renegade."

"I haven't," I said.

"I can take your word for that, huh?"

"I thought you said you knew what happened at Family."

"Right. Sorry." She turned back to her controls. "Force of habit. I don't trust anything anymore."

She didn't say anything after that. Neither did I. I stared out the windshield at the ground rolling beneath us. Almost all the greenery had been replaced by dark patches of purple and occasional blossoms of red. Here and there were clusters of pink fuzzy things. They looked like balls of cotton candy.

Family was coming back to me again, flooding in like a firestorm. Whatever that pink stuff had been, it was wearing off. The walls were disintegrating fast.

Or maybe I was deciding that it was all right to hurt again. That would be nice.

Because maybe it meant that I wanted to trust Lizard.

I looked over at her. She was just letting go of her controls. They continued moving without her, as if they had a mind of their own. The autopilot was running this mission. She reached past the regular controls and unslung a pair of extra joysticks-auxiliary weapon controls. She would be adding her input to the targeting computer, picking out targets she especially wanted to hit.

She flipped down the goggle plate on her helmet, adjusting it to fit directly against her eyes. Now she had a target disk superimposed on her field of vision. Whatever she was looking at, she could destroy with just the touch of a button. Lizard leaned forward in her seat to scan the ground below, testing her range of vision.

She pointed at one particularly thick clump of pink cotton candy. "See that?" she said. "Puffballs. We're lucky it's late in the year."

I remembered the pink snow in California. "Yeah."

She pointed ahead. "We're coming up on it now. Switch on the cameras." She did things to her console, finishing up by hitting the master fire control. I stretched upward and tapped the middle bar. It beeped and lit up red.

The ground ahead was rising toward a crest. The grass beneath us had a bluish tinge. Chtorran grass? Probably. Or something tougher than grass. There were black and purple bushes scattered all over the hills. I leaned forward in my chair to follow a large orange Chtorran threading its way through the brush. Three more followed behind it. One of them looked like it had a human rider. But we were past it too fast to see. I'd have to wait and see what the cameras had caught.

"Get ready," said Lizard.

We lifted up toward the crest, came over it and-

"Holy shit!"

-dropped down the slope of the other side toward the largest Chtorran encampment I had ever seen!

I saw it all in the single moment we hung there above it. It was a wide, almost circular valley, shrouded in streaks of bluish haze. The western sun, shining through the haze lent it shades of chocolate, pink, and magenta. As we dropped down toward them, I could see the lavender mists were punctuated by the round pink bumps of Chtorran huts.

Everywhere, the landscape was dotted with huts-there were gumdrops everywhere-of all sizes! Most of them were small, one-family igloos. Many of them had corrals. I could see things in them, but I wasn't sure what. A few of the domes were clustered like berries to make larger structures. Streaks of gray mist clung to the ground, threaded between the huts and corrals. I wondered what it was.

Closer now, I could see orange and red and pink and purple blobs of fur. They were all moving toward us, streaking and screaming. I could hear them even over the chopper's roar. I saw humans running too! The chopper lurched then-we bounced sideways, then up, and back, down and across

"What the-?"

"Hang on! I told you it'd be bumpy!"

Something was flashing orange beneath and behind us. I could feel the missiles firing from the wings of the chopper. The whole ship clanged every time one went off. We rang like the inside of a bell! We were headed directly toward the center of the Chtorran infestation-toward a huge, high, half-spherical dome. It was the mother of them all!

I pointed and shouted.

"I see it!" she screamed back. She was already firing. Two silver needles streaked out and ahead of us, leaving thready trails of white smoke. They angled forward directly toward the dome and entered it-- For the briefest of instants nothing happened.

Then the dome exploded with fur! The walls came apart in a thousand places as Chtorrans flung themselves outward! Red and yellow and orange and crimson and purple and pink and white and magenta and gray and a thousand other shades of fur! Too many of them! Too many colors!

And then the missiles actually went off! There were double fireballs--and then there was just one, climbing brightly into the sky. Streaks of phosphorus arced outward. I could feel the heat.

The chopper shuddered as the force of the blast hit us. We were already pulling up and leaning sideways into a turn toward the south end of the valley where it opened out onto a plain. The chopper jerked and bumped and bounced. Things were still roaring behind us.

There were more huts ahead of us--even more huts! Was there no end to this encampment? Lizard fired two more missiles toward another thick cluster of domes. She left the rest for the computer. I wished I had a window to look behind us. All I could see out of Lizard's side of the cockpit was a tower of black smoke. Something started beeping loudly.

Lizard said, "Shit!" and hit the panic button.

Something went Ka-BANG! behind us. Something else went THUMP! Then a whole lot of things released from the chopper all at once, and the jets cut in. We punched up into the air so fast the breath was knocked out of me. A wall of force slammed me deep down into my seat. I couldn't inhale. What the hell was this? Three gees? Five?

The air around us turned orange. And then it got even brighter.

A giant hand was pushing the chopper upward. We were buffeting in the air. I had the sense that the ground was sparkling with a thousand firework explosions, but that wasn't what was hurling us into the sky.

Lizard grabbed her controls and peeled us off sideways. For a moment, I had the feeling we were upside down--then we were plunging south and upward and leaving a column of burning air behind us.

"What happened?"

"They fired on us!"

"They what?"

"Ground-to-air missiles. Vipers probably. We nearly took one up the tail. We caught the rest before they got close. I did a no-no," she said. "I blew up every piece of ordnance in the camp." She pointed back.

"Look how much they had."

I had to lean forward to peer past her. In the distance, almost on the horizon now, I could see the thick black pillar of smoke that marked the worm camp. There were still explosions going off in it. It was speckled with bright places. There were orange flames everywhere.

"Shit," she said.

"What's the matter? You did it! The mission was a success! You blew up the whole camp!"

She shook her head. She flipped up her goggle plate and wiped her eyes. "No, I didn't. You saw the size of it. I only cut a chunk out one edge. We didn't even get near the thickest part. I veered off when I knew we wouldn't have enough bombs. In a month, that camp will be bigger than ever. They'll have rebuilt everything we destroyed tonight. They're getting too big for us, Jim. Denver isn't going to like this."

"That wasn't the center of the infestation?"

"That wasn't even a suburb. That was an outlying village."

"Uh--"

"You know what this means, don't you?" I shook my head.

"We're going to have to use nukes."

?

Sally sued for support; she was claimin'

Phil had fathered her baby (named Damon).

She said, "I ought to know."

as she pointed below.

"Cause this is the box that he came in."

?

"When you transcend the medium, you have achieved art."

- SOLOMON SHORT

I climbed the ramp and stopped, waiting for my eyes to adjust to the darkness.

There was a man with a clipboard at the top. He peered at my name badge with a pocket-light.

"McCarthy," he said. "You're late." He looked annoyed.

"Sorry," I mumbled.

He ignored the apology. "Sit there." He pointed at a rear row. I nodded and went. The theatre was round and shaped like a wide bowl resting on a forty-five degree angle; there were seats mounted up its entire face. My row was high on the upper curve. A second and larger bowl enveloped the first-that was the screen. The audience would be peering into a 360 degree bubble of light and sound. Up, down, right, left; the entire field of human vision would be filled.

Right now, though, it was muted to a dim pearlescent glow. It had just enough luminance to delineate itself as a screen, but not enough to illuminate the theatre itself. The effect was like twilight. There was light above us, but we remained in the dark. As I climbed I glanced to the rows of seats above me, but I wouldn't make out any faces.

My row was empty, so I moved to a center seat. The chair was high-backed and comfortable looking. As I sat down it adjusted to my body. I leaned back and the chair leaned with me. It could both rock and swivel. The occupant could turn to look at any part of the screen, including the ceiling, and do it comfortably. I let myself relax into it and a soft voice began to whisper in my ear, "Here is the agenda for today's briefing. First we will see the tapes of this morning's Colorado overflight, with commentary by the pilot, Colonel Elizabeth Tirelli. That will be followed by . . ."

"Cancel," I said. The voice shut up.

I leaned forward, surveying the seats below me in the bowl. Some were empty. Most were filled with grim military types. Too many brass buttons. I didn't see anyone I recognized. I leaned back again. Five people were filing down to the center of the room to fill up the last empty seats there. One of them was Colonel Tirelli. Another was the Japanese lady I had met on my first trip to Denver. Who was she anyway? I didn't see the dark fellow with her, the one from the same trip. I recognized two of the others with her though. The tall man was the secretary of defense. And, of course, I recognized the president. Lizard had been right. This was serious business. I wondered why I was here.

As soon as everyone was settled, the Japanese lady signalled to the officer with the clipboard. The theatre doors were closed and the screen came to life.

First we heard the sound of the chopper. It was so realistic I looked up. Overhead was the outline of the gunship. Those cameras were wide-angle! We were looking up at the underside of the cockpit.

I looked forward and we were in the air. The theatre had disappeared. We were sitting in an airborne bowl, hanging beneath a camouflage-painted Valkyrie. I could see the strop of the rotors, the tunnels of burned air pouring backward from the jets. To either side were the Colorado foothills. Ahead, the ground was rising toward a familiar red ridge. My stomach churned. I knew what lay ahead.

We crested the ridge-I wanted to close my eyes-and dropped into that blue-hazed valley again. I was clutching the arms of my seat.

Lizard's voice said, "First, we'll go through the mission in real time, so you'll have a sense of the actual combat situation. We were over the worm camp for less than thirty seconds." We were already bouncing across the landscape. I leaned forward in my seat, studying the ground directly beneath us. The shadow of the chopper rippled across the huts. We looked close enough to some of those igloos to touch them. I saw the worms come boiling out of the ground, scores of them, hundreds of them! They reared up in fury, chirruping and waving their arms backward and forward in that peculiar double-jointed shoulder

motion I had come to be so familiar with. I could hear their purple screaming over the roar of the chopper's engines.

I saw humans too! One of them was pointing a rifle straight at me-I could see the red laser beam angled through the mist-and then he dropped away behind. We jerked and zigzagged through the sky above the camp.

Then the big dome exploded ahead of us and we were pulling up into the clouds.

The screen went blank.

You could hear the simultaneous exhalations all over the theatre.

Lizard's voice said, "Now, we're going to look at the rear view. We'll be running this at one-fifth real time. This is what you would have seen if you had been facing backward."

The screen lit up again. The stop of the rotors was slower now. The roar of the jets was more drawn out. Somewhere a logic circuit was adjusting the sound to the rate of the imagery on the screen.

Again, we were hanging beneath the chopper, but this time facing rearward. We were looking back across a bloody landscape. It was painted in shades of red and orange, blue and purple, pink and yellow. It looked alien-but the distant range of black mountain peaks was too familiar, too much a part of Earth. We were dropping down a slope now, and there were worm huts falling back behind us. Again the worms came boiling out of the ground, but this time in a slow and stately ballet.

Directly behind us, silvery particles began to appear in the air, the radar chaff. To either side, streaks of yellow smoke spread out across the sky-the bug spray. The missiles dropped on either side with us. They came apart in the air, sending needles in all directions. The napalm sprayed in smoky jets. Clusters of madballs were falling away from the bomb bays above. They hit the ground and scattered, bounced and splattered, bounced and splattered flame and smoke.

Below us the worms were wreathed in flame, churning and writhing across the ground. Explosions tore the domes apart, sending pieces of flame and wall skittering high into the sky. Bodies too were hurled before the blast. Again, I saw human beings come running out of domes. I saw the man with the rifle again aiming his beam toward the chopper. The napalm was already spraying. He disappeared in a ribbon of flame.

The image shuddered slowly then. We started pulling upward. The angle shifted to show the huge dome we had destroyed just before pulling away-it was still boiling outward, more worms pouring out of it than we had ever seen in one place. For just one brief instant, I was looking straight down into that structure and all I could see was a bowl of crimson fur. Could there possibly be a worm that huge?

And then the missiles went off and the dome became a fiery hell.

The angle of the image shifted again and we were looking at four streaks of crimson smoke rising from the ground and angling directly up toward us. I heard oaths in the theatre and the words, "Vipers! How did they get Vipers?"

The first of the missiles puffed out, then two more. The last one kept on coming for just a second longer, then it too exploded brightly

The screen went dead.

"That was when we lost the rear camera," said Lizard quietly. The silence in the room was terrifying.

Directly beneath me, a general leaned over to his aide. "I want to know the location of every goddamned Viper missile on the planet. I want that information by 18:00 hours."

"That's not possible, sir-"

"Make it possible!" His tone was lethal.

"Yes, sir!" The aide was already on his way.

Lizard's voice came back again. She said, "That should give you some idea of what we were up against. We weren't over that camp fifteen seconds before the Vipers were tracking us. I had no choice but to abort the mission. I dropped all remaining ordnance and went to high-gee evasion.

"I was supposed to fly across the entire camp, cutting it in half. I made it less than a tenth of the way in before I was forced to abort. The scanners showed there was just too much ordnance in that infestation. We wouldn't have made it. It was more important to bring these pictures back.

"You'll see in a moment. Now, I'm going to show you the scary parts."

The scary parts? I was already terrified.

The screen lit up again. We were coasting sideways across the camp. The image slid by so slowly, we could examine every detail of the huts below. "This is being shown at one-tenth real time," Lizard said. "I want you to notice this-

A section of the screen became brighter. We saw the man with the laser rifle again. His beam was tracking straight toward us. "And this-

Another part of the screen-I hadn't seen that before! Three men in a Land Rover; it was armed with a tactical P-beam cannon! The vehicle was bouncing across the rough terrain trying to catch up with the chopper before the chopper's napalm caught up with them.

"And this-

A cluster of children was running away from the screen, screaming in terror. Some of them were running for igloos. I saw a worm scoop up two of them and dive into a burrow before the flames washed the rest away.

"And this-

A woman with a baby carriage, frozen in the act of looking up at us! It was a still frame. The bomb was already going off behind her.

"And this-

A thousand worms boiled up out of the seemingly solid ground. Holes kept opening up, releasing more and more of the crimson horrors. They were all sizes and all colors.

"And this-

The big dome we had annihilated. Once again, I saw its walls fly apart as the worms inside exploded outward. Once again I peered down into it. But this time the image expanded to fill the screen, and I could see quite clearly the face of a worm the size of a blimp! It was trying to lift itself up

"And finally, this-

The ground was tilting at an angle. It fell away into the distance and we could see the way the infestation stretched out toward the western horizon. There were domes everywhere-for a moment I thought I could almost see a pattern-some of them were even bigger than the one we had destroyed.

"And this is when I blew up every piece of ordnance in the camp-

The ground continued to tilt awry as we pulled away. Puffs of brightness began to dot the landscape, sparkling through the purple haze. Two here, three there-then a scattering of smaller sparks in the distance. They began to expand into fireballs-and then more explosions appeared, large ones, more violent. Their fireballs began to rise into the air. And then the whole landscape was on fire--everywhere there were explosions of fire and smoke. They were popping off like fireworks on the Fourth of July. They stretched from here to the horizon. You could hear the sounds of them as muffled thumps and booms against the crackling roar of the growing flames.

There were gasps in the auditorium. And quiet cursing too. The lights came up and the President's voice said, "Thank you, Colonel Tirelli." Then, in a louder tone, "We will reconvene in the War Room in fifteen minutes."

I stood up. Around me, I could hear the beginnings of angry conversations. Snatches of words floated past me. I didn't listen. I was watching the President and her group as they headed for the door. Lizard was moving with them.

The President stopped at the exit to talk to a broad man in a naval uniform. She looked upset. She looked as if she were giving him orders. He was nodding his head up and down. "Yes, Madam President. Yes, Ma'am."

Lizard caught my eye then. She held up her phone meaningfully.

I unclipped mine from my belt and flipped it open. "Yes, Colonel?"

"This briefing includes you too. As of thirty minutes ago, you're part of my staff." Then she added, "But the paperwork is backdated to the moment you first helped yourself to army equipment. I'm covering your tail, buster. You'd better cover mine."

"Huh?"

"Never mind that now. Just get your ass downstairs. I want you sitting behind me."

"Yes, sir!" I moved.

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We will need a computer to tally
all the cowboys who scouted our Sally.

There were some on her mountains
and some on her fountains,
and quite a few down in the valley.

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? 59?

Madam President

I've always had trouble with employers. They forget that they're only renting my judgment, not buying my soul. That's why they're paying so much.

-SOLOMON SHORT

The President of the United States banged the session loudly to order. She looked haggard and upset. The War Room was circular. The tables were curved to match. I didn't recognize everybody there, but it looked as if the entire United States government was represented. I recognized two of the joint chiefs of staff. I assumed the other three men at the table were the others. I recognized the secretary of state, the secretary of defense, and the secretary of the interior. I also saw Dr. Daniel Foreman sitting to the president's left. When had he come in?

The session was hosted by the Chtorran Control Agency. The members of that unit—the Japanese lady who was never addressed by name, the dark fellow, Dr. Moyra Zymph, Colonel Elizabeth Tirelli, and two other men I didn't recognize—sat facing the president. I was sitting directly behind Lizard's right shoulder. The bald man on the end looked familiar, but I couldn't figure out from where. He caught me looking at him once and winked.

The president said, "I have a decision to make today. I want you all to know that it is solely my decision. What I want from you is information. Nothing more. You can spare me your opinions. I know them already." She looked around the room, fixing individuals with her famous glare. I'd heard about that look. A newscaster had once said, after one memorable press conference, that it had made him feel like he was six years old again, and he'd just been caught by his mommy in a fib about the cookie jar. The phrase had caught on. Nobody lied to the president's cookie jar stare.

"You've seen the video," she said. "The implications of it are . . . disheartening." She poured a glass of water from the pitcher beside her. She took a drink. "But we don't have time to worry about the implications. We have to deal with the basic military issue. We can't avoid it any longer. In fact, let me put it into military terms. Large parts of United States territory are under enemy control. The territories are not only occupied, but colonized. The decision to be made is whether or not we will use nuclear weapons against those beachheads." She looked around the room again.

The men and women here looked unhappy. I got the feeling that this argument had been going on a long time—and that today it was obvious that one side had finally lost. The evidence of that video was too compelling.

"I'm no longer interested in the moral question," she said. "What I need to know today are the consequences of continuing with—" she referred to a folder in front of her, "--Operation Valhalla. Plan B. I assume most of you are familiar with the details. By the way, fifteen minutes ago, I authorized the program to be brought on line, holding at Condition Yellow. I say that to emphasize the enormity of this meeting. This is the last go/no-go point." She turned to the secretary of the interior. "Fred? Let's talk about the effects on our civilian population."

He stood up. "Madam President. There are three consequences that we need to be aware of. The first is the fallout consideration. Even though we intend to use clean-jacketed weapons, we still estimate a significant rise in nuclear streaking effects. Denver will probably have to be evacuated."

"Say it in English, Fred. Abandoned."

"-Uh, yes. Abandoned. Uh, except for those facilities that are suitably equipped for operations in a radioactive environment. This facility, for example, could survive for three years with a full complement of personnel." He stopped and looked at her. He was sweating. "Madam President, it's not the short-term effects. We can have this city evacuated in five days, if need be. What I am concerned about is that without appropriate maintenance of its perimeter defenses, we'll just be giving it to the enemy. They'll move in to this area immediately."

She looked back at him. "So, it's either tomorrow or six months from tomorrow. The simulations say

Denver is untenable. We're too close to the largest reservoir of infestation in the country, the Rocky Mountains. If we nuke the nests in the mountains, Denver becomes uninhabitable by the fallout, right? Fine, neither side will have the city then."

He exhaled. He was beaten. "There are two other points I want to make. First, how will the rest of the civilian population react to the use of nuclear weapons?"

She said, "Go on."

"I suspect it will be demoralizing, Ma'am. It will indicate how serious the worm threat is."

"I suspect it will also indicate how serious we are about stopping it. I'm not concerned about our public relations right now."

"Yes, Ma'am. My last point is this. There are civilians living in the infested zones. How much time are we going to give them to evacuate? And how will we manage the logistics of that?"

"Eh?" Her face clouded. "We're not. Fred, you're operating under an assumption here. I'm not going on the air with this until after the missiles are in the air."

"Madam President!"

"There will be no announcement!"

"I protest!"

"I'm sure you do! Our experience with warning civilians about military action against worms has been somewhat less than thrilling. We have to assume that any human being who is living in a Chtorran zone has somehow developed some form of cooperation with the enemy. I have no intention of forewarning the Chtorran invaders about our next moves, nor giving their renegade collaborators the opportunity to escape to continue their I reason elsewhere." It was the first time I'd seen the president get angry.

The secretary of the interior looked upset. He sat down.

The president said, "All right, let me make sure I have this correct now." She ticked off on her fingers.

"We are going to have nuclear fallout, right? We will lose Denver. We will lose a large part of the Rocky Mountain areas for the time being, right?"

The secretary nodded.

"Seeing as how we've already lost them, then that's not a consideration. Second point. We will have civilian reactions. Seeing as how we're already in a state of permanent emergency, those reactions can be managed. Is that correct?"

"We hope so."

"You hope?"

"Madam President, we have very little history on which to base our models."

"I'm not interested in computer models, Fred. I want to know gut feelings. How are the people going to react?"

The secretary shook his head. "I don't know." The president turned to Foreman. "Danny?"

Foreman closed his eyes. He pinched the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger. He concentrated for a moment. He said, "Shock. Some upset. Possible panic." He opened his eyes. "You'll need to make a speech."

"I was planning on a statement."

"No. A speech. Rabble-rousing. Angry. Focus the energy on the enemy. Use a lot of good quotes. Talk about commitment, the long dark road. Remind them that the Earth is our planet. Inspire them. "

"I don't feel very inspiring right now."

"Hell, lady-who does? Remember what I told you during your last campaign?"

"Yes. No. Which one?"

He grinned at her. "Fake it till you make it."

She looked back at him. "I've been faking it for fifty-three years, Danny. When do I make it?"

He twinkled. "You didn't notice when it happened?"

She got off it then, relaxed and turned back to the room. She nodded to her press secretary. "We'll need to reserve a block of TV time. Have Wally and Wilma start on the speech. Have them check with Danny before the final draft." The press secretary nodded and began typing quietly into her clipboard.

The president said, "All right. Let's keep on purpose." She pointed to the secretary of state. "What kind

of reactions can we expect from foreign governments when we go?"

The secretary of state was a tall, handsome woman in a dark blue suit. She said, "I expect the usual upset and anger, only played at a louder pitch than normal. Everything we do these days creates upset and anger."

The president nodded with a quiet smile. "I'm willing to have a little upset and anger. Go on."

"Our allies will try to talk us out of it, of course."

"Wait a minute. There's an assumption that needs to be cleaned up here. We're not giving anyone any forewarning. Not even our allies."

The secretary of state looked unhappy. "I don't know how they'll handle it."

"I'll handle that," said the president. She pointed to her press secretary. "Here's how we'll work it. I'll tape the speech as soon as it's ready. The speech will go on the air as soon as the bombs go off. At the same time, I'll want a conference call with the heads of as many friendly governments as we can get on the line. We'll put diplomatic notes on the network to everyone else. In other words, everybody finds out at the same time. I don't want it on the air anywhere until the planes have dropped their load. Assume that they have video set and picate terminals in those worm camps." There was silence.

"Is that understood?" Nods.

"Good." The president turned back to her secretary of state. "Will there be any diplomatic problems that you can't handle?"

"No, Madam President, there won't. I would like to add something though. There are probably quite a few governments on this planet who are just waiting for someone else to take the first step and use nuclear weapons. They may put on a show of complaining at first, but eventually, they'll be using their own bombs on their own invaders. I just want to acknowledge your courage in willing to be first."

"It's not courage, Anne. It's terror, but thanks anyway." The president smiled gently.

The secretary of state sat down.

"All right, we know the military can do the job. The plan can be implemented at any moment. We've looked at the consequences. Again. We've been looking at them for weeks. We're willing to trade our present problems for those problems. Is there anything we've failed to consider?"

Dr. Zymph spoke up. "Yes. It won't work." Everyone looked at her.

She said, "Oh, you'll wipe out the biggest camps, but I suspect we'll just have bigger camps to deal with in a year. Two years ago, we thought we'd turned the corner on the gastropedes. We were finding fewer and fewer nests. Suddenly, this year there are thousands of nests. Six months ago, we started to see incredible infestation. It took a very short time for them to begin gathering together and building cities. They're a very fast-paced ecology. The energy flow-through is incredible. The use of nuclear weapons will destroy their current infestations. But it won't handle the problem. We still don't know where the gastropedes are coming from. We could be back at this same point in six months. We cannot continue to bomb them every time they build up."

The president looked unhappy. "Will it buy us time, Moyra?"

Dr. Zymph nodded. "Yes, a little. But it's an unsatisfactory solution."

"I grant you that," said the president. "But it's the least unsatisfactory of all of our unsatisfactory solutions, right now." Dr. Zymph nodded her agreement. "Madam President, may I suggest that we look beyond this moment? We need to up the level of our commitment by several orders of magnitude. We've been putting a series of coordinated proposals on your desk for three weeks now--"

"I've seen them." The president held up a hand. "But this session is about the decision to go in with the nukes. Friday's session will be about our next steps. Can you wait until then?" Dr. Zymph nodded. She sat down.

The president said, "We'll take a fifteen-minute break. Then we'll reconvene."

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A lady who overly lusted
was frequently opened and thrust.
When the baby came due
it was female too,

and its hymen was already busted.

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? 60

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The Cookie-Jar Stare

"It's not who wins or loses that counts-it's who keeps score."

- SOLOMON SHORT

The president disappeared into a waiting room with her aides, her press secretary, and the bald man who looked so familiar. I was incore certain than ever that I knew him from somewhere.

The Japanese lady motioned to Lizard and she went over to whisper quietly with her. The rest of the meeting was breaking up into small conferences.

For some reason, I wandered over to say hello to Foreman. "You probably don't remember me," I began.

"McCarthy, James Earl-no, Edward," he said. He extended a hand. "You're looking . . . feral." He studied me with narrowed eyes. "Are you all right?"

"No," I said, truthfully.

Somebody touched Foreman's arm then. He held up a hand to stay that person. He looked at me. "Will you come see me?" There was something about the way he said it.

"Uh, why?"

"I want to train you."

"In what?"

"Will you come and see me?"

I thought about it. "All right."

"Good. Thank you." He turned to the waiting questioner, forgetting me completely.

What did he want, I wondered. I remembered my last conversation with him-a peripatetic affair. He had been trying to determine if I was fit to be turned loose upon the planet.

I wandered around the room, eavesdropping on other people's conversations.

Two naval officers were arguing quietly. ". . . looks to me like she's already made her decision."

"I don't think so. You don't know the old lady. She's playing devil's advocate. She takes the position and then challenges you to talk her out of it. My guess is that she doesn't want to go nuclear, but she doesn't see any alternative. She's letting us look for a good reason not to."

"Well, I can think of one," said the taller of the two. "It looks like defeat."

"That falls in the area of public relations. It can also be made to look like victory. I'll give the old witch credit. She makes her decisions by logistics, not politics." He turned to his colleague quietly to the wall.

"You'd better get on the phone and alert your staff. If we take the Hawaii option, there'll be a lot of extra work for the Navy."

The stocky man nodded. He turned and left the room quietly. I found myself moving up behind Lizard.

She was with the Japanese lady and the dark fellow. The Japanese lady noticed me with a polite nod.

She looked at Lizard. "Your young man has come a long way since the last time we were all in the same room."

Lizard said, "I think so." She said to me, "Jim, I don't think you've ever been formally introduced. This is Madam Shibano, and this is Dr. Rico. Madam Shibano and Dr. Rico are two of the three civilian managing directors of the Agency."

"Dr. Foreman is the third?"

"Yes, he is," said Madam Shibano. She extended her hand. "I'm glad you have rejoined us, James. It will be good to have you on the team again."

"Well, I'm not so sure I . . ." Lizard touched my arm gently. A warning, "-uh, I mean, thank you."

Madam Shibano smiled. "James. You make a difference. That is why you are here today."

An officer came up to the group then. "Madam Shibano? Dr. Rico? The president would like to see you now."

"Thank you," she said. Before leaving, she looked to Lizard. "Elizabeth," she said, looking directly at her.

"This is a very important meeting."

"I know," said Lizard. "You can count on me." Then she added, "And McCarthy as well."

"Good. Thank you."

After they left, I turned to Lizard. "What was that all 'about?'"

"You're my worm expert."

"So?"

"The president hasn't made her decision yet. The video is pretty convincing, but . . . well, she doesn't want to use nuclear weapons on the continental United States. She's desperately looking for an alternative."

"Is there one?"

"If there were," Lizard said, "don't you think we'd be arguing for it?"

"I don't know."

"Trust me." She put her hand on my shoulder and looked straight into my face. "I may need to call on you. All I want you to do is tell the truth. Tell everything you've seen, everything you know about the worms. That's all."

"Why me? You've got Dr. Zymph here."

"Dr. Zymph has never been out in the field. Not like you have. You've put your life on the line. She hasn't. You've seen things she hasn't. She can talk about the ecology-she's an incredible theoretician-but you can tell us what it feels like. You know the experience of it. You've come face to face with it. That's what we need to bring into this conference. A little terror."

"Like the Chtorran in the auditorium?"

Lizard didn't blink. "If that's what it takes, yes."

"Do I have a political position?" I asked.

"Beg pardon?"

"What side am I on?" I asked. "My testimony-who am I supporting?"

"Your facts will speak for themselves," she said.

"Uh-huh-and what will they say?"

Lizard looked unhappy. "Use the nukes."

I didn't reply to that. Not at first. I was trying the idea on.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said.

Lizard led me over to a table, poured me a tumbler of ice water and handed it to me. I drank it quickly. I realized I was breathing hard. I said, "When I was in high school, we were given a kind of test. The whole class."

"The button test?" Lizard asked. "I remember it."

"Yeah, the button test. We were given the opportunity to press the button. Would we do it? Could we do it?" I remembered the feeling again and felt a cold chill in my stomach. It wasn't just the ice water.

"There was a lot of fear in the class. A lot of crying. Even some screaming. In the end, we realized there wasn't one of us who was willing to take the responsibility for launching the missiles."

"That's the usual result," said Lizard. "But not always."

"Well, then the question came up. If the majority of the people don't want to own that responsibility, why do we still have nuclear missiles? The teacher-his name was Whitlaw-then offered us the chance to disarm them completely. But none of us would do that either, because we couldn't trust the other side. I think the point of that process was to show us how we were trapped into our present political situation. But all I remember from it is the fear of having that black box in my hands, the one with the red button in the middle of it. There was a point when I was so damned tempted to just press it and end the whole maddening discussion once and for all-but I didn't, of course."

I looked at Lizard. "Are you getting this? Or am I boring you?"

"Go on," she said.

"Well, this is the point. Here I am really being given the decision to press the button."

"It's the president's decision," said Lizard.

"Not entirely. I might be given a voice here. I'm part of the decision. That was the point of that process. It's my responsibility too. I can't speak to the issue unless I'm willing to own it."

"I see," said Lizard. "And are you? Are you willing to drop the bomb?"

I said, "I don't know. And I do. It's the logical extension of everything. It's my whole history. It's the same question as the little girl in the corral, as Shorty, and the people in the auditorium-and the renegades. It's all those lives. I don't want to be the one who has to make the decision-but I keep getting handed the gun, or the flame-thrower. And now it's the black box with the red button. I don't want it."

She grabbed me by the shoulders. "Listen to me. What you want is irrelevant. I want all the Chtorrans to disappear. I want my husband alive again. I want my baby alive again. I want to go back in time four years. But can I make any of that happen? No. I can't. This is it. The question is not what you want, but what you're willing to do with what you've got."

There were tears in my eyes. My voice cracked. "One life I can cope with, Lizard. I didn't pull the trigger on that little girl. And Shorty gave me permission; he told me to pull the trigger on a man being attacked by a Chtorran. Those people in the auditorium, they were in the way. The renegades-I was mad with rage. I mean, I had a . . . a justification, every time. An excuse. I don't have one this time. This time, it's a cold-blooded decision." I looked to her for help.

There was none forthcoming. Lizard said, "Now, do you understand the president's problem?"

I wiped my eyes. "I think so. A little bit."

"Right. You've got it, Jim. It's her decision, but you have to be responsible for your part of it. Now, are you willing to do that?"

"I'm willing to be responsible."

"Would you be willing to drop the bomb, if it were your decision?"

"I don't see any other alternative," I said.

"That's what we're here for," Lizard said. "Not to talk her into it, but to find a way out of it. And-failing that-then our job here is to be responsible for the decision that we do have to make."

"It's that inevitable?"

She didn't have a chance to answer. The stocky naval officer came storming back in, looking very angry.

"The goddamn phones have been disconnected!" he said.

The president was just coming back into the room. "And for very good reason," she said. "Some people can't be trusted not to use them." She fixed him with the cookie jar stare. "Even when they've given their word that the proceedings of the session are top secret!"

The officer turned red, but didn't respond.

The president smiled grimly. "If you'll all resume your seats, we can continue."

?

When writing these verses of mine,
I start with a clever last line,
then work backward from there,
toward the opening pair,
with the hope it'll all work out fine.*

*only sometimes it doesn't.

?

"Always be sincere. Even if you have to fake it."

-SOLOMON SHORT

"There's a question I need answered," said the president. She glanced around the room. "I'm not sure that any one of us knows the answer, but we need to consider it before we go any further. "It's the moral question. It's the question of humanity."

I looked at the other men and women sitting around the table. Some looked unhappy. Others were puzzled or uncertain. One or two were making marks on their notepads. A few were studying their hands or their shoes. Where had I seen-? Oh, yes. It was called "reality evasion." When circumstances are confronting, our first reaction is to want to avoid confrontation.

"Wake up!" shouted the president. She'd seen it too. She was angry. "Whatever other considerations we may have discussed today, this is the one that has to be handled. This is the one that historians will focus on."

General Wainright said wryly, "If any."

The president looked at him. "I'm sure you meant that as a joke, General, but that is the issue here. How far are we willing to go to guarantee the survival of the human species?"

"As far as we have to, Ma'am. You've seen the contingency plans. Lunar evacuation, sterilization and recolonization if that's what it takes. Whatever it takes, Ma'am."

The president held up a hand. "General, I respect your commitment. As a matter of fact, not ten minutes ago, I was on the phone to the head of the Space Agency, authorizing the necessary mobilizations for reopening both LS projects and reestablishing the Lunar colonies."

Wainright looked surprised-and pleased.

"I tell you that now because I want you to let go of that long enough to participate in this discussion. All right?"

The general grinned. He was looking too satisfied to take note of the implied criticism.

The president turned back to the rest of the room. "Now then, here's where I want your advice. We're looking at the use of nuclear weapons on the Chtorran camps. The evidence of the video is that there are human beings living in the Chtorran camps. Living there peaceably. And that implies that they are in cooperation. Human beings and worms.

"It implies communication," she concluded.

The president turned to the tall dark-haired woman. "Dr. Zymph? Would you elaborate?"

Dr. Zymph straightened her notes in front of her. She studied them for a moment, then looked up again.

"The question is this. What is the nature of the human-Chtorran relationship? Now that we know that communication is possible--On whatever level it occurs--we have to reconsider all of our actions in that light.

"The possibility of communication reopens the opportunity for negotiation. Or does it? Do the Chtorrans recognize human beings as sentient or not? Would they recognize a human government? Would they make a treaty with us? Could we deal with their human intermediaries? It all hinges on the nature of that humanworm relationship.

"We need to consider the possibilities here. Is it a true partnership? A symbiosis? Is it a master and slave relationship? In which case, who are the masters in that camp? Or is it, as some have postulated, a circumstance of one species using the other as cattle?

"There is evidence to support all of those possibilities. None of it is compelling. It may be that the relationship in that camp is still in a state of flux. It may be that all of those possibilities exist to some degree or other. Or it may be some kind of relationship that we cannot comprehend because it is beyond our experience . . ."

"Excuse me, Ma'am." That was General Wainright again. He spoke in a soft southern drawl. That was a

danger sign. It was a thin cover for his sarcasm. Usually, his demeanor was crisp. He said, "Y'are gonna answer some of these questions, aren't you?"

Dr. Zymph did not look annoyed. She merely looked back at him with a pleasant expression. "As a matter of fact, no, I'm not. We don't have the answers. Yet. What we have are some very good guesses based on some very bad evidence. That's the problem. We have to make our recommendations based on less than acceptable information."

The general leaned back in his chair. I couldn't tell if he was annoyed or satisfied that he'd trapped Dr. Zymph into admitting something. He said, "Well, with all due respect-could we cut to the chase?"

Dr. Zymph pushed her notes away. She looked upset. "The issue is this, General. We don't know what we're doing here. If we nuke that camp, we may be throwing away our opportunity at establishing a detente of some sort."

"Doctor," the general looked fierce. "There will be no detente with worms. This is a war. They are the enemy. If we talk detente, we might as well talk surrender-and walk willingly into their stewpots. Or have you forgotten? The worms are responsible for the deaths of over seven billion human beings-more than three quarters of our species is gone. Do you think that they now have some pressing reason to respect the rights of the rest of us? I doubt it a lot!"

Dr. Zymph waited till he ran down. Then she said, "As a matter of fact, so do I."

The general leaned back in his chair looking satisfied. I noticed that the President was holding a pen between her two hands, looking from one to the other. She was making no sign to interrupt.

Dr. Zymph said, "General, I have not lost sight of the larger context. However, we need to notice that something is going on here that does not appear to fit into that context. Is it possible that we are seeing the beginnings of a new context?"

"Well, Ma'am, when you figger that one out, let me know. We'll be just as happy to nuke the recontextualized worms as we are to nuke the old-fashioned kind."

When the laughter died down, Dr. Zymph turned to the president. "I'm through," she said quietly. "Are you clear on the question?"

The president nodded. She looked to the rest of us. "Is everybody else clear on the question? What is the nature of that human-Chtorran relationship? It very definitely affects the decision that we have to make here. Let me translate that into military language for General Wainright. Are those humans in those camps our enemies or our allies?"

She looked across the table at Colonel Tirelli. "Elizabeth," she said. "I believe you have some information on that. I think now would be a good time to bring that out."

Colonel Tirelli stood then. "Yes, Ma'am. Thank you." She addressed the room. "As you know, we've had the devil's own time trying to infiltrate worm zones. We've sent in a number of telepaths. We've lost them all." I wondered if Ted had been one of those.

She continued, "The bulk of our information about the human/Chtorran interface has come from captured renegades. Most of them have been so psychotic that communication has been next to impossible. We do know that there is an interface, though: It has been directly observed by one of our best agents." She stepped back and put a hand on my shoulder. "This is Captain McCarthy. He's spent the past year observing the worms in a wide variety of habitats. He has had personal experience with the renegades." I noticed that General Wainright's aide was punching something into his clipboard. After a moment, he handed the clipboard over to the general, who studied it a moment and then raised his hand.

"Excuse me, Colonel . . ." He was holding up the clipboard. "But I can't find Captain McCarthy in the computer."

"Of course not," said Lizard. "I took him out."

"You what-?" The general's voice rose angrily. "Those files are supposed to be tamper-proof."

"Yes, they are," said Lizard. "That's why I took all record of Captain McCarthy out of them. I couldn't trust them. Captain McCarthy's role has been so secret that we wouldn't even trust our own security."

Somebody started to say something to that. Lizard cut him off. "I'm not going to defend that. We do know that the renegades have pirate terminals. We do know that they have access to ordnance. I suspect that's how we've been losing our telepaths. The only thing that may have protected Captain McCarthy's

life is the fact that we've kept him out of the data banks."

General Wainright was still working with his clipboard. He said abruptly, "It says here, that a Lieutenant James Edward McCarthy was killed in battle fourteen months ago. Is this the same man?"

"As a matter of fact, yes."

"It also says here that he may still be alive, but a deserter. Is that correct?"

"If you'll look, I put that note in myself. That's part of Captain McCarthy's cover. We had no way of knowing who had access to that file. We had to give him what cover we could. Other than that, there has been no direct contact between Captain McCarthy and the agency since that time. He let us know when he wanted to come back in."

General Wainright looked unconvinced. "What is it you're trying to get at, General?"

"I'm not trying to get at anything, Colonel. All I want is some validation for this man's credential.

Obviously, this is Captain McCarthy. He's not dead yet. But is he what you say he is--one of your agents--Or is he a deserter who will say whatever you need to have said to prove your point?" He added.

"No offense intended, of course."

Lizard smiled. Her smile was deadly. "And none taken. You can't insult me. However, you do insult the intelligence of this body if you suggest that they can be so easily gulled." Lizard indicated the room.

The president interrupted then. "General, please--I respect your commitment to the truth. But this isn't producing results. I want to hear what Captain McCarthy has to say. We can question his judgment, intelligence, sanity, and moral character afterward." Her eyes were twinkling. "That's the way we always did it in Congress, and that's the way we will do it here."

She said to Lizard, "Colonel? You may continue."

Lizard poked me. "Stand up." She continued, "Captain McCarthy was assigned to routine reconnaissance in California. That was a cover. His real purpose was to infiltrate a renegade Tribe. As intended, Captain McCarthy allowed himself to be captured and taken prisoner. He was given the choice of collaborating or dying. He chose to collaborate. That is, he pretended to collaborate. Part of what he had to do to win the trust of the renegades was to teach them how to access classified information and how to use restricted military ordnance." Lizard held up a hand to cut off General Wainright who looked ready to explode. "Sir, if you please--McCarthy knew what he was doing. He didn't reveal any information which had not already been compromised. If that band of renegades didn't know it, they would have known it soon enough--as soon as they plugged into the Chtorrans' communication network."

The president interrupted then. "Elizabeth, would you also explain about that. I think some of the people here may be unfamiliar with that phenomenon."

Colonel Tirelli nodded. "It has been demonstrated that the worms do have some form of communication. When we began using P-beam weapons against Chtorran infestations, they began using shredded metal particles in the construction of their domes. P-beams were used only on the east coast, yet we began seeing metal foil shreds in worm construction all over the country within three weeks. By six weeks, it was standard. Somehow, information spreads from infestation to infestation, but we don't know what the mechanism is yet. We don't think it's through the human interface, because we discovered P-beam defenses in huts whose Chtorran inhabitants had no human contact at all.

"I need to return to the subject of the human-Chtorrarr interface. Captain McCarthy here has actually seen the Chtorrans and humans communicating. He will describe the process, and how it's initiated. Jim?"

She shoved me forward.

"Uh--" I began. "It's more than communication. It's a relationship. You don't just talk to a worm . . . you, uh, marry it." There were some snorts from some of the senior officers around the table.

"Shut up, Willy!" the president snapped. "He's telling you why your boys haven't had any results. You'd do well to pay attention. Go ahead, Captain."

"Thank you, Ma'am," I said. "What I saw was difficult at first to understand. The Tribe I was with--I use the word Tribe because that's what they were--they had a chief who focused their energies, he made the decisions for them. He was as charismatic as a movie star. It was like he glowed in the light.

"And they had a witch. That's the only word I can think to describe what she did: it was some kind of mystical aura. Jason was the focus for the energy, but Jessie was the real power source. I think she was

the one who really understood what was going on, but she didn't have the personal magnetism Jason did, so Jason was the leader, but she was the-what do you call it, manager?"

The president smiled grimly. "In politics, we call them handlers. Go on."

"Anyway, I only saw her do this once, but she acted as a kind of Earth Mother or goddess or midwife. She took Jason into the barn. Everybody waited. I didn't know what was happening. When he came out, he was carrying a worm baby. There was a lot of celebration and cheering then. This was the smallest worm I'd ever seen. It was about the size of a large cat. He was feeding it pieces of raw meat. I got the sense that the creature was being imprinted with his identity.

"At the point at which the cub was willing to follow Jason everywhere, we knew the imprinting was complete. It was then introduced to the rest of the worms in the tribe. They treated it with curiosity, but it was a detached curiosity, as if they didn't know who it was. But that was only at first. Over the course of the next few weeks, they become as familiar with it as if they were all lovers. I noticed that there were many times when all of the worms would retire together into their own chamber. They would writhe together for a while, as if they were making love, and then they would go torpid together.

"But it wasn't torpidity. There was something else going on. It was some kind of communication linkup, I don't know the mechanics of it . . ."

"We're already studying that," said Dr. Zymph. "Go on."

"Well, that's pretty much it. At my first opportunity, I slipped away from the band."

"This was when?" interrupted General Wainright. He was blustery and had a red face.

"Five months ago," I said.

"How come we didn't have this information sooner."

Lizard put in. "It took a while for Captain McCarthy to reestablish communication in a way that would not compromise his cover. Gentlemen, Captain McCarthy is officially dead. He knew that if he showed up on the network again, he would be risking his life if he ever again came in contact with renegades."

"I'd like to hear that from Captain McCarthy," the general said. "I've already heard from you, Colonel Tirelli." He looked at me expectantly.

"Uh, well-sir, because of the nature of the circumstances, I didn't have certainty on the nature of the human-worm interface. The only communication I saw at first was a combination of hand signals, whistles, and one-word commands. At first, it appeared to me that the worms were being trained like very intelligent dogs. It wasn't until later that I realized that what I was seeing was a mutually beneficial partnership."

"These were the ones who attacked Family?" he asked.

"Uh-" How did he know about that? "-Yes, sir."

The general looked skeptical. "And was Captain Duke Anderson there too? I'm not clear about his participation. It says here, he's on the permanently disabled list; but I've also got a death certificate for him. I fail to see how . . ."

"Uh, I had to impersonate him, sir." I looked around the room; how best to explain?

Lizard said quickly, "Captain Anderson is deceased. But the Captain Anderson identity was deliberately left active in the files so that Captain McCarthy could access it at will, without arousing suspicion."

Oh? I turned to look at Lizard, trying very hard not to reveal my surprise. That explained a lot.

"Captain Anderson was a friend of McCarthy's," Lizard was saying. "And, uh-this was one of his last requests, that we use his codes to provide McCarthy this cover." She was lying, it was a little too obvious, but it was a nice lie. I liked it. "As it happened, there were certain clearances that Captain McCarthy needed in the field and this was the best way to provide them."

"I guess I'd better explain the situation," I said, touching her arm gently. Lizard nodded, and let me take over. This was going to take some fancy tap-dancing, but it was the least I could do, considering what Lizard had just done for me.

"A renegade tribe attacked a small settlement called Family on the California coast," I said. "They killed some women and children. I was living there at the time. I organized the survivors into a posse. Using the Captain Anderson identity, I secured certain necessary pieces of military hardware. We caught up with and captured the renegades, tried them, convicted them, and executed them. I don't know if the report is

in there or not." I looked to Lizard for help.

"All the renegade material is under very tight security," she said calmly. "And none of it is in the network. It's all hard copy, and only on a need-to-know basis."

"Oh," I said. "Well. It was, um-then I guess I'd better not say too much about it. It was a very unpleasant duty, and uh, the resolution was particularly disturbing. Perhaps it was even mishandled, but if we hadn't handled it the way we did, it wouldn't have been handled at all-and letting the renegades continue what they were doing would have been even more intolerable.

"The point is, this particular incident made it quite obvious what the nature of the renegade-Chtorran relationship really was." I noticed that one of the president's aides had handed her a red-covered folder. She was reading it as I spoke. Occasionally, she would glance up and study me. If that was the report, I wondered who had written it.

Lizard said, "That was when Captain McCarthy put a prearranged pickup signal into the network and I pulled him out of Colorado."

The general did not look convinced.

It didn't matter. The president spoke then. "Captain," she said. "May I ask you a question?"

"Ma'am?"

"You've given us the bare bones, but I know that there's a lot more to it than you've told us. I've been looking over your file. It's obvious that you've been through a great deal of personal anguish here. Is that correct?"

"Yes, Ma'am. That is."

"Thank you. Now, I'm going to ask you something, and I want you to try to put aside your personal feelings. As difficult as that may be, it's necessary. I need you to be an impartial observer of your own experience, so you can give me an accurate answer."

"I'll do my best, Ma'am."

"I'm sure you will. Here's the question, Captain. In your experience, are the renegades still human?"

"Um . . . Ma'am, I've seen them in all different kinds of situations. I've seen them celebrate birthday parties for their children, giving the kids worm-back rides. Have you ever seen a worm in a party hat? If that was all I'd seen, I'd say yes, the renegades have found a way to preserve their humanity and incorporate the worms into their lives. But that isn't all I've seen." I stopped and cleared my throat. "May I have a glass of water please?"

An aide provided a pitcher and a glass. She filled the glass and handed it to me.

"Thank you," I said.

She smiled quickly and then got out of the way.

I continued. I said, "The other things I've seen-I'd prefer not to talk about. I'd prefer not to think about them. I'd prefer not to even have them in my head. But they are in my head, and I'm afraid they always will be. I've seen humans directing worms against other humans as if they were military weapons. I've seen humans sorting children into pens for use as food for worms. I've seen-" My throat tightened then, and my voice choked. I put my hand up to cover my mouth, then my eyes. "I've seen my own children-" And then the tears came.

Lizard handed me a tissue. I turned away from the table for a moment. I could feel her hand on my shoulder. "It's all right, Jim. Let it out," she said. "It's all right."

After a moment, I turned back. "Madam President. You've asked me to be impartial. That's almost impossible for me. From what I've seen of the renegades-I'd have to say this: There's a point at which their identification with the worms is so complete that they've lost touch with the rest of humanity.

"When we captured the tribe that invaded Family, the question that we needed to resolve was not one of guilt. That wasn't in doubt. It was the question of response. What do we do about it? And what it boiled down to was this very question: Do we treat the renegades as human or worm? The answer we came up with at family was that by the very act of collaboration, the renegades had turned in their humanity. I don't know if that's the answer you want, but it's the one that was true at Family. And it's still true for me today. I don't think that traitors to the human species deserve any better than any of our other enemies."

I sat down.

"Thank you, Captain. I think you've definitely made your point." The president looked uneasy. Lizard sat down again too. She turned back to me, put a hand on my knee and whispered, "You did fine." I shook her hand away and stared at the floor and wondered what I had done. Who had I betrayed this time?

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There once was a whore from St. Paul,
who took anyone, wide, short, or tall.

She said to her clients,

"It's not really science-

it's just that one size will fit all!"

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? 62

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A Small Piece of Truth

"Those who abhor history are compelled to rewrite it."

-SOLOMON SHORT

"Come on," said Lizard. She poked me out of my chair. "I'll buy you dinner." She pushed me quickly toward the door.

Two of the men in uniforms started toward us on an interception course, but Lizard just shook her head and kept on guiding me out. "Colonel Tirelli!" one of them called. She let the door cut him off.

They followed us out into the corridor. "Colonel!"

"Just keep moving," she said to me.

They were hurrying to catch up to us. General Wainright was sixtyish, red-faced, overweight, and out of breath. He spoke in exclamation points. The colonel looked like he'd been stamped from a mold.

The general said, "You're not going to get away with this, you know!"

"I don't know what you mean, sir. Now, if you'll excuse us, I have another appointment."

"You cooked that conference. You stacked the deck." The colonel grabbed her arm and stopped her where she stood. Lizard looked at his hand on her elbow.

"Should I deck him?" I asked. I was already stepping forward.

"You do and you're a dead man," the colonel said.

"I'm already dead," I replied; he didn't understand.

Lizard touched my arm. "I'll handle him, Jim." She looked at the man. "Colonel? How many of those fingers do you want broken?"

The general nodded at his aide. "Let go of her."

The colonel did so. The general said, "We know what you did. We know how you scheduled your flights. You've been pulling teams out of Colorado for a year. You deliberately allowed certain areas of infestation to get beyond manageable limits. You wanted to go in there with the nukes, didn't you?"

Lizard looked at him. "General, I've said everything I have to say to the President of the United States."

"You might be able to fool her!" blurted the colonel. I was sorry I wasn't going to be allowed to hit him.

"That old grandmother's just a flunky for the Agency anyway."

"She's the commander in chief! By the highest law of this land. Maybe that's something you don't understand," Lizard said. She turned to the general. "This man-" She jerked her thumb at the colonel, "-is dangerously close to talking sedition! If you don't report him, I will!" Her eyes were blazing. She turned and stalked down the hall. I hurried to follow after.

As we stepped into the elevator, I glanced back to see if they were following. They weren't. The elevator doors slid shut and Lizard burst out laughing.

"Huh? What's so funny?"

She was punching the top button. "Everything. The worms are in the suburbs of Denver. General Wainright wants to drop the bomb-so do we-and we're at each other's throats because neither side wants to be left holding the bag if it doesn't work."

"Do we want to drop the bomb?"

"No," said Lizard. "We don't. It's just the only thing left that we haven't tried. After that, all we have left are fallback plans, and the president has authorized those too. We might have to abandon the whole planet."

"Huh? How-?"

The elevator doors opened and we came out into the security cage. Lizard put her palm on the clearance panel and the doors slid open. As we took the escalators down to the parking garage, Lizard explained, "If we have to, we can evacuate to the moon and the LS stations-by the way, Alpha was eighty-five percent complete when the plagues hit; it won't be too big a job to make it livable. It already holds ten

percent atmosphere. We just have to send up enough gas to bring it up to livable pressure. It's doable. We know that there are still a hundred and eleven survivors in the Lunar stations. I don't know how they're hanging on, but they are. We can learn a lot from them. We estimate we can salvage maybe ten to fifteen percent of our ecology, plus germ plasm of maybe another ten or fifteen percent. Figure we'll lose the rest. We've already begun to evacuate the World Ecology Bank. We may do that if we evacuate the planet or not."

"How many people?" I asked.

"About five hundred thousand. And sperm samples from ten million more. The species' genetic heritage will be saved."

"But not the species."

"Not the species, right. Not unless we figure out some kind of sterilization that local flora and fauna can survive. Dr. Zymph isn't optimistic. Anything strong enough to kill Chtorrans would take out humans too. Here's the car."

I got in. "Where are we going?"

"Dinner, remember?"

"Why me?"

"Because," said Lizard, "it's very simple. I want you where no one else can get their hands on you. You know too much. Worse, you don't know what you know."

She started the car then. The motor whined up to inaudibility and we slid up and out into the Denver night. Lizard laughed abruptly. "The general was right. We did let that infestation get bigger than manageable. But not for the reasons he thinks. The nuclear option wasn't the only one. We've got five other alternatives to take out that camp. And the president knows those alternatives too. However, yes, we did cook that conference. We always do." She stopped grinning. "We didn't just cook it, we boiled it-right down to the essentials. We don't have time any more, Jim. We don't."

I nodded.

She fell silent. "What do I know?"

"I don't know," she said. "But I intend to find out."

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There was a young fellow named Forrest
whose cornhole was one of the sorest.

Said he, "I don't mind

a regular grind

-but I do wish my ass were elitorlsed."

?

? 63

? Fadeout

"Loving well is the best revenge."

-SOLOMON SHORT

"Remember this place?" Lizard asked as we came down the ramp off the freeway.

"The Marriott-Regency? How can I forget? Only the last time I was here, there were fireworks and lasers."

"Sorry, we don't do that any more. There's a war on."

"I can see that."

The place looked like a tomb. The huge pyramid looked somehow shrouded. Then I figured it out. There were no exterior lights. No fountains. No celebrations. This building used to be a pcn. Now it was a hulking dark monolith. There were individual room lights on, but somehow they served to make the building seem even more deserted, more lonely.

We coasted up the service ramp and into the interior lobby. At least there was still a valet to park the car. As I got out, I noticed now stark the interior looked.

"We took the plants out," Lizard said before I could ask. "They got infected. Plant diseases. Viruses. They turned purple. Or red. They turned into Chtorran things. They were pushed out of their pots." She took my arm and guided me toward the escalator. Last time I'd ridden this escalator, it had been with Ted and Marcie and a Colonel who looked like a buffoon. Marcie was dead. Colonel Buffoon was dead, and I didn't know where Ted was. He was probably dead too. Lizard was saying, "It was too disheartening. This was supposed to be the nerve center of resistance and we wouldn't even protect our own green plants. We're losing Denver, Jim. It's just a matter of time."

One thing was still the same, the buffet where I'd met Foreman. I noticed that the selection wasn't quite as lavish as I'd remembered. The salmon was canned, not fresh. And instead of human waiters there were robots trundling back and forth.

"We kept the chef when we took over the facility," Lizard said. "It's good for morale to have good food available. It's comforting. Or as Foreman says, 'It's like getting back to Mama's tit.'" She handed me a plate. "Here, Chtorr into it."

"Chtorr into it?"

She shrugged. "Chtorran jokes. What can I say?"

"Don't say anything." I was staring at the canned peaches, the fresh cottage cheese, the warm bread, the cold sliced roast beef, the pickles, the sausages, the scrambled eggs, the . . .

I lowered my plate.

"What's the matter?" Lizard asked.

"This is unreal. Last night, I was a thousand clicks away from here, trying to make a meal out of hard salami and stale sourdough. I got my brains fucked out by a hallucination. This morning I had my van blown up. Then I helped strafe a worm camp. I came back and was debriefed by the president of the United States. Suddenly, I'm back in civilization staring at a hotel buffet. And I'm told that it's good for morale."

I turned to face her. There was no one else around us. It didn't matter, I would have said it anyway.

"Colonel, I must be in some kind of culture shock. Three weeks ago I did something that should have put me in front of a firing squad. I've been running from it ever since. Suddenly I'm here-and it doesn't make sense. It isn't real."

She put her hand on my arm. "Jim . . ."

I shook it off. "No, let me finish. It wasn't real out there. It wasn't. Every time I took a breath and smelled Chtorr in the atmosphere, it wasn't real. Every time I looked at the hills and saw purple or pink or blue or red, it wasn't real. I've been crazy. I still am. I've been walking around saying, 'This can't be happening. This isn't happening. Please let me wake up.' Only, it is happening. And now I'm here, looking at this

buffet, and you take it for granted that there's all this food. I've been out there, Lizard. This isn't real. This is artificial. I don't know how long you can keep pretending here, but I know that this is not real. This is the pretense. It is happening. And . . . I don't feel right anywhere."

"I know the condition, Jim." She looked straight into my eyes. "I do. We all do. It's called . . . well, never mind. We're all a little fuzzy around the edges. That's why we keep this buffet t~wing. To remind us of the way it used to be. It's the one bearing wa still have in a world gone mad." She took my plate and handed n to me again. "Will you eat?"

I didn't answer. I couldn't win. And there was no escape. So I let go. I let my body go through the motions and drifted along helplessly behind it. It was easier that way.

The body turned to the table. It put food on the plate. It did it mechanically. I wasn't there. This was easier. I didn't have to be involved in any more decisions.

Lizard said to do something and my body did it, but I was uanewhere else, I don't know where. Hiding. Thinking. Trying to figure it out. Being crazy. Being numb. Being nothing.

Jim's body followed her back to a table. I watched from a distance while she ordered wine from a waiter. She tasted it and wrinkled her nose. A second bottle was produced. It was acceptable.

He drank wine. He ate food. He tasted nothing. Everything was nice and numb. Lizard talked to him. Sometimes she asked questions. Mostly he grunted. If she pressed, he answered mechanically.

Abruptly, she pushed her plate away. She put her hands on the table. "Jim?" she said. "Are you even here?"

"I'm here," he replied.

"No, I don't think so," she said. "You're showing all the Symptoms,"

"I am?"

"Yes, you are."

"Symptoms of what?"

"Fadeout. It's a kind of walking catatonia."

"Oh," he said. "That's interesting. How does it happen?"

"It happens to everyone. When things become too confronting or too intense . . ." She stopped herself.

"Shit. Why am I trying to explain this to you? Wait here." She got up and went to the service bay. She came back a moment later with two live waiters. "Him," she said, and pointed to Jim in the chair. I watched with Interest.

The two waiters grinned and grabbed him, picked up the chair with him in it and carried him and it across the dining terrace, out to the main concourse, across the interior patio, toward the pool at a run, and tossed him into it, ass over teakettle.

I came up spluttering and swearing and shaking clouds out of my head. "What the goddamn bloody fuck do you think you're doing, you crazy pink bimbo?" I started swimming toward the shallow end. "This is a stupid, flaming, asshole, mother-fucking, sadistic stunt!"

Lizard was standing there laughing, so were the waiters. I squished and squelched out of the pool toward them. "Shit! I don't care if you are a colonel, Lizard! There are some things that you just don't do!"

"Oh, are you pissed?" she asked.

"You bet your rosy-cheeked freckled ass I am!" I bellowed at her. "I'm so fucking angry I could-"

"How angry are you?" she demanded. "Show me."

Something snapped then. Something happened. I exploded. My rage filled my entire body. I began to scream. I began to bring up great howling gasps of breath. I took in great gulps of air and turned them into guttural roars. I could feel the muscles of my face stretched into a rictus of terror. I could feel the muscles of my arms and legs tensing as if I were pushing against the weight of the entire universe. I pushed against my own rage and pushed it out of my body and out against Lizard and beyond her, out against the walls of the hotel. I could see them shattering before my screams. I pushed my rage out into the entire universe. I was hoarse with roaring.

And then I collapsed wetly to my knees in a sodden heap, gasping, sobbing out of breath.

I looked up to applause. "Huh?"

I was surrounded by a crowd of grinning appreciative people, some in uniform, some not. They were

applauding and cheering. "Good job! Congratulations! Go for it!"

Lizard was offering me a hand to help me up. I took it and pulled myself up weakly. I looked at Lizard-she was beaming-then I pulled her into my arms. If I was going to be wet, so was she. I grabbed her and kissed her hard.

I wasn't surprised when she kissed me back, only by the intensity.

"That isn't the usual response," she said. "But it'll do."

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When Shakespeare awakes with a scream
and his member a-drippin' with cream,
'tis just the commission
of nocturnal emission,
which he dubs, "A Mid-Slumber Night-Stream."

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Acceptance

"All life is barriers. All growth is the transcendence of barriers. It's the dividing line that makes everything possible. Without it, there's nothing but soup."

-SOLOMON SHORT

-and that was a curious thing.

In the middle of dying, we stopped for dinner.

I remember eating. I remember that people were willing to give me anything I wanted. I could have had every dessert in the room. I didn't want.

Curiously, food had become irrelevant. There was something else happening. . . .

After dinner, I resumed my place on the platform without any emotion that I could name.

I mean, I was feeling something, but it was something I had never felt before in my life. If I had to put a word to it, perhaps I'd call it peace. If you can believe that.

I was going to die.

And it didn't bother me any more.

Foreman had brought me through denial and anger, bargaining and depression, and now I had reached a place that he called acceptance and I called peace.

How very very odd.

Was this what he meant by enlightenment?

Was this the thing he was talking about that existed on the other side of survival?

I didn't care. The explanation didn't matter. I didn't have to think about this at all. I could simply sit and watch and appreciate and experience whatever happened anywhere around me.

This is what peace feels like.

First of all, everything in the world-and I mean, everything is fascinating. You can see how things fit together. You can see things as if they are illuminated by an interior presence. Everything seems to glow with its own energy. People in particular-you can almost see what they're thinking. And when they speak, you can hear what they mean; and when you speak back to them, they turn to you with light in their eyes and listen to what you're saying. They truly listen.

This is what peace feels like.

It feels like being connected to everything in the universe, everything at once. Foreman and Lizard and the sky and the grass-and even the worms. How very curious. Even the worms. It's like the worm song. It's a feeling I wish I could share.

And that's the only thing wrong with peace. You can't share it. You can't give it away. You can't even talk about it or they'll think you're crazy. For some reason, that thought was terribly funny. I was still giggling as I headed back into the training room.

Foreman looked at me-when I climbed back up to the platform and he nodded thoughtfully. I recognized the nod. It was his acknowledgment that something had happened.

"You can see it, can't you?" I asked.

"The whole world can see it, Jim. You're wearing a silly beatific expression on your face." He sat me down in the chair and began speaking quietly to me. "Jim, you don't look like a man who's going to die. Someone to whom this training is a totally alien experience would look at you and wonder. They'd think you're crazy; because where you are is light years beyond what most people call normal.

"I want to talk to you now about what's on the other side of survival. Do you want to know about it?"

I nodded. Yes, tell me.

"You think it's a feeling of joy or peacefulness, don't you?" Nod.

"It's not. That feeling-and I can see that you're feeling it now; the whole room can see it-that feeling is only a very small part of what I'm talking about.

"What is beyond survival, Jim, is service. Contribution. Doing something for someone else, for no other reason than to make a difference for them. Without thought of acknowledgment or reward. Without the thought of personal advantage or gain. "Service is a quality that is beyond most people on the planet. They don't even know what the word means. Most people, when they talk about service, they're talking about what they expect from others; they're talking about what they think they have a right to, or what they think they've paid for. Most people on this planet never think of service as something that they themselves might be capable of, let alone be responsible for providing. Why? Because most people don't hear the word service; they hear the word servant; and they think that to be a servant is to be at the lowest state.

"I say that service is the highest state-that there is no greater thing that you can do than serve your fellow beings. By serving, I mean doing things which benefit others, and doing them without regard for your own concerns. And I'm not talking about stopping what you're doing to become some kind of a monk or a nun. I'm talking about an operating context, where you do what you're doing not for your own good, but to produce a result for others. I'm talking about the difference between merely going through the motions and actually making a difference.

"Let me give you an example. The technicians who ready your equipment for you before you go out on a mission; they're not simply serving you, they're serving the mission. And service is a two-way street. You can serve them by making sure that they share the victory, that they know that you got the job done because the equipment worked. That contributes to their pride in the job.

"Service-" said Foreman, "comes from being clear about the larger goal and committing to that goal, first and foremost. The goal for the Core Group is a simple one: design the future of humanity. Do you see the incredible responsibility of that goal? We will not simply let the future happen to us; we will be the source, the cause of our own destiny. By the way, do you get the joke? We have to make sure that humanity survives. Yes, survival is part of service too. It's part of everything. But do you see that service is larger than survival?

"We are at service to all of humanity. That's the core of the Core Group. Our charter says that our job is to create the future. Anyone who wants to be part of the Core Group can be-if you're ready to be of service to an entire planet. That's what this training is all about.

"Our job, Jim, is threefold: Stop the Chtorran infestation. Provide a safe environment for human beings. Preserve as much of the Terran ecology as we can. There are a lot of different ways we can solve any single one of those three tasks. But solving each of those tasks is infinitely more important than who is president or what flag is flying on the flag pole or what language we speak or which government gets to take credit. How much it costs is irrelevant. We can afford it. However much manpower it takes, we'll do it. However long it takes, that's how long it takes. We'll do the job. It's not about being right. It's about getting the job done. And I promise you that the feelings of satisfaction and joy and enthusiasm that you will experience-even under the most horrifying and adverse of circumstances-will be incredible, so long as you never forget what your job is. To serve your fellow beings."

I nodded.

"There's just one more thing-" BANG!

-I looked up startled. As did everyone else.

Foreman was still holding the gun outstretched in his hand. Smoke was curling from the barrel. He had fired it into the wall. The silence in the room was a roar. And then the roaring in the room was deafening. Foreman turned and put the gun down on the table. He held up a hand for silence.

"Don't get confused! The process is not over," he said. "The process will continue until McCarthy dies. The process will continue until each and every one of you die. You will go through The Survival Process each and every day of your life, for the rest of your life-every single minute of your life will be about one thing and one thing only: your survival. The only thing different is that after today, you will have it indelibly engraved on your consciousness that you are in The Survival Process.

"Is there another place to be? No. It is all survival.

"Don't get confused! Don't make the mistake of thinking that service is something you do instead of survival. No. Service is a way to transform survival from a chore to a challenge."

Foreman lowered his voice. We had to strain to hear him. "That has been the point of this entire exercise: to bring you to this moment of consciousness. The words are irrelevant, but the experience is indelible. The purpose of this process is to open you up to the possibility of service. Up until the moment that I fired that gun, you thought that service was just only a part of survival. I fired the gun to break that paradigm. You now have a mnemonic, a focus, something to remind you.

"This is the new paradigm. You are in The Survival Process, but survival is only the smallest part of service. That knowledge alone is enough to transform the rest of your life. It will force you to realize, over and over and over again: There is no other place-but what you do in this place makes all the difference in the world.

Foreman stood behind me. He rested his hands on my shoulders and spoke past my ear. "This is what life looks like from the inside.

"From this moment on, now that you know, every moment of your life is going to be about the choice between survival or service. I promise you, you cannot forget.

"Now that you know that you have a choice, you have space to choose. Now that you know the cost of investing your energy in survival, you can weigh that against the cost of investing your energy in service. What do you get out of survival? Anguish? What do you get out of service? That's what the rest of this training is going to be about."

Foreman let go of my shoulders and stepped out to the edge of the platform. "Now, one more thing. I mean it when I say, 'Don't get confused.' I did not lie to you. The process is not over. It continues until you die. I did not mislead you. You misled yourselves. What I said was, 'I will use the gun. The process will continue until McCarthy dies.' I never said that McCarthy would die today, but you were all so locked up in survival thinking that you made connections that were never there. Yes, I played into those false connections deliberately-I allowed you to think what I knew you were thinking, but you want to notice that you didn't listen. Had any single one of you listened carefully to what I said, we would have had to do this process in an entirely different way, but we could not do it any other way while you were still stuck in Your false connections.

"Some of you are going to be convinced until your dying day that I played a trick on you. Don't fall into that trap! You'll miss the point of the exercise. You are still in The Survival Process. It continues until you die."

There was a forest of hands waving, but Foreman turned to me first. "McCarthy? What are you feeling?" I was laughing. "I feel disappointed. I mean, I was almost looking forward to dying. I was starting to . . . I don't know. I feel like a damn fool." I couldn't help it, I couldn't stop laughing.

"I suppose I should be so fucking angry at you I want to wring your fucking neck-but I feel so good. You know what I feel? I feel more alive than I have ever felt in my entire life!" There were tears running down my cheeks. Foreman reached over and touched my hand.

"You know what I feel?" I blurted. "I'm feeling every emotion in the world, all at once. I'm feeling joy and aliveness and giddiness-and grief, oh, God I'm so full of anguish-and fear and despair at being so trapped in death-and anger and rage at you for doing this to me. And . . . oh, God, this is overwhelming!"

Foreman was holding me. "That's right, Jim, that's right. What you're feeling is birth-rage. Have you ever noticed how angry babies are at being born? Look at their faces. That's what you've got now. And it's mixed up with curiosity and wonder and joy, the same way it is in a baby. You're fine. You're doing just fine."

I hated him and I loved him. Just like Jason.

But this was different.

Because this was us playing at god-this wasn't worms. There was a lot more than that. Foreman and I went down off the platform and everybody sat on the floor and we all talked. We talked about the responsibilities of human beings to each other and what it felt like to be trapped in human bodies.

We talked about what we really wanted.

And I know it sounds sappy and maudlin-but underneath all of it, we began to discover how much we really cared about each other; we even loved each other.

Not love like most people think of love, but love nonetheless.

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Sally-Jo taught erotic correction.
She told her student to get an erection.
"Put your dick in my mouth.
Move it north, move it south -
Now, you're getting a sense of direction!"

Her instructions were very explicit,
and more than a little illicit:
"Please fill up my cunny with fresh clover honey,
and butter my buns like a biscuit."

"Then wrap me up nice in a blanket,
and I'll sit on your staff while you crank it.
I'll put on some feathers,
and laces and leathers,
and wiggle my ass while you spank it."

"Now that your fingers are stinky,
tie me up in some chains that are clinky.
Bring in goats and a sheik,
give my titties a tweak
-and now, we can start getting kinky!"

"Forget what the chain and the whip meant.
Just get the straps and the slings and a shipment
of high-grade Vaseline,
and a strong trampoline,
and all of the other equipment!"

"Now, when we get all the bedsprings a-drummin',
that's when I'll start in a-hummin',
then quickly, my dear,
put it into my ear,
so I'll hear the sound of it comin'!"

"I don't know how much this is costing,"
said her student, still covered with frosting.
"But I can say with affinity
that I've lost my virginity.
Quite frankly, my dear, you're exhausting!"
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Dirty Limericks

"Isn't it amazing how much fun two people can have just by taking off their clothes?"

-SOLOMON SHORT

Of course, we ended up in bed.

She unpinned her dark red hair and it fell in an auburn cascade to below her shoulders. She took off her blouse and her bra and I saw how pearl-smooth her skin was. Her breasts were rosy; they looked firm.

She took off her underwear and I started to giggle. Her ass was freckled.

And she had the longest legs.

I wouldn't mind spending the rest of my life between those legs. She took me into her bed and into her body. I let go of my mind and let it happen. I dissolved into her freckled pink face, her tender red kisses.

She was a crimson ocean, stormy and wave-tossed. I was caught up in the rise and fall of her. I felt like a man caught in a whirlwind. My heart was racing-I could die here!-it didn't matter. I pulled myself up, pushed her knees up to her chest, and plunged in deeper. She wrapped her legs around me and began to gasp and laugh and cry. When she came, it was with a little shudder of delight, and then she pulled me close, hugging me even tighter as she held me and held me. I could feel her spasming and throbbing beneath me, around me, and I came too, exploding into her.

And then we collapsed into each other, rolling over onto our sides. I was still facing her, still inside her.

I let myself look into her eyes. She was beaming. "Hi," she said.

"Hi," I replied.

We lay there gasping for breath. "Now, I know," I said.

"Know what?"

"What it's like to screw a colonel. Always before, it's been the other way around."

She burst out laughing. "Believe me," she said. "It's far more fun screwing captains."

"Really?"

"Sure. You'll find out when you're a colonel."

"Mm, I love it when you talk dirty." I shifted my position, she smiled in response.

"Now, say general."

"Brigadier," she whispered.

"Oh, I can't stand it."

She giggled.

"Want to know something?" I said.

"What?"

"I've missed you."

"I've missed you too."

"You mean, I wasn't just a one-night stand?"

"No, you were; but whoever said that one-night stands couldn't be fun and affectionate too? You don't have to fall in love every time."

"Problem is, I did."

"Mm." She didn't answer that. "I didn't expect you to come back from that mission."

"Nobody did." I turned so I could look directly into her face. "You know, I used to wonder what it would be like to make love to you."

"Really?" Her voice went soft. "What did you imagine?"

"Um . . ." I tried to remember. I couldn't. I started giggling.

"What?"

"I forgot."

"No, you didn't. You just don't want to say."

"No, really, I did."

"Captain, I could order you to tell me."

"Colonel, just about anything I would say right now would get me in a lot of trouble."

"Then I order you to say it."

"No, sir!"

She rolled me over on my back, so she was on top of me. She was surprisingly strong. She said, "What is it you're not saying? Tell me!" She saw the look on my face and pounced. "That one! Say it."

I said, "I love you."

She blinked.

"What did you say?"

"I said, 'I love you.' See, I told you it would get me in a lot of trouble."

She sniffed back the tears. "No-it's just-you caught me by surprise." She sniffed again. "The army takes a dim view of captains falling in love with their colonels. Well, sleeping with them anyway. I guess this is why." She smiled through the tears. "It's probably lousy for morale to see your superior officer crying."

I pulled her down to me and kissed her. She felt good. She made me feel good.

I stopped and looked into her face and said, "Well, it's true. I do love you. And you ordered me to tell you."

"I know. I have only myself to blame."

"For what?"

She gave her head a quick shake. Her red hair fell down around us both. "Never mind."

"No, go on-"

She shook her head again.

"Now, I order you."

She looked at me, impishly smug. "You can't order me. I outrank you."

"You can't pull rank in bed."

"Why not?"

"Well, for one thing . . ." I rolled her over on her back. Now I looked down on her. ". . . you're out of uniform. How do I know you're a colonel?"

"I fuck like one." Her expression was prim.

"Can't prove that by me. I've never fucked any other colonels."

"You want me to wait?"

"No, I want you to answer the question."

"What question?"

"The one you're trying to avoid. What is it you're not saying? I showed you mine, now you show me yours."

She saw I meant it and a sad look came into her eyes. She said, "I love you too."

"Really?"

"Uh-huh."

My jaw must have dropped. She reached up and pushed it closed. "Really," she insisted.

"I . . . I . . ." Now it was my turn to be flustered. I opened my mouth and a word fell out. "Why-?"

She shrugged and shook her head. "Beats the hell out of me. If I was going to pick a lover, you are probably the worst person I could pick."

"Thanks," I said.

"No, listen." She put a finger across my lips. "Jim, you are one of the dearest and sincerest and most committed men I've ever met. . . ."

"But?"

"There's no `but.' It's all that sincerity and commitment that keeps getting you in so much trouble. I know I'm going to have my hands full trying to keep up with you."

"I didn't ask you to fall in love with me."

"So? I didn't ask you to fall in love with me either, but you did." She sounded sad. "So, here we are."

"Well, don't look so glum about it. I always heard that when two people fell in love, it's supposed to be a

joyous thing."

"Oh, yeah. I forgot." She grinned up at me. "Wanna fuck?"

I couldn't help giggling. "I love you. I'll agree with anything you bring up."

"Really? Can I use my hands?" She used her hands.

"Uh . . ."

"Yes?"

I looked down. "I'm considering my response."

She followed my glance. "I like your response."

"Mm, do you?"

"I'm inclined to say so, yes."

"Well, I am prone to press the point-"

Our giggles were interrupted by the phone. It beeped loudly. We both said, "Shit!" at the same time.

"Wait a minute," Lizard said. "Let me see if I can reach it from here-"

"Here, I'll move with you-"

"I don't think this is going to work . . ."

"Yes, it will. Move your . . ."

"Oh, hell. Well, we tried-" She rolled away from me and scooped the phone off the nightstand. "Tirelli here."

Her expression clouded. "Say again? . . . Why?" She looked annoyed. "Yes, I'll be here. Yes, probably all night. Thank you." She hung up.

"Who was that?" I reached out for her.

"Dispatch." She didn't roll back to me. I let go of her shoulder. She seemed smaller now. Sadder. She sighed and said, "They were angry. I turned my beeper off. They wanted to know where I was." She lay down again, facing me, but her eyes were still distant. She rubbed her nose. "They told me to stay here for a while. They wouldn't say why."

I didn't say anything to that. I just waited. There was more. She reached over and patted me. "I guess we could do that. Couldn't we?" Her voice went soft. "I suppose we could think of something to do, couldn't we?"

"How about I just hold you for a while?"

"That would be good."

And then we shut up for a while. Whatever else we had to say wasn't important. It could wait.

She had the smoothest skin. Touching her was a luxury.

I felt like the man named O'Quinn-with an inordinate interest in skin . . .

After a bit, I started laughing again.

Lizard levered herself up on one arm. With her other hand she brushed the hair back from her face.

"What?"

"Limericks."

"Limericks?"

"Yeah. Limericks."

She blinked in confusion. "They told me you were crazy, Jim, but...."

"They were right. I am crazy. Totally bugfuck. I've been hearing voices in my head and having hallucinations ever since that worm fell on me three years ago."

"-But everybody's crazy these days. It's a given. So that's no excuse. Why limericks?"

"I dunno. I just keep thinking up limericks."

She grabbed my hand and bent several of my fingers backward. "Why now?"

"Ouch! Okay, okay. I was thinking of the one I wrote about you."

"You wrote a limerick about me?"

I shrugged, sort of embarrassed. "Yeah."

"Nobody's ever written a poem about me ever." She leaned over and kissed me.

"I think you should hear the limerick before you thank me."

"It's the thought that counts-" Then her expression clouded. She frowned suspiciously. "Let's hear the

limerick."

"Okay, but don't say you weren't warned." She reached for my fingers again. I recited quickly,

"There was a mad pilot named Lizzy,
whose manners were said to be skizzy.
She could loop, she could twirl;
she could make your head whirl.
She left all her men fucking dizzy."

"Dizzy who?" asked Lizard.

"I don't explain 'em. I only write 'em."

"Hmm," she said. "Tell me another."

"Okay." I told her the one about Chuck-
who expressed a great fondness for duck.

Whether gravied or roasted, pressed, ,sauced or toasted.

--And he never got down on his luck."

Lizard looked at me blankly. "I don't get it."

"Down. You know, as in: `How do you get down off an elephant?' "

"Huh?"

"You don't get down off an elephant. You get down off a duck."

"Oh," she said. "That's cute."

"Cute?" I sighed. Loudly. "All right. Try this one instead. Ahem-He was held in regard for his pluck."

She made a face.

"-and once he made headlines while stuck? "

"Mmm," she jiggled her hand sideways to indicate iffyness.

"Okay, one more try: `Tho he liked it well-seasoned, he was oft heard to reason, I haven't the thyme for
a . . . "

And then the phone went off. Lizard's face froze.

She reached over and grabbed the instrument with a frightened expression. "Tirelli."

She listened intently for a moment, then her face went gray. "She did? When?" She sat up quickly and switched on the light. I looked at her questioningly. She waved to me to keep silent. She was listening very hard. Her expression was grim. "Now? Couldn't you have given me a little more warning? Oh, is that what that was? Do I have time for a shower?"

I didn't wait. I rolled out of bed, padded to the bathroom and punched up a steaming spray. When I came back into the room, she was saying to the phone, "He's already on his way? All right-I'll meet him downstairs." She hung up.

"Meet who?"

"My driver. Lay out my clothes-?" She was already on her way to the bathroom.

"A clean uniform?"

"No, a jumpsuit. I'm flying tonight."

"What's going on?" I followed her into the shower, picked up a loofa and started scrubbing her back-and lower.

"Stop that. I'm in a hurry."

"To do what?"

"I can't tell you." She turned around under the spray, rinsing herself off. "You'll have to see it on TV."

"See what?"

"As of ten minutes ago, it's official. The president is moving the capital to Hawaii."

"And you're flying her?"

"Oh, no, she's got her own pilot. And they're already on their way, as of ten minutes ago. They didn't release my orders until Air Force One left the ground." She was already out of the shower and toweling herself off. "There's a driver on his way to pick me up. My plane is fueled and waiting."

"Who are you flying?"

She didn't answer. She just shook her head and walked away from me.

I followed her back into the bedroom. I watched her get dressed. She pulled on the jumpsuit quickly.

"What's going on, Lizard."

She straightened and pulled up her zipper. When she looked at me, her face was ashen. Suddenly, she was in my arms and she was shaking. "I can't tell you-"

"Huh?"

"That asshole on the phone! There're no fucking secrets in this city! He said, `Don't even tell the little boy you're sleeping with where Mommy's going!'"

"I'm not little," I said.

"I know," she sniffed again. She was holding me tight. "Do you really love me?"

"Yes, I do." I held her as tightly as she was holding me. "More than I've ever loved anyone." I buried my face in her hair. I loved the smell of her, the warmth of her.

We stood that way for a long moment.

"I've got to go," she said. She didn't move.

"I know," I said. I didn't let her go.

"No, really." She pulled away. She looked at me. "I don't know how long I'll be gone. Will you wait for me?"

I nodded. "It'll take a nuclear weapon to get me out of your bed."

She went ashen. "I wish you hadn't put it that way." She kissed me. Hard. And then she was gone.

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The speed of Ed's seed is unlocked
whenever a lady's unfrocked.

Tho' his spirit is willin,
when a pussy needs fillin',
he's a man who goes off half-cocked.

?

"It doesn't matter where you stand, it's still going to look like the middle."

-SOLOMON SHORT

What the bloody hell?

I padded back to the bed and switched on the TV.

The president's face filled half the wall. She looked old.

". . . clear and certain proof of our willingness to win. We are tonight giving ourselves again to the battles ahead. We are rolling, up our sleeves and saying, 'We will fight.'

"With your support, your partnership, and your prayers, we shall inevitably triumph.

"I thank you, and good night."

Her image faded, and an announcer came on. "That was the statement released by the president of the United States just fifteen minutes ago. For those of you who may have just joined us, we will be repeating the president's statement throughout the evening."

I picked up the phone, and stopped. I didn't have anyone to call.

I put the phone down again.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the president of the United States." The presidential seal dissolved to the president herself.

"My fellow Americans, twenty-eight months ago, when I assumed this office-under tragic circumstances-I knew that I was assuming a great responsibility. This is the greatest nation on this Earth-and this is the most perilous moment of our history.

"The human race is caught in a war we barely understand. Even our best advisors are stunned at the scope of this invasion, this ecological infestation. This nation, the United States of America, is perhaps humanity's last best hope for victory in that war. "When I accepted this responsibility, I knew that the size of the lusk confronting me-and all of us-was an awesome one. I did not shrink from that responsibility. Nor do I think that any American shrinks from the responsibilities ahead. We are all together committed. Whatever must be done, will be done.

"Since I took the oath of office, not a day has passed that I have not realized anew the sacred trust that has been placed in me. There are difficult decisions to be made. I must choose the course of action that will best serve not only this nation, but all of humanity.

"I know that I act in your name and on your behalf. That trust is not lightly taken. At this time of crisis, I know that I must come again to you to renew that trust and support. Tonight I must ask you to join with me in a most difficult decision.

"Let me give you some of the background. It has been the job of this administration to form a global battle plan for combatting the extraterrestrial infestation. Toward that end, we have gathered our finest surviving minds on the planet together. This advisory board is continually assessing the course of the infestation and the consequences of the responses open to us.

"I am given daily reports by this advisory board. I pay the closest attention to these reports. Let me stress the care with which this body assembles and investigates its facts. Let me stress the thoroughness of its deliberations. The choices that we are presented with are deeply considered.

"For some time, we have known that the infestation in certain parts of the country is-due to circumstances of geography-unruntable. These areas, particularly certain areas in the Rocky Mountain District, function as reservoirs of infestation for the rest of the nation. Those reservoirs must be neutralized, sterilized, or eliminated by whatever means possible, and as soon as possible.

"Toward that end, we have devoted considerable time, energy, and materiel. Our efforts have been successful, yes, but not on the scale necessary to insure the security of the American people living near the infested areas.

"It has been the difficult duty of the advisory board to inform you that conventional weapons will be unable

to do the job that needs to be done. In our best assessment of the situation, the Rocky Mountain infestation cannot be contained or controlled, let alone stopped, by the weapons we have been using. Even if it were possible to greatly expand the scale of our efforts, still it would not be enough to resist the ecological imperative of the Chtorran infestation in the affected areas.

"Therefore, we have been looking at alternative courses of action.

"Our research divisions have shown great progress in their development of specific biological weapons to use against the infestation. Unfortunately, nothing in their armament is in a state of readiness to handle the scale of problem confronting us tonight. "We cannot wait any longer. We must act.

"The United States Ecological Infestation Advisory Board has therefore reluctantly advised the use of low to medium yield nuclear weapons on selected sites in the following areas-"

"What?!" I came off the bed like a rocket and stood naked in front of the TV, hardly believing what I was hearing. She'd done it after all!

"-Western Colorado, Northern California, and parts of Oregon, Washington, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida. The Advisory Board has also suggested making specific nuclear weapons available to the governments of Mexico, Canada, and Central and South America-if they so request.

"I have accepted that report. Reluctantly, I must agree with the conclusions of the Advisory Board. I have therefore signed the order authorizing the United States Army to use nuclear weapons in those areas designated as Critically Infested. As I speak to you, our bombers are already in the air and on their way to the target sites."

"Oh, my dear God in Heaven-that's where Lizard's going-" I sat down on the edge of the bed and stared at the screen.

"Let me stress here that this is not an indiscriminate bombing of infested areas. Rather, this is a carefully targeted counterattack against specifically dense clusters of gastropede infestation. The gastropedes are the shock troops of the infestation. Tonight's action will destroy their largest staging areas.

"This action is not intended to be, nor can it be, a permanent solution; but it will retard the advancement of the infestation long enough for our scientists to prepare our more sophisticated biologically-specific counterweapons. This action will buy us the necessary time to develop the next level of our resistance. It should be seen as a sign, not of our desperation, but of our commitment."

The president stopped then and looked out at us. I knew that look. Now, she was going to get serious.

"The Ecological Infestation Advisory Board has also made a second recommendation.

"As you know, our nation's capital is uncomfortably close to one of the largest reservoirs of infestation. While there is no immediate danger to the city of Denver, it is not practical to keep so many of this nation's key officials in continual proximity to such danger. The Advisory Board has recommended that the nation's capital again be moved.

"I have given much consideration to the difficulty of such an action, as well as the consequences if it were not taken and later proved to be necessary. We cannot afford the risk. Your leaders in the Senate and House of Representatives concur.

"Therefore, acting on the further recommendations of the Advisory Board, I am tonight authorizing the temporary reassignment of the nation's capital to the one state still unaffected by the infestation. That state is Hawaii.

"The city of Honolulu has graciously offered to provide the necessary resources. The bulk of the United States government will be transferred to the island of Oahu within thirty days. This necessary step will guarantee the continued functioning of all government services throughout the difficult days ahead."

She took off her glasses and stared into the camera. This was the part she must have rehearsed. She wouldn't be reading this. "My fellow Americans. Let me conclude on this note. This administration has tonight recommitted itself to victory. Let these difficult choices be seen as evidence of that commitment to do whatever is necessary to guarantee not only our survival, but our eventual victory over this alien invasion. That we take these steps now, by choice, rather than later, by necessity, is clear and certain proof of our willingness to win. We are tonight giving ourselves again to the battles ahead. We are rolling up our sleeves and saying, 'We will fight.'

"With your support, your partnership, and your prayers, we shall inevitably triumph."

"I thank you, and good night."

I sat there, staring at the screen. An announcer came on and said something, then the president's announcement began to repeat. "Scan," I commanded.

The President was on all the other channels too-and probably would be all night.

I started pulling on a jumpsuit. Tonight could get very crazy. I started looking for my boots.

Let's see, Lizard was probably at the airport already. Probably she was already in the air.

The Rocky Mountain Infestation was about four hundred kilometers north. If she flew at a thousand kilometers an hour . . . I walked out onto the balcony and looked off toward the mountains. The flash should be visible from here. I leaned over the edge of the railing and looked down. I was not the only person waiting on the balcony. I could hear the president's voice coming from many other apartments, Every TV in the hotel must have been on. Her words echoed and reechoed across the plaza below. "It should be seen as a sign," she was saying again, "not of our desperation, but of our commitment."

She had ordered the use of nuclear weapons against the Chtorrans and was evacuating the government to Hawaii-and she wanted us to believe that it was evidence of commitment? It was as desperate an act as anyone could possibly think of! She couldn't possibly hope to sell it to the public.

I knew this lady. She was a shrewd politician. We were lucky to have her as president. But this time, it looked as if she'd misplayed her hand.

I sat down on the balcony and tried to think. I hollered for the robot, "Eye-gor!" It rolled up quickly, its eyestalks swiveling, and announced its presence with a three-note whistle that sounded like a question mark.

"Scotch. Straight up. A double-no, make it a triple. And stand by for refills."

It beeped affirmatively and rolled away. Apparently, Lizard didn't like her robots to talk. Some people did. My father had once said you could tell how emotionally starved a person was by the degree to which they anthropomorphized their robots.

I studied the looming mountains. They were black against the starlit sky. Where was Lizard now, I wondered? How long until the mountains burned?

How long until the nuclear wrath devoured the night?

I wondered, what had the president really unleashed tonight? With this single irrevocable action, what was she actually saying about the invasion and our ability to resist it?

It was more than just a statement of commitment. It was an acknowledgment of the scale of our enemy. It was an acknowledgment of the size of the war.

The robot returned with my drink riding on its "head," one clawlike hand holding it steady. It looked like a little Portuguese washer woman.

I took it and turned back to the mountains. I felt like I was waiting for the end of the world.

I didn't want to believe it.

And I was impatient for it to happen.

I wondered, how will the people react? And what happens next?

What will I do? I had no place to go. I was looking for my death when Lizard found me.

Would I go with her now? Lizard. Oh, God.

I remembered what I'd said to her. "It'll take a nuclear weapon get me out of your bed."

I remembered the look on her face. Ashen.

That's what she was afraid of. Would I still love her? Oh, God

I thought about the target site. There were human beings there. Probably children.

And worms. Lots of worms.

They'd be incinerated. All of them. Blinded, blasted, and burned. The sky would flame. I knew what would happen. I'd seen the pictures. Everyone had. We'd been reliving the Apocalypse war for twenty years. That was supposed to remind us what would happen if we failed to keep the peace.

I knew the horror.

The light. The blast. The firestorm. The radiation. The death.

I thought about the land we'd flown over.

A hundred thousand worms would die tonight. And how many human beings?

I remembered Marcie. And Delandro. And Alec and Tommy and Holly.

Fuck the renegades. They deserved what they were going to get.

No responsible human being should be in a worm camp anyway.

Kill them all. Let God sort them out.

The sky to the west turned white. Bright white. It could have been lightning, but it wasn't.

I stood up.

There was silence for the longest time.

And then the sound came rolling down from the mountains. It was a sudden soft thump, and then a rumble that rolled forever. It rattled the windows and grabbed you by the bones. It shook the floor and turned your knees to jelly.

Somewhere below, I heard cheering. I sank back into my chair.

I was still sitting there when Lizard returned. The sky to the west was pink. Somewhere on the other side of those mountains, a forest was burning. It looked like dawn.

?

A lady whose name is Tirelli
has tits made of dynamite jelli.

If you take on this dare,
you must fondle with care.

(The detonator's south of her belli.)

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The Woman Who Dropped the Bomb

"Despite all the evidence to the contrary, I remain convinced that Man is the missing link between apes and civilized beings."

-SOLOMON SHORT

I heard her come in.

I still didn't know what I wanted to say to her.

I put the empty glass down on the table next to me-how long had I been holding it?-and stood up to face her.

She looked terrible. "Are you all right?"

She nodded. She waved at the robot. "Eye-gor, make me a Poison Apple."

We stood and looked at each other. I didn't know if I should go to her. She didn't know if she could come to me.

"It wasn't. . . ." She swallowed and started again, "It wasn't anything like I expected. It was very odd."

For a moment she looked very fragile. "It was . . . so easy. The computer beeped and I pressed the release. I felt the plane jerk when the bombs fell away. There were two of them. They were shaped warheads, designed to spread the blast sideways. They were supposed to go off simultaneously. I guess they did, I don't know.

"I don't know what I expected. I almost forgot to climb. Those were my instructions. Once the bombs are away, stand the bird on its tail and climb. The blast caught me from behind. It threw me across the sky. The whole sky was white. I've never seen anything like it-"

She stopped and steadied herself. Eye-gor rolled up with her drink. It was tall and red and bubbled and smoked. Dry ice at the bottom? Lizard sipped at it.

She caught her breath and continued talking, as if she hadn't stopped at all. "The sky looked like it was on fire. The clouds boiled away in seconds. Just in the heat of the blast. I don't know what the videos will show. I didn't stay to look. I got out of the plane, I debriefed-I told them what I just told you, there's nothing else to tell-and then I came home. I didn't know if you'd still be here."

"I told you I would." She started shaking.

I took a step toward her, but she held up a hand to stop me. "Jim-I've just dropped the first nuclear weapons that the United States has used in war in almost a century. All my life, I've been taught that only a madman would use nuclear weapons. All my life, that's been the single most unforgivable sin. That's how we survived the Apocalypse crisis-by disavowing nuclear war. The whole planet swore never again. Never again. And I'm the one who broke the vow."

"You're not the only one."

"I dropped the first two bombs, Jim-"

"Elizabeth!"

She looked up, startled.

I said, "What if I had dropped those bombs instead of you?"

"I would hate you now," she said. "I would hate anyone who would do such a thing."

"So you think now that I have to hate you?"

"Don't you?" She gulped her words out.

"No. Because I would have dropped those bombs if I could."

"No. . . ." She shook her head. "No one wanted to drop those bombs. They gave me the job because . . . because they hate me. "

"They gave you the job because they knew you could do it!"

"I hate them," she said, "for doing this to me. I hate them almost as much as I hate myself for doing it."

"You did it," I said, "because it had to be done."

"Goddammit! Don't you think I know all this? I was in the air an hour each way. Don't you think I've been over all this already myself? Quit trying to make it better!"

"Goddammit yourself!" I screamed right back. "You asked me if I could still love you! Well, I still do! So what the hell am I supposed to do?"

"I don't know-but quit trying to be so goddamn supportive! I hate people being supportive! I hate it!" She threw her glass at the wall. It shattered in a bright red stain. Eye-gor beeped and started picking up pieces. Lizard started screaming at the robot. She started kicking it. It started making little squeaking sounds. They sounded like whimpers.

"Lizard!"

"Leave me alone! Let me have my tantrum!" She kicked Eye-gor again. It toppled over and lay where it fell, its wheels spinning wildly. It began making that awful "robot in distress" shriek. She kept on kicking and banging it with her fists.

"Lizard! Those robots are expensive! And hard to replace!" I came up behind her and grabbed her by the waist and by her left wrist. She would have tipped me over her right shoulder, but I was ready for her. I twisted her left arm back-she broke free and punched me in the stomach; I was already dodging sideways and she hit my rib cage instead of my solar plexus. I hooked a leg around her calf and toppled her backward-she pulled me with her. I hit the bed and rolled. She came down on top of me-I grabbed her in a hug so tight she didn't have room to punch. I rolled her over on her back and looked down into her eyes. "KNOCK IT OFF!"

She suddenly ceased all resistance. She went limp in my arms. "I can't . . ." she said. "I can't fight it any more." And then she started crying.

I held her while she cried. Her body shook. She gasped and coughed. She was racked with spasms. She screamed. I was terrified for her, but I didn't let go.

And then the worst was over and she began crying softly in little weak gulps. "I'm sorry, Jim."

"For what?"

"For everything." She wiped at her nose. "For screwing everything up."

"You didn't screw up!"

"I dropped the A-bombs. I'll never be me again. I'll always be `the one who dropped the bombs.'" She sniffed. "They'll probably make up some nasty name for me. Like, the Mad Bomber of Colorado."

I thought about it. "That's not nearly nasty enough. Or clever enough."

"Well, it's the best I can do," she said. "After all, I'm still upset."

"You want to kick the robot again?"

"Oh! Did I break him?" She tried to sit up.

I pushed her back down. "That's what they're going to call you-the Robot Killer!"

"They will not. Let me up. I want to see-" I sat up with her. Eye-gor had a vicious dent in its side, but it had somehow righted itself and was wiping the rest of Lizard's drink from the wall. It rolled with a wobble.

"They will not call me the Robot Killer-I only winged him."

"You want to try again?"

"Naw. If at first you don't succeed, the hell with it." She turned to me and became more serious. "Do you really love me?"

"Why do you keep asking?"

"I guess I find it hard to believe," she admitted. "I'm so used to people not loving me-" She added, "Or loving me and leaving me."

I said, "Lizard, sweetheart. It's easy to love someone when everything is wonderful. The proof of someone's love is that they still love you when everything is awful. I do love you-though I couldn't begin to tell you why. I don't care how many atom bombs you drop. I don't care how many robots you kick to death. I do love you. I will always love you."

"Even if they call me Lizzy the Hun?"

"Even if they call you Lizzy the Hun."

She sniffed. "I probably don't deserve you."

"Yes, you do. I pick my nose, I eat crackers in bed, and I fart in the bathtub. You deserve every bit of me. People who drop atom bombs don't deserve any better than me. I'm your punishment."

She laughed gently, and pulled me to her in a hug. When we finished kissing, she said, "Let's get out of these clothes. I want you to hold me close and I want to fall asleep in your arms, and I want to wake up in your arms. I want to have breakfast in bed with you, and then I want you to fuck my brains out. I want you to stay with me, Jim, and I want to have it be all right to love you back."

"Mm," I said, unzipping her jumpsuit. "Who am I to argue with Lizzy the Ripper?"

"You're a brave man, that's who." She was already undressing me.

"Mm," I said. "Do that some more. Mm, I like that. You can kick my robot to death any time."

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The fame of our Mame was her tushy,
and the front of her cunt. (It was bushy.)

But I heard that her Mike preferred for his spike
the place in her face that was skwooshy.

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A Large Piece of Truth

"Love is when you look into your lover's eyes and see God smiling back at you."

-SOLOMON SHORT

But we didn't fall asleep. Not right away.

First we made love. It was frenzied, almost desperate. I could feel her need. I abandoned myself to her and we rode the whirlwind. For a while, we weren't there-only the need, only the frenzy, only the desperate rush to release.

Afterward, I lay there gasping for breath, listening to the blood pounding in my head, wondering if my heart would burst, wondering if this was what it was like to die.

After a while, she curled up in the crook of my left arm and reached across my stomach and took my right hand in hers, and just lay there for a while and made little purring noises in her throat. After another while, she let go of my hand and began to play with the hair on my chest-there wasn't a lot, but she made do.

Then she began to talk.

"I was so scared. Ever since this thing began, I knew we might have to use the nukes. We've been talking about it for a long time. It's only these past few months that we've let it be real. And I've been so scared, because I knew that I would have to fly one of the first missions. I just knew-you know how that is? You just have this certainty about something and sure enough, that's how it happens." She took a deep breath and let it out in a sigh. "Do you want to know the truth? I wanted to do it. I wanted to know what it would feel like."

I didn't say anything. I knew the feeling. I had experienced it myself. I reached up with my left hand and stroked her hair. She said, "This is all so stupid. This should be one of the most incredible days of my life. It's everything I trained for. I knew it this morning. They said, 'We want the most dramatic video possible for the president's briefing. This is it.' I knew what that meant. I said, 'I'll go.' And I did." She looked up at me, "Except, you weren't part of the plan-" She blushed. "Well, you were. I told a lie. I told you I wasn't there to pick you up. I was. I'd been lallowing you for a long time, trying to figure out what you were up to. I read the report on Family. I know what happened there. You had to know something about the renegades, about their relationship with the Chtorrans. That's why I picked you up.

"But what I didn't count on-I mean, the part that wasn't planned-was that we would end up here." She started giggling.

"What?" I asked.

"Tonight is the night I've waited for all my life. I've just dropped two atom bombs and fallen in love and I don't know which scares me more."

"Being in love," I said.

"Yeah," she agreed. "I mean, why the hell should I love you? Do you know when I first met you and whatisname, I thought the two of you were fags. I even still thought it this morning. I don't know when I stopped thinking it."

"Do you want to know something funny?"

"What?"

"All my life, when people would call me names, that was always one of the first things they would call me. I used to hate it. I knew it wasn't true. But I was always afraid it was true, that they knew something I didn't. I hated it."

"So what's funny about that?"

"Wait, I'm getting to it. When Ted and I came to Denver that time, I did everything I could to prove I wasn't. Now, you want to know the joke?"

"Yes."

I told her about Ted. I told her about the trick he played on me. "That little shit," she said.

"Yeah. What pissed me off the most was that I got off on it. And he knew it. And he called me on it. I just hate that. But he was right. You know what he said? He said, 'Get off it. Every new advance in technology also opens up a whole new range of sexual possibilities. Go for it.' "

"And you did?"

"No! I was raised old fashioned. Except . . . "

She levered herself up on one elbow to watch my face. She was definitely interested.

"Stop that," I moved her hand away.

She slapped my wrist and put her hand back where it had been going. "Go on with your story."

"Well . . . I kept finding myself in situations." I told her about Tommy. Then I told her about the

hallucinations. "Only, he was too real to be a hallucination. But if he was, what does that say about me? I mean, if I'm hallucinating homosexual experiences? So, I guess you-and all those other people-were right all along. Can you love a faggot?"

"I guess so. I already did. Except-"

"Except what?"

"-I don't think you have anything to worry about. I liked it."

"That's not the issue."

"So what is?"

"I liked it too. That's why I did it. Not just with you, but with all those others. Remember what you said before? About doing it because you wanted to know what it would feel like?"

"I was talking about dropping the bombs."

"Yes, well, the same thing is true for me. I did it because I wanted to know what it would feel like."

"How many times did you do it?"

"What difference does that make?"

"Well, it's what Voltaire said. If you do it once, you're experimenting. More than once and you're a pervert."

I said, "I'm a pervert."

She sat up across from me. She wrapped the blanket around herself to keep warm. "So, you're a pervert and I'm a bitch. We deserve each other. The good as well as the bad."

I stared into her face. She was dead serious. I'm a pervert. She's a bitch.

So what?

I still loved her. And she still loved me.

I started laughing. So did she. I held out my arms, she fell into them. "Do you know why I love you so much?"

"Why?"

"Because I do, I just do. You make me laugh. I never would have believed that about Colonel Lizard Tirelli, that you would have such a sense of humor. You make me feel good. And you make me feel safe. And most of all, because you accept me the way I am."

After I finished kissing her and she finished kissing me, she said, "Listen, sweetheart, I don't have any choice in the matter. I love you because you're committed."

"Even though I'm guilty as hell?"

"Especially because you're guilty as hell."

"Lizzy," I said. "There's something else I have to tell you."

"What?"

"I lied."

"About what?"

"I lied to the president of the United States today-I mean, yesterday. About the people in the camps. She asked me if they were still human. And I said no. I said it was my experience that they'd sold out their humanity. That isn't true. That was a lie. I know how human they are. I only said that because . . .

because I wanted her to drop the bombs. I wanted revenge."

"I know," she said.

"What?"

"I know," she repeated.

"The thing is, I lied! And that was the issue on which the president was going to make her decision, wasn't it? About the people in the camps. And I told her they weren't people any more, I helped her justify the dropping of the bombs."

Lizard looked grim. She said, "I know. Now, I have a confession for you. We knew you would do that. That's why we put you in front of the president. Dr. Zymph, Dr. Foreman, and a couple of other people approved it. I was there. I work with the Advisory Board, sweetheart. We wanted those bombs dropped. Listen to me: I'm just as big a jerk. I dropped them! Do you think the decision was made solely on the basis of your testimony? No, there were a lot of other reasons why those bombs had to be dropped. You were there . . ." She started laughing suddenly. "Oh, no-the irony of it-you were there to mitigate the guilt of the decision!"

"Huh?"

"So we wouldn't have to wallow in it-like you do!"

And suddenly I saw it too. And we both burst out laughing!

I rolled her under me and said, "I have never had this much fun in bed in my life! It feels positively indecent!"

"Good! It's something else to be guilty about!" She wrapped her legs around me. "Do something perverted."

"Okay. Where do you keep the Boy Scouts?"

"In the fridge. Second shelf."

"Mm. Are we going to get any sleep today?"

"You'll sleep in October-"

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A whore with a face like a hound
complained that her sales were down,
till a lover named Michael
bought her a cycle,
and she peddled it all over town.

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Hawaii

"Genius is a perpetual notion machine."

-SOLOMON SHORT

"But it's such a touristy thing to do-" I protested.

"Foreman invited us," Lizard insisted. "It's a privilege."

I shrugged. "All right," and followed.

We rented bicycles from a stand opposite the beach and pedaled down the busy avenue toward Diamond Head. It loomed like a big ocean wall.

I was amazed at Foreman's energy. I had trouble keeping up with him. I began to be grateful for stop lights. "Over there," he pointed, "that's the Honolulu Zoo. You should go some time. They still have three rhinoceroses. Probably the last three in the world. It'll be something to tell your grandchildren about, won't it! There might not be any more."

The light turned green and he pushed off again. I looked at Lizard, "I thought you said he wanted to talk to me."

"He does." She pushed off after him.

I muttered something unprintable and followed them both. Why bicycles? Why couldn't we have driven?

I still hadn't gotten used to the weather here in Hawaii. It was either too hot or too wet, or both at the same time. The locals were saying all the rain was unseasonable. I didn't care. It felt like more excuses.

We rode past some houses, then up a hill and halfway around the crater, up another hill, through a tunnel and out into the wide open center.

I came to a stop just outside the tunnel. And stared. "I've never seen anything like this before."

And then I knew I had. A long long time ago. The memory came floating back. I'd forgotten

When I was nine years old, my mother had taken me to visit a friend of hers, a Chinese lady. The lady had shown me a bowl. She had made me sit down, then she placed it in my lap and put her hands around mine so we both held it at the same time and she told me to look into the bowl. Inside the bowl was a world, little houses of ivory, little trees of jade, little streams of ebony, little people made of gold.

"It's a window into paradise," she said. "It took over a hundred years to make. Four generations of a single family worked on this bowl. It's very valuable, but that's not why I keep it. I keep it because it's also very very beautiful. It's my own private little world."

I looked into that bowl and I felt awe. I couldn't pull my eyes away. I wanted to climb down into that bowl and explore every little copse and gazebo. I wanted to meet the tiny golden ladies under their delicate golden parasols. I wanted to see the ebony animals and birds in the tiny green garden. I wanted to live in that beautiful little world.

That was the feeling I had now, looking down at the center of Diamond Head crater.

It was a private world, a bowl both huge and tiny at the same moment. There was no sense of scale here, no sense of time. We were looking down across a lush green landscape, but not a tame one like the inside of that Chinese grandmother's jade bowl. No, this was a wilderness. It curved away from us into the distance, but the opposite wall of the crater was still too close. The bowl felt small, but the more you looked into it, the bigger it became. You could fall into this world. You could be lost in it and never be heard from again. You would not want to come back. You could hide a secret world here.

In fact, God already had.

The meadow was spread like a green blanket from here to forever. There were some small buildings on one edge of it. There were deep forests all around it, sprawling and lush and bright with blossoms. There were magic things living beyond those trees, I knew. And they came out on moonlit nights and danced on this broad green field, hidden away from the eyes of human beings.

The walls of the crater were a ring of sharp hills; they surrounded us like a hug, tall and sheltering.

The sky was brilliant.

I was frozen in the act of looking. I couldn't tear my eyes away.

I could feel the enchantment here, taste it, smell it. The air smelled of flowers, but there weren't any flowers near us.

"I've never seen anything like this-" I repeated.

Foreman said, "That's why I brought you here. Ready? Come along."

We pedaled down to the center of the crater. There was the inevitable comfort station there. "Do you have to go?" Foreman asked.

"No. Why?"

"Better go now. It'll be a while before you get another chance." I looked at Lizard. She shrugged back.

We did as he said. When I came out, he was locking the bicycles into a rack, I said, "I thought that locks were a thing of the past. Wasn't it you who said there's enough for everybody now?"

He nodded. "But not all of it is in Hawaii. And part of the job of being enlightened is to not tempt others to be less than they are."

I said, "We could have driven."

He shook his head. "No, we couldn't. Ah, here's Lizard. Follow me."

He led us off on a trail into the brush. I couldn't stop marveling at the lushness of the growth here. My only previous experience with craters had been the meteor crater at Winslow, Arizona, and that had been mostly barren on the inside. I hadn't known what I had expected to find here inside Diamond Head, certainly not this little piece of paradise.

The trail suddenly turned sideways and upward. It jogged back and forth across a rocky, tree-covered wall. Everything was dark and shady here. I realized we were hiking up to the top of the crater. I hadn't known that was possible. I followed Lizard and Foreman without much comment. I didn't wonder why they had brought me here, I already knew. This was all supposed to be part of my therapy.

Occasionally we passed people heading downward. They grinned and waved knowingly. They knew what was ahead. They'd been there. We hadn't. At least, I hadn't.

I felt that way with Lizard and Foreman. They always knew what was ahead for me. I never seemed to. We broke from the brush high on a cliff wall. We could see over the top of the crater now. The suburbs of Honolulu were scattered high on the green slopes of Oahu. The houses glimmered bright in the crystal air.

The trail wound around, zigged and zagged, and stopped before a hole.

"Well, come on," said Foreman. "First, the tunnel. Then the stairs." He plunged in.

"Where does he get his energy?" I asked Lizard.

"He creates it." She grabbed my hand and pulled me into the darkness. There was a handrail for part of the way.

For a moment, I was absolutely blind.

Lizard stopped me in the tunnel. She came into my arms and found my mouth with hers. The kiss was quick and passionate. "What was that for?" I gasped.

"So you don't forget."

"Forget what?"

"How much I love you."

"How much do you love me?"

"You'll find out."

Foreman was waiting for us when we came out of the tunnel. "Look," he pointed.

We were at the bottom of a concrete staircase. There were at least a thousand steps to the top. At least, it looked like that many. "Want to catch your breath before we go?"

"Uh . . ."

"How's your heart?"

"I'm young."

"You won't be when we reach the top. Let's go." He started cheerfully up.

He was right. I was a thousand years older at the top.

"This used to be a naval lookout station," he said. "It's over a hundred years old. They used to watch for Japanese planes from here. Now, it's mostly a weather station. And a place for tourists to picnic." He led us up through four levels of concrete bunker, up a set of stairs, and out onto a catwalk "Urk-" I said.

"You are now two hundred and thirty-three meters above sea level," said Foreman. "Don't look if it bothers you."

The catwalk led around a bulge of rock on the outermost edge of the highest point of the crater, to a set of stairs and a handrail. At the very top was a tiny concrete gazebo. It looked too high, too precarious, and much too easy to fall off of.

"I, uh . . . think, I'll go back inside . . . and look from there."

"Okay," said Foreman. He started up the last flight of stairs. Lizard followed him.

Neither looked back at me. Goddammit.

I hadn't even known I was this afraid of heights.

I closed my eyes and climbed the stairs, not opening them until I reached the top.

They were waiting for me there.

They had spread out a blanket. Lizard was laying out a small buffet. Foreman was opening a bottle of champagne. The cork popped and shot straight out toward Waikiki. It arced high, then tumbled down into the greenery, two hundred and forty meters below.

"Nice shot," I commented.

Foreman handed me a glass. "Thank you." He poured for himself and Lizard. "Have you ever been here before?"

"Uh, no."

"That's why we brought you. When I was your age, there weren't as many stairs or handrails. That last bit of stairs, for example-that used to be a rocky slope. A bit more challenging then."

I looked back and shuddered.

"Spend a moment taking in the view," he said.

"I feel like I can see almost all of Oahu from here."

"Well, this side of it anyway. Look," he pointed. "There goes the state bird of Hawaii."

I looked. "All I see is a lumbering old 747."

"That's it. We've got everything that flies going back and forth between here and the mainland. They're on the ground only long enough to take on fuel and supplies. We've got planes landing every thirty seconds. We're connecting to Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, LAX, and San Diego. We're moving as much of the vital organs of the United States as possible out of the cancerous part of the body. We're duplicating the memory tanks in New York, Denver, and Washington, D.C. as well.

"If you look out there," he pointed, "you can see where we've started three new artificial islands. By next year, we'll have a chain of them ten miles long. As long as the current flows, we have electricity. As long as we have electricity, we can grow all the sea domes and islands we can use. We're also putting in a floating runway exclusively for shuttle operations, but that'll be at Maui."

"How are the locals taking it?" I asked.

"Some of them hate it. Some of them love it." He shrugged. "Nobody likes living in a refugee camp, and there's a very good chance that's what this state will become. We're trying to get more people to move on to Australia and New Zealand, but most Americans don't want to go that far. Would you?"

"I wouldn't want to abandon the United States to the Chtorrans, no. Here, we're still fighting back."

"Uh-huh." Foreman smeared some chopped liver on a cracker and popped it into his mouth. "What about you?"

"What do you mean, what about me?"

"What do you want to do?"

"Haven't we had this conversation once before?"

"Uh-huh, and we'll probably have it again. The answer may have changed. What do you want to do, Jim?"

"You know where my commitment is. I hate the worms. I want to kill them."

"So? What?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I didn't say `So what?' I said, `So? What?' Two different sentences. So? What next?"

"I don't understand."

"Wanting to kill Chtorrans isn't all, Jim. There's something else there. If all you really wanted was to kill Chtorrans, we wouldn't be having this conversation. You'd just be a killing machine. We'd point you at Chtorrans and you'd kill them. But the truth is, you don't want to kill any more, do you? You've got some very real questions about what's going on, don't you? And you want to find the answers more than you want to keep on killing. Right?"

What he was saying was true. "Right," I agreed.

Foreman refilled my champagne glass. He refilled Lizard's as well. She was listening to both of us, saying nothing.

Foreman said to me, "Who are you?"

"I'm James Edward McCarthy."

"No, you're not. That's a name you use to identify that body."

"Well, I'm this body then."

"No, you're not. That's just a body that you use."

"Well, then, I'm the person who uses this body."

"So? Who's that? Who are you?"

"I'm a human being!"

"So? What's a human being?"

I stopped. "I don't know what you want me to say."

"I want to know who you are, Jim."

"Well, none of my answers has been good enough for you."

"None of your answers is who you really are. You keep saying things that show that you think you're your name, or your body, or your species. Are you really?"

I thought about it. I didn't know what he was driving at. I said, "I don't know."

He said, "That's right. You don't. You don't know who you really are. And you don't even know that you don't know."

"I know now," I said. "This conversation is . . . sort of silly. I mean, I don't know what we're talking about at all. It's like a head game."

"Yes, it is a head game, Jim. That's why God gave you a head. You can't play football without a ball, you can't play head games without a head. That's all it's good for. Now, let me ask you the next question.

Now that you know that you don't know who you really are, what are you going to do about it?"

"I don't know."

"Yes, you do."

"No, I don't."

"Saying you don't know is what keeps you unconscious. It keeps you stuck. It lets you avoid being responsible."

"All right. I guess I'm supposed to say that the next step is that I should find out who I really am. Except, I don't know how to do that."

"I didn't ask you if you knew how. That wasn't the question. Have you ever noticed that most people never answer the question that's asked them. They give you the reason why they won't answer it instead."

"What is all this about?"

"Lizard asked me to put you into the next Mode Training. I need to know if you really want to do it. Do you?"

I said, "I don't know."

Foreman smiled. "Thanks for being so honest. The purpose of the training is to reveal your operating modes, so that you can be aware of them and transcend them."

"Could you translate that into English?"

"It's really very simple, Jim." He scratched his ear. "Let me give it to you this way. Do you know how to

surprise a fish?"

"Huh? No, how do you surprise a fish?"

"You reach very carefully into the tank, grab it by the tail and lift it up out of the water, just high enough for it to get a very clear view of the top of the water. You'll have to watch very quickly, but if you do, you'll see that fish get a very surprised expression on its face."

"Uh-huh." How far into his cheek was his tongue?

"Now-whatever you do, do not put that fish back into the same tank with other fish who have not also had the same experience."

"Why?"

"Why? Because that poor fish is now crazy by their standards. He'll be swimming around poking all the other fish, saying, 'Hey! This is water! We're swimming in water!' They're going to look at him sideways and swim off into the corner to say, 'Poor old fellow, he used to be so sensible, till he started talking about this water stuff.' That's how the Training works."

"We grab you by the tail, we lift you up out of the water you're swimming in, then we put you back in the water. You know why? You can't keep a fish out of water. It dies. The Training doesn't mean you won't be swimming in water. It just lets you see the water you're swimming in. That's called an operating condition or a mode. The Training is the opportunity to discover your modes. Right now, you're unconscious to most of your operating states. So they run you. If you were conscious of them, you could transcend them. And you could be more responsible for the results you produce in the world."

"The Training is about your relationship with your own life. It's about being able to get out of the water long enough to see the water you're in. You can't see it while you're in it. This is about your natural ability to make great leaps. Most people are stuck underwater, Jim. This is the opportunity to learn how to fly."

"That doesn't tell me a lot."

"I know. The answer is unsatisfactory. If you knew what it was, you wouldn't need to do it to find out. I could explain it to you all day, but you still wouldn't know what it is." He grinned. "Would you rather spread whipped cream all over Lizard's body or would you rather have someone explain to you how to spread whipped cream all over Lizard's body?"

"I see the point," I said. "There's a difference between explanation and experience. We had that one in high school."

"Uh-huh."

"I, uh, don't think I'm ready for it," I said.

"Of course, you're not. Nobody ever is. Do you want to do it anyway?"

I thought about it. I didn't know what I was saying yes to.

I felt as if there were another gun in my mouth. Live or die?

But . . . I loved Lizard. I would do anything for her. I looked at Lizard. She smiled at me, reassuringly.

I said, "Yes."

"No, that's not good enough." Foreman looked at Lizard. "Not yet, my dear. He's not ready."

She nodded. "I see it too."

"What are you talking about?"

"You're willing to do it for Lizard. But I don't know yet if you're willing to do it for yourself."

For a moment, there was a cool breeze across the top of Diamond Head. It smelled of the sea. I shivered. I said, "You're right. I don't really want to do it."

Foreman nodded. "So, don't. There's no pressure on you."

"Yes, there is—"

He looked at me and raised an eyebrow.

I looked at Lizard. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. But, I'm not completely human any more. There's things that you don't know. Neither of you. I don't feel that I should be trusted."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm deranged. Crazy. Damaged. I don't know where it started. Maybe with the renegades, maybe at Family. Did you know that I pulled the trigger on them?"

Foreman nodded. So did Lizard. He said, "It must have been a tremendously difficult thing to do."

"It was . . . exhilarating. I liked it. And . . ." I started to choke, ". . . I'm horrified at myself."

"Uh-huh."

"I liked them. They were good people. They were. They poured their love over everything and everybody. It was real. They'd even worked out how to live with the Chtorrans. They had an answer. I'm terrified that Delandro might have been right-that they were the future. Their way may be the only way that people can survive on the same planet with the Chtorrans.

"But, see, it's also the wrong answer. It's not acceptable. I'm so confused. I've been confused since the beginning. And it only gets more confusing. The only thing I've been able to hang on to is my rage."

I looked at Lizard. "I love you, but it isn't fair for me to let you love me; you deserve better than me.

There are times when I think I know how crazy I really am. And I think I can handle myself. But I can't. I can't handle it any more. It's like that old Solomon Short quote: 'This neurotic pursuit of sanity is driving us all crazy.'"

Foreman started laughing. So did Lizard.

"Huh? What did I say?" I looked from one to the other.

"No, it's all right." Foreman held up a hand. "There's something you don't know. Who do you think Solomon Short is?"

"I never thought about it. Just some cynical old bastard who posts a quote on the network every day."

Lizard giggled. Foreman said, "Cynical, eh? Well, I won't argue with that one; but as far as I know, my parents were married."

"Huh-?" And then it hit me. "You're Solomon Short?"

Foreman grinned. "You don't know the half of it, Jim."

"Well, gosh," I said, because I couldn't think of anything else to say. "Everybody quotes you."

"That's the idea," said Foreman. "I never said I wasn't vain. But we were talking about you, not me. We were talking about The Mode Training."

I looked away from them both. I looked out over the sharp green hills of Hawaii. The colors were so bright here they were almost unreal. I looked back to Foreman. The breeze ruffled through his white hair, making it stand up like a crown. The top of his skull was pink and shiny. Once again, it was a question of trust.

It was always a question of trust.

Finally, I said, "I know what the Training is. I looked it up. It's about self-actualization. It's about being the best that you can be. It's about being truly human. It's the next step. But I can't even manage being me. How can I manage anything more?"

Foreman considered the question. "I don't know either."

"Well . . . what kind of an answer is that?"

"An unsatisfactory one. Do you know that all the answers are unsatisfactory? They always will be. If you're looking for satisfaction, you're looking in the wrong place. The answers are the answers. Period. Whether you like them or not is irrelevant. Satisfaction lives somewhere else."

"So . . . okay, then I can't do it," I said.

"That's right," he agreed. "You're arguing for your limitations. That guarantees your failure." He added, "Too bad."

I stood up. "Maybe we'd better go back then."

"Okay."

"Dammit! Aren't you going to try to convince me?"

"No." His expression was impassive. "Why should I? You're responsible for yourself. You already know that. If you want to keep on thinking you're a failure, that's your choice too."

"That's what Jason said," I snapped.

Foreman nodded. "Maybe Jason was right."

"No, he wasn't! He was wrong! I know it! I don't know how I know it, but I know it."

"So prove it," Foreman said calmly.

I froze. "You're manipulating me," I said softly. He shook his head.

I glowered at him. I wanted to punch his fatuous grinning face. Lizard's too. I felt trapped in a corner.

Foreman was impassive. "Relax, Jim. This is just a picnic. And a talk. We don't have an agreement for anything more. Lizard asked me if you could do the Training; but since you don't want to, you can't. Besides, you've already done it."

"Huh?"

"Delandro was one of my students ten years ago. One of the best. I'm certain that he discovered things about the Chtorrans that are true. I'm certain that everything he told you was the truth as he had experienced it. I'm certain that his Tribe was definitely a context of lovingness, despite whatever judgments any of us might care to add. I may not like the facts, but I'm certain that there is a truth behind what you say, else you-and I and Lizard-would not be so disturbed by it."

"He tried to brainwash me."

"And he must have succeeded. You're still crazy. Sit down." I sat.

He moved closer, so he could reach over and put his hand on mine. "You need to abandon some old concepts, Jim. They're keeping you stuck. Delandro used the technology of The Mode Training to create a specific mode, a context of operation. It worked for his Tribe. They survived. It worked until it stopped working. Somewhere, there was a fatal error. You were merely the expression of that error. Think of it as an experiment that failed. The program crashed. It wasn't viable. But it was one more attempt on the planet to create an operating mode for human beings that guarantees survival in a Chtorran future.

"You've already had the first part of the Training, the experience of transferring from one mode to another. But that's only the smallest part of it. The real training is the creation of operating modes. Call it programming the human machinery."

"I want to do the Training to be deprogrammed," I said.

"There is no deprogramming. All there is, is shifting from the operation of one program to another. A computer that isn't running a program is a dead-and useless-machine.

"I'm going to give you the good news now. If you know this fact, then you can create programs of joy and satisfaction."

"I don't like it."

"I didn't ask you to like it. Just know it." He sighed. "Let me give you one more piece of bad news that may put some of this in perspective. Do you know what the natural state of humanity really is?"

I shook my head.

"The cult. That's the impolite term for it, but it's accurate. People need tribal identities. Veteran. Hacker. American. Fan. Employee. Parent. Grandparent. Writer. Executive. The problem with America is that it's a country that invented itself. So there aren't a lot of tribal identities. People keep borrowing identities from other sources. Religious ones are great, especially some of the Eastern disciplines. Martial arts. Creative Anachrony. Transformational Communities. Political movements. Genre fanatics. Sexual communities. We use the word cult to identify the ones that are alien to us, and we ignore the real truth that people need to belong to tribes in order to provide a context for their identities. Without your family, tribe, nation, or context, you don't know who you are. That's why you have to belong to something.

"Break away from one something and become part of another and you're reprogramming your operating context and the identity that operates inside that context. We call that being seduced by a cult, because it threatens us. It suggests that there's something wrong or weak or inappropriate about our identities. It suggests that we're not right. So we call it a cult and make it as wrong as we can so that the people close to us won't want to do it, won't desert us, won't insult or damage our contexts. We do it to preserve our identities, right or wrong. But this is the bad news, Jim. It's always wrong. Because you are not your context."

I chewed that thought over. Foreman was right. I didn't like it. "So, all you're doing is replacing one cult with another?" I asked.

He nodded wryly. "You can look at it that way. It wouldn't be inaccurate. But The Mode Training is an attempt to go beyond the limitations of living inside a cult to the possibilities that are available when you can create any context or cult you need."

"So, it's all brainwashing?"

"Jim, forget that word. All education is reprogramming. All transformation is reprogramming. First we find

out what you know; then we identify what's inaccurate or inappropriate. Then we devalue your investment in it so that we can replace it with the correct information. A lot of times, it also means devaluing the context around the information and replacing that with a more appropriate one. This is what you do whether you're learning trigonometry or French or Catholicism. Yes, it's reprogramming. The same way you reprogram a computer. You're a machine, Jim. It's all bad news. So, what are you going to do about it?"

I looked him straight in the eye. "I don't know," I said. I said it with finality.

"Fair enough," said Foreman. "When you get bored with not knowing and start getting curious about what's on the other side-and I know you will-then come see me. The next Training starts in ten days. I'll hold a chair for you."

He stood up and stretched and ran a hand through his hair. He pointed along the rim of the crater. "See that little building over there? That's a comfort station. I'm going to take a walk."

He left Lizard and me alone.

I looked at her. "I don't like being told that what I feel for you is just a program. It makes me feel like I'm not in control."

Her eyes were deep. She asked, "So, who wrote the program?"

"I don't know."

"Yes, you do."

I looked at my love for Lizard. Oh. "I-I guess, I did."

"You guess?"

"I did."

"Uh-huh. And so did I. So what?" She said, "We've been looking at the worms as biological machines and trying to figure them out. What would we discover if we turned the same mirror on ourselves? What kind of machines are we?"

"I'm a jerk," I said. "I'm a jerk machine."

"And I'm a nasty bitch machine," she said. "So what?"

"I don't want to be a machine," I said.

"I got it. That's what kind of a machine you are. The kind who doesn't want to be."

"Uh . . ." And then I started to giggle. "I got it. I'm the kind of machine who goes around telling myself I'm not a machine. Like a little tape recorder playing my little tape, 'I'm not a machine, I'm not a machine.'"

She laughed too. And leaned over and kissed me. "You're ready to take the next step, sweetheart.

You've already taken it."

"I have?"

"Yes, you have. You're willing to deal with bad news."

I sighed. I looked into her eyes. "All I want is to find the way-not just the way to survive, but the way to win as well. I want to know. Is this it?"

She understood what I was saying. "You'll let us know, afterward," she said.

?

There was a young man named Levine
who said to his lady, inclined,

"Thanks for the spasm,

it felt like orgasm;

as a matter of fact, 'twas divine."

?

? 70

?

Mode: The Last Day

"Reality is what bumps into you when you stand still with your eyes open."

- SOLOMON SHORT

When we entered the room, it was empty. I mean, empty.

There was no stage, no dais, no platform. There was no podium, no music stand with a manual on it, no director's chair. There were no overhead screens. Everything had been dismantled and removed.

There were no assistants at the doors. There were no assistants in the back of the room. There was no table for them; there were no chairs.

There were no chairs for the trainees either; they were stacked neatly in a large closet in the back wall.

The door to the closet was half-ajar when we entered. Periodically, someone would walk over, open the door, look in, look back at the rest of us in the room, look puzzled, and then do nothing; he or she would return to the growing throng standing and milling near the door.

The room was abandoned. It was as if The Mode Training and all the people responsible for it had simply vanished during the night.

We stood around, waiting in puzzled groups, looking at each other and wondering. We talked in low voices. Was someone going to come in and take charge soon? Had they all overslept, or had they forgotten that there was one more day to the training?

Or maybe something serious had happened? Had the training been cancelled abruptly? Was there an emergency? If so, why hadn't they told us? We didn't know.

What the hell was going on here?

There was something else bothering me. For a moment, I couldn't figure out what it was. I looked to Marisov, but she shook her head; she couldn't figure it out either. I turned around slowly, trying to see what I had already seen, but hadn't consciously registered.

There was something wrong about the room. That was part of it.

Everything looked the same, but it wasn't. I had a feeling: if I could figure out what was wrong, it would explain everything else as well.

It wasn't just that the room hadn't been set up or that Foreman and all the assistants weren't here.

Something else was missing; something that I was used to wasn't the same

And then I got it. The floor hadn't been swept. It wasn't dirty, but neither was it clean-and that bothered me. It made a difference. There wasn't much dirt, and only a few scraps of paper, but it seemed dirty by comparison to the way we usually found the room.

Always before, the room had been spotless. Ready. Even the bullet holes in the walls were always repaired after the first break. Today, the room was not ready. That's why it looked abandoned. We had grown accustomed to that feeling of readiness. But this wasn't a big clean space waiting to be filled anymore; instead, it was just a big empty space. The difference was profound.

Foreman had talked about integrity almost every day. "You're either a guest on the planet or a host.

"Guests expect to be taken care of. Guests make messes without wondering who's going to clean them

up. Guests don't pay their own way. We invite guests into our homes because we enjoy their company, not because we enjoy cleaning up after them. If the cost of cleaning up after a guest becomes prohibitive, the guest becomes an enemy. Remember that.

"Hosts are the people who take care of other people. Hosts are owners. Hosts clean up messes wherever they find them. Hosts keep their homes clean so that guests will feel welcome and taken care of.

"The question is," Foreman had said, over and over, "Are you a guest or a host on the planet Earth? Are you leaving a trail of trash in your wake? Dropped cigarettes, candy wrappings, crumpled paper, orange peels, soft-drink containers, and all the other garbage of your life? Do your relationships look like

Dachau? Are you leaving a trail of dead bodies behind you? It's all the same.

"You're expecting someone else to clean it up. Or maybe you don't care if it ever gets cleaned up.

"A host cleans up trash wherever he finds it-it doesn't matter who left it there. He's a host, it's his responsibility. He enters a room and cleans it up because he can't stand seeing the dirt on the floor. He takes care of his relationships because he can't stand seeing people damaged, incomplete, and in pain. A host cares about the place he lives in.

"I live on Earth. Where do you live?" Right.

Foreman wasn't subtle. But then he'd never promised to be. He'd only promised results. I was laughing as I went to the closet where the chairs were stored.

As I expected, there were brooms and dustpans stashed in a corner.

I didn't ask-there wasn't anyone to ask anyway-I just took the broom and began sweeping the floor. Several people turned to stare at me; a couple applauded; but after a moment, there were four of us sweeping the floor.

"Why are you doing that?" someone asked.

I just looked at him. How could he not understand? And kept on sweeping.

"That's not your job," the man insisted. He was a big, burly looking fellow.

"Yes it is," I said. "I'm not a guest any more. I'm the host."

"Oh?" he asked. "You're taking over the training? Foreman died and appointed you God?"

The right answer was yes, but he wouldn't have understood it. "I'm taking responsibility for my part of the training," I said. "Would you move please? I want to sweep where you're standing."

He moved. He frowned; he was unhappy-he knew there was something he wasn't understanding-but he moved.

I wasn't worried. He'd get it. He'd figure it out soon enough. We all would.

Somebody else came up to me then. A woman with a worried expression. "You know what's going on, don't you?"

"Actually, I don't."

"But, you're sweeping."

"That's right. I'm sweeping."

"Because it has to be done," I said.

She made a face. She shook her head and walked away. I suppose she thought I was being rude for not explaining, but if she had to have it explained to her, then she wouldn't understand it. After a while, people left me alone.

It took a while to sweep the whole room, even with four of us doing it. We became an unspoken partnership. We understood without discussing it, what we were doing.

While I swept, while I had something to do, I didn't have to think. I could be the job. I could concentrate on having this floor be the cleanest floor possible.

I really didn't know what was going on, but I did know that this dirty floor was in the way. I had to clean the floor first before I could know what the next part was. That much I was sure of. It seemed to me though . . .

. . . I didn't quite have the words yet. I had the feeling, but I couldn't explain it. If I tried to put the experience into words, I would probably diminish it. So, for the moment, I let myself just feel it and I would worry about communicating it later. Foreman said that worrying about the communication becomes rehearsal for a performance, and communication isn't about performance, it's about transmission of information and experience.

But the one thing I was sure of was that this was part of the Training.

We hadn't been abandoned.

Every day the room had been set up differently, and there was a purpose for that. Foreman didn't do anything without there being a purpose behind it. Therefore, the room had been set up differently every day for us to become accustomed to a daily alteration in the environment. We had been learning/experiencing a paradigm about the room.

The fact that today the room was not set up at all was not a sign that the Training had broken down-no, it

was the next part of the Training.

This was another way to set up the room for the trainees: having it not set up at all!

Why?

I felt like I was almost there. We were almost through with the sweeping.

So we could set it up ourselves.

I emptied the last bit of dirt and dust into the trash and stashed the broom and dustpan back in the closet where I found them. I looked up at the others. There were seven of us here.

We were all grinning. We all knew.

We started pulling chairs out of the closet--

"Wait a minute." That was the short wiry fellow with black curly hair. He looked Pakistani. "How are we going to set them up?"

Good question. We stopped to consider.

"We're inventing this ourselves," I said. "We should invent something that represents our taking responsibility for our own training."

"Good," said the blond woman. "That makes sense."

"There shouldn't be a front and a back. Everyone should have a good view."

"Right," said the guy from Hawaii; his name was Rand. "Everybody should be equal. At least, all the chairs should be equal."

"A circle," said the woman. "A big circle."

"That sounds good," said Parent. "What do you think?" They all turned expectantly to me.

"Uh . . ." I realized something. "Why are you asking me?"

"You started the sweeping-that makes you the leader."

"Uh-uh," I said. "We're all in this together. I don't think we should have a leader. Having a leader is one of the ways we give up individual responsibility. No, this is something that has to represent all of us."

"That's why you're such a good leader," said the blond woman. I started to snap at her-then I saw her grin and realized she was joking. We laughed together.

"Okay," I said. "I like a circle. What does everyone else want?"

We all agreed. A circle. It felt right.

It didn't take that long to set up the chairs. Not with twenty of us working. And as we worked, others began to join us.

I hadn't realized how big the room really was, but it was big enough to hold a circle of nearly 500 chairs, and still have room left over.

That made me think about The Mode Training again. They knew.

They had to know.

They had to have all this space because they knew we were going to need it. They expected this.

In fact, this was very probably exactly the result they desired.

That meant they had to be watching us.

I looked up at the corners of the room. The cameras were still in place. In fact, one of them was focused on me right now. I had no way of knowing if it was active or not, but I'd bet good money that it was. I waved at the camera and grinned.

"You do know something, don't you?" It was the worried looking woman again.

I couldn't help myself, I was still grinning. I knew she wouldn't believe me. I said, "I honestly don't know any more than you do. I'm just enjoying the joke. Okay?"

"What joke? This isn't funny!"

"Yes, it is. The whole thing is. Everything is. It's all a joke. Life's a big joke that we've played on ourselves-and we're just getting the punch line today."

She shook her head. "You're weird." And walked away.

I thought about that. She was right. I am weird. I grinned at another camera that was pointed at me and waved; then I started looking around for a seat.

Most of the seats were starting to fill up now. As we'd finished the circle, people had started to sit down. Force of habit? Peer group pressure? Herding behavior?

Or were they starting to get the joke? I didn't know.

What I did know was that we were going to have to take this one step at a time.

It was all a carefully planned process-only a process that we were inventing ourselves as we went along. But we were supposed to invent it ourselves. That was the point.

The last few people sat down. They looked confused and uncertain, but clearly something was happening, so they sat down and waited with us.

What was happening was the last day of the Training. Only we were making it up now, because that's what we were supposed to do.

See....

Foreman had said, "You exist in modes. You shift from mode to mode to mode as you go through life. You have a parent mode, you have a child mode, you have a sexual mode, you have an aggressive mode. Each of these modes exist because at some point in your life, you discovered that you needed that mode to survive. Your personality is a collection of operating behaviors. Right now, some of you are in skeptical student mode-"

Foreman had said, "What this course is about is the transcendence of all those little modes. We're leaping out to the larger context in which those modes are created. Call it source. I know this is starting to sound like jargon; bear with me. What we're working toward here is teaching the computer to program itself.

"Your goal is to be able to create your own modes, as necessary and as appropriate. So what we're working for is a mode of no-modes, out of which you will create new modes as you need them, or want them."

Foreman had said, "What do you do when you have nothing? You create something."

Foreman had said, "Here's the point. Up till now, all your modes have been created from need. You created them because you thought they were linked to survival. From this moment on, you can now begin to create modes that have nothing to do with survival. You can create them because you want to create them. You choose to create them."

And now, we were choosing to create the last day of the Training. For no reason at all. There was no survival involved. Nobody had to be right. We were making it up as we went. We were making up our own training now.

That was the joke.

This is the way we lived our lives. We didn't know we could make it up the way we wanted. Instead we went through life doing what we thought we had to do-and hating ourselves for being trapped. And that was a choice too, just like this was a choice. But this was a much better choice.

Sitting in a room with 500 people who used to be strangers, grinning at each other and giggling.

We must have looked like idiots.

An outsider would have thought we were crazy. It was loony day at the asylum. Let's all sit in a circle and giggle and laugh and make faces at each other.

The laughter started to build, started to roll around the room in waves. We were all getting the joke now. We sat and looked at each other and felt good about ourselves and what we had all gone through. We were family.

We were the human family.

There weren't any outsiders any more.

It was a remarkable sensation, to finally belong to something; and that something was everything.

After the laughter died down, there was a brief period of uncomfortableness. We all looked at each other.

Okay. What happens next?

A woman stood up. She spoke with embarrassment, but her face was glowing. "I just wanted to say thank you to everybody. You're all wonderful."

We applauded.

A man on the other side of the circle stood up and he began to thank people too. And after him, another man. And then another woman. There was no order to it it wasn't necessary. You spoke when you were ready. We'd trained ourselves to function this way, with respect for each other's communications.

Nobody interrupted anybody. We listened to each person and applauded, and even though it seemed to go on for a terribly long time, we stayed in our seats until everybody had had a chance to say what they had to say.

The process was called completing your communications. Foreman had told us, "Most of you go through life saying, 'Here's what I should have said.' You walk around with a bag load of unfinished conversations and you wonder why you hear voices in your head. Worse-the first chance you get to complete one of those conversations, you go for the throat. You unload all that anger or grief or fear on the first poor dumb schmuck who gets in the way instead of delivering it to the person it's really intended for. And then you wonder why your relationships are so screwed up. You're walking around delivering all your communications to the wrong people. Try it sometime. Try saying what you have to say to the person who needs to hear it. Like, 'Thank you' and 'I'm sorry' and 'I love you' and see what happens-" I hadn't expected to speak. I didn't think I had anything to say to these people. But there was a lull and people were looking at me and I guess it must have showed on my face, because I stood up and looked around and flushed embarrassedly.

"Thank you," I said. "I'm sorry," I added. "I love you."

But-we had all said this, and after a while it was all just words. It was silly to pile more words on top of words.

There was something deeper that I was feeling; an emotion of such kinship and joy and connectedness that the word for it hadn't been invented yet. The sensation was extraordinary. I didn't know how to say it to these people-so I began to applaud them.

I turned around slowly, looking from one to the next, meeting their eyes and applauding them for being so human; such a silly thing, such a pitiful thing, such a proud and courageous thing-poor little naked pink monkeys challenging the universe.

We're not worm food! We're gods!

They began to applaud with me. We all applauded. The room swelled with applause. They stood up with me. We cheered and yelled and applauded together.

The Training was over! We had won! We were taking responsibility for the destiny of our whole species-and whoever didn't want to join us in this task could stay behind and get eaten by the worms.

The rest of us were going to kick some hairy purple asses! I felt terrific.

But when the applause finally died away, we were still alone in the room.

We sat down and waited.

Clearly, whoever was watching us should have recognized that we were complete. The Training was over.

Whatever we were waiting for could happen now. We waited.

After a bit, it began to sink in.

Okay, we had the spirit, but the process wasn't complete. There was something else that had to happen. We looked around at each other. We were pleased with ourselves; we had done all the right things. We had cleaned up the room, taken out the chairs, created our own Training, completed all the incomplete communications, celebrated ourselves--

-what wasn't complete?

I remembered what Foreman had told me so many years before; at least it seemed like years: "The Training is a game, Jim, but you don't play it to win. You play it to play. And you use what you learn in this game-where there are no penalties for losing-to support you in the games you play where you can't afford to lose. The trick is, in any game, to find out what the point of the game is; then you can play for that result."

The point of this game . . .

. . . was to reinvent the future of humanity. And I realized what was incomplete.

So far, everything we'd done in here had been about ourselves. Even the way we'd set up the chairs. We were all facing inward, facing each other, shutting out the outside world.

But this thing, this Training, was about breaking paradigms, about letting go of what was so we could invent what wasn't; it was about preparing us to meet the rest of the universe.

That was what was wrong. We were pointed in the wrong direction.

I stood up and turned my chair around. I pointed it outward. Instead of having my back to the outside world, I could turn my face to it. I could face the entire universe because I trusted the people behind me to guard my backside.

Behind me, I heard a gasp. Somebody else got it. It was the woman who'd had the worried expression. She looked delighted with herself. She stood up and turned her chair around too.

Then I began to hear the sounds of other chairs scraping and being moved. And pretty soon everybody was turning their chairs around, grinning and laughing and giggling as they did so. It was all a joke now.

We sat this way for a while, all facing outward, all ready to meet the universe.

And still nothing happened.

It still wasn't complete.

Damn! What was I missing?

Oh, my God.

Oh, shit!

Jason Delandro.

He'd said it.

This was his revenge.

At the moment I most needed to figure something out, it was his words that were the trigger.

Before I could complete The Mode Training, I would have to acknowledge that Jason Delandro had been right about something.

How much had he been right about?

I'd have a lot of time to think about that. I'd have to sort it out. I'd have to take it apart, piece by piece, and see what had really happened.

I stood up.

I said, "I know what has to happen next."

They all looked at me.

I said, "Listen. When we start out life; we're in one mode: we're waiting for Santa Claus. We're waiting for the next wonderful thing to happen. But one day, we realize there ain't no Santa Claus. Most of us are smart enough to figure that out before we get out of high school. He ain't coming. So we stop waiting for him, and that's when we shift into the second mode: waiting for rigor mortis."

A few people laughed.

"There's a third place to be," I said, ignoring the chuckles. "But to get there, we have to give up waiting."

They started to applaud-I held up my hand. "No. The time for applause is over." I was very sure of myself and I could hear the clarity in my voice. "The Training is over." They looked at each other, they looked at me-and they burst into grins! We all started cheering! We pounded each other on the back.

We hugged and we kissed-and we headed for the doors, pushing them open with a bang

Foreman and all the assistants were waiting for us on the other side.

And that's when the party really started.

We roared and hollered and stamped and whistled and cheered, all of us together.

We challenged the universe.

The meek may inherit the earth, but the rest of us are going to the stars!

We could have gone on like that forever, but in the middle of it, Lizard slipped up behind me and tapped me on the shoulder. I turned to grab her and kiss her, but instead she handed me my orders.

I fumbled them open and started to read. I looked up, halfway through, and stared at her, confused and questioning.

She was unhappy about it too, but all she said was, "The chopper's waiting in the parking lot. Come on, it's time to go." It took me only a moment. I let go of the past. I let go of the confusion. This was the job now.

I understood exactly. The universe was roaring back. "Right," I said. "Let's go to work."

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A king who was mad at the time,

decreed limerick writing a crime;
but late in the night
all the poets would write
verses without any rhyme or meter.
?

? About the Author

David Gerrold made his television writing debut with the nowclassic "The Trouble With Tribbles" episode of the original Star Trek TV series. Since 1967, he has story-edited three TV series, edited five anthologies, and written two non-fiction books about television production (both of which have been used as textbooks), and over a dozen novels, three of which have been nominated for the prestigious Hugo and Nebula Awards.

His television credits include multiple episodes of Star Trek, Tales From the Darkside, Twilight Zone, The Real Ghostbusters, Logan's Run, and Land of the Lost.

His novels include When H.A.R.L.I.E. Was One, The Man Who Folded Himself, A Matter for Men and A Day for Damnation. His short stories have appeared in most of the major science fiction magazines, including Galaxy, If, Amazing, and Twilight Zone.

Gerrold has also published columns and articles in Starlog, Profiles, Infoworld, Creative Computing, Galileo, A-Plus, and other science fiction and computing periodicals. He averages over two dozen lecture appearances per year, and also teaches screenwriting at Pepperdine University.

David Gerrold has completed working on the staff of Star Trek: The Next Generation, and is now preparing a new SF TV series for The Arthur Company and Universal Television.