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Introduction

Damon Knight is a recognized master of the short story. His career has spanned over 50 years and

continues to this day. His lifetime of achievement has earned him the special title "Grandmaster of Science Fiction" from Science Fiction Writers of America, a title that few living people hold.

His stories always include vivid characters, interesting plots, mind-boggling ideas, and satisfying (and often surprising) endings.

The ten stories in this collection span nearly every segment of Knight's career. For example, the horrifying "To Serve Man," was first published 50 years ago and became the basis of what many fans consider to be the best episode of the original *The Twilight Zone* TV show. The brilliant story "I See You" was a Hugo award nominee in the 1970s. His thought-provoking "Life Edit" was written only a few years ago and was picked as one of the best Science Fiction stories of the year by famed editor David Hartwell.

But from whatever decade they came, we hope you'll enjoy these timeless Damon Knight stories as much as we did.

To Serve Man

THE KANAMIT were not very pretty, it's true. They looked something like pigs and something like people, and that is not an attractive combination. Seeing them for the first time shocked you; that was their handicap. When a thing with the countenance of a fiend comes from the stars and offers a gift, you are disinclined to accept.

I don't know what we expected interstellar visitors to look like—those who thought about it at all, that is. Angels, perhaps, or something too alien to be really awful. Maybe that's why we were all so horrified and repelled when they landed in their great ships and we saw what they really were like.

The Kanamit were short and very hairy—thick bristly brown-gray hair all over their abominably plump bodies. Their noses were snoutlike and their eyes small, and they had thick hands of three fingers each. They wore green leather harness and green shorts, but I think the shorts were a concession to our notions of public decency. The garments were quite modishly cut, with slash pockets and half-belts in the back. The Kanamit had a sense of humor, anyhow.

There were three of them at this session of the U.N., and, lord, I can't tell you how queer it looked to see them there in the middle of a solemn plenary session—three fat piglike creatures in green harness and shorts, sitting at the long table below the podium, surrounded by the packed arcs of delegates from every nation. They sat correctly upright, politely watching each speaker. Their flat ears drooped over the earphones. Later on, I believe, they learned every human language, but at this time they knew only French and English.

They seemed perfectly at ease—and that, along with their humor, was a thing that tended to make me like them. I was in the minority; I didn't think they were trying to put anything over.

The delegate from Argentina got up and said that his government was interested in the demonstration of a new cheap power source, which the Kanamit had made at the previous session, but that the Argentine government could not commit itself as to its future policy without a much more thorough examination.

It was what all the delegates were saying, but I had to pay particular attention to Senor Valdes, because he tended to sputter and his diction was bad. I got through the translation all right, with only one or two

momentary hesitations, and then switched to the Polish-English line to hear how Grigori was doing with Janciewicz. Janciewicz was the cross Grigori had to bear, just as Valdes was mine.

Janciewicz repeated the previous remarks with a few ideological variations, and then the Secretary-General recognized the delegate from France, who introduced Dr. Denis Lévequè, the criminologist, and a great deal of complicated equipment was wheeled in.

Dr. Lévequè remarked that the question in many people's minds had been aptly expressed by the delegate from the U.S.S.R. at the preceding session, when he demanded, “What is the motive of the Kanamit? What is their purpose in offering us these unprecedented gifts, while asking nothing in return?”

The doctor then said, “At the request of several delegates and with the full consent of our guests, the Kanamit, my associates and I have made a series of tests upon the Kanamit with the equipment which you see before you. These tests will now be repeated.”

A murmur ran through the chamber. There was a fusillade of flashbulbs, and one of the TV cameras moved up to focus on the instrument board of the doctor's equipment. At the same time, the huge television screen behind the podium lighted up, and we saw the blank faces of two dials, each with its pointer resting at zero, and a strip of paper tape with a stylus point resting against it.

The doctor's assistants were fastening wires to the temples of one of the Kanamit, wrapping a canvas-covered rubber tube around his forearm, and taping something to the palm of his right hand.

In the screen, we saw the paper tape begin to move while the stylus traced a slow zigzag pattern along it. One of the needles began to jump rhythmically; the other flipped halfway over and stayed there, wavering slightly.

“These are the standard instruments for testing the truth of a statement,” said Dr. Lévequè. “Our first object, since the physiology of the Kanamit is unknown to us, was to determine whether or not they react to these tests as human beings do. We will now repeat one of the many experiments which were made in the endeavor to discover this.”

He pointed to the first dial. “This instrument registers the subject's heartbeat. This shows the electrical conductivity of the skin in the palm of his hand, a measure of perspiration, which increases under stress. And this—” pointing to the tape-and-stylus device—"shows the pattern and intensity of the electrical waves emanating from his brain. It has been shown, with human subjects, that all these readings vary markedly depending upon whether the subject is speaking the truth.”

He picked up two large pieces of cardboard, one red and one black. The red one was a square about three feet on a side; the black was a rectangle three and a half feet long. He addressed himself to the Kanama.

“Which of these is longer than the other?”

“The red,” said the Kanama.

Both needles leaped wildly, and so did the line on the unrolling tape.

“I shall repeat the question,” said the doctor. “Which of these is longer than the other?”

The black,” said the creature.

This time the instruments continued in their normal rhythm.

“How did you come to this planet?” asked the doctor.

“Walked,” replied the Kanama.

Again the instruments responded, and there was a subdued ripple of laughter in the chamber.

“Once more,” said the doctor. “How did you come to this planet?”

“In a spaceship,” said the Kanama, and the instruments did not jump.

The doctor again faced the delegates. “Many such experiments were made,” he said, “and my colleagues and myself are satisfied that the mechanisms are effective. Now—” he turned to the Kanama—"I shall ask our distinguished guest to reply to the question put at the last session by the delegate of the U.S.S.R.—namely, what is the motive of the Kanamit people in offering these great gifts to the people of Earth?”

The Kanama rose. Speaking this time in English, he said, “On my planet there is a saying, ‘There are more riddles in a stone than in a philosopher's head.’ The motives of intelligent beings, though they may at times appear obscure, are simple things compared to the complex workings of the natural universe. Therefore I hope that the people of Earth will understand, and believe, when I tell you that our mission upon your planet is simply this—to bring to you the peace and plenty which we ourselves enjoy, and which we have in the past brought to other races throughout the galaxy. When your world has no more hunger, no more war, no more needless suffering, that will be our reward.”

And the needles had not jumped once.

The delegate from the Ukraine jumped to his feet, asking to be recognized, but the time was up and the Secretary-General closed the session.

I met Grigori as we were leaving the chamber. His face was red with excitement. “Who promoted that circus?” he demanded.

“The tests looked genuine to me,” I told him.

“A circus!” he said vehemently. “A second-rate farce! If they were genuine, Peter, why was debate stifled?”

“There'll be time for debate tomorrow, surely.”

“Tomorrow the doctor and his instruments will be back in Paris. Plenty of things can happen before tomorrow. In the name of sanity, man, how can anybody trust a thing that looks as if it ate the baby?”

I was a little annoyed. I said, “Are you sure you're not more worried about their politics than their appearance?”

He said, “Bah,” and went away.

The next day reports began to come in from government laboratories all over the world where the Kanamit's power source was being tested. They were wildly enthusiastic. I don't understand such things myself, but it seemed that those little metal boxes would give more electrical power than an atomic pile, for next to nothing and nearly forever. And it was said that they were so cheap to manufacture that everybody in the world could have one of his own. In the early afternoon there were reports that seventeen countries had already begun to set up factories to turn them out.

The next day the Kanamit turned up with plans and specimens of a gadget that would increase the fertility of any arable land by 60 to 100 per cent. It speeded the formation of nitrates in the soil, or something. There was nothing in the newscasts any more but stories about the Kanamit. The day after that, they dropped their bombshell.

“You now have potentially unlimited power and increased food supply,” said one of them. He pointed with his three-fingered hand to an instrument that stood on the table before him. It was a box on a tripod, with a parabolic reflector on the front of it. “We offer you today a third gift which is at least as important as the first two.”

He beckoned to the TV men to roll their cameras into closeup position. Then he picked up a large sheet of cardboard covered with drawings and English lettering. We saw it on the large screen above the podium; it was all clearly legible.

“We are informed that this broadcast is being relayed throughout your world,” said the Kanama. “I wish that everyone who has equipment for taking photographs from television screens would use it now.”

The Secretary-General leaned forward and asked a question sharply, but the Kanama ignored him.

“This device,” he said, “generates a field in which no explosive, of whatever nature, can detonate.”

There was an uncomprehending silence.

The Kanama said, “It cannot now be suppressed. If one nation has it, all must have it.” When nobody seemed to understand, he explained bluntly, “There will be no more war.”

That was the biggest news of the millennium, and it was perfectly true. It turned out that the explosions the Kanama was talking about included gasoline and Diesel explosions. They had simply made it impossible for anybody to mount or equip a modern army.

We could have gone back to bows and arrows, of course, but that wouldn't have satisfied the military. Besides, there wouldn't be any reason to make war. Every nation would soon have everything.

Nobody ever gave another thought to those lie-detector experiments, or asked the Kanamit what their politics were. Grigori was put out; he had nothing to prove his suspicions.

I quit my job with the U.N. a few months later, because I foresaw that it was going to die under me anyhow. U.N. business was booming at the time, but after a year or so there was going to be nothing for it to do. Every nation on Earth was well on the way to being completely self-supporting; they weren't going to need much arbitration.

I accepted a position as translator with the Kanamit Embassy, and it was there that I ran into Grigori again. I was glad to see him, but I couldn't imagine what he was doing there.

“I thought you were on the opposition,” I said. “Don't tell me you're convinced the Kanamit are all right.”

He looked rather shamefaced. “They're not what they look, anyhow,” he said.

It was as much of a concession as he could decently make, and I invited him down to the embassy lounge for a drink. It was an intimate kind of place, and he grew confidential over the second daiquiri.

“They fascinate me,” he said. “I hate them instinctively still—that hasn't changed—but I can evaluate it. You were right, obviously; they mean us nothing but good. But do you know—” he leaned across the table—"the question of the Soviet delegate was never answered.”

I am afraid I snorted.

“No, really,” he said. They told us what they wanted to do—'to bring to you the peace and plenty which we ourselves enjoy.’ But they didn't say*why* .”

“Why do missionaries—”

“Missionaries be damned!” he said angrily. “Missionaries have a religious motive. If these creatures have a religion, they haven't once mentioned it. What's more, they didn't send a missionary group; they sent a diplomatic delegation—a group representing the will and policy of their whole people. Now just what have the Kanamit, as a people or a nation, got to gain from our welfare?”

I said, “Cultural—”

“Cultural cabbage soup! No, it's something less obvious than that, something obscure that belongs to their psychology and not to ours. But trust me, Peter, there is no such thing as a completely disinterested altruism. In one way or another, they have something to gain.”

“And that's why you're here,” I said. “To try to find out what it is.”

“Correct. I wanted to get on one of the ten-year exchange groups to their home planet, but I couldn't; the quota was filled a week after they made the announcement. This is the next best thing. I'm studying their language, and you know that language reflects the basic assumptions of the people who use it. I've got a fair command of the spoken lingo already. It's not hard, really, and there are hints in it. Some of the idioms are quite similar to English. I'm sure I'll get the answer eventually.”

“More power,” I said, and we went back to work.

I saw Grigori frequently from then on, and he kept me posted about his progress. He was highly excited about a month after that first meeting; said he'd got hold of a book of the Kanamit's and was trying to puzzle it out. They wrote in ideographs, worse than Chinese, but he was determined to fathom it if it took him years. He wanted my help.

Well, I was interested in spite of myself, for I knew it would be a long job. We spent some evenings together, working with material from Kanamit bulletin boards and so forth, and with the extremely limited English-Kanamit dictionary they issued to the staff. My conscience bothered me about the stolen book, but gradually I became absorbed by the problem. Languages are my field, after all. I couldn't help being fascinated.

We got the title worked out in a few weeks. It was*How to Serve Man* , evidently a handbook they were giving out to new Kanamit members of the embassy staff. They had new ones in, all the time now, a shipload about once a month; they were opening all kinds of research laboratories, clinics and so on. If there was anybody on Earth besides Grigori who still distrusted those people, he must have been somewhere in the middle of Tibet.

It was astonishing to see the changes that had been wrought in less than a year. There were no more standing armies, no more shortages, no unemployment. When you picked up a newspaper you didn't see H-BOMB or SATELLITE leaping out at you; the news was always good. It was a hard thing to get used to. The Kanamit were working on human biochemistry, and it was known around the embassy that they were nearly ready to announce methods of making our race taller and stronger and healthier—practically a race of supermen—and they had a potential cure for heart disease and cancer.

I didn't see Grigori for a fortnight after we finished working out the title of the book; I was on a

long-overdue vacation in Canada. When I got back, I was shocked by the change in his appearance.

“What on earth is wrong, Grigori?” I asked. “You look like the very devil.”

“Come down to the lounge.”

I went with him, and he gulped a stiff Scotch as if he needed it.

“Come on, man, what's the matter?” I urged.

“The Kanamit have put me on the passenger list for the next exchange ship,” he said. “You, too, otherwise I wouldn't be talking to you.”

“Well,” I said, “but—”

“They're not altruists.”

I tried to reason with him. I pointed out they'd made Earth a paradise compared to what it was before. He only shook his head.

Then I said, “Well, what about those lie-detector tests?”

“A farce,” he replied, without heat. “I said so at the time, you fool. They told the truth, though, as far as it went.”

“And the book?” I demanded, annoyed. “What about that—*How to Serve Man*? That wasn't put there for you to read. They *mean* it. How do you explain that?”

“I've read the first paragraph of that book,” he said. “Why do you suppose I haven't slept for a week?”

I said, “Well?” and he smiled a curious, twisted smile.

“It's a cookbook,” he said.

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The Enemy

THE SPACESHIP lay on a rockball in the middle of the sky. There was a brilliance in Draco; it was the sun, four billion miles away. In the silence, the stars did not blink or waver: they burned, cold and afar. Polaris blazed overhead. The Milky Way hung like a frozen rainbow above the horizon.

In the yellow circle of the airlock, two figures appeared, both women, with pale, harsh faces behind the visors of their helmets. They carried a folding metal disk a hundred yards away and set it up on three tall insulators. They went back to the ship, moving lightly on tiptoe, like dancers, and came out again with a bulky collection of objects wrapped in a transparent membrane.

They sealed the membrane to the disk and inflated it by means of a hose from the ship. The objects inside were household articles: a hammock on a metal frame, a lamp, a radio transceiver. They entered the

membrane through its flexible valve and set the furniture in order. Then, carefully, they brought in three last items—three tanks of growing green things, each in its protective bubble.

They unloaded a spidery vehicle with six enormous puffed wheels and left it standing on three insulators of its own.

The work was done. The two women stood facing each other beside the bubble house. The elder said, “If your finds are good, stay here till I return in ten months. If not, leave the equipment and return in the escape shell."

They both glanced upward, where a faint spark was moving against the field of stars. The parent ship had left it in orbit before landing. If needed, it could be called down to land automatically by radio; otherwise, there was no need to waste the fuel.

“Understood,” said the younger one. Her name was Zael; she was fifteen, and this was her first time away from the space city alone. Isar, her mother, went to the ship and entered it without another glance. The lock door closed; the spark overhead was drifting down toward the horizon. A short burst of flame raised the parent ship; it drifted, rising and turning as it went. Then the torch blazed out again, and in a few moments the ship was only a brighter star.

Zael turned off her suit light and stood in the darkness under the enormous half-globe of the sky. It was the only sky she knew; like her mother's mother before her, she was space-born. Centuries ago, driven out of the fat green worlds, her people had grown austere, like the arid fields of stars they roamed among. In the five great space cities, and on Pluto, Titan, Mimas, Eros and a thousand lesser worlds, they struggled for existence. They were few; life was hard and short; it was no novelty for a fifteen-year-old child to be left alone to mine a planetoid.

The ship was a dim spark, climbing up the long slant toward the ecliptic. Up there, Isar and her daughters had deliveries to make and cargoes to take on at Pluto. Gron, their city, had sent them down this long detour to make a survey. The planetoid was now approaching the sun, on its eccentric cometary orbit, for the first time in twenty thousand years. Once here, it would be folly not to surface-mine the planetoid for whatever it might be worth. One child could do that, and survey the planetoid as well.

Alone, Zael turned impassively to the six-wheeled crawler. She might have rested awhile in the bubble house, but she had some hours of suit time left, and there was no need to waste it. She lifted herself easily against the slight gravity into the cab, turned on the lights and started the motor.

The spidery vehicle crawled ahead on its six individually sprung wheels. The terrain was astonishingly broken; giant spires and craters alternated with ravines and with fissures, some of them forty feet wide and thousands of feet deep. The planetoid's orbit passed near the sun, according to the astronomers, perhaps nearer than the orbit of Venus. Even now, the temperature of the rocks was a few degrees above absolute zero. This was a cold beyond anything Zael had ever experienced. She could feel it drawing at her feet through the long insulator spikes of her boot soles. The molecules of every stone were slowed to stillness; the whole world was one frozen yawn of hunger.

But once it had been a hot world. The record was here. At every perihelion passage, the rocks must have split, again and again, to make this nightmare of tumbled stone.

The surface gravitation was only one tenth g, almost like free-fall; the light, puffy-wheeled vehicle crawled easily up slopes within a few degrees of the vertical. Where it could not climb, it went around. Narrow fissures were bridged by the crawler's extensible legs; when she came to larger ones, Zael fired a harpoon which soared across the gap and embedded itself on the other side. The crawler edged forward, toppled and swung at the end of its cable; but while the slight gravity drew it toward the far side of the

fissure, the crawler's winch motor was reeling in the cable. It arrived with a faint jar at the opposite side and, without pausing, inched up and over.

Sitting erect behind her instruments, Zael was charting the mineral deposits she passed over. It was a satisfaction to her to find they were rich enough to repay surface mining. The cities could make almost anything out of anything, but they needed a primary source: they had to have metals.

Methodically, she spiraled outward from the bubble house, charting a region no more than thirty miles in diameter. In the unpressurized crawler, it was not feasible to take in a larger area.

Laboring alone, hour after hour under the unchanging sky, she identified the richest lodes, marked them and established routes. Between times, she ate and slept in the bubble house, tended her necessary plants, serviced her equipment. Out of her armor, she was slender and spare, quick in her movements, with the harsh, thin-lipped comeliness of her people.

When her chart was made, she rode out again. At each marked spot, she dropped two widely separated poles. Self-embedding, each pair generated a current which ionized the metals or metallic salts and would slowly deposit pure metal around the cathode. Eventually the concentration would be such that the metal could be sawed out in blocks for convenient loading.

Only then did she turn her attention to the traces of shaped metal that clung here and there to the rocks. They were fragments, for the most part, such as were commonly found on cold satellites like Mimas and Titan, and occasionally on stony asteroids. It was not a matter of any importance; it simply meant that the planetoid had been inhabited or colonized at one time by the same pre-human civilization that had left its traces throughout the solar system.

But she had been sent to see whatever was to be seen. Her real work was almost done; she conscientiously examined the traces, photographed some, took others for specimens. She beamed regular radio reports to Gron; sometimes, five days later, there would be a curt acknowledgment waiting for her in the printer; sometimes not. Regularly she made the rounds of the poles, testing the concentration of metal. She was ready to replace any faulty poles she might find, but the occasion did not arise; Gron equipment seldom failed.

The planetoid hung in its millennial arc. The sky imperceptibly turned around it. The moving spark that was the escape shell traced its path, again and again. Zael grew restless and took the crawler on wider explorations. Deep in the cold crannies of the mountains, she found some metal constructions that were not mere fragments but complete works—dwellings or machines. The dwellings, if they were that, were made for some creature smaller than man; the doorways were ovals not more than a foot across. She dutifully radioed this information back to Gron and received the usual acknowledgment.

Then, one day the printer came to life out of season. The message read, I AM COMING. ISAR.

The ship would be three months slower than the message. Zael kept her calendar, rode her rounds, her starlit face impassive. Above her the escape shell, unneeded now, made its monotonous passage over and over. Zael was tracing the remnants of a complex of surface structures that had miraculously survived, some half buried, others naked to the stars. She found where they led, in a crater only forty miles from her base, a week before the ship was due.

In the crater was a heavily reinforced globe of metal, dented and scarred, but not broken. As Zael's light shone steadily on it, a sudden puff of vapor went out; the globe seemed to haze over briefly. Zael peered, interested: the minute warmth of the light beam must have thawed some film of frozen gas.

Then it happened again, and this time she could see distinctly: the jet escaped from a thin, dark seam that

had not been there before.

The seam widened as she watched. The globe was splitting. In the narrow gap between the two halves, something moved. Startled, Zael threw the crawler into reverse. The cab lights dipped as the crawler retreated up-slope. In the dimness outside the light beams, she saw the globe expanding still more. There was an ambiguous motion between the barely visible halves of the globe, and she wished she had not taken the light away.

The crawler was tilting sidewise up a steep, broken slab of rock. Zael turned downward, still backing at a sharp angle. The light swung away from the globe altogether, then came back to it as she leveled out.

The two halves of the globe had separated completely. In the middle, something jerked as the light struck it. She could see nothing but a thick, gleaming coil of metal. While she hesitated, there was new motion between the halves of the globe. Something gleamed briefly; there was a short ground shock, and then something struck the cab a hard, resonant blow. The lights whirled bewilderingly and went out.

In the darkness, the cab was tipping. Zael clutched at the controls, but she was too slow. The crawler went over on its back.

Zael felt herself being flung out of the cab. As she rolled over, ears ringing, her first and sharpest impression was of the cold that struck through her armor at gauntlet and knee. She scrambled up quickly to a squatting position, supporting herself on the brushlike spiked soles of her boots.

Even the brief contact had made her fingers smart with cold. She searched automatically for the crawler, which meant safety and warmth. She saw it smashed on the mountainside. Even so, her instinct drew her toward it, but she had hardly taken a first step before the wrecked machine leaped again and rolled another dozen yards down the slope.

She turned now, for the first time fully realizing that something down there was shooting at the crawler. Then she saw a glimmering shape that writhed up toward the wrecked machine. Her helmet light was not turned on; she crouched still and felt two grinding, metallic shocks transmitted through the rock.

The moving thing appeared again on the other side of the crawler, vanished inside, and after a long time came out again. Zael caught a glimpse of a narrow head upraised, and two red eyes gleaming. The head dropped; the sinuous form glided down into a ravine, coming toward her. Her only thought was to get away. She scrambled up in the dark, circled a spire. She saw the gleaming head upraised farther down, among a tangle of boulders, and went at a headlong, dangerous run across the slope to the wrecked crawler.

The control board was ruined, levers bent off or flattened down, dials smashed. She straightened to look at the engine and transmission, but saw at once that it was no use; the heavy drive shaft was bent out of true. The crawler would never run again without shop repairs.

Down in the bowl, she caught sight of the silvery shape casting along the edge of a fissure. Keeping it in view, she examined her suit and instruments all over. As far as she could tell, the suit was tight, her oxygen tanks and recirculation system undamaged.

She was thinking coldly and clearly as she looked at the split globe, gaping empty under the stars. The thing must have been coiled in there, inert, for thousands of years. Perhaps there had been a light-sensitive device in the globe, designed to open it when the planetoid approached the sun again. But her light had broken the globe prematurely; the thing inside was awake before its time. What was it, and what would it do, now that it was alive again?

Whatever happened, her first duty was to warn the ship. She turned on the broadcast transmitter in her suit; its range was small, but now that the ship was so near, there was a chance.

She waited long minutes, but no answer came. From where she stood, the sun was not visible; one of the high crags must be blocking her transmission.

The loss of the crawler had been a disaster. She was alone and afoot, forty miles across an impassable terrain from the bubble house. Her chances of survival now, she knew, were very small.

Still, to save herself now, without finding out more about the thing, would be less than her duty. Zael looked doubtfully down at the empty globe in the starlight. The way between was broken and dangerous; she would have to go slowly, for fear of attracting the thing if she used a light.

She started down nevertheless, picking her way carefully among the tumbled stones. Several times she leaped fissures too long to bypass. When she was halfway down the slope, she saw movement, and froze. The thing writhed into view over a broken ridge—she saw the triangular head again, and a waving ruff of tentacles—and then disappeared inside the open globe.

Zael moved cautiously nearer, circling to get a view directly into the gap. After a few moments the thing emerged again, curiously stiff and thick-looking. On a level place outside the globe, it separated into two parts, and she saw now that one was the thing itself, the other a rigid metal framework, narrow and perhaps ten feet long. The thing retreated inside the globe again. When it came out, it was burdened with a bulbous mechanism which it fitted on somehow to one end of the framework. It continued working for some time, using the tentaclelike jointed members that sprouted from just behind its head. Then it returned to the globe, and this time came out with two large cubical objects. These it began to attach to the opposite end of the framework, connecting them by a series of tubes to the bulbous mechanism.

For the first time, the suspicion entered her mind that the thing was building a spacecraft. Nothing could look less like a conventional ship, to be sure: there was no hull, nothing but a narrow shaft on which the thing could lie, the bulbous object which might be an engine, and the two big containers for reaction mass. Abruptly, she was certain. She had no Geiger with her—it was back in the crawler—but she felt sure there must be radioactives in the bulbous mechanism—a micropile, unshielded, for a spaceship without a hull! It would kill any living creature that rode on it—but what creature of flesh and blood could survive for twenty thousand years on this airless planetoid, at close to absolute zero?

She stood gravely still. Like all her people, she had seen the evidences of an eons-old war among the cold planetoids. Some thought the war had ended with the deliberate destruction of the fifth planet, the one which had formerly occupied the place of the asteroids. A bitter war, that one must have been; and now Zael thought she could understand why. If one side had been humanlike, and the other like this thing, then neither could rest until it had wiped out the other. And if this thing were now to escape, and perhaps breed more of its kind ...

Zael inched forward, making her way from stone to stone, moving only when the thing was out of sight. The alien had finished attaching several small ambiguous objects to the front of the frame. It went back inside the globe. To Zael, the structure looked almost complete. It did not seem possible to encumber it any more and still leave space for the rider.

Her heart was thudding. She left her concealment and went forward in a clumsy tiptoe pace that was faster than leaping. When she was almost in reach of the framework, the thing came out of the open globe. It glided toward her, enormous in the starlight, with its metal head rearing high.

Out of pure instinct she hit the light switch. The helmet beams flared: she had an instant's glimpse of skeletal metal ribs and gleaming jaws. Then the thing was thrashing away from her into the darkness. For

a moment more she was stunned. She thought, it can't stand light! And she scrambled forward desperately into the globe.

The thing was coiled there, hiding. When the light struck it, it hurled itself out the other side. Zael pursued again, and caught it once more on the far side of the low ridge. It dived into a ravine and was gone.

She turned back. The framework lay on the rock where it had been left. Zael picked it up tentatively. It had more mass than she had expected, but she was able to swing it at arm's length until it gained a respectable speed. She dashed it against the nearest stone; the impact numbed her fingers. The framework leaped free, slid to rest on the stone. The two containers were detached: the bulbous mechanism was bent away from the frame. She picked it up again, and again swung it hard against the rock. The frame bent and buckled; small pieces came loose. She swung it again, and again, until the frame broke and the bulbous part came free.

The alien thing was not in sight. Zael carried the pieces of the framework to the nearest fissure and dropped them in. In her helmet beams, they drifted silently down and were gone.

She returned to the globe. The creature was still nowhere to be seen. She examined the interior: it was full of oddly shaped partitions and of machines, most too large to be moved, some that were detached and portable. She could not with certainty identify any of them as weapons. To be safe, she took all the movable objects and dropped them after the framework.

She had done all she could, and perhaps more than was prudent. Her task now was to survive—to get back to the bubble house, call the escape shell down, and get away.

She turned back up the slope, past the wrecked crawler, retracing her route until she came to the crater wall.

The crags loomed over her, hundreds of feet above her head, and so sheer that when she tried to climb them, even her momentum would not keep her upright; she began to topple back and had to dance her way slowly down again to firmer footing.

She made the full circuit of the crater before she was convinced: there was no way out.

She was sweating under the armor: a bad beginning. The ragged tops of the mountains seemed to bend forward, peering down at her mockingly. She stood still to calm herself, took a salt pill and a sip of water from the dispenser in her helmet. The indicators showed that she had less than five hours of air left. It was little enough. She had to get out.

She chose what seemed to be the easiest slope within reach. She went up it with a rush. When her momentum began to fail, she used her hands. The cold bit through her gauntlets like needles of fire. The slightest contact was painful; to grasp firmly became an agony. She was within yards of the top when her fingers began to grow numb. She clawed upward furiously, but her fingers refused to grip; her hands slid uselessly away from the rock.

She was falling. She toppled slowly down the slope she had climbed with so much pain; caught herself with an effort and came to rest, shaken and trembling, at the bottom.

Cold despair settled at her heart. She was young; she had no taste for death, even for a quick and clean one. To die slowly, gasping for air in a foul suit, or bleeding out her warmth against the stone, would be horrible.

Out across the crater floor, she saw a dim movement in the starlight. It was the alien thing; what could it

be doing, now that she had destroyed its means of escape? The thought came to her slowly that perhaps it could not get out of the crater, either. After a moment, hesitantly, she went down the slope toward it.

Halfway down, she remembered to turn off her suit lights so as not to drive it away. The crater floor was crisscrossed with innumerable fissures. As she came nearer, she saw that the split sphere was surrounded by them on all sides. Down at one end of this long, irregular island of rock, the alien was throwing itself back and forth.

It turned to face her as she leaped the last gap. She could see its red eyes gleaming in the darkness, and the circle of thin, jointed arms that formed a collar behind its head. As she approached, the head reared higher, and the jaws gaped.

The sight of the thing, so near, filled her with a cold loathing she had never experienced before. It was not only that the creature was metal, and alive; it was some radiance of evil that seemed to reach her directly from the thing, as if to say, I am the death of all you love.

The blind, red eyes stared with implacable hatred. How could she make it understand?

The body of the thing was sinuous and strong; its jointed arms could grasp and hold. It was made for climbing, but not for jumping.

Abruptly, her loathing for the alien was more than she could master. She turned and jumped the chasm again. On the far side, she looked back. The alien was swaying high, with more than half its length raised from the rock. She saw now that there was another cluster of gripping members at its tail. The thing glided forward to the very edge of the fissure and swayed upright again, jaws agape, eyes glaring.

They had nothing in common but hatred—and fear. Staring across at the alien, Zael realized that it must be as afraid as she. Metal though it was, it could not live forever without warmth. She had broken its machines, and now, like her, it was trapped. But how could she make it understand?

She moved a few yards away along the edge of the fissure, and then jumped again, back to the alien's side. It watched her alertly. The thing was intelligent; it must be. It must know that she was not native to the planetoid, and therefore that she must have a ship, or some means of escape.

She spread her arms. The alien's circle of limbs widened in response: but was that a gesture of invitation or of menace? Suppressing her fear and repugnance, she walked nearer. The tall shape swayed above her in the starlight. She saw now that the segments of the alien's body were metal rings that slid smoothly upon one another. Each ring was slightly open at the bottom, and inside she could glimpse some mechanism.

Such a thing could never have evolved on any world; it must have been made, for some unguessable purpose. The long, supple body was built for pursuit and capture, the jaws were for killing. Only a depth of hatred beyond her comprehension could have conceived this horror and let it loose in the world of the living.

She forced herself to move a step nearer. She pointed to herself, then back to the crater wall. She turned and leaped across the fissure, recovered herself and leaped back.

It seemed to her that the alien's attitude, as it stared at her, was an almost human parody of wariness and doubt. She pointed to herself, and to the alien; again, she turned and leaped across the chasm, then leaped back. She pointed to herself and to the alien, and then gestured across the fissure, a wide, slow motion of one arm. She waited.

After a long time the alien moved slowly forward. She retreated, as slowly, until she was at the edge of the fissure. Trembling, she held out her arm. Slowly the great head dipped; the circle of grasping members waved forward to wrap itself around her sleeve. The red eyes stared blindly into hers from a few inches away.

She turned and kicked off strongly. She tried to allow for the alien's mass, but the unaccustomed drag on her arm tipped her backward in midair. They landed together with a grating jar. Awkwardly, Zael scrambled up, away from the cold that searched through her armor. The alien was swaying erect, near—too near.

By instinct again, she hit the light switch. The thing writhed away in silvery coils.

Zael was trembling with reaction. Her heart pounded at her throat. With an effort, she turned off the light again. The thing rose into view, waiting for her, a dozen yards away.

When she moved, it moved, keeping its distance. When they reached the next fissure, she stood still until it again approached and laid its grasping members on her arm.

On the far side, they separated once more. In this way, they traversed four of the islands of rock before they came to the crater wall.

The alien thrust its body slowly up along the steep incline. At full stretch, the gripping arms found a hold; the tail swung free. The long body looped gracefully up; the tail members found another hold above the alien's head.

It paused there, looking down at her. Zael spread her arms; she pantomimed climbing, then stepped back, shaking her head. She held out her arms again.

The alien hesitated. After a long moment, the head members gripped again; the tail swung down. Zael braced herself as the alien slid nearer. The smooth, shining head loomed over her. In that frozen moment, Zael found herself thinking that to the alien, the universe might be like a photographic negative: all the evil things good, the good things evil. It gave her a queer sense of exhilaration to realize when they met, the alien too might be embracing darkness.

Then the head glided past her shoulder; the heavy coils looped around her body with a faint scraping sound. The thing was cold, but not with the numbing super-cold of the rocks. As the coils tightened, she felt the chill, constrictive strength of the great body. Then she was being lifted off her feet. The steep wall tilted and swung at a crazy angle.

A faintness sapped her strength as she lay in the metal coils. The stars swung around her head; they steadied and burned still. The alien had set her down at the top of the crater wall.

The cold coils slowly slipped away. Shaken and stunned, Zael followed the alien down the broken, tilted land. The touch still burned in her flesh. It was like a meaning that lay so heavily and coldly inside her that she had to puzzle to make it out. It was like a ring that, having been worn so long, still seems to be there after it has been removed.

Down in the tumbled vastness of the valley, the alien's head was upraised, waiting for her. Humbly she went down to it, where it lay at the edge of a fissure. This time, instead of clutching her arm, the heavy mass coiled itself around her.

She leaped. At the other side, slowly, almost reluctantly, the supple body slid down and away from her. When they came to a high place, again the alien took her in its cold embrace and swung her up,

weightlessly, like a woman in a dream.

The sun was in the sky, low over the horizon. Zael put her hand to the radio switch, hesitated, and let her hand fall away. What could she tell them? How could she make them understand?

Time slipped away. When they passed one of her mining areas, where the cold purple light flickered from the rocks, she knew they were on the right path. She steered by that, and by the sun. At each fissure, the alien coiled itself around her shoulders; at each steep ascent, it cradled her about the waist and lifted her in long, free arcs to the top.

When, standing on a height, she saw the bubble house, she realized with a shock that she had lost account of time. She looked at the indicators. There was half an hour of air left.

The knowledge brought to wakefulness some part of her mind which had been submerged and asleep. She knew that the other had seen the bubble house too; there was a new tension in its manner, a new fixity in the way it stared ahead. She tried to recall the topography that lay between this spot and the house. She had been over it dozens of times, but always in the crawler. It was very different now. The high ridges that had been only momentary obstacles before were now impassable. The whole aspect of the country was changed; she could not be certain even of her landmarks any longer.

They were passing the last of the mining areas. The cold purple light rolled across the rocks. Just beyond this point, Zael recalled, there should be a wide fissure; the alien, a few yards distant, was not looking her way. Bending forward, she broke into a stiff-toed run. The fissure was there; she reached the edge, and jumped.

On the far side, she turned to look. The alien was writhing back and forth at the edge of the fissure, its collar of limbs extended in fury, its red eyes blazing. After a moment, its motion slowed and stopped. They stared at each other across the gap of silence; then Zael turned away.

The indicators gave her fifteen minutes more. She set off at a brisk pace and soon found herself descending into a deep ravine she recognized. All around her were the landmarks of the route she was accustomed to take in the crawler. Ahead and to the right, where stars gleamed in a gap, must be the place where a broken fall of rock formed a natural stairway to the top of the ravine. But as she neared the place, something made her uneasy. The far wall of the ravine was too sheer and too tall.

She stood beneath the gap at last, and there was no stairway.

She must have mistaken the spot. There was nothing for it but to cast along the ravine until she came to the right place. After a moment's indecision, she set off hurriedly to the left.

At every step, the ravine promised to become familiar. Surely, she could not have gone so far wrong in so short a time! The dots of light from her helmet beams danced ahead of her, mockingly elusive. Abruptly, she realized that she was lost.

There were seven minutes of air left.

The thought came to her that the alien must still be where she had left it, trapped on one of the islands of rock. If she went straight back to it, now, without hesitating a second, there might still be time.

With an involuntary groan of protest, she turned back. Her movements were hurried and unsure; once she stumbled, and caught herself barely in time to prevent a bad fall. Yet she dared not slow down or stop for a moment. Inside the helmet, her breath was labored; the familiar reek of the recirculated air seemed to have grown stuffier and more foul.

She looked at the indicators: five minutes.

Topping a rise, she saw a liquid glint of metal moving down among the purple fires. She leaped the last fissure and came to a wary halt. The alien was approaching her slowly. The great metal head was expressionless, the jaws closed; the ruff of grasping members was almost still; only now and then, one of the jointed limbs twitched abruptly. There was a grim, waiting stillness about it that she found disquieting, but she had no time for caution.

Hurriedly, with abrupt gestures, she tried to pantomime her need. She held out her arms. The alien glided forward slowly, and slowly wrapped its coils around her.

She scarcely felt the leap, or the landing. The alien glided beside her: close, this time, near enough to touch. Down into the starlit half-darkness of the ravine they went, Zael treading uncertainly because she could not use her helmet lights. They paused at the foot of the precipice. The alien turned to look at her for a moment.

Zael's ears were ringing. The great head swayed toward her and passed by. The metal arms gripped the rock; the great body swung up, over her head. She looked up to see it looping diagonally across the face of the rock; it glimmered briefly against the stars and then was gone.

Zael stared after it in incredulous horror. It had happened too quickly; she did not understand how she could have been so stupid. She had not even tried to grasp the coils as they passed!

The indicators were blurred; the needles hung near the zero mark. Staggering a little, she set off down the ravine to the right. She had perhaps a minute or two of air left, and then five or six minutes of slow asphyxiation. She might still find the stair; she was not dead yet.

The ravine wall, instead of sinking to an easier level, rose in spires and pinnacles. Zael stopped, cold and sodden with weariness. The silent peaks rose high against the stars. There was no help there, nor in all the dead, vampirish world around her.

Something leaped out of the stone at her feet. Startled, she drew back. The thing was spinning away under the stars. As she watched, another fragment of rock burst into view, and then another. This time she saw it fall, strike the stone and rebound.

She jerked her head back. Halfway down the rock face, swinging easily from hold to hold, came the alien. A cloud of rock fragments, dislodged by its passage, floated slowly down and rebounded about her head. The alien slid the last few yards and came to rest beside her.

Her head was swimming. She felt the heavy coils wind themselves around her; felt herself lifted and carried. The coils were too tight; she could not get her breath. When she was released, the pressure did not relax.

Reeling, she went forward toward the bubble house, where it winked and beckoned from the low horizon. Her throat was afire. Beside her, the alien went like quicksilver among the rocks.

Once she fell—an appalling, slow, helpless fall into the bruising cold—and the alien's heavy coils helped her up.

They came to a fissure. Zael stood tottering on the lip of it, dimly understanding now why the alien had come back for her. It was tit for tat; and now she was too bemused to play that game again. The alien's grasping members were on her sleeve.

Up there, somewhere in Draco, Isar's ship was on the way. Zael fumbled for the radio switch. Her voice

came hoarse and strange: “Mother..."

The heavy body was winding itself around her shoulders. Breathing hurt her chest, and her vision was dim. Gathering her strength, she jumped.

On the far side, she moved with a blurred slowness. She could see the bubble-house light winking prismatically at the end of an avenue of mist, and she knew that she had to get to it. She was not sure why; perhaps it had something to do with the silvery being that glided beside her.

The hum of a carrier wave suddenly filled her earphones. “Zael, is that you?"

She heard the words, but their meaning slipped away. The bubble house was near now; she could see the flexible valve of its doorway. She had the idea that the silver thing must not be allowed to go inside, or it might breed there, and then there would be a plague of metal creatures running everywhere.

She turned clumsily to prevent it, but lost her balance and fell against the side of the bubble. The great silvery head was looming over her. She saw the jaws open and a pair of gleaming fangs slide into view. The head dipped delicately, the jaws seized her thigh, and the fangs went in, once. Without haste, the thing coiled itself away, out of her range of vision.

A coldness was spreading outward from her thigh. She saw two thin jets of vapor escaping from the armor where it was pierced. She turned her head; the alien creature was just disappearing through the flexible valve into the bubble. Inside, she could see it coursing back and forth, avoiding the one tiny light. It nosed at the hammock, the lamp, then the radio transceiver. Remembering, Zael said plaintively, “Mother?"

As if in answer, the carrier hum came again, and the voice said, “Zael, what is it?"

She tried to respond, but her thick tongue could not find the words. She felt weak and cold, but not at all afraid. Fumbling in her kit, she found the adhesive paste and smeared it over the punctures. The paste bubbled for a moment, then hardened. Something slow and languorous was spreading from the icy hurt in her thigh. As she turned again, she saw that the alien was still curved over the radio transceiver. Even from here, she could see the bright red knob of the escape shell signaler. As she watched, one of the alien's limbs grasped it and pushed it down.

She glanced up. After a moment the crawling orange spark in the sky seemed to pause and then grow slowly larger. The light burned to a bright star, then to a golden flare.

The escape shell came down on the rocky plain a hundred yards away. The torch winked out. Dazzled, she saw the dark shape of the alien come gliding down out of the bubble house.

It stopped, and for a moment the cruel head was poised, looking down at her. Then it flowed on.

The airlock door was a circle of yellow light. The alien seemed to hesitate before it; then it moved on and disappeared inside. The door closed. After a few moments the torch blazed again, and the shell rose on a pillar of fire.

Zael lay cradled against the bubble's resilient curve. Dimly the thought was in her mind that inside the bubble, a few feet away, were air and warmth. Whatever venom the alien had deposited in her flesh, perhaps it would not kill her for a long time. Her mother's ship was coming. She had a chance to live.

But the escape shell was still rising on its long golden plume, and she had eyes for nothing but that terrible beauty ascending into the night.

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Mary

THIRTY SISTERS, alike as peas, were sitting at their looms in the court above the Gallery of Weavers. In the cool shadow, their white dresses rustled like the stirrings of doves, and their voices now murmured, now shrilled. Over the courtyard was a canopy of green glass, through which the sun appeared to swim like a golden-green fish: but over the roofs could be seen the strong blue of the sky, and even, at one or two places, the piercing white sparkle of the sea.

The sisters were ivory-skinned, strong armed and straight of back, with eyebrows arched black over bright eyes. Some had grown fat, some were lean, but the same smiles dimpled their cheeks, the same gestures threw back their sleek heads when they laughed, and each saw herself mirrored in the others.

Only the youngest, Mary, was different. Hers was the clan face, but so slender and grave that it seemed a stranger's. She had been brought to birth to replace old Anna-one, who had fallen from the lookout and broke her neck sixteen springs ago: and some said it had been done too quick; that Mary was from a bad egg and should never have been let grow. Now the truth was that Mary had in her genes a long-recessive trait of melancholy and unworldliness, turned up by accident in the last cross; but the Elders, who after all knew best, had decided to give her the same chance as anyone. For in the floating island of Iliria, everyone knew that the purpose of life was happiness: and therefore to deprive anyone of life was a great shame.

At the far side of the court, Vivana called from her loom, “They say a new Fisher came from the mainland yesterday!” She was the eldest of the thirty, a coarse, good-natured woman with a booming laugh. “If he's handsome, I may take him, and give you others a chance at my Tino. Rose, how would you like that? Tino would be a good man for you.” Her loom whirled, and rich, dark folds of liase rippled out. It was an artificial fiber, formed, spun, woven and dyed in the loom, hardening as it reached the air. A canister of the stuff, like tinted gelatin, stood at the top of every loom. It came from the Chemist clan, who concocted it by mysterious workings out of the sea water that tumbled through their vats.

“What, is he tiring of you already?” Rose called back. She was short and moon-faced, with strong, clever fingers that danced on the keyboard of her loom. “Probably you belched in his face once too often.” She raised her shrill voice over the laughter. “Now let me tell you, Vivana, if the new Fisher is as handsome as that, I may take him myself, and let you have Mitri.” Mounds of apple-green stuff tumbled into the basket at her feet.

Between them, Mary worked on, eyes cast down, without smiling.

“Gogo and Vivana!” someone shouted.

“Yes, that's right—never mind about the Fisher! Gogo and Vivana!” All the sisters were shouting and laughing. But Mary still sat quietly busy at her loom.

“All right, all right,” shouted Vivana, wheezing with laughter. “I will try him, but then who's to have Gunner?"

“Me!"

“No, me!"

Gunner was the darling of the Weavers, a pink man with thick blond lashes and a roguish grin.

“No, let the youngsters have a chance,” Vivana called reprovingly. “Joking aside, Gunner is too good for you old scows.” Ignoring the shrieks of outrage, she went on, “I say let Viola have him. Better yet, wait, I have an idea—how about Mary?"

The chatter stilled; all eyes turned toward the silent girl where she sat, weaving slow cascades of creamy white liase. She flushed quickly, and bowed her head, unable to speak. She was sixteen, and had never taken a lover.

The women looked at her, and the pleasure faded out of their faces. Then they turned away, and the shouting began again:

“Rudi!"

“Ernestine!"

“Hugo!"

“Areta!"

Mary's slim hands faltered, and the intricate diapered pattern of her weaving was spoiled. Now the bolt would have to be cut off, unfinished. She stopped the loom, and drooped over it, pressing her forehead against the smooth metal. Tears burned her eyelids. But she held herself still, hoping Mia, at the next loom, would not see.

Below in the street, a sudden tumult went up. Heads turned to listen: there was the wailing of flutes, the thundering of drums, and the sound of men's rich voices, all singing and laughing.

A gate banged open, and a clatter of feet came tumbling up the stair. The white dresses rustled as the sisters turned expectantly toward the arch.

A knot of laughing, struggling men burst through, full into the midst of the women, toppling looms, while the sisters shrieked in protest and pleasure.

The men were Mechanics, dark-haired, gaunt, leavened by a few blond Chemists. They were wrestling, Mechanic against Chemist, arms locked about each other's necks, legs straining for leverage. One struggling pair toppled suddenly, overturning two more. The men scrambled up, laughing, red with exertion.

Behind them was a solitary figure whose stillness drew Mary's eyes. He was tall, slender and grave, with russet hair and a quiet mouth. While the others shouted and pranced, he stood looking around the courtyard. For an instant his calm gray eyes met hers, and Mary felt a sudden pain at the heart.

“Dear, what is it?” asked Mia, leaning closer.

“I think I am ill,” said Mary faintly.

“Oh, not now!” Mia protested.

Two of the men were wrestling again. A heave, and the dark Mechanic went spinning over the other's

hip.

A shout of applause went up. Through the uproar, Vivana's big voice came booming, “You fishheads, get out! Look at this, half a morning's work ruined! Are you all drunk? Get out!"

“We're all free for the day!” one of the Mechanics shouted. “You too—the whole district! It's in the Fisher's honor! So come on, what are you waiting for?"

The women were up, in a sudden flutter of voices and white skirts, the men beginning to spread out among them. The tall man still stood where he was. Now he was looking frankly at Mary, and she turned away in confusion, picking up the botched fabric with hands that did not feel it.

She was aware that two Mechanics had turned back, were leading the tall man across the courtyard, calling, “Violet—Clara!” She did not move; her breath stopped.

Then they were pausing before her loom. There was an awful moment when she thought she could not move or breathe. She looked up fearfully. He was standing there, hands in his pockets, slumped a little as he looked down at her.

He said, “What is your name?” His voice was low and gentle.

“Mary,” she said.

“Will you go with me today, Mary?"

Around her, the women's heads were turning. A silence spread; she could sense the waiting, the delight held in check.

She could not! Her whole soul yearned for it, but she was too afraid, there were too many eyes watching. Miserably, she said, “No,” and stopped, astonished, listening to the echo of her voice saying gladly, “Yes!"

Suddenly her heart grew light as air. She stood, letting the loom fall, and when he held out his hand, hers went into it as if it knew how.

“So you have a rendezvous with a Mainland Fisher?” the Doctor inquired jovially. He was pale-eyed and merry in his broad brown hat and yellow tunic; he popped open his little bag, took out a pill, handed it to Mary. “Swallow this, dear."

“What is it for, Doctor?” she asked, flushing.

“Only a precaution. You wouldn't want a baby to grow right in your belly, would you? Ha, ha, ha! That shocks you, does it? Well, you see, the Mainlanders don't sterilize the males, their clan customs forbid it, so they sterilize the females instead. We have to be watchful, ah, yes, we Doctors! Swallow it down, there's a good girl."

She took the pill, drank a sip of water from the flask he handed her.

“Good, good—now you can go to your little meeting and be perfectly safe. Enjoy yourself!” Beaming, he closed his bag and went away.

On the high Plaza of Fountains, overlooking the quayside and the sea, feasts of shrimp and wine, seaweed salad, caviar, pasta, iced sweets had been laid out under canopies of green glass. Orchestrinos were playing. Couples were dancing on the old ceramic cobbles, white skirts swinging, hair afloat in the

brilliant air. Farther up, Mary and her Fisher had found a place to be alone.

Under the bower in the cool shade, they lay clasped heart to heart, their bodies still joined so that in her ecstasy she could not tell where hers ended or his began.

“Oh, I love you, I love you!” she murmured.

His body moved, his head drew back a little to look at her. There was something troubled in his gray eyes. “I didn't know this was going to be your first time,” he said. “How is it that you waited so long?"

“I was waiting for you,” she said faintly, and it seemed to her that it was so, and that she had always known it. Her arms tightened around him, wishing to draw him closer to her body again.

But he held himself away, looking down at her with the same vague uneasiness in his eyes. “I don't understand,” he said. “How could you have known I was coming?"

“I knew,” she said. Timidly her hands began to stroke the long, smooth muscles of his back, the man's flesh, so different from her own. It seemed to her that her fingertips knew him without being told; they found the tiny spots that gave him pleasure, and lingered there, without her direction.

His body stiffened; his gray eyes half closed. “Oh, Mary,” he said, and then he was close against her again, his mouth busy on hers: and the pleasure began, more piercing and sweet than she had ever dreamed it could be. Now she was out of herself again, half aware that her body was moving, writhing; that her voice was making sounds and speaking words that astonished her to hear ...

Near the end she began to weep, and lay in his arms afterward with the luxurious tears wetting her cheeks, while his voice asked anxiously, “Are you all right? Darling, are you all right?” and she could not explain, but only held him tighter, and wept.

Later, hand in hand, they wandered down the bone-white stairs to the quayside strewn with drying nets, the glass floats sparkling sharp in the sun, spars, tackle and canvas piled everywhere. Only two boats were moored at the floating jetty below; the rest were out fishing, black specks on the glittering sea, almost at the horizon.

Over to eastward they saw the desolate smudge of the mainland and the huddle of stones that was Porto. “That's where you live,” she said wonderingly.

“Yes."

“What do you do there?"

He paused, looked down at her with that startled unease in his glance. After a moment he shrugged. “Work. Drink a little in the evenings, make love. What else would I do?"

A dull pain descended suddenly on her heart and would not lift its wings. “You've made love to many women?” she asked with difficulty.

“Of course. Mary, what's the matter?"

“You're going back to Porto. You're going to leave me."

Now the unnamed thing in his eyes had turned to open incredulity. He held her arms, staring down at her. “What else?"

She put her head down obstinately, burying it against his chest. “I want to stay with you,” she said in a

muffled voice.

“But you*can't* . You're an Islander—I'm a Mainlander."

“I know."

“Then why this foolishness?"

“I don't know."

He turned her without speaking, and they stepped down from the promenade, went into the shadow of some storehouses that abutted on the quayside. The doors were open, breathing scents of spices and tar, new cordage, drying fish. Beyond them was a pleasant courtyard with boats piled upside down on one side, on the other a table, an umbrella, chairs, all cool in the afternoon shadow. From there they took a shallow staircase up into a maze of little streets full of the dim, mysterious blue light that fell from canopies of tinted glass between roofs. Passing a house with open shutters, they heard the drone of childish voices. They peered in: it was the nursery school—forty young Bakers, Chemists, Mechanics, fair skins and dark, each in a doll-like miniature of his clan costume, all earnestly reciting together while the shovel-hatted Teacher stood listening at the greenboard. Cool, neutral light came from the louvered skylights; the small faces were clear and innocent, here a tiny Cook in his apron, there two Carters sitting together, identical in their blue smocks, there a pale Doctor, and beside him, Mary saw with a pang, a little Weaver in white. The familiar features were childishly blunted and small, the ivory skin impossibly pure, the bright eyes wide. “Look—that one,” she whispered, pointing.

He peered in. “She looks like you. More like you than the others. You're different from all the rest, Mary—that's why I like you.” He looked down at her with a puzzled expression; his arm tightened around her. “I've never felt quite this way about a girl before; what are you doing to me?” he said.

She turned to him, embracing him, letting her body go soft and compliant against his. “Loving you, darling,” she said, smiling up, her eyes half-closed.

He kissed her fiercely, then pushed her away, looking almost frightened. “See here, Mary,” he said abruptly, “we've got to understand something."

“Yes?” she said faintly, clinging to him.

“I'm going to be back in Porto tomorrow morning,” he said.

“Tomorrow!” she said. “I thought—”

“My work was done this morning. It was a simple adjustment of the sonics. You'll catch plenty of fish from now on ... There's nothing more for me to do here."

She was stunned; she could not believe it. Surely there would be at least another night ... that was little enough to ask.

“Can't you stay?” she said.

“You know I can't.” His voice was rough and strained. “I go where they tell me, come when they say come."

She tried to hold back the time, but it slipped away, ran through her fingers. The sky darkened slowly from cerulean to Prussian blue, the stars came out and the cool night wind stirred over the jetty.

Below her, in a cluster of lights, they were making the boat ready. Orchestrinos were playing up the hillside, and there was a little crowd of men and women gathering to say good-bye. There was laughter, joking, voices raised good-naturedly in the evening stillness.

Klef, pale in the lights, came up the stairs to where she stood, his head tilted as he came, his grave eyes holding hers.

“I'm not going to cry,” she said.

His hands took her arms, gripping her half in tenderness, half impatiently. “Mary, you know this is wrong. Get over it. Find yourself other men—be happy."

“Yes, I'll be happy,” she said.

He stared down at her in uncertainty, then bent his head and kissed her. She held herself passive in his arms, not responding or resisting. After a moment he let her go and stepped back. “Good-bye, Mary."

“Good-bye, Klef."

He turned, went quickly down the steps. The laughing voices surrounded him as he went toward the boat; after a moment she heard his voice too, lifted in cheerful farewells.

In the morning she awoke knowing that he was gone. A frightening knowledge of loss seized her, and she sat up with her heart leaping.

Down the high dormitory, smelling faintly of cinnamon oil and fresh linens, the sisters were beginning to rustle sleepily out of their cubicles, murmuring and yawning. The familiar hiss of the showers began at the far end of the room. The white-curtained windows were open, and from her bed Mary could see the cream and terra-cotta roofs spread out in a lazy descent. The air was cool and still and mysteriously pure: it was the best moment of the day.

She rose, washed herself and dressed mechanically. “What is it, dear?” asked Mia, bending toward her anxiously.

“Nothing. Klef is gone."

“Well, there'll be others.” Mia smiled and patted her hand, and went away. There was a closeness between them, they were almost of an age, and yet even Mia could not be comfortable long in Mary's company.

Mary sat with the others at table, silent in the steaming fragrances of coffee and new bread, the waves of cheerful talk that flowed around her. Carrying her loom, she went down with the rest into the court and sat in her usual place. The work began.

Time stretched away wearily into the future. How many mornings in her life would she sit here, where she sat now, beginning to weave as she did now? How could she endure it? How had she ever endured it? She put her fingers on the controls of the loom, but the effort to move them appalled her. A tear dropped bright on the keyboard.

Mia leaned over toward her. “Is there anything the matter? Don't you feel well?"

Her fists clenched uselessly. “I can't—I can't—” was all she could utter. Hot tears were running down her face; her jaw was shaking. She bowed her head over the loom.

Iliria was neither wearisomely flat, nor cone-shaped nor pyramidal in its construction, like some of the northern islands, but was charmingly hollowed, like a cradle. The old cobblestoned streets rose and fell; there were stairways, balconies, arcades; never a vista, always a new prospect. The buildings were pleasingly various, some domed and spired, others sprawling. Cream was the dominant color, with accents of cool light blue, yellow, and rose. For more than three hundred years, the island had been afloat, just as it now was: the same plazas with their fountains, the same shuttered windows, the same rooftops.

During the last century, some colonies had been creeping back onto the land as the contamination diminished; but every Ilirian knew that only island life was perfect. Above, the unchanging streets and buildings served each generation as the last; down below, the storage chambers, engine rooms, seines, preserving rooms, conveniently out of sight and hearing, went on functioning as they always had. Unsinkable, sheathed in ceramic above and below, the island would go on floating just as it now was, forever.

It was strange to Mary to see the familiar streets so empty. The morning light lay softly along the walls; in corners, blue shadow gathered. Behind every door and window there was a subdued hum of activity; the clans were at their work. All the way to the church circle, she passed no one but a Messenger and two Carters with their loads: all three looked at her curiously until she was out of sight.

Climbing the Hill of Carpenters, she saw the gray dome of the church rising against the sky—a smooth, unrelieved ovoid, with a crescent of morning light upon it. Overhead, a flock of gulls hung in the air, wings spread, rising and dipping. They were gray against the light.

She paused on the porch step to look down. From this height she could see the quays and the breakwater, and the sun on the brightwork of the moored launches; and then the long rolling back of the sea, full of whitecaps in the freshening breeze; and beyond that, the dark smudge of the land, and the clutter of brown windowed stone that was Porto. She stood looking at it for a moment, dry-eyed, then went into the shadowed doorway.

Clabert the Priest rose up from his little desk and came toward her with ink-stained fingers, his skirt flapping around his ankles. “Good morning, cousin, have you a trouble?"

“I'm in love with a man who has gone away."

He stared at her in perplexity for a moment, then darted down the corridor to the left. “This way, cousin.” She followed him past the great doors of the central harmonion. He opened a smaller door, curved like the end of an egg, and motioned her in.

She stepped inside; the room was gray, egg-shaped, and the light came uniformly from the smooth ceramic walls. “Twenty minutes,” said Clabert, and withdrew his head. The door shut, joining indistinguishably with the wall around it.

Mary found herself standing on the faintly sloping floor, with the smooth single curve of the wall surrounding her. After a moment she could no longer tell how far away the big end of the ovicle was; the room seemed first quite small, only a few yards from one end to the other; then it was gigantic, bigger than the sky. The floor shifted uncertainly under her feet, and after another moment she sat down on the cool hollow slope.

The silence grew and deepened. She had no feeling of confinement; the air was fresh and in constant slight movement. She felt faintly and agreeably dizzy, and put her arms behind her to steady herself. Her vision began to blur; the featureless gray curve gave her no focus for her eyes. Another moment passed, and she became aware that the muffled silence was really a continual slow hush of sound, coming from all

points at once, like the distant murmuring of the sea. She held her breath to listen, and at once, like dozens of wings flicking away in turn, the sound stopped. Now, listening intently, she could hear a still fainter sound, a soft, rapid pattering that stopped and came again, stopped and came again ... and listening, she realized that it was the multiple echo of her own heartbeat. She breathed again, and the slow hush flooded back.

The wall approached, receded ... gradually it became neither close nor far away; it hung gigantically and mistily just out of reach. The movement of air imperceptibly slowed. Lying dazed and unthinking, she grew intensely aware of her own existence, the meaty solidness of her flesh, the incessant pumping of blood, the sigh of breath, the heaviness and pressure, the pleasant beading of perspiration on her skin. She was whole and complete, all the way from fingers to toes. She was uniquely herself; somehow she had forgotten how important that was ...

“Feeling better?” asked Clabert as he helped her out of the chamber.

“Yes ...” She was dazed and languid; walking was an extraordinary effort.

“Come back if you have these confusions again,” Clabert called after her, standing in the porch doorway.

Without replying, she went down the slope in the brilliant sunshine. Her head was light, her feet were amusingly slow to obey her. In a moment she was running to catch up with herself, down the steep cobbled street in a stumbling rush, with faces popping out of shutters behind her, and fetched up laughing and gasping with her arms around a light column at the bottom.

A stout Carter in blue was grinning at her out of his tanned face. “What's the joke, woman?"

“Nothing,” she stammered. “I've just been to church."

“Ah!” he said, with a finger beside his nose, and went on.

She found herself taking the way downward to the quays. The sunlit streets were empty; no one was in the pools. She stripped and plunged in, gasping at the pleasure of the cool fresh water on her body. And even when two Baker boys, an older one and a younger, came by and leaned over the wall shouting, “Pretty! Pretty!” she felt no confusion, but smiled up at them and went on swimming.

Afterward, she dressed and strolled, wet as she was, along the sea-wall promenade. Giddily she began to sing as she walked, “Open your arms to me, sweetheart, for when the sun shines it's pleasant to be in love...” The orchestrinos had been playing that, that night when—

She felt suddenly ill, and stopped with her hand at her forehead.

What was wrong with her? Her mind seemed to topple, shake itself from one pattern into another. She swung her head up, looking with sharp anxiety for the brown tangle of buildings on the mainland.

At first it was not there, and then she saw it, tiny, almost lost on the horizon. The island was drifting, moving away, leaving the mainland behind.

She sat down abruptly; her legs lost their strength. She put her face in her arms and wept: “Klef! Oh, Klef!"

This love that had come to her was not the easy, pleasant thing the orchestrinos sang of; it was a kind of madness. She accepted that, and knew herself to be mad, yet could not change. Waking and sleeping, she could think only of Klef.

Her grief had exhausted itself, her eyes were dry. She could see herself now as the others saw her—as something strange, unpleasant, ill-fitting. What right had she to spoil their pleasure?

She could go back to church, and spend another dazed time in the ovicle. “If you have these confusions again,” the Priest had said. She could go every morning, if need be, and again every afternoon. She had seen one who needed to do as much, silly Marget Tailor who always nodded and smiled, drooling a little, no matter what was said to her, and who seemed to have a blankness behind the glow of happiness in her eyes. That was years ago; she remembered the sisters always complained of the wet spots Marget left on her work. Something must have happened to her; others cut and stitched for the Weavers now.

Or she could hug her pain to herself, scourge them with it, make them do something ... She had a vision of herself running barefoot and ragged through the streets, with people in their doorways shouting, “Crazy Mary! Crazy Mary!” If she made them notice her, made them bring Klef back ...

She stopped eating except when the other sisters urged her, and grew thinner day by day. Her cheeks and eyes were hollow. All day she sat in the courtyard, not weaving, until at length the other women's voices grew melancholy and seldom. The weaving suffered; there was no joy in the clan house. Many times Vivana and the others reasoned with her, but she could only give the same answers over again, and at last she stopped replying at all.

“But what do you want?” the women asked her, with a note of exasperation in their voices.

What did she want? She wanted Klef to be beside her every night when she went to sleep, and when she wakened in the morning. She wanted his arms about her, his flesh joined to hers, his voice murmuring in her ear. Other men? It was not the same thing. But they could not understand.

“But why do you want me to make myself pretty?” Mary asked with dull curiosity.

Mia bent over her with a tube of cosmetic, touching the pale lips with crimson. “Never mind, something nice. Here, let me smooth your eyebrows. Tut, how thin you've got! Never mind, you'll look very well. Put on your fresh robe, there's a dear."

“I don't know what difference it makes.” But Mary stood up wearily, took off her dress, stood thin and pale in the light. She put the new robe over her head, shrugged her arms into it.

“Is that all right?” she asked.

“Dear Mary,” said Mia, with tears of sympathy in her eyes. “Sweet, no, let me smooth your hair. Stand straighter, can't you, how will any man—"

“Man?” said Mary. A little color came and went in her cheeks. “Klef?"

“*No*, dear, forget Klef, will you?” Mia's voice turned sharp with exasperation.

“Oh.” Mary turned her head away.

“Can't you think of anything else? Do try, dear, just try."

“All right."

“Now come along, they're waiting for us."

Mary stood up submissively and followed her sister out of the dormitory.

In bright sunlight the women stood talking quietly and worriedly around the bower. With them was a

husky Chemist with golden brows and hair; his pink face was good-natured and peaceful. He pinched the nearest sister's buttock, whispered something in her ear; she slapped his hand irritably.

“Quick, here they come,” said one suddenly. “Go in now, Gunner."

With an obedient grimace, the blond man ducked his head and disappeared into the bower. In a moment Mia and Mary came into view, the thin girl hanging back when she saw the crowd, and the bower.

“What is it?” she complained. “I don't want— Mia, let me go."

“No, dear, come along, it's for the best, you'll see,” said the other girl soothingly. “Do give me a hand here, one of you, won't you?"

The two women urged the girl toward the bower. Her face was pale and frightened. “But what do you want me to— You said Klef wasn't— Were you only teasing me? Is Klef—?"

The women gave each other looks of despair. “Go in, dear, and see, why don't you?"

A wild expression came into Mary's eyes. She hesitated, then stepped nearer the bower; the two women let her go. “Klef?” she called plaintively. There was no answer.

“Go in, dear."

She looked at them appealingly, then stooped and put her head in. The women held their breaths. They heard her gasp, then saw her backing out again.

“Crabs and mullets!” swore Vivana. “Get her in, you fools!"

The girl was crying out, weakly and helplessly, as four women swarmed around her, pushed her into the bower. One of them lingered, peered in.

“Has he got her?"

“Yes, now he's got her.” Stifled mewing sounds were coming from the bower. “Hang onto her, you fool!"

“She bit!” came Gunner's indignant voice. Then silence.

“Sst, leave them alone,” whispered Vivana. The woman at the bower entrance turned, tiptoed away. Together the women withdrew a few yards, found themselves seats on the old steps under the portico, and sat down comfortably close to one another.

There was a scream.

The women leaped up, startled and white. Not one of them could remember hearing such a sound before.

Gunner's hoarse voice bawled something, then there was a stir. Mary appeared in the entrance to the bower. Her skirt was ripped, and she was clutching it to her lap with one hand. Her eyes were filmed, pink-rimmed. “Oh!” she said, moving past them blindly.

“Mary—” said one, reaching out a hand.

“Oh!” she said hopelessly, and moved on, clutching her garment to her body.

“What's the matter?” they asked each other. “What did Gunner do?"

“I did what I was supposed to,” said Gunner, sulkily appearing. There was a red bruise on his cheek. “Gut me and clean me if I ever do it with that one again, though."

“You fool, you must have been too rough. Go after her, someone."

“Well, then serve her yourself the next time, if you know so much.” Prodding his cheek gently with a finger, the Chemist went away.

Up the slope, an orchestrino began playing.*"If you would not be cruel, torment me no more. Do not deny me ever, let it be now or never. Give me your love, then, as you promised me before...* "

“Shut that thing off!” cried Vivana angrily.

Her ageship, Laura-one, the eldest Weaver, was pacing up and down the sea-wall promenade, knotting her fingers together in silent agitation. Once she paused to look over the parapet; below her the wall dropped sheer to blue water. She glanced over at the blur of Porto, half concealed in the morning haze, and at the stark hills above with their green fur of returning vegetation. Her eyes were still keen; halfway across the distance, she could make out a tiny dark dot, moving toward the island.

Footsteps sounded in the street below; in a moment Vivana appeared, holding Mary by the arm. The younger woman's eyes were downcast; the older looked worried and anxious.

“Here she is, your ageship,” said Vivana. “They found her at the little jetty, throwing bottles into the sea."

“Again?” asked the old woman. “What was in the bottles?"

“Here's one of them,” said Vivana, handing over a crumpled paper.

“Tell Klef the Fisher of the town of Porto that Mary Weaver still loves him,” the old woman read. She folded the paper slowly and put it into her pocket. “Always the same,” she said. “Mary, my child, don't you know that these bottles never can reach your Klef?"

The young woman did not raise her head or speak.

“And twice this month the Fishers have had to catch you and bring you back when you stole a launch,” the old woman continued. “Child, don't you see that this must end?"

Mary did not answer.

“And these things that you weave, when you weave at all,” said Laura-one, taking a wadded length of cloth from her apron pocket. She spread it taut and held it to the light. In the pattern, visible only when the light fell glancingly upon it, was woven the figure of a seated woman with a child in her arms. Around them were birds with spread wings among the intertwined stems of flowers.

“Who taught you to weave like this, child?” she asked.

“No one,” said Mary, not looking up.

The old woman looked down at the cloth again. “It's beautiful work, but—” She sighed and put the cloth away. “We have no place for it. Child, you weave so well, why can't you weave the usual patterns?"

“They are dead. This one is alive."

The old woman sighed again. “And how long is it that you have been demanding your Klef back, dear?"

“Seven months."

“But now think.” The old woman paused, glanced over her shoulder. The black dot on the sea was much nearer, curving in toward the jetty below. “Suppose this Klef did receive one of your messages; what then?"

“He would know how much I love him,” said Mary, raising her head. Color came into her cheeks; her eyes brightened.

“And that would change his whole life, his loyalties, everything?"

“Yes!"

“And if it did not?"

Mary was silent.

“Child, if that failed, would you confess that you have been wrong— would you let us help you?"

“It wouldn't fail,” Mary said stubbornly.

“But if it did?” the older woman insisted gently. “Just suppose—just let yourself imagine."

Mary was silent a moment. “I would want to die,” she said.

The two elder Weavers looked at each other, and for a moment neither spoke.

“May I go now?” Mary asked.

Vivana cast a glance down at the jetty, and said quickly, “Maybe it's best, your ageship. Tell them—"

Laura-one stopped her with a raised hand. Her lips were compressed. “And if you go, child, what will you do now?"

“Go and make more messages, to put into bottles."

The old woman sighed. “You see?” she said to Vivana.

Footsteps sounded faintly on the jetty stair. A man's head appeared; he was an island Fisher, stocky, dark-haired, with a heavy black mustache. “Your ageship, the man is here,” he said, saluting Laura-one. “Shall I—?"

“No,” said Vivana involuntarily. “Don't— Send him back—"

“What would be the good of that?” the old woman asked reasonably. “No, bring him up, Alec."

The Fisher nodded, turned and was gone down the stair.

Mary's head had come up. She said, “The man—?"

“There, it's all right,” said Vivana, going to her.

“Is it Klef?” she asked fearfully.

The older woman did not reply. In a moment the black-mustached Fisher appeared again; he stared at them, climbed to the head of the stair, stood aside.

Behind him, after a moment, another head rose out of the stairwell. Under the russet hair, the face was grave and thin. The gray eyes went to Laura-one, then to Mary; they stared at her, as the man continued to climb the steps. He reached the top, and stood waiting, hands at his sides. The black-mustached Fisher turned and descended behind him.

Mary had begun to tremble all over.

“There, dear, it's all right,” said Vivana, pressing her arms. As if the words had released her, Mary walked to the Fisher. Tears were shining on her face. She clutched his tunic with both hands, staring up at him. “Klef?” she said.

His hands came up to hold her. She threw herself against him then, so violently that he staggered, and clutched him as if she wished to bury herself in his body. Strangled, hurt sounds came out of her.

The man looked over her head at the two older women. “Can't you leave us alone for a moment?” he asked.

“Of course,” said Laura-one, a little surprised. “Why not? Of course.” She gestured to Vivana, and the two turned, walked away a little distance down the promenade to a bench, where they sat looking out over the seawall.

Gulls mewed overhead. The two women sat side by side without speaking or looking at one another. They were not quite out of earshot.

“Is it really you?” Mary asked, holding his face between her hands. She tried to laugh. “Darling, I can't see ... you're all blurred."

“I know,” said Klef quietly. “Mary, I've thought about you many times."

“Have you?” she cried. “Oh, that makes me so happy. Oh, Klef, I could die now! Hold me, hold me."

His face hardened. His hands absently stroked her back, up and down. “I kept asking to be sent back,” he said. “Finally I persuaded them—they thought you might listen to me. I'm supposed to cure you."

“Of loving you?” Mary laughed. At the sound, his hands tightened involuntarily on her back. “How foolish they were! How foolish, Klef!"

“Mary, we have only these few minutes,” he said.

She drew back a little to look at him. “I don't understand."

“I'm to talk to you, and then go back. That's all I'm here for."

She shook her head in disbelief. “But you told me—"

“Mary, listen to me. There is nothing else to do. Nothing."

“Take me back with you, Klef.” Her hands gripped him hard. “That's what I want—just to be with you. Take me back."

“And where will you live—in the Fishers’ dormitory with forty men?"

“I'll live anywhere, in the streets, I don't care—"

“They would never allow it. You know that, Mary."

She was crying, holding him, shuddering all over. “Don't tell me that, don't say it. Even if it's true, can't you pretend a little? Hold me, Klef, tell me that you love me."

“I love you,” he said.

“Tell me that you'll keep me, never let me go, no matter what they say."

He was silent a moment. “It's impossible."

She raised her head.

“Try to realize,” he said, “this is a sickness, Mary. You must cure yourself."

“Then you're sick too!” she said.

“Maybe I am, but I'll get well, because I know I have to. And you must get well too. Forget me. Go back to your sisters and your weaving."

She put her cheek against his chest, gazing out across the bright ocean. “Let me just be quiet with you a moment,” she said. “I won't cry any more. Klef—"

“Yes?"

“Is that all you have to say to me?"

“It has to be all.” His eyes closed, opened again. “Mary, I didn't want to feel this way. It's wrong, it's unhealthy, it hurts. Promise me, before I go. Say you'll let them cure you."

She pushed herself away, wiped her eyes and her cheeks with the heel of one hand. Then she looked up. “I'll let them cure me,” she said.

His face contorted. “Thank you. I'll go now, Mary."

“One more kiss!” she cried, moving toward him involuntarily. “Only one more!"

He kissed her on the lips, then wrenched himself away, and looking down to where the two women sat, he made an angry motion with his head.

As they rose and came nearer, he held Mary at arm's length. “Now I'm really going,” he said harshly. “Good-bye, Mary."

“Good-bye, Klef.” Her fingers were clasped tight at her waist.

The man waited, looking over her head, until Vivana came up and took her arms gently. Then he moved away. At the head of the stairs he looked at her once more; then he turned and began to descend.

“Dear, it will be better now, you'll see,” said Vivana uncertainly.

Mary said nothing. She stood still, listening to the faint sounds that echoed up from the stairwell: footsteps, voices, hollow sounds.

There was a sudden clatter, then footsteps mounting the stair. Klef appeared again, chest heaving, eyes bright. He seized both of Mary's hands in his. “Listen!” he said. “I'm mad. You're mad. We're both going to die."

“I don't care!” she said. Her face was glowing as she looked up at him.

“They say some of the streams are running pure, in the hills. Grass is growing there—there are fish in the streams, even the wild fowl are coming back. Well go there, Mary, together—just you and I. Alone. Do you understand?"

“Yes, Klef, yes, darling."

“Then come on!"

“Wait!” cried Laura-one shrilly after them as they ran down the stair. “How will you live? What will you eat? Think what you are doing!"

Faint hollow sounds answered her, then the purr of a motor.

Vivana moved to Laura-one's side, and the two women stood watching, silent, as the dark tiny shape of the launch moved out into the brightness. In the cockpit they could make out the two figures close together, dark head and light. The launch moved steadily toward the land; and the two women stood staring, unable to speak, long after it was out of sight.

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Anachron

THE BODY was never found. And for that reason alone, there was no body to find.

It sounds like inverted logic—which, in a sense, it is—but there's no paradox involved. It was a perfectly orderly and explicable event, even though it could only have happened to a Castellare.

Odd fish, the Castellare brothers. Sons of a Scots-Englishwoman and an expatriate Italian, born in England, educated on the Continent, they were at ease anywhere in the world and at home nowhere.

Nevertheless, in their middle years, they had become settled men. Expatriates like their father, they lived on the island of Ischia, off the Neapolitan coast, in a palace—*quattrocento*, very fine, with peeling cupids on the walls, a multitude of rats, no central heating and no neighbors.

They went nowhere, no one except their agents and their lawyers came to them. Neither had ever married. Each, at about the age of thirty, had given up the world of people for an inner world of more precise and more enduring pleasures. Each was an amateur—a fanatical, compulsive amateur.

They had been born out of their time.

Peter's passion was virtu. He collected relentlessly, it would not be too much to say savagely; he collected as some men hunt big game. His taste was catholic, and his acquisitions filled the huge rooms of the palace and half the vaults under them—paintings, statuary, enamels, porcelain, glass, crystal, metalwork. At fifty, he was a round little man with small, sardonic eyes and a careless patch of pinkish goatee.

Harold Castellare, Peter's talented brother, was a scientist. An amateur scientist. He belonged in the nineteenth century, as Peter was a throwback to a still earlier epoch. Modern science is largely a matter

of teamwork and drudgery, both impossible concepts to a Castellare. But Harold's intelligence was in its own way as penetrating and original as a Newton's or a Franklin's. He had done respectable work in physics and electronics, and had even, at his lawyer's insistence, taken out a few patents. The income from these, when his own purchases of instruments and equipment did not consume it, he gave to his brother, who accepted it without gratitude or rancor.

Harold, at fifty-three, was spare and shrunken, sallow and spotted, with a bloodless, melancholy countenance; on his upper lip grew a neat hedge of pink-and-salt mustache, the companion piece and antithesis of his brother's goatee.

On a certain May morning, Harold had an accident.

Goodyear dropped rubber on a hot stove; Archimedes took a bath; Becquerel left a piece of uranium ore in a drawer with a photographic plate. Harold Castallare, working patiently with an apparatus which had so far consumed a great deal of current without producing anything more spectacular than some rather unusual corona effects, sneezed convulsively and dropped an ordinary bar magnet across two charged terminals.

Above the apparatus a huge, cloudy bubble sprang into being.

Harold, getting up from his instinctive crouch, blinked at it in profound astonishment. As he watched, the cloudiness abruptly disappeared and he was looking*through* the bubble at a section of tesselated flooring that seemed to be about three feet above the real floor. He could also see the corner of a carved wooden bench, and on the bench a small, oddly shaped stringed instrument.

Harold swore fervently to himself, made agitated notes, and then began to experiment. He tested the sphere cautiously with an electroscope, with a magnet, with a Geiger counter. Negative. He tore a tiny bit of paper from his notepad and dropped it toward the sphere. The paper disappeared; he couldn't see where it went.

Speechless, Harold picked up a meter stick and thrust it delicately forward. There was no feeling of contact; the rule went into and through the bubble as if the latter did not exist. Then it touched the stringed instrument, with a solid click. Harold pushed. The instrument slid over the edge of the bench and struck the floor with a hollow thump and jangle.

Staring at it, Harold suddenly recognized its tantalizingly familiar shape.

Recklessly he let go the meter stick, reached in and picked the fragile thing out of the bubble. It was solid and cool in his fingers. The varnish was clear, the color of the wood glowing through it. It looked as if it might have been made yesterday.

Peter owned one almost exactly like it, except for preservation—a viola d'amore of the seventeenth century.

Harold stooped to look through the bubble horizontally. Gold and rust tapestries hid the wall, fifty feet away, except for an ornate door in the center. The door began to open; Harold saw a flicker of umber.

Then the sphere went cloudy again. His hands were empty; the viola d'amore was gone. And the meter stick, which he had dropped inside the sphere, lay on the floor at his feet.

“Look at that,” said Harold simply.

Peter's eyebrows went up slightly. “What is it, a new kind of television?"

“No, no. Look here.” The viola d'amore lay on the bench, precisely where it had been before. Harold reached into the sphere and drew it out.

Peter started. “Give me that.” He took it in his hands, rubbed the smoothly finished wood. He stared at his brother. “By God and all the saints,” he said. “Time travel."

Harold snorted impatiently. “My dear Peter, ‘time’ is a meaningless word taken by itself, just as ‘space’ is."

“But, barring that, time travel."

“If you like, yes."

“You'll be quite famous."

“I expect so."

Peter looked down at the instrument in his hands. “I'd like to keep this, if I may."

“I'd be very happy to let you, but you can't."

As he spoke, the bubble went cloudy; the viola d'amore was gone like smoke.

“There, you see?"

“What sort of devil's trick is that?"

“It goes back... Later you'll see. I had that thing out once before, and this happened. When the sphere became transparent again, the viol was where I had found it."

“And your explanation for this?"

Harold hesitated. “None. Until I can work out the appropriate mathematics—"

“Which may take you some time. Meanwhile, in layman's language—"

Harold's face creased with the effort and interest of translation. “Very roughly, then—I should say it means that events are conserved. Two or three centuries ago—"

“Three. Notice the sound holes."

“Three centuries ago, then, at this particular time of day, someone was in that room. If the viola were gone, he or she would have noticed the fact. That would constitute an alteration of events already fixed; therefore it doesn't happen. For the same reason, I conjecture, we can't see into the sphere, or—” he probed at it with a fountain pen—"I thought not—or reach into it to touch anything; that would also constitute an alteration. And anything we put into the sphere while it is transparent comes out again when it becomes opaque. To put it very crudely, we cannot alter the past."

“But it seems to me that we did alter it, just now, when you took the viol out, even if no one of that time saw it happen."

“This,” said Harold, “is the difficulty of using language as a means of exact communication. If you had not forgotten all your calculus ... However. It may be postulated (remembering of course that everything I say is a lie, because I say it in English) that an event which doesn't influence other events is not an event. In other words—"

“That, since no one saw you take it, it doesn't matter whether you took it or not. A rather dangerous precept, Harold; you would have been burned at the stake for that at one time."

“Very likely. But it can be stated in another way or, indeed, in an infinity of ways which only seem to be different. If someone, let us say God, were to remove the moon as I am talking to you, using zero duration, and substitute an exact replica made of concrete and plaster of Paris, with the same mass, albedo and so on as the genuine moon, it would make no measurable difference in the universe as we perceive it—and therefore we cannot certainly say that it hasn't happened. Nor, I may add, does it make any difference whether it has or not."

“‘When there's no one about on the quad,’” said Peter.

“Yes. A basic and, as a natural consequence, a meaningless problem of philosophy. Except,” he added, “in this one particular manifestation."

He stared at the cloudy sphere. “You'll excuse me, won't you, Peter? I've got to work on this."

“When will you publish, do you suppose?"

“Immediately. That's to say, in a week or two."

“Don't do it till you've talked it over with me, will you? I have a notion about it."

Harold looked at him sharply. “Commercial?"

“In a way."

“No,” said Harold. “This is not the sort of thing one patents or keeps secret, Peter."

“Of course. I'll see you at dinner, I hope?"

“I think so. If I forget, knock on the door, will you?"

“Yes. Until then."

“Until then."

At dinner, Peter asked only two questions. “Have you found any possibility of changing the time your thing reaches—from the seventeenth century to the eighteenth, for example, or from Monday to Tuesday?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact. Amazing. It's lucky that I had a rheostat already in the circuit; I wouldn't dare turn the current off. Varying the amperage varies the time set. I've had it up to what I think was Wednesday of last week—at any rate, my smock was lying over the workbench where I left it, I remember, Wednesday afternoon. I pulled it out. A curious sensation, Peter—I was wearing the same smock at the time. And then the sphere went opaque and of course the smock vanished. That must have been myself, coming into the room."

“And the future?”

“Yes. Another funny thing, I've had it forward to various times in the near future, and the machine itself is still there, but nothing's been done to it—none of the things I'm thinking I might do. That might be because of the conservation of events, again, but I rather think not. Still farther forward there are cloudy areas, blanks; I can't see anything that isn't in existence now, apparently, but here, in the next few days, there's nothing of that.

“It's as if I were going away. Where do you suppose I'm going?"

Harold's abrupt departure took place between midnight and morning. He packed his own grip, it would seem, left unattended, and was seen no more. It was extraordinary, of course, that he should have left at all, but the details were in no way odd. Harold had always detested what he called “the tyranny of the valet.” He was, as everyone knew, a most independent man.

On the following day Peter made some trifling experiments with the time-sphere. From the sixteenth century he picked up a scent bottle of Venetian glass; from the eighteenth, a crucifix of carved rosewood; from the nineteenth, when the palace had been the residence of an Austrian count and his Italian mistress, a hand-illuminated copy of De Sade's*La Nouvelle Justine* , very curiously bound in human skin.

They all vanished, naturally, within minutes or hours—all but the scent bottle. This gave Peter matter for reflection. There had been half a dozen flickers of cloudiness in the sphere just futureward of the bottle; it ought to have vanished, but it hadn't. But then, he had found it on the floor near a wall with quite a large rat hole in it.

When objects disappeared unaccountably, he asked himself, was it because they had rolled into rat holes, or because some time fisher had picked them up when they were in a position to do so?

He did not make any attempt to explore the future. That afternoon he telephoned his lawyers in Naples and gave them instructions for a new will. His estate, including his half of the jointly owned Ischia property, was to go to the Italian government on two conditions: (1) that Harold Castellare should make a similar bequest of the remaining half of the property and (2) that the Italian government should turn the palace into a national museum to house Peter's collection, using the income from his estate for its administration and for further acquisitions. His surviving relatives—two cousins in Scotland—he cut off with a shilling each.

He did nothing more until after the document had been brought out to him, signed and witnessed. Only then did he venture to look into his own future.

Events were conserved, Harold had said—meaning, Peter very well understood, events of the present and future as well as of the past. But was there only one pattern in which the future could be fixed? Could a result exist before its cause had occurred?

The Castellare motto was*Audentes fortuna juvat* —into which Peter, at the age of fourteen, had interpolated the word “*prudentesque*": “Fortune favors the bold—and the prudent."

Tomorrow: no change; the room he was looking at was so exactly like this one that the time sphere seemed to vanish. The next day: a cloudy blur. And the next, and the next...

Opacity, straight through to what Peter judged, by the distance he had moved the rheostat handle, to be ten years ahead. Then, suddenly, the room was a long marble hall filled with display cases.

Peter smiled wryly. If you were Harold, obviously you could not look ahead and see Peter working in your laboratory. And if you were Peter, equally obviously, you could not look ahead and know whether the room you saw was an improvement you yourself were going to make, or part of a museum established after your death, eight or nine years from now, or ...

No. Eight years was little enough, but he could not even be sure of that. It would, after all, be seven years before Harold could be declared legally dead....

Peter turned the vernier knob slowly forward. A flicker, another, a long series. Forward faster. Now the

flickering melted into a grayness; objects winked out of existence and were replaced by others in the showcases; the marble darkened and lightened again, darkened and lightened, darkened and remained dark. He was, Peter judged, looking at the hall as it would be some five hundred years in the future. There was a thick film of dust on every exposed surface; rubbish and the carcass of some small animal had been swept carelessly into a corner.

The sphere clouded.

When it cleared, there was an intricate trail of footprints in the dust, and two of the showcases were empty.

The footprints were splayed, trifurcate, and thirty inches long.

After a moment's deliberation Peter walked around the workbench and leaned down to look through the sphere from the opposite direction. Framed in the nearest of the four tall windows was a scene of picture-postcard banality: the sun-silvered bay and the foreshortened arc of the city, with Vesuvio faintly fuming in the background. But there was something wrong about the colors, even grayed as they were by distance.

Peter went and got his binoculars.

The trouble was, of course, that Naples was green. Where the city ought to have been, a rankness had sprouted. Between the clumps of foliage he could catch occasional glimpses of gray-white that might equally well have been boulders or the wreckage of buildings. There was no movement. There was no shipping in the harbor.

But something rather odd was crawling up the side of the volcano. A rust-orange pipe, it appeared to be, supported on hairline struts like the legs of a centipede, and ending without rhyme or reason just short of the top.

While Peter watched, it turned slowly blue.

One day further forward: now all the display cases had been looted; the museum, it would seem, was empty.

Given, that in five centuries the world, or at any rate the department of Campania, has been overrun by a race of Somethings, the human population being killed or driven out in the process; and that the conquerors take an interest in the museum's contents, which they have accordingly removed.

Removed where, and why?

This question, Peter conceded, might have a thousand answers, nine hundred and ninety-nine of which would mean that he had lost his gamble. The remaining answer was: to the vaults, for safety.

With his own hands Peter built a hood to cover the apparatus on the workbench and the sphere above it. It was unaccustomed labor; it took him the better part of two days. Then he called in workmen to break a hole in the stone flooring next to the interior wall, rig a hoist, and cut the power cable that supplied the time-sphere loose from its supports all the way back to the fuse box, leaving him a single flexible length of cable more than a hundred feet long. They unbolted the workbench from the floor, attached casters to its legs, lowered it into the empty vault below, and went away.

Peter unfastened and removed the hood. He looked into the sphere.

Treasure.

Crates, large and small, racked in rows into dimness.

With pudgy fingers that did not tremble, he advanced the rheostat. A cloudy flicker, another, a leaping blur of them as he moved the vernier faster—and then there were no more, to the limit of the time-sphere's range.

Two hundred years, Peter guessed—A.D. 2700 to 2900 or thereabout—in which no one would enter the vault. Two hundred years of “unliquidated time."

He put the rheostat back to the beginning of that uninterrupted period. He drew out a small crate and prized it open.

Chessmen, ivory with gold inlay, Florentine, fourteenth century. Superb.

Another, from the opposite rack.

T'ang figurines, horses and men, ten to fourteen inches high. Priceless.

The crates would not burn, Tomaso told him. He went down to the kitchen to see, and it was true. The pieces lay in the roaring stove untouched. He fished one out with a poker, even the feathery splinters of the unplaned wood had not ignited.

It made a certain extraordinary kind of sense. When the moment came for the crates to go back, any physical scrambling that had occurred in the meantime would have no effect; they would simply put themselves together as they had been before, like Thor's goats. But burning was another matter; burning would have released energy which could not be replaced.

That settled one paradox, at any rate. There was another that nagged at Peter's orderly mind. If the things he took out of that vault, seven hundred-odd years in the future, were to become part of the collection bequeathed by him to the museum, preserved by it, and eventually stored in the vault for him to find—then precisely where had they come from in the first place?

It worried him. Peter had learned in life, as his brother had in physics, that one never gets anything for nothing.

Moreover, this riddle was only one of his perplexities, and that not among the greatest. For another example, there was the obstinate opacity of the time-sphere whenever he attempted to examine the immediate future. However often he tried it, the result was always the same: a cloudy blank, all the way forward to the sudden unveiling of the marble gallery.

It was reasonable to expect the sphere to show nothing at times when he himself was going to be in the vault, but this accounted for only five or six hours out of every twenty-four. Again, presumably, it would show him no changes to be made by himself, since foreknowledge would make it possible for him to alter his actions. But he laboriously cleared one end of the vault, put up a screen to hide the rest and made a vow—which he kept—not to alter the clear space or move the screen for a week. Then he tried again—with the same result.

The only remaining explanation was that sometime during the next ten years something was going to happen which he would prevent if he could; and the clue to it was there, buried in that frustrating, unbroken blankness.

As a corollary, it was going to be something which he *could* prevent if only he knew what it was ... or even when it was supposed to happen.

The event in question, in all probability, was his own death. Peter therefore hired nine men to guard him, three to a shift—because one man alone could not be trusted, two might conspire against him, whereas three, with the very minimum of effort, could be kept in a state of mutual suspicion. He also underwent a thorough medical examination, had new locks installed on every door and window, and took every other precaution ingenuity could suggest. When he had done all these things, the next ten years were as blank as before.

Peter had more than half expected it. He checked through his list of safeguards once more, found it good, and thereafter let the matter rest. He had done all he could; either he would survive the crisis or he would not. In either case, events were conserved; the time-sphere could give him no forewarning.

Another man might have found his pleasure blunted by guilt and fear; Peter's was whetted to a keener edge. If he had been a recluse before, now he was an eremite; he grudged every hour that was not given to his work. Mornings he spent in the vault, unpacking his acquisitions; afternoons and evenings, sorting, cataloguing, examining and—the word is not too strong—gloating. When three weeks bad passed in this way, the shelves were bare as far as the power cable would allow him to reach in every direction, except for crates whose contents were undoubtedly too large to pass through the sphere. These, with heroic self-control, Peter had left untouched.

And still he had looted only a hundredth part of that incredible treasure house. With grappling hooks he could have extended his reach by perhaps three or four yards, but at the risk of damaging his prizes; and in any case this would have been no solution but only a postponement of the problem. There was nothing for it but to go through the sphere himself and unpack the crates while on the other “side” of it.

Peter thought about it in a fury of concentration for the rest of the day. So far as he was concerned, there was no question that the gain would be worth any calculated risk; the problem was how to measure the risk and if possible reduce it.

Item: He felt a definite uneasiness at the thought of venturing through that insubstantial bubble. Intuition was supported, if not by logic, at least by a sense of the dramatically appropriate. Now, if ever, would be the time for his crisis.

Item: Common sense did not concur. The uneasiness had two symbols. One was the white face of his brother Harold just before the water closed over it; the other was a phantasm born of those gigantic, splayed footprints in the dust of the gallery. In spite of himself, Peter had often found himself trying to imagine what the creatures that made them must look like, until his visualization was so clear that he could almost swear he had seen them.

Towering monsters they were, with crested ophidian heads and great unwinking eyes; and they moved in a strutting glide, nodding their heads, like fantastic barnyard fowl.

But, taking these premonitory images in turn: first, it was impossible that he should ever be seriously inconvenienced by Harold's death. There were no witnesses, he was sure; he had struck the blow with a stone, stones also were the weights that had dragged the body down, and the rope was an odd length Peter had picked up on the shore. Second, the three-toed Somethings might be as fearful as all the world's bogies put together; it made no difference, he could never meet them.

Nevertheless, the uneasiness persisted. Peter was not satisfied; he wanted a lifeline. When he found it, he wondered that he had not thought of it before.

He would set the time-sphere for a period just before one of the intervals of blankness. That would take care of accidents, sudden illnesses, and other unforeseeable contingencies. It would also insure him against one very real and not at all irrational dread: the fear that the mechanism which generated the

time-sphere might fail while he was on the other side. For the conservation of events was not a condition created by the sphere but one which limited its operation. No matter what happened, it was impossible for him to occupy the same place-time as any future or past observer; therefore, when the monster entered that vault, Peter would not be there any more.

There was, of course, the scent bottle to remember. Every rule has its exception; but in this case, Peter thought, the example did not apply. A scent bottle could roll into a rat hole; a man could not.

He turned the rheostat carefully back to the last flicker of grayness; past that to the next, still more carefully. The interval between the two, he judged, was something under an hour: excellent.

His pulse seemed a trifle rapid, but his brain was clear and cool. He thrust his head into the sphere and sniffed cautiously. The air was stale and had a faint, unpleasant odor, but it was breathable.

Using a crate as a stepping stool, he climbed to the top of the workbench. He arranged another crate close to the sphere to make a platform level with its equator. And seven and a half centuries in the future, a third crate stood on the floor directly under the sphere.

Peter stepped into the sphere, dropped, and landed easily, legs bending to take the shock. When he straightened, he was standing in what to all appearances was a large circular hole in the workbench; his chin was just above the top of the sphere.

He lowered himself, half squatting, until he had drawn his head through and stepped down from the crate.

He was in the future vault. The sphere was a brightly luminous thing that hung unsupported in the air behind him, its midpoint just higher than his head. The shadows it cast spread black and wedge-shaped in every direction, melting into obscurity.

Peter's heart was pounding miserably. He had an illusory stifling sensation, coupled with the idiotic notion that he ought to be wearing a diver's helmet. The silence was like the pause before a shout.

But down the aisles marched the crated treasures in their hundreds. Peter set to work. It was difficult, exacting labor, opening the crates where they lay, removing the contents and nailing the crates up again, all without disturbing the positions of the crates themselves, but it was the price he had to pay for his lifeline. Each crate was in a sense a microcosm, like the vault itself—a capsule of unliquidated time. But the vault's term would end some fifty minutes from now, when crested heads nodded down these aisles; those of the crates' interiors, for all that Peter knew to the contrary, went on forever.

The first crate contained lacework porcelain; the second, shakudo sword hilts; the third, an exquisite fourth-century Greek ornament in *repousse* bronze, the equal in every way of the Siris bronzes.

Peter found it almost physically difficult to set the thing down, but he did so; standing on his platform crate in the future with his head projecting above the sphere in the present—like (again the absurd thought!) a diver rising from the ocean—he laid it carefully beside the others on the workbench.

Then down again, into the fragile silence and the gloom. The next crates were too large, and those just beyond were doubtful. Peter followed his shadow down the aisle. He had almost twenty minutes left: enough for one more crate, chosen with care, and an ample margin.

Glancing to his right at the end of the row, he saw a door. It was a heavy door, rivet-studded, with a single iron step below it. There had been no door there in Peter's time; the whole plan of the building must have been altered. *Of course!* he realized suddenly. If it had not, if so much as a single tile or lintel had remained of the palace as he knew it, then the sphere could never have let him see or enter this

particular here-and-now, this—what would Harold have called it?—this nexus in space-time.

For if you saw any now-existing thing as it was going to appear in the future, you could alter it in the present—carve your initials in it, break it apart, chop it down—which was manifestly impossible, and therefore ...

And therefore the first ten years were necessarily blank when he looked into the sphere, not because anything unpleasant was going to happen to him, but because in that time the last traces of the old palace had not yet been eradicated.

There was no crisis.

Wait a moment, though! Harold had been able to look into the near future.... But—of course—Harold had been about to die.

In the dimness between himself and the door he saw a rack of crates that looked promising. The way was uneven; one of the untidy accumulations of refuse that seemed to be characteristic of the Somethings lay in windrows across the floor. Peter stepped forward carefully, but not carefully enough.

Harold Castellare had had another accident—and again, if you choose to look at it in that way, a lucky one. The blow stunned him; the old rope slipped from the stones; flaccid, he floated where a struggling man might have drowned. A fishing boat nearly ran him down, and picked him up instead. He was suffering from a concussion, shock, exposure, asphyxiation and was more than three quarters dead. But he was still alive when he was delivered, an hour later, to a hospital in Naples.

There were, of course, no identifying papers, labels or monograms in his clothing—Peter had seen to that—and for the first week after his rescue Harold was quite genuinely unable to give any account of himself. During the second week he was mending but uncommunicative, and at the end of the third, finding that there was some difficulty about gaining his release in spite of his physical recovery, he affected to regain his memory, gave a circumstantial but entirely fictitious identification and was discharged.

To understand this as well as all his subsequent actions, it is only necessary to remember that Harold was a Castellare. In Naples, not wishing to give Peter any unnecessary anxiety, he did not approach his bank for funds but cashed a check with an incurious acquaintance, and predated it by four weeks. With part of the money so acquired he paid his hospital bill and rewarded his rescuers. Another part went for new clothing and for four days' residence in an inconspicuous hotel, while he grew used to walking and dressing himself again. The rest, on his last day, he spent in the purchase of a discreetly small revolver and a box of cartridges.

He took the last boat to Ischia and arrived at his own front door a few minutes before eleven. It was a cool evening, and a most cheerful fire was burning in the central hall.

"Signor Peter is well, I suppose," said Harold, removing his coat.

"Yes, Signor Harold. He is very well, very busy with his collection."

"Where is he? I should like to speak to him."

"He is in the vaults, Signor Harold. But ... "

"Yes?"

"Signor Peter sees no one when he is in the vaults. He has given strict orders that no one is to bother him, Signor Harold, when he is in the vaults."

“Oh, well,” said Harold. “I daresay he'll see me."

It was a thing something like a bear trap, apparently, except that instead of two semicircular jaws it had four segments that snapped together in the middle, each with a shallow, sharp tooth. The pain was quite unendurable.

Each segment moved at the end of a thin arm, cunningly hinged so that the ghastly thing would close over whichever of the four triggers you stepped on. Each arm had a spring too powerful for Peter's muscles. The whole affair was connected by a chain to a staple solidly embedded in the concrete floor; it left Peter free to move some ten inches in any direction. Short of gnawing off his own leg, he thought sickly, there was very little he could do about it.

The riddle was, what could the thing possibly be doing here? There were rats in the vaults, no doubt, now as in his own time, but surely nothing larger. Was it conceivable that even the three-toed Somethings would set an engine like this to catch a rat?

Lost inventions, Peter thought irrelevantly, had a way of being rediscovered. Even if he suppressed the time-sphere during his lifetime and it did not happen to survive him, still there might be other time-fishers in the remote future—not here, perhaps, but in other treasure houses of the world. And that might account for the existence of this metal-jawed horror. Indeed, it might account for the vault itself—a better man-trap—except that it was all nonsense; the trap could only be full until the trapper came to look at it. Events, and the lives of prudent time-travelers, were conserved.

And he had been in the vault for almost forty minutes. Twenty minutes to go, twenty-five, thirty at the most, then the Somethings would enter and their entrance would free him. He had his lifeline; the knowledge was the only thing that made it possible to live with the pain that was the center of his universe just now. It was like going to the dentist, in the bad old days before procaine; it was very bad, sometimes, but you knew that it would end.

He cocked his head toward the door, holding his breath. A distant thud, another, then a curiously unpleasant squeaking, then silence.

But he had heard them. He knew they were there. It couldn't be much longer now.

Three men, two stocky, one lean, were playing cards in the passageway in front of the closed door that led to the vault staircase. They got up slowly.

“Who is he?” demanded the shortest one.

Tomaso clattered at him in furious Sicilian; the man's face darkened, but he looked at Harold with respect.

“I am now,” stated Harold, “going down to see my brother."

“No, Signor,” said the shortest one positively.

“You are impertinent,’ Harold told him.

“Yes, Signor."

Harold frowned. “You will not let me pass?"

“No, Signor."

“Then go and tell my brother I am here."

The shortest one said apologetically but firmly that there were strict orders against this also; it would have astonished Harold very much if he had said anything else.

“Well, at least I suppose you can tell me how long it will be before he comes out?"

“Not long, Signor. One hour, no more."

“Oh, very well, then,” said Harold pettishly, turning half away. He paused. “One thing more,” he said, taking the gun out of his pocket as he turned, “put your hands up and stand against the wall there, will you?"

The first two complied slowly. The third, the lean one, fired through his coat pocket, just like the gangsters in the American movies.

It was not a sharp sensation at all, Harold was surprised to find; it was more as if someone had hit him in the side with a cricket bat. The racket seemed to bounce interminably from the walls. He felt the gun jolt in his hand as he fired back, but couldn't tell if he had hit anybody. Everything seemed to be happening very slowly, and yet it was astonishingly hard to keep his balance. As he swung around he saw the two stocky ones with their hands half inside their jackets, and the lean one with his mouth open, and Tomaso with bulging eyes. Then the wall came at him and he began to swim along it, paying particular attention to the problem of not dropping one's gun.

As he weathered the first turn in the passageway the roar broke out afresh. A fountain of plaster stung his eyes; then he was running clumsily, and there was a bedlam of shouting behind him.

Without thinking about it he seemed to have selected the laboratory as his destination; it was an instinctive choice, without much to recommend it logically. In any case, he realized halfway across the central hall, he was not going to get there.

He turned and squinted at the passageway entrance; saw a blur move and fired at it. It disappeared. He turned again awkwardly, and had taken two steps nearer an armchair which offered the nearest shelter, when something clubbed him between the shoulderblades. One step more, knees buckling, and the wall struck him a second, softer blow. He toppled, clutching at the tapestry that hung near the fireplace.

When the three guards, whose names were Enrico, Alberto and Luca, emerged cautiously from the passage and approached Harold's body, it was already flaming like a Viking's in its impromptu shroud; the dim horses and men and falcons of the tapestry were writhing and crisping into brilliance. A moment later an uncertain ring of fire wavered toward them across the carpet.

Although the servants came with fire extinguishers and with buckets of water from the kitchen, and although the fire department was called, it was all quite useless. In five minutes the whole room was ablaze; in ten, as windows burst and walls buckled, the fire engulfed the second story. In twenty a mass of flaming timbers dropped into the vault through the hole Peter had made in the floor of the laboratory, utterly destroying the time-sphere apparatus and reaching shortly thereafter, as the authorities concerned were later to agree, an intensity of heat entirely sufficient to consume a human body without leaving any identifiable trace. For that reason alone, there was no trace of Peter's body to be found.

The sounds had just begun again when Peter saw the light from the time-sphere turn ruddy and then wink out like a snuffed candle.

In the darkness, he heard the door open.

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Life Edit

Maureen Appleforth opened the door, saw that the little conference room was empty, walked in, and let the door close behind her. She pulled out a chair and sat down. One day away from her twenty-ninth birthday, Maureen Appleforth had reddish brown hair with a natural wave, and she was neither too plump nor too thin, but just right.

After a moment the door opened and a young man came in with a machine under his arm. He had sleek brown hair and looked like the kind of man who smoked a pipe. He saw Maureen and looked surprised. “Ms. Appleforth? I was just going to set up the life editor. I'm Brian Orr.”

He offered his free hand and she took it for a moment with her cool fingers. “I'm a little early,” she said.

“That's all right. Better early than never.” He laughed briefly and set the machine down on the table. Then he uncoiled a thick cable and plugged it into an outlet. “Would you sit over here please, Ms. Appleforth? We won't start until you're ready, but I just want to do some calibrations first.” He pulled two leads out of the machine and showed her the cuffs at the ends of them. “Okay to put these on you?”

She said, “Will it hurt?”

“No, not a bit. Take off your watch, please.” He wrapped the cuffs around her wrists; the cuffs were soft but a little tight. He tapped keys on the pad in front of him and looked at the screen. “You're a bit nervous,” he said. “Is this a voluntary decision on your part?”

“Not entirely. They told me I couldn't go any higher in the company unless...”

“But you don't want to do it?”

“No.”

“But you want to stay in the company. Go higher.”

“Yes.”

“So it's a dilemma, isn't it?”

“Yes.” She smiled. “That's the kind of thing I tell people.”

“You're in conflict resolution upstairs? Or counseling?”

“Conflict.”

“And you're good at it. Or they wouldn't care if you went higher or not.” His voice was pleasant, and she was feeling a little more relaxed.

“So let's just talk,” he said. “Is there anything I can tell you?”

She looked at him. He was projecting honest concern and impartiality. She said, “Why did you take the treatment? If you did, and if you remember.”

“Oh, I remember, all right. It was something I said to a girlfriend of mine, years ago. I don't remember what it was, but it used to bother me about once a week. I'd sit and think, ‘Jesus, I wish I hadn't said that to her.'”

“And now you don't remember.”

“No, because it never happened.”

“But you can remember remembering.”

“That's the way it works.”

“What if I don't have anything like that? Anything that bothers me when I remember it?”

“You may be surprised. Everybody has something. All the way from horrible crimes to egg on your face.”

“I don't. I've had a very tranquil life.”

“Happy childhood?”

“Oh, yes. My father—my biological father—”

“Yes?”

“He left us when I was a year old, but he looked me up when I was grown, and we have dinner every now and then. He's very nice, a very gentle man. He's very fond of me, in fact. So even that—it's just—”

He waited.

“Why do I have these headaches?” she said.

He looked down at his keypad. “Been to a doctor?”

“Many doctors. All the tests.”

“Well, then that's another good reason, isn't it? Really, I don't see how you can lose. Either you'll find something to change, like everybody else, or you won't. And if you *don't,* that's even better, don't you think?”

She hesitated. “When you edit your *life* —”

“Yes?”

“Doesn't that make everything different? Not just for you, for other people?”

“I'm not sure I follow.”

“Suppose, for instance, you had a lover, a woman, and it was a bad relationship. Now you go back and edit her out of your life, right?”

“Yes.” He looked uncomfortable.

“So, after you do that, just suppose she finds somebody else and they have a child. That child wouldn't have*existed* before. Or suppose you kill somebody, and you wish you hadn't. So you edit that, make it come out differently. So now the dead person is alive, but is she real, or just—some kind of ghost?”

“As far as I'm concerned, she's real. You know, what they tell us in training is, you're not creating anything. You're just moving from one timeline to another. Where you didn't say anything dumb to your girlfriend, didn't get drunk and fall down the stairs, whatever. So, in this new timeline, naturally you meet people that weren't in the old one. They're just as real as you are. Whatever that means.”

After a moment, looking at the machine, he remarked, “Your pulse rate has been holding pretty steady. This isn't an emotional thing with you, is it?”

“No. And I'm going to do it. Yes. I am. What do I do?”

“Just relax and remember. Start with things that happened today, then further back, further back. You'll know when you hit something you need to change, even if it's buried back there.”

The machine began to hum and the room darkened gradually, as if transparent dark petals were closing around her. She closed her eyes, and it was like falling into a well of shadows. Bright images swam up and receded, but there was nothing to edit or change; it was all moonlight and shadows, right back to her first birthday. The day when her drunken father picked her up by the ankles. And swung her. Against the cold dark.

And there was nothing to edit there, either. Somebody else, her father probably, had already edited that moment, or she wouldn't be here wandering like a cool ghost through the life that was so important to other people.

Orr was bending over her. “Ms. Appleforth?” She opened her eyes. “Are you all right?”

“I have an awful headache,” she said.

“That happens sometimes.” He sat down again.

She took the cuffs off, rose and opened the door. “Aside from that, I'm fine,” she said over her shoulder. “You're fine too, aren't you?”

“Yes.”

“Well, that's just fine. Isn't it?”

Orr looked up at her anxiously. “Ms. Appleforth, are you sure you're all right?”

“Oh, yes. Or if not—” As the door closed, her voice drifted back, “—does it matter?”

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A Likely Story

THAT WAS the damnedest December I ever saw in New York. Whatever the weather is, Manhattan always gets the worst of it—frying hot in summer, snow or slush up to your ankles in winter—and all along the seaboard, it was a mean season. Coming in from Pennsylvania the day before, we'd been held up twice while the tracks were cleared. But when I stepped out of the hotel that night, the Saturday after Christmas, it was like a mild October; the air was just cool, with a fresh hint of snow in it. There was a little slush in the gutters, not much; the pavements were dry.

I was late, or I would have gone back and ditched the rubbers; I hate the foolish things to begin with, one reason I moved to the country—out there, I wear house slippers half the year, galoshes the rest; there's no in-between. I took off my gloves, opened my scarf, and breathed deep lungfuls while I walked to the corner for a cab. I began to wonder if it had been smart to move ninety miles out of town just because I didn't like rubbers.

The streets didn't seem overcrowded. I got a cab without any trouble. Nobody was hurrying, it was as if the whole population was sitting peacefully at home or in some bar, in no rush to be anywhere else.

“Listen,” I said to the cabbie, “this is still New York, isn't it?"

He jerked his chin at me. “Hah?"

“Where's the crowds?” I said. “Where's the rotten weather? What happened?"

He nodded. “I know whatcha mean. Sure is funny. Crazy weather."

“Well, when did this happen?"

“Hah?"

“I said, how long has this been going on?"

“Cleared up about three o'clock. I looked out the winda, and the sun was shinin'. Jeez! You know what I think?”

You think it's them atom bombs,” I told him.

“That's right. You know what I think, I think it's them*atom* bombs.” He pulled up opposite a canopy and folded down his flag.

In the lobby, I found an arrow-shaped sign that said MEDUSA CLUB.

The Medusa Club is, loosely speaking, an association of professional science fiction writers. No two of them will agree on what science fiction is—or on anything else—but they all write it, or have written it, or pretend they can write it, or something. They have three kinds of meetings, or two and a half. One is for club politics, one is for drinking, and the third is also for drinking, only more so. As a rule, they meet in people's apartments, usually Preacher Flatt's or Ray Alvarez', but every year at this time they rent a hotel ballroom and throw a whingding. I'm a member in bad standing; the last time I paid my dues was in 1950.

Rod Pfehl (the P is silent, as in Psmith) was standing in the doorway, drunk, with a wad of dollar bills in his hand. “I'm the treasurer,” he said happily. “Gimme.” Either he was the treasurer, or he had conned a lot of people into thinking so. I paid him and started zigzagging slowly across the floor, trading hellos, looking for liquor.

Tom Q. Jones went by in a hurry, carrying a big camera. That was unusual; Tom Q. is head components

designer for a leading radio-TV manufacturer, and has sold, I guess, about two million words of science fiction, but this was the first time I had ever seen him in motion, or with anything but a highball in his hand. I spotted Punchy Carrol, nut-brown in a red dress; and Duchamp biting his pipe; and Leigh MacKean with her pale proto-Nordic face, as wistful and fey as the White Knight's; and there was a fan named Harry Somebody, nervously adjusting his hornrims as he peered across the room; and, this being the Christmas Party, there were a lot of the strangest faces on earth.

Most of them were probably friends of friends, but you never knew; one time there had been a quiet banker-type man at a Medusa meeting, sitting in a corner and not saying much, who turned out to be Dorrance Canning, an old idol of mine; he wrote the “Woman Who Slept” series and other gorgeous stuff before I was out of knee pants.

There were two blue-jacketed bartenders, and the drinks were eighty-five cents. Another reason I moved to the country is that the amusements are cheaper. Nursing my collins, I steered around two broad rumps in flounced satin and ran into Tom Q. He snapped a flashbulb in my face, chortled something, and went away while I was still dazzled. Somebody else with a lemon-colored spot for a head shook my left hand and muttered at me, but I wasn't listening; I had just figured out that what Tom had said was, “There's no*film* in it!"

Somebody fell down on the waxed floor; there was a little flurry of screams and laughter. I found myself being joggled, and managed to put away an inch of the collins to save it. Then I thought I saw Art Greymbergen, my favorite publisher, but before I could get anywhere near him Carrol's clear Sunday-school voice began calling, “The program is about to begin—please take your seats!” and a moment later people were moving sluggishly through the bar archway.

I looked at my watch, then hauled out my copy of the little mimeographed sheet, full of earnest jocularity, that the club sent out every year to announce the Party. It said that the program would begin somewhere around ten, and it was that now.

This was impossible. The program always pivoted on Bill Plass, and Bill never got there, or anywhere, until the party was due to break up.

But I looked when I got down near the bandstand, and by God there he was, half as large as life, gesturing, flashing his Charlie Chaplin grin, teetering like a nervous firewalker. He saw me and waved hello, and then went on talking to Asa Akimisov, Ph.D. (A-K-I-M-I-S-0-V, please, and never mind the Akimesian, or Akimsiov.)

Maybe it*was* them atom bombs. I found a vacant folding chair with a good view of the platform, and a better one of a striking brunette in blue. Akimisov got up on the platform, with his neck sticking out of his collar like a potted palm (he had lost forty pounds, again) and began telling jokes. Ace is the second funniest man in Medusa, the first being Plass; the peculiar thing is that Plass writes humor professionally, and delivers his annual set-pieces the same way—the rest of the time he is merely a perfectly fascinating morbid wit—but Akimisov, who writes nothing but the most heavily thoughtful fiction in the business, bubbles with humor all the time, a poor man's Sam Levenson. I was going to write an article once proving that a writer's personality on paper was his real one turned inside out, but I fell afoul of some exceptions. Like Tom Q., who was still flashing his bulbs over at the side of the platform, and being noisily suppressed—you could paper him all over with his published stories, and never know the difference.

The program was good, even for Medusa. Ned Burgeon, wearing a sky-blue dinner jacket and a pepper-and-salt goatee, played his famous twenty-one-string guitar; a dark-haired girl, a new one to me, sang in a sweet, strong contralto; there was a skit involving Punchy Carrol as a dream-beast, L. Vague

Duchamp as a bewildered spaceman, and B. U. Jadrys, the All-Lithuanian Boy, as a ticket agent for the Long Island Railroad. Then came Plass's annual monologue, and there is just nothing like those. I'm not exaggerating out of parochial pride (once a year is enough Medusa for me): the simple truth is that Plass is a comic genius.

He had his audience laid out flat, gasping and clutching its sides. Why should a man like that waste his time writing fiction?

Toward the end he paused, looked up from his notes, and ad-libbed a biting but not very funny wisecrack about—well, I'd better not say about what. A certain member in the audience stiffened and half got up, and there was a little embarrassed murmur under the laughter, but it was over in a minute. Bill looked flustered. He went back to his prepared speech, finished, and got a roar of applause.

I did my share, but I was worried. Bill can charm the rattles off a snake; if he wanted to go in for quack-doctoring, nut cultism or Canadian mining stock, let alone night-club comedy, he could be a millionaire. That *gaffe* simply hadn't been like him, at all. Still, it was Bill's Dostoevskian soul that made him the funny man he was, and God only knew what had been happening to him in the year since I'd been in town ...

Akimisov, as m.c., delivered the final words. He bowed, straightened, and his pants fell down.

In the dressing room, when I got back there, Bill was busy apologizing to the member on whose toes he had trodden—that apology would have soothed a tiger with a toothache—and Akimisov, with a bewildered expression, was holding up his pants. That was what I was curious about; it was another false note—I didn't think Ace would stoop that low for a laugh. The pants were too big for him, of course, but Ace had always struck me as the kind of guy who wears a belt *and* suspenders.

He did; but the tongue had come out of the belt-buckle, and all the suspenders buttons had popped, all at once. Scouts were being sent out to look for a belt that would fit.

I wandered out into the hall again. I was beginning to get a peculiar feeling on one drink. Too many fresh vegetables; I can't take it like I used to. So I went to the bar and got another.

When I came out, the brunette in the blue evening gown was standing near the doorway listening to Larry Bagsby. Next thing I knew, she let out a whoop, grabbed her bosom, and fetched Larry a good one on the ear. This was unfair. I was a witness, and Larry hadn't done a thing except look; her over-worked shoulder straps had simply given way, like Akimisov's suspenders.

Curiouser and curiouser ... The noises around me were picking up in volume and tempo, for all the world like a dancehall scene in a Western movie, just before somebody throws the first table. There was a thud and a screech off to my right; I gathered that somebody else had fallen down. Then a tinkle of bursting glass, and another little chorus of shouts, and then another thud. It went on like that. The crowd was on the move, in no particular direction, everybody was asking everybody else what was going on.

I felt the same way, so I went looking for Ray Alvarez; you can always count on him to tell you the answer, or make one up.

Tom Q. went by, flashing that camera, and it wasn't till the mob had swallowed him that I realized he wasn't replacing the bulb between shots—the same one was blazing over and over.

Well, a few years ago it was silly putty; the year before that, Diarrhetics. This year, everlasting flash bulbs—and no film in the camera.

Ned Burgeon passed me, his grin tilting his whiskers dangerously near the lighted stub in his cigarette holder; he was carrying the guitar case as if he were wading ashore with it. I saw Duchamp off to one side, talking to somebody, gesturing emphatically with his pipe.

It isn't so, but occasionally you get the impression that science fiction writers are either very tall or very short. I watched H. Drene Pfeiffer stilt by, Ray Bolgerish in an astonishing skin-tight suit of horseblanket plaid, followed by Will Kubatius and the*heldentenor* bulk of Don W. Gamble, Jr. I lowered my sights. Sandwiched between the giants there ought to have been half a dozen people I'd have been glad to see—if not Alvarez, then Bill Plass or his brother Horty; or Jerry Thaw; Bagsby; Preacher Flatt, who looks too much like a marmoset to be true ... But no: down on those lower levels there was nobody but an eleven-year-old boy who had got in by mistake, and the ubiquitous fan, Harry*You* -Know, the one with the glasses and all that hair. I tacked, veering slightly, and beat across the room the other way.

There was another crash of glass, a*big* one, and a louder chorus of yells. It wasn't all automatic female shrieks, this time; I caught a couple of male voices, raised in unmistakable anger.

The crowd was thinning out a little; droves of friends of friends appeared to be heading for the coat room. Across one of the clear spaces came a pretty blonde, looking apprehensive. In a minute I saw why. Her skirt billowed out around her suddenly and she yelled, crouched, holding the cloth down with both hands, then sunfished away into the crowd. A moment later the same thing happened to a tall brown-haired girl over to my left.

That was too much. Glancing up, I happened to see the big cut-glass chandelier begin swaying gently from side to side, jingling faintly, working up momentum. I moved faster, buttonholing everyone I knew: “Have you seen Ray? Have you seen Ray?"

I heard my name, and there he was, standing like stout Cortez atop the piano, where he could see the whole room like an anthill. I climbed up beside him. Alvarez, to quote Duchamp's description, is a small rumpled man with an air of sleepy good-nature. This is apt until you get close to him, when you discover he is about as sleepy as a hungry catamount. “Hi,” he said, with a sidewise glance.

“Hi. What do you think's doing it?"

“It could be,” said Ray, speaking firmly and rapidly, “a local discontinuity in the four-dimensional plenum that we're passing through. Or it could be poltergeists—that's perfectly possible, you know.” He gave me a look, daring me to deny it.

“You think so?"

“It*could* be."

“By golly, I believe you're right,” I said. This is the only way to handle Alvarez when he talks nonsense. If you give him the slightest degree of resistance, he will argue along the same line till doomsday, just to prove he can.

“Mmm,” he said thoughtfully, screwing up his face. “No, I don't—think—so."

“No?"

“No,” he said positively. “You notice how the thing seems to travel around the room?” He nodded to a fist fight that was breaking out a few yards from us, and then to a goosed girl leaping over by the bar entrance. “There's a kind of irregular rhythm to it.” He moved his hand, illustrating. “One thing happens—then another thing—now here it comes around this way again—"

A fat friend of a friend and her husband backed up against the platform just below us, quivering. There was something wrong with my fingers; they felt warm. The collins glass was turning warm. Warm,*hell* —I yelped and dropped it, sucking my fingers. The glass looped and fell neatly on the flowered hat of the friend of a friend, and liquid splattered. The woman hooted like a peanut whistle. She whirled, slipped in the puddle and lurched off into the arms of a hairy authors' agent. Her husband dithered after her a couple of steps, then came back with blood in his eye. He got up as far as the piano stool when, as far as I could make out, his pants split up the back and he climbed down again, glaring and clutching himself.

"Now it's over in the middle," said Ray imperturbably. "It*might* be poltergeists, I won't say it isn't. But I've got a hunch there's another answer, actually."

I said something dubious. A hotel-manager-looking kind of man had just come in and was looking wildly around. Punchy Carrol went up to him, staring him respectfully right in the eye, talking a quiet six to his dozen. After a moment he gave up and listened. I've known Punchy ever since she was a puppy-eyed greenhorn from Philadelphia, and I don't underestimate her anymore. I knew the manager-type would go away and not call any cops—at least for a while.

I glanced down at the floor, and then looked again. There were little flat chips of ice scattered in the wetness. That could have been from the ice cubes; but there was*frost* on some of the pieces of glass.

Hot on the bottom, cold on top!

"Ray," I said, "something's buzzing around in my mind. Maxwell's demon." I pointed to the frosted bits of glass. "That might— No, I'm wrong, that couldn't account for all these—"

He took it all in in one look. "Yes, it could!" he snapped. His cat-eyes gleamed at me. "Maxwell had the theory of the perfect heat pump—it would work if you could only find a so-called demon, about the size of a molecule, that would bat all the hot molecules one way, and all the cold ones the other."

"I know," I said. "But—"

"Okay, I'm just explaining it to you."

What he told me was what I was thinking: Our unidentified friend had some way of changing probability levels. I mean, all the molecules of air under a woman's skirt*could* suddenly decide to move in the same direction—or all the molecules in a patch of flooring*could* lose their surface friction—it just wasn't likely. If you could make it likely—there wasn't any limit. You could make honest dice turn up a thousand sevens in a row. You could run a car without an engine; make rain or fair weather; reduce the crime index to zero; keep a demagogue from getting re-elected ...

Well, if all that was true, I wanted in. And I didn't have the ghost of a chance—I was out of touch; I didn't know anybody. Ray knew everybody.

"Spread out, folks!" said a bullhorn voice. It was Samwitz, of course, standing on a bench at the far wall. Kosmo Samwitz, the Flushing Nightingale; not one of the Medusa crowd, usually—a nice enough guy, and a hard-working committeeman, but the ordinary Manhattan meeting hall isn't big enough to hold his voice. "Spread out—make an equal distance between you. That way we can't get into any fights." People started following his orders, partly because they made sense, partly because, otherwise, he'd go on bellowing.

"That's good—that's good," said Samwitz. "All right, this meeting is hereby called to order. The chair will entertain suggestions about what the nature of these here phenomenon are..."

Ray showed signs of wanting to get down and join the caucus; he loves parliamentary procedure better than life itself; so I said hastily, “Let's get down with the crowd, Ray. We can't see much better up here, anyway."

He stiffened. “You go if you want to,” he said quietly. “I'm staying here, where I can keep an eye on things."

The chandelier was now describing stately circles, causing a good deal of ducking and confusion, but the meeting was getting on with its business, namely, arguing about whether to confirm Kosmo by acclamation or nominate and elect a chairman in the usual way. That subject, I figured, was good for at least twenty minutes. I said, “Ray, will you tell me the truth if I ask you something?"

“Maybe.” He grinned.

“Are you doing this?"

He threw his head back and chuckled. “No-o, I'm not doing it.” He looked at me shrewdly, still grinning. “Is that why you were looking for me?"

I admitted it humbly. “It was just a foolish idea,” I said. “Nobody we know could possibly—"

“*I*don't know about that,” he said, squinting thoughtfully.

“Ah, come on, Ray."

He was affronted. “Why not? We've got some pretty good scientific brains in Medusa, you know. There's Gamble—he's an atomic physicist. There's Don Bierce; there's Duchamp; there's—"

“I know,” I said, “I know, but where would any of them have got hold of a thing like*this* ?"

“They could have invented it,” he said stoutly.

“You mean like Balmer and Phog Relapse running the Michelson experiment in their cellar, and making it come out that there*is* an ether drift, only it's*down?* "

He bristled. “No, I do not—"

“Or like Lobbard discovering Scatiology?"

“Ptah! No! Like Watt, like Edison, Galileo” —he thumbed down three fingers emphatically—"Goodyear, Morse, Whitney—"

Down below, the meeting had taken less than five minutes to confirm Samwitz as chairman. I think the chandelier helped; they ought to install one of those in every parliamentary chamber.

The chair recognized Punchy, who said sweetly that the first order of business ought to be to get opinions from the people who knew something, beginning with Werner Kley.

Werner accordingly made a very charming speech, full of Teutonic rumbles, the essence of which was that he didn't know any more about this than a rabbit. He suggested, however, that pictures should be taken. There was a chorus of “Tom!” and Jones staggered forward with his war-cry: “There isn't any*film* in it!"

Somebody was dispatched to get film; somebody else trotted out to telephone for reporters and cameramen, and three or four other people headed in a businesslike way for the men's room.

Ray was simultaneously trying to get the chair's attention and explaining to me, in staccato asides, how many epochal inventions had been made by amateurs in attic workshops. I said—and this was really bothering me—"But look: do you see anybody with any kind of a gadget? How's he going to hide it? How's he going to focus it, or whatever?'

Ray snorted. “It might be hidden in almost anything. Burgeon's guitar—Gamble's briefcase—Mr. Chairman!"

Duchamp was talking, but I could feel it in my bones that Samwitz was going to get around to Ray next. I leaned closer. “Ray, listen—a thing like this—they wouldn't keep it to themselves, would they?"

“Why not? Wouldn't you—for a while, anyway?” He gave me his bobcat grin. “I can think of quite—a—few things I could do, if I had it."

So could I; that was the whole point. I said, “Yeah. I was hoping we could spot him, before the crowd does.” I sighed. “Fat chance, I suppose."

He gave me another sidelong look. “That shouldn't be so hard,” he drawled.

“You*know* who it is?"

He put on his most infuriating grin, peering to see how I took it. “I've, got, a few, ideas."

“Who?"

Wrong question. He shook his head with a that-would-be-telling look.

Somebody across the room went down with a crash; then somebody else. “Sit on the floor!” Ray shouted, and they all did it, squatting cautiously like old ladies at a picnic. The meeting gathered speed again.

I looked apprehensively at the narrow piano top we were standing on, and sat down with my legs hanging over. Ray stayed where he was, defying the elements.

“You know, all right,” I said, looking up at him, “but you're keeping it to yourself.” I shrugged. “Well, why shouldn't you?"

“O-kay,” he said good-naturedly. “Lets figure it out. Where were you when it started?"

“In the bar."

“Who else was there? Try to remember exactly."

I thought. “Art Greymbergen. Fred Balester. Gamble was there—"

“Okay, that eliminates him—and you, incidentally—because it started in here. Right, so far?"

“Right!"

“Hmmm. Something happened*to* Akimisov."

“And Plass—that booboo he made?"

Ray dismissed Plass with a gesture. He was looking a little restive; another debate was under way down below, with Punchy and Leigh MacKean vociferously presenting the case for psychokinesis, and being

expertly heckled by owlish little M. C. (Hotfoot) Burncloth's echo-chamber voice. “It's too much,” I said quickly. “There's too many of them left. We'll never—"

“It's perfectly simple!” Ray said incisively. He counted on his fingers again. “Burgeon—Kley—Duchamp—Bierce—Burncloth—Jones—MacKean—Jibless. Eight people."

“One of the visitors?” I objected.

He shook his head. “I know who all these people are, generally,” he said. “It's got to be one of those eight. I'll take Kley, Bierce, Jibless and MacKean—you watch the other four. Sooner or later they'll give themselves away."

I had*been* watching. I did it some more.

A wave of neck-clutching passed over the crowd. Cold breezes, I expect. Or hot ones, in some cases. Tom Jones leaped up with a cry and sat down again abruptly.

“Did you see anything?” Ray asked.

I shook my head. Where, I wondered, was the good old science-fiction camaraderie? If I'd been the lucky one, I would have let the crowd in—well, a few of them, anyway—given them jobs and palaces and things. Not that they would have been grateful, probably, the treacherous, undependable, neurotic bums ...

They were looking nervous now. There had been that little burst of activity after a long pause (even the chandelier seemed to be swinging slowly to rest), and now the—call it the stillness—was more than they could stand. I felt it too: that building up of tension. Whoever it was, was getting tired of little things.

A horrible jangling welled out of Burgeon's guitar case; it sounded like a bull banjo with the heaves. Ned jumped, dropped his cigarette holder, got the case open and I guess put his hand on the strings; the noise stopped. That eliminated him . . . or did it?

Take it another way. What would the guy have to be like who would waste a marvel like this on schoolboy pranks at a Medusa Christmas party? Not Jibless, I thought—he abominates practical jokers. Bierce didn't seem to be the type either, although you could never tell; the damnedest wry stories get hatched occasionally in that lean ecclesiastic skull. Duchamp was too staid (but was I sure?); MacKean was an enigma. Gamble? Just maybe. Burgeon? Jones? It could be either, I thought, but I wasn't satisfied.

I glanced at Ray again, and mentally crossed him off for the second or third time. Ray's an honorable man, within his own complicated set of rules; he might mislead me, with pleasure, but he wouldn't lie outright.

But I had the feeling that the answer was square in front of me, and I was blind to it.

The meeting was just now getting around to the idea that somebody present was responsible for all the nonsense. This shows you the trouble with committees.

A shocking idea hit me abruptly; I grabbed Ray by the coatsleeve. “Ray, this cockeyed weather—I just remembered.*Suppose it's local* ."

His eyes widened; he nodded reluctantly. Then he stiffened and snapped his fingers at somebody squatting just below us—the invisible fan, Harry Somebody. I hadn't even noticed him there, but it's Ray's business to know everything and keep track of everybody—that's why he's up on his hill.

The fan came over. Ray handed him something. “Here's some change, Harry—run out and call up the weather bureau. Find out whether this freak weather is local or not, and if it is, just where the boundaries are. Got that?"

Harry nodded and went out. He was back only a couple of minutes later. “I got the weather bureau all right. They say it's local—just Manhattan and Queens!"

Something snapped. I did a fast jig on the piano top, slipped and came crashing down over the keys, but I hardly noticed it. I got a death-grip on Ray's trouser leg. “Listen! If he can do that—he doesn't have to be in the same room. Doesn't Gamble live out in—"

There were cries of alarm over by the open courtyard window. The room was suddenly full of cats—brindle ones, black ones, tabbies, white ones with pink ribbons around their necks, lunatic Siamese.

After them came dogs: one indistinguishable wave of liquid leaping torsos, flying ears, gullets. In half a second the room was an incident written by Dante for the Mutascope.

I caught a glimpse of a terrier bounding after two cats who were climbing Samwitz’ back; I saw Duchamp asprawl, pipe still in his mouth, partially submerged under a tidal eddy of black and white. I saw Tom Q. rise up like a lighthouse, only to be bowled over by a frantically scrambling Leigh MacKean.

Ray touched my arm and pointed. Over by the far wall, his back against it, Gamble stood like a slightly potbound Viking. He was swinging that massive briefcase of his, knocking a flying cat or dog aside at every swipe. Two women had crawled into his lee for shelter; he seemed to be enjoying himself.

Then the briefcase burst. It didn't just come open; it flew apart like a comedy suitcase, scattering a whirlwind of manuscript paper, shirts, socks—and nothing else.

The tide rushed toward the window again: the last screech and the last howl funneled out. In the ringing silence, somebody giggled. I couldn't place it, and neither could Ray, I think—then. Stunned, I counted scratched noses.

Samwitz was nowhere in sight; the crowd had thinned a good deal, but all of the eight, thank heaven, were still there—MacKean sitting groggily on a stranger's lap, Werner Kley nursing a bloody nose, Tom Q., camera still dangling from his neck, crawling carefully on hands and knees toward the door ...

He reached it and disappeared. An instant later, we heard a full chorus of feminine screams from the lobby, and then the sound of an enormous J. Arthur Rank-type gong.

Ray and I looked at each other with a wild surmise. “*Tom* lives in Queens!” he said.

I scrambled down off the piano and the platform, but Ray was quicker. He darted into the crowd, using his elbows in short efficient jabs. By the time I got to the door he was nowhere in sight.

The lobby was full of large powdery women in flowered dresses, one of them still shrieking. They slowed me down, and so did tripping over one of those big cylindrical jardinieres full of sand and snipes. I reached the street just in time to see Ray closing the door of a cab.

I hadn't the wind to shout. I saw his cheerful face and Tom's in the small yellow glow of the cab light; I saw Tom Q. raise the camera, and Ray put out his hand to it. Then the cab pulled away into traffic, and I watched its beady red tail lights down the avenue until they winked out of sight.

Some time later, walking down the cold morning street, I discovered there was somebody with me, keeping step, not saying anything. It was Harry Er-Ah.

He saw I had noticed him. “Some party,” he remarked.

I said yeah.

“That was pretty funny, what happened in the lobby."

“I didn't see it."

“He came tearing through there on all fours. Right into the middle of all those women. They probably thought he was a mad dog or something."

I took two more steps, and stopped, and looked at him. “That was*all* he did?” I said.

“Sure."

“Well, then,” I said with mounting exasperation, “in the name of— Oh. Wait a minute. You're wrong,” I told him, calming down again. “There was the gong. He made that gong noise."

“Did he?” said Harry. One nervous hand went up and adjusted the hornrims.

I felt a little tugging at my shirt front, and looked down to see my necktie slithering out. I swatted at it instinctively, but it ducked away and hovered, swaying like a cobra.

Then it dropped. He showed me his open hand, and there was a wire running up out of his sleeve, with a clip on the end of it. For the first time, I noticed two rings of metal wired behind the lens frames of his eyeglasses.

He pulled his other hand out of his pocket, and there was a little haywire rig in it—batteries and a couple of tubes and three tuning knobs.

Fans, I was thinking frozenly—sixteen or eighteen, maybe, with pimples and dandruff and black fingernails, and that wonderful, terrible eagerness boiling up inside them ... slaving away at backyard rocketry experiments, wiring up crazy gadgets that never worked, printing bad fiction and worse poetry in mimeographed magazines ... How could I have forgotten?

“I wasn't going to tell anybody,” he said. “No matter what happened. If they'd*looked* at me, just once, they would have seen. But as long as you're worrying so much about it—” He blinked, and said humbly, “It scares me. What do you think I ought to do?"

My fingers twitched. I said, “Well, this will take some thinking about, Harry. Uh, can I—"

He backed off absentmindedly as I stepped toward him. “I've been thinking about it,” he said. “As a matter of fact, I haven't been to bed since yesterday morning. I worked on it straight through from four o'clock yesterday. Twenty hours. I took caffeine tablets. But go ahead, tell me. What would you do if you"—he said it apologetically—"were me?"

I swallowed. “I'd go at it slowly,” I said. “You can make a lot of mistakes by—"

He interrupted me, with a sudden fiendish glint in his eye. “The man that has this is pretty important, don't you think?” And he grinned. “How would you like to see my face on all the stamps?"

I shuddered in spite of myself. “Well—"

“I wouldn't*bother* ,” he said. “I've got something better to do first."

“Harry,” I said, leaning, “if I've said anything..."

“You didn't say anything.” He gave me such a look as I hope I never get from a human again. “Big shot!"

I grabbed for him, but he was too quick. He leaped back, jamming the gadget into his pocket, fumbling at the spectacles with his other hand. I saw his feet lift clear of the pavement. He was hanging there like a mirage, drifting backward and upward just a little faster than I could run.

His voice came down, thin and clear: “I'll send you a postcard from..."

I lost the last part; anyhow, it couldn't have been what it sounded like.

Just over a month later came Palomar's reports of unaccountable lights observed on the dark limb of Mars. Every science fiction reader in the world, I suppose, had the same thought—of a wanderer's footprints fresh in the ancient dust, his handprints on controls not shaped for hands, the old wild light wakened. But only a few of us pictured hornrims gleaming there in the Martian night ...

I drove over to Milford and had a look through Ham Jibless’ homemade telescope. I couldn't see the lights, of course, but I could see that damned infuriating planet, shining away ruddy there across thirty-six million miles of space, with its eternal*Yah, yah, you can't catch me!*

Medusa meetings have been badly attended since then, I'm told; for some reason, it gives the members the green heaves to look at each other.

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La Ronde

HE FELT that he was gone a long time, and when he came back from wherever it was, he found himself sitting on a stone, gazing at a wrecked automobile that was tilted upside down against a tree. One of the front wheels was lazily turning. The door on the driver's side hung open; below it the whole top of the car had been crushed flat, and it seemed to him a miracle that anyone had got out alive.

There was a buzzing in his head, but he stood up and went closer to the wreck to see if anyone needed help. The car was empty. What could have become of the driver?

For that matter, what was he himself doing here? Perhaps it would come back to him in a minute, when he was rested. He went all around the car with a kind of dumb obstinacy, through brush that whipped his legs under his coat. No one was there.

Above him there was a broad muddy swath, littered with glass, bits of chrome, and more incongruous things—scattered pieces of white tissue, sunglasses, a pack of cigarettes. He climbed, helping himself up from one sapling to another, until he reached the highway, where he stood looking uncertainly around him. There were long black skid marks on the macadam. The road made a curve here, and on the opposite side the slope resumed, rising another hundred feet against the gray sky. It was very cold.

He peered down the slope again, thinking that from this elevation he might be able to see the body of the driver, but he could barely make out the wreck itself through the screen of branches.

Although he could not think very clearly because of the continuous dull buzzing in his head, he knew that he ought to report the accident, and he trudged out around the curve in the direction the car had been going. The road straightened here for a distance of half a mile or so; it was empty and gray under the sky, with the gloomy forested slope on one side and the ravine on the other. There were no highway signs, no billboards, nothing to tell him where he might be.

The road ran on, empty and cold under the gray sky. The forested hill was behind him now and on either side were bare fields. A few flakes of snow came drifting along; they melted at once on the highway. Then the snow came more thickly and made a white film in which he left a trail of glistening footprints. For some reason this alarmed him, but when he looked back after a few minutes, he saw that the prints were rapidly being covered.

He went on, with the snow whipping into his eyes, until he came to a private road with a chain across it. He ducked under the chain. The road went up steeply, covered with dead leaves and fallen branches. Over the crest of the rise, it ran straight between fields grown up with tall weeds to a white house on a hill. While he was climbing the slope he had been sheltered a little from the wind-driven snow, but now it flew at him again. As he approached the house he could see that the windows were boarded up. The big front door had a padlock on it. He went around the house and found the back door padlocked too.

As he stood under the eaves to get out of the wind, he noticed an oblong pit covered by a framework of metal bars next to the foundation. He crouched over it and tugged the framework; the metal was rusted and heavy, but it came up. He laid it aside. When he had cleared out the dead leaves and spruce needles underneath, he found, as he had guessed, that the pit was a light-well for a cellar window. He pulled up the hinged window, crawled through and dropped into musty darkness.

The light from the cobwebbed glass was water-gray, but it was enough to show him the wooden steps that led up to a trap-door. When he raised the trap, he found himself in a long gray room illuminated only by a watery glow at one of the windows. It was cold—colder, it seemed, than the outdoors. His ghostly breath rose in the air.

There was firewood and kindling in a box beside the old-fashioned cookstove, but not a scrap of paper, though he opened one drawer after another and lighted matches to look in. In one of the drawers he found the stub of a candle, and with this in his shivering hand he went through a dining room, and from there into a library. Even here there were no newspapers, only the moldy-apricot-colored leather books in the glass-fronted bookcases. He retreated into the kitchen, and this time opened the doors of cabinets, where he found brittle shelf paper under the heavy old plates and tumblers. He pulled out a few pieces of this, and presently had a fire going in the stove.

The tall wooden icebox was empty, but he found peaches in a glass jar in the pantry. The jar was like none he had ever seen; it had a glass top held down by two jointed handles, and a red rubber gasket between jar and lid. He stood beside the stove, which was now radiating an almost imperceptible warmth, and ate the peaches with a cold metallic-tasting spoon.

There was a kerosene lamp on the kitchen table; he filled it from a can he found in the pantry and lighted it. It smoked at first, blackening the inside of the glass chimney, until he found out how to adjust and trim the wick. Carrying the lamp, he mounted the back stairway and found two bedrooms. The beds had been stripped, but the mattresses, covered with coarse gray-striped twill, remained. He dragged one of them down the stairs to the kitchen; there, in front of the stove, he stretched out in his clothes and fell asleep.

The cold woke him early in the morning; the fire had gone out. He built it up again, ate the rest of the peaches for breakfast, and then set out to explore the house. All the furniture was Victorian, even the pieces that looked almost new. Under the high crossbeamed ceiling hung a black wrought-iron chandelier with candles in it. Kerosene lamps with painted china shades were on all the tables. The living room, dining room, and library had fireplaces, red brick in the living room, green tile in the other two; there were fireplaces in two of the upstairs bedrooms as well. Two other upstairs rooms had doors which he could not open.

He went down again to forage in the pantry. He found sacks of flour and cornmeal, cans of condensed milk, oil and lard, and jar after jar of preserved fruit and vegetables. There was plenty of wood stacked on the porch and in the yard.

With tools he found in the cellar he pried loose the staple that held the padlock on the back door, so that he could go in and out freely while leaving the door apparently still locked. Gray smoke ascended from the kitchen chimney; he could not help that, but the sky was so overcast, although it was no longer snowing, that he thought the smoke would not be seen.

With flour, water and condensed milk he mixed a batter and made pancakes. There was even a whole cheese, not very moldy; he cut off the bad part and ate a wedge with his pancakes.

Afterward he made fires in all the fireplaces downstairs. He fed them until they roared in the chimneys, but the stubborn cold of the house yielded slowly. Even when he sat in a wing chair with his feet on the hearth, he could feel the insistent chill probing at his back.

All through the house, the firelight sent shadows racing up the walls. These shadows disturbed him, and he went to work filling the oil lamps, trimming and adjusting their wicks.

Nowhere in the house was there any electrical appliance: no lights, no television, not even a radio. There were no newspapers, and no magazines except for the bound volumes of*Harper's* and*The Century* in the library, Even the bathroom fixtures were old; the shower (which did not work) was a vast sunflower-head of metal suspended on a stalk over the claw-footed bathtub. In the mahogany medicine cabinet he found bone toothbrushes with black hog-bristles, and medicines in plain brown bottles with paper labels: ipecac, calamine. Yet he knew that the house could not have been abandoned for more than a year or two; there was dust everywhere, but only a light film, not the accumulation of a century. Moreover, it was curious, in a house with so much food in it, that there was no sign of rats.

He was reluctant to damage anything in the house, but in the end his curiosity won out, and he forced the two locked doors upstairs. Behind one of them was a lumber room, choked with bedsteads, sofas, chairs, all dusty and soiled, but modern in appearance. The second room had been fitted out as an office, with an oak desk, a leather armchair, and an ancient Royal typewriter, the kind with a little glass window in the side through which part of the works could be seen.

Beside the typewriter lay a sheaf of manuscript. The first few words caught his eye, and he sat down to read.

My maternal great-grandfather built his house on a terrace at the foot of a wooded hill in Potamos Township, near the New York and New Jersey borders of Pennsylvania in what they now call the “Tri-States” area. Behind the house there are seven Norway spruces, of which the tallest is about eighty feet; the ground beneath them is carpeted with brown needles, and the wind moves quietly through their branches. Farther up the hill are Scotch pines, native spruces and firs, maples, and birch. Still farther up, a mile or so above the house, there is an old logging road, now grown up in maple saplings, and above that the foundations of a settler's cabin, the stones barely visible in the underbrush. Except for these, and

a power line that crosses the hill, there is no sign of human habitation.

The house itself is of white-painted frame and shiplap construction, three stories tall, with dormers, a veranda and an Italian slate roof. Over the years it has settled, having been built without footings, as the custom then was, but the frame is sturdy; I remember that an electrician who was called in to wire the house, when I was a boy, complained that he had to drill through innumerable “cats,” diagonal framing members which united the studs.

The downstairs rooms are paneled in golden oak; the floors are parquet. All the rooms, even the old servants’ quarters on the third floor, are ample in size; the living room ceiling is eighteen feet high, and the rest fifteen. These high ceilings make the house “hard to heat,” as the local expression has it, but they give a sense of spaciousness and a quality of sound entirely different from that in “modern” cheap-jack houses. It is a soothing and relaxing ambience, a feeling of permanence and safety, which must be experienced to be appreciated.

When I saw the house again, after the death of my aunt Margaret in 1978, the silences of the vast rooms seemed to speak of boyhood pleasures. I am half-convinced that houses somehow soak up psychic experiences of their inhabitants; there are certain houses which have a mean-spirited or discouraged air, and there are city apartments that seem to radiate a sense of irritability, as if the walls still contained the last echoes of an angry shout.

My aunt Margaret, who had lived in this house since I was a boy, and to whom my parents willed the possession and use of the property during her lifetime, was, I now think, a kindred soul; we were alike at least in that each of us was happiest in a state of nonmatrimony. When I was a child, however, I disliked and feared her, because she sometimes seemed aware of my existence and sometimes not.

It was she who had redecorated the house and covered all the sofas with chintz, hung “modern” pictures and strewn the coffee tables with cigarette boxes and French novels. Yet even her old age and illness seemed to have left no psychic traces in this house. The walls, the cornices, the mantelpieces seemed to say, “Here we are, as we have always been. Why have you stayed away so long?"

I must add that although there were no ghosts in the house itself, the cellar was another matter. It was irregular and low, angling around a huge stone that had been too big for the excavators to remove; to reach it, one went down through a trap in the kitchen and then had to walk stooping along a sort of cobwebbed passageway to reach the farther room where the furnace was. In this chamber, so long as the light was on, I felt no uneasiness, but in the stifling dark something was there, some malevolent and incoherent impulse that was older than the house.

Against the well-meant advice of my friends, I settled my affairs in New York, retired from my practice, sold most of my furniture, and disposed of my lease. In September I moved into the old house. A local woman, Mrs. Beveridge, helped me set the place to rights. I gathered that she was a recent widow, in straitened circumstances; I asked her to stay on as my housekeeper, and she agreed.

Mrs. Beveridge was a woman of perhaps fifty, sturdily built, with pale skin and dark hair which she wore in an old-fashioned bun. Her husband, whom she rarely mentioned, had been a carpenter or roofer or something of that sort; she herself had had little education, but she had a high degree of native intelligence and had formed her mind by reading. I felt myself lucky to have her, not only because of her efficiency in caring for the house, but because there was no suggestion on either side of any sexual innuendo between us. She spoke little, in a quiet voice, and adapted her habits perfectly to mine. When I wanted her for any reason she was there; when I wished to be alone she effaced herself. In the evenings she retired to her room on the third floor, where I sometimes heard her radio playing softly.

In November an early storm knocked down power lines and left us without light or heat. Mrs. Beveridge kindled fires in the fireplaces and kept the wood range going in the kitchen; I got out the kerosene lamps which were kept for such emergencies, and we ate by candlelight. During the four days of the storm, I became accustomed to the soft light of lamps and candles and grew to like it. When the power came back on, I discovered that I was actually disappointed. The electric lights seemed cold and impersonal; they revealed too much; I preferred the warm brown darkness, the mystery. I continued to use the lamps; Mrs. Beveridge appeared to have no objection.

With her help, I carried down some pieces of furniture abandoned years ago in the attic. The marble-topped dressers and tables were as sound as ever; the chairs and love seats, of course, were upholstered in horsehair, impossibly hard to sit on, and the leather was cracked and peeling. As soon as I was able, I got an upholsterer in Stroudsburg to come out and take these pieces away for refinishing. I had them done in rose and blue plush, or rather mohair, a deep-piled fabric. When they were brought back and arranged in the living room, the remaining modern pieces looked all the more out of place. One by one I got rid of them. At the Auction Barn, so-called, on the Port Jervis road I found a huge icebox and two large copper washtubs. I consulted Mrs. Beveridge about each of these changes, half-expecting her to demur since they involved more labor for her, but she expressed her entire satisfaction, and indeed, I often heard her singing quietly at her work. At last, more than nine months after I had begun, I was able to look about me and see nothing whatever that had been made later than the year 1910. I had, of course, canceled my subscriptions to all newspapers and magazines. Our supplies were delivered in bulk by a Mr. Thomas and stored by Mrs. Beveridge.

From a dealer in Stroudsburg I acquired a parlor organ in fair condition. It had not been converted to motorized operation, as so many old organs have; the bellows was cracked, however, and some of the padding under the keys was worn away. When it was restored, it functioned perfectly. The organ had a keyboard of two and a half octaves, and with the use of various stops ("Tremolo," “Celeste,” “Vox Humana,” and the like) it could produce an astonishing variety of pleasant sounds. I made some effort to learn this instrument, and amused myself with it sometimes when Mrs. Beveridge was at her work, but she was so much better at it than I that in the evenings I merely sat and listened to her play. We had a music book, published in the 1880s, which contained some charming things of Schubert's, as well as some sacred music and even a few popular songs.

I discovered in myself an insatiable appetite for Victorian literature—novels, miscellanies, journals. That spring I haunted the antique shops and secondhand stores around Potamos. One of my prizes was a leather-bound set of Dickens, published in 1878, with the original illustrations; another was a work entitled*Dr. Hood's Plain Talks and Common Sense Medical Adviser* , a quaint heavy volume which recommended prussic acid for stomach ulcers, and cocaine for heroin addiction. As for health care, I knew quite well that if I became seriously ill I should have to seek modern medical treatment, but my health was good as long as I took care not to overstrain my heart, and Mrs. Beveridge was never ill.

I was aware that the Victorian life I was attempting to re-create within these walls was not the reality. The songs of Victorian men and women were not all decorous, nor were all their habits nice. A real Victorian bachelor in my situation would long before now, in all probability, have undone the laces of his housekeeper's underwear. No, it was not the real Victorian world that I was attempting to re-create, but my boyhood's imaginary world of safety, serenity, and gentleness.

I confess that I was as much alarmed as pleased by the alacrity with which Mrs. Beveridge fell in with my scheme. Never once did she suggest even by a smile or a gesture that what we were doing was absurd. She seemed to take it all as perfectly normal, and it was this that alarmed me. Either we were falling together into a*folie a deux* , or she was humoring me, with consummate skill, for some motive of her own which I could not guess.

At any rate, the life we now began to lead was so pleasant that I ceased to question it. In the mornings, in fine weather, I tended my garden; in the afternoons I worked in my study, and in the evenings Mrs. Beveridge and I decorously diverted ourselves. On fair days the house was sunny, and the porch pillars, which I could see through the glass pane of the door at the far end of the living room, gave back the pure essence of light. But it is the winter evenings that I remember with more pleasure, when the whole world was shut out in darkness, and the lamps were surrounded by a brown gloom.

With the aid of an old book of parlor tricks and games, Mrs. Beveridge and I relearned the art of the cat's cradle, forming more and more intricate figures with a loop of string. Beginning with the Cat's Cradle, we went on to the Calm Sea, the Upturned Cradle, the Mattress Turned Over, the Cat's Eye, the Pig on the Pegs. We also played at making hand shadows on the wall: the Bird in Flight, the Tortoise, the Goose a prisoner (in which one hand grips the wrist of the other which forms the goose), and so on; we played word games, at which Mrs. Beveridge was very good, and sometimes Anagrams, Scat, or Old Maid.

I counted, I say, on the fact that I was completely aware of my own deepening obsession, but this belief was shaken one morning, when, arising earlier than usual, I went down to the kitchen to see if there was any coffee. It was about seven o'clock; the day was clear, and the sunlight reflecting from the white snow gave a shimmer to the atmosphere. Mrs. Beveridge was nowhere in sight, but a man in a long coat was carrying a sack up the steps of the back porch to the pantry. At first I thought it was Mr. Thomas; then I saw that he was an older and stouter man, and when he shifted his burden noticed that he was wearing a long brown apron under his coat. He turned and stumped down the stairs again, and as I went to another window to watch him, I distinctly saw him get up on the driver's seat of a wagon drawn by two massive horses. I saw the wagon move off down the driveway; then it was gone.

When Mrs. Beveridge came in a few minutes later, I asked her, “Who was here just now?"

“Why, Mr. Thomas,” she replied, and gave me such a puzzled look that I could not say any more.

One of our evening amusements was the Ouija board. Mrs. Beveridge was very adept at this, and under her fingertips the planchette swept rapidly about the board, spelling out ambiguous communications from various defunct notables (Napoleon informed us, for instance, that he did not like fish).

I soon noticed that she could manipulate the planchette by herself, and it was not long before I discovered that she often went into light trance while doing so. This gave me the notion of trying to deepen the trance, to which she readily assented, and I found her to be an excellent subject; after a few sessions she exhibited all the classical signs of deep trance: catalepsy, glove anesthesia, amnesia, hallucination, and all the rest. I was able to suggest to her that her hand would write automatically, a procedure less tiresome than the Ouija board. While she sat with her eyes closed, the pencil in her fingers traced large, childish letters, only a dozen or so to a page. When her pencil slipped off the edge of the paper she seemed to know it, and after a moment's hesitation would begin a new line; when she reached the bottom of the paper I lifted her hand, put a fresh sheet under it, and she began where she had left off, even if it were in the middle of a word.

When I say that her writing was childish I mean to be understood literally; not only were the letters large and painfully formed, but the*t's* were often uncrossed and there were many misspellings, “annd” for “and,” for example, and “pulleded” for “pulled.” The lines sloped more and more downward as she wrote, and that seemed curious to me, because she was right-handed. When something agitated her, as when I asked her to describe a dream she had had the night before, her writing grew more irregular and the lines sometimes ran into each other.

These sessions were tiring to her, but she was as interested by their results as I was, and we performed

them at least two or three times a week for a considerable period. We had been able to dispense with hypnotic induction entirely, by the use of posthypnotic suggestion; after having settled herself comfortably, on a word of command, she would go promptly into deep trance and begin to write. Ordinarily I would suggest a topic, but on several occasions she produced rather surprising things without any prompting from me. Her most elaborate effort was a narrative which she produced in the course of five consecutive sessions. In each case I woke her after three quarters of an hour, and on the following evening I suggested to her that she would go on with the narrative until it was done. The transcript which follows is verbatim except for the correction of errors in spelling, the elimination of repetitions, etc.

Some people seem to be born with a taste for violence. One of these was a man named Norman Edwards, who lived with his wife Sally in a hillside house in a suburb of Newark, New Jersey. The living room and master bedroom were upstairs, the kitchen, family room, and spare bedroom were down. Edwards, who worked as an insurance underwriter in Newark, was a man in his thirties, pale, horse-faced, deceptively slender. His hands were large, and he enjoyed using them.

One Saturday morning in early October he was taking down the screens on the side of the house when he heard the water hiss in the upstairs bathroom. Sally had slept late that morning. Edwards raised the window quietly and put his head in. He saw her body moving against the blue shower curtain in the tub. He leaned in over the windowsill, stretched as far as he could, and grabbed her leg. He heard a shriek and a thump. He waited, but the water kept on running. “Sally?” he said. She did not answer.

He climbed in the window and twitched the shower curtain aside. She was lying in the tub with her yellow shower cap on. A little blood from her nose was washing away in pink trails. He turned off the water and pulled her upright. Her eyes were open, but she looked stuporous.

He had her dressed by the time the doctor came; by then her nose was beginning to swell. It was broken, as it turned out, and they kept her in the hospital overnight to see if she had a concussion. When Edwards saw her the next day there was a red and purple bruise spreading out from under the bandage, and she had two beautiful shiners. “It was just a joke, Sally,” he said, but she turned her head away.

That afternoon her sister Wanda came over. “Sally sent me for some things.” She walked past him up the stairs.

“They going to keep her? I thought she was getting out today.” Edwards followed her.

“That's it. Some complications,” Wanda said. She opened a suitcase on the bed and began pulling things out of bureau drawers. When she had finished packing the suitcase, she started on another.

“She doesn't need all that in the hospital,” Edwards said.

“She might,” Wanda said. She lifted the two suitcases and walked past him.

He caught up with her downstairs and crowded her against the wall. “You're lying, aren't you?” he said. “She isn't coming home."

“That's right,” Wanda said, “and *listen to me* , you bastard, if you lay a hand on me, Morris will kill you. Now get out of my way."

After a moment he stepped back, and she carried the suitcases down to her car, got in and drove off.

When he thought about the incident, Edwards realized that he was hearing in his mind the sound Sally's nose had made when it hit the water faucet, a sort of crunching *click* . He had not actually heard the sound, but it was perfectly clear to him, and he found himself playing it over and over, each time with the

same little stab of pleasure.

It was not a complete surprise to him that he felt this way. Once, as a boy, he had hit his older brother Tim with a baseball bat, and he had heard the same sort of sound—a*thud* , with a sharp little*crack* in the middle of it when Tim's collarbone had broken.

Edwards called Wanda's number several times, hoping Sally would answer the phone, but it was always Wanda or Morris, and they told him Sally didn't want to talk to him. Twice he went to their house and made a nuisance of himself. On the day after the second of these visits, when Wanda had threatened to call the police, Morris Hollander came to see Edwards. Hollander, Sally's sister's husband, was a prosperous man who had business interests up and down New Jersey. He was much older than Wanda, at least sixty, but he was still trim and erect. His sleek hair was not white, not gray, but something in between, and he wore emerald cuff links.

“Hello, Morris, what do you want?” Edwards said.

“You can't invite me in? We have to talk on the doorstep?"

“All right,” said Edwards, and led the way upstairs to the living room.

Hollander laid his hat carefully on the sofa, but he did not sit down or take off his black overcoat. “Norman,” he said, “I'll put the whole thing in a nutshell. You're making Sally nervous, she don't want to see you, so what good is it? Save the aggravation."

“Sally is my wife,” Edwards said.

“O.K., why not treat her like a wife? Arguments I understand, believe me, and even to hit someone I understand, but to break your wife's nose—this I don't understand."

“It was an accident."

“So? A woman is taking a shower, and you reach through the window and grab her leg—this is an accident? If you're walking down the street, I throw a banana peel under your foot, and you fall and break your hip—this is also an accident?"

The old man took a turn around the room. “I was married to my first wife, she should rest in peace, twenty-seven years. To me a divorce is a shame. But I wouldn't say to Sally, go back to him, your place is with your husband. It's better she shouldn't have more accidents."

He turned and gave Edwards one level look. “So, now I said what I came to say. Don't make no more trouble. Good-bye, Norman."

Edwards was thinking about the phrase, “fall down and break your hip,” and in the plosive of the last word he seemed to hear the faint sound of a breaking bone. As Hollander started down the stairs, he said, “Morris."

The old man half-turned, taking his hand off the banister. “Yes?"

“Go to hell.” Edwards kicked him hard in the chest. The old man fell backwards and clattered down the stairs. When Edwards got to him, he was lying against the wall with his neck bent, and he was dead.

Edwards knelt, got his arms under the body, hoisted it to his chest with an effort, and stood. As he carried it through the kitchen, the phone began to ring. He put his foot on a chair, steadied the body with his knee and one arm, picked up the receiver. “Hello."

“Norman, this is Wanda. Excuse me for calling, but is Morris there?"

“Morris? No,” he said, speaking over the dead man's face. “Why would he be here?"

“Well, he said he was going to stop by on his way home from Sparta. Anyway, if he comes over there, would you please ask him to call me?"

“Sure. ‘Bye."

He put the receiver down, hoisted the body chest-high again, and went out to the driveway where Morris's big blue Lincoln was parked. He toppled the body gently into the trunk head-first, moved the heavy arm that seemed to want to cling to him, then folded the legs. He explored the pockets gingerly for car keys, found them, and stepped back.

The body lay on its side, one arm underneath. By the time he got where he was going, it would be stiff; it might be harder to get out of the trunk. He bent the legs upward as far as he could, folded the arm. The other one was too hard to get at; this would have to do. What else? The hat. Where was the hat?

Edwards went back through the kitchen, glancing at the phone, but it did not ring. He found Morris's hat under the little table at the foot of the stairs, hiding there like a black animal. He put it on top of the body in the trunk, closed the lid, and went back inside for his jacket and topcoat. When he pulled out onto the street, it was just after two o'clock.

The day was cold and bright, the road clear; most of the traffic was coming the other way. According to the map, there were three or four lakes and reservoirs not far from U.S. Route 206. Edwards drove steadily north, keeping just under the speed limit. The car handled well. At Netcong he turned northeast to have a look at Lake Hopatcong. The approaches were too shallow, and there were too many trailers parked on the shore. He kept going around the lake, then northwest again to Lake Mohawk, but it did not suit him, either. He drove through Newton, Lafayette, and Augusta. North of Branchville there was a turnoff marked “Culvers Lake.” Edwards kept on going. He realized now that the Jersey lakes would not do. He was close to the state line already; somewhere along the Delaware there would be a private place where he could tip the car down into deep water. Then he would walk or hitchhike to the nearest town, stay in a motel overnight, and take the bus home in the morning.

North of Dingmans Ferry the map showed the highway running close to the river, and he glimpsed it, or thought he did, occasionally through the trees, but there was no good approach. The sky had turned gray; there were a few flakes of snow. He turned on his headlights. A curve came up, too fast. As he swung around it, braking, two yellow-white eyes leaped into view, the headlights of another car. He turned frantically, saw the lights blaze up, felt a hammering jolt. Then things began to become very queer.

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A Thing of Beauty

THERE WAS a time slip in southern California at about one in the afternoon. Mr. Gordon Fish thought it was an earthquake. He woke up confused and sullen from his midday nap, blinking fiercely, as pink as a spanked baby's behind, with his sandy-yellow beard and eyebrows bristling. He got off the sofa and listened. No screams, no rumble of falling buildings, so probably it was all right.

He heard a knock. Squinting uneasily, Fish went to the door. He had left his glasses on the table, but never mind; it might be a client, or even an investigator from the city. In which case ... He opened the door.

A slender man in purple was standing there. He was small, hardly an inch taller than Gordon Fish. He said, “Three twenty-two and a half Platt Terrace?” His face was an oval blur; he seemed to be wearing some kind of tight uniform, like a bellboy's—but purple?

“That's right, three twenty-two and a half, this is it,” said Fish, straining to make out the fellow's salmon-colored face. He caught sight of some other people standing behind him, and a shadowy bulk, like a big box of some kind “I don't know if you—"

“All right, fezh, bring it in,” said the man, turning to speak over his shoulder. “Bung, did we have a time finding you,” he said to Fish, and pushed his way into the living room. Behind him, other men in tight purple clothing came staggering under the weight of boxes, first a big one, then two smaller ones, then a *really* big one, then a clutter of smaller boxes.

“Listen, wait, there must be some mistake,” said Fish, dancing out of the way. “I didn't order—"

The first man in purple looked at some papers in his hand. “Three twenty-two and a*half* Platt*Terrace?* ” he said. His voice sounded slurred and angry, as if he were half drunk or had just waked up, like Fish himself.

Fish was unreasonably irritated. “I tell you I didn't order anything! I don't care if— You walk in here, into a man's home, just like— Listen! You get that out of there!” Infuriated, he rushed at two of the men who were setting down one of the smaller boxes on the sofa.

“This is the address,” said the first man in a bored voice. He shoved some papers into Fish's hand. “You don't want ‘em, send ‘em back. We just deliver ‘em.” The purple men began to move toward the door.

The spokesman went out last. “Bung, are*you* a dvich!” he said, and closed the door.

Raging, Fish fumbled for his glasses. They ought to be right*there* , but the movers had upset everything. He went to the door anyway, twitching with anger. Dammit, if he could just find his glasses he'd*report* them, but ... He opened the door. The purple-uniformed men, a little knot of them, were standing in the courtyard looking bewildered. One of them turned a salmon-colored dot of a face. “Hey, which way is ...” Something. It sounded like “enchmire."

There was a tremor, and Fish lurched against the door frame. It felt like an earth shock, a heavy one, but when he looked up the palm trees in the street were not swaying, and the buildings were solid and firm. But the purple men were gone.

Swearing frantically to himself, Fish went back into the living room and slammed the door behind him. The biggest box was in his way. He kicked it, and a slat fell out. He kicked it again, grunting with angry satisfaction. The whole side fell down with a clatter, revealing a black-enameled panel. Fish kicked that, and bruised his toe.

“Hm,” said Fish, looking at the sleek black finish of whatever it was. “Hah.” It looked like money.

Peering, he ran his finger along the metal. Cool and smooth. Why, it might be almost anything. Industrial machinery, worth thousands of dollars to the right party. With rising excitement, Fish ran to the table, found his glasses pushed into some magazines, and ran back, fitting the glasses over his mean little eyes.

He pulled some more slats aside. The box fell away, disclosing an oddly shaped hunk of metal with knobs, dials and switches in the top. An engraved white plate read: "TECKNING MASKIN," and then some numbers. It sounded ominous and important. Heart beating, Fish rubbed his fingers over the knurled knobs and the gleaming switch handles. There was a faint click. He had accidentally moved one switch, he saw, from "Av" to "Pä." The dials were lighting up, and a set of long hooked arms, like claws, were slowly drifting out over the flat empty space in the middle.

Hastily, Fish turned the switch back to "Av." The lights went out; the arms, looking disappointed, he thought, drifted back into their enclosures.

Well, it*worked* , whatever it was, which was funny, because come to think of it he hadn't plugged it in anywhere. Fish stared at the machine uneasily, rubbing his pudgy hands together. Batteries? In a machine that size? And those funny dials, the peculiar*expression* the whole thing had, and "Teckning Maskin"—not even English. There it sat, all eight or nine pieces of it, filling up his living room—one crate, he saw with a pang, blocked off his view of the TV. Suppose it was all some kind of*joke?*

The instant he thought of it, he saw the whole thing in a flash. The crates sitting here, and then in a few days the bill would come in the mail—maybe they wouldn't even take the things away until he'd paid the shipping—and all the time, the joker would be laughing himself sick. Laughing, whoever it was that had ordered the machines in Fish's name—some old enemy, or it could even be someone he thought of as a *friend.*

With tears of rage in his eyes, he rushed to the door again, flung it open and stood panting, staring around the courtyard. But there was nobody there. He slammed the door and stood looking helplessly at the crates. If they would fight*fair!* How was he going to watch*Dragnet,* and, good heavens, where was he going to talk to clients—in the*kitchen?*

"Oh!" said Fish, and he kicked another crate hard. Slats gave, and something fell out, a little yellow booklet. Fish glimpsed more black-enameled machinery inside. He bent wildly to pick up the booklet and tried to tear it across, but it hurt his hands. He threw it across the room, shouting, "Well, then!" He danced from one crate to another, kicking. Slats littered the floor. Gleaming machines stood up from the mess, some with dials, some without. Fish stopped, out of breath, and stared at them with a new bewilderment.

A trick—no, it couldn't be. Big industrial machines like that—it wasn't like ordering something from a department store. But then what? A mistake. Fish sat down on the arm of a chair and frowned, scrubbing his beard with his fingers. In the first place, now, he hadn't*signed* anything. Even if they came back tomorrow, if he could manage to get rid of say one piece, he could always claim there had been*eight* instead of*nine.* Or suppose he even got rid of all of it, discreetly of course, then when they came back he could simply deny the whole thing. Say he never heard of any machinery. Fish's nerves began to twitch. He jumped up, looked around, sat down again. Speed, speed, that was the thing. Get it over with. But what kind of machinery*was* it?

Fish frowned, squirmed, got up and sat down. Finally he went to the phone, looked up a number and dialed. He smoothed down his vest, cleared his throat musically. "Ben? This is Gordon Fish, Ben .... Just fine. Now, Ben—" his voice dropped confidentially—"I happen to have a client who wants to dispose of a Teckning Maskin. Eight— What? Teckning Maskin. It's machinery, Ben. T-E-C-K-N-I-N-G— No? Well, that's the name they gave me. I have it written down right here. You never— Well, that's funny.

Probably some mistake. I tell you, Ben, I'll check back and see. Yes, thanks a lot. Thanks, Ben, bye-bye."

He hung up, chewing his whiskers in vexation. If Ben Abrams had never *heard* of it, then there couldn't be any market for it, not in *this* part of the country anyhow .... Something funny. He was beginning to have a hunch about this thing now. Something ... He prowled around the machines, looking at them this way and that. Here was another engraved white plate; it said "TECKNING MASKIN," and under that "BANK 1," and then two columns of numbers and words: "3 Folk, 4 Djur, 5 Byggnader," and so on, a lot more. Crazy words; it didn't even look like any language he'd ever *heard* of. And then those maniacs in the purple uniforms ... Wait a minute! Fish snapped his fingers, stopped, and stood in a pose of thought. Now what was it that fellow had said just as he was leaving? It had made him mad, Fish remembered—something like, "Boy, are you a dvich." Made him mad as a hornet; it *sounded* insulting, but what did it *mean?*

And then that kind of earthquake just before they got here—woke him up out of a sound sleep, left him feeling all funny. And then another one after they left—only *not* an earthquake, because he remembered distinctly that the palm trees didn't even tremble.

Fish ran his finger delicately over the shining curved edge of the nearest machine. His heart was thumping, his tongue came out to lick his lips. He had a feeling—no, he really *knew* —nobody would be coming back for the machines.

They were his. Yes, and there was money in them, somewhere; he could smell it. But how? What did they *do?*

He opened all the crates carefully. In one of them, instead of a machine, there was a metal box full of creamy-thick sheets of paper. They were big rectangular sheets, and they looked as if one would just about fit onto the flat center space on the biggest machine. Fish tried one, and it did.

Well, what could go wrong? Fish rubbed his fingers nervously, then turned the switch on. The dials lighted and the hooked arms drifted out, as before, but nothing else happened. Fish leaned nearer again and looked at the other controls. There was a pointer and a series of marks labeled "Av," "Bank 1," "Bank 2," and so on down to "Bank 9." He moved the pointer cautiously to "Bank 1." The arms moved a little, slowly, and stopped.

What else? Three red buttons marked "Utpläna," "Torka," and "Avslä." He pressed one down, but nothing happened. Then a series of white ones, like on an adding machine, all numbered. He pressed one down at random, then another, and was about to press a third when he leaped back in alarm. The hooked arms were moving, rapidly and purposefully. Where they passed over the paper, thin dark-gray lines were growing.

Fish leaned closer, his mouth open and his eyes bulging. The little points under the ends of the arms were riding smoothly over the paper, leaving graceful lines behind them. The arms moved, contracted on their little pivots and springs, swept this way and that, lifted slightly, dropped again and moved on. Why, the machine was drawing—drawing a picture while he watched! There was a face forming under the arm over on the right, then a neck and shoulder—kind of a sappy-looking man, it was, like a Greek statue. Then over here on the left, at the same time, another arm was drawing a bull's head, with some kind of flowers between the horns. Now the man's body—he was wearing one of those Greek togas or whatever you call them—and the back of the bull curving around up on top. And now the man's arm, and the bull's tail, and now the other arm, and the bull's hind legs.

There it was. A picture of a man throwing flowers at this bull, who was kind of leaping and looking at the

man over his shoulder. The arms of the machine stopped moving, and then pulled back out of sight. The lights went out, and the switch clicked by itself back to “Pä."

Fish took the paper and looked it over, excited but a little disappointed. He didn't know anything about *art,* of course, but he knew this was no good—all flat looking and kind of simple, like a kid would draw. And that bull—whoever saw a bull dancing like that? With flowers between its horns? Still, if the machine would draw this, maybe it would draw something better; he couldn't quite see the angle. Where would you sell drawings, even good ones? But it was there, somewhere. Exhibit the machine, like in a fair of science and industry? No, his mind hurriedly buried the thought—too exposed, too many questions. Heavens, if Vera found out he was still alive, or if the police in Scranton ...

Drawings. A machine that made drawings. Fish looked at it, all eight lumpy black-enameled massive pieces of it scattered around his living room. It seemed like a lot of machinery just to make *drawings* . He admitted it: he was disappointed. He had expected, well, metal stampings or something like that, something real. Crash, bang, the big metal jaw comes down, and tink, the bright shaped piece falls out into the basket. There was machinery for you; but this ...

Fish sat back and pondered, twitching the paper disapprovingly between his fingers. Things were always letting him down like this. Really, his best line was marriage. He had been married five times, and always made a little profit out of it. He smoothed the vest down over his suety front. Between times, he turned to whatever was handy—marital counseling some years, or gave life readings if he could get enough clients, or naturopathy. It all depended. But somehow every time it looked as if he had a real gold mine, it slipped out from under his hand. He reddened with discomfort as he thought of the one winter he had been forced to go to work in a *shoe store* .... Having this house had softened him up, too, he had been getting lazy—just a client or two a week for life readings. He ought to be getting busy, working up new contacts before his money ran out.

The thought of poverty made him ravenously hungry, as it always did. He kneaded his stomach. Time for lunch. He got his jacket hurriedly, and, as an afterthought, rolled up the drawing—it would not fold—and tucked it under his arm.

He drove to the barbecue place three blocks down the boulevard where he had been eating a lot of his meals lately, to save funds. The counterman was a young fellow named Dave, lean and pale, with a lock of straight dark hair falling over his forehead. Fish had got into friendly conversation with him and knew he was going to art school nights, over in Pasadena. Fish had tried to get him over for a life reading, but the youngster had said frankly that he “didn't believe in it” in such an honest and friendly way that Fish bore him no ill-will.

“Bowl o’ chile, Dave,” he said cheerfully, hoisting himself up on a stool with the rolled drawing precariously on his lap. His feet dangled; the paper was squeezed tight between his vest and the counter.

“Hello, Doc. Coming up."

Fish hunched forward over the bowl, loosening his collar. The one other customer paid and left.

“Say, Dave,” said Fish indistinctly, munching, “like to get your opinion of something. Unh.” He managed to get the rolled paper free and opened it on the counter. “What do you think—is it any good?"

“Say,” said Dave, coming nearer. “Where'd you get *that?* "

“Mm. Nephew of mine,” Fish answered readily. “He wants me to advise him, you know, if he should go on with it, because—"

“Go on with it! Well, say. Where's he been studying, anyhow?"

“Oh, just by himself, you know—back home.” Fish took another mouthful. “Ver’ bright boy, you understand, but—"

“Well, if he learned to draw like that all by himself, why he must be a world-beater."

Fish forgot to chew. “You really mean it?"

“Why, sure. Listen, are you sure he drew this himself, Doc?"

“Oh, certainly.” Fish waved the imputation of dishonesty away. “Ver’ honest boy, I know'm well. No, ‘f he tells me he drew it, why—” he swallowed—"he drew it. But now don't fool me, is it—do you really think it's as*good* —"

“Well, I tell you the truth, when I first saw it,*I* thought Picasso. You know, his classical period. Of course I see now it's different, but, my gosh, it's good. I mean, if you want*my* opinion, why—"

Fish was nodding to indicate that this only confirmed his own diagnosis. “M-hm. M-hm. Well, I'm glad to hear you say it, son. You know, being a relative of the boy, I thought— Of course, I'm very impressed. Very impressed. I thought of Pricasso, too, same as you. Of course, now from the money end of it—” he wagged his head dolefully— “you know and I know ..."

Dave scratched his head under the white cap. “Oh, well, he ought to be able to get commissions, all right. I mean, if I had a line like that—” He traced in air the outline of the man's lifted arm.

“Now, when you say*commissions, ”* Fish said, squirming with eagerness.

“Oh, well, you know, for portraits, or industrial designs or, you know, whatever he wants to go in for.” Dave shook his head in admiration, staring at the drawing. “If this was only in color."

“How's that, Dave?"

“Why, I was just thinking—see, there's a competition up in San Gabriel for a civic center mural. Ten-thousand-dollar prize. Now I don't know, it might not win, but why don't you have him render this in color and send it in?"

“Color,” said Fish blankly. The machine wouldn't color anything, he was sure. He could get a box of water color paints, but ... “Well, now, the fact is,” he said, hastily revolving ideas, “you know, the boy is laid up. Hurt his hand—oh, not serious,” he said reassuringly (Dave's mouth had fallen into an*O* of sympathy), “but won't be able to draw any more pictures for a while. It's a shame, he could use the money, you know, for doctor bills.” He chewed and swallowed. “Tell you, this is just a wild idea, now, but why couldn't you color it up and send it in, Dave? Course if it doesn't win, I couldn't pay you, but—"

“Well, gee, I don't know how he'd like that, Doc. I mean, suppose he'd have something else in mind, like some other color scheme altogether. You know, I wouldn't like to—"

“I'll take full responsibility,” said Fish firmly. “Don't you worry about that, and if we win, why I'll see that you're paid handsomely for your work, Dave. Now there, how's that?"

“Well, sure, then, Doc. I mean, sure,” said Dave, nodding and blushing. “I'll do it tonight and tomorrow, and get it right off in the mail. Okay? Then—oh, uh, one thing, what's your nephew's name?"

“George Wilmington,” said Fish at random. He pushed the cleaned chile bowl away. “And, uh, Dave, I

believe I'll have an order of ribs, with french fries on the side."

Fish went home with a vastly increased respect for the machine. The civic center competition, he was positive, was in the bag. Ten thousand dollars! For one drawing! Why, there was millions in it! He closed and locked the front door carefully behind him, and pulled down the venetian blinds to darken the gloomy little living room still further. He turned on the lights. There the machine still was, all eight gleaming pieces of it, scattered around on the floor, the furniture, everywhere. He moved excitedly from one piece to another, caressing the slick black surfaces with his palm. All that expensive machinery—all his!

Might as well put it through its paces again, just to see. Fish got another sheet of creamy paper from the stack, put it in position, and turned the switch to "Pä." He watched with pleasure as the dials lighted, the hooked arms drifted out and began to move. Lines grew on the paper: first some wavy ones at the top—could be anything. And farther down, a pair of long, up-curved lines, kind of like handlebars. It was like a puzzle, trying to figure out what it was going to be.

Under the wavy lines, which Fish now perceived to be hair, the pointer drew eyes and a nose. Meanwhile the other one was gliding around the outline of what, it became clear in a moment, was a bull's head. Now here came the rest of the girl's face, and her arm and one leg—not bad, but kind of beefy—and now the bull's legs, sticking out all different ways, and then, whoops, it wasn't a bull: there was the whatyoumaycallum with the teats swinging; it was a cow. So, a girl riding on a cow, with flowers between its horns like before.

Fish looked at the drawing in disappointment. People and cows—was that all the thing could *do?*

He scrubbed his beard in vexation. Why, for heaven's sake, suppose somebody wanted a picture of something *besides* bulls and people? It was ridiculous—eight big pieces of machinery ...

Wait a minute. "Don't go off half cocked, Gordon," he told himself aloud. That was what Florence, his second, always used to say, except she always called him "Fishy." He winced with discomfort at the memory. Well, anyway, be noticed now that the same buttons he had pressed down before were still down. That must have something to do with it. Struck by another thought, be trotted over and looked at the machine marked "Bank 1." Now this list here, number 3 was "Folk," and number 4 was "Djur." Those were the numbers he had pressed on the big machine, so ... maybe "folk" meant *people* , and "djur," why, that might be some crazy word for *bulls* . Then if he pressed a different set of buttons, why, the machine would have to draw something else.

In fifteen minutes he verified that this was the case. Pressing down the first two buttons, "Land" and "Planta," gave him drawings of outdoor scenes, just hills and trees. "Folk" was people, and "Djur" seemed to be animals; now he got goats or dogs instead of bulls. "Byggnader" was buildings. Then it got more complicated.

A button marked "Arbete" gave him pictures of people at work; one labeled "Kärlek" produced scenes of couples kissing—all in the kind of Greek-looking clothes—and the landscapes and buildings were sort of vague and dreamy. Then there was a whole row of buttons under the heading "Plats," and another headed "Tid," that seemed to control the time and place of the pictures. For instance, when he pressed "Egyptisk" and "Gammal," along with "Folk," "Byggnader" and, on a hunch, "Religion," he got a picture of some priests in Egyptian headdresses bowing in front of a big statue of Horus. Now *there* was something!

The next day he nailed up the crates again, leaving the tops loose so that he could remove them whenever he wanted to use the machines. In the process, he came across the little yellow booklet he had thrown away. There were diagrams in it, some of which made sense and some didn't, but the printing was all in

the same unfamiliar language. Fish put the booklet away in a bureau drawer, under an untidy heap of clothes, and forgot about it. Grunting and sweating, he managed to push the smaller crates into corners and rearranged the furniture so there was room to put the big one against the wall. It still looked terrible, but at least he could get around, and have clients in, and he could see the TV again.

Every day he ate lunch at the barbecue place, or at least stopped in, and every day, when Dave saw him come in, he shook his head. Then all afternoon he would sit with a glass of beer, or maybe a plate of nuts or fudge, watching the machine draw. He used up all the paper in the stack and started turning them over to use the other sides.

But where was the money coming from? After some thought, Fish built a simple magic-writing box, and used it with his Egyptian drawings—he had a dozen, all of different gods, but after the first one the machine didn't draw any priests—to show clients what they had been up to in previous incarnations. He began to get a little more business, and once or twice his instinct told him he could raise the fee on account of the drawings, but that was only pocket money. He knew there was*millions* in it, he could almost taste it, but where?

Once it occurred to him that maybe he could take out a patent on the machine and sell it. Trouble with that was, he didn't have any idea how the thing worked. It seemed like the little machines must have pictures inside, or pieces of pictures, and the big machine put them together—how? Fuming with impatience, Fish took the big crate apart again, moved furniture out of the way, and fumbled at the smooth black side of the machine to see if there was any way of opening it up.

After a moment his fingers found two shallow depressions in the metal; he pushed experimentally, then pressed upward, and the side plate of the machine came off in his hands.

It weighed almost nothing. Fish put it aside, staring doubtfully into the interior of the machine. It was all dark in there, nothing but a few very tiny specks of light, like mica dust hanging motionless. No wires, no nothing. Fish got a sheet of paper and put it in position, and turned the machine on. Then he squatted down. The tiny specks of light seemed to be moving, circling slowly around one another in time to the motion of the drawing arms. It was darker in there, and looked further away, somehow, than it had any right to.

Holding the front of the machine, Fish touched another shallow depression and, without really meaning to, he pushed upward. The whole front of the machine fell off, and the other side with it.

He sprawled backward frantically to get out of the way, but the top of the machine didn't fall. It stayed there, rock-steady, although there was nothing holding it up but the back panel.

And underneath, nothing. No framework, just the thick darkness, with the little stars going slowly around as the machine drew.

Fish hastily picked up the front and side panels and put them back. They slid easily and perfectly into place, and fitted so closely that he couldn't see any line between them.

After that, he put the crate back together and never tried to look inside the machine again.

Dave hurried around the end of the counter to him. “Doc! Where you been?” He was drying his hands on his apron and grinning nervously, with a sort of pole-axed expression around his eyes. A customer around the other side of the counter looked up, then went on chewing with his mouth open.

“Well, I had quite a lot of things to do,” Fish began automatically. Then he began to feel excited. “Say! You don't mean—"

Dave fished a long white envelope out of his back pocket. “Came yesterday! Look here!” The envelope crackled in his nervous fingers. He pulled out a folded letter, and Fish seized it. Dave looked over his shoulder, breathing heavily, as he read.

DEAR MR. WILMINGTON:

It is my very great pleasure to inform you that your design has been awarded the First Prize in the San Gabriel Civic Center Mural Competition. In the opinion of the judges, the classic simplicity of your entry, together with its technical mastery, made it far superior to anything else submitted.

Enclosed please find our check for three thousand dollars ($3,000.00) ....

“Where?” cried Fish, looking up.

“Right here,” said Dave, with a grin that looked painful. He held up a salmon-colored strip of paper. The red-printed lettering read: “EXACTLY 3,000.00” DOLLARS*****."

Fish hugged Dave, who hugged him back, and then looked at the letter again.

... the remainder to be paid when the design is executed to the satisfaction of the Committee ....

“Executed?” said Fish, with a sinking feeling. “What's that mean? Dave, what's he mean here, where he says—”

“When he paints the mural on the wall. Gee, Doc, I just can't tell you—"

“Who?"

“Your nephew. George Wilmington. See, when he paints the mural—

“Oh,” said Fish. “Oh. Well, you see, Dave, the fact *is* —"

Dave's long face grew solemn. “Oh, gosh, I never thought. You mean he's not well enough to draw yet?"

Fish shook his head mournfully. “No, sir. It's a terrible shame, Dave, but—” He folded the check absently and slipped it into his pocket.

“I thought you said, I mean, it wasn't serious or anything ...."

Fish continued to shake his head. “Turned out, there was more to it than they thought. It looks like now, they just don't know when he'll ever be able to draw again."

“Oh, Doc,” said Dave, stricken.

“That's the way it is. These things—the doctors don't know as much about ‘em as they'd like you to think, Dave.” Fish went on staring fiercely at the letter, barely listening to the sound of his own voice. *To be paid when the design is executed ...*

“Look here,” he said, interrupting Dave's murmurs of commiseration. “It don't say *who* has to execute it, now does it? Notice right there? Says ‘when the design is executed.’”

“How about a glassa water over here?” called the customer.

“Coming right up, sir. Look, Doc, I think you got an idea.” He retired sidewise toward the counter, still talking. “You know, anybody could scale that up and do the actual painting—any competent artist, I

mean. Gee, I'd do it myself, I mean if George didn't care. And if it was all right with the committee, why, you know, it would be an opportunity for me." He gave the customer his water, mopped the counter blindly and came back.

Fish leaned over the counter, beard in hand, frowning. "Wilmington" was just a name. Dave could take the part, just as well as not, and it would be a lot better in one way, because then Fish himself could stay out of sight. But, whoops, if they did that, then Dave would *be* Wilmington, and he might want to take off on his own ....

"Well, Dave," he said, "are you a *good* artist?"

Dave looked embarrassed. "Gee, Doc, you put me on the spot, but, well, anyway, they liked how I rendered the design, didn't they? See, I used a color scheme of deep aqua and a kind of buff, with accents of rose, you know, to make it cheerful? And, gee, if I did it on the paper, I could do it on a wall."

"Sold!" said Fish heartily, and clapped Dave on the shoulder. "George don't know it yet, but he just got himself an assistant!"

A slim female figure popped up at him suddenly from beside a potted palm. "Mr. Wilmington? If I could just have a moment ..."

Fish paused, one hand going to his chin in the old gesture, although be had shaved off the beard over a year ago. He felt exposed without it, and his features tended to twitch when he was startled like this. "Why, yes, uh, miss ..."

"My name is Norma Johnson. You don't know me, but I have some drawings here ..."

She was carrying a big black portfolio fastened with tapes. Fish sat down beside her and looked at the drawings. They looked all right to him, but skimpy, like the kind of thing he turned out mostly himself. What he *liked* was pictures with some meat to them, like Norman Rockwell, but the one time he had set the machine to draw something like that, his agent—the first one, Connolly, that crook!—had told him there was no market for "genre stuff."

The girl's fingers were trembling. She was very neat and pale, with black hair and big expressive eyes. She turned over the last drawing. "Are they any good?" she asked.

"Well, now, there's a good deal of spirit there," said Fish comfortably. "And a very fine sense of design."

"Could I ever be successful at it?"

"*Well* ..."

"See, the thing is," she said rapidly, "my Aunt Marie wants me to stay in San Francisco and come out next season. But I don't want to. So she agreed, if you said I had real talent, that she would send me abroad to study. But if you didn't, I'd give up."

Fish looked at her intently. Her fingernails were short but looked cared for. She was wearing a simple white blouse and a little blue jacket and skirt; there was a whiff of woodsy perfume. Fish smelled money.

He said, "Well, my dear, let me put it this way. Now you could go to Europe and spend a lot of money—ten thousand, twenty thousand dollars." She watched him without blinking. "Fifty thousand," said Fish delicately. "But what would be the point of it? Those fellows over there don't know as much as they'd like you to think."

She fumbled blindly for her purse and gloves. “I see.” She started to get up.

Fish put a pudgy hand on her arm. “Now what *I* would suggest,” he said, “why don't you come and study with me for a year instead?"

Her pale face lengthened. “Oh, Mr. Wilmington, *would* you?"

“Well, anybody with as much talent as these drawings—” Fish patted the portfolio on her knee—"why, we have to do something, because—"

She stood up excitedly. “Will you come tell that to Aunt Marie?"

Fish smoothed down the front of his pink shirt. “Why, gladly, my dear, gladly."

“She's right here in the lounge."

Fish followed her and met Aunt Marie, who was a handsome woman of about fifty, plump but beautifully tailored in brown linen. They agreed that Norma would take a studio near Mr. Wilmington's home in Berkeley, and that Mr. Wilmington would look in several times a week and give her the full benefit of his great experience, in return for ten thousand dollars per annum. It was, as Fish pointed out to them, less than half the amount he usually got now for major commissions; but, never mind, every little bit helped. Murals, institutional advertising, textile designs, private sales to collectors—my God, how it was rolling in!

The only thing that really worried him was the machine itself. He kept it now in a locked inner room of the house he was renting—twenty rooms, furnished, terrific view of the Bay, lots of room for parties—and up to a point he could work it like a kiddy car. One time or another, he had figured out and memorized every one of the dozens of labeled buttons on the “Bank” machines, and just by combining the right ones, he could get any kind of a drawing he wanted. For instance, that commission for stained glass for a church—"Religion,” “People,” “Palestine,” “Ancient,” and there you were.

The trouble was, the machine wouldn't draw the same thing twice in a row. On that church window job, he got one picture of Christ and then couldn't get another, no matter how long he tried, so he had to fill out with saints and martyrs. The church put up a beef, too. Then sometimes at night, for his own amusement, he used to put the machine through its paces—for instance, set it for “Historical figures” and “Romantisk,” which seemed to be the machine's name for the present era, and then push the button marked “Överdriva,” and watch the famous faces come out with big cartoony noses, and teeth like picket fences.

Or he would set it for “Love,” and then various interesting times and places—ancient Rome gave him some spicy ones, and Samoa was even better.

But every time he did this, the machine turned out fewer drawings; and finally it wouldn't do any more like that at all.

Was there some kind of a censor built into the thing? Did it *disapprove* of him?

He kept thinking of the funny way those men in purple uniforms had delivered the thing. They had the right address, but the wrong ... time? Whatever it was, he knew the machine wasn't intended for him. But who was it meant for? What was a “dvich"?

There were eight pieces—six banks, the master machine, and one which he had discovered would enlarge any detail of a drawing to almost full size. He could handle all that. He could manage the controls that governed the complexity or simplicity of a drawing, gave it more or less depth, changed its style and

mood. The only buttons he wasn't sure of were the three red ones marked “Utpläna,” “Torka,” and “Avslä.” None of them seemed to *do* anything. He had tried all three both ways, and they didn't seem to make any difference. In the end he left them the way they had been: “Torka” down, the other two up, for lack of any better idea. But big and red like that, they must be important.

He found them mentioned in the booklet, too: *"Utpläna en teckning, press knappen ‘Utpläna.’ Avlågsna ett mönster från en bank efter användning, press knappen ‘Torka.’ Avslä en teckning innan slutsatsen, press knappen ‘Avslä.’”*

Press knappen, press knappen, that must be “push button.” But *when?* And that business about “mönster,” that made him a little nervous. He had been pretty lucky so far, figuring out how to work the whole machine without any accidents. Suppose there was still something that could go wrong—suppose the booklet was a *warning?*

He prowled restlessly around the empty house—empty, and untidy, because he wouldn't have any servants in the place. You never knew who was going to spy on you. A woman came in two days a week to clean the place up—all but the locked room—and once in a while he'd bring a couple of girls up for a party, but he always threw them out the next morning. He was busy, all right, seeing a lot of people, traveling around, but he'd had to drop all his old friends when he decided to become Wilmington, and he didn't dare make any new ones for fear of giving himself away. Besides, everybody was out for something. The fact was, dammit, he wasn't *happy* . What the hell good was all the money he was making, all the things he'd bought, if they didn't make him happy? Anyhow, pretty soon now that oil stock would start paying off—the salesman had assured him that the drillers were down within a few hundred feet of oil right now—and then he'd be a millionaire; he could retire—move to Florida or someplace.

He paused in front of his desk in the library. The booklet was still there, lying open. The thing was, even suppose that was some language anybody had ever heard of, who would he dare show it to? Who could he trust?

An idea occurred to him, and he leaned over, staring at the yellow pages with their incomprehensible text. After all, he could already figure out some of the words; he didn't have to show anybody the whole book, or even a whole sentence.... Then there was that information business that came with his de luxe set of the Encyclopaedia Britannica—he ought to have it right here somewhere. Fish hunted in the file drawers and finally came up with a folder and a sheet of gummed yellow stamps.

Grunting, he sat down at the desk, and after much cigar-chewing, scribbling and crossing out, he typed the following:

DEAR SIRS:

Kindly inform me as to what language the enclosed words are, and also what they mean. Kindly give this matter your best attention, as I am in a hurry.

On a separate sheet he wrote all the doubtful words from the paragraph about the red buttons, cannily mixing them up so no one could guess what order they came in. Feeling a little foolish, he carefully drew in all the tiny circles and dots. Then he addressed an envelope, stuck one of the yellow stamps to his letter, and mailed the thing off before he could regret it.

“My rhetorical question is,” said Fish craftily to the young physicist shouting over the hum of cocktail-party conversation, “purely in interest of science, could you make a machine that would draw?” He beamed over his glasses at the horn-rimmed blur of the young man's face. He had had three martinis, and whew! he was floating. But fully in command of his senses, of course.

“Well, draw what? If you mean charts and graphs, sure, or something like a pantograph, to enlarge—"

“No, no. Draw*beau'ful* pictures.” The last word sprayed a little. Fish rocked forward and back again. “Purely rhetorical question.” He put his glass down with precision on a passing tray and took another one, which spilled icy liquid down his wrist. He gulped to save it.

“Oh. Well, in that case, no. I would say not. I assume you mean it would originate the drawings, not just put out what was programmed into it. Well, that would mean, in the first place, you'd have to have an incredibly big memory bank. Say if you wanted the machine to draw a horse, it would have to know what a horse looks like from every angle and in every position. Then it would have to select the best one out of say ten or twenty billion—and then draw it in proportion with whatever else is in the drawing, and so on. Then, for God's sake, if you wanted*beauty* , too, I suppose it would have to consider the relation of every part to every other part, on some kind of esthetic principle.*I* wouldn't know how to go about it."

Fish, thick-fingered, probed for his olive. “Say it's impossible, hey?” he asked.

“Well, with present techniques, anyhow. I guess we'll be staying out of the art business for another century or two.” The blur smiled and lifted its highball glass.

“Ah,” said Fish, putting a hand on the young man's lapel to support himself and keep the other from moving out of the corner. “Now, suppose you had machine like that. Now, suppose that machine kept forgetting things. What would be the reason for that?"

“Forgetting things?"

“What I said.” With a disastrous sense that he was talking too much, Fish was about to go on, but a sudden hand on his arm forestalled him. It was one of the bright young men—beautiful suit, beautiful teeth, beautiful handkerchief in pocket. “Mr. Wilmington, I just wanted to say, what an absolutely marvelous piece of work that new mural is. One enormous foot. I don't know what the significance is, but the draftsmanship is marvelous. We must get you on*File Seven* some afternoon and have you explain it."

“Never go on television,” said Fish, frowning. He had been fending off invitations like this one for almost a year.

“Oh, too bad. Nice to have met you. Oh, by the way, somebody asked me to tell you there's a phone call for you over there.” He waved his arm and drifted away.

Fish excused himself and set an adventurous course across the room. The phone was lying on one of the side tables giving him a black look. He picked it up jauntily. “Hello-o."

“Dr. Fish?"

Fish's heart began to knock. He put the martini glass down. “Who's that?” he demanded blankly.

“This is Dave Kinney, Doc."

Fish felt a wave of relief. “Oh, Dave. I thought you were in Boston. Or, I suppose you*are* , but the connection—"

“I'm right here in San Francisco. Look, Doc, something's come up that—"

“What? What're you doing here? Now I hope you haven't quit school, because—"

“This is summer vacation, Doc. Look, the fact is, I'm here in Norma Johnson's studio."

Fish stood with the sweaty black phone in his hand and said nothing. Silence hummed in the wires.

“Doc? Mrs. Prentice is here too. We've been kind of talking things over, and we think you ought to come over and explain a few things."

Fish swallowed, with difficulty.

“Doc, you hear me? I think you ought to come over. *They're* talking about calling the police, but I wanted to give you a chance first, so—"

“I'll be right over,” said Fish hoarsely. He hung up the phone and stood bemused, with his hand to his flushed forehead. Oh, Lord, three—no, four—martinis and this had to happen! He felt dizzy. Everybody seemed to be standing at a slight angle on the kelly green carpet, all the bright young men in glossy summer jackets and the pastel women in cocktail dresses with bright, phony smiles on their faces. What did they care if all he could get out of the machine any more was parts of bodies? His last one a big clenched fist, and now a foot, and don't you think the committee didn't beef. They beefed plenty but they had to take it, because they had already announced the commission. Now this morning his agent had called up. Some church group in Indiana, they wanted sample sketches. So it was all going down the drain while he watched, and now this. Dave, good God, you'd think at least he would stay stuck off in Boston, and how the *hell* did he ever run into Norma?

One of the newspaper reporters turned away from the free lunch and planted himself in Fish's path as be lurched toward the door. “Oh, Mr. Wilmington, what would you say was the real significance of that foot?"

“Gow my way,” said Fish, staggering around him. He took a cab home, told the driver to wait, ducked in for a quick shower and a cup of black coffee, and came out again, shaky but not as drunk as before. Those goddamn cocktails ... He never used to get like this when he just drank beer. Things were better back on Platt Terrace; how did he ever get mixed up in this crazy art game anyway?

His stomach felt hollow. He hadn't eaten any lunch, he remembered. Well, too late now. He braced himself and rang the bell.

Dave opened the door. Fish greeted him with cries of pleasure, shaking his limp hand. “Dave, boy! Good to see you! How long has it been, anyway?” Without waiting for a reply, he bustled on into the room. It was a gray, windowless place that always made him nervous; instead of a roof there was one big slanting skylight, high overhead; the light filtered down cool and colorless through the translucent panes. There was an easel in one corner and some drawings pinned up on the otherwise bare walls. Down at the far end, Norma and her aunt were sitting on the red padded bench. “Norma, how are you, honey? And Mrs. Prentice—now this is a real pleasure!"

That wasn't hard to say—she really did look good in that new dark-blue suit. He could tell he was projecting the old charm, and he thought he saw her eyes glint with pleasure. But it was only for an instant, and then her expression hardened. “What's this I hear about your not even coming to see Norma?” she demanded.

Fish registered deep surprise. “Why ... why, Norma, didn't you explain to your aunt? Excuse me a minute.” He darted over to the drawings on the wall. “Well. Now these are really excellent, Norma; there's a good deal of improvement here. The symmetry, you see, and the dynamic *flow* —"

Norma said, “Those are three months old.” She was wearing a man's shirt and dungarees, and looked as if she might have been crying recently, but her face was carefully made up.

“Well, honey, I wanted to come back, even after what you said. I did come around, twice, you know, but you didn't answer your bell."

“That's not so."

“Well, I suppose you might have been out,” said Fish cheerfully. He turned to Mrs. Prentice. “Norma was upset, you know.” His voice dropped. “About a month after we started, she told me to get out and not come back."

Dave had drifted back across the room. He sat down beside Norma without comment.

“The idea of taking the poor child's money for*nothing* ,” said Mrs. Prentice vehemently. “Why didn't you give it back?"

Fish pulled up a folding chair and sat down close to her. “Mrs. Prentice,” he said quietly, “I didn't want Norma to make a mistake. I told her, now, if you'll live up to your agreement and study with me for a year, I said, and then if you're not satisfied, why, I'll gladly refund every cent."

“You weren't doing me any*good* ,” said Norma, with a hysterical note in her voice.

Fish gave her a look of sorrowful patience.

“He'd just come in, and look at my work, and say something like ‘This has a good feeling,’ or ‘The symmetry is good,’ or some*meaningless* thing like that. I was getting so nervous I couldn't even*draw* . That's when I wrote you, Aunt Marie, but you were in Europe. My golly, I had to do something, didn't I?” Her hands were clenched white in her lap. “There, dear,” Mrs. Prentice murmured, and gave her arm a little squeeze.

“I've been going to day classes at the Art Center,” Norma said between her teeth. “It was all I could *afford."*

Mrs. Prentice's eyes sparkled with indignation. “Mr. Wilmington, I don't think we have to discuss this much longer. I want you to return the money I paid you. I think it's disgraceful, a well-known artist like you*tooping* —"

“Mrs. Prentice,” said Fish, pitching his voice lower again, “if it wasn't for my faith in Norma's great future as an artist, why I would hand you over every cent. But as it is she would be making a great mistake, so I suggest again—"

“Doc,” said Dave rudely, “you give her back that money pretty damn quick.” He leaned forward to speak to the older woman. “You want to know what his real name is, it's Fish. Anyhow, it was when I met him. This whole thing is just a joke. Why, he's no artist. The real George Wilmington is his nephew; he's an invalid out in Wisconsin. Doc here has just been fronting for him, because he's too sick to stand the publicity and all. Now, that's the truth. Or as much of it as I know."

Fish said sorrowfully, “Dave, is this the thanks I get for putting you through art school?"

“You got me the scholarship, but it didn't cost you anything. I found that out from the director. I guess you just wanted to put me out of the way so I wouldn't talk too much. Hell, Doc, that was all right. But when I met Norma here, over at your place yesterday—"

“What? When was that?"

“About ten o'clock.” Fish winced, he had been in bed with a bad head and hadn't answered the bell; if

he'd only known! “You weren't home, so we got to talking, and—well, pretending to be your nephew, that's one thing, but when you promise to teach somebody when you can't even draw a line yourself!"

Fish raised a hand. “Now, Dave, there's a thing or two you don't know. You say my real name is Fish. Now did you ever see my birth certificate, or did you know anybody that knew me as a child? How do you know my name is Fish?"

“Well, you*told* me."

“That's right, Dave, I did. And you say the real George Wilmington is an invalid out in Wisconsin. You ever see him, Dave? You ever been in Wisconsin?"

“Well, no, but—"

“Neither have I. No, Dave—” he lowered his voice solemnly—"every single thing I told you about that was just a lie. And I admit it.” Now here was the place for a tear. Fish turned his mind to the creditors, the trouble with the machine, the oil stock salesman who had gone south with his money, the lawyers who were robbing him blind trying to get it back, the ungratefulness of everybody. A warm trickle crept out onto his cheek and, lowering his head, he knuckled it away.

“Well, what?” said Dave, bewildered.

Fish said with an effort, “I had reasons. Certain reasons. You know, it's ... it's hard for me to talk about ‘em. Mrs. Prentice, I wonder if I could just see you alone for a minute."

She was leaning forward a little, looking at him with concern. It never failed—a woman like that couldn't stand to see a man cry.

“Well, it's certainly all right with*me* ,” said Norma, getting up. She walked away, and Dave followed her. After a moment the door closed behind them.

Fish blew his nose, dabbed unobtrusively at his eyes, straightened up bravely and put his handkerchief away. “Mrs. Prentice, I don't s'pose you know that I'm a widower.” Her eyes widened a little. “It's true, I lost my dear wife. I don't usually talk about it, as a matter of fact, but somehow—I don't know if you've been bereaved yourself, Mrs. Prentice."

She said nervously, “Didn't Norma tell you? I'm a widow, Mr. Wilmington."

“No!” said Fish. “Isn't that strange? I felt something—you know, a*vibration* . Well, Mrs. Prentice—can I call you Marie?—you know, after my loss—” time for another tear now; once started, they came easily—"I just went to pieces. I don't excuse myself, I didn't want to live. I couldn't touch a pencil for a year. And even to this day I can't draw a line if there's anybody watching me. Now—there's the reason for this whole mixup. That business about my nephew and all, that was just a story I made up to make things a little easier. That's what I*thought* . I don't know, I'm so clumsy where it takes a little tact. I'm just like a bull in a china closet, Marie. And that's the whole story.” He sat back, blew his nose vigorously again.

Mrs. Prentice's eyes were moist, but her handsome face had a wary expression. “I honestly don't know what to think, Mr. Wilmington. You say you can't draw in public—"

“Call me George. You see, it's what the psychologists call a trauma."

“Well, how would this be? I'll step outside for a few minutes, and you draw a picture. Now, I think that would be—"

Fish was shaking his head sadly. “It's worse than I told you. I can't draw*anywhere* except in one room in my house—I've got it fixed up with her picture, and some mementos.” He gulped hard, but decided against a third tear. “I'm sorry, I'd do it for you if I could, but ..."

She sat quietly in thought for a moment. “Then let's say this. You go home, Mr. Wilmington, and draw something—a sketch of me, my face, from memory. I believe any competent artist could do that?"

Fish hesitated, not liking to say no.

“Now, you see, that will settle it. You couldn't get a snapshot of me and send it off to Wisconsin—there wouldn't be time. I'll give you, oh, half an hour."

“Half an—"

“That should be enough, shouldn't it? So that when I come to call on you, in half an hour from now, if you have a sketch of me—a likeness—why then I'll know that you're telling the truth. If not ..."

Boxed in, Fish made the best of it. He got to his feet with a confident smile. “Well, now, that's fair enough. One thing, I know I could never forget*your* face. And I want to tell you how relieved I am that we had this little talk, incidentally, and—well, I better go and get that drawing started. I'll expect you in half an hour, Marie!” He paused at the door.

“I'll be there ... George,” she said.

Grunting and twitching, Fish stormed into the house banging doors behind him. Place was a mess—sofa cushions and newspapers all over the living room—but, never mind, she might marry him to clean up his house. Thing was—he unlocked the private room, feverishly swept the cover off the big machine, and began pushing buttons on one of the banks—thing was, get that sketch made. One chance in a hundred. But better than no chance at all. He switched on the machine, watched in helpless impatience while the arms drifted out and hung motionless.

A face—and a likeness! Only hope he had was to put it together from bits and pieces. Nothing left now that would work in the whole machine but some useless items, mechanical drawings and architecture, and a few scraps of anatomy. Let there be enough for one more face! And let it be something like Marie's face!

The machine clicked suddenly and began to trace a line. Fish stood over it in hand-wringing anxiety, watching how the combined motion of the two revolving pivots translated the straight push of the arm into a subtle line. Pretty thing to watch, even if he never could like what it made. Now here it came curving around; now the arm was lifting, going back. A nose! It was drawing a nose!

It was a kind of Greek nose, shapely but thick, not much like Marie's fine curved nose, but, never mind, he could talk her into it—give him the raw material, he could always sell. Let there be*any* kind of a female face, so long as it wasn't ugly. Come on, now, an eye!

But the arms stopped and hung motionless again. The machine hummed quietly, the dials were lighted; nothing happened.

Eaten by impatience, Fish looked at his watch, clapped his palm over it, peeked, swore, and wandered rapidly out of the room. Sometimes lately the machine would just sit like that for minutes at a time, as if it were trying and trying to work, but somehow not succeeding, and then,*click* , off it would go again. He hurried back, looked—still nothing—and went back, pacing the empty rooms, looking for something to do.

For the first time he noticed there was some mail in the basket under the letter drop. Mostly bills. He threw them behind the living-room sofa, but one was a long, bulky brown envelope with “Encyclopaedia Britannica Library Research Service” in the corner.

It had been so long ago, it took him a moment to remember. A couple of weeks after he sent in his letter, there had been a polite printed postcard acknowledging it, then nothing for months. Somewhere along the line he had decided he wasn't going to get an answer. There wasn't any such language.... Well, let's see. He picked the end of the envelope open.

His restless eye was caught by the dining-room clock. Look at the time! Clutching the envelope forgetfully, he rushed into the private room again. The machine was still sitting motionless, humming, lighted. There was nothing on the paper but a noble nose.

Fish pounded on the side of the big machine, with no result except to his fist, and then on the bank that was in use. Nothing. He turned away, noticed he was still holding the envelope, and irritably plucked out the papers inside.

There was a stiff orange folder, stapled at the top. When he lifted the cover, there was a single sheet of paper inside. At the top, the Britannica letterhead, and “V. A. Sternback, Director.” Then, in the middle, “SWEDISH WORDS."

His eye ran down the list, startled. There were all the words he had copied off, and opposite each one a word in English.*Teckning* ... drawing.*Mönster* ... pattern.*Utpläna* ... to erase.*Användning* ... application, use.

Fish looked up. Then that was why nothing had happened when he pressed the*Utpläna* button—he'd always tried it before the machine made a drawing, never while there was a finished one on the board. Now why hadn't he thought of that? Yes, and here was*Avslä* ... to reject. And*slutsatsen* ... completion. “To reject a drawing before completion, press ...” He'd never done that, either.

What about the middle button,*Torka* ... to wipe. To wipe? Let's see, there was another word—*Avlågsna*, that was it. Sometimes the phrase*"Avlågsna ett mönster"* would be running through his head when he was half awake, like a whispered warning .... Here it was.*Avlågsna* ... to remove.

His hands were shaking. “To remove a pattern from bank after use, press button ‘Wipe.’” He let the folder fall. All this time, not knowing, he'd been systematically using up the precious patterns in the machine, throwing them away one by one, until now there was nothing left—just eight big hunks of useless machinery, made for somebody somewhere who spoke Swedish ....

The machine clicked softly and the other arm began to move. It traced a graceful upright line, some distance in front of the nose. It looped over and came back down again, then up ....

Somewhere distant, the doorbell rang imperiously.

Fish stared, mesmerized, at the paper. The moving point traced another graceful open loop, then another, like a squeezed-together roller coaster. Then another one, moving inexorably and without hurry: now there were four. Without pausing, it extended the last line downward and then brought it across. The line met the tip of the nose and curved back.

The four open loops were fingers. The fifth one was a thumb.

The machine, humming quietly, withdrew its arms into their recesses. After a moment the lights went dark and the hum stopped. Outside, the doorbell rang again, and went on ringing.

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Special Delivery

LEN AND MOIRA Connington lived in a rented cottage with a small yard, a smaller garden and too many fir trees. The lawn, which Len seldom had time to mow, was full of weeds, and the garden was overgrown with blackberry brambles. The house itself was clean and smelled better than most city apartments, and Moira kept geraniums in the windows; however, it was dark on account of the firs and on the wrong side of town. Approaching the door one late spring afternoon, Len tripped on a flagstone and scattered examination papers all the way to the porch.

When he picked himself up, Moira was giggling in the doorway. “That was funny.”

“The hell it was,” said Len. “I banged my nose.” He picked up his Chemistry B papers in a stiff silence; a red drop fell on the last one. “God*damn* it!”

Moira held the screen door for him, looking contrite and faintly surprised. She followed him into the bathroom. “Len, I didn't mean to laugh. Does it hurt much?”

“No,” said Len, staring fiercely at his scraped nose in the mirror, although in point of fact it was throbbing like a gong.

“That's good. It was the funniest thing—I mean, funny-peculiar,” she said hastily.

Len stared at her; the whites of her eyes were showing. “Is there anything the matter with you?” he demanded.

“I don't know,” she said on a rising note. “Nothing like that ever happened to me before. I didn't think it was funny at all, I was worried about you, and I didn't know I was going to laugh—” She laughed again, a trifle nervously. “Maybe I'm cracking up?”

Moira was a dark-haired young woman with a placid, friendly disposition, Len had met her in his senior year at Columbia, with—looking at it impartially, which Len seldom did—regrettable results. At present, in her seventh month, she was shaped like a rather bosomy kewpie doll.

Emotional upsets, he remembered, may occur frequently during this period. He leaned to get past her belly and kissed her forgivingly. “You're probably tired. Go sit down and I'll get you some coffee.”

... Except that Moira had never had any hysterics till now, or morning sickness, either—she burped instead—and anyhow, was there anything in the literature about fits of giggling?

After supper he marked seventeen sets of papers desultorily in red pencil, then got up to look for the baby book. There were four dog-eared paperbound volumes with smiling infants’ faces on the covers, but the one he wanted wasn't there. He looked behind the bookcase and on the wicker table beside it. “Moira!”

“Hm?”

“Where the bloody hell is the other baby book?”

“I've got it.”

Len went and looked over her shoulder. She was staring at a mildly obscene drawing of a fetus lying in a sort of upside-down Yoga position inside a cutaway woman's body.

“That's what he looks like,” she said. “Mama.”

The diagram was of a fetus at term. “What was that about your mother?” Len asked, puzzled.

“Don't be silly,” she said abstractedly.

He waited, but she didn't look up or turn the page. After a while he went back to his work.

He watched her. Eventually she leafed through to the back of the book, read a few pages, and put it down. She lighted a cigarette and immediately put it out again. She fetched up a resounding belch.

“That was a good one,” said Len admiringly. Moira's belches surpassed anything ever heard in the men's locker rooms at Columbia; they shook doors and rattled windows.

Moira sighed.

Feeling tense, Len picked up his coffee cup and started toward the kitchen. He halted beside Moira's chair. On the side table was her after-dinner cup, still full of coffee: black, scummed with oil droplets, stone-cold.

“Didn't you want your coffee?”

She looked at the cup. “I did, but...” She paused and shook her head, looking perplexed. “I don't know.”

“Well, do you want another cup now?”

“Yes, please. No.”

Len, who had begun a step, rocked back on his heels. “Which, damn it?”

Her face got all swollen. “Oh, Len, I'm so mixed up,” she said, and began to tremble.

Len felt part of his irritation spilling over into protectiveness. “What you need,” he said firmly, “is a drink.”

He climbed a stepladder to get at the top cabinet shelf which housed their liquor when they had any; small upstate towns and their school boards being what they were, this was one of many necessary precautions.

Inspecting the doleful three fingers of whisky in the bottle, Len swore under his breath. They couldn't afford a decent supply of booze, or new clothes for Moira, or— The original idea had been for Len to teach for a year while they saved enough money so that he could go back for his master's; more lately, this proving unlikely, they had merely been trying to put aside enough for summer school, and even that was beginning to look like the wildest optimism.

High-school teachers without seniority weren't supposed to be married. Or graduate physics students, for that matter.

He mixed two stiff highballs and carried them back into the living room. “Here you are. Skoal.”

“Ah,” she said appreciatively. “That tastes— Ugh.” She set the glass down and stared at it with her mouth half open.

“What's the matter now?”

She turned her head carefully, as if she were afraid it would come off. “Len,*I don't know* . Mama.”

“That's the second time you've said that. What is this all—”

“Said what?”

“Mama. Look, kid, if you're—”

“I didn't.” She looked a little feverish.

“Sure you did,” said Len reasonably. “Once when you were looking at the baby book, and then again just now, after you said ugh to the highball. Speaking of which—”

“Mama drink milk,” said Moira, speaking with exaggerated clarity. Moira hated milk. Len swallowed half his highball, turned and went silently into the kitchen.

When he came back with the milk, Moira looked at it as if it contained a snake. “Len, I didn't say that.”

“Okay.”

“I didn't. I didn't say mama and I didn't say that about the milk.” Her voice quavered. “And I didn't laugh at you when you fell down.”

“It was somebody else.”

“It was.” She looked down at her gingham-covered bulge. “You won't believe me. Put your hand there. A little lower.”

Under the cloth her flesh was warm and solid against his palm. “Kicks?” he inquired.

“Not yet. Now,” she said in a strained voice. “You in there. If you want your milk, kick three times.”

Len opened his mouth and shut it again. Under his hand there were three squirming thrusts, one after the other.

Moira closed her eyes, held her breath and drank the milk down in one long horrid gulp.

“Once in a great while,” Moira read, “cell cleavage will not have followed the orderly pattern that produces a normal baby. In these rare cases some parts of the body will develop excessively, while others do not develop at all. This disorderly cell growth, which is strikingly similar to the wild cell growth that we know as cancer—” Her shoulders moved convulsively. “Bluh.”

“Why do you keep reading that stuff if it makes you feel that way?”

“I have to,” she said absently. She picked up another book from the stack. “There's a page missing.”

Len attacked the last of his egg in a noncommittal manner. “Wonder it's held together this long,” he said. This was perfectly just; the book had had something spilled on it, partially dissolving the glue, and was in an advanced state of anarchy; however the fact was that Len had tom out the page in question four nights

ago, after reading it carefully: the topic was “Psychoses in Pregnancy.”

Moira had now decided that the baby was male, that his name was Leonardo (not referring to Len but to da Vinci), that he had informed her of these things along with a good many others, that he was keeping her from her favorite foods and making her eat things she detested, like liver and tripe, and that she had to read books of his choice all day long in order to keep him from kicking her in the bladder.

It was miserably hot; Commencement was only two weeks away, Len's students were fish-eyed and galvanic by turns. Then there was the matter of his contract for next year, and the possible opening at Oster High, which would mean more money, and the Parent-Teacher's thing tonight at which Superintendent Greer and his wife would be regally present....

Moira was knee-deep in Volume I of *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* , moving her lips; an occasional guttural escaped her.

Len cleared his throat. “Moy?”

“...*und also des tragischen*—what in God's name he means by that— What, Len?”

He made an irritated noise. “Why not try the English edition?”

“Leo wants to learn German. What were you going to say?”

Len closed his eyes for a moment. “About this PTA business—you sure you want to go?”

“Well, of *course* . it's pretty important, isn't it? Unless you think I look too sloppy—”

“No. No, damn it. But are you feeling up to it?”

There were faint violet crescents under Moira's eyes; she had been sleeping badly. “Sure,” she said.

“All right. And you'll go see the sawbones tomorrow.”

“I said I would.”

“And you won't say anything about Leo to Mrs. Greer or anybody—”

She looked slightly embarrassed. “No. Not till he's born, I think, don't you? It would be an awful hard thing to prove—you wouldn't even have believed me if you hadn't felt him kick.”

This experiment had not been repeated, though Len had asked often enough; all little Leo had wanted, Moira said, was to establish communication with his mother—he didn't seem to be really interested in Len at all. “Too young,” she explained.

And still... Len recalled the frogs his biology class had dissected last semester. One of them had had two hearts. This disorderly cell growth... like a cancer. Unpredictable: extra fingers or toes—or a double helping of cortex?

“And I'll burp like a lady, if at all,” Moira said cheerfully.

When the Conningtons arrived, the room was empty except for the ladies of the committee, two nervously smiling male teachers and the impressive bulk of Superintendent Greer. Card-table legs *skreeked* on the bare floor; the air was heavy with wood polish and musk.

Greer advanced, beaming fixedly. “Well, isn't this nice. How are you young folks this warm evening?”

“Oh, we thought we'd be*earlier* , Mr. Greer,” said Moira with pretty vexation. She looked surprisingly schoolgirlish and chic; the lump that was Leo was hardly noticeable unless you caught her in profile. “I'll go right now and help the ladies. There must be something I can still do.”

“No, now, we won't hear of it. But I'll tell you what you can do—you can go right over there and say hello to Mrs. Greer. I know she's dying to sit down and have a good chat with you. Go ahead now—don't worry about this husband of yours; I'll take care of him.”

Moira receded into a scattering of small shrieks of pleasure, at least half of them arcing across a gap of mutual dislike.

Greer, exhibiting perfect dentures, exhaled Listerine. His pink skin looked not only scrubbed but disinfected; his gold-rimmed glasses belonged in an optometrist's window, and his tropical suit had obviously come straight from the cleaner's. It was impossible to think of Greer unshaven, Greer smoking a cigar, Greer with a smudge of axle grease on his forehead, or Greer making love to his wife.

“Well, sir, this weather...”

“When I think of what this valley was like twenty years ago...”

“At today's prices...”

Len listened with growing admiration, putting in comments where required; he had never realized before that there were so many absolutely neutral topics of conversation.

A few more people straggled in, raising the room temperature about half a degree per capita. Greer did not perspire, he merely glowed.

Across the room Moira was now seated chummily with Mrs. Greer, a large-bosomed woman in an outrageously unfashionable hat. Moira appeared to be telling a joke; Len knew perfectly well that it was a clean one, but he listened tensely, all the same, until he heard Mrs. Greer yelp with laughter. Her voice carried well. “Oh, that's*priceless* ! Oh, dear, I*only* hope I can remember it!”

Len, who had resolutely not been thinking of ways to turn the conversation toward the Oster vacancy, stiffened again when he realized that Greer had abruptly begun to talk shop. His heart began pounding absurdly; Greer was asking highly pertinent questions in a good-humored but businesslike way—drawing Len out, and not even bothering to be Machiavellian about it.

Len answered candidly, except when he was certain he knew what the superintendent wanted to hear; then he lied like a Trojan.

Mrs. Greer had conjured up a premature pot of tea; and oblivious to the stares of the thirstier teachers present, she and Moira were hogging it, heads together, as if they were plotting the overthrow of the Republic or exchanging recipes.

Greer listened attentively to Len's final reply, which was delivered with as pious an air as if Len had been a Boy Scout swearing on the*Manual* ; but since the question had been “Do you plan to make teaching your career?” there was not a word of truth in it.

He then inspected his paunch and assumed a mild theatrical frown. Len, with that social sixth sense which is unmistakable when it operates, knew that his next words were going to be: “You may have heard that Oster High will be needing a new science teacher next fall....”

At this point Moira barked like a seal.

The ensuing silence was broken a moment later by a hearty scream, followed instantly by a clatter and a bone-shaking thud.

Mrs. Greer was sitting on the floor; legs sprawled, hat over her eye, she appeared to be attempting to perform some sort of orgiastic dance.

“It was Leo,” Moira said incoherently. “You know she's English—she said of course a cup of tea wouldn't hurt me, and she kept telling me to go ahead and drink it while it was hot, and I couldn't—”

“No. No. Wait,” said Len in a controlled fury. “What—”

“So I drank some. And Leo kicked up and made me burp the burp I was saving. And—”

“Oh, Christ.”

“Then he kicked the teacup out of my hand into her lap, and I wish I was*dead* .”

On the following day, Len took Moira to the doctor's office, where they read dog-eared copies of*The Rotarian* and*Field and Stream* for an hour.

Dr. Berry was a round little man with soulful eyes and a twenty-four-hour bedside manner. On the walls of his office, where it is customary for doctors to hang at least seventeen diplomas and certificates of membership, Berry had three; the rest of the space was filled with enlarged, colored photographs of beautiful, beautiful children.

When Len followed Moira determinedly into the consulting room, Berry looked mildly shocked for a moment, then apparently decided to carry on as if nothing*outre* had happened. You could not say that he spoke, or even whispered; he rustled.

“Now, Mrs. Connington, we're looking just fine today. How have we been feeling?”

“Just fine. My husband thinks I'm insane.”

“That's g— Well, that's a funny thing for him to think, isn't it?” Berry glanced at the wall midway between himself and Len, then shuffled some file cards rather nervously. “Now. Have we had any burning sensations in our urine?”

“No. Not as far as I'm— No.”

“Any soreness in our stomach?”

“Yes, he's been kicking me black and blue.”

Berry misinterpreted Moira's brooding glance at Len, and his eyebrows twitched involuntarily.

“The baby,” said Len. “The baby kicks her.”

Berry coughed. “Any headaches? Dizziness? Vomiting? Swelling in our legs or ankles?”

“No.”

“All rightie. Now let's just find out how much we've gained, and then we'll get up on the examining table.”

Berry drew the sheet down over Moira's abdomen as if it were an exceptionally fragile egg. He probed delicately with his fat fingertips, then used the stethoscope.

“Those X rays,” said Len. “Have they come back yet?”

“Mm-hm,” said Berry. “Yes, they have.” He moved the stethoscope and listened again.

“Did they show anything unusual?”

Berry's eyebrows twitched a polite question.

“We've been having a little argument,” Moira said in a strained voice, “about whether this is an ordinary baby or not.”

Berry took the stethoscope tubes out of his ears. He gazed at Moira like an anxious spaniel. “Now let's not worry about*that* . We're going to have a perfectly healthy, wonderful baby, and if anybody tells us differently, why, we'll just tell them to go jump in the lake, won't we?”

“The baby is absolutely normal?” Len said in a marked manner.

“Absolutely.” Berry applied the stethoscope again. His face blanched.

“What's the matter?” Len asked after a moment. The doctor's gaze was fixed and glassy.

“*Vagitus uterinus*,” Berry muttered. He pulled the stethoscope off abruptly and stared at it. “No, of course it couldn't be. Now isn't that a nuisance: we seem to be picking up a radio broadcast with our little stethoscope here. I'll just go and get another instrument.”

Moira and Len exchanged glances. Moira's was almost excessively bland.

Berry came confidently in with a new stethoscope, put the diaphragm against Moira's belly, listened for an instant and twitched once all over, as if his mainspring had broken. Visibly jangling, he stepped away from the table. His jaw worked several times before any sound came out.

“Excuse me,” he said, and walked out in an uneven line.

Len snatched up the instrument he had dropped.

Like a bell ringing under water, muffled but clear, a tiny voice was shouting:*"You bladder-headed pill pusher! You bedside vacuum! You fifth-rate tree surgeon! You inflated enema bag!"* A pause.*"Is that you, Connington? Get off the line; I haven't finished with Dr. Bedpan yet."*

Moira smiled, like a Buddha-shaped bomb. “Well?” she said.

“We've got to think,” Len kept saying over and over.

“*You've*got to think.” Moira was combing her hair, snapping the comb smartly at the end of each stroke. “I've had plenty of time to think, ever since it happened. When you catch up—”

Len flung his tie at the carved wooden pineapple on the corner of the footboard. “Moy, be*reasonable* . The chances against the kid kicking three times in any one-minute period are only about one in a hundred. The chances against anything like—”

Moira grunted and stiffened for a moment. Then she cocked her head to one side with a listening expression, a new mannerism of hers that was beginning to send intangible snakes crawling up Len's spine.

“What?” he asked sharply.

“He says to keep our voices down, he's thinking.”

Len's fingers clenched convulsively, and a button flew off his shirt. Shaking, he pulled his arms out of the sleeves and dropped the shirt on the floor. “Look. I just want to get this straight. When he talks to you, you don't hear him shouting all the way up past your liver and lights. What—”

“You know perfectly well. He reads my mind.”

“That isn't the same as—” Len took a deep breath. “Let's not get off on that. What I want to know is what is it like, do you seem to hear a real voice, or do you just know what he's telling you, without knowing how you know, or—”

Moira put the comb down in order to think better. “It isn't like hearing a voice. You'd never confuse one with the other. It's more— The nearest I can come to it, it's like remembering a voice. Except that you don't know what's coming.”

“My God.” Len picked his tie off the floor and abstractedly began knotting it on his bare chest. “And he sees what you see, he knows what you're thinking, he can hear when people talk to you?”

“Of course.”

“But damn it, this is tremendous!” Len began to blunder around the bedroom, not looking where he was going. “They thought Macaulay was a genius. This kid isn't even *born* . Quints, schmints. I *heard* him. He was cussing Berry out like Monty Woolley.”

“He had me reading *The Man Who Came to Dinner* two days ago.”

Len made his way around a small bedside table by trial and error. “That's another thing. How much could you say about his... his personality? I mean, does he seem to know what he's doing, or is he just striking out wildly in all directions?” He paused. “Are you sure he's really conscious at all?”

Moira began, “That's silly—” and stopped. “Define consciousness,” she said doubtfully.

“All right, what I really mean is— Why am I wearing this necktie?” He ripped it off and threw it over a lampshade. “What I mean—”

“Are you sure you're really conscious?”

“Okay. You make joke, I laugh, ha. What I'm trying to ask you is, have you seen any evidence of creative thought, organized thought, or is he just... integrating, along the lines of, of instinctive responses. Do you—”

“I know what you mean. Shut up a minute.... I don't know.”

“I mean, is he awake, or asleep and dreaming about us, like the Red King?”

“I don't *know* .”

“And if that's it, what'll happen when he wakes up?”

Moira took off her robe, folded it neatly, and maneuvered herself between the sheets. “Come to bed.”

Len got one sock off before another thought struck him. “He reads your mind. Can he read other people's?” He looked appalled. “Can he read mine?”

“He doesn't. Whether it's because he can't, I don't know. I think he just doesn't care.”

Len pulled the other sock halfway down and left it there. In another tone he said, “One of the things he doesn't care about is whether I have a job.”

“No... He thought it was funny. I wanted to sink through the floor, but I had all I could do to keep from laughing when she fell down. ... Len, what are we going to do?”

He swiveled around and looked at her. “Look,” he said, “I didn't mean to sound that gloomy. We'll do something. We'll fix it. Really.”

“All right.”

Careful of his elbows and knees, Len climbed into the bed beside her. “Okay now?”

“Mm... Ugh.” Moira tried to sit up suddenly and almost made it. She wound up propped on one elbow and said indignantly, “Oh, no.”

Len stared at her in the dimness. “What?”

She grunted again. “Len, get up. All*right* . Len,*hurry!* ”

Len fought his way convulsively past a treacherous sheet and staggered up, goose-pimpled and tense. “Now what?”

“You'll have to sleep on the couch. The sheets are in the bottom—”

“On that couch? Are you crazy?”

“I can't help it,” she said in a thin voice. “Please don't let's argue, you'll just have to—”

"Why?”

“We can't sleep in the same bed,” she wailed. “He says it's—oh!—unhygienic!”

Len's contract was not renewed. He got a job waiting on tables in a resort hotel, an occupation which pays more money than teaching future citizens the rudiments of three basic sciences, but for which Len had no aptitude. He lasted three days at it, he was then idle for a week and a half, until his four years of college physics earned him employment as a clerk in an electrical shop. His employer was a cheerfully aggressive man who assured Len that there were great opportunities in radio-TV, and firmly believed that atom-bomb tests were causing all the bad weather.

Moira, in her eighth month, walked to the county library every day and trundled a load of books home in the perambulator. Little Leo, it appeared, was working his way simultaneously through biology, astrophysics, phrenology, chemical engineering, architecture, Christian Science, psychosomatic medicine, marine law, business management, Yoga, crystallography, metaphysics and modern literature.

His domination of Moira's life remained absolute, and his experiments with her regimen continued. One week, she ate nothing but nuts and fruit washed down with distilled water; the next, she was on a diet of porterhouse steak, dandelion greens and Hadacol.

With the coming of full summer, fortunately, few of the high-school staff were in evidence. Len met Dr. Berry once on the street. Berry started, twitched, and walked off rapidly in an entirely new direction.

The diabolical event was due on or about July 29. Len crossed off each day on their wall calendar with

an emphatic black grease pencil. It would, he supposed, be an uncomfortable thing at best to be the parent of a super-prodigy-Leo would no doubt be dictator of the world by the time he was fifteen, unless he was assassinated first—but almost anything would be a fair price for getting Leo out of his maternal fortress.

Then there was the day when Len came home to find Moira weeping over the typewriter, with a half-inch stack of manuscript beside her.

“It isn't anything, I'm just tired. He started after lunch. Look.”

Len turned the face-down sheaf the right way up.

Droning. Abrasing

the demiurge.

Hier begrimms the tale:

Eyes undotted, grewling

and looking, turns off

a larm, seizes cloes.

Stewed! Bierly a wretch!

Pence, therefore jews we. Pons!

Let the pants take air of themsulves.

Searches in the bottom of a hole

for soap; hawks up a good gob.

Flayed on fable, a

round cut of cat's meat...

The first three sheets were all like that. The fourth was a perfectly good Petrarchan sonnet reviling the current administration and the party of which Len was an assenting member.

The fifth was hand-lettered in the Cyrillic alphabet and illustrated with geometric diagrams. Len put it down and stared shakily at Moira.

“No, go on,” she said. “Read the rest.” The sixth and seventh were dirty limericks, and the eighth, ninth and so on to the end of the stack were what looked like the first chapters of a rattling good historical adventure novel.

Its chief characters were Cyrus the Great, his gallon-bosomed daughter Lygea, of whom Len had never previously heard, and a one-armed Graeco-Mede adventurer named Xanthes; there were also courtesans, spies, apparitions, scullery slaves, oracles, cutthroats, lepers, priests, whoremasters and men-at-arms in magnificent profusion.

“He's decided,” said Moira, “what he wants to be when he's born.”

Leo refused to be bothered with mundane details. When there were eighty pages of the manuscript,

Moira invented a title and byline for it—*The Virgin of Persepolis*, by Leon Lenn—and mailed it off to a literary agent in New York. His response, a week later, was cautiously enthusiastic and a trifle plaintive. He asked for an outline of the remainder of the novel.

Moira replied that this was impossible, trying to sound as unworldly and impenetrably artistic as she could. She enclosed the thirty-odd pages Leo had turned out in the meantime.

Nothing was heard from the agent for two weeks. At the end of this time Moira received an astonishing document, exquisitely printed and bound in imitation leather, thirty-two pages including the index, containing three times as many clauses as a lease.

This turned out to be a book contract. With it came the agent's check for nine hundred dollars.

Len tilted his mop handle against the wall and straightened carefully, conscious of every individual gritty muscle in his back. How did women do housework every day, seven days a week, fifty-two bloody weeks a year? It was a little cooler now that the sun was down, and he was working stripped to shorts and bath slippers, but be might as well have been wearing an overcoat in a Turkish bath.

The clatter of Moira's monstrous new typewriter stopped, leaving a faint hum. Len went into the living room and sagged on the arm of a chair. Moira, gleaming sweatily in a flowered housecoat, was lighting a cigarette.

“How's it going?”

She switched off the machine wearily. “Page two-eighty-nine. Xanthes killed Anaxander.”

“Thought he would. How about Ganesh and Zeuxias?”

“I don't know.” She frowned. “I can't figure it out. You know who it was that raped Mariamne in the garden?”

“No, who?”

"Ganesh."

“You're kidding.”

“Nope.” She pointed to the stack of typescript. “See for yourself.”

Len didn't move. “But Ganesh was in Lydia, buying back the sapphire. He didn't get back till—”

“I know, I know. But he wasn't. That was Zeuxias in a putty nose and his beard dyed. It's all perfectly logical, the way he explains it. Zeuxias overheard Ganesh talking to the three Mongols—you remember, Ganesh thought there was somebody behind the curtain, only that was when they heard Lygea scream, and while their backs were turned—”

“All right, but for God's sake this fouls everything up. If Ganesh never went to Lydia, then he*couldn't* have had anything to do with distempering Cyrus's armor. And Zeuxias couldn't, either, because—”

“I*know* . It's exasperating. I know he's going to pull another rabbit out of the hat and clear everything up, but I don't see how.”

Len brooded. “It beats me. It had to be either Ganesh or Zeuxias. Or Philomenes. But look, damn it, if Zeuxias knew about the sapphire all the time, that rules out Philomenes once and for all. Unless... No. I forgot about that business in the temple. Whuff. Do you think he really knows what he's doing?”

“I'm certain. Lately I've been able to tell what he's thinking even when he isn't talking to me—I mean just generally, like when he's puzzling over something, or when he's feeling mean. It's going to be something brilliant, and he knows what it is, but he won't tell me. We'll just have to wait.”

“I guess.” Len stood up, grunting. “You want me to see if there's anything in the pot?”

“Please.”

Len wandered into the kitchen, turned the flame on under the Silex, stared briefly at the dishes waiting in the sink, and wandered out again. Since the onslaught of The Novel, Leo had relinquished his interest in Moira's diet, and she had been living on coffee. Small blessings...

Moira was leaning back with her eyes closed, looking very tired. “How is the money?” she asked without moving.

“Lousy. We're down to twenty-one bucks.”

She raised her head and opened her eyes wide. “We couldn't be. Len, how could anybody go through nine hundred dollars that fast?”

“Typewriter. And the dictaphone that Leo thought he wanted, till about half an hour after it was paid for. We spent about fifty on ourselves, I guess. Rent. Groceries. It goes, when there isn't any coming in.”

She sighed. “I thought it would last longer.”

“So did I.... If he doesn't finish this thing in a few days, I'll have to go look for work again.”

“Oh. That isn't so good.”

“I know it, but—”

“All right, if it works out, fine, if it doesn't... He must be near the end by now.”

She stubbed out her cigarette abruptly and sat up, hands poised over the keyboard. “He's getting ready again. See about that coffee, will you?”

Len poured two cups and carried them in. Moira was still sitting in front of the typewriter, with a curious half-formed expression on her face.

Abruptly the carriage whipped over, muttered to itself briefly and thumped the paper up twice. Then it stopped. Moira's eyes got bigger and rounder.

“What's the matter?” said Len. He went and looked over her shoulder.

The last line on the page read:

(TO BE CONTINUED IN OUR NEXT)

Moira's hands curled into small, helpless fists. After a moment she turned off the machine.

“What?” said Len incredulously. “To be continued— What kind of talk is that?”

“He says he's bored with the novel,” Moira replied dully. “He says he knows the ending, so it's artistically complete; it doesn't matter whether anybody else thinks so or not.” She paused. “But he says that isn't the real reason.”

“Well?”

“He's got two. One is that he doesn't want to finish the book till he's certain he'll have complete control of the money it earns.”

“Well,” said Len, swallowing a lump of anger, “that makes a certain amount of sense. It's his book. If he wants guarantees...”

“You haven't heard the other one.”

“All right, let's have it.”

“He wants to teach us, so we'll never forget, who the boss is in this family.”

“Len, I'm awfully tired.”

“Let's just go over it once more; there has to be some way—He still isn't talking to you?”

“I haven't felt anything from him for the last twenty minutes. I think he's asleep.

“All right, let's suppose he *isn't* going to listen to reason—”

“We might as well.”

Len made an incoherent noise. “Okay. I still don't see why we can't write the last chapter ourselves—a few pages—”

“*Who* can?”

“Well, not me, but you've done a little writing—damned good, too. And if you're so sure all the clues are there— Look, if you say you can't do it, okay, we'll hire somebody. A professional writer. It happens all the time. Thorne Smith's last novel—”

“Ugh.”

“Well, it *sold* . What one writer starts, another can finish.”

“Nobody ever finished *The Mystery of Edwin Drood.* ”

“Oh, hell.”

“Len, it's impossible. It *is* . Let me finish. If you're thinking we could have somebody rewrite the last part Leo did—”

“Yeah, I just thought of that.”

“Even that wouldn't do any good, you'd have to go all the way back, almost to page one, it would be another story when you got through. Let's go to bed.”

“Moy, do you remember when we used to worry about the law of opposites?”

“Mm?”

“The law of *opposites* . When we used to be afraid the kid would turn out to be a pick-and-shovel man with a pointy head.”

“Uh. Mm.”

He turned. Moira was standing with one hand on her belly and the other behind her back. She looked as if she were about to start practicing a low bow but doubted she could make it.

“What's the matter now?” he asked.

“Pain in the small of my back.”

“Bad one?”

“No...”

“Belly hurt, too?”

She frowned. “Don't be foolish. I'm feeling for the contraction. There it comes.”

“The... but you just said the small of your back.”

“Where do you think labor pains usually start?”

The pains were coming at twenty-minute intervals, and the taxi had not arrived. Moira was packed and ready. Len was trying to set her a good example by remaining calm. He strolled over to the wall calendar, gazed at it in an offhand manner, and turned away.

“Len, I know it's only the fifteenth of July.”

“Huh? I didn't say that aloud.”

“You said it seven times. Sit down; you're making me nervous.”

Len perched on the corner of the table, folded his arms, and immediately got up to look out the window. On the way back he circled the table in an aimless way, picked up a bottle of ink and shook it to see if the cap was on tight, stumbled over a wastebasket, carefully upended it and sat down with an air of *J'y suis, j'y reste* . “Nothing to worry about,” he said firmly. “Women do this all the time.”

“True.”

“What for?” he demanded violently.

Moira grinned at him, then winced slightly and looked at the clock. “Eighteen minutes. This is a good one.”

When she relaxed, Len put a cigarette in his mouth and lighted it in only two tries. “How's Leo taking it?”

“Isn't saying. He feels—” She concentrated. “Apprehensive. He's feeling strange and he doesn't like it.... I don't think he's entirely awake. Funny.”

“I'm glad this is happening now,” Len announced.

“So am I, but...”

“Look,” said Len, moving energetically to the arm of her chair, “we've always had it pretty good, haven't we? Not that it hasn't been tough at times, but—you know.”

“I know.”

“Well, that's the way it'll be again, once this is over. I don't care how much of a superbrain he is, once he's born—you know what I mean? The only reason he's had the bulge on us all this time is he could get at us and we couldn't get at him. He's got the mind of an adult, he can learn to act like one. It's that simple.”

Moira hesitated. “You can't take him out to the woodshed. He's going to be a helpless baby, physically, like anybody else's. He has to be taken care of. You can't—”

“No, all right, but there are plenty of other ways. If he behaves, he gets read to. Like that.”

“That's right, but—there's one other thing I thought of. You remember when you said suppose he's asleep and dreaming... and what happens if he wakes up?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, that reminded me of something else, or maybe it's the same thing. Did you know that a fetus in the womb gets only about half the amount of oxygen in his blood that he'll have when he starts to breathe?”

Len looked thoughtful. “Forgot. Well, that's just one more thing Leo does that babies aren't supposed to do.”

“Use as much energy as he does, you mean. All right, but what I'm getting at is, it can't be because he's getting more than the normal amount of oxygen, can it? I mean, he's the prodigy, not me. He must be using it more efficiently.... And if that's it, what happens when he's getting twice as much?”

They had soaped and shaved and disinfected her, along with other indignities, and now she could see herself in the reflector of the big delivery-table light—the image clear and bright, like everything else, but very haloed and swimmy, and looking like a statue of Sita. She had no idea how long she had been here—that was the scopolamine, probably—but she was getting pretty tired.

“Bear down,” said the staff doctor kindly, and before she could answer, the pain came up like violins and she had to gulp at the tingly coldness of laughing gas. When the mask lifted she said, “I*am* bearing down,” but the doctor had gone back to the other end of her and wasn't listening.

Anyhow, she had Leo.*How are you feeling?*

His answer was muddled—because of the anesthetic?—but she didn't really need it; her perception of him was clear: darkness and pressure, impatience, a slow Satanic anger ... and something else. Uncertainty? Apprehension?

“Two or three more ought to do it. Bear down.”

Fear. Unmistakable now. And a desperate determination. “Doctor, he doesn't want to be born.”

“Seems that way sometimes, doesn't it? Now bear down good and hard.”

Tell him stop blurrrrr too dangerrrrrrrr stop I feel wowrrrr stop I tellrrrr stop.

“What, Leo, what?”

“Bear down.”

Faintly, like a voice far under water:*Hurry I hate you tell him ... sealed incubator ... tenth oxygen, nine tenths inert gases ... Hurry.*

The pressure abruptly relaxed. Leo was born.

The doctor was holding him up by the heels, red, bloody, wrinkled, trailing a lumpy soft snake. The voice was still there, very small, very far away: *Too late. The same as death.* Then a hint of the old cold arrogance: *Now you'll never know ... who killed Cyrus.*

The doctor slapped him smartly on the minuscule buttocks. The wizened, malevolent face writhed open; but it was only the angry squall of an ordinary infant that came out. Leo was gone, like a light turned off under the measureless ocean.

Moira raised her head weakly. “Give him one for me", she said.

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I See You

YOU ARE five, hiding in a place only you know. You are covered with bark dust, scratched by twigs, sweaty and hot. A wind sighs in the aspen leaves. A faint steady hiss comes from the viewer you hold in your hands; then a voice: “Lorie, I see you—under the barn, eating an apple!” A silence. “Lorie, come on out, I see you.” Another voice. “That's right, she's in there.” After a moment, sulkily: “Oh, okay."

You squirm around, raising the viewer to aim it down the hill. As you turn the knob with your thumb, the bright image races toward you, trees hurling themselves into red darkness and vanishing, then the houses in the compound, and now you see Bruce standing beside the corral, looking into his viewer, slowly turning. His back is to you; you know you are safe, and you sit up. A jay passes with a whir of wings, settles on a branch. With your own eyes now you can see Bruce, only a dot of blue beyond the gray shake walls of the houses. In the viewer, he is turning toward you, and you duck again. Another voice: “Children, come in and get washed for dinner now.” “Aw, Aunt Ellie!” “Mom, we're playing hide and seek. Can't we just stay fifteen minutes more?” “Please, Aunt Ellie!” “No, come on in now—you'll have plenty of time after dinner.” And Bruce: “Aw, okay. All out's in free.” And once more they have not found you; your secret place is yours alone.

Call him Smith. He was the president of a company that bore his name and which held more than a hundred patents in the scientific instrument field. He was sixty, a widower. His only daughter and her husband had been killed in a plane crash in 1978. He had a partner who handled the business operations now; Smith spent most of his time in his own lab. In the spring of 1990 he was working on an image intensification device that was puzzling because it was too good. He had it on his bench now, aimed at a deep shadow box across the room; at the back of the box was a card ruled with black, green, red and blue lines. The only source of illumination was a single ten-watt bulb hung behind the shadow box; the light reflected from the card did not even register on his meter, and yet the image in the screen of his device was sharp and bright. When he varied the inputs to the components in a certain way, the bright image vanished and was replaced by shadows, like the ghost of another image. He had monitored every television channel, had shielded the device against radio frequencies, and the ghosts remained. Increasing the illumination did not make them clearer. They were vaguely rectilinear shapes without any coherent pattern. Occasionally a moving blur traveled slowly across them.

Smith made a disgusted sound. He opened the clamps that held the device and picked it up, reaching for the power switch with his other hand. He never touched it. As he moved the device, the ghost images had shifted; they were dancing now with the faint movements of his hand. Smith stared at them without breathing for a moment. Holding the cord, he turned slowly. The ghost images whirled, vanished, reappeared. He turned the other way; they whirled back.

Smith set the device down on the bench with care. His hands were shaking. He had had the thing clamped down on the bench all the time until now. “Christ almighty, how dumb can one man get?” he asked the empty room.

You are six, almost seven, and you are being allowed to use the big viewer for the first time. You are perched on a cushion in the leather chair at the console; your brother, who has been showing you the controls with a bored and superior air, has just left the room, saying, “All right, if you know so much, do it yourself."

In fact, the controls on this machine are unfamiliar; the little viewers you have used all your life have only one knob, for nearer or farther—to move up/down, or left/right, you just point the viewer where you want to see. This machine has dials and little windows with numbers in them, and switches and pushbuttons, most of which you don't understand, but you know they are for special purposes and don't matter. The main control is a metal rod, right in front of you, with a gray plastic knob on the top. The knob is dull from years of handling; it feels warm and a little greasy in your hand. The console has a funny electric smell, but the big screen, taller than you are, is silent and dark. You can feel your heart beating against your breastbone. You grip the knob harder, push it forward just a little. The screen lights, and you are drifting across the next room as if on huge silent wheels, chairs and end tables turning into reddish silhouettes that shrink, twist and disappear as you pass through them, and for a moment you feel dizzy because when you notice the red numbers jumping in the console to your left, it is as if the whole house were passing massively and vertiginously through itself; then you are floating out the window with the same slow and steady motion, on across the sunlit pasture where two saddle horses stand with their heads up, sniffing the wind; then a stubbled field, dropping away; and now, below you, the co-op road shines like a silver-gray stream. You press the knob down to get closer, and drop with a giddy swoop; now you are rushing along the road, overtaking and passing a yellow truck, turning the knob to steer. At first you blunder into the dark trees on either side, and once the earth surges up over you in a chaos of writhing red shapes, but now you are learning, and you soar down past the crossroads, up the farther hill, and now, now you are on the big road, flying eastward, passing all the cars, rushing toward the great world where you long to be.

It took Smith six weeks to increase the efficiency of the image intensifier enough to bring up the ghost pictures clearly. When he succeeded, the image on the screen was instantly recognizable. It was a view of Jack McCranie's office; the picture was still dim, but sharp enough that Smith could see the expression on Jack's face. He was leaning back in his chair, hands behind his head. Beside him stood Peg Spatola in a purple dress, with her hand on an open folder. She was talking, and McCranie was listening. That was wrong, because Peg was not supposed to be back from Cleveland until next week.

Smith reached for the phone and punched McCranie's number.

“Yes, Tom?"

“Jack, is Peg in there?"

“Why, no—she's in Cleveland, Tom."

“Oh, yes."

McCranie sounded puzzled. “Is anything the matter?” In the screen, he had swiveled his chair and was talking to Peg, gesturing with short, choppy motions of his arm.

“No, nothing,” said Smith. “That's all right, Jack, thank you.” He broke the connection. After a moment he turned to the breadboard controls of the device and changed one setting slightly. In the screen, Peg turned and walked backward out of the office. When he turned the knob the other way, she repeated these actions in reverse. Smith tinkered with the other controls until he got a view of the calendar on Jack's desk. It was Friday, June 15th—last week.

Smith locked up the device and all his notes, went home and spent the rest of the day thinking.

By the end of July he had refined and miniaturized the device and had extended its sensitivity range into the infrared. He spent most of August, when he should have been on vacation, trying various methods of detecting sound through the device. By focusing on the interior of a speaker's larynx and using infrared, he was able to convert the visible vibrations of the vocal cords into sound of fair quality, but that did not satisfy him. He worked for a while on vibrations picked up from panes of glass in windows and on framed pictures, and he experimented briefly with the diaphragms in speaker systems, intercoms and telephones. He kept on into October without stopping and finally achieved a system that would give tinny but recognizable sound from any vibrating surface—a wall, a floor, even the speaker's own cheek or forehead.

He redesigned the whole device, built a prototype and tested it, tore it down, redesigned, built another. It was Christmas before he was done. Once more he locked up the device and all his plans, drawings and notes.

At home he spent the holidays experimenting with commercial adhesives in various strengths. He applied these to coated paper, let them dry, and cut the paper into rectangles. He numbered these rectangles, pasted them onto letter envelopes, some of which he stacked loose; others he bundled together and secured with rubber bands. He opened the stacks and bundles and examined them at regular intervals. Some of the labels curled up and detached themselves after twenty-six hours without leaving any conspicuous trace. He made up another batch of these, typed his home address on six of them. On each of six envelopes he typed his office address, then covered it with one of the labels. He stamped the envelopes and dropped them into a mailbox. All six, minus their labels, were delivered to the office three days later.

Just after New Year's, he told his partner that he wanted to sell out and retire. They discussed it in general terms.

Using an assumed name and a post office box number which was not his, Smith wrote to a commission agent in Boston with whom he had never had any previous dealings. He mailed the letter, with the agent's address covered by one of his labels on which he had typed a fictitious address. The label detached itself in transit; the letter was delivered. When the agent replied, Smith was watching and read the letter as the secretary typed it. The agent followed his instruction to mail his reply in an envelope without return address. The owner of the post office box turned it in marked “not here"; it went to the dead-letter office and was returned in due time, but meanwhile Smith had acknowledged the letter and had mailed, in the same way, a large amount of cash. In subsequent letters he instructed the agent to take bids for components, plans for which he enclosed, from electronics manufacturers, for plastic casings from another, and for assembly and shipping from still another company. Through a second commission agent in New York, to whom he wrote in the same way, he contracted for ten thousand copies of an instruction booklet in four colors.

Late in February he bought a house and an electronics dealership in a small town in the Adirondacks. In

March he signed over his interest in the company to his partner, cleaned out his lab and left. He sold his co-op apartment in Manhattan and his summer house in Connecticut, moved to his new home and became anonymous.

You are thirteen, chasing a fox with the big kids for the first time. They have put you in the north field, the worst place, but you know better than to leave it.

“He's in the glen."

“I see him, he's in the brook, going upstream."

You turn the viewer, racing forward through dappled shade, a brilliance of leaves: there is the glen, and now you see the fox, trotting through the shallows, blossoms of bright water at its feet.

“Ken and Nell, you come down ahead of him by the springhouse. Wanda, you and Tim and Jean stay where you are. Everybody else come upstream, but stay back till I tell you."

That's Leigh, the oldest. You turn the viewer, catch a glimpse of Bobby running downhill through the woods, his long hair flying. Then back to the glen: the fox is gone.

“He's heading up past the corncrib!"

“Okay, keep spread out on both sides, everybody. Jim, can you and Edie head him off before he gets to the woods?"

“We'll try. There he is!"

And the chase is going away from you, as you knew it would, but soon you will be older, as old as Nell and Jim; then you will be in the middle of things, and your life will begin.

By trial and error, Smith has found the settings for Dallas, November 22, 1963: Dealey Plaza, 12:25 p.m. He sees the Presidential motorcade making the turn onto Elm Street. Kennedy slumps forward, raising his hands to his throat. Smith presses a button to hold the moment in time. He scans behind the motorcade, finds the sixth floor of the Book Depository Building, finds the window. There is no one behind the barricade of cartons; the room is empty. He scans the nearby rooms, finds nothing. He tries the floor below. At an open window a man kneels, holding a high-powered rifle. Smith photographs him. He returns to the motorcade, watches as the second shot strikes the President. He freezes time again, scans the surrounding buildings, finds a second marksman on a roof, photographs him. Back to the motorcade. A third and fourth shot, the last blowing off the side of the President's head. Smith freezes the action again, finds two gunmen on the grassy knoll, one aiming across the top of a station wagon, one kneeling in the shrubbery. He photographs them. He turns off the power, sits for a moment, then goes to the washroom, kneels beside the toilet and vomits.

The viewer is your babysitter, your television, your telephone (the telephone lines are still up, but they are used only as signaling devices; when you know that somebody wants to talk to you, you focus your viewer on him), your library, your school. Before puberty you watch other people having sex, but even then your curiosity is easily satisfied; after an older cousin initiates you at fourteen, you are much more interested in doing it yourself. The co-op teacher monitors your studies, sometimes makes suggestions, but more and more, as you grow older, leaves you to your own devices. You are intensely interested in African prehistory, in the European theater, and in the ant-civilization of Epsilon Eridani IV. Soon you will have to choose.

New York Harbor, November 4, 1872—a cold, blustery day. A two-masted ship rides at anchor; on

her stern is lettered: MARY CELESTE. Smith advances the time control. A flicker of darkness, light again, and the ship is gone. He turns back again until he finds it standing out under light canvas past Sandy Hook. Manipulating time and space controls at once, he follows it eastward through a flickering of storm and sun—loses it, finds it again, counting days as he goes. The farther eastward, the more he has to tilt the device downward, while the image of the ship tilts correspondingly away from him. Because of the angle, he can no longer keep the ship in view from a distance but must track it closely. November 21 and 22, violent storms: the ship is dashed upward by waves, falls again, visible only intermittently; it takes him five hours to pass through two days of real time. The 23rd is calmer, but on the 24th another storm blows up. Smith rubs his eyes, loses the ship, finds it again after a ten-minute search.

The gale blows itself out on the morning of the 26th. The sun is bright, the sea almost dead calm. Smith is able to catch glimpses of figures on deck, tilted above dark cross-sections of the hull. A sailor is splicing a rope in the stern, two others lowering a triangular sail between the foremast and the bowsprit, and a fourth is at the helm. A little group stands leaning on the starboard rail; one of them is a woman. The next glimpse is that of a running figure who advances into the screen and disappears. Now the men are lowering a boat over the side; the rail has been removed and lies on the deck. The men drop into the boat and row away. He hears them shouting to each other but cannot make out the words.

Smith turns to the ship again: the deck is empty. He dips below to look at the hold, filled with casks, then the cabin, then the forecastle. There is no sign of anything wrong—no explosion, no fire, no trace of violence. When he looks up again, he sees the sails flapping, then bellying out full. The sea is rising. He looks for the boat, but now too much time has passed and he cannot find it. He returns to the ship and now reverses the time control, tracks it backward until the men are again in their places on the deck. He looks again at the group standing at the rail; now he sees that the woman has a child in her arms. The child struggles, drops over the rail. Smith hears the woman shriek. In a moment she too is over the rail and falling into the sea.

He watches the men running, sees them launch the boat. As they pull away, he is able to keep the focus near enough to see and hear them. One calls, “My God, who's at the helm?” Another, a bearded man with a face gone tallow-pale, replies, “Never mind—row!” They are staring down into the sea. After a moment one looks up, then another. The *Mary Celeste,* with three of the four sails on her foremast set, is gliding away, slowly, now faster; now she is gone.

Smith does not run through the scene again to watch the child and her mother drown, but others do.

The production model was ready for shipping in September. It was a simplified version of the prototype, with only two controls, one for space, one for time. The range of the device was limited to one thousand miles. Nowhere on the casing of the device or in the instruction booklet was a patent number or a pending patent mentioned. Smith had called the device Ozo, perhaps because he thought it sounded vaguely Japanese. The booklet described the device as a distant viewer and gave clear, simple instructions for its use. One sentence read cryptically: “Keep Time Control set at zero.” It was like “Wet Paint—Do Not Touch."

During the week of September 23, seven thousand Ozos were shipped to domestic and Canadian addresses supplied by Smith: five hundred to electronics manufacturers and suppliers, six thousand, thirty to a carton, marked “On Consignment,” to TV outlets in major cities, and the rest to private citizens chosen at random. The instruction booklets were in sealed envelopes packed with each device. Three thousand more went to Europe, South and Central America, and the Middle East.

A few of the outlets which received the cartons opened them the same day, tried the devices out, and put them on sale at prices ranging from $49.95 to $125. By the following day the word was beginning to spread, and by the close of business on the third day every store was sold out. Most people who got

them, either through the mail or by purchase, used them to spy on their neighbors and on people in hotels.

In a house in Cleveland, a man watches his brother-in-law in the next room, who is watching his wife getting out of a taxi. She goes into the lobby of an apartment building. The husband watches as she gets into the elevator, rides to the fourth floor. She rings the bell beside the door marked 410. The door opens; a dark-haired man takes her in his arms; they kiss.

The brother-in-law meets him in the hall. “Don't do it, Charlie."

“Get out of my way."

“I'm not going to get out of your way, and I tell you, don't do it. Not now and not later."

“Why the hell shouldn't I?"

“Because if you do I'll kill you. If you want a divorce, OK, get a divorce. But don't lay a hand on her or I'll find you the farthest place you can go."

Smith got his consignment of Ozos early in the week, took one home and left it to his store manager to put a price on the rest. He did not bother to use the production model but began at once to build another prototype. It had controls calibrated to one-hundredth of a second and one millimeter, and a timer that would allow him to stop a scene, or advance or regress it at any desired rate. He ordered some clockwork from an astronomical supply house.

A high-ranking officer in Army Intelligence, watching the first demonstration of the Ozo in the Pentagon, exclaimed, “My God, with this we could dismantle half the establishment—all we've got to do is launch interceptors when we see them push the button."

“It's a good thing Senator Burkhart can't hear you say that,” said another officer. But by the next afternoon everybody had heard it.

A Baptist minister in Louisville led the first mob against an Ozo assembly plant. A month later, while civil and criminal suits against all the rioters were still pending, tapes showing each one of them in compromising or ludicrous activities were widely distributed in the area.

The commission agents who had handled the orders for the first Ozos were found out and had to leave town. Factories were fire-bombed, but others took their place.

The first Ozo was smuggled into the Soviet Union from West Germany by Katerina Belov, a member of a dissident group in Moscow, who used it to document illegal government actions. The device was seized on December 13 by the KGB; Belov and two other members of the group were arrested, imprisoned and tortured. By that time over forty other Ozos were in the hands of dissidents.

You are watching an old movie,*Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice* . The humor seems infantile and unimaginative to you; you are not interested in the actresses’ occasional seminudity. What strikes you as hilarious is the coyness, the sidelong glances, smiles, grimaces hinting at things that will never be shown on the screen. You realize that these people have never seen anyone but their most intimate friends without clothing, have never seen any adult shit or piss, and would be embarrassed or disgusted if they did. Why did children say “pee-pee” and “poo-poo,” and then giggle? You have read scholarly books about taboos on “bodily functions,” but why was shitting worse than sneezing?

Cora Zickwolfe, who lived in a remote rural area of Arizona and whose husband commuted to Tucson, arranged with her nearest neighbor, Phyllis Mell, for each of them to keep an Ozo focused on the bulletin board in the other's kitchen. On the bulletin board was a note that said “OK.” If there was any trouble

and she couldn't get to the phone, she would take down the note, or if she had time, write another.

In April, 1992, about the time her husband usually got home, an intruder broke into the house and seized Mrs. Zickwolfe before she had time to get to the bulletin board. He dragged her into the bedroom and forced her to disrobe. The state troopers got there in fifteen minutes, and Cora never spoke to her friend Phyllis again.

Between 1992 and 2002 more than six hundred improvements and supplements to the Ozo were recorded. The most important of these was the power system created by focusing the Ozo at a narrow aperture on the interior of the Sun. Others included the system of satellite slave units in stationary orbits and a computerized tracer device which would keep the Ozo focused on any subject.

Using the tracer, an entomologist in Mexico City is following the ancestral line of a honey bee. The images bloom and expire, ten every second: the tracer is following each queen back to the egg, then the egg to the queen that laid it, then that queen to the egg. Tens of thousands of generations have passed; in two thousand hours, beginning with a Paleocene bee, he has traveled back nto the Cretaceous. He stops at intervals to follow the bee in real time, then accelerates again. The hive is growing smaller, more primitive. Now it is only a cluster of round cells, and the bee is different, more like a wasp. His year's labor is coming to fruition. He watches, forgetting to eat, almost to breathe.

In your mother's study after she dies you find an elaborate chart of her ancestors and your father's. You retrieve the program for it, punch it in, and idly watch a random sampling, back into time, first the female line, then the male ... a teacher of biology in Boston, a suffragette, a corn merchant, a singer, a Dutch farmer in New York, a British sailor, a German musician. Their faces glow in the screen, bright-eyed, cheeks flushed with life. Someday you too will be only a series of images in a screen.

Smith is watching the planet Mars. The clockwork which turns the Ozo to follow the planet, even when it is below the horizon, makes it possible for him to focus instantly on the surface, but he never does this. He takes up his position hundreds of thousands of miles away, then slowly approaches, in order to see the red spark grow to a disk, then to a yellow sunlit ball hanging in darkness. Now he can make out the surface features: Syrtis Major and Thoth-Nepenthes leading in a long gooseneck to Utopia and the frostcap.

The image as it swells hypnotically toward him is clear and sharp, without tremor or atmospheric distortion. It is summer in the northern hemisphere: Utopia is wide and dark. The planet fills the screen, and now he turns northward, over the cratered desert still hundreds of miles distant. A dust storm, like a yellow veil, obscures the curved neck of Thoth-Nepenthes; then he is beyond it, drifting down to the edge of the frostcap. The limb of the planet reappears; he floats like a glider over the dark surface tinted with rose and violet-gray; now he can make out individual plants. He is drifting among their gnarled gray stems, their leaves of violet horn; he sees the curious misshapen growths that may be air bladders or some grotesque analogue of blossoms. Now, at the edge of the screen, something black and spindling leaps. He follows it instantly, finds it, brings it hugely magnified into the center of the screen: a thing like a hairy beetle, its body covered with thick black hairs or spines; it stands on six jointed legs, waving its antennae, its mouth parts busy. And its four bright eyes stare into his, across forty million miles.

Smith's hair got whiter and thinner. Before the 1992 Crash, he made heavy contributions to the International Red Cross and to volunteer organizations in Europe, Asia and Africa. He got drunk periodically, but always alone. From 1993 to 1996 he stopped reading the newspapers.

He wrote down the coordinates for the plane crash in which his daughter and her husband had died, but never used them.

At intervals while dressing or looking into the bathroom mirror, he stared as if into an invisible camera and raised one finger. In his last years he wrote some poems.

We know his name. Patient researchers, using advanced scanning techniques, followed his letters back through the postal system and found him, but by that time he was safely dead.

The whole world has been at peace for more than a generation. Crime is almost unheard of. Free energy has made the world rich, but the population is stable, even though early detection has wiped out most diseases. Everyone can do whatever he likes, providing his neighbors would not disapprove, and after all, their views are the same as his own.

You are forty, a respected scholar, taking a few days out to review your life, as many people do at your age. You have watched your mother and father coupling on the night they conceived you, watched yourself growing in her womb, first a red tadpole, then a thing like an embryo chicken, then a big-headed baby kicking and squirming. You have seen yourself delivered, seen the first moment when your bloody head broke into the light. You have seen yourself staggering about the nursery in rompers, clutching a yellow plastic duck. Now you are watching yourself hiding behind the fallen tree on the hill, and you realize that there are no secret places. And beyond you in the ghostly future you know that someone is watching you as you watch; and beyond that watcher another, and beyond that another ... Forever.

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