

IN A WORLD LIKE THIS
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My wife makes out her shopping lists not in single words but in dependent clauses and prepositional phrases. She will write "fruit but not apples, which we have," or "kuchen, for Sunday A.M." This habit sparks in me a deep, primal dislike - for its manneredness, its pretentious completeness. Emily knows this.

"You realize you're being ridiculous," she says.

"I know it," I answer, having already been put at a disadvantage by the pettiness of my objections, and now at a further one by admitting them. "I can't help it."

"Of course you can."

"I'll tell you what," I say, trying to salvage dignity through jocularly - always a risky move. "So long as you don't end the clauses with a period."

Emily smiles at me, the slant-eyed smile that she often wears in bed. "Fair enough. No periods."

The next time I come across her shopping list, it says "tampons, for my;"

She has left it on the kitchen table, where I am sure to see it.

"Look at this, John," Kip Lowry says after we settle ourselves on the 7:42. He has opened his newspaper, and it is flapping over into my half of the seat. Kip works for some scientific/political think tank downtown and reads the morning newspaper with an intensity that would make me wonder exactly what he expects to see there, except that I suspect it of being a pose to look more knowledgeable than he is.

"Two earthquakes last night. Mexico City and Miskolc. And both registered exactly the same on the Richter scale."

"I didn't think the Reds released that information." I poke at the edge of the newspaper, nudging it back toward Kip. He frowns and glances at me evasively. Watching Soviet information may or may not be something his institute does.

"Who knows? Look at this - another burglary in Hickory Village."

Hickory Village is the subdivision in which we both live. I crane my neck toward the paper I have just pushed away.

"The cops don't have any leads," Kip reports. "When do they ever? Hey, look at this - some guy in Albany just won the New York State Lottery for the second time! Do you know what the odds are against that?"

"High," I say, apparently too sourly. Kip gives me that evasive glance once more. He does this at parties as well - starts a subject that touches on his specialty, something called information theory, and then suddenly shies away as if his listeners were moving toward something politically sensitive. I dislike the habit intensely. He also wears wide-brimmed, overly dramatic hats.

"A Russian last name for that lottery winner," Kip says slowly. I close my eyes and pretend to sleep. Whatever Kip thinks he is looking for, or wants me to think he is looking for, he can look alone.

The lobby of Jefferson Tower rings with jackhammers. I step over chunks of floor and rolls of sodden carpet to scream at the receptionist, "What happened?"

She screams back, "Water leaking from someplace. They can't find where. Damnedest thing - ruined the carpet!"

I can't consider the carpet, which has always looked like cold oatmeal with pebbles in it, to be much loss. The noise, on the other hand, is unbearable. Even in my office on the eighth floor the jackhammers are audible, like a steady whine from huge but distant insects.

Helen, my secretary, comes in with a sheaf of papers. She looks distracted.

"This is the agenda for Ken Robinson's meeting at ten, because he wants to be sure everyone sticks to both the topic and the time frame. This is the script for the new training film, because the production studio is booked for next Tuesday and they need copy approval. Your report for the senior staff isn't done yet because the Xerox copier is down again."

"Christ."

"I think the copier is down because either the Corotron needs rewiring or the baffle spring is pulled off the shaft."

I stare at her. Helen has trouble getting the top off a jar of coffee. "How do you know that?"

"I looked inside. I also leafed through the manual because I thought maybe I could fix it."

"But you can't. Nobody can fix those things, not even the tech rep, or they would stay fixed longer than ten minutes after he leaves."

"The machines don't stay fixed because we run too much volume on them. That's because--"

"Helen," I say, with some irritation, "you aren't by any chance related to my wife, are you?"

She looks confused. "I don't think so."

"Good."

On the 6:17, Kip Lowry smacks his knee with his folded newspaper - the evening edition this time. He has pulled his hat brim down lower than usual, and this strikes me as an ominous sign. Visible is his lower jaw, bristling with a day's worth of dark stubble, which gives him a dangerous look. The hints Kip drops about his project in information theory seem to mostly involve such tame and academic things as mathematical formulas and high-speed computers, but it has nonetheless always seemed to me that there is something inflamed about the look of Kip's jaw. Something needing only the right environment to erupt into possibly contagious boils. The 6:17 seems an unlikely environment, but I don't like that smacking newspaper.

"Colder tonight," I say. I am trying to make up for my morning rudeness.

Kip doesn't answer.

"Thought I'd cover the roses, even though it's early in the year for that. No pattern to the weather lately. You should cover yours, too." Kip's roses are the most neglected in Hickory Village: spindly stems and sparse blossoms. This gives me an obscure sense of cheerfulness.

Kip says, "Sandra is leaving me." Smack, smack.

After a pause I say, "I'm sorry." I know this is inadequate, but what else would be better? We don't look at each other.

"After seventeen years," he says. A tear appears from beneath the lowered hat brim, and I am disgusted with myself for feeling a profound distaste. Kip is, I suppose, the closest thing I have to a friend. But on the 6:17?

"You'd think," he says, "that after seventeen years she'd be willing to ride this thing out."

"What thing?" I say, because I see I'm supposed to and despite a strong reluctance to ask.

"Lara Kashinsky."

"Lara *Kashinsky*?"

He stiffens. "Lara just happens to be one of the best random-information specialists in the world."

"I remember your saying that she's brilliant," I say hastily. I also remember her picture in the newspapers, at the time of her defection. She must be well over fifty.

"I never thought Sandy would find out," Kip says gloomily. "And now she won't even listen. I didn't plan the thing with Lara. It just happened."

"Ummm."

"These things happen," Kip says. He stops smacking the newspaper and stares out the train window, at trees flashing past too fast to be counted.

"Janice called," Emily says over a late-night brandy. She tucks her hair behind her ears; this is a characteristic gesture of agitation. "There was another burglary, two doors down from her. The police

questioned her and Jim and the kids. No clues. They looked in all the soft mud in the yard for tracks, because-

"I can guess why they looked for tracks without your telling me," I cut in. There is a silence while Emily stares into her brandy. We are sitting up in bed, and the bedside lamp casts a pearly glow on Emily's shoulders, bisected by the lacy straps of her nightgown. At thirty-eight she is beautiful still, and my irritation vanishes and is replaced by affection. Emily is very precious to me, although it is hard for me to say so. I have always found it hard. Emily knows this; she is one of the few women who will forgive it. I reach for her.

She frowns. "Why now?"

"Just because."

"Because why?"

Irritation returns, swamping affection. "Do I need a reason? I want to make love to you. If you don't want to, say so."

"Sandy Lowry is leaving Kip."

So that is what the agitation is about, not the burglary. I see that the Hickory Village phones have been buzzing all day. I see, too, the trickiness of the conversation ahead. When one husband strays, all husbands are somehow implicated, in some weird web I have never understood but learned to recognize.

"Ummm," I say, noncommittally.

"It's because he's having an affair with that Russian scientist."

Emily is watching me closely; another "ummm" will probably not do. I decide instead on honesty.

"I know. Kip told me today on the train."

She stops fiddling with her hair, and her shoulders relax; apparently she knew I knew. "It's that ridiculous house. It's strapped him with debt, and he was looking for some sort of cheap release. Sandy didn't even want such a huge place. Kip only wanted it because he grew up so poor, because his father died when he was three and his mother's eyesight was too poor for her to work, and *her* father was an immigrant who never understood about childhood corrective surgery before it was too late."

"I don't think you have to go back three generations and produce such an elaborate explanation. Anyway, you probably couldn't pin down any definitive reasons. These things happen."

Emily shifts against the headboard and reaches out to set her glass on the nightstand. One shoulder strap slides down. Her eyes narrow. "What do you mean - 'these things happen'?"

"They just do. Kip and Lara work together on that information project, whatever it is."

"So?"

"So it just... happens." Even to me these words have started to sound curiously lame, and I resent it.

Emily punches up her pillow and lies back. "That's irresponsible. It lets everybody off the hook - it lets *Kip* off the hook. Things don't just happen. They're connected, they happen for good and sufficient reasons!"

"Emily-"

"There are always *reasons*."

I suddenly think of my secretary, Helen. "Women always want things so definite. Black and white. The world simply isn't that way. Things fall into shades of gray, into unpredictable subtleties. Why can't you just *accept* that!"

I hear, to my own surprise, that I am shouting. Emily turns her head on the pillow to look at me. Perhaps it is a trick of the lighting, some passing effect, but her eyes look like those of a woman I don't know. They are both thoughtful and outraged; violation sparkles in them like stained glass.

There is a long silence, which slowly turns unbearable. To break the silence without having to break it, I reach again for Emily. She doesn't resist, but she lies passive in my arms while I stroke her. Then she half-turns and clutches me almost desperately, and we make very definite and unsubtle love.

The carpet in the corridor outside my office is sopping. Inside the office, water meanders down the

walls, drips from the ceiling onto my desk, pools on chairs and file cabinets. As I stand in the doorway staring at this, Helen hurries around the corner, looking harried.

"Oh, Mr. Catton - it's the sprinkler system, they think. That's what was wrong in the lobby yesterday, too. They think that while they were jackhammering the floor someone hit something vital and jammed the whole thing."

"How long-?"

"They won't say!" Helen cries. I have never seen her so overwrought; she is usually the calmest and most efficient secretary on the floor, making consistent sense out of my chaotic meeting and memo flow. "They think it happened because of a workman who is very inexperienced; he had only been on the job two weeks and three days. His supervisor was out sick because he caught the flu from his little boy, who got it at day-care because the supervisor's wife died in a car crash two years ago and he's raising the little boy alone."

I stare at her, "Helen - how do you know all that?"

She makes a vague gesture, flinging her palms upward as if begging for mercy. "The control thing for the sprinkler system was manufactured in Japan, because it cost sixteen dollars and forty-two cents less per unit to do it there. The engineer said it appeared to be functioning perfectly, because he took it out and tested it, but he won't say how long it will be before you can use your office!"

"Well," I say helplessly - could Helen be having some sort of secretarial burn-out? - "we can work around the mess, I suppose. Where did you put my phone and the Hentschel files?"

"In George Schwartz's office. The water isn't too bad in there, and George is out because he took a vacation day to go up to his daughter's college, because she's failing two subjects, due to excessive partying with Kappa Delta Omicron. But I don't know *why* there's less water in his office than in yours!"

"Well," I say, more helplessly than before, "I don't suppose it matters. So long as we can get on with the day. So it goes."

And at my last words Helen calms down instantly, moving rapidly past calm to a set and rigid face, from which she stares at me in silence like stone.

"Look at that!" Kip says, his face pressed to the train window. I obediently look; Kip has had a hysterical edge to him for a week, ever since Sandra moved out with their girls.

"John - did you see it?"

"Did I see what?"

"On that other track. A train went by and it...shimmered. Like a ghost image on TV."

"There are three sets of track there."

"No - it wasn't on the third set! You didn't see it?"

"I wasn't looking."

Kip grimaces abstractedly beneath his hat brim. When the brim dips forward, I brace myself. Kip has been twirling his self-aggrandizing veils of information theory all week: message channels. Noise level. Algorithms. Context-sensitive redundancy. If he does it yet again, I will change my seat. This time, I will. But he says something else.

"Lara called Sandy and told her that I said I wanted to marry her. Marry Lara."

I am somehow not surprised by this. "Do you want to marry her?"

"Of course not. I still care everything for Sandy."

"Did you say anything to Lara that might lead her to think-?"

"Oh, hell, how should I know? You know how it is. You're in bed, you say things - and then women try to hold you to them in a goddamned court of law. Sandy had a fit. She called me after Lara called *her*, and then Lara called on the line in the den, and it seemed I was on the phone with one or the other of them all night. Christ, the hysteria all around."

I can picture it and am meanly glad that Kip lives at the other, richer end of Hickory Village.

At the station, he trudges toward the Depot, a bar-cum-restaurant built in an antiquated baggage office for commuters grabbing a quick orange juice in the morning, or a quick drink instead of going

home. He has been heading for the Depot every night; I don't know what time he leaves it. I turn my steps in the other direction, toward my street. I am halfway down it when two police cars dash up to the Lindstrom house.

They swerve to the edge of the lawn, black-and-white doors fly open, and two cops run to the back of the house, and two more to the front. The Lindstroms, I remember vaguely, are on vacation. I prepare to tell this to the cop approaching me when Kitty Sue Cunningham comes running out of her house across the street and begins babbling in the Georgia accent that somehow becomes thicker each year in New Jersey.

"Ah saw him go in, just sneak around the side of the house, and Ah called the police right away. Ah just *know* he's the one who's been doin' all these *horrible* robberies..."

She goes on and on, an anxious, syrupy flow, her eyes never leaving the Lindstrom house, hands twisting the material of a pink dress too young for her lacquered blond beehive. The cop listens stoically.

"...lookin' so long at the window because Ah was cleanin' the glass, because of those horrible fly spots every time the weather goes and warms up again and the eggs hatch, and that's all just because a single housefly can lay one hundred fifty eggs at a time, all hatching in just twelve hours-"

"What?" I say. There is lead in my lungs.

"-because the rate they get eaten up by birds and toads and all those bitty creatures is so high-"

"*Kitty Sue*-"

"Nothing," a cop says to me, in a tone I recognize as intentional reassurance. "The lady must have been mistaken. There aren't any tracks anywhere, and in that soft mud, there would have to be."

"But Ah *saw*-"

"No tracks, ma'am," the cop says in the same reassuring tone, but Kitty Sue is not listening. She is not even there. A faint bluish shimmer, and Kitty Sue Cunningham - pink dress, Georgia drawl, dyed blond hair, reasons for the mating habits of flies - has vanished.

Another faint shimmer a second later, and she is back, "-might have been the Wozniak boy, he's breakin' his poor mother's heart with his shenanigans, but that's all because-"

The cop's eyes slide toward mine. I see the shock on his face; but the next moment it, too, is gone, locked behind a stony blank cop look - *Make something of it, buddy* - that gives him a jawline like an erection.

"-stealin' money from his daddy's wallet, and doin' it more than once, Ah was told, because-"

"Just *because*," I say - loudly, angrily, pointlessly, and with fear. Neither of them answers, and I walk away, trembling a little. I don't look back but go straight home, where I find Emily in tears: While she was out at the shopping mall, our house had been burglarized.

"They said it was random," I say to Emily as we prepare for bed. Both of us are exhausted from talking to the police, soothing the kids, notifying the insurance people, listing the stolen possessions. Who knows exactly what the stolen possessions are? Months from now we will discover things missing that we had forgotten we owned.

"Random, Emily. Not personal. They probably didn't know us, or anything about us, You shouldn't take it personally. It happens."

Emily looks up, shimmers, and is gone.

In a moment she is back, yanking her slip over her head and flinging it into an open drawer. I stand completely still, unable to speak. Perhaps I hallucinated about Kitty Sue Cunningham; perhaps I am hallucinating now.... Terrible thoughts chase themselves through my head: Cerebral arteriosclerosis. Alzheimer's disease. Brain tumors.

Emily, in bra and panties, begins a frenzied straightening of the jars and tubes on her dresser. "The burglars took my mother's silver candlesticks, because they are worth four hundred fifty-eight dollars with silver at current market prices. He didn't know my mother because she died in 1978 and never visited us in Hickory Village because we hadn't moved here yet. He *does* need the money because he's the only child of a single-parent female-headed household with an average taxable income of only six thousand

four hundred thirty-two dollars, and he dropped out of high school ten months ago because-

"Stop it!" I shout, and seize her by the shoulders. She twists savagely away from me, and we face each other at arm's length, Emily panting hard and I shaking with a primordial fury I no longer care to control. I recognize that there is some elemental abyss here, some deep lack in her that I have always despised. Almost I could strike her.

Emily glares at me with hatred.

The moment spins out, frozen, unbearable. Then Emily breaks, putting her hands over her face and starting to sob.

"I want things to make sense. I just want things to *make sense*...."

And the naiveté of this, the sheer lost longing, fills me with a rush of pity. I take her in my arms. Pity, exasperation - and, unaccountably, desire. Her breasts through the lacy bra are soft against my chest, her breath silky against my face. The whole moment has taken one of those unpredictable turns into sweetness, into grace. There is a profound mystery in the circle of yellow lamplight on the floor, in the random movements of the air, in the improbable longings of the fragile and sweet-limbed body in my arms. Emily. I press her closer.

"No," Emily says. Carefully she detaches herself, turns her back, and yanks a flannel nightdress over herself, bra and all. She crawls into bed and lies on the far edge, facing away from me. I do not understand. She does not explain.

The next day it all happens.

Kip is not on the train. I enter Jefferson Tower, get on the elevator, press the button for the eighth floor. When the door opens, I am on the sixteenth.

Jefferson Tower has fourteen floors.

I have never seen this place before. The elevator faces a bank of copiers and telecommunications equipment, as in my building, but the signs above them are sheer gibberish: HY*CAFK OIG TYH MB K. Only the "16" on the lighted elevator panel makes sense. Music fills the air, a woman singing softly in gibberish. Out of sight, around a corner, someone laughs, and a sudden nauseating smell, strong enough to make my stomach lurch, wafts from that direction. The light is a soft purple. I stand frozen, until the elevator doors close and the elevator descends. It opens on the eighth floor. Helen, her back to me, is fiddling with the Xerox copier.

I let the doors close again, ride to street level, and leave the building. Some part of my mind notes that I am not trembling, not even when I insert coins into the newspaper vendor and buy a morning edition I cannot quite make myself read on the deserted train. At the Hickory Hill station, however, among the familiar wooden platform and red-painted metal railing and late-blooming fall wildflowers in straggling clumps, I open the paper.

STRANGE RADIO BROADCASTS MYSTIFY CITY
MASS DELUSIONS SUSPEGTED IN JPLCO
GT& BHO + P SAYS "NEVER AGAIN"

A woman, expensively dressed in linen and mink, walks by me. She is talking to herself with intense, preoccupied concentration. "-can't go along with it because of previous commitments, and *that* came about because-

I squeeze my eyes shut. She sounds like Helen, like Kitty Sue, like Lara Kashinsky. Like Emily. When I open my eyes, Kip Lowry is standing on the station platform in front of me, looking as if he has not slept for days. Wordlessly he puts a hand on my shoulder, a gesture I normally dislike from anyone but Emily, and drags me into the Depot.

I have lost all power to resist.

Inside, we sit at the long bar, which at this hour - ten thirty-two A.M. - is empty of all but a dour bartender polishing glasses. Kip orders a double scotch, downs it with a single snap of his wrist, then orders another. Perversely, the cheap theatricality of this deepens my dazed numbness. We sit for several

minutes in complete silence.

Eventually Kip looks around him and says hollowly, "Low information content."

"What?"

"This bar. Dark paneling, stools and booths, mirror over the bar - all predictable. The greater the predictability, the less the new information. This bar is a boring information system."

I say carefully, "I hadn't thought of it as an information system."

"It is. Everything is." He drinks off the second double scotch, motions for a third, and then gives a bark of laughter. "Everything. All of it out there."

"Kip," I say, but only because I cannot stop myself, "just what is going on out...out there?"

"What Lara predicted."

"What *Lara* predicted?"

"She warned them," he says, and I am appalled to hear under the strain in his voice another, unmistakable note: dramatic satisfaction. "Them. Us. At the institute. Of course nobody believed her, except me. Then nobody believed either of us: a female defected Russki and a second-rate researcher."

"Believe what?" I say, and wonder if I am humoring him or believing him myself. Suddenly, without reason, I know that Kip has been fired from his institute. Today, yesterday, or the day before. There has been a scene, one of Kip's messy dramas, and he is making me part of the third act. I want no part of that, after all the rest of it, and I am rising to leave when Kip says, "See this glass?"

I don't answer.

"This glass is an information system. The molecules in the ice cube are in one state, the molecules in the scotch in a very different state. Entropy in this glass is low. Sit down, John."

"I don't want to hear about entropy in that glass!"

"Yes, you do," he says, with utter conviction. "That glass is what happened to you out there."

I lower myself onto the barstool.

"This glass has low entropy, or, to put it another way, the information system has a high degree of order. You know which is the ice and which is the scotch, and where the molecules of each are located, at least roughly." He stirs the scotch with a red plastic swizzle stick. "See - there's only a few places the ice can go. Or - in terms of information theory - there are only a few possible messages. High order, low entropy, limited possible states."

Why do I sit and listen? "Kip-"

"But even now, even as we speak, it changes!" Kip shouts. The bartender gives us a startled glance. Kip drops his voice, shoves his face close to mine, and says in a stage whisper, "Watch - don't miss it - keep your eyes peeled every second! Entropy increases!"

"You damned-"

"Yes, indeed. As are we all. Entropy in this glass is increasing. The ice is melting. Soon you won't be able to tell which is scotch and which is ice. All the molecules will be mixed. You won't be able to predict where any single one is. There will be low order, high entropy, an infinite number of possible states. That's what Lara says the Russians are doing."

Despite myself, I look at Kip's glass and think of vodka. "*What's* what the Russians are doing?"

"Information theory, The whole world is an information system: a glass of booze, DNA, Sandy's angry little mind."

"I don't see it."

"Increase the amount of disorder, you increase the number of the possible arrangements of the parts. Thirty minutes from now, those scotch molecules could be anywhere in the system. Lara says it was a sort of skunkwork project, blue-skying it, way apart from their official scientific establishment. They might not have even tried it if the last grain harvest hadn't been such a bust. But it's working, isn't it?" Kip makes a vague gesture toward the door. "They're revving up the flow of chaotic information, artificially increasing it exponentially, and so increasing both the entropy and the number of possible states for the whole planetary system."

"How would you increase the flow of chaotic infor-" I say, and think suddenly of all the high-speed

computers in the world - the communications satellites, data links, phone lines, banking networks, electromagnetic broadcasts. Kip is watching me.

"Exactly," he says softly - too softly. I see once again that some theatrical part of him is *enjoying* this.

"That's all insane, Kip. Just theory. What goes on in the real world...there are physical laws. *Rules.*"

Kip smiles slyly. "Ah, but Lara says they are not mutating just the information. They're mutating the rules by which 'molecules' of information act on each other."

"But that can't be possible. To change the *rules*?"

"Rules are just more information, differently coded. That code, too, can become entropic. That's what cancer is: a DNA code that has managed to gain in entropy, and so in the number of possible states it can produce."

"But-"

"Stop saying 'but.' There's a complexity barrier - Von Neumann proved the equations for that."

"But-"

Kip picks up my glass - untouched - and pours it into his. Liquid overflows and begins to meander in rivulets along the polished surface of the bar.

"Too much individual information. The old system can't contain it. Complexity is a decisive property. Above some critical level, too much information - even high-possibility random information - becomes explosive. You get an exponential leap in the number of possible states. Lara says the Other Side probably wants a different state. This one is slow economic suicide for them."

The longer Kip talks, the more of what he says makes a weird, distorted sense, just out of grasp, like an object at the bottom of a shallow but murky pond. One second you think you know it's a tire iron, a perfectly familiar object - except that no tire iron was ever bent in that peculiar way. But then, was Kip's abstruse theory any more bent than what had happened in the Jefferson Tower elevator?

Some objection, some half-remembered piece of learning, surfaces in my mind. "Wait," I say, and hear the triumph in my own voice, as earlier it had sounded in Kip's: the perverse triumph of proving a connection wrong. "Wait, no - things don't always tend toward entropy. There's biological life and evolution: Living beings tend to become *more* orderly, not more random!"

"The complexity barrier," Kip says. His mercurial theatrics have faded by now, and he sits in quiet gloom. "Vertebrates passed it. But you're right - when they did, another force entered the information system - a drive to create order, connections, meaning. And that's why I'm scared shitless."

I am confused all over again. "Why?"

"I don't know." He starts drawing meaningless pictures in the spilled scotch: a flower, a house, a long-tailed squiggle that might have been a sperm. "Who knows? That drive for meaning isn't random, isn't entropic, isn't high possibility. It seeks the probable. If I write a letter that starts 'Dear Sadny' - spelled *S-a-d-n-y* - the brain will read it *S-a-n-d-y*. At least, some brains would. Not everyone's. Some types of mind just like order. Some search compulsively for connections. Some don't."

I think of Kip's messy life, his hysterical nights. He has sketched a woman in the scotch; she has long hair. Lara, I remember, has long hair, which she wears in a neat twist.

"Fuck it," he says suddenly, violently.

I say, "I don't believe any of this."

"You don't want to believe it. Too much of a comic book. Look at you - you're red in the face. *You!*"

I say stiffly, "Do you think you can get home all right?"

Kip throws back his head and laughs, a sound of such reckless amusement that I am shocked.

"Christ, John, you're priceless! Prissy to the end. Don't you see it, even now? *This is the end of this information system.* Any hour now-"

The bartender has been walking toward us, rag in hand and eyes disapprovingly on the mess Kip has made all over the bar. As we watch, the rag bursts into flames. The bartender yells and hurls it into the sink; the stainless steel begins to stain, then abruptly stops.

"Different information systems operating there," Kip says conversationally, and laughs again. I hit him on the arm, hard.

"Stop it!"

He grins at me. "Why, John, you man of few words, I never knew you cared." His grin widens. "About anything." Then he says, in a different voice, "In living things, the very complex system divides. Like with sexual reproduction."

And for some reason this statement - no less abstract than the rest of his crazed theory - makes sense. The pond drains away, and I see the tire iron nearly clear, only it's not a tire iron but a dangerous club, covered now only by a passing wave, a watery shimmering-

A shimmering-

"Oh, my God."

"What now?" Kip says, still smiling.

A different state of information. Some types of mind search compulsively for order. Black and white, with no gray.

"You damn fool!" I shout. "All of you damn fools!" Kip rises from the bar stool, combative or concerned, I don't care which. I am running out of the Depot, hitting the doorjamb with my shoulder as I hurl through.

The doorjamb responds by turning from brown to yellow.

All the four blocks home it is like that. Things happen as in dreams. Trees turn purple, shade through indigo to blue, return to green as information about the wavelength of light alters its coding. The sky is red. A parked car serenely floats two feet straight up, then drops. The air fills with staticky noise, weird chaotic droning that turns briefly into the theme from Handel's Suite Number Five. It is hot and then freezing. I reach the street end of my driveway, which has begun to melt. One moment I am running, and the next I feel my legs and arms and heart pump as hard as ever, but I do not move. I am suspended. Time itself does not move, hangs suspended.

The complexity barrier. This is the decisive passage, the crossing point.

I am too late.

I am xjj sbeg.

v yp *c#1/4mm;p-

Then the moment passes, and I am standing, dazed, in the middle of the new information state.

The trees stand straight. The sky is blue. Parked cars are parked; the McMillans' BMW has a ticket stuck under the wiper. A quiet breeze blows. At my feet, the green grass thrusts upward through cracks in the asphalt in its eternal bid to extend roots, reproduce itself, control my driveway. At the end of the driveway stand two houses.

One is the familiar center-door Colonial I left this morning in hurried disorder: socks on the bathroom floor; an unanswered letter from my sister on the coffee table; no silver candlesticks because they have been burglarized; newspapers filled with airline disasters and stock market gains, multiple lottery winners and simultaneous earthquakes, random muggings and paragraphs of garbled gibberish. The letter from my sister was one I wasn't going to answer. I never particularly liked my sister.

The other house is a bluish shimmer, Colonial lines still in the process of fading in and out, Right now it is hard to see clearly, like a house under deep water. But I know perfectly well what will be inside: All the shopping lists will be written with explanatory clauses.

Desperately I glance down the length of street. Number 54 stands alone; old Mr. Ashrider is a widower. Number 56 is a double shimmer; Elizabeth Hauser stays home with her and Ed's small children. Number 58, double; Jane and Carl Romano recently reconciled. Number 60, not; the Griswolds are off vacationing in Jamaica. Number 62, double; Chuck Dugan has remarried.

Anger seeps through me, but there is no time for anger. Already the blue shimmer of my second house is fading. I can't remember - did Kip say that information states, like galaxies, all move farther away from each other?

Shopping lists in dependent clauses. Burglars and infidelities with life histories. Answered letters. Sex talk that means exactly what it says, no more and no less. A low-possibility state with few shades of gray. Everything personal, connected.

And Emily.

I stand rooted to the asphalt, uncertain. But there is no longer room for uncertainty. Still, even as my feet carry me forward, I do not know which of the two houses I will enter.