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ISBN: 1-931305-05-6

Scorpius Digital Publishing

PO Box 19423

Queen Anne Station

Seattle, WA 98109

www.scorpiusdigital.com

Cover painting by Paul Clift

Cover design by Bridget McKenna

D A R K C O R N E R S

Barry B. Longyear

To

Harlan Ellison

“Vini vidi nates calce concidi.”

First...

Dark Corners.

I was young, perhaps six or seven, in a room the size of a small bedroom. Something — some horror that I knew — would be coming soon to get me, to destroy me. I wasn't strong enough to defeat it and I wasn't swift enough to outrun it. I knew this. Besides, I knew that if I tried either, the horror would hurt me all the more.

Listening, I couldn't hear anything moving in the hall outside. My heart was beating so painfully hard, I could hear nothing else. I wiped my palms on my upper sleeves, my breaths coming shallow and rapid,

my entire body trembling.

It was coming.

The horror was coming, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

In a panic I moved to the door and made certain it was latched and locked. That taken care of, I examined the door. It was paneled, painted white, and very old. One panel was visibly loose, and I could see how loose the hinge on the top was. The door didn't look sturdy enough to withstand any kind of onslaught, and the thing that was after me would come like an avalanche.

I moved a heavy dresser in front of the door. I pushed a foot locker in front of the dresser, and then began piling chairs, bookshelves, and anything I could carry and put it on top of the dresser and footlocker. At last, with everything in the room in front of the door, I allowed myself a breath.

I stood there, still shaking, and braced myself against the furniture, thinking that I might have a chance. It couldn't get through everything I had piled against the door. Even if it could, I would be going down fighting, not curled up in a corner whimpering.

My breathing slowed and my heart ceased its wretched pounding. Whatever it was out there, I was safe behind the fort I had constructed.

And then

I looked

ever so slowly

to my left

and saw

one entire wall of the room was missing!

The room was open to the hallway!

I screamed.

I heard it coming for me, and I screamed.

I backed away from the enormous opening, clawed at the wall behind me, and screamed, and screamed, and screamed until my wife shook me awake.

A dream.

Messages from what Carl Jung called the great guide, friend, and adviser: the unconscious. Grist for the story mill, as I had told the attendees of countless writer's workshops. Still, as I lay there in the dark, waiting for my heart to calm, the dream seemed more message than grist. It was two in the morning and I didn't really want to go back to sleep. I got up, put on a sweatshirt, made some neutered coffee, and stumbled upstairs to my office to write it out.

What was my friend the unconscious trying to tell me? I began writing down the dream, the fleeting

thoughts that were racing back to their hiding places in my mind were rounded up and dragged to the paper, and the story that became “Chimaera” was begun. It was through writing that story that I managed to crack the code and figure out what my dream was trying to tell me. It was this:

There was something lurking in a dark corner of my mind, a memory, a number of memories, that I had spent a lifetime not seeing because they did not fit into the reality in which I wanted to live. But the memories were coming, and no matter how hard I tried to deny them, forget them, or disguise them, they would be heard at last.

And heard they were. Years later their echoes remain. After much work they are becoming a part of me, but through that work I discovered that the dark corner of my mind which I finally illuminated was only one of thousands. Each dark corner calls for its own light, and this function is what is served by many of my stories.

The corners I have explored have shown me laughter, grief, shame, pain, courage, cowardice, fear, and thousands of different views of myself, others, and this universe in which we live and do our hopeless best to keep up with the changes. It seems as though we spend our childhoods constructing mental hiding places for ourselves and for the things we refuse to acknowledge, and then spend the rest of our lives either being controlled by these dark corners or fighting like the devil to take back our power from them. From where do these dark corners come? It comes from a process that is as natural as time.

There was once a first grader who was having a birthday party, and all of his classmates were invited to the party at his home — all but one. Perhaps an invitation got misplaced, perhaps his name was left out because of a momentary lapse of memory, perhaps he was just not wanted. Whatever the reason, the boy who was not invited chose not to see that he was not invited.

At the end of the school day, as his excited classmates began climbing on the chartered bus to where the party would be held, the uninvited boy could not say to the others that he couldn't go because he wasn't invited. He couldn't allow them to believe that. He couldn't allow himself to believe that. He followed the others onto the bus and went to the party. There he told his classmates, the birthday boy, and himself that he was invited so convincingly that everyone believed him, including himself. There were, presents, party favors, cake, ice cream, music, a movie, and pretty lights. Everyone was laughing and playing games, and he laughed and played with the others. He had never before had such a wonderful time.

There was much amusement, though, when the uninvited boy's mother finally tracked him down and the truth came out. He wasn't invited to the party, no arrangements had been made, and the silly boy just followed everyone else onto the bus. She had been frantic when he wasn't where he was supposed to be at the appointed time. The birthday boy's mother laughed, the classmates laughed, the uninvited boy's mother laughed, and the uninvited boy laughed with them.

That is how dark corners come into being. Mind shadows aren't possible in the absence of some kind of injury and the denial of that injury. And for every mind shadow that comes into being, one or more persons pay. The uninvited boy could not bear the pain of being left out. Hence, he adjusted his view of reality until he *was* invited. This adjustment cast a shadow, however, a shadow that kept him from seeing and therefore feeling, the rejection, the pain, and the humiliation. When he was caught in his reality lie and everyone, including his mother, was making fun of him, he adjusted reality again, made fun of himself, kept everyone laughing, and cast yet another shadow. In one evening he added two dark corners both of which will dog him until the day he dies, causing no end of trouble, unless he does what it takes to bring those corners into the light.

That was just crashing a first-grader's birthday party. Can we imagine the distortions of reality and the depths of the consequent shadows that can make a pedophile or a serial killer? What about one who

undergoes such extreme trauma his or her entire mind is cast in shadows, becoming a protected lump responding to nothing?

There are secrets we keep from ourselves. They are enigmas created in moments of panic, despair, pain, confusion, or ignorance designed to either make something understandable or render it so thoroughly incomprehensible we won't have to deal with it at all. Each such mystery is a mental virus lurking in a dark corner from which it fogs the distinctions between reality and illusion. As the years pass, these bugs shade each moment with strange meanings and dangerous designs. Often, with the passage of enough time or the arrest of a feeling-numbing compulsion, the virus explodes. Memory returns or the illusion mutates and takes total control. The outwardly normal being suddenly becomes the logical conclusion of his or her fantasies and evasions.

Does he grab a rifle and begin executing the patrons of the local fast food franchise? Perhaps she picks up a knife and mutilates her husband. A young adult might take her own life. A young boy might execute his entire family. Some just withdraw, becoming nothing. Others get in touch with just enough of the real world to make living like a human being (for the humans) a matter of possibility.

There are, of course, many kinds of therapy, many of them recognized by the American Psychiatric Association, most of them not so recognized. Psychiatrists, psychologists, counselors, spiritualists, support groups, aliens, strangers, fortune tellers, magicians, witch doctors, friends, family, and self are all warriors in this struggle to kill the virus.

A good bit of my therapy comes from writing stories, and this collection contains a few dedicated to my own particular shadows. *Dark Corners* is a collection of adventures in minds human and other than human. Some of the voyages are beautiful, inspiring, some are funny, some are sad, and some are terribly dangerous and frightening. These are stories of patients, therapists, counselors, gods, and those simply playing the best hand they can with the cards they were dealt.

Stories to me are little realities in which I have an opportunity to carve out and thereby realize a piece of myself. My pieces, moreover, are scattered in a thousand distant places. When I discover one in a story it's an important kind of validation to have the reader witness the same fragment. It's healing, perhaps, but it is also one hell of a roller coaster ride.

If anything, this current collection might be viewed as a chance to sit in on a rather bizarre group therapy session on this and other planets, in this and other realities. As with all such sessions, the goals are insight, truth, relief, and thrills.

Have you ever had a sick thought? A corrupt feeling? Have you honestly inventoried your hates, your loves, your lusts? What was it that created your favorite serial killer? What do you do with your own rage? What will you do with it tomorrow? What are the chances in taking a voyage through an alien mind? What are the dangers of trying to understand minds of our own design? What are the perils of trying to understand ones own mind?

What if you could absorb and become the entirety of another being, adding to yourself, for the first time, feelings?

What if you could enter and walk your own mind, identifying and confronting the monsters that lie in wait there?

What if the only help you can give to another is to help him lose his fear of death?

There are other dimensions and they too must have their dangerous mental cases. What if the insane of our dimension, muttering gibberish to themselves, are actually in communication with the insane of other

dimensions? What if they could exchange more than thoughts?

What if you really could go back? Could you handle it? You couldn't handle it before. That's why the virus is occupying your brain pan instead of reality. What about a chance to start over, but knowing what you know now?

All intelligent beings we can imagine have mind shadows. The ability to imagine and create is the ability to choose one's warp of reality. Gods are intelligent beings. What of their dark corners? What kind of help can they seek? What does a god use for a god?

Dark corners only exist because we don't want to know what's in them. Yet, when we become aware of a problem through pain or embarrassment, the curiosity to establish the origins occasionally gets the better of us and we take a chance. It reminds me of all those ancient horror movie clichés. Just at midnight the couple enters the huge, ramshackle dwelling, the thunder from the lightning storm shaking the remaining window panes. As the lightning flashes illuminate the murky interior of the house, he turns on a flashlight and plays the beam over the cobweb hung heart of the dwelling. The dust is thick on the floor and furniture. There is, however, a strange set of footprints in the dust on the floor. He shines the light on one and examines it. The foot that made the print was bare, very large, and had unusually long toenails that disturbed the dust between each print as whatever it was dragged its nails across the floor. Nails — or claws.

Suddenly there is a noise, the whunk of something heavy and soft falling against something unyielding, like two hundred pounds of meat against a stone floor. She grabs his arm and shakes his sleeve, causing him to jump.

"Don't do that!" he says, pulling his arm free from her grasp.

"Can't we go now?" she whispers.

"What was that sound?"

"I don't know. I don't want to know. Please, let's get out of here."

He plays the beam of light along the floor, following the footprints, until they disappear beneath the door to the cellar. The noise comes again.

"It's coming from down there," he whispers. A strange pale mist begins coming from beneath the door as the flashlight goes dark. He smacks the flashlight against his hand and the beam returns. As he goes to the door, she pulls on his sleeve. "We shouldn't. Oh, please, let's leave this place!"

He shushes her as he places his hand on the door latch and pulls up, the latch grating as though it hadn't been opened in decades. As he pulls the door open, the ancient hinges scream and the flashlight goes out again.

He shakes it until the beam returns showing a set of crumbling stone steps leading down into the depths, trails of tattered cobwebs moving slightly with the dank air. "I wonder what made that noise?" he asks, as the light dims and then returns. She stands on the tips of her toes and looks over his shoulder.

"What is down there?"

C'mon.

Let's find out.

Then Came the Misty Man

If I don't write it, I forget it, so I write it. It's not real writing with a pen and paper. The only paper here is for the toilets and they never let any of us have anything sharp like a pen. I understand that. Some of the people in here are crazy. So I write this down on my left palm with an imaginary pen held by my right hand. I'm doing that right now. It sounds silly, but when I write it down, I remember. When I don't, I forget. I have to remember. There is so little left.

Hicks is hitting me again. It's unfair. No hospital attendant should ever act like that, hitting the patients. It makes him mad seeing me write these things down. But I have to keep doing it or I'll forget. Then I'll wake up all sore and bruised and not know why.

But it hurts, him hitting me. Sometimes it hurts so much my mind moves through the shadows into other lands, other worlds, other times and dimensions. It's really true. I know because I wrote it down on my hand. One time when Hicks was hitting me, it hurt so bad my mind walked off into the shadows, and there I met the Misty Man. I called him the Misty Man because I needed to write down something right away and I'd never seen anything like that before, a thing made of vapors, lights, and shadows. The Misty Man spoke to me then. He was in the shadows fleeing his own persecutor.

Ohhhhh. Hicks hit me hard that time. Real hard. I'm in for it this time. God, I don't know why he hates me so. I'm not like the ones who have to be fed or get their diapers changed. I feed myself, wash myself, and go to the toilet alone. He should like me best of all. But I'm the one he likes to hit the most.

Maybe it's because of who I was before the trial. This is, after all, a place for the criminally insane. The sign on the gate says so. An unthinkable thing. Another unthinkable thing. There is no memory of what I was supposed to have done because I wrote nothing down. It must have been bad though. Some of the things they said about me at the trial. I don't remember what they said. I didn't write that down. I did write down that they were bad things—

—kicked me. So hard.

Going away.

Gone.

Now I'll cry, but just to myself. I can't ever let Hicks see me cry.

When Hicks hits me in front of the other patients, or the nurses and doctors, he does it like he's only joking, kidding around. But the words sting. The slaps hurt. Sometimes he takes my left hand and forces me to slap my own face.

"You don't have a pencil," Hicks explains with a sneer. "We don't give sharp instruments to nuts. You

don't have any paper and nothing is written on your palm. Look!" He punches my upper arm. I keep writing. Hicks grabs my hand and shoves it into my face.

"Look at your palm, Nut! Can you read anything there?" Again he forces me to slap my own face. "Look at it, you nut! Look!"

He smacks the back of my head with his open hand. Some of the patients in the rec room laugh. Most don't. Most have Hickses of their own.

"Look at it!"

I keep writing. I need to remember as much as I can. So much is gone. Like those three dead men and the dead woman. Don't remember killing them. That woman and those three men. Don't even remember who they were. I was told about the results of the trial, but I don't remember the trial.

Sometimes I pick at these pieces of memory I have, then the feelings fill me, flattening me with that burning, deafening, shock wave of rage. I can't write like that, so I never find out what it is. Better to leave it alone.

Hicks has stopped slapping my head. I look up to see why. Hicks is chunky with long, stringy dark hair, a few strands of which come down to his shoulders. His eyebrows turn up at the ends and his nose is lumpy and bulbous like some sort of mutant potato. He isn't very big, but it doesn't matter. The patients can't hit back. The last patient who hit back was taken into the storeroom behind the hospital kitchen by half a dozen orderlies and beaten to death. That's what they tell us.

Hicks is looking at someone across the room. I look and see her: Nurse Stover. She is shaking her head and frowning at Hicks. The look says several things. He knows better than to abuse patients in the rec room. That's why they have the padded cells: secluded, sound proofed.

Bad form, Hicks, says her look.

All these witnesses.

Bad form.

Nurse Stover yawns and goes back to reading her tabloid, freshening up her fantasy of being abducted and raped by giant grasshoppers.

I study Nurse Stover, the wisps of unruly black hair on her neck rebelling against the tight bun beneath her starched white cap.

I couldn't rape Nurse Stover.

The idea of it repels me.

I might think differently, though, if I were a giant grasshopper.

I could cut her throat. I wonder about that, because the doctor once said that the four victims I was supposed to have killed had all been butchered. Then, because I never speak, the doctor went back to making notes.

In my little rubber room for the night. Long ago I wrote that it looks like the upholstered interior of a

really cheap coffin, and that hasn't changed.

God, I want to know who I am. I want out of here, to be free of Hicks, but to do that I have to remember my name.

It's a rule. If I can't remember my name, I'm crazy and they won't let me loose. If I tell them my name, then I'm cured and can be sent back out to do whatever it is that I once did.

If I ever find out what my name is, I will write it down. I must remember to write it down. It's important.

What was it that took my name and memory?

Was it the Misty Man?

The Misty Man had filled the corner of my cell after that one terrible beating Hicks had given me. It was like the punishment had excreted the Misty Man into existence by the sheer demand of my pain and need.

A god?

A ghost?

The projections of an other dimensional alien whose brain waves seeped through the cracks of his own dimension? That's what I believe. He was locked up and tortured by his own kind and he reached for me the same way that I reached for him. Then we met. I saw him in my cell. He saw me in his cell.

What's there to believe? The doctor had pushed around a pink form. He told me that I had been overworked, under great stress. Then there was a death. Then there were four more deaths.

According to the doctor.

The issue isn't communication with aliens, the doctor had said. The issue is getting in touch with reality. The issue is getting better.

What was it? Numbers, policy, politics, habit, arbitrary rules? I was caught in a bind, assaulted by rubber stamps, there had been that embarrassment before the Foreign Relations Committee, that dressing down by the Secretary, and then someone had died.

Someone had died.

Dear, dear someone. Dear, dear one. Are you the one I fear to remember? Are you the one I walk Hell trying to forget?

Then there were great gaps torn into my memory; then the hospital and Hicks. Then came the Misty Man. The creature asked me what I wanted to do about it.

"About what?" I asked the thing.

"About life, the planet, the universe, things." The voice was level, devoid of emotion. There were muted lights within the mist. The lights were the emotions the mind words couldn't feel. The Misty Man cared about me. It cared about what I thought, what I wanted, about the ocean of pain in which I was drowning.

I was scared. It was the only time I ever thought I was crazy. My need, though, drove me toward the creature. The Misty Man listened to my pain. It told me how it suffered. It asked me things: How is my

time? There are no days, no nights, in the Misty Man's reality. Only mass and time.

The Misty Man was isolated from its kind, removed from its body and held in a field that rendered it powerless in its own dimension. My pain had driven my mind into the Misty Man's dimension. There I have the power.

"Through you," said the Misty Man, "I can have power again. Through me, you can have power again. We can have power through each other."

If it is true, there is something I can do about my day, my year, my existence. I can bring back to life those who should have never died. I can kill those who should have never been born.

"Are these things we can do?" I had asked the Misty Man.

The creature didn't know. We would have to try out our powers through each other and see.

"You have already slain someone for me," the Misty Man said. It was a caretaker the shadow hated: the shadow's Hicks. "You wanted to kill your caretaker and instead you killed mine. We must have other ways to serve ourselves by serving each other. Shall I kill your caretaker?"

I didn't want Hicks killed. Not just right then. But it made me feel strong. It was my choice. Life or death for Hicks became my choice. He could be brought down with nothing more than my wish.

"You're repressing the memory of what you've done," says the doctor. "What you did was so unacceptable to your own moral sense, your mind refuses to admit to it. It's a very common survival mechanism. If the past can't be remembered, it doesn't exist? If it doesn't exist, then you didn't do it. But to chop out that piece of reality you've lost your entire past."

What he says sounds stupid. I write it down here for the whole world to see. It's stupid, what the doctor says.

Everybody knows why I can't remember. I didn't write it down.

His office is shabby. He doesn't even hang up his diplomas and certificates. The way his office looks says to me that even he doesn't like it there. Everything looks like it was reclaimed from the Salvation Army before it could be repaired. Even the doctor looks bald, threadbare, worn out.

All he has left now are eyes.

Eyes and a watch.

Eyes and a watch, and a clock on the wall.

His eyes look at his watch, his mouth makes another bored comment, the eyes look at the clock on the wall, then aim down again and look at the watch.

"Well, we're done for today."

This time the session went for only six minutes. The state pays him for forty-five.

"Shall I melt his legs?" asks the Misty Man.

I giggle and the doctor opens the door to allow me and the Misty Man to exit.

I have to get this down fast.

It's night.

Hicks's voice in the hall woke me up.

I hear him talking outside the door.

The orderly named Boyle answers. They talk angrily about a football game: who should be congratulated, who should die, who should be cast down into Obscure Hell as gross incompetents, as though they were authorities on incompetence.

Actually, they are.

Boyle is Danny's orderly. Boyle is a body builder with a big belly. Danny is a writer who spends his time thinking of ways to kill Boyle and a book editor named Herb Liselli. Danny will kill Boyle tomorrow. Danny always says that. Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow never comes. I think he's afraid if he kills Boyle, the other orderlies will gang up and kill him. Danny's crazy though. That's why he's locked up in a room like mine. He's a writer.

He has a good plan, even so. His plan to kill Boyle is very good, but he made me promise not to write it down. He's afraid Hicks will read it and tell Boyle. I didn't write it down, so I don't remember the plan, but Danny promised to tell me again right after he kills Boyle. He told me that once he kills Boyle, he'll go after Herb Liselli. Once Liselli is dead, Danny doesn't care what happens. Then I can use the plan.

Boyle swears and his words fade as he moves away from the door. They have decided who the stupid football players are and now Hicks is looking at me through the peephole. I keep writing down everything on my palm even though I know it makes him furious. I don't do it to make him angry, although I don't think Hicks believes that.

The door latch clicks.

The smell of the food.

It's food time and I didn't even know. The smell. I'm hungry. The smell makes my mouth water.

Hicks pushes open the door with his ass and says, "Lunch time, Nut. Put your imaginary pencil and pad away and pay attention."

I don't.

I keep writing.

He pushes me back, pulls me to my feet, and forces a big spoonful of something into my mouth. I want to feed myself. I can do it. And I am hungry.

He digs the edge of the spoon into my upper pallet, making me cry out. He did it on purpose. I see the look in his eyes.

I gag on it. The something that was on the spoon is like a thousand tiny bugs in my mouth. I'm sure it

must be rice. But it isn't like rice. It's like bugs. Thousands of tough, crunchy little beetles. I push it out of my mouth with my tongue.

"Damn you, you stupid pig!" Hicks drops everything, grabs the hair on the back of my head, and brings back his fist.

The Misty Man asks me, "Now?"

"No," I answer. "Not just yet."

Darkness—

I awake to countless aches. They divide, organize, process, and center into several major systems. The Misty Man explores them with fingers of black fog.

There is a swelling over my left eye. My cheeks are swollen, the bones beneath bruised. My ribs ache all over my sides where Hicks kicked me. The ring finger on my left hand, the thumb and index fingers of my right hand, are broken. Black with blood, the skin stretched so tightly over the swelling it shines. My hands hurt terribly.

"Hicks," stated the Misty Man.

"Yes. This time I know it's him. I wrote it down. This time I know."

There is a crusty substance in my nose and on my upper lip. It's dried blood. "How can I write now? He's broken my fingers."

The Misty Man's power fills my mind. If I can write on an imaginary pad with an imaginary pencil, I can hold the imaginary pencil with imaginary fingers.

I laugh and it's a howl of power and victory. I can write.

The writing is in my head, and the doctor doesn't even notice my hands are not moving. Nor does he notice my broken fingers, black and swollen. The dried blood on my lip.

He looks at the clock, looks at his watch. Looks back at the clock.

"Doctor," I say out loud. There is a smile on my face because he's got to be excited about me speaking. I know I've been locked up here for over three years, and this is the first time I've ever said anything.

The doctor looks at the clock, looks at his watch.

I check my notes to see if I really did speak to him, and I did. Maybe it wasn't loud enough for him to hear.

"Doctor?"

The doctor turns his head toward me, his eyebrows going up. "Yes?"

"I spoke."

The doctor nods and looks back at the clock. "I told you that you could anytime you wanted."

Deep red, pus yellow, blackening eddies of anger fill the room, cover the walls, flow through the barred windows, cover the earth.

If the Misty Man should appear this second and ask me to end the universe, I—

"Our time's about up." The doctor leans forward and places his hands on his chair's armrests preparatory to standing.

"What about my hands?" I ask.

The doctor stood. "I noticed you weren't pretending to write down things. If you'll remember I told you—"

"No. Look. My fingers. They're broken." I held them out for him to see.

"Broken?" The doctor walked over, took each of my hands in one of his, and looked down at them. "How did you do this?"

"Hicks did it. He broke them to keep me from writing."

"Nonsense. You did this to yourself, didn't you?"

I don't think. I swing and smash the doctor's face with the heel of my right hand. He falls to the floor and I jump on his face, smashing that tired smugness until it becomes nothing. There are noises behind me, a shout, something sharp stabbing into my leg—

In the bed rest wing, splinted and taped, strapped down on a bed covered with a discolored rubber sheet. I study the straps around my wrists and ankles and across my chest. I nod at the wisdom. They are afraid I'll use the tape and splints to kill myself. Or someone else.

I can't reach to scratch my nose, my ear, my crotch, or anything. I don't like being strapped down. It makes me so helpless, vulnerable, dependent.

A sound.

From behind me, out of sight, the sound of a footstep.

My mouth is so dry.

Hicks moves into view.

"Nut, the doctor says you talk now. And what's the first thing out of your filthy mouth? You tattle on me about your fingers. You know, you're not just crazy. You're stupid, too." Hicks pronounces the word like stoopud.

The orderly looks down at my right hand. With his middle finger he traces along the surface of my splinted index finger. Just the touch makes my finger throb.

"The doctor didn't believe what you said, Nut. I told him you broke your own fingers just to get attention, and he believed me. That's because it's true." He grasped my middle finger with his fist and

began bending it back. "You did break your own fingers. You're not writing now, are you?"

Yes I am.

More and more he bends back my finger. Blinding lights flash as I feel the bones crack, the ends grind together. I vomit from the pain. It covers my cheek, wets my hair. I hate vomit.

Hicks laughs.

"I don't clean this wing, Nut. Let's see if we can make you crap, too." He begins bending back my right ring finger.

The world gets soft and black.

All of my fingers are broken. Both of my hands are in casts. I am clean and the sheets are clean, my arms still in restraints.

"If you ask me to do it," says the Misty Man, "I will take care of those who cause you pain. We have to do it together. You must want and I will do. If you do not want, I cannot do. I'll kill Hicks. Your doctor. Anyone."

"Everyone isn't bad," I tell him. "Even Hicks and the doctor. They aren't evil. The doctor is washed up, frustrated, hurt, old, disappointed with his life. He can't see the pain in others because his own pain fills his sight. Hicks is the same. The world is populated with men and women who are just like them. I'm like them. I couldn't kill them for that."

Smug laughter comes from the Misty Man's image. "You tried to kill the doctor for that."

"No." I turn my face away from the dark. "I was wrong. I didn't think. I just reacted. The doctor doesn't deserve to die for what he thinks."

"What he thinks of you?"

"Especially for what he thinks of me."

"What then for the doctor? I think you know it's time to do something. They've replaced the caretaker you killed for me with someone who is very gentle and kind. In a like manner, I could help you."

I think. There has to be something between doing nothing and doing murder. Another option or two. After all, I'm not some kind of psycho killer. "The doctor needs different work," I tell the Misty Man. "Something away from here."

For a long time the Misty Man is silent. "At least let me kill Hicks," asks the creature.

Something, either compassion or vengeance, touched my heart. "Hicks is sick," I told the Misty Man. "He needs help. Hicks needs to be in here."

The image of the Misty Man fills with blue lights and a few yellow glows. It fades and I am again alone. I let the anger, the pain, the rage fill me until I scream the universe out of existence.

The new doctor closes the folder and tosses it on his desk. He has his diplomas and certificates hanging on the wall as though he wants to be there.

He wears black-rimmed glasses and works with his tie down and his sleeves rolled up. Danny says he's a good man. I agree with him. The Misty Man did very well. I wonder what happened to the old doctor.

The desk is new, as is the chair in which I am sitting. Instead of pajamas I am wearing my raw silk sport jacket and tan slacks. Suede shoes are on my feet. Socks, too.

I put them all on myself. I fed myself, washed myself, made my own way to the new doctor's office. I lean forward and eye a manila folder upon the new doctor's new desk and grin inwardly as the world suddenly opens its doors.

My name is Paul Linden.

Mr. Paul Linden.

It's printed in big letters right on my file folder. Now I know my name. Suddenly I'm sane.

"With what you've suffered here, Paul, I don't know how many of us could have maintained our sanity, much less your excellent attitude," says the new doctor. He speaks in a calm but rapid manner. My imaginary fingers have difficulty keeping up.

"They were human beings doing the best they could with what they had," I answer. "Besides, forgiveness is the price of serenity, isn't it?"

The doctor nods, a big smile on his face. He waves his hand at my folder. "You've been rather suddenly cleared of all charges, which means that your reason for being committed here expired with them. If you want, I imagine you could sue the police, the state, and this institution for a considerable fortune."

"I'm aware of that, doctor. I can't afford to be vindictive, however. Things happen, and I understand that. Besides, resentment and revenge can eat me alive. I've learned that much here. As far as I'm concerned, the past is past."

"Well, the sessions we've had together, as well as all of your tests, show you to be one of the best adjusted humans on Earth. Of course no one will ever accuse the previous administration of this institution with keeping too many records."

He laughs.

I laugh.

The Misty Man laughs.

Doctor and former patient stand, shake hands, and laugh again. It is funny. The right papers aren't there, the right persons aren't available, and out of the shadows comes this editor of Danny's, Herb Liselli, to admit to everything.

In the hallway the doctor walks ahead to talk with the guard on the security door. I stay behind for a moment. Danny and a dozen other patients are waiting to say good-bye. Danny turns away, hurt that I am leaving him there.

"Danny. Good-bye."

Danny shrugs, shakes his dark curls, and keeps his eyes closed. "Guess I'll miss you, Nut. You didn't tell

the new doc anything about my plan, did you? You didn't tell him what I'm going to do to Boyle?"

"No. Do you think I'm crazy?"

"You sure?"

"I don't remember it, Danny." I lower my voice. "I didn't write it down, so how could I remember it?"

I give Danny a big hug and whisper in his ear, "You remember Herb Liselli, that editor you want to dismember?"

I feel Danny's head nod against my cheek. "He's coming here as a patient, Danny. It shouldn't be more than a few weeks."

"Are you sure?" Danny asks in a whisper, his eyes as wide with promise as a child's on Christmas morning.

"The Misty Man worked it. Call it a gift from me to you." Danny holds me at arm's length, tears of gratitude in his eyes. I squeeze Danny's shoulder and look at the other patients. Teddy, Mike, Grandma, Rough Stuff and the rest. I nod to a few, touch hands with them, give another hug or two.

When done, I ask Danny, "Where's Hicks?"

"We brought him." Danny points to a patient squatting and leaning his shoulder against the wall, his arms wrapped around his knees. Hicks's eyes look around, his neck muscles twitching. Danny stands next to him and Hicks cowers and covers his head with his arms.

"Don't hit me!" he cries quietly. "Please, don't hit me."

I squat in front of him. I can see one of Hicks's eyes, wide and frightened, peering at me from between trembling forearms. "I'm leaving now, Hicks. Keep trying, let these people help you, and you'll be fine." I pat his arm. "Every now and then I'll be back to visit you."

Hicks violently shakes his head and whimpers. I squeeze his shoulder and stand up. I hug Danny again, say some more good-byes, and go to the security door. I hug the new doctor and nod at the guard. The guard isn't a hugger.

"What'll you do after this, Paul?" asks the new doctor.

"I'm going back to my old job at Defense. But, Doc, come the election don't be surprised if the President nominates someone who looks a lot like me to be the new Secretary of Defense."

The doctor frowns and cocks his head to one side. "You're not setting yourself up for a big fall, are you, Paul? Those confirmation hearings can get pretty rugged. Even though you were cleared of those charges, you did have a minor breakdown. Are you certain the President would want to put you through something like that?"

"Yes," I agreed, "Things like that often place a nomination under a shadow." I gave a tiny giggle and then took control of myself. "The Cold War is over, doctor, and the world is swamped with tens of thousands of nuclear weapons that no longer have any purpose. I have a couple of ideas for what to do with them. The value of the ideas should outweigh any reservations concerning the state of my mental health. Besides, I've done a few favors that have placed some good people on my side."

The doctor's eyes say that he thinks I'm chasing a fantasy. I shake hands with the doctor one last time,

the security guard smiles through the grill, unlocks the door, and I step into the chill of a winter afternoon.

Somewhere, somewhen, in a distant dimension, the essence of Iyef Nu Reytim was released from its restraint field and was returned to its body to resume normal life. The investigator, recently placed in charge of the case, said many, many apologies to Iyef, for no one could remember why Iyef had ever been placed in restraint. There were empty files and blank data cores at the mental support facility, as well as several counselors who had literally lost their minds. Strangest of all were the curious blanks that appeared in news and history cores all over the world. Nonetheless, Iyef accepted the apology, ate most of the investigator, and streaked away from the facility directly toward the closest major population center.

Iyef Nu Reytim and his shadow were free.

L.A. in L.A.

Lyle Bennet tried to hide his facial expression from Dr. Raeder by looking down at his notes. He needed a moment to think. Lyle had always envisioned himself as a future psychological explorer blazing new paths in the treatment of mental disorders. He had found himself, however, contemplating a master's thesis comparing the performances of two breeds of lab rats running a slight modification of the Hauser Maze. After hearing a description of the project, his thesis advisor had suggested he look for something else. That's what Lyle had thought even before the suggestion had been made, and that was what he was doing that morning in Dr. Raeder's office. But Raeder had to be kidding.

Lyle looked up from his notes, stifled a giggle, and leveled his gaze at his thesis advisor. "Let me get this straight, Dr. Raeder. You're telling me wolf men are real? Silver bullets, full moons, bad hair days, and all that?"

Janos Raeder returned the gaze and didn't change expression as he tapped the tip of a freshly sharpened pencil against his desk blotter. Abruptly he tossed down the pencil, leaned forward in his chair, and clasped his hands in front of him, his wrists on the edge of his desk. "No, that is not what I said. What I said was that you should check out a meeting of that new twelve step program." He glanced at a sheet of paper on the desk. "Let's see. This is the thirty-first, right? Friday?"

"That's right."

Dr. Raeder moved a finger down the list. "Here it is. There's an L.A. meeting tonight on Alameda. I think you should at least go and check it out."

Lyle's eyebrows went up. "L.A.? Lycanthropics Anonymous? Werewolves, right?"

"Look, Lyle, you were the one who came to me for suggestions regarding a new thesis topic."

"Yeah, but werewolves? Give me a break."

Dr. Raeder slowly shook his head. "I don't know, Lyle. Perhaps I made a mistake. This is the kind of subject that, properly handled, could make your career take off from a standing start. Your mind seems a little too shut down, though, to take on a subject as radical and controversial as this."

Lyle held up his hands. “Okay, look, I’m coming at this cold, Dr. Raeder. This is all new to me, as long as you ignore a bunch of bad Lon Chaney, Jr. movies that rotted out my mind years ago.” He lowered his hands to his lap and tried to hold his face expressionless. “Why not let me hear the whole thing and then I’ll decide.”

His advisor took a pained breath then continued. “First, Lyle, forget all about Lon Chaney, Jr., silver bullets, full moon freakouts, and Hollywood horrors. Lycanthropy is a very real, quite painful, condition. I’m not only referring to the well-known psychotic belief in being an animal. The variation of lycanthropy to which I refer also manifests itself in physical symptoms, such as measurable increases in body and facial hair, dentition, bone mass, musculature, and alterations in saliva and blood chemistry. Are you familiar with Kuchilan’s recent paper on hysteria?”

Lyle nodded. “Yes. Fanatics tapping into forces on the quantum level, miracle cures, religious freaks who go into a frenzy and begin squirting blood from their palms. But this—”

“This is the same sort of thing, Lyle,” interrupted his advisor. Dr. Raeder held up a finger, nodded, and said, “Hold on. There’s something I want you to see.”

He got up from his desk, went to an old wooden filing cabinet in the corner of his cluttered office, and opened the middle drawer. “It’s in here somewhere . . . here.” He pulled out a thick accordion file that had obviously seen a lot of wear. Almost reverently the doctor placed the file on his desk, opened it, and began thumbing through the contents. “Yes,” He pulled out a dog-eared eight by ten glossy print and handed it across the desk to Lyle. “Look at that.”

Lyle took the print and frowned as he examined it. It was a print of six different stages in the transformation of a man in his early twenties into something very much resembling a latter day Hollywood wolf man. In all six stages the man was clad in sixtyish hippie garb: headband, peasant shirt, patched flares, and sandals. In each stage there was a definite increase in body and facial hair, an elongation of the upper and lower mandibles into a shape resembling a muzzle, an incredible enlargement of the canine teeth, and a tongue that would be the envy of any Doberman. The increase in upper body mass had been sufficient to split open the baggy shirt’s seams. On the final frame the enlarged hairy toes sticking out of the sandals each carried what looked to be a two inch long claw. Similar armaments graced the fingertips. Time and date signatures appeared on each of the frames. The date on all of the frames was 4 May 1967. The elapsed time indicated that the subject had made the transformation from young adult to drooling beast in just under three minutes. Lyle raised an eyebrow and handed back the print. “Jack Nicholson did it better in *Wolf*.”

Ignoring the comment, Raeder took the glossy and tapped it with his finger. “The subject’s name was Roger Westlake. He was a psych student at Pepperdine working on his master’s. This series of shots was taken under faculty supervised laboratory conditions just before he was committed to Pescadero.”

“Was Roger Westlake?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You used the past tense, doctor.”

“Oh.” Dr. Raeder nodded, his expression quite wooden. “He was reported dead in October of ‘Sixty-nine. The story was that he attacked some other patients and in the process of subduing him, he was accidentally killed.” Raeder held out a photocopy of a newspaper clipping. The headline read: “Three killed, eleven mauled at Pescadero.”

Janos Raeder dropped the clipping back into the file. “Westlake’s body was cremated before anyone

could get a look at it. The two patients and the guard who were killed, however, looked as though they had been savaged by timber wolves.” He looked up at nothing in particular. “They were all cremated, as well.” He faced Lyle. “It might be very interesting to find out what happened to all of the patients who survived. The belief among most lycanthropics is that a virus in the saliva is what transmits the disease.” Dr. Raeder tapped the glossy and said, “In any event, this is one of the most well documented modern cases of lycanthropic hysteria that exists.”

Lyle gestured at the photo with his hand. “Look at that increase in body mass, doctor. All that has to come from somewhere, doesn’t it? What’d he do, snack on an ox while they took the snapshots?”

Dr. Raeder looked up from the file and fixed Lyle with his eyes. “Here is a theory for you to consider: the quantum field is a universe-wide matrix of energy and information. We are all parts of this matrix and you cannot alter any part of it without altering every other part in some manner. Changing or reinforcing a thought pattern is just such an alteration. The upshot of this is that if you believe strongly enough, your body will use every power available to it within the field to fulfill that belief. Energy convertible into mass can be drawn from the field. Are you familiar with the works of Deepak Chopra?”

“No.”

“In just one of his works, *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind*, he shows how one’s intentions can affect the quantum field such that an individual can increase or even reverse aging. Imagine the physiological changes—”

“Is this the guy who was on Oprah Winfrey some time back? I’m supposed to take pop science seriously?”

“No. As a scientist, Lyle, I expect you to investigate first, and only then form your conclusions.”

“Sorry.”

Janos Raeder brushed away the apology and the question with a wave of his hand. “It doesn’t matter. Look, Lyle, there are the miracle cures from terminal diseases you mentioned, and the stigmata, what you called those freaks squirting blood from their palms. Think about the very real cases of stigmata we have on record. These cases are similar to lycanthropy in that they involve actual hysterical alteration of fluids and tissues simply on the basis of a very intense belief.” He tapped the print once more. “And this. It is a very real, very painful, and quite debilitating condition. It can’t be cured, as far as we know, but it can be arrested much like compulsive gambling or alcoholism.”

Lyle clasped his hands over his belly and slumped down in his chair. “I’m familiar with the cases. In fact, I’m pretty familiar with all of the literature on hysteria, and I’ve never run across anything like werewolves.”

Dr. Raeder pursed his lips, placed the glossy on top of his desk and dropped into his chair. “I’ll tell you why, Lyle. It’s for the same reason you’re dragging your anchor right now. Just as no one would take alcoholism and addiction seriously as diseases back in the thirties, lycanthropic hysteria has been passed off as a moral problem, or hoax, for almost eighty years. That’s why this study, almost thirty years old, wasn’t taken seriously. It was never published and little new work has been done in the field. There is simply no grant money available for research in this field. But just as those who wanted to recover from alcoholism back in the thirties put together their own therapy program in the form of Alcoholics Anonymous, thereby pioneering the treatments for a host of compulsive disorders, those who want to recover from lycanthropy are doing the same. I think the field is ready for a courageous new look at this problem.” He shrugged and held out his hands. “If you want a new thesis topic, it’s the best suggestion I’ve got in the shop. It will be new work and much more impressive than another herd of tired rats run

through yet another maze.”

Lyle twiddled his thumbs for a moment, then leaned forward and held out a hand. “Could I look at that photo once more?”

Dr. Raeder allowed himself a slight smile. “By the way, Lyle, if you decide to go to the meeting, don’t make a point out of you being free of this condition. Also, don’t take any notes or bring a recorder. They are adamant about their anonymity, and for very good reasons. Finally, don’t call them wolf men or werewolves. Call them lycanthropics. They are quite touchy about that.”

“What time is the meeting?”

“Eleven thirty at night.”

“That late?”

Janos Raeder’s eyebrows went up. “You’re kidding. Midnight is the toughest time for lycanthropics. If nothing else, Lyle, this experience will be an excellent opportunity to raise your consciousness regarding the plight of a much neglected minority.”

There was plenty of time before the meeting, and, after an uninspired taco at the student center, Lyle put in a few hours at the university library. First he tackled the subject of stigmatization with examples beginning with Francis of Assisi in 1224 to Louise Lateau in 1868. The latter was a peasant girl whose case was investigated by Professor Lefebvre of Louvain. The girl’s “Christ wounds” began on April 24th, 1868 and bled regularly every Friday thereafter. The ability of the human organism to alter its tissues radically through intense belief was well established. What was not so well established was a degree of alteration sufficient to turn a human into a completely different species.

Search as he might, his pursuit of a work on quantum physics for dummies was fruitless. The only works available were either dripping with equations or too general to discuss the application in which he was interested. Reluctantly he resorted to pulling Chopra’s *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind* from the shelf and paged through it. The thesis seemed to be that every cell of an individual’s body is constantly listening to what that individual is telling it. If you tell yourself “I’m too old for that kind of stuff,” the cells listen and you become “too old for that kind of stuff.” By the same token, if you decide to become more youthful, the cells listen and can actually reverse the aging process. He wrote:

“You can control the informational content of the quantum field. Although there is a certain amount of fixed information in the atoms of food, air, and water that make up each cell, the power to transform that information is subject to free will.”

Lyle leaned back and scratched his head as he recalled the photograph Dr. Raeder had shown him. As scientists looked on, Roger Westlake supposedly just stood there, turned into a werewolf, and almost doubled his body mass in the process. All of that bone and tissue had to come from somewhere. By changing the informational content of the quantum field, would it be possible to convert that energy directly into mass? Several primitive cultures had shape-shifter traditions: men and women who turn themselves into snakes, eagles, bears, even wolves. Lyle leaned over the keyboard and began to tackle the subject of lycanthropy.

The computer subject search was not sympathetic to the term “lycanthropy.” The prompt insisted that if Lyle wanted to pursue the topic, “werewolves” was the term to use. The pickings seemed slim.

Douglas's *The Beast Within*, was filed under "Animals, mythical." An 1865 work, Baring-Gould's *The Book of Werewolves*, revealed its thesis in its subtitle: *An account of a terrible superstition*. Then Lyle's eye was caught by another title: *A Lycanthropy Reader: werewolves in western culture*. Published in obscurity in 1986 by the Syracuse University Press, the work was described as "Medical cases, diagnoses, descriptions; trial records, historical accounts, sightings; philosophical and theological approaches to metamorphosis; critical essays on lycanthropy—" He looked up at the availability code and the *Reader* was out.

His eyes next turned to a 1937 work published in Paris by psychiatrist Jean Rieneau, English translation by Paul Norgren: *The Hidden Face of Jeorg Brandt: a case study of a lycanthropic*. The work was described as a three-year study of an unemployed Swiss laborer whose metamorphosis from man to werewolf was witnessed no less than nine times by Rieneau, four such times under confinement in laboratory conditions with corroborating witnesses. The volume was available.

It was a thin book, the embossed printing on its cover faded and gray, the pages inside edged with yellow. Lyle scanned the table of contents, skipped the background material, and turned to the first of the laboratory controlled observations of Jeorg Brandt's changing. Rieneau wrote:

"Jeorg was caged at his own request. The metamorphosis began shortly after midnight with Jeorg coming 'alive' from his usual deep depression, his increased animation followed first by the change of his eye color from blue to reddish black. His chest, normally at 120cm, showed 151cm on the tape before Jeorg swatted Dr. Bresette away from the bars where my colleague was taking the measurement. I saw the front of Bresette's laboratory coat slashed to ribbons and turned back to see that Jeorg's claws were already half-formed, his muzzle filled with horrendous teeth...."

Here it was again: energy consuming transformation, incredible increase in body mass, with no apparent source. Or, as Rieneau put it, "He seemed to draw upon the thin air for material," although when the change was complete, Jeorg Brandt wolfed down 24kg of raw beef before he exhausted himself trying to get out of his cage and fell asleep. Later, as himself, Jeorg was horrified after reading the reports and seeing the photographs. It was after one of these laboratory episodes that Rieneau's subject committed suicide, unfortunately in full human form.

In the translator's introduction, Paul Norgren described how the publication of *The Hidden Face* had destroyed Rieneau's reputation as well as the reputations of the four colleagues of his who had participated in the study. Lyle checked his watch and realized that he had just enough time to make it to the meeting. He frowned as he realized that on some strange level he was just a little bit frightened.

"My name is Ted and Ah'm a gr-r-rateful recoverin' lycanthropic."

"Hi, Ted!" answered the twenty or so men and women seated in the conference room on the ground floor of an otherwise locked up office building. As Lyle examined the faces seated in the circle, he was uneasy. Everyone in there looked just like regular humans. Minority representation, old, young, male, female, neckties and tie-dyes. What made him uneasy was that everyone in the room, with the sole exception of himself, believed him or herself to be a werewolf.

The one called Ted cleared his throat, which sounded a bit like a growl to Lyle, then he smiled and said, "Welcome all tew the Hair of the Dog Group of Lycanthropics Anonymous." Ted spoke with just a touch of Scottish brogue. "We'll all open the meetin' with a moment of silence followed by the Serenity Prayer."

During the moment of silence Lyle swore that the young lady sitting to his right was panting while a young man sitting on the opposite side of the circle was scratching behind his ear, although only with a finger. Lyle started having an almost uncontrollable urge to laugh out loud. His defenses began crumbling when he heard someone to his far left sniffing. He didn't look. Lyle believed that if he caught a glimpse of one of them sniffing the butt of another, he would lose it altogether. Just thinking about the possible flea problem made tears come to his eyes and he covered his face hoping that at the worst he might look like he was crying.

While they recited the Serenity Prayer (God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference), Lyle felt a friendly hand (paw?) petting the back of his head. He thought he would pop an artery and he decided that he would have to leave the meeting. Before he could go into action, however, the man chairing the meeting began speaking again.

"This is a special anniversary meetin' tonight. Allyson is celebratin' one whole year without turnin'." Loud applause followed Ted's remarks accompanied by some whistling and some rather distinct howling. The woman to Lyle's right seemed to have increased her panting. Lyle noted that her tongue wasn't hanging out. He wondered if her real problem was asthma.

"Allyson will be our speaker for the first part of the meetin'," Ted announced, "then after the break we'll have our sharin' session. Before we get started, are there any newcomers to the group?"

One hand went up. It was a man of about thirty-five with wads of shaggy black chest hair showing above the neck of his faded red tee shirt. He had an under bite like a steam shovel. "I'm Waldo," he almost growled. "I'm a recovering lycanthropic. I just got out of treatment and this is my first meeting."

A round of welcomes greeted Waldo, then a few faces turned in Lyle's direction. Lyle shrugged to hide his embarrassment and grinned as he held up his hand. "I'm Lyle and I'm just new here."

"Hi, Lyle," greeted the group. "Welcome."

Red-faced, Lyle managed to nod in return as he lowered his hand to his lap and focused his gaze on the floor in the center of the circle of chairs. Two latecomers entered and took their places in the chairs to Lyle's far left. As Ted resumed the program by having members of the circle read the Steps and Traditions of L.A., the woman to Lyle's right whispered to him, "Too bad. It looks as though Ralph went out again."

Lyle turned and looked at the two latecomers. One was a very normal looking business type dressed in a tan three-piece suit. The other one looked like a nightmare. He was built like a short power lifter with upper arms like thighs and thighs like sides of beef. His clothing consisted of a torn and dirty pair of triple extra large gray sweats and a pair of black shower clogs. His hands and feet both were knobby and twisted, while his lower jaw jutted out from his face so far that it appeared to be an effort for the man to keep his lips closed over his teeth. His hair was trimmed into a burr cut, and he appeared to have no body hair at all. Little bloody pieces of toilet paper on his face and the backs of his feet and hands were the aftermath of what appeared to have been a marathon encounter with a razor. His nose was sharply upturned and powdered to a light gray. Lyle watched Ralph until the man absentmindedly allowed his mouth to fall open revealing a set of tearing teeth that looked capable of biting through a picnic ham with a single snap. The expression on Ralph's face was one of deep shame.

Just as Lyle turned to ask the woman to his right what she meant about Ralph going out, Ted called out from the podium, "Verra well, let's hear from Allyson now. Come oop, lass!"

Accompanied by thunderous applause and howling, the woman who had been seated to Lyle's right

stood, and with a face glowing with excitement, her diminutive form replaced Ted at the podium. Ted took his place in a chair to her right. As the applause and howling died down to a few whimpers, Allyson looked down at Ted and said, "It's okay to call me lass, Ted. Just don't call me Lassie!"

From the subdued chuckle coming from the circle, Lyle presumed that it was a well worn joke in the group. It was new to him, however, and he laughed out loud. Allyson faced the circle, smiled, and said, "My name is Allyson. I'm a recovering lycanthropic."

"Hi, Allyson," answered the circle, including Lyle.

She shrugged her small shoulders and looked down at the podium for a moment. "I guess I'm a little nervous," she confessed. She pushed the bobbed blond hair back from her forehead and aimed her pale blue eyes at the faces in the circle. "I never thought I'd see this night," she said quietly. "Fourteen months ago I was locked up in a mental ward with three charges of murder pending against me." She fixed her gaze on the one called Ralph. "The medical records from there show I weighed three hundred and seven pounds, and not an ounce of it was fat. I was covered with coarse blond hair, I had teeth that could, and did, chew through a solid oak door, I had claws and paws, and I had ears like Mr. Spock." A quick laugh ran around the circle.

Allyson's eyes glistened as she said, "And now I am a free human being. I haven't turned for a whole year. It is such a miracle." As the woman paused to get control of her tears of gratitude, Lyle found himself curiously touched. Perhaps he looked upon the whole issue with skepticism, but he certainly believed that *they* believed.

Lyle glanced to his left at the one called Ralph and saw the huge man sobbing into his shaved paws. Taking a second look at those paws, Lyle noticed that the claws had been trimmed very short. From the thickness of the claws it must have been done with bolt cutters.

Now in control of herself, Allyson continued. "As it did for many of us, it began for me by being bitten by an infected family member." She held up her hands. "Now, I know that some of you have therapists who say lycanthropy is not an infectious disease at all, but is, instead, a form of hysteria, and I respect that. Speaking just for myself, though, there are lots and lots of sisters in this world who are bitten by their younger brothers who don't become beasts ravaging and terrorizing the countryside."

Several spontaneous growls of enraged agreement erupted from the circle. Lyle noticed Ralph looking angrily at the floor between his feet as his massive head nodded. His lower fangs were visible. Lyle studied the man, trying to see if Ralph had made himself up to look that way, but all of the evidence suggested that he was almost a werewolf trying very much to look like a human. Suddenly Ralph glanced at Lyle and Lyle averted his eyes and concentrated his attention on the speaker.

"I was nine when my brother bit me," said Allyson. "He was seven. He'd been a little strange ever since a huge dog bit him when our family was camping in Maine that one summer when he was five. He had the disease, of course, but I'd never seen him turn so I didn't know what was going on. I just thought he was being a little brother." After a sympathetic chuckle from the circle, Allyson bowed her head and became quite melancholy. "In fact I'd never seen him turn until I was brought in to identify his body four years ago. He had been killed while attacking someone who was armed. Until he died my brother hid his disease from all of us. Of course, it wasn't any big accomplishment to hide it from me. By then I was, as we say in L.A., up to my own knees in fleas.

"It was about three months after my brother bit me, almost on my tenth birthday, when I turned for the first time. It was after fourth grade gym in the shower room. I'd been feeling sick all day and had been excused from gym early. While I was by myself in the shower, it happened. The bone pain, the stretching

of my skin, all of the awful hair. It hurt and surprised me so much I screamed. The janitor heard me and came running in. By then I was fully turned and I-I mean, he was the first, you know, what for legal reasons we're supposed to keep just between us and our sponsors." Again Allyson paused to control her tears while Lyle struggled with what she had said. Did she mean she had offed the janitor? Her next words gave him chills.

"After I cleaned up the mess I looked at myself in the mirror, the taste still in my mouth. You all know how it felt." Ralph and the newcomer, Waldo, grunted violently while the rest raised their eyebrows and nodded. "I had never felt so strong, so alive. I crawled in among the steam pipes down in the furnace room and slept off the first of many, many binges."

Ted stood and whispered something to Allyson. She nodded in return and looked back at the circle, a note of embarrassment in her voice. "It's just been pointed out to me that my words might cause some of you to want to go out again, and forgive me if I've called up any euphoric memories."

Lyle glanced to his left and saw a string of drool dribbling from Ralph's open mouth. The backs of his hands appeared to have gotten a shade darker. Waldo had his arms wrapped around himself and appeared to be holding on very tightly. When Allyson resumed her talk she concentrated on all of the horrors of a young girl, sensitive about her appearance and desperate to make friends and be popular, afflicted with a disease that would, without notice, turn her into a hideous creature that craved human flesh. She talked about when her parents found out and pulled her out of school. From then until she was seventeen she was kept under lock and key. Shortly after her seventeenth birthday the police found her parents dead, their throats torn out, the barred windowless room where she had been kept was empty.

By day she took classes and worked at odd jobs until she graduated into a well paying position as a paralegal. By night she moved through the shadows of the inner city, seeking prey. On one of her nightly prowls she was taken down by officers from the University Division, L.A.P.D. They were assisted by a wildlife expert with a tranquilizer gun.

"They didn't know what to do with me at the mental hospital where I had been sent to assess if I was competent to stand trial. One of the orderlies there asked me if I wanted help, and when I said yes, he was the one who called Lycanthropics Anonymous." She glanced at the fellow who chaired the meeting, then to her left at a smartly dressed woman in her sixties.

"Ted and Margie were the ones who showed up for me. They told me their stories and met with me almost every day, teaching me how to share and work the program. That was when I stopped turning for the first time. I'd go back after a few days, but my periods out were shorter and shorter. By the time experts on lycanthropy filed a brief with the court and the charges against me were dismissed, I hadn't turned for six days and that was three hundred and fifty-nine days ago. This was the first meeting I went to after getting out of treatment, I asked Margie to be my sponsor, and she took me to meetings all over L.A. until I could trust myself out at night by myself. It's been a miracle for me and I never want to go back to what I was before. Thank you for letting me share."

Applause and howls erupted from the circle, Lyle clapping along with the others. As the applause continued, Margie stood, presented Allyson with something, then gave her a big hug. Allyson returned to her seat and Ted took over the podium. "Verra well, people, its time for our break. Coffee, donuts, and the rest are in the refreshment area and we'll pick this up again at midnight."

As some of the members headed for the kitchen and a few others headed outside for a smoke, Lyle leaned forward in his chair and rested his elbows on his knees. He couldn't make up his mind. Should he be afraid or fascinated? This was certainly a great subject of study for a thesis, but Ralph frightened him. So did Waldo. Everyone else seemed all right, but it was such a bizarre affliction.

“Having a tough time making up your mind?” He turned to his right and Allyson was smiling at him.

Lyle shrugged and said, “Congratulations on the year.”

“Thanks.”

He nodded toward her hand. “What did you get?”

She opened her hand revealing a key chain. Hanging from the chain through a hole in its base was a silver bullet marked with the numeral 1. “The program group gives these things out for anniversaries. I guess it’s a bit of a joke.” She held out her hand. “I’m Allyson.”

“I know.” Lyle shook hands with her. “My name’s Lyle. Did that guy Ted say there’s coffee out there?”

Allyson nodded. “Coffee, tea, donuts, a little burger—”

“Burger?”

Allyson nodded and lowered her voice. “You know, ground beef. In case a newcomer starts freaking. A little raw burger can sometimes help bring them down.”

Lyle stared at her for a moment and was about to say “you’re kidding,” when there was a loud noise from the direction of the kitchen. He looked at the door leading to the kitchen as he got to his feet. “What in the hell was that?” One of the members peeked out of the kitchen door and said to all those left in the room, “Ralph’s in trouble. Get Ben. I think he’s out front getting a smoke.”

“I’ll do it,” said Lyle. Turning to Allyson, her back was toward him. He placed a hand on her shoulder and asked, “Is Ben the guy Ralph came in with?”

Before she could answer there was a crash from the kitchen, then a long mournful howl which was immediately followed by Ralph bellowing out, “To hell with the damned beef burger! Out there is live meat! He was staring at me like I was some kind of thing. *Live meat!*”

“He’s right,” came Waldo’s voice. “That guy, Lyle! He’s not one of us! He’s meat!”

His hand still on Allyson’s shoulder, he looked at the back of her head and whispered, “What — what should I do?”

She turned her head to the right, looked down at Lyle’s fingers grasping her shoulder, and then bit them. “Ow!” He pulled back his arm, looked at his hand, and sucked on the side of his fingers where Allyson had bitten him. The skin wasn’t broken, but it hurt like the dickens. “What in the—”

She turned and looked at him with blood red eyes. She then smiled displaying gleaming white fangs that seemed to grow before his eyes. He bolted and ran screaming into the night.

“Allyson?”

She faced the kitchen door, removed her false fangs and faced Dr. Raeder. “You people were too slow. He ran before anyone could shout ‘April fool.’”

Janos Raeder dropped his Waldo mask and makeup on one of the chairs and said between gasps of laughter, “You mean he still doesn’t know? Hey, everybody, Lyle still doesn’t know. He’s probably calling the police right now.”

Ben and his two smoking companions came in from the front. “Hey, what gives? Lyle or someone was

supposed to come and get me to sit on Ralph, right? I just saw Lyle going ninety plus across Alameda. He's lucky he wasn't killed."

The laughter died down as Ben's comment sobered them a bit. Allyson cocked her head to one side and said, "It's my fault. I got a little deep into the part and bit his hand."

"*You bit* his hand?" demanded Dr. Raeder.

"Just a little nip. I didn't draw blood or anything with these rubber teeth."

They all stood in silence for a moment, then one of them made a rude sound by letting the air out of his pneumatic muscles. They all broke down and laughed as they howled and began removing their makeup. It was the best psych department April fool's prank ever.

Out of breath, Lyle leaned his back against the alley wall and gulped air. After only a few seconds, he looked around the corner and saw that the street was empty. "Oh, god," he gasped. "Oh, god."

There was a tightness in his chest and shoulders, and he pushed away from the wall to shake it out. As he crossed his arms in front of him, he could hear the seam on the back of his shirt split. He looked down and watched in horror as the hair on the backs of his arms lengthened.

"*What?* Oh, god! No! It couldn't—"

He shook his head as he thought at panic speed. That woman, Allyson, had bitten him, but she hadn't broken the skin. How—

He looked down at the hand that Allyson had bitten, hair already covering the spot, skin a darkening purple in the dim alley light, the nails already beginning their metamorphosis to claws. She hadn't broken the skin, but he had sucked on his hand immediately afterward.

"The saliva! Omigod! The saliva!"

The sleeve seams split one after another and Lyle felt himself filled with savage power, physical strength beyond anything he could have ever imagined, cravings and lusts that seemed to blot out portions of his awareness. His chest expanded as his thighs and upper arms thickened. He lifted his clawed hands and felt the shape of a muzzle erupting from his face.

"Hey, who's that? Look here, Pauly."

A young man with a blue printed bandanna covering his curly black hair stood in the alley entrance, his face hidden by shadows cast by the street lights. Lyle saw him and felt an eerie heat fill his chest as his heart pumped energy to his growing musculature.

"What you got here?" said the one called Pauly. He carried a wicked looking stiletto in his hand.

As the pair advanced on him, Lyle could see his immediate future very clearly. It would involve a lot of late nights, demands, and sacrifices that would probably savage his grade point average, but there was the excitement, the high, the incredible thrill waiting for him. Now he knew why Ralph had been drooling as Allyson related her war stories at the meeting. It was, Lyle knew, the first step on a walk through hell. It was a journey, however, that would not be denied.

Deep within his soul there remained a tiny human spark that spoke to him with fear. Perhaps there would come a time when the pain of the night hunt would exceed the sick thrill and excitement. Possibly then, when enough was enough, he would want help from those people at Lycanthropics Anonymous. He nodded his shaggy head as he felt the drool fall on the backs of his bristly paws. As soon as he was finished with Pauly and his friend, he'd have to go to Dr. Raeder's home and get his copy of the meeting list. He'd have to go to Dr. Raeder's house in any event. He could already tell that the pair facing him in the alley would never be enough.

Old Soldiers Never Die

As the tour bus rounded the circle and approached the Virginia end of the Arlington Memorial Bridge, Mark glanced to his left. Johnny was sitting next to the window, looking through the winter grime toward Roosevelt Island, seeing neither the island nor the fresh flakes of snow falling into the pale gray waters of the Potomac. Johnny Nolan's face was lined and hard set above a full beard salted with gray. The maroon stocking cap on his head was jammed forward, almost covering his eyebrows. The narrowed eyes beneath those brows were dark circled and a long way from the snow and slush of Washington, DC. He was back in the jungle, decades in the past, trying hard to forget the things he refused to remember. Mark rubbed his eyes and nodded. That was the problem with them all, he reminded himself.

"Why didn't you get off at the Arlington stop?" he asked Johnny. The man next to the window closed his eyes, turned his head from the wintry scene, and hunched his head down into his shoulders as he attempted to snuggle some warmth from the collar of his faded olive jacket.

"Why didn't you get off at the cemetery?" Mark insisted. "You made a contract with the group."

"I know. Sorry." Johnny let out a long sigh and closed his eyes. "I just couldn't."

"You've heard it a thousand times, man. If you don't face what happened and accept it, you're never going to be able to let go of it."

A flash of anger passed over Johnny's features. It quickly faded, leaving him as he had been for twenty three years: frightened, hostile, confused, depressed, and desperate in his isolation and loneliness.

"They're all still alive in my head, Mark. I see them just like they were then. That's the way I want to remember them." He pulled a bare hand from his jacket pocket and waved it around. "On the TV I see these beer-gutted, balding old farts carrying signs in front of the V.A., and I don't know them." He lowered his hand to his lap. "I see my own balding head in the mirror, and I don't know me."

He reached into his jacket pocket and removed a photograph from it. He looked down at the plastic laminated picture, then faced it toward Mark. It depicted eleven young soldiers standing, squatting, and sitting before a burned out piece of North Vietnamese artillery. The young men were grinning and waving. Not one of them looked older than twenty, although back in group Johnny had said his sergeant, Glenn Dunham, had been close to thirty. Mark could see the young Johnny Nolan standing in the center at the back. He had his arms over the shoulders of the two men who stood at either side.

Young, thought Mark. We were all young once upon a time.

Johnny put the photo back onto his pocket and resumed his look out the window of the bus. The traffic on the icy bridge was slow and heavy. It was getting dark. Evening rush hour was beginning, more snow, more cold. "You know what really pisses me off?" asked Johnny.

“What’s that?”

“The new kid. The one who joined the group day before yesterday?”

“Dennis,” Mark stated.

“Yeah. Desert Storm Dennis.”

“How does he make you angry?”

Johnny turned from the window and stared at Mark, his expression shocked. “*Why?* What kind of a stupid question is that?”

“My kind, I guess.”

“Jesus, Mark, don’t you ever get tired being a saint?”

“How does Dennis make you angry?”

“Oh, yeah,” sneered Johnny. “Find your center, work the process, get in touch with your feelings. How does Dennis make you feel?”

“Okay,” said Mark, “So how does Dennis make you angry?”

The bus lurched, found an opening in the traffic, and moved into it. Through the bus’ windshield Mark could see the top of the Lincoln Memorial, the barest outline of white against the falling snow. Johnny Nolan was frowning and glowering at his own fists. “Damned Dennis. His war lasted a hundred damned hours and he needs his head screwed back on, not because of all the friends he saw killed, but because of all the Iraqis he thinks he might have killed. What a load of crap.” Johnny faced Mark, his eyes glistening. “They’re still throwing parties and putting on parades for the bastards! Christ, I even saw a damned Bart Simpson doll wearing desert camouflage!”

“So, what I hear you saying, Johnny, is that you’re jealous.”

“You’re god damned right I’m jealous!” Johnny glanced up at all of the faces in the bus that were looking back at him. He slumped back in his seat, sighed, and nodded. Embarrassed once again, he glared at his knees. “Yeah. Jealous. Who wouldn’t be? A parade isn’t much, but it’s better than having people spit on you.”

The air brakes squealed as the bus pulled up at the stop on the circle in front of the Lincoln Memorial. Mark grabbed the back of the seat in front of him and pulled himself to his feet. Once he was standing he looked down at Johnny. “This is our stop. Are you coming?”

Johnny looked around. “I don’t see it.”

Mark pointed. “It’s up there, a couple hundred yards north off Bacon Drive.”

“I don’t know. It’s just a damned list of names.”

“Come on, Johnny. It’s part of the treatment.”

“Treatment,” muttered Johnny as he angrily shot to his feet and shouldered his way past Mark out of the bus, Mark following in his wake.

They walked the snow covered sidewalks in silence until the black gash of the memorial’s east wall

leaped out from the dull white that covered Constitution Gardens. The wall was an enormous horizontal splinter pointing toward the Washington Monument. They stood, looking at the memorial from a distance.

Said Johnny at last, "Did you ever hear what that one brass hat said back when they were trying to get this thing built? He said, 'Why build a memorial to losers?'"

"He's an asshole, Johnny. The world's full of them. Let's go."

The path was difficult to see in the diffused light, and Johnny followed in Mark's footsteps until they reached the eighteen inch high end of the memorial's west wall. The west wall pointed directly at the Lincoln Memorial. Half buried in the snow at the foot of the wall were tiny American flags, bits of paper, toys, photos, and other mementos. Here and there, their stems thrust into the cracks between the black granite slabs, were flowers. A bright yellow carnation, a withered rose. An elderly woman glanced at Johnny, her gaze met his for an instant, and he turned away. There were only a handful of visitors before the wall, each one within his or her own wall.

The wind driven flakes stung Johnny's skin as he looked down and saw his legs reflected in the polished surface of the granite. Then he saw the names cut into the stone across his legs.

Turning away from the wall he swallowed and took a deep breath. "I'm not sure about this."

Mark placed his arm around Johnny's shoulders. "I'm here with you, man. Come on. You know you have to do this."

"Listen. Mark, listen." Johnny sniffed back his tears. "You know, with them all dead and me alive, I used to wonder if there was some reason. You know, God? Maybe I'd been saved for something big, important? But what did I do with it? My life? I can't stand being near anyone, I can't hold down a job, and all I can do is bum around and try to keep a step ahead of the nightmare."

"Come on, Johnny. Your time on the wall's further down."

"I don't know if I can face those names," said Johnny as he stumbled toward the ever thickening wall. "How can I face them?"

"Like you said, Johnny. It's only a list."

They stood before a panel ten feet tall, deep within Nineteen Sixty Nine. Mark kept his hand on Johnny's shoulder as Johnny's eyes searched from the top of the slab toward the bottom. Down and down his gaze fell until it was wrenched to a halt a foot above eye level: Joseph E Levy.

"Oh, Joe," said Johnny, the name escaping quietly from his lips as he reached up with his hand and touched the letters. His vision filled with tears. "Joe." Johnny Nolan's mouth broke into an involuntary smile. "Joe. He was a joker. Funny. Real funny guy. He could imitate anyone. In basic when my parents came down to Fort Jackson for graduation, Joe met them. My dad liked Joe a lot. Joe and Mike Hallet came home with me on leave after basic." He shook his head and began to turn away but his fingers touched another name: Glenn A Dunham.

"Sarge. God, sarge." He looked at Glenn Dunham's name so intensely and for so long it was as though he had been cast in tortured steel. At last Johnny closed his eyes and shook his head. "Dunham. He seemed so ancient back then. Such a rock, so full of wisdom. What was he? Twenty seven? Twenty eight? When he died he couldn't have been more than twenty eight." Johnny looked at Mark. "In another month I'll be forty four."

He looked back at the wall, and as he began taking his fingers away from Glenn A Dunham's name, they

touched another. He found Gerald P Ross, Edward I Lawson, Richard K Garrison, Anthony R Geneso, L Randall Brown.

“Hey, Leroy,” said Johnny as he coughed and laughed. The laugh was forced, for Johnny Nolan’s eyes were wide and haunted. Wiping the tears from his eyes with his sleeve, Johnny kept looking at where his fingers touched the name of L Randall Brown. “Leroy. He really hated the name Leroy. Man he was the blackest, angriest, bitterest sonofabitch I ever met in my life. Nineteen, twenty years old. He hated the name Leroy, so naturally we all made a point of calling him Leroy.” Johnny frowned as his eyes focused on the past.

“I saw him get it.” He moistened his lips and swallowed. “I saw Leroy die.” He glanced up and looked at Mark. “It was a night straight out of Hell. The noise. People dying, fires and gun flashes everywhere, smoke, screams, damned mortar rounds falling all around, the dirt down my shirt and in my eyes. They were all over us. Leroy and me shared a fighting hole near the wire. We could hear the damned sappers talking to each other. Leroy, he touched my shoulder and pointed. I could see the silhouette of someone cutting through the wire. I aimed and dropped him. I looked back at Leroy and he was leaning up against the side of the hole, his head open at the neck. Like a rubber doll his head was back.”

Johnny’s face drained of color as he touched the fingers of his left hand to his throat. “An arm. An arm grabbed me. Strong. An arm grabbed me and there was a sharp pain in my chest.” His eyes focused on the polished black granite surface as his fingers moved down the names; past the names he knew, his friends, his enemies, past the names he didn’t remember, and the names he never knew, until at eye level his fingers stopped on the name John V Nolan.

The edges of the letters were clean and sharp. As he felt them beneath his fingertips, he thought he could read them through his fingers, through the back of his hand. Taking his hand from the wall, he turned it over and saw through his palm the tiny American flag that someone had left at the foot of the wall.

“Mark, my hand!” He faced Mark and saw that Mark’s eyes were filled with tears.

“It’s okay, man. Just let go. It’s way past time. Let go.”

The soldier was a mist, a vapor, then only a memory. A few scratches in a black granite slab.

Mark was alone. On the snow at his feet was a photograph of eleven young soldiers standing, squatting, and sitting before a burned out piece of North Vietnamese artillery. The young men were grinning and waving. The young Johnny Nolan stood in the center at the back. He had his arms over the shoulders of the two men who stood at either side. Mark picked up the photo and stuck it in the crack to the left of Johnny Nolan’s name.

Back at the bus stop, Mark climbed the stairs into the bus, took a seat, and closed his eyes. He was happy to be riding back from the wall all alone. And sad.

The Death Addict

Code blue, code blue.

Stat time. Lights flashing, crash wagon rolling, an ominous flat tone from Room 301, the ICU nurses quietly and efficiently hurrying through their well practiced routine: strip, drip, ventilation, clear the mouth of obstructions, insert the air passage, blow, pump, pump, pump, pump, blow—

“Here’s the wagon. Clear! Clear, dammit!” Panic, rather than urgency, in the doctor’s voice. New resident.

The whump of multiple volts passing through still living tissue, the muscles contracting and relaxing, lifting a frail old form from the bed.

“Still flat!”

“Clear!”

Whump.

Adrenaline.

Blow, pump, pump, pump, pump, blow.

“Clear!”

Whump.

“Still flat.”

Another jolt.

One more.

A pause. A brief moment of silence to allow acceptance to spread over the losing team. Acceptance of the mortal fact that sooner or later every doctor loses every patient.

“Okay ... time.”

“Eight twenty-two.”

“Great damned way to start the shift.”

“It was righteous. We did everything we could and we did it all right. Lighten up.” Alberta hadn’t said lighten up, *kid*, but it had been in her voice.

“She knew she was going to die, doc,” said Nurse Ramos. “So did we. Didn’t that news make it down to the doctor’s lounge?”

“Okay. Yeah, you’re right. Get her prepped and down to the morgue. I’ll be back in a few minutes to sign the papers. Shit, I hate this part.”

The losing team captain ducked out to hit the doctor’s lounge to suck down some smoke and the first of twenty cups of coffee he’ll consume that night, risking his own heart in an attempt at lifting himself out of his feelings of personal defeat. And he was taking the death personally, Nurse Ramos decided. On his shift and everything. How inconsiderate. Should the doctor live so long, in a few years it will be easier. He’ll learn that the doctors never win. First quarter or overtime, death wins. Always. It’s the law. Erico Ramos turned back to the task of clearing out the old tenant and preparing the room for the next contestant.

The loser this time was Rachael Raddenburg, 61, mother, grandmother, owner of a doll shop employing three persons. Nurse Alberta Smallet, who had invested some minutes of her night shift hours the past three days talking with Rachael, knew that the elderly Mrs. Raddenburg would have been mortified if she

could've seen herself at that moment. She had been very fussy about her appearance, and now, her hair askew, she lay flat on her back, eyes sunken, skin waxy yellow, naked, withered breasts, stretch marks, hardened arteries, and all. She had been so afraid of dying.

Yet Rachael's face was now soft, relaxed, more than peaceful. It was as though she were in a state of bliss. "The things one tries to convince oneself of," muttered Nurse Smallet. She closed off the drip, removed the IV, and tossed the old tape and clear plastic plumbing into the medical waste. No need to bandage where the IV had been pulled. For a wound to bleed a heart needs to beat.

Nurse Ramos checked to make certain the oxygen was turned off and removed that plumbing, tossing it into the medical waste, as well. Clearing and punching off the video monitor, he began removing the multiple leads, clips and automatic cuff that had passed on to the room monitor and the bank of monitors at the ICU nurse's station the information regarding Rachael's no longer existent heartbeat, respiration, blood oxygen absorption, and blood pressure. As he removed the self-sticking tabs to which the EKG and respiration leads had been attached, he winced at the ripping sound made by the removal of each tab. It resembled the sound of Velcro being parted.

There was no point in wincing. After all, Rachael Raddenburg was past pain. It was the sound more than the possibility of pain. It was a raucous, disrespectful, sound.

"He's back," muttered Nurse Smallet. She had announced it with a voice dulled with dark humor; perhaps disgust; anger.

Erico Ramos didn't have to look up. He knew to whom his colleague was referring. Standing respectfully in the doorway, his face carrying the same tranquil expression as the corpse's, would be Rene Boniface, the morgue orderly. Skinny, dark, spectacled, geeky son of a bitch.

"I didn't call for you," said Erico.

"I know. You ready for the cart?"

Ramos and Smallet exchanged glances and Erico faced the door. "On this side."

As Rene pushed the wheeled stretcher around the end of the bed, Erico guided one end until it was parallel to the bed and up against it. He, Nurse Smallet, and the morgue orderly leaned across the stretcher, grabbed the rolled up edge of the bed sheet, and pulled the body onto the stretcher's surface. Rachael Raddenburg was deceptively light.

As they threw the sides of the sheet over the body, Erico Ramos saw the morgue orderly squeeze Rachael Raddenburg's hand. Afterward, the geek rolled the stiff toward the elevators and Nurse Smallet called down to housekeeping. Erico gathered the soiled laundry and stuffed it into the bag hanging from the door. He looked up just as the elevator doors closed.

At the nurse's station Alberta shook her head and bent to the eternal paperwork. Erico sighed and looked back into the room. There were still Rachael Raddenburg's belongings to collect.

He felt a headache coming on as he opened the small metal clothes locker. Hanging inside were a full length charcoal cloth coat and a pale blue woman's leisure suit. The suit and coat both were torn and stained, even though they had both been cleaned. When Rachael Raddenburg had blacked out she had been in the center of a freshly asphalted piece of 37th Street. One car had bumped her as she went down. No one had stopped.

She didn't have a suitcase. Everything went into the white plastic tote bag. No purse. Someone on 37th

had paused long enough to grab her purse and her shoes. In the pocket of her coat were some tissues and a plastic daily pill counter containing another failed doctor's impotent ammunition. In the night stand an untouched cache of hospital issue: rose plastic wash basin, barf tray, cup and pitcher, tissues, body lotion, toothbrush, toothpaste, and mouthwash. Towel and washcloth, both clean. The laundry bag got the towel and washcloth, the rest went into the white plastic tote bag.

And who would rise to claim this pitiful legacy? Rachael had told Alberta that she had a will. There were a few belongings in her apartment, and the doll shop, of course. In her apartment, though, would be only a few old photos, some well worn dishes, dented pots, a few things spoiling in her refrigerator, bed clothes dotted with fuzz pills, some costume jewelry, a few threadbare dresses in her closet, an eight year old TV, and a tiny collection of old movies to play on her VCR. There would be *Excalibur*, Errol Flynn's *Robin Hood*, *El Cid*. Rachael Raddenburg's fantasies were of knights, kings, princesses, honor, courage, and courtesy. Doll shops, in addition, were like some restaurants and saloons: the place was what it was because of the owner. The new owner makes it a different place. Raddenburg's Doll Hospital died along with its owner.

Rachael had given the nurses a few names and they had managed to track down two of the woman's grown children. One of them, an attorney in Oregon, couldn't come to his mother's side due to the immense pressures of his schedule. In a few days, perhaps. Perhaps not.

Her daughter, a San Francisco real estate agent, had hung up on the nurse who had called.

Erico Ramos looked down at the empty bed. Whatever did you do, Rachael Raddenburg, to rate such a response from your offspring? What were your crimes? Child abuse? Neglect? Over indulgence? You tried too little? Tried too hard? Failed to stroke an ego or refused to bless a particularly foolish choice? What do your transgressions amount to now that the main concern of those around you is to get you to a drain table before your bladder and bowels relax? Is that what it comes down to: making the least mess on the way out?

He sealed the bag and paused as he mused over the fact that there was something else concerning him. Two days earlier Rachael Raddenburg and he had something in common: a terror of death. Now Rachael had a smile on her lips and death still sat in Erico's pocket.

Had he become a nurse to join the fight against death? If so, he thought, it had been a childish move. He knew who it was who always won in the end. Erico Ramos had learned that lesson four hospitals ago. Everyone who is born is born to die. Every person who studies to heal is studying to lose.

But Rachael Raddenburg had been wide eyed with terror two nights ago. Last night she had been calm. She had even made a couple of small jokes to cover her embarrassment about having to use the bedpan. He remembered laughing with her, and wondering if she had bent her perception into a sufficient form of denial that she could blot out that this was it: the end; two minute warning, get your shit together. If it had been denial, it had lasted all of the way through the next day until her death at twenty-two after eight PM.

The look on her face, however, had been one of genuine bliss. Nurse Ramos had seen the giddy manner, bad jokes, and harsh laughter of those attempting to jolly themselves out of the big dark. Eventually the jokes end, the fear fills every corner, and all he could do was give them a hand to hold as he tried to swallow his own terror.

Erico Ramos had seen hospital death in its many forms. He had seen the stare, the frozen scream, lips and tongues bitten through, tears pooled in the corner of an eye, and every now and then indifferent oblivion. All but the last had fought death down to the last gasp from sheer panic. Terrible ways to go, all of them.

He had never before seen the blissful expression that had been on Rachael's face; not until he had come to Northvale General. He had hung onto, fought for, lost, and cleaned up after six losers at Northvale, and all of them but one had carried the same joyous expression. Nurse Ramos had checked out the one exception. Patient Ben Crawford had been in ICU for only three days, then he had died, and without a happy face. In fact, he had bitten his tongue clean off. Rene Boniface, the morgue orderly, had been out that week with a virus.

Weekly staff meeting, Room 1113. Emergency room staff, the attempted malpractice suits stemming from the interstate pileup the previous November had been thrown out as frivolous. Hang onto your notes, though. One of the patients was looking for a new lawyer. Wilbur Stokes's kidney, as well as Doctor Pinell's work on it, will be featured in the February *JAMA*. Two ICU deaths the past week, both righteous and routine.

Question time.

Erico Ramos had never done anything in those meetings before except answer direct questions. This time he stuck up his hand. "Yeah, I got a question."

"Yes, Erico?" said Doctor Janice Landry, who was chairing the exercise.

"First, what gets said in here stays in here, right?"

Dr. Landry nodded. "Of course. Those are the rules."

Erico leaned forward until his elbows rested upon his knees. He glanced first at Alberta, then back at Dr. Landry. "It's Rene down in the morgue. What can anyone tell me about him? The reason I want to know is that he seems to have some strange kind of relationship with the terminal patients — a strange effect on them."

An actionable hush fell over the room. Doctors, nurses, lawyer, and administrator racing through their memories, reexamining their cases and orders, making certain their asses were covered. The hospital's attorney blanching at the possibility of a big mistake and an even bigger scandal. There was nothing bigger than a serial killer secretly flitting from bed to bed, leaving corpses behind. Remember Donald Harvey, the nurse's aide in some hospital out in Ohio, who snuck around injecting arsenic and cyanide into the IVs? He never would've been caught except that one of his victims had been in a motorcycle accident and the law had required, in such cases, an autopsy.

Rene Boniface? No. That would be nothing but rank projection, thought the attorney. It had nothing to do with the morgue orderly. Not yet. Nothing had been proven. The attorney quickly reviewed the provisions of his own malpractice protection.

"What kind of effect do you mean, Erico?" asked the attorney.

"Look, I've been at Northvale a little over a month. In that time, up in ICU we've had six deaths."

"That's not unusual," said Dr. Landry. "This is a very large facility in a very large city. In addition we're closest to center city and the interstate. We get the majority of the Saturday night stabbings and shootings, the attempted suicides, and the traffic accident trade."

"I'm not talking about the body count, doctor. I'm talking about how they looked when they died."

“Then, what do you mean?”

“Look, one of those deaths, Benjamin Crawford, was like every other death I’ve ever seen. Maybe even a little more grim. He bit off his tongue, died, and that was that. The other five deaths were different.”

“Different how?”

As it came out of his mouth, Erico knew how silly he sounded. “They were smiling.”

Laughter interrupted Erico, and when it died down, Dr. Kramer the staff pathologist asked, “What does this have to do with Rene Boniface?”

“He visited every one of those five when they were still alive. Rene never got to see Crawford.”

Dr. Kramer held out his hands. “I don’t get it. What are you saying? Are you suggesting that Rene had something to do with causing their deaths?”

“No. No, I don’t.”

“Then what are you getting at?” Dr. Kramer faced the room at large. “Rene has been my orderly for more than two years. He is competent, uncomplaining, and he does his work with efficiency, compassion, and respect. I admit he seems a little strange at times, but for Christ’s sake, he works in a morgue.” He turned back to Erico. “Look, all of this highfalutin anonymity notwithstanding, this is exactly the kind of thing that can permanently damage someone’s reputation. If you’ve got a charge you can substantiate, then let’s hear it. If not, then let’s call it a day and get the hell back to work.”

What are the charges, Erico asked himself. Rene Boniface smiles. He visits patients. The patients smile. When a patient dies, Rene shows up without being called. Not exactly Jeffrey Dahmer stuff. Erico Ramos shrugged and raised his eyebrows. “Sorry. I guess I spoke out of turn.”

“Erico,” said Dr. Landry, “If you know something, or even suspect something, I need to know. If we’re going to make any mistakes around here, I want them to be on the side of caution.”

“I don’t suppose I have anything more on Rene than that the guy gives me the creeps. All of those patients he visited all died with big happy smiling faces. The one he didn’t have a chance to visit just looked dead; cold, gray, sour, dead. And you never have to call the guy when there’s someone to be taken down to the morgue. He’s always there.”

Landry frowned and clasped her hands together. “Euthanasia? Are you suggesting Rene Boniface is killing these patients?”

“No ... maybe. I don’t know. Look, I said I was out of line, and I was. I had a feeling, okay? It bothered me and I said something about it, and now I’m sorry I did.”

Dr. Landry held up her hand. “As I said, Erico, with the cost of being sorry so terribly high, being safe is all we can afford.”

“This is idiotic,” declared Dr. Kramer. “Look, these patients died with smiles on their faces. What’s wrong with that? Erico, you have something against happiness? Rene shows up without being called. Did you ever stop to think that someone might’ve called him and didn’t tell you?”

“Why?”

“Maybe they forgot. It’s not a crime not to tell you every time someone makes a phone call.” He grinned

wickedly. “Just maybe everybody’s hip to how flaky you’re getting about this thing and they’re pulling your leg.”

Someone began humming the theme from *Twilight Zone* and another round of giggles made its way around the room.

Erico felt his face getting red. “Okay, doc. But what about him visiting the patients? What’s it do to our bedside manner to have a morgue orderly dropping in to see our terminal patients? Before even we know they’re terminally ill, I might add. Two of those patients were expected to recover. Rene visited them anyway. And they died, big happy smiles and all.”

Dr. Kramer, an exasperated expression on his face, turned to Dr. Landry. “Janice, I fear young Ramos has gone off the deep end.”

“Does Rene Boniface visit the patients?” asked Landry.

“Sure. So do I. So do you. So do all the medical, administrative, and housekeeping staff. So what? A relative, a friend, maybe just some nice person, an old lady or a little kid who could use a little company. What’s wrong with that?”

“What Erico said about a morgue orderly dropping in on the patients. Don’t you think that might be a shade morbid? He might become something of a death angel sort of thing, frightening the patients. We don’t need anything like that.”

“Especially in the newspapers,” added the attorney.

“Nonsense,” said Dr. Kramer. “Rene Boniface has a perfectly respectable job. As for dropping in on patients unannounced, I don’t know about the others, but I can certainly speak to his visit with Rachael Raddenburg. She requested him.”

“Requested him?” repeated Nurse Ramos.

“That’s right. And before you accuse him of lying to me about it, I was the one who took the call from her and passed the message on to Rene. She asked for him by name. Early in the afternoon two days ago, she telephoned and asked for him to come up to her room in ICU.”

A week passed and no one seemed to be concerned about the morgue geek, Rene Boniface. Erico Ramos didn’t like looking ridiculous, hence he never mentioned the subject again. When he should chance to pass Rene in a corridor, he would look through him or turn the other way. It was true, he argued with himself, that he had begun being obsessed by Rene and his association with the morgue and the terminally ill patients — obsessed with death; with the fear of death. Erico Ramos had to get at least that honest with himself. It was death and Rene’s seemingly friendly relationship with death and the dying that had caught his attention. If he didn’t put it away soon, he, not Rene, would be the one who would be asked to leave Northvale. He put it away and did his job.

Two more days later a little girl of thirteen, Alicia Fuentes, was brought in from an auto accident on the interstate. The paramedics had been covered with blood. Alicia’s family car had rear ended a truck carrying an overhanging load of sheet metal and pipe. Alicia’s left kidney was crushed, her right kidney severed, her liver shattered, and her spinal cord cut through. Nearly all of her bodily functions needed artificial assistance. Despite the Demerol drip, she was awake, in pain, and she was dying. Her mother,

father, and sister hadn't survived the crash.

In theory, if several improbable accidents happened within an extremely narrow time window, if the victims of those accidents were matchable organ donors, and if by some stroke of number magic Alicia could be moved to the top of the eight month long waiting list, the girl might've lived if they could've done the operations on that night, providing she had been strong enough to withstand the procedures. None of those improbabilities, however, materialized. There was no well-heeled nationwide TV campaign to come up with organs, waivers, pressure, and the green stuff that made everything happen. Not for Alicia Fuentes. There wasn't time enough to get her on *60 Minutes*. Besides, there were lots of little girls dying in the world. No one was making a special place at life's table for them, either. Alicia was just waiting to lie down, mortally speaking.

The night shift again. Erico Ramos stood next to Alicia's bed checking the drip that fed the pain killer into her tiny wrecked body. Without looking at her large brown eyes, he checked the video monitor and the automatic cuff. "Are you having any pain?" he asked automatically, his own feelings frozen from the sheer terror of what the little girl faced.

"No," she whispered.

"You look like you're having some discomfort." Erico kicked himself for saying "discomfort" instead of "pain." Patients knew that it didn't matter what you called it, pain hurts. "Are you sure I can't get you something?"

"Anything more and I'd go to sleep. I don't want to sleep before I have to. What's your name?"

"Erico Ramos. I'm going to be one of your nurses tonight."

"Funny," she said, "a man being a nurse."

"Lots of men are nurses. Do you think it's funny for women to be doctors?"

"No. My doctor's a woman. Dr. Landry. Do you know her?"

"Very well. She's a terrific doctor. Can I get you anything? Some ice to suck on? Want me to turn on the TV? You're allowed to have it on as late as you want."

"Is it all right if I call you Erico?"

Erico Ramos looked at the girl's eyes for the first time. Her eyes were huge, clear, intelligent, and did not waver from his for a split second. "Sure. You can call me Erico. Is it all right if I call you Alicia?"

"At home they call me Ally. I prefer Alicia, though. Erico, if I ask you a hard question, will you answer me with the truth?"

It was Erico Ramos's second worst nightmare. Please, the doctors won't tell me. Will I ever walk again? Did my baby live? Can I see my daughter? When the bandages come off will I be able to see? Erico, am I going to die? The family's keeping secrets from me, the doctor has a yellow streak a yard wide, and the nurses won't talk. Erico, am I going to die?

"I'll do the best I can," he answered, leaving himself a technical loophole. Alicia, however, was too smart for that. She moved her piece and blocked his exit.

Her beautiful brown eyes closed as she frowned. "The best you can do is a lie, isn't it? I want the truth." Check and mate.

“What’s your question?”

“My mother, my father—” her voice caught as her eyes opened and filled with tears. “-My sister Dolores, are they dead?”

Judgment calls, Erico swore to himself. God, do I hate judgment calls. She was full of pain killers. She ought to be out cold. But she had to be awake. Wide awake. Erico knew those huge eyes could tell if he lied. He didn’t want to disappoint her. Also, he didn’t want to hurt her any more than she had already been hurt. “Tell me,” she insisted.

Erico took her hand in his and nodded. “Yes. They died in the accident.”

There was a long pause while Alicia cried. When she calmed a bit, she asked, “Was anyone else hurt?”

“No.”

“Are you just guessing?”

“No. No one else was hurt. We would’ve heard about it if someone else had been brought in. Do you remember the crash?”

“I don’t remember it. I was reading a book.”

“The paramedics said it was a miracle they got you out alive. They said there’s nothing left of the car. I’m really sorry.”

Her moist, angry eyes looked up at the ceiling. She had known the answer to her question before she asked it. No one had given her credit for that. The only reason she’d asked the question was to kill that nagging hope that seemed so much more important to adults than it was to children. Before she could get on with whatever remained of her life, certain childish fantasies needed to be put to rest. “I have another question, Erico.”

Here it comes, he said to himself. The big one. “Go ahead.”

“Am I dying?”

Erico moistened his lips, squeezed her hand, and nodded, surprised as the tears came to his own eyes. He could’ve fed her the party line: not for a long time yet; why would you say such a thing; a few transplants and you’ll be as good as new; that’s right, stupid, life’s a god damned sitcom. All you need to do is wait for the obligatory third act miracle closer followed by all the new things they’ve figured out to do with corn flakes.

“You’re dying, Alicia. God, I wish I could tell you different, but that’d be a lie.”

She looked at him, her eyes concerned. “Will you get into trouble for telling me?”

“No, honey,” he whispered. “That’s my job.”

To himself he thought, that’s my job. That’s my god damned job. Especially when everyone else is ignoring the subject, avoiding it, hoping that the patient doesn’t notice his family’s just been wiped out or that he’s dying. Perhaps the patient really doesn’t want to know.

The big black dragon sitting in the middle of the bed. Everyone knows it’s there, but if we ignore it, work around it, and pretend it isn’t there, maybe it will just go away. A great comfortable theory, except that patients really do want to know if they’re going to die. There is a lot of old business to take care of, even

for a little girl. Faces you want to remember, to apologize to, to forgive, to say I love you, even if it's only in one's thoughts.

A lot of times the patient won't ask if he or she thinks answering will make the medical staff uncomfortable. What a pathetic place from which to draw pity, he cursed to himself. But Alicia wanted to know more than she pitied the staff.

Her tears were dribbling down the sides of her head. No crying. Just the tears; her eyes sad brown oceans. She lifted Erico's hand up to her mouth, kissed it, and held it to her cheek. He could feel the wetness of her tears against the back of his hand. "Thank you, Erico. Thank you for telling me." Her eyes darted back and forth in her head and she squeezed Erico's hand. "I'm so scared."

"I know, honey."

She closed those enormous moist eyes and asked, "One more favor? Please?"

"Sure, honey. Anything."

"I can't reach the telephone. Please call down to the morgue. Extension 446. Ask for someone called Rene and tell him I want to see him. I want to see him right away. Do that for me?"

"How do you know Rene?"

She shook her head. "I — I just know. Please call down."

Erico realized his mouth was hanging open and he closed it. "Yeah. Sure." He released her hand, walked around the foot of the bed to the night stand, and picked up the phone. He dialed for the morgue and one of the orderlies answered. "Could you send Rene up to ICU, Room 307?"

"*He's on his way,*" answered the orderly.

"Thanks." Erico hung up and looked down at the girl. "He'll be here in a minute."

She was crying. She was scared. Erico Ramos closed his eyes and choked off his own tears. He was scared, too, but for a different reason.

Rene Boniface didn't do anything but sit in a chair next to the girl's bed and hold her hand. That much Erico witnessed. He was called away, however, to bring up a new admission from emergency. The interstate had nailed another one. This time it was an off duty police officer, Dana Storey, who must've decided his occupation exempted him from the laws of chemistry, biology, and physics. When he had taken his Olds for that flight off the overpass and dived into six lanes of rush hour traffic, he had a blood alcohol level that looked more like his IQ. As the wheel of justice turned this time, the off duty officer would live once his stomach and bladder woke up and went back to functioning. Then he could begin detox, rehab, and that long climb back to reality, if he chose. Two of the persons riding in one of the cars he slammed into, however, had no choices. They were dead on arrival.

By the time Erico was finished with Dana Storey, Room 307 was already vacant, the bed stripped, and housekeeping dusting up the floor. The only sign that Alicia Fuentes had ever been there was a crumpled tissue on the floor. There ought to have been a toy, a picture, a paper cutout, a book, a piece of ribbon, something besides a used piece of Kleenex. Soon that was gone, as well.

“Excuse me, Erico.” He turned his head and saw Alberta carrying fresh linen for the bed. He stood out of the way and asked, “What happened?”

“She flat-lined a little after nine,” came her answer. She unfolded and snapped out the bottom sheet and began cornering and tucking it in. Erico could see Alberta’s face. Her eyes were red, but already she was forcing herself to occupy safe mental corners. After all the girl hadn’t been there but a few hours. Hardly enough time to get attached. That’s why she’s reduced in memory to “she” and “the girl” rather than Alicia. In another hour she’ll lose that, too. No longer “the girl,” she’ll become “the patient” or simply “Tuesday’s 307.” That’s why she “flat-lined” instead of “died.” Alberta needed to insulate herself from death, too. Find those safe places. Erico, too, looked for those safe places.

Well, she’d been expected to die. That’s what Erico had told the girl.

Her.

The girl.

Alicia.

Alicia of the ocean eyes. It was a clean croak, too. The girl had been all alone in the world. There hadn’t been any wailing relatives or loved ones freaking out on the floor. She was even light.

“What’d her face look like?” asked Erico.

Alberta frowned as she looked back at him. “Are you all right, Erico? You’re as pale as a sheet.”

“The geek. What’d he do?”

“Rene?” A frown crossed Alberta’s face. “Don’t call him that, Erico. I don’t like it. It’s unkind. I don’t ever want to hear it again.”

Erico put his hands into his pockets and cocked his head to one side, his eyes closed. “I’m sorry. What’d he do? Rene Boniface. What’d he do while he was in here?”

“All I saw him do was sit next to her and hold her hand. I don’t even think he said anything.”

“What was her face like? What did Alicia’s face look like?”

Alberta shook out the draw sheet and crossed the bed with it. She stood up, glanced at Erico, and said, “You know what her face looked like.” She looked down at the bed and returned to her work. “It’s not wrong, you know. What Rene does. It’s not wrong.”

“I’ll know that once I know what the hell it is that he does.”

“He put a smile on that little girl’s face, Erico. That’s what he does.” She looked up at him, her eyes filled with angry tears. “*That’s* what he does!”

The morgue was dark, the door closed. It was at the end of a doglegged corridor in the basement level, far from the hospital cafeteria, far from where a civilian could accidentally stumble upon it, helping to keep the secret that death really hadn’t been conquered. Erico Ramos pushed open the door and looked inside. It was a minimalist operating room with lights, drain table, sink, supply shelves, and a desk with an automatic coffee maker brewing upon it. There were files, forms, and paperwork cluttering up the desk

between the coffee maker and the morgue's computer terminal. Beyond the insulated door on the opposite side of the drain table was the cold room. Alicia would be in there as well as the motorist and passenger crushed by Dana Storey's flying Oldsmobile. Perhaps others might be in there, as well. There were the two cancers on the sixth floor, the premature birth on the eighth, and the incredibly old man on the fifth. ICU wasn't the only unit where they died.

Erico felt as though he couldn't breathe. Death was in the room. It's feel, its smell, its clammy presence. It crowded him. Images of skulls, mould covered hands, spider webs, and ancient dust raced through his mind. Grave stones, tombs, black veils, flowers, and organ music. Coffins, satin, ministers, old men and women viewing the remains, counting their own remaining moments.

He remembered his father's face as the dead man rested in his coffin. Hector Ramos's corpse had been brushed, powdered and rouged. Erico had been eleven and he remembered thinking that he had never seen his father look so neat and healthy. He was like a department store dummy taking a nap, his mouth sewn shut. He was even wearing a necktie; one that he hated. Everything about the funeral, everything about death, seemed unnecessarily disrespectful, needlessly cruel. Death took no notice of his father's smiles, his angers, his moments of fear, compassion, hope and love. His father's strengths, his skill as a stone mason, his weakness for Reese's Peanut Butter Cups; death cared nothing for any of it. All of those special qualities and moments that had made Hector Ramos who he was were gone, and death didn't even notice.

Death.

Dead.

Gone. The end.

Cold.

Dark.

Still and silent.

Erico leaned his back against the wall and slid down until he was squatting, his sobs making him choke for air. "God!" he cried. "God, your rules suck!"

"Erico?"

He turned and started as he saw Rene looking down at him. The man's face was completely cast in shadows, obscuring it. He was carrying a donut and napkin in his hand. Erico felt his heart beating hard enough to thump against his rib cage. "Jesus!"

He pushed himself to his feet and almost leaped into the corridor. Once away from the morgue door, he steadied himself by leaning up against the wall. He took deep breaths and tried to keep his heart from racing.

"Are you all right?"

Erico turned his head and faced Rene. The morgue orderly still had that donut in his hand. "Yeah." He nodded once and took another deep breath. "I'm okay."

"You sure? I can get some help down here if you want. You look like hell."

"I'm okay," snapped Erico. "That place, the morgue. It made me feel like things were closing in on me

for a bit. Maybe I have a touch of the flu.”

“It’s going around.”

Erico stood up and glared as he snapped, “It’s always going around!” He forced himself to calm down, looked into Rene’s eyes, and asked, “You and the girl; when you were in her room, what did you do?”

Rene’s face, dark and filled with compassion, became expressionless, wary, as he seemed to back off a bit. “I visited her. I was only there for a few minutes, then she died. I was sitting next to her the whole time.”

“Did you kill her?”

Rene’s gaze remained fixed on Erico’s face as he slowly shook his head. “No.”

“You sure you didn’t help her along? Pinch her drip? Dick with the oxygen?”

“I didn’t kill Alicia Fuentes. I did nothing to accelerate her death. Perhaps I did help her, but that was limited to holding her hand.”

“How did she know to call you, Rene? Why did she have me ring your extension?”

“You’d have to ask her that.”

“Well, that’s just a little hard to do, now, isn’t it?”

Rene shrugged and half turned back toward the morgue. Erico grabbed the man’s arm and stopped him. “Then here’s something you can answer. How come you didn’t need the phone call? You were already on your way up to ICU when I called. How did you know?”

“I just know. I always know.” He looked down at Erico’s hand and pulled his arm free. Looking at Erico’s eyes, he said, “I can’t afford not to know.” He turned and walked back to the morgue.

Some days passed. Erico concentrated as hard as he could on minding his own business, to no avail. The head of nursing had him moved from the night shift and ICU both. He was now on the morning shift at the rehab unit. Instead of warring with death he had been traded down to the war against better living through chemistry; a harder form of death to see. “Just until you get back on track,” Maureen Staples had assured him. Getting back on track was the head nurse’s way of saying, seeketh thou a wigpicker. Picketh thy wig, go forth and freak no more.

Erico hadn’t objected to the shift and unit changes. He felt he needed a vacation from death, a vacation from Rene Boniface. Rene had become, in his mind, what Dr. Landry had called an angel of death. The association between death and the morgue orderly had become so strong in Erico’s mind that he was beginning to convince himself that Rene *was* death personified: that the morgue orderly was responsible for the deaths on the unit, perhaps even all the deaths in the world.

It was silly; insane. He knew this, and he welcomed his transfer to the rehab unit. Erico needed some distance until he could get his head straight. Because he couldn’t think of a single thing about his condition that he was willing to admit to another human being, he decided against the shrink. The wig would not be picked. Instead, he threw himself into his new duties and tried to bury himself with work.

The big players on the rehab unit were the group counselors. Erico dispensed medications three times a day, took vitals, escorted rehab patients to their various appointments for tests, physicals, and other kinds of therapy, and kept patient charts up to date. The rehab nurses, most of whom were recovering addicts themselves, were a breed different from any other kind of nurse he had ever worked with. By and large they were the most positive, uplifting coworkers he had ever had. They had problems, but they talked about them to each other, without shame, and listened to each other as though they cared. The floor counselors and group counselors were the same. So were most of the patients. Eventually the patients who weren't like that began to disturb Erico.

It began on a Tuesday night just about three months after he had been assigned to the rehab unit. One of the patients came to the counter at the nurse's station while Erico was seated updating a pile of patient charts. "Excuse me? Erico?"

Erico looked up and he could feel the blood drain from his face as he stared at a death's head. It was a face, not unusually thin, but there was the image of a death's head within the features, almost as though Erico could see through the tissues that covered the skull.

"Erico?" asked the patient. "Are you all right?"

Erico Ramos blinked his eyes, rubbed them, and willed the death's head image from the patient's face. The patient was a boy in his late teens, Pat Nelson. Tall, olive skinned, trimmed black hair and liquid brown eyes. His eyes reminded Erico of the little girl, Alicia. The image of the death's head would not go away.

"What is it, Pat?"

"Are you all right, man? You look like you seen a ghost."

"I'm all right. What is it?"

The kid shrugged and raised his eyebrows. "If you say so. What I want to know is what to do with my bedding and book issue. I'm going home today."

Erico leaned back in his chair and frowned at the boy, death's head and all. "What the hell do you mean you're going home? You've only been here a week."

Pat looked sheepish and turned his head so that he no longer was making eye contact with Erico. "I'm not going to do the whole month. This place isn't for me." It was a death's head talking. It was saying, "I'm terrified. I'm so frightened of death, I'm going right out there and make certain I die."

Death's head. Erico couldn't shake the image. Pat Nelson had bent things to the point where anything would be better than facing life, and eventual death was one piece of life those who lived in the real world all had to face. Pat Nelson was going to die. It was written, literally, all over his face.

"Pat, you know what your odds of recovering are even if you go all the way through treatment and complete it? Maybe one out of three. If you quit, your chances are maybe a hundred — a thousand to one. I wish you'd reconsider."

The boy's face reddened slightly and he still refused any kind of eye contact. "I've heard the sales pitch from my counselor, and from about half a dozen members of my group. I really don't think I have a problem. All I really need to do is learn to control my using better."

"Don't try to snow me, Pat. Don't you remember back there in detox? I was there when they pumped your guts out and fought all night to quiet down your heart before it ripped loose from its supports."

“I overdid it one time,” answered Pat Nelson. “One time. Okay, I’ve learned my lesson, and that’s it. I’ll never do that again, so don’t worry about it. All I need to know is what to do with my bedding and my book issue. The N.A. text and the A.A. Big Book are brand new; hardly been opened.”

“I wonder why I already knew that,” cracked Erico. Like the rehab nurses kept telling him, if a person wants to recover, you can’t say anything wrong. If he wants to die, you can’t say anything right. Recovery isn’t for those who need it; it’s only available for those who want it. “Stuff your sheets and blanket in your pillow case and leave it on the floor in your room. The books are yours. I suggest you take them home with you and read them.”

Later that day housekeeping found Pat Nelson’s bedding stuffed in a pillow case on the floor where he had been told to leave it. Housekeeping also found Pat’s book issue in the room’s trash can. Nine days later the assistant manager of the Seventh Street McDonald’s found Pat Nelson himself dead in the toilet stall in the men’s room at the aforementioned establishment, a few granules of blow still adhering to his upper lip.

The autopsy showed his heart had torn itself to pieces. Erico read the notice of Pat Nelson’s death that made it to the rehab unit. It upset him because, since then, he had seen the death’s head in the faces of four more of the rehab patients and one of the nurses.

Erico Ramos went to a psychiatrist and paid a total of one hundred and twenty dollars to be told that he had a fear of death. A little on the extreme side, but perfectly normal. The death’s heads were a manifestation of his fear in combination with twelve hour shifts, too much caffeine, and the life style of a lone wolf; he was too isolated; too much into his own head. Pat Nelson’s death had been simple coincidence, as were the deaths of the nurse and the four other patients in whose faces he had imagined seeing death’s heads. After all, how many had died without such advance advertising? Less caffeine, fewer hours, a little meditation, and a lot of medication.

Erico had spent long enough on the rehab unit to appreciate the risks of treating problems with Valium and other chemical wonders. He destroyed the prescription. Meditation seemed like nothing but a way to play with his nightmares. He didn’t bother with meditation. He did manage to arrange for fewer hours and he cut out caffeine.

He didn’t have any idea what to do about his isolation; his lone wolf life style. He wasn’t dating and he had no close friends or family. He didn’t know what good it would do anyway. Friends seemed to be more obligation than comfort. That went doubly so for romantic attachments. It was redoubled for family. For a brief moment he considered splitting the difference and purchasing a kitten, but his landlord didn’t allow pets any riskier than a goldfish. Hard to cuddle a goldfish.

He did note that several persons he had known had died recently, none of whom had sported death’s heads in advance. One was a suicide; Mrs. Baum who worked for the cleaners next door to the apartment house. She had inoperable cancer and had taken an overdose of sleeping pills. Erico had seen no death’s head in her face. Roger Stokes, a police officer who lived in the apartment building, had died in his sleep from a massive coronary. There had been no death’s head in his face.

Perhaps the wigpicker was right. Imagination, lack of sleep, a preoccupation with the fear of death. Erico decided to take it easy, take care of himself, and ignore the death’s heads that he continued to see. After all, anyone who had a head had a skull inside of it. A little outline here, a jutting chin, a cheekbone, the ridge of an eye socket. The suggestions were all about him. It was his imagination that was turning them

into death's heads. He forced himself to relax.

One snowy night in late December Erico was driving back to his apartment on the interstate after shopping at the supermarket. In the oncoming lane was a BMW full of merry-makers wending their way from one party to another. Young, modern, and politically correct, they had designated a driver, one of their friends who could not tolerate alcohol. It was he who, after four joints and a line of coke, plowed the vehicle and his mates head on into the front end of Erico's Mazda. When the fire department, paramedics, and coroner showed up to sort out the pieces, the merry-makers were on their way to the county morgue while Erico Ramos was unconscious, bleeding internally, and on a fast chopper heading toward Northvale General.

Dread.

Before he opened his eyes, Erico was filled with horror. He remembered the accident, the car's dashboard and steering post folding into his abdomen, the shower of glass, the stunning blow through the back of the seat into his spine that caused him to lose consciousness. He knew he was in an ICU. The heart monitor was on audio, he could feel the automatic cuff on his upper left arm, the IV taped to the back of his left hand, the blood oxy clip on the tip of his index finger, the catheter inserted into his bladder.

He caught his breath.

It was there in the room with him.

Death.

The nightmare he had fought for so long and from which he had tried to flee.

Death.

Quickly he recited to himself the Platitudes of Acceptance: Everyone dies. No one has a lock on the next ten minutes. Who does Erico Ramos think he is to be granted immortality? Everyone eventually faces their final moment. How will Erico Ramos measure up? Be a man, Erico. There are people watching. They're not only watching, they're taking extensive notes.

How will Erico Ramos go out? What will those who see him die think of his departure? If I must die, thought Erico, I want to do so with dignity, although dignity is a tough thing to manage with a piece of plastic stuck up your dick.

The automatic cuff began squeezing his arm as the tiny air compressor grumbled into his left ear with the sound of a monotone machine fart. All of his vitals would be up on the video screen, but he wouldn't be able to see the screen unless he could face it. He could feel the sandbags against both sides of his head. Broken neck? He wiggled the fingers of his right hand and the toes of his left foot, somehow pleased that he wasn't paralyzed.

The back of his head hurt and he could feel that the pain had been numbed by pain killers. But his breath was short. It was as though icy fingers were gently gripping his throat, squeezing, cutting off the flow of oxygen.

Erico knew he was getting enough oxygen. He could feel the nose piece hissing into his nostrils, smelling of stale plastic, drying out his nasal membranes. The icy fingers were nothing more than his fears. Fears of

death, fears of knowledge. Ignorance is not only bliss; at times it's a bloody necessity.

Still, his breath was short, panic began gnawing at his resolve to lie still in bed. He forced himself to lie motionless. After all, he might not be dying. It's possible. Ripping out his IV and trying to run from the room might kill the one chance had of staying alive, and staying alive was the point of all of this expensive equipment, wasn't it? Besides, he still had that piece of plastic stuck up his dick.

Nonetheless, Erico's cosmic accountant was in there hard at work making up the final tally. *That was your life, Erico. What had you made of it?* Nursing school when you could have been a physician or a great research scientist? Hell, thought Erico, I did save some lives and helped to save many more. The fleeting nature of this accomplishment, however, was never clearer. The law was still on the books: everyone dies. No one ever lost money by betting on death's eventual victory.

There were other things, though. A childhood that was lonely, save for a brief flirtation with a street gang. No one, nothing, left behind. Not even a kitten.

That was the fear of death, he thought. Finding out your ticket's expired and you hadn't yet had your turn on the ride. Dying without having lived. He could feel the tears running down the sides of his head. It was no longer possible for Erico to remain confined within his own head and he opened his eyes. Because of his tears the images were smeared, but he blinked them away. Above was the acoustic tile set into the room's false ceiling. A corner of one of the tiles was cracked. There was a brown spot on another. Coffee? Feces? Blood?

He looked down and to his left. Next to his hand, hanging from the raised bed rail, was the combination call button and TV control. Beneath his wrist were the leads leading to the contact patches attached to his chest. The TV, hanging above the foot of the bed, was off. He looked up and to his left and saw the edge of the video monitor's side. The screen was pointed toward the foot of the bed and he couldn't view it. There was a clock on the wall and it registered a little after nine in the evening. He pushed the call button, feeling somehow ashamed for doing so.

A face appeared in the doorway. Female. Unfamiliar. "Hi. Mr. Ramos? I'm your nurse for tonight. My name's Helen. How are we doing?"

"You're half of us seems to be doing very well," answered Erico, his voice sounding strange in his ears. "I still don't know anything official about my half."

"Well, you certainly sound better." She checked the video monitor, cycled the blood pressure cuff, and took a note or two. "I can get you a little broth, if you're hungry. How about a ginger ale?"

"Nothing. How am I doing?"

"Well, your blood pressure and pulse are very good. Are you feeling any pain?"

"Not overwhelming. My head mostly. I'd like to know my condition."

Helen's face showed the nightmare. Judgment call. Tell me, nurse, am I dying? She reviewed her options and selected the elsewhere road. "The doctor'll have to tell you that in the morning. I can say you've been in a bit of a scrape, but we're taking care of you now. Your neck's been injured, so for the time being you have to remain on your back. If you need help or a bedpan, just push the button." And, before the waves of her final audio communication landed upon Erico's eardrums, she was long gone.

Of course by not answering his question she had answered it, changing Erico's question from "what?" to "how long?" He closed his eyes as a chill traveled the length of his body.

He didn't want to travel the extent of his fears again. He opened his eyes, reached for the control, and turned on the television. After running around the available channels twice, the amount of time he had left and what he was doing with it began to plague his thoughts. If he only had seconds or minutes left, did he want to go out listening to *Jeopardy* or reruns of *Cheers*? High school basketball? Oprah and women married to midget mimes with body odor?

He punched off the set and took a deep breath, letting it out as a ragged sob. Another face appeared in the door. Hesitant. Dark. "Rene."

"Yes."

"What're you doing here?"

"I'll go, if you want."

"No. No, don't go. I wanted to see you — talk to you. I just didn't know it." A pause. "How did you know it?"

Rene smiled sadly. "I told you before, man. I just know." He entered the room and stood at the right side of Erico's bed, looking down at him. His usually smiling face carried a grave cast. "How can I help you?"

"Do you know how bad a shape I'm in?"

"No. I just got up here. Did you ask the nurse?"

"I asked her and she told me squat."

Rene nodded. "That tells you something."

Erico closed his eyes. "Yeah. About her as well as me." The fear that was choking him made his eyes jump open. "I'm scared."

Rene Boniface took Erico's right hand in both of his and held it. "I know, man."

"I'm so damned scared of dying I can hardly breathe. What did you do to those people? Rachael Raddenburg, Alicia Fuentes, all of them?"

Rene glanced down, his face troubled. "I have a gift. Maybe it's a curse. Anyway, I took them to death."

"What?"

"Death. Dying. I showed them what it's like. I can take you there. I can show you it's nothing to fear. In fact it's the most wonderful thing you'll ever experience." He shrugged and raised his eyebrows. "That's all I do."

"That's it? No catches? No money?"

Rene nodded. "Oh, there's a catch; a payment."

"What?"

"If I do this for you, Erico, you agree to share your death with me."

"Share my ... death?" The fear climbed into Erico's throat, the physical sensation of being strangled. "How do I share my death with you?" he whispered. "And why? What do you get out of it?"

Rene squeezed Erico's hand. "Like I said, man, it's the most wonderful feeling you've ever had."

"I don't get it."

"You'll see. And don't worry about how I do it. I could take it. If I wanted I could take your death and share it without your permission. But I don't do that. I ask first."

Erico tried to shake his head, but the sandbags stopped the gesture. His neck muscles seemed to scream. "I don't care how. I just don't want to be afraid anymore. I just don't want to be afraid."

Still gripping Erico's fingers with his left hand, Rene reached back with his right hand, pulled up a chair, and sat down. "We have a deal?"

"Yes."

Rene Boniface nodded, closed his eyes, and held Erico's hand with both of his.

Fear comes as fear; dark as dark; pain as pain.

Death comes smooth, warm, and silent.

Feet of silk, arms of soft black cotton.

Erico felt his headache fall away, the aches and tension in his limbs, in his chest, his abdomen, his head and neck, it all fell away. He could see no lights, no colors, but he could see hope, joy, a peculiar tension that was an anticipation of something splendid about to happen.

"This was Rachael's death," said Rene, his voice speaking to Erico as from within Erico's own mind.

There was a glow, a hazy blue light high above her. Rachael could feel her arm reach up toward the light, although she could not see her own hand. She couldn't see it, yet it was not strange to her, for she understood everything.

All that had been anxiety, all that had been worry, all that had been fear. Nothing. Foolish, silly. It would have been laughable, save the reality that Rachael now understood all. Hence she understood herself, her fear, and the fears of the entire universe. The answers to all of the questions ever asked reposed within her memory. Not just her questions; everyone's questions. All that was unimportant fell away. All that was important became understood. Every cell of her body became aware and understood its place and worth to the organ, the body, the universe, the soul of Rachael Raddenburg.

Beyond the light, the warmth, perhaps its source, was the end, the beginning, the source, the center, an event/power/entity/state of such towering consequence, attaching any name to it diminished it. Next to it any conception of god that had ever existed became as nothing.

It was something of love.

The love was for Rachael, and because she understood everything in the universe, Rachael knew that she was worthy of the love. It was hers for eternity.

Glittering billows of down soft diamonds parted and folded her within as every particle of her joined with every particle of the universe and forever became both the mother and the child of existence.

The blinding light dimmed, the warmth diminished, and Erico opened his eyes to see Rene looking back at him. Rene's face looked drawn, empty. Erico still felt the understanding, the meaning, of the experience. He had been gone for years; perhaps decades. "Rene?"

The morgue orderly nodded, his eyes still closed.

"Was that God?"

Even as he asked it, Erico could feel his understanding collapsing, his life of answerless questions returning, the love dissolving in a bath of petty doubt and self-recrimination. The clock on the wall showed the time to be seventeen after nine. "I shouldn't've asked," said Erico. "I shouldn't've said anything."

Rene sighed as his face grew a patient smile and he squeezed Erico's hand. "You're not dead. The things you see, the things you hear, the things you feel and think begin cluttering up what you experienced. How do you feel?"

"Feel?"

"Yes. Your fear. How do you feel?"

Erico looked within himself. There was something he felt. It was the residue of a great peace slowly being eroded by a desperate sense of loss. The fear of death, though, was gone. There were still some things that remained from his experience. He felt relaxed, confident, worthy of love.

Of course it had been Rachael Raddenburg's feelings he had experienced. *She* had been the one who had been worthy of love; not Erico. The more he teased at it, the faster the feelings left him. "I can't stay like this, Rene. I'm not scared of death. It's something worse. The way I felt. I want to feel that way again." Erico squeezed Rene's hand. "It's leaving me, man. I don't want to lose it."

"It'll come soon enough, Erico."

He closed his eyes as he mentally nodded. Soon enough. Death would come soon enough. A shard of the understanding he had experienced remained in his memory. It was the knowledge of what an incredibly improbable gift life is. Any life; his life. There was no way to cast it aside now that he knew the truth.

Peace. A feeling of serenity— that everything was exactly where it was supposed to be — washed over him just as he relaxed and drifted off to sleep, the morgue orderly still holding his hand.

The next morning when Erico Ramos awakened, he was hungry. When his doctor, Janice Landry, came by on her rounds, Erico was proclaimed "guardedly stable." There were setbacks, periods of progress, and a series of operations. In three weeks, however, Erico was allowed to sit up. In another four days he was, with the aid of a walker, allowed to go to his room's bathroom on his own. Six days after that he was allowed to take a shower. In another week he was discharged and continued physical therapy on an outpatient basis.

Although he was grateful to have pulled through, each moment he lived was touched by the sense he was

living on borrowed time, that he had touched something wondrous that was now gone, and that he owed Rene Boniface a death. After Erico got his old job in ICU back, he would, at times, see Rene visit a patient. The patient would always say that he or she had requested the morgue orderly, usually the patient died within a few days, and the remains took that last ride down to the cold room, big smile and all. Perversely, Erico envied them their smiles.

Then came a period of almost three weeks during which no one at Northvale General died. It was nothing special; just a statistical lull in deaths by alcohol and other drugs, fatal traffic accidents, various diseases and old age. Just as there are statistical peaks, there are valleys. For whatever reason, at that point in time, there were no death experiences for the morgue orderly to collect.

There was something about it all that disturbed Erico. Perhaps it was the old debt he owed Rene; perhaps it was the fact of what Rene Boniface was: a spiritual ghoul who fed upon death. A very hungry ghoul.

It was the night shift in early summer, the warm breezes carrying the scent of honeysuckle past the sealed windows, Erico sat in the almost deserted cafeteria sipping at a cup of decaf until Rene Boniface came for his usual mid-shift donut. As he went through the line, paid for his donut, and headed for the door, the morgue orderly avoided any eye contact with Erico.

“Rene,” called out Erico.

The morgue orderly stopped and turned toward him. His face was drawn, his eyes wide and frightened. “What is it?”

Erico held out a hand toward the opposite side of the cafeteria table. “Have a seat.”

“You don’t like me, man. You never did. You needed me, once. But you don’t like me.”

“I want to talk.”

The tip of Rene’s tongue nervously moistened his lips. He glanced down at the napkin and donut in his hand, then dropped into the seat facing Erico and draped an arm over the back of the chair. “Okay, what?”

Erico glanced down at his coffee cup. “Look, maybe I wanted to thank you for what you did for me.”

“You’re welcome. Can I go now?”

Erico slowly shook his head as he stared at his coffee cup. One thing he had learned from his time on the rehab unit was that the only way to say it was to say it. He lifted his gaze until he was looking directly into the morgue orderly’s eyes. “You need it, don’t you? I don’t pretend to understand much about this, but you need it.”

Rene’s eyes narrowed. “Need it? Need what?”

“Death — not death, but those feelings. How a person feels when he dies. You need that, don’t you? You get off on it.”

“Man, you are poking into something that is none of your business.”

Rene began standing, but Erico placed his hand on the morgue orderly's arm. "Wait. Hear me out."

Rene settled back into his chair but withdrew his arm. "I'm listening."

"Look, I guess I feel like I do owe you something. You helped me when I was so afraid I might've died from the fear alone. The deal was I'd share my death with you, and I haven't come across."

"You will someday."

Erico sat back in his chair. "Is that some kind of threat?"

"No. Just a reminder of mortality. Everyone dies."

"Okay. But look at you right now. It's been twenty days since you've had your fix, right? No one's died here in almost three weeks. It's getting to you, isn't it?"

"You're calling me a junky?"

Erico nodded. "It's true, isn't it? Just like a late stage addict, you need it. You need it just to feel normal. And you haven't had any for a long time."

Rene moistened his lips again and looked down at the arms that were folded across his chest. "I helped you, man. I helped them all. What's so bad about that?"

"Great for them. Great for me. But what about you? Look at yourself. You look like any strung out coke head getting ready to do something desperate to get his shit."

Rene bit at the inner skin on his lower lip as he looked at a point in space. "Erico, man, it's not like that with me. I can control it. I told you before, I always ask. I never took anyone's feelings, and I never killed anyone to get my fix, as you call it. If I was willing to do that, then I'd be down on Skid Row prowling among the homeless. All I do is share what death feels like with those who need it and share their deaths when they happen —*naturally*. I don't kill anyone."

"Look, Rene, you need help. Besides, what you can do is real special. Maybe you can make some important contribution to science or medicine. With—"

"What I do, Erico, everyone can do. You too." Upon saying that, Rene Boniface stood and pushed back the chair, picked up his donut, and left the cafeteria.

Code blue, code blue.

Stat time. Lights flashing, crash wagon rolling, an ominous flat tone from Room 324, the ICU nurses quietly and efficiently hurrying through their well practiced routine: strip, drip, ventilation, clear the mouth of obstructions, insert the air passage, blow, pump, pump, pump, pump, blow —

"Wagon over here. Let's move it. Clear." Calm in the doctor's voice. Old hand. The whump of multiple volts passing through still living tissue, the muscles contracting and relaxing, lifting a middle aged carpenter named Pete Midori from the bed, going on the ride he paid for with a lifetime of Winstons and saturated fats.

Some scrambled tones for a moment settling down to a steady bip, bip, bip.

“Sinus rhythm.”

“Well, that was easy.”

Orders for meds, a chest x-ray, this and that. Once the patient was stabilized and the others had left, Erico noticed that the man’s eyes were open. Open and wide. He stood next to the man’s side, took his hand, and looked down into the man’s face.

The death’s head was there, grinning back through the man’s fear.

“You’re all right for now, Pete,” said Erico.

The man’s hand gripped Erico’s with surprising strength. “Help me,” he whispered. “Oh please God help me.”

The ancient enemy: the fear of death. A strange feeling of need and power, of wealth and longing, came over Erico; a vision of dangerous paths through newly opened gates. Erico Ramos looked down at face of death and said, “Maybe I can help.” He closed his eyes and entered the deepest pools of his soul.

Fear comes as fear; dark as dark; pain as pain.

Death comes smooth, warm, and silent.

Feet of silk, arms of soft black cotton.

There was a glow, a hazy blue light high above them. Rachael could feel her arm reach up toward the light, although she could not see her own hand. She couldn’t see it, yet it was not strange to her, for she understood everything.

“What is this?” asked Pete Midori.

“It’s a death,” answered Erico. “The death of a woman named Rachael.”

They traveled Rachael’s path, understood all and defeated the fears of the universe. They possessed the answers to all of the questions ever asked. All that was unimportant fell away. Every cell of their bodies became aware and understood its place and worth to the organ, the body, the universe, the soul.

The light, the center, the power without name.

Love.

Eternity.

Glittering billows of down soft diamonds parted and folded them within as every particle of them joined with every particle of the universe and became both the mother and the child of existence.

Erico felt chilly and desolate as he opened his eyes and looked down upon the joyful face of Pete Midori. He released the man’s hand and felt even more forsaken. “Thank you,” said the carpenter. “You’re an angel. You came to me when I was afraid. I don’t understand it, but thank you. I was so scared. But I’m

not frightened now. How can I ever thank you?"

The image of the carpenter swam before him as Erico looked through his tears. "Yes," he whispered as fresh caverns of despair yawned beneath his feet. "There's something you can do. If you should die, please share your death with me. Then I can pass it on to whoever needs it."

What was the knowing look in the man's face? Secret knowledge? Suspicion? Or only concern. Erico couldn't get over the feeling that Pete Midori knew exactly what was happening. "Yes," said Pete quietly. "Sure." Erico looked up to see Rene Boniface standing in the room's doorway. The man's face was desperate, hungry. "This one," said Erico through clenched teeth, "*ismine* !"

The morgue orderly studied Erico's eyes for a moment, nodded, and headed back toward the elevators.

The Calling of Andy Rain

"Prisoner, stand on the line."

Billy Stark came to a halt and put the toes of his shoes on the white painted line before the barred entrance to "C" block. In his manacled hands he carried a cardboard box containing the few possessions he had been allowed in his death row cell. The corpulent guard on "C" block's entrance looked through the bars and grinned displaying large, crooked teeth. "Back in the general population, huh, killer? Welcome to Club Fed. My name's Grubbs." The guard shook his head. "Man, Stark, you gotta give me your lawyer's name. Can't ever tell when I might need a miracle worker."

"C'mon, Grubbs," urged Lt. Rain. "I don't have all day."

"Yessir. Open seventeen!" shouted Grubbs to the door keeper. A warning beep sounded, the bars rolled open, and the guard stepped aside and commanded, "Prisoner, step inside the door." Billy, his eyes kept to the front, took two steps and came to a halt, his toes on the yellow line inside the door. "Close seventeen!"

The prisoner listened as the alarm beeped and the door rumbled and clanged shut behind him. Something hard and twisted in his gut loosened just a bit. The smell of death row was still in his nostrils, but it was fading. He realized he was holding his breath and took a tiny gulp of air.

"Billy."

As Grubbs waited, the prisoner turned and looked through the bars at the death row guard supervisor. "Yes, lieutenant?"

Lt. Gary Rain's face was broad and amiable beneath a shock of blond hair. He looked like he should be hosting a kid's TV show rather than running the death row screws. Billy had been renting a room at Rain's hotel for seven years.

"I won't be seeing you again, Billy." He smiled and raised his eyebrows. "It'll seem strange after all this time." Lt. Rain's shoulders shrugged slightly. There were some words called for, but Grubbs was there, and Stark had been convicted of killing three men, and Billy knew that Gary Rain hated that. You don't say "good luck" to someone you think ought to fry. Good-byes in prison were screwed up anyway. Billy would miss Gary Rain. The death row guard commander was a by-the-book officer, but he was scrupulously fair and always treated the condemned as though they might be human. He figured the payment to be collected from the condemned was death, not humiliation. Billy would miss Gary Rain and

he hoped he would never see the man's face again.

"I hope the experiment does some good." Lt. Rain turned and walked back toward death row.

Grubbs shook his head as he watched the solid fire door close behind Lt. Rain. "I bet he's good to his mother."

Billy turned his head and looked at the guard with steady gray eyes. He did not change expression, and after a moment Grubbs shifted uncomfortably and nodded toward the first gallery cells. "Step off, Stark. Head for personal issue and get your bedding. After that there's an old friend of yours in your cell. You're in one-sixteen."

Burdened now with bedclothes and pillow, in addition to his box of belongings, Billy entered cell one-sixteen. There was the old friend Grubbs had mentioned. Detective Sergeant John Draper was seated in the middle of the small cell's only bed, his back against the cell wall, hands in his trouser pockets, his legs thrust out before him and crossed at the ankles. Draper was a slender man in his early fifties with a long angular face beneath short brown hair peppered with gray. His brownish sport coat needed pressing and his five-dollar necktie was pulled down, his collar button open. A rumpled trench coat, wet from the damp day outside, was tossed on the foot of the bed. Billy stood there until Grubbs said, "Prisoner, put the stuff on the desk and put out the wrists."

When the cuffs were removed, Grubbs left and Billy was left alone with the officer who had tracked him down and arrested him almost eight years ago. Draper looked up at him with pale blue eyes. "Hi, Billy."

Billy rubbed his wrists and nodded. "Sgt. Draper. Congratulations on the promotion."

Draper shifted his gaze and looked around at the cell's dingy yellow interior. "This is a lot nicer than The Row, isn't it? Bookshelf, desk, your own chair. You even got your shoelaces back. Now you can go out in the exercise yard, play chess, and powwow with all the other killers."

Billy pulled out the chair, faced its back toward Draper, straddled the seat, and sat down. "What can I do for you, sergeant?"

"I don't suppose you'd consider suicide." Draper sat up, removed his hands from his pockets and leaned his elbows on his knees. "You think you got away from Old Sparky up there, don't you, killer? You run out of stalls, appeals, and stays, and presto, out pops donating your body to science." The detective slowly shook his head. "And I'll be damned if the governor didn't go for it."

"The people at the institute asked me, sergeant. It was their idea. I didn't ask them."

"Yeah, I know. Out of all the cons in here, you're the one who has never been sick a day in your life. You don't smoke and never used any drugs, so when they shoot those enzymes and that secret gunk into you, the only thing they have to worry about is: does it work on humans?" The cop grinned slightly. "I wonder if it does?"

"That's what they're going to find out with me, isn't it?"

Draper's grin faded. "Last week I went to the institute for a visit. Those people are real proud of their work. Dr. Polinzer gave me the fifty-cent tour, showed me a bunch of slides, talked a yard of gibberish, introduced me to a couple of chimps, and put on a demonstration just for me. He and his assistant took a full grown sedated chimp, wired it up, and gave it a shot. Then we all watched while the chimp looked around dopey for a bit and then started screaming."

The homicide detective slowly turned his head to the left and allowed his gaze to settle on a prisoner in

the center of the block mopping the gallery floor. "Billy, you never heard such screaming, not in your whole life." He faced the new occupant of cell one-sixteen. "Not even from your victims. It almost made me send in my dues for animal rights." Draper stood, walked to the back of the cell next to the seatless toilet, turned around and fixed Billy with his gaze.

"I asked the good doctor if the screaming was because of what the chimp was thinking, seeing, or feeling. He didn't know about the first two, but he told me the chimp was doing some big time feeling. Pain, man. Pain that is so far off the pain scale it's impossible to imagine. You see, Billy, every cell in that animal's body was undergoing reconstruction. That gunk chops up the cells, rearranges the parts, throws away what it doesn't want, and puts it all back together again."

The detective clasped his hands behind his back and brushed the cell's tiny bookshelf checking for dust. He looked at his fingertips, brushed them against his thumb, and nodded. "That includes every nerve cell, Billy. Can you imagine having a trillion splinters? All at the same time? Man, it's going to be like having your entire mind and body amputated and put through a meatgrinder a million times over. All while you're conscious."

The police officer waited a moment, but Billy Stark's face did not change expression. "Anyway, I watched that chimp for almost six hours. The first thing that happened, besides the screaming, was all his hair fell out. Then it looked like he lost control of every function of his body. Remember those films you see in the service about nerve gas?"

"I never was in the service, but you already know that."

"You're damned right I know that!" Draper exploded. He took several deep breaths and slowly resumed an appearance of uncaring calm. "Every muscle begins twitching uncontrollably," he continued, "you lose control of your bowels and bladder, tears run from your eyes, mucous from your nose, drool from your mouth. Then, slick with sweat, the breathing gets very hard. That chimp bled from its eyes and ears." Draper forced a smile onto his face. "And that was the easy part."

Billy raised his eyebrows and held out one hand for a moment. "They showed me a video of that back on The Row."

"Did they show you the end, when the dead and dying skin comes off in sheets and you begin excreting the old you?"

Billy let the hand drop. "Yeah. My lawyer made them go into the whole thing detail by detail." He smiled. "Surround sound and living color. More than once."

The detective resumed his seat on the bed. "I have studied you and everything I could about you for more than eight years, Billy. I know you're not stupid."

"The prison shrink says I got the IQ of a genius. 'Course if she was any good, she wouldn't be workin' here, right?"

Draper lifted a hand and rubbed the back of his neck as he continued studying the prisoner. "Billy, the chimp I saw died a death I wouldn't even wish on you."

"The one on the video I saw lived," answered Billy, "but my lawyer got out of Polinzer that only one out of three survives regeneration. After that I got to see a tape of one that didn't make it. You're right about one thing, sergeant. It looks like a hard way to go."

Draper leaned back against the cell wall and frowned as he continued his examination of Billy Stark's

face. “You are going to suffer like few humans have ever suffered, your mind is going to be wiped of everything, and in the unlikely event that you live—”

“I thought about this for a long time, sergeant. You think I’ll quit out now and run back to the hotseat just because you shake the bogeyman at me?”

“No.” Draper patted his coat pocket, reached in and withdrew an evil smelling briar pipe. Holding it by the bowl, he tapped the stem against the fingers of his left hand. “I’m just trying to figure out why you’re doing this. It’s not for medicine or science or anything like that. You’ve never did anything for another person in your entire life.”

Billy remembered a boy he helped once, but that was a murder the cops didn’t know about. Anyway, he was beyond having to prove anything to anyone. Billy shrugged. “I guess I figure it’s a better chance than the chair. That’s all there is to it.”

The detective stood and looked down at the killer. “You don’t get it at all, Billy. The odds of you living might be two to one against, but the you that is *you* has no chance. No chance at all. The regeneration process wipes the slate acid clean.”

Turning around to his desk, Billy reached into the box of his belongings and withdrew an issue of *New Detective Magazine*. “I read the story you wrote. ‘Blood’s Truth.’ Your first story it says in here.”

Astonished, Draper looked from the magazine to the killer’s face. “Yeah.”

“I liked it.”

“I didn’t ask.”

“Are you going to go full time writing?”

Draper curled his lip, glanced away for a moment, then faced the prisoner. “I have a few more killers to put away before I try anything like that. Think about what I said.”

Sgt. Draper turned to go and Billy held out the magazine. “Could you autograph it? I never asked for an autograph before.”

The detective burst out with a single laugh, stared at the open magazine for a moment, then took it as he reached into his inside breast pocket for a pen. “I never gave an autograph before.” He scribbled for a bit, handed back the copy, and left the cell. As his leather heels echoed on the block, Billy opened the magazine to the proper page and read the inscription:

To Billy Stark,

You’re all finished. Rot in Hell,

John Draper

Billy looked at the sentiment and wondered. The chimp in the first video Dr. Polinzer had shown him was an intelligent creature, good at games and quick to learn, according to the tests that were described in the beginning. More than that, the chimp’s face was expressive. It showed that there was more there than a dumb animal. The animal was full of mischief and liked to play jokes. When he thought he had been especially clever or funny, there was this thing he did with his mouth. A strange sort of grimace.

When the film cut to the testing of the regenerated baby chimp, it showed that the baby chimp

remembered none of its tests or games. There was something else, though; something that didn't fit within the tests; something none of the scientists appeared to have noticed.

The baby chimp pinched its handler, a studious youth with glasses that made him look like an owl. The handler jumped back and yelped. Then the baby chimp did that thing, that strange sort of grimace, with its mouth. Something of the old chimp's thinking might have made it through the regeneration, thought Billy. The chimp in the second video had a completely different set of expressions before it died. On the first chimp, though, some individuality had made it through. Maybe. Possibly.

There was that study he had read about in *Science News* where a worm was trained to make some simple moves in response to a stimulation. Then the pencil necks conducting the experiment ground up the worm and fed it to some other worms. After those worms ate the smart worm, they became smart, too. They could all do what the ground up worm had been trained to do.

Doc Lamb, the serial killer children's dentist in the cell next to his on the Row, had been the one who told Billy about the worm study. Lamb also mentioned that humans are a little more complicated than flatworms.

Cell regeneration. It was such a slender thread. It was a chance, though, and any chance is more of a chance than Old Sparky would give him.

"Stark."

Billy looked up at the guard standing in the open door to his cell. The man's name tag said he was Connely. "Yeah?"

The guard cocked his head toward the block access door. "On your feet, Stark. Shrink wants to see you."

Billy Stark stood, placed the magazine into the box next to his coded notebook, and followed the guard named Connely. The coded notebook reminded him to apply for a phone call later in the day. It was November second.. The experiment would be in less than two weeks and there were some details that needed tending.

Just in case.

Over the next eleven days it seemed to Billy that he took and repeated at least four times every psychological and physical test ever invented. Ellen Nash, the prison psychologist, seemed very excited by the project, even though the people from the Steiman Institute seemed to have difficulty tolerating her. Dr. Nash was very young and very beautiful behind the dowdy image she presented for the benefit of the male prison population, but that didn't seem to be reason enough to irk her coworkers.

On the day of the experiment, as he floated in the warm fluid of the tank the techs called "The Iron Womb," Billy worked at trying to let the drugs relax him. He had just about written off Ellen Nash's problems with the institute bunch as a personality thing when the tech supervising his monitors let slip to a nurse that, as prison shrink, Ellen Nash's approval had been required to secure the necessary funding. The price of her approval was participation in the experiment and credit on any papers published.

A touch of ambition, thought Billy. It doesn't mean anything. Everybody's in everything for what they can get. If playing poker made Mother Theresa feel better than helping the poor, she'd be in Vegas dealing

stud. Ellen Nash had been pleasant and had tried to be helpful. He didn't begrudge the shrink a little career boost.

The tech nodded, looked at Billy, and said, "So long, killer." The nurse pushed the plunger on a syringe and Billy reviewed his numbers one last time: *Eleven, three, ninety-seven. Four-three-one-two. Twenty-four forty-two and ... and a bright color—*

Billy's breath caught, the images around him smeared and went blinding white. He felt a slight burning sensation in his arm followed by his entire body getting warm. Immediately afterward his entire body felt as though it had been dipped into molten steel. His mouth opened and he heard himself cry out, then scream. For a split second he wondered if Sgt. Draper was watching, then it all dropped into a nightmare of plasma flashes, thundering sounds no synthesizer ever produced, smells of fire, feces, and fear, violent touch sensations from every nerve in his body, the taste of salt and blood. As the pain transcended mere sensation, he felt himself lifted from his body into a great dark.

...the sound of a heartbeat, dull and steady, layers of existence in flight. A voice garbled, distorted.

The heartbeat is the world, warmth its sign—

—abrupt cold, a wash of painful light, and warmth again.

...eleven, three, ninety-seven ...

—sucking, a thick warm sweet cloying substance in the throat, sending it up again, the smell, acid—

...four-three-one-two ...

Dark, light, both smaller, dark, light, smaller still.

Dark forever and ever.

... twenty-four forty-two and a bright color ...

A sound; steady, monotonous as it grew louder and louder still. A never ending scream, a lump of trembling tissue crying for help to a very small universe.

Stillness.

A song, meaningless words, gentle touches.

Light, dark, movement, light, dark.

Endless.

He opened his eyes.

The dream, the deadly ages of light and dark, haunted the shadows. He tried to turn his head to the left, and it was difficult, his neck weak.

The darkness was a smear of forms, yellow from below, cool white from the left. Wiping his eyes with his hands, he found them full of tears. He looked at his hands, confused by the wetness, the softness, the size, the shape. The smell. A really bad smell.

The tears cleared from his eyes and he could see a window, a tree beyond, lights, and a squat gray building. There was a night light on a dresser next to the door, a fat clown with a red hat and nose glowing from within. He looked back at his hands. Something about them was wrong. Everything was wrong. And that *smell* .

His breaths came rapidly as panic filled him.

He wasn't where he belonged, but where he belonged he couldn't remember. He was lost and everything was all wrong.

With effort he turned his head to the left. He saw bars. A row of vertical bars. He felt his heart move into his throat, then he looked again. A row of green, yellow, red, and blue beads were strung on a metal rod and set into the middle of the bars. The bars were made of wood.

"Where am I?" he cried, the squeak of his own voice strange on his ears, the feel of his mouth speaking bizarre. He tried to remember the day before. How had he been brought here.

He closed his eyes and tried to squeeze the memories out. There was nothing but numbers.

Eleven, three, ninety-seven.

Four-three-one-two.

Twenty-four forty-two and a bright color ...

He held his hand to his mouth and felt the tears dribbling down his cheeks. He knew he was the numbers, except they meant nothing to him.

A scream was coming.

He could feel it building in his throat, and he didn't know what to do with it except hide it. He knew he had to hide it. He couldn't afford to attract attention until he knew where he was, who he was, what was going on. He picked up a blanket, stuffed a corner in his mouth, and screamed. Again and again he screamed until he was too exhausted.

No whimpers, no cries, nothing to be heard outside the room.

He was alone.

Alone, frightened.

There was something lumpy, wet, between his legs.

The smell.

It was a *diaper* .

There was a mess in it!

The horror of that drove other fears before it. He couldn't deal with any of the big issues right then. He was scared, tired, and confused.

He shook his head, the weakness in his neck making the gesture an effort. Issues for another moment. Right then his crotch burned and the smear and the smell of the bowel movement in his diaper were making him ill.

He moved to the side of the crib and looked for the locking mechanism. Finding none, he reached out his hand and froze as he saw it again.

So small. The hands and fingers, so tiny.

He reached through the bars near the bottom and felt around. His fingers touched a thin metal bar and he pulled on it. When that had no effect, he pushed. The entire side of the crib slid down with a bang, not falling quite far enough to guillotine his arm at the shoulder. He rolled onto his belly, moved his legs over the rail, and slid to the floor, his toes touching the short pile of a carpet.

Teetering for a moment, he held on to the rail and tried to remember something very important. He felt the tears rising again, and he forced the feelings of panic down. He didn't know if he knew how to walk. He took a step back, turned, released the rail, and began wobbling toward the door, reeling from one leg to the other, terrified that he would lose his balance and fall down on his bottom and its filthy diaper. He made it to the door, reached up with both hands, turned the glass doorknob, and slowly pulled it open.

There was a dark hallway illuminated by a dim night light on a small narrow table. On the wall were framed photographs of enigmatic faces, one of which he thought he ought to know. It was a man with light colored hair and an engaging smile. He was standing next to a woman whose identity was a total mystery. The hardwood floor was cold on his feet as he passed the stairwell going to the floor below. There was a dim light on down there, as well. Through a window in the very top of the door he could see the reflections of a porch light. All left on for someone who was out of the house working late.

He passed a closed door that muffled the sounds of gentle snoring. The space beneath the door was black. He turned the knob and pushed the door open enough to see inside. The room was dark, no night lights, the curtains allowing almost no light in from outside. Whoever was in there was dead to the world. He backed out and pulled the door shut behind him.

The next door opened onto the upstairs bathroom. It was warm in there and he closed the door behind him. He turned the lock and snapped on the lights. The bathroom was modern, all pink enamel and blue and pink tile. There was a full length mirror attached to the wall and he walked over to it and beheld himself.

A small boy, five or six years old, looked back. Tear-reddened eyes, tousled black hair, with the look of a frightened rabbit. He was clad in powder blue pajamas with snaps that ran up the inseams of both legs and the crotch, enabling the diaper to be changed without making it necessary to remove the garment, which stank of feces and Johnson's Baby Oil.

The snaps at back of his neck were impossible to reach and he undid the crotch snaps. He was shocked to see how thin his legs were. Putting that aside for the moment, he pulled the pajamas off over his head and dropped them on the floor. Taking a deep breath, he steeled himself and pulled away the self-sticking tabs on the sagging disposable diaper. Gasping at the odor, he pulled the diaper away from his bottom, used it to wipe up what he could, then, holding it with both hands, he looked for a place in which to dispose of the thing. There was a blue plastic pail in the corner and he teetered over, lifted the lid, and found the mother lode. He dropped the diaper in, replaced the lid, and didn't give a thought to trying to clean himself up with toilet paper. He headed for the shower.

He pulled the knob on the faucet, turning on the water. After adjusting the temperature, he climbed in, grateful to soap up and wash away the feces, the urine, the baby oil and powder, and the stench of

something else. It was more a feeling than an odor. It felt like an old life; a past. As the steam filled the air, he felt himself relax a little.

After soaping his bottom and crotch, he soaped his genitals and looked down. The size, the shape, astonished him. Something very old inside saw and the boy said, "I'm new." He reached his hands to his face, felt his mouth, his cheeks, his eyes, his ears, "I'm brand new."

He felt as though someone was looking over his shoulder and he turned to see nothing but a back brush dangling from the shower head by a plastic cord. Feelings of fear, sadness, regret, and guilt bubbled up in him. "Maybe it's a dream."

All these feelings.

Turning off the water, he pulled the curtain aside, climbed out of the tub, took a fresh bath towel from a shelf, and rubbed himself dry. While he was drying himself, he heard the doorknob rattle. "Honey? Gary? Is that you?" It was a woman's voice. Strange and almost familiar.

He took a deep breath and let it escape slowly as he notified himself that it had to begin sooner or later. "It's me," he answered, his voice still small and squeaky.

There was a profoundly stunned silence from the other side of the door. Wrapping the towel around his body, he unlocked the door and opened it. A woman's sleep-puffed face looked back, her eyes wide, her mouth hanging open. She was incredibly tall. She pulled her flower printed flannel nightgown in to her lap, squatted down, and placed her hands on his shoulders. She smelled of sleep and a familiar perfume.

"Andy? Andy, honey? You talked." Tears filled her eyes. "You talked."

At this observation Andy's eyebrows went up and he said, "Yes."

She looked up, saw the blue pajamas on the floor next to wet footprints. "You can stand, you walk ..." She looked into his eyes, her own eyes showing confusion. "What have you been doing? How did you get out of your crib?"

Her hands moved down his body. "You're wet and where's your diaper?"

He turned and nodded toward the diaper pail. "In there. It was dirty."

The woman stood, rocked a bit as though dizzy, walked to the blue plastic container, and looked in. On her way back from the pail, she stooped to pick up the blue pajamas. While she was bent over, she looked into the shower. "You had the water on."

"I took a shower."

Her eyes opened wide and she almost fell over. She straightened up, her hand held to her mouth, and she lowered herself down until she was seated on the toilet. "Oh, Andy! You could've scalded yourself! You're never to play with the water!"

"I wasn't playing," he answered curtly. "I was taking a shower. I was dirty and I wanted to get clean. I want to go to bed now. I'm tired."

His mother looked down at him, her brow wrinkled in confusion. She blinked her eyes, shook her head, and held a hand to her forehead. She lowered her hand and looked at the boy. "I must have taken too many of those pills. Everything is just a little unreal."

“That’s no lie,” agreed the boy as he shivered in the draft from the hall.

“Talking after all this time. Talking, walking . . .” She reached forward, placed her hands on his cheeks, and studied him.

“*You are* talking. Standing there. And you sound so smart.” She took him gently by the shoulders and kissed both of his cheeks. Her eyes were blue as they stared into his. Another tear streaked down her right cheek. “But you did talk to me, didn’t you? I should call Gary. Didn’t you talk to me? Say something, Andy.”

“Yes. I talked.”

She shook her head, chasing away those pieces of reality that didn’t fit. “We both need sleep, honey. First a fresh diaper then back into your pajamas then back to bed for both of us.”

“No,” he answered flatly.

“No?”

“No diaper. I don’t wear them anymore. I don’t want those pajamas near me ‘til they’re washed. They stink.”

The confusion on the woman’s face grew deeper. Lifting the pajamas to her nose, she sniffed at the garment and then smiled. “Why, honey, they smell like baby oil.”

“Baby oil stinks,” said the boy. “It makes me sick to my stomach. I won’t use it. No baby powder either. It stinks, too.”

She studied the strange creature with the strange requests and squeezed his shoulders. “Honey, you have to wear a diaper. You’ll wet the bed.”

“No I won’t. I’ve already shown I can make it to a toilet.”

The woman’s face filled with love. “Andy, honey, let me change you.” She smiled warmly.

“I’m too old for that, too.”

“Honey, you haven’t been well, and an important part of being a mother is changing her baby.”

With an effort the boy shrugged her hands off his shoulders and said, “Go buy yourself a baby doll to change. From now on, I do my own changing.” He left her there, sitting on the toilet, her expression even more confused.

He walked into the nursery, closed the door behind him, and flicked on the lights. His heart was pounding, his mouth dry. She was huge, the world was huge, and he was desperate to find something real. At last the cold drove him to find some clothes. After trying several drawers, he found a fresh set of yellow pajamas. This pair had feet sewn in them. He put them on, turned off the light, and walked over to the crib. There was a faint smell of urine in it and the overpowering stench of baby oil. He turned away, took an afghan from the overstuffed chair in the corner, wrapped it about himself, and settled into the chair.

His heart was still pounding. He didn’t talk right. He knew that. He didn’t know how he knew, but he knew. The woman could tell that. She said so. Tomorrow he would talk like a kid. He had to say something to her, though. He couldn’t have some strange woman strip him and clean the crap out of his

pants. The thought of it filled him with embarrassment.

But what about how he talked?

It's late at night, he thought to himself, and the woman had taken some pills. Maybe too many. She won't even believe herself. He had almost dozed when he said out loud, "That's my *mother* !" In another moment he said, "My name is *Andy* !"

He felt a lump beneath his rump, pulled out a small brown teddy bear, studied it for a moment, and tossed it to the floor. He curled up once more and watched the lights from the squat gray building. There were more lights, some of them moving. He got up, walked to the window, and watched as a long black car left the building through a gate. Somehow he knew the car was a hearse. He knew that the building was a prison. He knew that there was a fresh corpse in the hearse.

Andy shuddered as he ran back to the chair, climbed up on the seat cushion, and curled into a ball. The tears in his eyes were for someone he never knew; someone who could never cry for himself. The woman came in, picked him up, settled into the chair, and arranged him on her lap, his head resting on her ample bosom. He was surprised at how comfortable it was.

"Why are you crying, honey?" asked the woman.

He just shook his head and buried his face in the woman. In a moment he was asleep.

A gaunt man with hooded dark eyes wearing prison grays. His head was shaved. He was sitting in a field of wild flowers. Next to him was a little boy with black hair. The boy picked a bright orange flower and handed it to the man. The man held the flower and wept. The man looked at the blossom for ever so long. He stood, turned, and began walking, the flower still in his hand. The boy watched until the man was gone leaving him all alone.

A noise. There was a noise from downstairs. The front door closing. A familiar voice talking to the woman. It was still dark and Andy noticed that he was in the crib. Although slightly annoyed, he felt too tired to make an issue of it. He thought about the man's voice, couldn't place it, but decided before he fell back to sleep that he had a father, too.

The next morning Andy was awakened by voices. "He talked," said the woman from the bedroom next door.

"Talked? You mean ... talked? Words? Really talked?"

"Honest."

"After all this time, and what the doctors said?" The man's voice was giddy from lack of sleep and, perhaps, a pain killer or two of his own. Andy frowned. The voice seemed very familiar. "What'd he say?"

A long pause. The woman answered, her voice troubled. "The talk was strange."

"Strange?"

"You know, like in full sentences. Almost like an adult."

"What did he say?" asked the man, disbelief in his voice.

"He told me no more diapers and from now on he changes his own clothes. I'm supposed to throw out the baby powder and baby oil. He says they stink. The smell makes him sick to his stomach."

"He didn't."

"I amnot kidding! He told me ... That's right. He told me if I wanted to change something to go and buy a doll."

Andy's father laughed, the strain in his voice making it crack. "Marnie, no more super migraine pills for you." He laughed again. "Go buy a doll," he repeated, "How many of those pills did you take?"

A long pause, then she said quietly, "I might have taken my medication twice. But he just doesn't talk. He walks! He went in the bathroom and took a shower, for god's sake!"

"Go buy a doll," the man laughed, the laugh changing by slow degrees into sobs. The man cried and for some reason Andy felt his heart ache. Afterward the man and the woman talked.

"This one was really bad. They had to run the charges twice. After we hit him with the twenty-five hundred volts, we gave him the low tension one. You know, the five hundred volts to interrupt his heartbeat. God, sparks, smoke, and stink all over the place. The doc checks Stokes's heartbeat and he says it's still beating. Can you believe that? Stokes ate amps for seventy seconds and he was still alive. So, we do it all again."

He talked, calmed down, talked some more, and Andy seemed to know that this was a familiar ritual his parents went through every time a prisoner was executed. The name Stokes seemed familiar, too. Killed his girlfriend's entire family. Mother, father, younger sister, younger brother, uncle, and the girlfriend, too. Had a strange laugh. Used to cry all night about how sorry he was. In the dream, though, where the man took the flower from the little boy, Stokes wasn't the man. That was someone else.

Andy's daddy talked awhile about Ricky Stokes, his family, his childhood, his life and execution. Then he shared his own dark thoughts from the night before. Taking the .32 revolver he had locked up in the kitchen, about eating a bullet. Then they talked about a vacation, seeing his parents, maybe getting a new job. And what would pay as well? Besides, it's tough starting over again at fifty, and so on. Captain Wilson should be retiring soon and the warden promotes from inside. As yard captain he'd be off the Row.

Soon Andy's strange behavior was forgotten. Later, when Daddy looked into his room, his eyes were red. He smiled at his boy and said, "Say, Andy. Mommy told me you talk. Say something for Daddy. Say something for Daddy."

Andy looked at his daddy and couldn't understand how he could have forgotten his name. It was Gary. Gary Rain. "Yes, Daddy." Andy nodded and could not protest in time before his father swept him up in his arms, hugged him, and kissed his cheek. "We are so lucky, son. So lucky."

Andy hesitated for a moment, then as a flood of emotion covered him, he put his arms around his father's neck and hugged him. "I love you, Daddy."

There were days of adjusting, days of learning, trying to sort out the joys and the horrors of being five and a half years old. Once his parents had put the Stokes execution behind them, the feeling of this new beginning filled Andy with resolve. Stokes was dead. Andy Rain was alive. Somehow Rick's death made his own life new. He'd work hard at school when he could go, sports, enjoy all of life, do the things he'd never been allowed to enjoy—

Five and a half.

Five and a half years, but nothing before that night; the night he awakened wearing that filthy diaper.

Still, it's my turn.

My turn. He would frown at this feeling, this it's-my-turn passion, that would devil him, drive him to have a childhood. He would push away the feeling, secure in the heart of his home within the bosom of his parents' love. This is my life now, he would think to himself. Everything is perfect. He couldn't understand what it was that used to fill him with fear and he let the fear fall away.

Then Uncle Herman showed up.

Andy's mommy and daddy talked about it. Argued about it.

Mommy's brother, Herman Jenner, had had a rough life. When he was young he'd gotten mixed up in "something shady" and ever since he just didn't seem to be able to get a break, especially after those hoods at that one bar attacked him, putting him in the hospital. It was rare that he could get work doing whatever it was that he did, and when he did get work, it just never seemed to last out the week. His wife and two daughters had left him years before amid a cloud of dark rumors. He was the family embarrassment to both the Rains and the Jenners. Whenever he visited he would sit in the kitchen, his left hand around a cup of coffee, the handle pointed away from him, complaining about the breaks he never got or bragging about the fights he had been in.

A few days after the Stokes execution, Uncle Herman moved in for an indefinite stay and Gary Rain received a promotion. He was no longer running death row. Captain Wilson had taken early retirement due to illness and Lt. Rain was made acting yard captain. In celebration Andy's parents were invited to dinner by the Drapers. Mr. Draper's name was John, he was a mystery writer who was a former police detective, and Mrs. Draper was the prison psychiatrist. Her name was Ellen, and she was very young and very beautiful. John Draper looked at Andy with a strange expression. No baby sitters were available on such short notice, which left Mommy's brother the only one available.

Uncle Herman was charged with making sure Andy ate his dinner, washed, brushed his teeth, and went to bed on time. In a low voice, his sister made Uncle Herman promise not to drink anything. After Andy's parents left, the first thing Uncle Herman did was to turn on the TV to the football game. The second thing he did was go to his room and return with a pint bottle of whisky. Problems began with the dinner.

"I don't want to sit in the high chair. I sit at the table."

"Like hell," said Uncle Herman as he grabbed the boy beneath his armpits and dropped him none too

gently into the wooden chair. "You sit where I tell you to sit." Without fastening the safety belt, he swung the wooden tray down with a bang. "Here, kid." Uncle Herman dropped a bowl of unappetizing green slime in front of Andy. Next to it he placed a white plastic spoon. "Eat it."

"What is it?" asked Andy.

Uncle Herman's eyebrows went up in surprise. "Don't worry about what it is. That's what I put in front of you. Eat it."

Andy sniffed at the soupy stuff and wrinkled his nose. "That's creamed spinach."

"You're right."

The boy shook his head. "I can't eat this stuff. It'll make me sick."

"Oh, you'll eat it. Marnie said you might start working your mouth. God knows why she was so damned happy about it. You be careful unless you want me to slap it off." Uncle Herman opened the refrigerator door, took out a can of beer, and walked into the living room.

The boy could feel his skin tingle. It was back there somewhere. Hands hitting. Somehow he knew what it was like to be beaten, to be helpless under the control of the powerful.

He looked down at the bowl. He wouldn't eat the slime. He couldn't eat it. He looked to the cabinet door beneath the kitchen sink. Behind it was the garbage pail. He could climb down from the chair, empty the bowl into the garbage, and make it back into the highchair before Uncle Herman came back for another beer.

He slumped back in the highchair. He knew Uncle Herman's type. If his mother's brother spied the discarded spinach in the garbage, he'd go into a vicious rage, and the rage would be directed at Andy. If Uncle Herman did not find it, he would simply fill the bowl with more slime. Uncle Herman wanted to rage—needed to rage.

The boy knew a few simple truths:

First, he would not eat the slime.

Next, he would not allow himself to be beaten.

Finally, Andy's father kept a .32 revolver locked up somewhere in the kitchen.

Andy moved all the way to the left in the chair, slid forward, picked up the bowl with both hands and placed it on the seat next to him. He placed the spoon in the bowl and lifted the wooden tray until it quietly came to rest on the wall behind the chair. Once the tray was up, he slid to the edge of the seat, turned and climbed down.

Once on the floor, he quickly scanned the kitchen. Beneath the counter, on both sides of the sink, were six drawers. One of the drawers sported a flat black plate containing a keyhole. The boy went to the door, glanced through it, and saw the back of Uncle Herman's head as the man finished off the pint of whisky, put the empty on the end table, then popped open the beer and took a long drink. The TV's volume was on very high. If Andy made some noise opening the drawer, the noise from the TV would probably cover it. The boy turned from the door.

Once he reached the drawer, Andy reached up and pulled on the handle with both hands. Locked. He looked around, went to the edge of the counter near the sink, and picked up a dinner knife. Going back

to the drawer, he inserted the knife in the crack above the lock and pushed hard. The crack widened as the thick part of the blade next to the handle jimmied the lock. Holding the knife in, he pulled on the drawer's handle. The drawer slid open easily. He reached into the drawer and felt around inside the drawer until his hand found the hefty chunk of machined metal.

It was cold and heavy, its touch bringing strange images into his head. Dark marks, spatters of red, a waiting place for death. With both hands he took it from the drawer. It surprised him how surprised he was at the weapon's size. He could comfortably fit two fingers side by side on the trigger. Looking to the side, he toggled the cylinder catch and checked the load. All of the chambers were filled.

As he stood looking at the open cylinder, there were flashes of things: horrors, screams, blood, the jump of a gun in his hand.

He looked dizzily at the gun, knowing somehow that using it would take his life away from him. He wasn't going to let Uncle Herman take away his new life. He closed the cylinder, reached up and replaced the revolver in the drawer.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Andy whirled about and saw Uncle Herman staring in disbelief at the highchair with the bowl of creamed spinach on the seat. The man staggered around and looked at Andy. "You get over here and eat this spinach and don't get out of your chair until I let you out, understand?"

Andy Rain narrowed his eyes, clenched his teeth, and balanced making an issue of eating a bowl of creamed spinach against his new life. "I understand."

He took a step toward the high chair and met his uncle's left hand flying the other way. The open palm against his face twisted his head around and drove him to the tiled floor. "That's for not doing what I told you the first time."

Face down on the tile, Andy's tears dried up as a cruel heat filled his face. His eyes went in and out of focus in time with his heartbeat and he placed his hands on the tile, lifted his head from the floor, and turned his head toward his uncle.

"Don't you look at me like that!" The man dropped his beer can, strode across the floor, and swept down with his left arm, slapping Andy with the back of his heavy hand. The boy twisted over onto his back from the force of the blow. "Now, get up and eat that spinach, and no more mouth!"

With the taste of blood in his mouth, Andy pushed himself to his feet, wobbled over to the open drawer, reached in with both hands, and came out with the .32 pointed at Uncle Herman's head. The gun shook wildly as he cocked it with both thumbs.

"What . . . now, Andy. Now, kid. You don't know what you're doing. Give me the gun!" Uncle Herman was bent over, his left hand extended toward the boy. "Give me the gun, boy. That's not a toy."

The angle was all wrong. It had to be in the left temple or the mouth. The mouth shot wouldn't work unless Uncle Herman had his mouth open and was looking up. Unless he had a beer or bottle to his lips, his mother's brother had permanently clenched teeth. There could be no broken teeth. Uncle Herman was a southpaw. It had to be in the left temple. He thrust both of his index fingers through the trigger guard and looked at the door to the living room. Opening his eyes wide, he exclaimed, "Mommy!"

Uncle Herman, still in a crouch, swung around to face the empty doorway. At that instant, Andy took three steps closer, stood on his toes, held the gun close to the man's left temple, and pulled the trigger.

He jumped back and fell to the floor as the pistol barked and jumped out of his hands. His heart beating wildly, he looked around and saw that Uncle Herman was down on his right side on the floor. Andy stood, walked around the still form, bent over, and held the backs of his fingers beneath Uncle Herman's nose. Dead.

Going to the counter, Andy stood on a chair, took another cartridge from the gun drawer and opened the window above the sink. After that he took the dinner knife from the counter, polished it with a dish towel, and went to the corpse's side. Placing the knife in Uncle Herman's left hand, he wrapped the fingers around it, then removed it by holding it by the blade with the dish towel. Replacing it on the counter above the open drawer, he took the towel back to the weapon, replaced the spent cartridge with the new, cleaned the prints from the gun, placed the grip in the man's left hand, wrapped the fingers around the grip with the index finger on the trigger, waited for the right commercial to come on the TV, aimed the gun out the window, and fired. The gun jumped and shook itself out of the dead man's limp grip and fell to the floor. Andy checked the powder burn around the entrance wound and concluded that the pattern looked small enough. Then he climbed up in the chair before the sink, put some dish soap on his hands, and washed his hands all of the way above the elbows, using a vegetable brush to get beneath his fingernails. After he had changed his pajamas, he was done, and all that was left to do was to wait.

Andy curled up in the corner of the kitchen opposite the door to the living room and stared at the body. He was surprised at how little blood there was. As he sat looking at the remains of Uncle Herman, his feelings returned. He hated the man. He hated the man's memory. He hated that Uncle Herman had been who he was and what he was when and where he was, and that all of that added up to making Andy Rain a killer. There was a nagging thought, though. The thought was that it was not Uncle Herman who had made Andy into a killer. It was, instead, something else.

Uncle Herman had done the big wrong. He had hit Andy. What Andy had done was self defense. Using the gun was the use of too much force, if he had been an adult. He could have just wounded the man, but then it would be his word against Uncle Herman's, and he'd be in trouble for having the gun, and most likely his father would be in trouble for allowing the boy to get to the weapon. Better for everyone that Herman Jenner should get severely depressed and act on it. Andy wrapped his arms around his knees, let his head nod down, and went to sleep.

The scene when his parents returned was predictably hysterical, but brief. Once the doctor had sedated Marnie Rain and put her to bed, the uniformed police officers had only a few questions. Andy kept shaking his head and they allowed the doctor and Andy's father to put the boy to bed. Afterward, Andy crept part of the way down the stairs and watched the scene in the kitchen through the balustrade. In addition to the two uniformed police officers, the mystery writer, John Draper, was there. Instead of his suit, he was wearing jeans and pajama tops beneath a rumpled trench coat. He only watched and listened as Andy's father continued.

"Herman relied on the bottle a little too much. Just look at the empties. Marnie said he promised he'd stopped. He hadn't had a regular job in years. God, I feel like a damned fool for letting him baby-sit my son, but he's my wife's brother and ... Yes, he knew I kept a gun in the house, locked up there in the drawer—

That was when Andy remembered that *his* fingerprints were on the brass drawer handle, not Uncle Herman's. The handle seemed to grow larger, looming, almost shouting for attention.

Caught.

One stupid mistake.

Everything thrown away. The great new life finished before it had a chance to start.

The situation, however, looked pretty clear cut to the cops. Suicide, plain and simple. No one had heard the shot, but everyone had heard the TV. A couple of photographs; no dusting for prints, no firearm or trace metal residue tests. A brief visit from the medical examiner. He agreed with the cops. The orderlies from the coroner's office bagged Uncle Herman and toted off the remains.

A few swipes with a Handi Wipe, and it was over, except for one little detail.

"It's your son, Captain Rain," said the one uniformed officer, a big man with black hair and olive skin. "He really ought to be put into some kind of counseling. Besides seeing the suicide, from the welts on the boy's face I'd say it's a sure thing that your brother-in-law smacked the kid around some before he shot himself. That combination of things has a good chance of screwing up the boy's whole life. He might even be blaming himself for what happened. I've seen it before. Anyway, keep it in mind. I can get you the names of some good people if you want."

And then they were all gone, except for John Draper, who was leaning against the back of the couch, looking at the sparkling clean kitchen. He turned and looked at Andy's father. Gary Rain rubbed the back of his neck. "Thanks for coming all the way back, John. I guess you ought to call home and let Ellen know what happened."

Mr. Draper placed a hand on his father's shoulder. "Gary, why not let Ellen talk to the boy? She's really good with kids and I think Andy likes her."

Andy watched as his father covered his face, shook his head, and turned away from Mr. Draper. "She'd be great, John, except, you know. What if she finds out?"

"How?" The writer waved a hand in a dismissive gesture. "That project became ancient history as soon as the funding dried up. Andy is just a boy that needs help and Ellen knows how to give that kind of help. Think about it."

They said goodnight and Andy quickly ran back up the stairs and climbed into his crib. The door opened quietly and his father entered the room. "Andy? Son, are you awake?"

"Yes, Daddy."

"I guess that was a stupid question." Gary Rain stepped all of the way into the room and stood next to the crib. His eyes seemed to glisten in the dark. He reached down, took his son's hand, and said, "How are you doing, son?"

"Okay."

"That was a horrible thing that happened down there. Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'm sure, Daddy."

"Did your uncle hit you?"

Andy turned his face away from his father's gaze. He could feel the tears welling in his eyes. He was scared. He didn't want to kill anyone. Uncle Herman shouldn't have hit him, though. That was dead wrong.

Gary Rain held his hand against the boy's cheek. "Andy, how would you like to talk to someone about what happened tonight? A special person; someone who's trained to help?"

The tears would not stop. Andy nodded. "Somebody I know, Daddy. Could I talk to that friend of Mommy's, Mrs. Draper?"

"Ellen?" Andy's daddy frowned for a moment, then raised his eyebrows. "Sure. Sure, that'd be fine." He picked up his son and began drying his tears. "That'd be fine." That night Andy slept in the chair wrapped in his father's arms.

The next Tuesday Gary Rain dropped the boy off at the Draper's house and, upon Mrs. Draper's advice, went to work. Ellen would take Andy back to his home.

Andy sat on the couch and Ellen Draper sat in a chair facing the couch. She studied the boy for a long time before she spoke. "You can call me Ellen. May I call you Andy?"

"Sure."

She studied him some more. "Your father told me what happened, Andy, and I'm so sorry. Gary said that you asked for me by name. Do you remember me from somewhere?"

"Somewhere." Andy looked around at the room. He was seated in a cozy den before a fireplace. On the mantelpiece were a tobacco humidor and a rack of six pipes. He turned and faced Ellen. She was in her early thirties, but she looked like a teenager. Ellen was petite and attractive with large dark eyes and billows of auburn hair. An oversized turquoise knit sweater and black slacks finished the picture.

"I want to know something, Ellen."

"Very well, Andy. What do you want to know?"

"Is everything between you and me secret?"

Ellen's beautifully smooth brow wrinkled in a tiny frown. "What do you mean?"

"If I tell you something, is it just between you and me, or do you tell my parents or the police or someone else?"

"What kinds of things, Andy?"

The boy sat back on the couch and clasped his hands over his belly. "Any kind of things."

As her eyebrows lowered, Ellen Draper settled back in her own chair. "How old are you, Andy?"

"Five and a half."

"I thought that's what your father said. You talk as though you are older."

"My question still needs an answer."

She stared at him for a long time. At last she blinked her eyes. "According to the law, if I suspect certain things in a family situation, I'm required to report it."

“I want it different between us,” stated Andy. “Whatever I say to you stays just between you and me.”

“I don’t know if I can do that, Andy.”

“If you can’t, I won’t talk to you about anything.”

Her lips spread into a wary smile as she studied the boy. “Andy, I can’t quite get over the way you talk. I know your parents very well, and neither of them talk the way you do. You’re very assertive. Do you know what I mean when I say ‘assertive’?”

“Yes.”

“Then, how does a boy not yet six years old know terms like ‘assertive,’?”

Andy closed his eyes as he fought down the frustration, the fear, the loneliness. Something within told him that he couldn’t trust Ellen Draper. Something else told him he didn’t have any other choice. He needed to talk to someone.

“Do you agree?”

Again she smiled. “If I agreed, what would I tell your parents? They’ll want to know how you’re doing.”

“Say I’m doing better, things are moving along, he’s just fine. Nothing specific.”

Her smile faded by slow degrees as her eyes studied him. At one point she frowned. “Okay.” Before she spoke again she let the word hang in the air for a long time. “Okay, Andy. We have a deal. Whatever you say to me is just between us.”

“No tapes, no notes, no files.”

She held out her hands. “I have to make notes.”

“No you don’t.”

Ellen Draper leaned forward. “Why?”

“People can get into notes.”

“What people?”

He shrugged and began playing with the crimson fringe on one of the couch’s pillows. “Anybody.” He looked at her. “Your husband.”

“Do you know my husband?”

“Sure. The night Uncle Herman died. I met both of you before you went out with Mommy and Daddy. He came back that night to talk with Daddy.”

She closed her eyes and nodded. “Very well, Andy. We have a deal. No notes.” Her eyes opened and she leveled her gaze on the boy. “What do you want to talk about?”

Andy whispered through his tears. “*I killed my Uncle Herman.* I didn’t want to, but he hit me. He hit me.” The tears rolled, he went to her side, held on to her and cried. When he calmed down, Ellen continued holding him and stroked his hair.

“Now, Andy,” she said softly, “what makes you think you killed your Uncle Herman?”

He turned his head and looked up at her. "Do you believe me?"

"What you believe is what's important."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only answer I have, Andy."

He looked down at his hands on his lap. "He hit me. He wanted me to eat that horrible stuff, and at first I wasn't going to do it. But he hit me. He hit me twice!"

"So you wanted to kill him."

He shook his head as the tears came to his eyes again. "I didn't. Don't you see? I don't ever want to kill anybody. But what was I supposed to do? He was going to hit me again!"

She hugged him, stroked his hair, and began rocking him. "How do you feel now, Andy?"

He was quiet for a long time. When he realized his cheek was leaning against her right breast, he pulled back, his face red. "I feel better. A little better. What am I going to do?"

"We'll take care of that together, Andy. It'll take some time, but we'll take care of it."

"I don't want to kill anybody else. I just want to be a boy."

She stroked his cheek and continued rocking him, her face in a frown. "You don't have to do anything for now except be a boy. Everything is going to be okay."

On Wednesday Andy Rain woke up feeling much, much better. Despite the fact that his mother didn't get out of bed all day, his father seemed happier, too. Thursday he saw Ellen again and they played some games and colored some pictures. She had him talk again about killing Uncle Herman, and he described it in detail: how he forced the lock, checked the gun, put it back, the hitting, and then the shooting followed by cleaning up and planting the fingerprints and gunshot residue. She seemed very strange after that.

He told her about his numbers and she asked him to repeat them several times. Eleven, three, ninety-seven. Four-three-one-two. Twenty-four forty-two and a bright color.

She wanted to know where the numbers came from, but Andy didn't know. One day he woke up with them, that's all. Did he remember anything before that day?

He didn't know. Sometimes he sees things, has strange dreams, but he didn't remember anything for sure.

In twenty-four forty-two and a bright color, she wanted to know what the bright color was, but Andy just shook his head. Then they played more games.

By the time Ellen dropped him off at his home, Andy's mother was up, although still groggy from medication. By that evening, Marnie Rain had a meal on the table and the family sat down to eat. They talked, and there was even laughter. There would be a closed coffin funeral for Uncle Herman on Saturday, but that night Gary Rain, his wife and son, did much to heal the family.

Later, as they tucked him into bed, his father kissed him and left the room. His mother kissed him and then said something. "I know you think you did something bad to your Uncle Herman, but you didn't, baby. It's just a bad dream. Please believe me. You didn't do anything wrong."

She kissed Andy, turned off the light, and closed the door. Andy looked at the glowing face of the clown and tried to keep his heart quiet.

Had Ellen violated his confidence? Did she say something to Marnie? Or was it worse than that? Did she say something to Gary and Gary said something to Marnie? Who else had Ellen told? Her husband?

Even Ellen didn't really believe he killed Uncle Herman, he was sure. But he needed to know if he could still trust her. It was possible that his mommy could've come to the conclusion that he felt guilty about her brother's death all by herself. Andy knew from how his mommy talked that even she felt guilty about Uncle Herman's death. If she had only done this; if she had only said that.

There were no decisions to make right then. To do the right thing, he needed to know the facts. He looked at the squat gray building outside his window, closed his eyes, slept, and saw faces he only knew from his dreams.

On Saturday they buried Uncle Herman. Little Andy insisted on attending, and the tears he shed were genuine, although he was crying more for himself than for the contents of the box being lowered into the ground. Twice during the service and once at the graveside ceremony, Andy caught John Draper looking at him. Ellen was there, too, and she smiled at him. By the time they got into the car and went home for the tiny reception hosted by his parents, Andy was convinced Ellen had told her husband.

As they drove home from the funeral through the center of the city, Andy sang the numbers beneath his breath, not knowing what they were, but enjoying the sounds. As his father steered the car left from Broad Street onto Cherry Street, Andy looked at the stores and shops and signs. Half of the way down Cherry the businesses were larger, fewer windows, doors, and signs. There was a fur storage company with a sign over its door that said "Nightlinger & Sons, Since 1887." Opposite Nightlinger's was a printing company. "Dodson & Steel, Quality Printing" said its sign. The number next to the printing company's door was 2398. Andy noticed it because it was so close to one of his numbers. He looked to see if there was a number matching his. Because the buildings were so big and the doors so few, a lot of numbers were missing.

The car crossed Benton Avenue and the first building on the corner was huge with no windows at all. Its sign said "Burke General Storage." The number next to the door was formed by the ends of bricks sticking out from the wall. Two four four two. Twenty-four, forty-two. And Cherry is a bright color. Twenty four, forty-two Cherry Street. He wondered at it as he watched the Burke's sign move out of sight.

Four Tuesdays later, Ellen picked Andy up for his regular session. As they were driving toward the Draper home, Andy finally asked her. "Did you ever tell anyone what I said about killing Uncle Herman?"

“No. We have an agreement.” She glanced at him and returned her gaze to the traffic. “Why?”

He told Ellen about what his mother said and about her husband looking at him during the graveside ceremony. “Well, you know I didn’t say anything to your mother. She was in bed and under sedation for most of that time. Besides, even if I was willing to break our agreement, which I’m not, I wouldn’t risk upsetting your mother. I’m sure she guessed on her own how you felt. After all, Andy, she’s your mother.”

Andy thought on that for a time and allowed that Ellen was speaking the truth there. “What about your husband looking at me like that?”

Ellen shrugged. “I don’t know.” She faced Andy and raised her eyebrows. “Maybe you should ask him.”

As she turned back to the traffic, Andy looked down and studied his hands. Before he had completely thought out the matter, he looked out the window and saw that Ellen was turning onto Cherry Street. “Why’re you going this way? This isn’t how to get to your house.”

“I have to pick up something on the way home. Do you mind?”

Andy shook his head as he continued staring out of the window. On this side of the street the numbers were odd instead of even. Before they reached Benton Avenue, Ellen pulled over to the curb and parked the car. Across the street was the entrance to the Burke General Storage Company, twenty-four forty-two Cherry Street. Ellen was smiling at him. “Do you want to come in with me?”

Andy nodded, a strange chill going down his back.

Burke’s was a curiously boring place. Nothing but endless locker-lined corridors. The size of the lockers grew progressively smaller as the number of the floor increased. On the first floor, the lockers were the size of Andy’s bedroom. On the second floor they were the size of closets. On the third floor they were the size of the new clothes dryer in the basement. On the fourth floor they were only as large as a small suitcase. Andy looked around and Ellen and the storage company man were out of sight. A woman went around a corner and Andy could hear her opening a locker. In a moment the locker door slammed, there was a click, then the woman returned. She walked with her eyes to the front, aware of everything and pretending to notice nothing.

Andy was alone and he looked at the lockers near the door. They were stacked three to a column, and the top of the near stack had the number four thousand. The one next to it, four thousand and three.

Four-three-one-two.

Andy walked down the corridor, and at the end the top locker’s number was four-one-oh-two. He turned the corner into the next corridor and followed the numbers, the second corridor with a number of columns only stacked two high. In the third corridor, on the bottom, was locker four-three-one-two.

It looked like all the other lockers, but Andy knew there was something in there — something meant for him. He looked at the wheel of the combination lock, and for a second his mind went blank. Then he twisted the knob and stopped on the number eleven. He turned it right to the number three. Moistening his lips he turned it to the number ninety-seven and . . . nothing. It didn’t open. He pulled at the lock, hit it, then twisted the knob and tried again. Nothing.

“There you are,” said Ellen. Andy dropped the lock as though it were red hot and turned to look. Ellen

was standing at the turn of the corridor. She held out a plastic tote bag. "I got what I came for. Let's get going."

Andy glared once more at the lock, turned away, and followed Ellen. Once in the car, Ellen pulled away from the curb and said, "Hey, Andy, how would you like to go on a picnic?"

The boy shrugged as he looked out of the window. "That'd be okay."

"I have just the place: St. George's Park. Have you ever been there?"

Andy thought on it and the name meant nothing to him. "I don't think so," he said, still looking from the window, wondering why he couldn't open that lock. Everything fit. The address, the locker number, a combination lock, but the combination he knew didn't work. *It had* to work, but it didn't.

"What are you thinking about, Andy?"

"Nothing."

"It looks pretty heavy to be a nothing." Andy glanced at Ellen and saw that she was smirking at him. "I bet I know what you're thinking about."

Andy shook his head. "I bet you don't."

"You're wondering why you couldn't open that combination lock."

Andy felt his lower jaw fall open.

Her smile very broad, she turned her attention to the traffic and said, "I know because I did the same thing you did, except I did it a couple of weeks ago. I took your numbers, found the storage company and found what was in locker forty-three twelve. When I emptied the locker, they changed the combination on the lock."

There was a well of anger bubbling up inside the boy. There was no claim that he could think of to the locker's contents excluding an overwhelming feeling that it belonged to him. He could see that Ellen knew that too. The plastic tote bag of stuff she had gotten from the locker was on the seat between them. Without asking for permission, he pulled the bag over and reached inside.

The first thing his fingers touched was a magazine. He took it out and looked at it. *New Detective* was the magazine's name, and John Draper's name was among those on the cover. He looked at the date and saw that the magazine was issued more than three years before he was born. He turned to the Draper story, "Blood's Truth," and read the inscription written there:

To Billy Stark,

You're all finished. Rot in Hell,

John Draper

"This is your husband's first story, isn't it?"

"We weren't married when that was published, but yes, that's his first story. Do you remember it?"

"How? This is before I was born."

"Andy, did you ever wonder why you can read?"

The boy frowned, thought for a moment, then shrugged. "I've always known how to read." He put the magazine on the seat and reached into the bag. This time he came out with a wad of photographs wrapped with a rubber band. The photo on top was a black-and-white of a thin little boy with ragged clothes and very short hair. He had a serious expression and was standing in front of a decaying barn. The date on the snapshot was almost forty years ago. The boy removed the rubber band and looked at the writing on the back of the snapshot.

Me at two years old at the farm.

Hair short like that because of head

lice, I was told.

The next photo, also black-and-white, showed the same boy a little older standing between a middle-aged woman and a girl of about fifteen. They were on the broad front porch of a large New England town house. He couldn't see it in the photo, but he knew that the post on the right going down the front stairs to the path had his sister's initials carved into it. He turned it over.

Just before my third birthday at

Grampa Borden's. The woman is

Mother. The girl is my half-sister,

Arlene

.

He knew that both of them were dead. Mother of a respiratory illness, Arlene was a suicide.

Without looking at the rest, he put the photos back in the bag. As he replaced the photos, his fingers felt the cover of a book. He took the book out and opened it to the first page. It was one of those bound books filled with blank lined paper. On the first page were groups of letters.

bsgyi eouee grcat eitty fytuo

eniow tyfit deaho rwhio rohtw

stnur hofhh inual eaomu ouitw

owsao iubai fosre nnpek mtsih

mhtrt naeds fwedt ttepn moino

"Can you read that?" asked Ellen.

He leafed through the book and the entire thing was filled with similar columns of letter groups. He smiled as, in his mind, he tilted them, tilted them again, reversed and divided the letters into words. It was like those strange pictures that look like meaningless squiggles and specs, unless you focus through it and see the three dimensional picture within.

"I can read it."

"Read it out loud," asked Ellen.

Andy moistened his lips and began. "I wrote this to let you know who you were. I had a hard time

putting in stuff because I hope this isn't who you are now. I want you to be something different from me, but I don't know what. I put down everything about my life I could remember, and I put down everything I did, including a couple things the cops don't know about. I put down the facts, why I did what I did and how I felt about it.”

Andy could picture the book in front of him, balanced on his lap, while he wrote with a ball-point pen. And he remembered knowing that he had no feelings and correcting himself. The words were in front of him and he read them to himself.

No, I didn't put down how I felt about it. I don't feel anything about it or much of anything else. I guess what I mean is I put down what I think I felt about it. All I really feel right now is about you. I want you to be a man. A good man. I want you to feel these things that others feel. Especially love. I'd feel love right now if I could, but I'm too hard.

If everything works out, and you do remember enough to get this book and read it, I'm not sure you should read it. The way I understand it, this experiment might be a lot more than a way out of the chair. It might be a chance to begin life all over again. If you make it, please don't waste your life. Become somebody, do some good for others, do important things. I want you to have a good life.

Make up your own mind about reading the rest of this. I sure hope you're smarter than me

Andy lowered the book to his lap as he closed his eyes and let the images, feelings, and thoughts swim through his awareness. He could almost feel the pieces of himself coming together, joining larger pieces, becoming memory.

—Stokes, Lamb, Dorentz, and Beck on the Row, waiting as they all waited. The smells: disinfectant, machine oil, stale air. Old Sparky always hovering in the back of memory.

A dead man, another dead man, a dead woman, another dead man—

—caught by a demon, a feeling, and then blood.

—a race through the night, dozens of flashing blue lights, his face being ground into the gravel as his hands were cuffed behind him. That was Detective Draper.

Then Lt. Rain.

Dr. Polinzer.

Ellen—

He reached back into the bag and looked at the photo on the top of the stack, the photo of the little boy with the shaved head. Andy knew him. He knew that barn, the places where he hid from his stepfather, the places where Ailene and her boyfriend hid to kiss and make love, the places where his stepfather hid his drinking —

In the bottom of the bag was a pile of newspaper clippings and articles from magazines. Andy closed his eyes.

There was a memory, a scene with a man from Burke's.

Kirk Miller.

Miller was paid to store the stuff in the locker and add to the stuff anything the press printed about the experiment.

Part of the memory: Billy Stark wondering if the man from Burke's would actually do what he was being paid to do.

As a young boy Billy learned that if he trusted anyone, he would get hurt. On the Row the only person he trusted was one of the men who was supposed to walk with him to keep his date with Old Sparky: Gary Rain. After his return to the general population, he had no choice but to trust that the man from Burke's would do as he said he would. Still, he wondered. Kirk Miller turned out to be an honest man. Ellen Draper, maybe not so honest.

"Ellen?"

"Yes?"

"You know all about this, don't you? About the experiment. About who I was?" He opened his eyes, turned his head, and looked at her. Excitement filled her face.

"I didn't know at first," said Ellen. "I mean every dream I ever had was crushed as a result of that fiasco. I knew Gary and Marnie adopted you, but I didn't know you were *that* baby. See, after you regressed uncontrollably to that baby vegetative state and stayed that way, the project was considered a flop and lost its funding. Do you understand that?"

"Yes."

"Well, we *all* wound up in the tabloids. I almost lost my job because of the publicity and Dr. Polinzer; do you remember him?"

Palefaced fragile man, skin like parchment. He'd go down in a strong wind. A will like iron. Used to getting his own way. Old, obsessed with not getting any older. "I remember him."

"He was ruined professionally. God, the media had a field day with him. He died three years ago. Whatever there was left of the project died with him."

"Except for me."

Ellen nodded. "Except for you. Of course, you were virtually brain dead, and in the three years subsequent to the regeneration, you didn't grow, gain weight, develop intellectually, or anything. You could feed and fill a diaper, and that was about it. John and I were married by then and he knew that Gary and Marnie were childless, so—"

"So he had them take me in and I'm almost nine instead of almost six?"

"If you want to be technical about it, you're almost forty-nine. Look, Andy, eight years ago no one expected you to live more than another year or two, but after Marnie saw you in the hospital, she insisted on bringing you home. I've never seen a mother love a baby more. Every day she'd move your limbs about the way the therapist showed her. But don't you see, Andy? The experiment wasn't a failure. It's more of a success than anyone could have imagined. John and the Rains never told me where you came from, but I began suspecting after we talked that first time. When I saw what was in that locker, I was certain. You reading that coded book is all the proof I needed."

"You know what's in it?"

“A little. An old professor of mine used to be a cryptologist back during the Korean War. He fiddled with it for half an hour, then showed me how to decode it. I managed about forty pages so far. One of the things Billy Stark confessed to was killing a woman in St. George’s Park. No such murder was ever reported.”

“The police thought it was just a hoax,” said Andy. “They never found a body.”

“I’m sure that must be in the book,” said Ellen. “When you show me where that body is, that will be all of the proof that anyone will ever need.”

Andy looked out of the window as a sickness filled him. He didn’t need to read Billy Stark’s book. He had lived it. He spoke to Ellen as he continued to look from the window. “You figured out what the numbers meant, then you waited to see if I could figure it out.”

“And you *did* ! Don’t you see what this means? Polinzer’s regenerative solution works. Even better, the individual personality isn’t completely lost in the process! That’s more than old Polinzer ever dreamed of. Look at you. This is going to revolutionize so many disciplines, and *I’m* the one who is going to publish it!”

The boy felt the tears burning his eyes. Fragments of memories, bits of feelings, the shards of a shared past, but he was not who Ellen thought he was. *I am not Billy Stark* , he swore to himself. *I do not want to be Billy Stark* . He smiled inwardly as he remembered what was written in the coded book. Billy Stark didn’t want him to be Billy Stark either.

One clipping in the bag reported a fantastic tale of a medical experiment where an adult serial killer was actually turned into a drooling cuddly baby. The headline read simply: **BABY KILLER** . The article next to it was titled **PET CAT EATS ALIEN** . There were more and Andy didn’t want to read them. He didn’t want there to be any new stories, either. A whole new life dogged by scientists and reporters would not be worth living. And sooner or later someone would take another look at the Herman Jenner suicide.

He put the clippings back into the bag and looked up at Ellen. “You promised not to tell anyone about me.”

“Andy, don’t be a child.” Ellen glanced at Andy and laughed at what she had said. “Strictly speaking, I’m not going to pass on anything you’ve said. I’m going to make history, though, by showing the world who and what you are. Andy, can’t you see all of the good this can do? All of the people you can help? Andy, you are going to be the most famous person on earth.”

“You promised me.”

Her brow furrowed as an irritated note crept into her voice. “I’m not going to break that promise. Another thing I’m not going to do, young man, is bury the most important scientific happening of the decade. Now I want you to trust me, okay? I know you’re a little scared right now, but you’ll see. Everything is going to be fine. We’re going to have a picnic and then you are going to show me a very old hiding place of yours. Please trust me, Andy. I know best.”

Andy sat in sullen silence for a few minutes then looked into the back of the car. Ellen had loaded the back seat of her sedan with pillows and blankets in case he wanted to nap while they drove. There were two bags of groceries, as well. The boy looked at Ellen and noted that she didn’t use her seatbelt. Andy settled into his seat, reached to the door, and snapped his seatbelt in place. There was time.

As they left the limits of the city, Ellen Draper finally broke the frosty silence. “Andy, do you know where we are?” She nodded toward the crowded four lane highway upon which they were driving.

He adjusted his seatbelt so it wouldn't rub against his neck. "Beaman Road," he answered. "It goes through Harrison and Grange Corners, then it goes to two lanes, twists up through the park and ends at the expressway outside Watertown." He looked at her and she was biting at the skin on her lower lip.

Andy sat back and let his gaze play among the hills, trees, and wildflowers while the thoughts in his head sped from one dark corner to the next. He knew the park. He remembered a traffic rotary and a tourist information center, closed for the season. On the other side of the small wooden building was a parking lot. There was a playground next to the parking lot. Sand boxes, swings, monkey bars, slides, teeter-totters, and the whirl-around. His senses swam as the years fell away.

There weren't many people there that winter twelve years ago. The ground was frozen but there was no snow. The air was bitter. There was only a woman leaning against a station wagon. She was chain smoking cigarettes.

A child.

Little boy. There was a child in the back of the station wagon. Four years old; perhaps five. "Can I get out? Can I get out and play? Can I please? Please!"

"Oh, all right!" she snapped as she tossed away her cigarette and yanked open the tailgate. "Stay close to the car and keep your voice down."

The little boy climbed down from the back of the station wagon and ran to the whirl-around.

Billy watched from the edge of the trees. The little boy looked happy on the whirl-around. Twice he squealed with glee. The second time he squealed, the woman lit another cigarette, looked at her watch, and said, "That's enough. Get back to the car. We have to go."

"No!" protested the boy.

The woman went to the whirl-around, grabbed one of the handles, and pulled the turntable to a halt. She slapped the boy's face and dragged him to the car. Lifting him up, she threw him in the rear and slammed shut the tailgate.

"I do you a favor and look how you pay me back! Stop that damned crying," she commanded. The boy continued crying and Billy Stark felt his own throat closing with rage, his jaw muscles straining. "Do you want me to give you something to cry about?" Reaching through the open rear window, the woman slapped the little boy. Once, twice, three times.

Then Billy moved from his hiding place.

Andy looked down at his hands. There were no scars, no blood, no signs pointing to what they had done. They were new hands. Every cell in them was new. He was a new person. He wanted nothing to do with Billy Stark, and Billy wanted the same.

"I know where the woman is hidden," he said. Then he told Ellen about the woman, the crying boy, and the station wagon, how he had carried the woman into the woods, down to the bottom of the gorge. It was steep, choked with brush and trees. No one ever went down there. Billy went down there, however, because Billy always traveled paths unfamiliar to most persons. He met fewer of them that way. There was the entrance to a tiny cave above the stream at the bottom of the gorge.

When he was down there he lost track of time.

Hours.

Days.

There were no feelings. His heart felt dead. By the time he returned to the parking lot, the station wagon and the boy were gone.

“I remember,” said Ellen. “I was still in college. The TV and newspapers were screaming about it, the kidnapped boy. What was his name? Jimmy something. Jimmy Patrick. His picture was everywhere. He’d been kidnapped, and a few days after the ransom note was delivered, the police found the boy in the park sleeping in a car. The boy never would say what had happened to the woman.” She raised her eyebrows and looked over at Andy.

“Ellen, it’s a long way to the park from here. Is it okay if I go in back and eat something?”

“Of course. Do you like peanut butter and jelly?”

“Yes.”

“Let me pull over.”

“It’s okay,” said Andy. “I’ll just climb over the seat and make myself something.” He unclipped his seatbelt, stood on the seat, and climbed over the back.

Once he was on the back seat, he looked around Ellen’s shoulder and saw that the speedometer read over eighty miles per hour. There were two paper grocery bags in back. In one he found the peanut butter, all fruit jelly, and white bread along with a few other things she had picked up at the store: paper towels, yogurt, dishwashing detergent, toothpaste, dinner candles, a clear bag of plastic eating utensils, a box of animal crackers.. “Is all this stuff for the picnic?”

“When I was at the store I picked up a few things I needed at home.”

“Can I have some animal crackers?”

“Sure. I got those for you. Have an apple juice, too. I got them out of the cooler.”

Andy opened the box, placed a rhino cracker in his mouth, and chewed as he looked into the other bag. Household ammonia in a special bag, parmesan cheese, paper napkins, tomato paste, pasta, aspirin, a small bag of apples, a six-pack of apple juice cartons in a quilted plastic bag, and a newspaper.

Using a plastic knife, he made a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and as he was eating it, he took out an apple juice, removed the pointed straw, punctured the carton with it, and took a sip. As he was eating, Ellen said in mock hysteria, “I can’t take it anymore! The smell of that peanut butter is driving me crazy! Could you make me a sandwich?”

“Sure.” He pulled out the peanut butter, opened the jar, and used the same plastic knife he used to make his own sandwich. As he was spreading the peanut butter he took a moment and considered the household ammonia. It left too many unanswered questions. He would have to stick with the animal crackers. Lifting the wax paper liner full of animal crackers from the tiny box, he placed it on the floor of the car. On Ellen’s sandwich, he put the peanut butter extra heavy with only a thin layer of jelly. As he stood to hand it to Ellen, he stepped on the liner full of crackers, crushing the contents.

While Ellen ate and Andy finished his apple juice, the boy refolded the three blankets, one atop another, on the back seat so that they exactly fit the width of the seat, but only half its depth. There were several throw pillows, and he placed one of them on the seat next to the right hand door. Another he placed flat on the floor next to the right hand door, and a third he put on the floor leaning against the right hand door.

The last pillow he put on the floor leaning up against the back of the passenger seat.

When they reached the end of the four lane part of Beaman Road, the traffic seemed to triple and Ellen pressed on the accelerator and began passing the cars in front of her, weaving in and out of the other lane, dodging the trucks and cars coming the other way. One trucker gave his air horn an angry blast as he hit his brakes to avoid hitting her.

One last chance.

“Ellen, please keep my secret. You don’t know how important it is.”

“Oh, I know you’re scared, honey, but don’t you see? What about all of the people this can help? You don’t want to be selfish, do you? This is so important. Please trust me in this, Andy, and you’ll see.

“Ellen, I don’t want to be made into a freak.”

“Oh, Andy, you’re no freak. You’re *special* .”

“I’ve been special before.”

“You’re not even six years old, Andy. Nothing’s going to happen to you. I’ll see to that.”

Andy nodded his head in discouragement. He saw that Ellen was halfway through her sandwich. “Ellen, do you want an apple juice?”

“That would hit the spot. This peanut butter has me just a little stuck up.”

She giggled and held up her right hand while she held onto the sandwich with the thumb, index and middle fingers of her left hand, holding onto the steering wheel with the ring finger and little finger. Andy handed her a carton of juice, the pointed straw still stuck to the carton’s side. Ellen raised her knees until the tops of her thighs pressed against the steering wheel, keeping it from turning. Still holding the steering wheel and sandwich with one hand, she pulled the straw loose with her teeth and began maneuvering the carton so that she could push the straw into the carton. As she did so, Andy reached around her head with both hands and ground a handful of animal cracker crumbs into each of her eyes.

She screamed, dropped everything, and grabbed for her eyes as the car veered into the oncoming lane of traffic. As it did so, Andy fell to the floor of the car, pulled the blankets and pillow down on top of himself, and began screaming. He didn’t know if he’d remember to scream after the collision. On the floor, under the blankets and pillows, they might miss him. He didn’t think he’d want to burn.

He heard a squeal of air brakes, the blast of an air horn, then everything went dark as he felt his body slam into the back of the front seat.

Andy suffered only a mild concussion and a dislocated shoulder and was home the next day. The truck Ellen’s car plowed into suffered a bent grill and crumpled left fender. The truck driver, a long time white line veteran named Donald Washington, was not injured at all. In fact it was he who was responsible for dragging Andy and Ellen’s dead body out of the vehicle before the leaking gasoline caught and the car went up in flames. He and his cargo of plumbing fixtures continued on their way two and a half hours later. Ellen Draper was killed as she took a header through the windshield before she was thrown back into her seat. It was mentioned on the news that Mrs. Draper had lost control of her car while she was trying to drive and eat at the same time. It was also mentioned that she was speeding and hadn’t had her

seatbelt buckled.

For the next two days Andy kept to his crib and stared at the nightlight on the dresser. It's face would fade into other faces; Ellen, the faces who had made him suffer, the faces of those he had killed, imaginary faces of those who he might become if only he were allowed to be a little boy.

In another two days he was up. For breakfast his mother made him blueberry pancakes. Later, when his father asked him if he wanted to talk to another counselor, he said no. He desperately wanted to talk to someone, but those he could talk to would either believe him or they would not believe him. If they did not believe him they would be useless. If they did believe him, well, that would be a kind of death in itself. However he would manage, he decided, he would have to manage it on his own.

A month later, on the thirteenth day of November, things in the house were somehow different. At breakfast his parents seemed uneasy. That made him uneasy. He wanted to ask if something was wrong, but he was afraid of the answer. He didn't eat much breakfast. He tried to talk to his mother after his father drove off to work, but she was baking something and almost ordered him to his room.

What was it?

For an hour or two he tried to kid himself out of his feelings, but then he noticed strange things going on outside. At nine-thirty in the morning Andy noticed a state police cruiser pulling up in front of the house. He hid behind the curtain, his back against the wall, his mind racing to arrive at answers to questions yet unasked, his eyes searching frantically for a route of escape as hushed conversations took place downstairs. By ten o'clock he glanced again from his room's window, and there was another state police cruiser and a city police cruiser parked behind the first.

Across the street was parked a brown and yellow cruiser from the county sheriff's department, and behind it was parked a plain gray no frills Plymouth. Behind the wheel of the Plymouth was retired Detective Sergeant John Draper. He opened the car's door, stood, and leaned one elbow on the roof of the car and the other on the top of the still open door. The man was looking at the house; at Andy's window; at Andy.

Andy continued to stand in the window and look at the man who was looking at him. John Draper closed the door of his Plymouth and began walking toward the door of the house. He lifted a hand, waved at Andy, and the boy waved back. He watched until the man walked out of view and the doorbell rang.

There seemed to be something in the back of Andy's throat, choking him.

Fear.

Things were so much simpler when he could feel nothing. Deadly barren, but simple. No joy, but no fear. No happiness, no love, but no fear.

Andy went to his closet, opened the door, and seated himself on the floor in the back where it was quiet, dark, and smelled of mothballs. He wrapped his arms around his knees and closed his eyes.

What could they do? What could they really do?

They couldn't prove anything. Even if they did believe he was Billy Stark, what could they do? He was a little boy. A child. They couldn't put him in prison, or even in a reformatory. Maybe they could lock him up in a psycho ward. But it wouldn't be anything like that for Andy Rain. No hospitals, no prisons. He

was just a little kid. If he believed that and acted like that, no one could believe anything else. He couldn't talk like he talked to Ellen. Almost six years old. That's what he needed to remember. Almost six.

Maybe they were just there to follow up on Ellen Draper's death. Something didn't fit. There was always something that didn't fit. The cracker crumbs. An easy explanation for that: They got mashed, and when the accident happened, they flew everywhere—

“Andy?” called his mommy's voice. “Andy, please come down to the living room.”

Cracker crumbs. But how did Ellen wind up with so many of them in her eyes? The crackers were in the back seat. The impact might have thrown some of them into the front seat, but they had to be going in the other direction to get in Ellen's eyes. Even if they could have gotten into her eyes, why not her mouth or nose? There was no explanation for the cracker crumbs. There hadn't been time to wipe his hands in the car. Did the police see if he had crumbs on his palms? There must have been some residue.

His throat closed and he held his breath as he rubbed his hands together to remove the imaginary evidence; the blood pounded in his temples. What was it? What could it be? What *else* could it be?

He stood, entered the nursery, his eyes searching frantically for a weapon, a disguise, a route of escape, a place to hide forever.

He took a deep breath, let it out slowly, then again and again. Panic would kill him, if he let it. He looked again at the nursery. On the top of the dresser. There was a disguise, something with which he could hide himself. He reached up with both hands, picked up the little brown teddy bear, and held it by one arm as he left the room and walked to the head of the stairs. At the bottom of the stairs, waiting for him, were his mommy and daddy and a state police lieutenant, a man.

“Come down, baby.”

Step by step, Andy came down the stairs, hugging his teddy bear. When he finally made it to the bottom, he felt light-headed as he looked up at his mommy. She touched his cheek with the palm of her hand as his daddy said, “I bet you thought we'd forgotten all about it.”

Andy said nothing as his mommy placed her hands on his shoulders and turned him around toward the living room. “Surprise!” shouted a dozen voices. There was a computer printed banner stretched across the entrance to the living room. It said “HAPPY BIRTHDAY ANDY.”

And Andy cried. He cried, his mommy knelt and hugged him, and everyone else laughed.

Birthday party.

Billy Stark was born on December seventh. Andy Rain was celebrating his birthday on August 13th. He filed away the unasked question. He could have asked Ellen, but Ellen was dead. Perhaps it had something to do with the experiment or when his mommy and daddy adopted him.

Andy could never remember having a birthday party before. It's a number of family friends and their children gathering to celebrate a special person's special day.

Presents.

He had never had birthday presents before; so many wishing him well; honoring him. Captain Rain had

old friends from his days as a police officer with the city. Lt. Bill Pace and Trooper Mickey Parsons of the state police. Sheriff's Deputy Claudia Hayes. Detective Mick Arnold of the city police. Det. Arnold and the state troopers brought their wives and the sheriff's deputy brought her husband. They all brought children ranging in ages from eight months to seven years old. There were small presents for each of the children. John Draper didn't have any children.

When Marnie Rain brought in the birthday cake, there were seven burning candles: one for each year and one to grow on. "Make a wish, Andy, and if you can blow out all the candles, it'll come true."

He closed his eyes, made a wish, blew out all the candles, and everyone applauded. "What'd you wish, honey?" his mommy asked.

"He can't tell you, Mrs. Rain," said Gloria Pace. "His wish won't come true if he tells what it is."

Andy was grateful to Gloria. He didn't know the rules and he didn't want his wish rejected over a technicality. He had wished to grow up to do good for others. It was what Billy Stark had wanted.

The party progressed, but only a little of it was playtime for Andy. He spent most of the party studying his peers. The Arnold boy was eight months old, Jason Pace was five and a half. His sister Nina was seven. Mickey and Wendy Parson's son Roy was three years old and their twins, Larry and Ted, were six. Lettie Hayes was six, as well, and her sister Gloria was seven. Andy was officially six years old, and he narrowed his observations to Larry, Ted, and Lettie. Soon he, too, talked about football, hating school, and the silliness of girls.

When the party broke up, leaving only John Draper who was staying for dinner, Andy Rain was concerned. Why was he there? At the table John Draper sat facing Andy. The boy stayed quiet, unless he was asked a direct question. Mostly he just listened and looked at his plate. He didn't know why John Draper was there, but he did not believe in coincidence. He had spent too many years as the fox. He knew the smell of the hounds.

That night, from the conversation, Andy learned that Mr. Draper was Gary Rain's old partner in the city police. He retired, he said, because the bad guys were winning. He talked some about his writing and the visits to schools where he did writing clinics for children to introduce them to writing. They kicked around old times, reminisced a little about Ellen, then Mr. Draper said to Andy's daddy, "Did Harry tell you about trying to track down the Shadow Snatcher? They're bringing in Molly Warton."

"The psychic? I didn't think Harry believed in that sort of thing."

"He doesn't. Neither do I. But before I took retirement, we used Molly Warton to identify and take down Dick Ritter."

"I remember Ritter," said Andy's father. "Wasn't he that serial sicko who went after truckers sleeping in their rigs on the interstate?"

"That's the guy."

"I didn't know you people resorted to the supernatural to find him."

"Well, John, what happened?" asked Marnie.

"I took Molly to one of the crime scenes," John Draper answered. "She soaked up the atmosphere, had a couple of hot flashes, then picked Ritter out of a line up. He wouldn't say a word, but once we tossed his place we found enough to hang him. He had trophies from at least two dozen—"

John Draper saw Andy's mommy frowning and shaking her head. The former detective shrugged and continued. "Anyway, once we showed him what we had on him, he started singing. We eventually nailed him for eleven murders." John Draper faced Andy's daddy, but kept his gaze on Andy. "That's eight on Billy Stark's total. What do you think of that, Andy?"

Andy concentrated on looking dull-eyed as he thought to himself. Ellen's widower had set bait and dangled the hook. John Draper knew that Billy Stark had claimed over eight killings. Maybe Ellen had told him everything and he hadn't believed it then. Now that she was dead, though, he might be willing to take another look. The trap was set. The boy decided not to step in. "I don't know." He then began playing with the peas on his plate.

There was a little more talk on the subject of murder and why John Draper had taken retirement when he did. After dinner, while Andy's parents finished doing the dishes, Andy was left alone with Mr. Draper in the living room. Andy played with one of his presents, a wooden toy truck. The man looked at the boy for a long time, then asked, "Andy, did you ever hear of Billy Stark?"

Andy nodded.

"Who was he?"

"A bad man."

"That's right," said Draper. "Billy Stark was a bad man. Ellen tested him years ago. Did you know that?"

Andy shrugged.

"Ellen tested you, Andy."

The boy thought quickly. This was not the time to go into a rage about the violation of his confidence. Instead he shook his head. "Oh no she didn't. We played games, and drew pictures, and talked a lot."

"Those were tests."

Andy felt tears come to his eyes and he wiped them away with his fists. "Ellen used to talk to me."

John Draper sighed, slowly nodded and said, "I know, boy. I know."

Later, in his room, Andy dressed for bed, brushed his teeth, climbed into the chair, and wrapped the blanket about himself. Right then he didn't feel like being inside the bars of the crib.

John Draper suspected him, that was clear. All Andy could do was to insist on being a little boy. If he was perceived to be a little boy, he could not be a killer, even to John Draper.

His door opened and his mommy looked into the nursery. "Sleeping in your chair again tonight, baby?"

"Yes, Mommy."

She came in and was followed by Andy's daddy. Marnie sat next to Andy on the chair and lifted him to her lap. Andy's father stood next to them, his large hand squeezing the boy's shoulder. His mother, with her arms around him, asked, "Did Mr. Draper frighten you, dear?"

"A little."

His father touched Andy's cheek with his hand. "He's been going through a rough patch, Andy. Try and understand."

"I understand. I miss Ellen, too."

His mommy hugged him, kissed his cheek, and pushed some hair back from his forehead with her hand. "Honey, what would you think if we put your old crib up in the attic and got you a real bed? Would you like that?"

"That would be great."

Gary Rain grinned broadly, went into the hallway, and brought in a wooden frame already assembled. Pushing the crib aside, he set up the frame, returned to the hall and came back with a box spring and mattress. His Mommy put him in the chair and helped his father make the bed. The sheets were deep blue and dotted with stars and planets. Andy jumped into the bed before they spread the bright red blanket on it.

"Thank you. Thank you, Mommy. Thank you, Daddy."

She kissed his cheek and said, "We love you, Andy. We love you very much. Happy birthday, son."

"Happy birthday," said his father.

Andy Rain hugged and kissed his mother, then turned and allowed himself to be picked up by his father. Another hug. Another kiss. He loved them. He loved them both so much and his feelings seemed a terrible threat.

Next month Andy would be enrolled in first grade, but for the next week or two things went along just the way they were supposed to. Gary Rain would take his son out to play catch, swim, go canoeing, even fishing. When winter came, his daddy promised, he would teach Andy how to ski. The whole family would go to see movies on Saturdays, and only once was there a problem with a baby-sitter. It was a girl named Tammy Saulter, and the only problem was that, after Andy was put to bed, she disappeared. Andy, upon questioning, could add nothing to that. He had a bruise on his back and shoulder and his mom asked him about it. Andy had shrugged and said it must have happened when Dad had taken him to the playground in the park where he played some pretty rough games with Larry and Ted.

The police never did find Tammy Saulter. She was listed as a runaway and forgotten. Six weeks later the garbage disposal in the Rain household had to be replaced. It had simply burned out. That was two days after the equally mysterious disappearance of teenage neighborhood bully, Toby Yucker. Toby had been the terror of all the neighborhood kids. Even the parents in the neighborhood were afraid of him. Everyone assumed, and prayed, that Toby had run off the same as Tammy Saulter. Some suspected that they had even run off together.

In a few days he would be at school. Andy had made up his mind that school was going to be different for him than it had been for a distantly remembered Billy Stark. Billy had spent what seemed like hundreds of years in school, unprepared, unable to concentrate, feeling inadequate, and like an unwanted stranger. He had quit school when he was in his second year of high school. Each failing grade had been

a judgment on himself that seemed to reflect what the universe had been dishing out, and reflected as well his view of himself. Andy Rain, however, had a different view. He also knew how to read, write, do numbers, and lots of other things. He wanted to experience doing well in school; to be the one who got the gold stars and medals.

Around him there were other things in the news. There was a new president, an entire world in the throes of momentous changes, and occupying the attention of the local law enforcement community, there was the capture, trial, and conviction of gang boss “Bear” Brandt. He had been sentenced to life without parole for complicity in the murder of his lawyer, thus becoming Captain Rain’s most celebrated guest.

They talked a lot about Bear Brandt around the Rain family table. Brandt was a very bad man, possibly responsible for as many as a hundred deaths, although all they could prove was one. His gang was one of the largest, wealthiest, and most powerful in the state. It was no coincidence that the guard staff at the prison had been beefed up by the addition of six more officers.

The first day of school came, and Andy’s mom drove him there and made sure he got to his first class. Andy Rain entered the room feeling apart from everyone, but eager to begin. He really was getting to do it all over again. The failure, fear, and despair were behind him. Here he could succeed.

In his class were the twins, Larry and Ted Parsons, and Lettie Hayes. The twins were very neat in matching yellow and brown jerseys and corduroys while Lettie had on a red and white dress with a tiny matching wrist bag. Andy’s teacher was Miss Douglas, a young woman with long brown hair and, to Andy, the world’s most engaging smile.

His desk was next to Lettie’s. There was penmanship, spelling, arithmetic, then lunch and recess. Andy went out to recess feeling very good about being able to answer the teacher’s questions, at being able to do all the work, to see his first gold star go up on the wall. He excelled, too, at the playground sports organized for recess. To his utter amazement, he found himself popular. It was glorious. Then he saw Lettie Hayes crying. She was by the swings, her dress filthy from the playground soil.

“What happened, Lettie?”

The girl looked at him, her eyes filled with tears. “That boy!” She pointed toward a third grader who was standing in the entrance going back to the classrooms. He was talking to two other boys and they were laughing among themselves. “I was on the swing playing and that boy pushed me so hard I fell out and hurt my knees. I hate him.” She lifted the front of her dress and looked at her scraped knees.

She looked at her wrist, then at the ground, and around beneath the swings. She turned and looked at the boy and the boy was looking back, dangling her wrist bag by a dirty finger.

Andy seemed to drift in and out of the past, images of a little boy being beaten up and robbed, the bully smirking at him, laughing.

“What do you want, kid?”

Andy brought his mind back to the present and saw that he was standing in front of the boy who had Lettie’s wrist bag. He held out his hand and looked up into the boy’s face “Give me the bag.”

The boy raised his eyebrows and laughed. “Get lost.”

Andy didn’t move. “Give me the bag,” he repeated.

Then the boy looked angry and shoved Andy, making him fall on his backside. "Get lost, kid, before you get hurt."

Andy stood up, ironed all emotion from his voice, and said, "Hand over that bag, you ugly little bastard, or I'll glide on you in the night and leave six inches of steel through your heart."

The boy and his two friends looked stunned. Andy took the bag from the boy's hand, turned, and walked away. Four steps, five, and Andy could hear Ted shouting at him from across the playground, trying to warn him. Lettie was also screaming. Andy, however, was listening to the footsteps, breaths, and grunts coming from behind. At the exact moment, he stooped over, turned, and drove his head into the boy's groin.

The boy screamed and gasped as he writhed on the ground. Andy bent over the boy and said to him quietly, "This was just a warning. The next time, no warning. I just kill you."

"What's going on here?" demanded the teacher with the duty. He was a thin man with even thinner hair. He was peering through thick glasses at the boy on the ground. "Leon? What happened?"

"I think Leon tripped, Mr. Fontana," said another teacher. It was Miss Douglas. "What about it, Leon?" Her eyes were narrowed and an evil grin tugged at the corners of her mouth. Leon was still clutching his crotch and writhing on the ground. She whispered at him, "C'mon, Leon. Did you trip, or should we take this little first grader in to the principal for beating you up?"

"I tripped," he muttered. Leon struggled to his feet, dried his eyes with the back of his hand, and limped with tiny steps toward the building, still holding his crotch with both hands. Miss Douglas looked after him, then patted Andy on his shoulder, and headed back inside. Mr. Fontana scowled for a moment, then turned and resumed observing the children playing. Andy handed the bag back to Lettie and went into the academic building to get away from everyone.

Passing by his classroom, he heard his teacher saying to her aide, "I've waited for two years to see that bully Leon Colter get his. God, it was beautiful. My man Andy jammed that bully's nuts up so far Leon can use them for ear plugs. It was inspirational." Andy heard, thought about it, and still didn't know how he should feel. He could still remember the words from Billy Stark's book: *It might be a chance to begin life all over again. If you make it, please don't waste your life. Become somebody, do some good for others, do important things. I want you to have a good life* . He couldn't help but feel that he had somehow let down someone.

That evening after dinner, it took Andy a little over an hour to do his homework, most of the time spent preparing a notebook and thinking about what had happened during recess. He felt stupid. To risk everything to get back a dumb little bag for a silly girl. Now he was known as a trouble maker and Leon Colter was his still living enemy. Perhaps Miss Douglas thought him a hero, but Mr. Fontana had seen something he didn't like.

What had possessed him? He didn't even like Lettie Hayes all that much. His frown grew deeper. There was, however, someone he hated. He hated Leon Colter. He hated Leon Colter's friends, too. He hated bullies; boys, girls, women, men who fed their demons by filling others with pain and fear.

Billy Stark had left Andy Rain a mission. Become somebody, do some good for others, do important things.

He wouldn't be a victim. He didn't want to see anyone become or remain a victim. But how does a very young child protect himself? How does he protect others? Anything less than death leaves an enemy bent on revenge. And all of the power, all the rules, favor the enemy. Uncle Herman would've punched and

slapped him around some more; perhaps even killed him. Ellen would have had him in a spotlight from which he could never escape. And she had promised. What else could he have done and not be a victim?

There was a knock and Andy's dad opened the door and looked in. "Andy?"

"Yes?"

"I just got a very strange phone call from Roger Colter. He's Leon Colter's father. He said you frightened his son very badly."

Andy leaned back in his chair and studied his father to see what he would do. It was a test. "He stole Lettie Hayes's bag. When I asked him to give it back, he wouldn't. Then he shoved me and I told him that if he ever did that again, I'd hurt him."

Captain Rain held up his hand. "Something about sticking a knife in his heart?"

Andy nodded. "Then I took the bag from him and walked away. He tried to jump me, I turned around, and he ran into my head and hurt himself." Andy thought for a second, then decided to go for the truth. "I knew he'd run into my head and that it would hurt him. I told him that was a warning and that there wouldn't be any warning next time, I'd just kill him."

Captain Rain's eyebrows went up and he grinned. "I guess that's what scared him, huh?"

Andy laughed as he felt the heat come to his face. "I guess."

"How old is Leon?"

"He's in the third grade. Eight or nine."

His dad nodded. "I got another phone call from Deputy Hayes. Do you remember her?"

"Sure. Lettie's mom."

"Well, she called and then she put Lettie on the phone. She made you sound like the silver knight slaying fire belching dragons right and left. According to her you are quite a hero."

Andy felt his face getting even redder. "Lettie's silly."

Captain Rain stood next to his son and squeezed his shoulder. "How's the homework coming along?"

"Okay."

He patted Andy's shoulder and walked to the door. "When you're done, come on down to the rec room and let's watch the game." His father closed the door behind him.

The game.

Andy didn't know what game it was, or even what sport. But he had a father who believed in him and wanted to be with him. He felt himself begin to cry, and he didn't understand the feelings or the tears. Before he cried out loud, he went to his bed and buried his face in his star scattered pillow. When he was done, he went down to the rec room to watch the game and eat popcorn with his father. It was baseball and his dad's team won.

The next day at school, and the days after that, were shining gems set in a glorious crown of childhood. There were friends, a teacher who knew how to feed an eager mind, games, sports, and a widening feeling that life was good. The school still had bullies, of course. The change was that they kept their attitudes to themselves. There was a point, just before the Christmas break, when Andy realized that his memories of Billy Stark were very foggy. He was Andy Rain. He had some strange memories of another life, nightmares that would disturb his dreams, curious fragments of valuable knowledge, but he was Andy Rain.

On the last day before the beginning of the Christmas break, Andy's mom got in the car to drive the boy to school as usual. There was a thin covering of slushy snow on the streets and Andy was daydreaming about the skiing trip to New Hampshire the family was giving itself for Christmas. At the corner of Lake and 5th, where Marnie Rain usually turned north toward the school, there was a stalled truck. Two police officers were directing traffic, and as a van pulled up behind Marnie's station wagon, one of the police officers bent over and looked through her window. She rolled it down and asked, "Is there another way around this, officer?"

Andy saw the man grin, pull his weapon, and point it at his mom's face. "Turn off the ignition and hand me the keys." The policeman's face was partly covered by a rubber mask.

She glanced to her right, saw the other masked officer pointing his gun at Andy. "Do as he says, Mrs. Rain, or you're both dead."

As she froze on the wheel, Andy recognized the voice of the cop on the right. He was no cop. Behind the rubber mask he was King Girard, the ruler of A Block back when nineteen year old Billy Stark was doing his six at Greenville. Andy saw the panic building in his mom's face. He unclipped his seat belt, leaned over, turned off the ignition, and put the gearshift into park. After pulling the key from the ignition, Andy held it out to the man looking in the driver's side. "Do as he says, Mom."

"You heard the kid," said the first officer as he took the keys. "Do as he says, Mom."

Within seconds they were blindfolded, their hands and legs bound, and on the floor of the van headed somewhere. Andy's mom was whimpering, and one of the voices said, "Keep it down, lady, unless both you and the kid want to die."

"What do you want?" she cried.

"You're not the negotiator, lady, you're the goods. So shut up."

They kept the blindfolds on Andy and his mom, even after they were indoors and locked away far from the traffic noises. Andy was tied up on the floor and he could hear his mother breathing. The kidnappers talked very little. When they did talk, their messages were brief and they used no names. Andy thought on it and reasoned that such precautions were not necessary unless the kidnappers really intended returning Andy and his mom back to Captain Rain.

In exchange for what? The Rains had no money; certainly not enough to interest someone powerful enough and wealthy enough as King Girard. Then Andy thought of something valuable his father had: Bear Brandt. Back at Greenville, everybody knew that Girard worked for Bear Brandt. Help the mobster to escape, and we'll let you have your wife and kid back. If the yard captain is in on a prison break, how dangerous could it be? No cops, and when the dust settles, Gary Rain's career will be ruined, but his family will still be alive.

Maybe.

The same precautions would be necessary if all they wanted to do was convince Andy and his mom that they would be returned so they could say the right things on the telephone.

Still, would Capt. Rain betray his trust to save his family? Back when he was running the Row, one thing every con knew was that Lt. Rain followed the rules. He took no bribes, shaved no corners, and was as fair as the cons and the system allowed. But Gary Rain also loved his family. Whichever way he decided to go, the decision would shatter him. Even if Andy and his mom were returned alive, his dad would be broken. The family would be destroyed.

Marnie Rain was still whimpering, crying beneath her breath, saying, "Why? What can they want? We don't have any money."

Andy knew there were others in the room with them so he kept his suspicions to himself. "Don't cry, Mom."

After awhile, she sobbed then the whimpering stopped. They were there for about an hour when one of the kidnappers turned on a phone and punched in a number. It was King Girard. He asked for extension 414, which meant that the man had called Andy's dad at work. "Captain Rain?"

A pause.

"Captain, we have kidnapped your wife and son. You have fifteen minutes to verify that they are missing, then I will call you back. Do not call the police and do not attempt to either record or trace any of these calls. At the first sign that you have violated any of these instructions, your wife and son will be killed." There was a beep as the phone was punched off.

"That's it for now," said Girard.

"What about the woman?" said a third voice. "You don't want her weeping and wailing on the phone. Rain might freak."

Another pause. "Okay. Take her in the other room. The kid's cool. We'll work with him."

After Andy's mom was taken from the room, it was quiet for a few minutes. The silence was broken by someone standing and walking across the floor. The person stopped in front of Andy and grunted as he squatted. "Your name's Andy, right?" It was Girard.

"Yes."

"Okay, Andy, I'm going to call your father in a couple minutes. Understand?"

"Yes."

"Good kid. Okay, your old man's going to want to talk to you to see that you're all right. Can you do that?"

"Sure."

"Okay. Don't worry about a thing. This whole business should be over in a few hours." King Girard stood and then said, "Now."

The sounds of a number being punched into the telephone. "Extension four fourteen," said a fourth voice. A brief pause. "Yes, this is the call you've been waiting for. Have you verified that your wife and son are

missing?”

A moment, then the voice continued. “Very well. In the center drawer of your desk, in the back, is a small blue envelope containing your instructions. As soon as you have complied with the instructions, and we have been notified that Mr. Brandt is safe, we will release your wife and son.”

Another brief pause.

“Here, I’ll put him on.”

Andy could feel the telephone being placed next to his head. “Dad?”

“Andy? Are you all right, son? Your mother?”

“I’m okay, Dad. Mom’s getting sick. You know. She’s upset. I don’t think she can talk.”

“Don’t worry, Andy. Take care of Mom, do what they tell you to do, and we’ll get you out of this before you know it.”

“I love you, Dad.” Andy wanted to say it, just in case. As soon as he said it, the phone was taken away from his head.

“Captain, you have your instructions. Perform them correctly and you’ll have your family back together before night. Fail, and you’ll never see them again. There will be no more calls.” The phone beeped as it was turned off.

“Well,” said the man who had been talking on the phone, “That’s that. That was a good move, kid, telling your pop your mom couldn’t talk. We don’t want anyone to freak and do something dumb.”

Said Girard, “You two might as well make yourselves scarce. We’ll take care of them if the captain doesn’t come through.”

Footsteps, a door closing, steps going down stairs, another door closing. “Okay, kid,” said the second voice, “do you want a drink of soda? Maybe you need to go to the bathroom?”

“Yes. I need to go to the bathroom.”

The man took Andy to the bathroom, stood behind him, untied his hands and removed his blindfold.

“Andy, you keep your eyes to the front until I close this door. You understand that?”

“Yes.”

“When you’re done, stand in the center of the floor with your back toward the door and let me know. Understand?”

“Yes.”

“You seem like a smart kid, Andy. Don’t do anything stupid. You don’t want to see what I look like because it’ll mean I’ll have to kill you. You be good and you and your mom’ll be out of here in a little while.”

Andy heard the door close and he opened his eyes and squinted against the light. He checked to the left, the right, then turned completely around. It was a small bathroom, old and dirty, the mirror above the sink broken out long ago. The cracked, filthy sink was opposite the door. To the left of the sink was the toilet. In the same corner a plumber’s friend was leaning up against the wall. To the left of the sink, above

the toilet, was a window with wire reinforced pebble glass. The window was too small, too high, and painted shut. To the right was a bath tub. The shower curtain was missing. There was a roll of toilet paper on the toilet tank, but there was no holder. No soap at the sink. The walls were covered with tan and pale green ceramic tile and the floor was covered with cracked white and gold linoleum. He opened the medicine cabinet and looked inside. Nothing; not even shelves. As he closed the medicine cabinet Andy noticed his hand was shaking.

He pulled down his pants, sat on the toilet seat, and relieved himself while he continued to examine the room. He couldn't allow his father to be destroyed and he needed a weapon. What was there? He could've made a club out of the handle of the toilet plunger, but there was no way to hide it. Even if he could have hidden it, he didn't think he could swing it or jab it with enough force to accomplish anything. Even if he had the strength, how was he to explain all the dead kidnapers? They took turns beating each other to death with a plumber's friend?

"That's silly," he whispered in frustration.

He turned to grab the roll of toilet paper and his shifting weight caused the stool to rock slightly. He wiped himself, climbed off the stool, and looked at the floor behind the toilet. The floor was rotten there. Sweat from the tank, overflow from plug ups, perhaps burst pipes from some past winter. Whatever the cause, the floor beneath the linoleum was rotten, the floor covering easily lifted up. He got down on his hands and knees.

Lifting up a corner of the linoleum, he looked beneath. The wood was wet and black with rot. The head of an old square floor nail stuck up a quarter of an inch above the remaining surface of the wood. Andy grabbed it with his fingers and pulled. The nail didn't move. He heard footsteps outside the door and he jumped to his feet, flushed the toilet, and faced the sink.

"Okay," he called out, "I'm done."

As the man replaced the blindfold and tied the boy's hands in front, Andy wanted to cry he felt so helpless. He sniffed, and the man said, "Now, you hang in there, kid. You've been tough so far and you keep it up for a bit. I'm going to go downstairs and bring us all up something to eat. Maybe some pizza. That'll make you feel better, won't it?"

"I guess so."

"Good. I'll take you in, drop you next to your mother, then get the stuff. Don't do anything stupid, now, 'cause someone'll be in there watching you. Understand?"

That was when Andy's weapon made itself known. "Yes," he answered, "I understand."

Andy cuddled up to his mom, faced his back toward the wall, and strained against his bonds. The man who had gone to get the food must have taken pity on Andy's rope burned wrists because this time they were not tied as tightly. When they had loosened a bit, Andy cuddled more closely to his mom and gently leaned his elbow on her bladder until she began squirming and timidly asked to go to the bathroom. King Girard took her there, and returned to guard Andy. The boy listened very hard. He heard the creak of a chair and the rattle of stiff paper. King Girard was reading a magazine.

Andy waited until he heard footsteps coming from downstairs.

It was all or nothing. The only chance Andy and his family had. Toss the grenade, stand back, and hope for an opening. “Mr. Girard,” said Andy, “will the food take much longer?”

The silence from King Girard was impenetrable. At long last he asked, “What did you call me?” His words had razor edges.

“Mr. Girard.” Andy cultivated his most innocent baby voice. “Did I do something wrong?”

“Why’d you call me that?”

“The other man. He said your name was King Girard. Did he mean someone else?” Andy could hear the other man’s footsteps reaching the top of the stairs.

The sound of disbelief in Girard’s voice reached towering heights. “He called me *what* ?”

“King Girard,” Andy whimpered. “He said he and you worked for Bear Brandt.” He turned in a mock cringe that hid his hands and face from the room.

“What the hell?” Girard growled through clenched teeth as the door opened.

“Here’s the chow. You wanted the chicken salad—” began the other man. He was silent for a moment, then shock crept into his voice. “What in the hell are you doing?”

“You told this kid my name, idiot!”

“I never! What—”

“Then, how in the hell did he learn it? Answer me that? How did he find out who we worked for? Huh? Telepathy?” Andy heard the sound of skin being slapped. It was close to the time and Andy began pulling his hands free of his bonds as one of the men grunted and then there was the deafening sound of a shot being fired.

Immediately Andy’s mom began screaming from the bathroom. Andy shoved up his blindfold and saw King Girard drop his gun and fall to the floor where he came to rest, his head and shoulders propped up by a built in bookshelf. The other man was slouched against the wall holding his middle. His nose was bleeding and he had a smoking automatic in his hand.

“Daddy!” cried Andy as he ran to the side of King Girard’s body, fell to his knees, and threw himself over the corpse. “Daddy! You killed my daddy!”

“Whathehell?”

The other man’s confused frown turned to astonishment as Andy rolled off, pointed King Girard’s .357 Magnum at him and shot him through the heart, the roar of the weapon making his ears ring. The recoil was very strong, but he managed to hold on, his mother still screaming from the bathroom.

First things first. He got up, placed the pistol on the table, and grabbed the cellular phone. He placed a call to his father’s extension and waited. Soon his father’s voice came on the line. “This is Captain Rain.”

“Dad?” Andy responded, a genuine sob in his voice.

“Andy? Son, what is it? Where are you? What’s going on?”

“Dad, the men here had a terrible fight. It was awful. I think they’re both dead. Come and get me and Mom.”

“I will, son. My god, I will. Where are you? Do you know where you are?”

“I don’t. I’ll get Mom on the phone and then look outside.” Andy paused as he worked himself up to ask the question that frightened him the most. “Dad, did you let Bear Brandt go?”

“No,” his father answered. “I couldn’t let him go. Do you hate me for that?”

A great weight lifted from Andy’s shoulders. “No, Dad. I love you. I’ll go get Mom.” Andy took the phone with him to the bathroom and opened the door. His mother was sitting on the floor sobbing hysterically. When she saw Andy, she screamed again and held out her arms. He walked to her side and allowed her to hug and kiss him until it hurt. “Mom,” he said. “We’re all right, Mom. Here. Dad wants to talk to you on the phone. Take it and talk to him.”

“Your father?” she sobbed.

“Here. Talk to him. I have to find out where we are.”

“What about the men? What about the men out there?”

“They’re gone.” He handed the phone to her and disengaged himself from her arms. He handed her the phone and she placed it to her ear.

“Yes? Gary? Oh, Gary!”

Andy went back to the small living room and surveyed the scene. He cleaned the prints off Girard’s weapon, held the barrel by his shirt tail, checked to make certain how and where King hung his piece, then placed the weapon in the corpse’s right hand. He looked back to make certain that he had been unobserved. Returning his gaze to King Girard, he was dizzy for a moment and then a terrible headache hit him. It was like an ice pick thrust into his right eye. It was an old headache. A Billy Stark headache. In prison Ellen had said to Billy that the headaches were pain, rage, and guilt coming out sideways.

But Andy Rain wasn’t Billy Stark. Andy Rain had feelings. He could be angry and he had nothing to be guilty about. As the heat filled his face, Andy swung back his foot and kicked King Girard in the side. The man groaned, rolled back, lifted his weapon, and aimed it at Andy. Without thinking, the boy grabbed the barrel of the weapon with both hands, closed his eyes, lifted up, and twisted the barrel away from him with all of his might. The weapon discharged, Andy’s mom screamed, and King Girard shuddered from his toes all the way to his fingertips as he fell back, dragging Andy with him. Andy fell on top of King Girard and opened his eyes. He raised his head and saw that he was still holding onto King’s gun. He let go of the weapon, pulled himself off the kidnapper, and stood up. As his point of view rose, he saw that a good portion of King Girard’s forehead and scalp were missing. Pieces of them were splattered all over the living room’s off-white wall.

In a daze Andy turned around and saw his mom standing in the doorway, the phone in her hand. Her eyes were wide, frozen in an unblinking stare. Her mouth was open and a panicked voice was yelling from the phone’s earpiece. Andy led his mom to the couch, sat her down, and took the phone from her hand. “Dad? Dad?”

“Andy? What happened?”

Andy took a deep breath when he realized tears were running down his cheeks. “Mom’s sick, Dad. She’s real sick.”

“What was that shot?”

Andy assumed his mom had seen everything after he had placed the gun in King Girard's hand. "I kicked him. One of the kidnapers. I'm so sorry. It was real stupid. I thought he was dead. I kicked him and his gun went off. I really scared Mom. I'm so sorry. Dad, I'm going to go find out where we are. I'll be back in a minute."

They had been on the second floor of a working class tenement, 1207 Beecher, only three houses down from Wayne Road. He stood there in the noon sun, looking at the faces on the street. A man washing his car. A woman carrying groceries. An old man sitting on the curb talking to himself.

He thought about running. There was so much to explain. Girard and his companion had been professionals. How had they suddenly gone stupid and shot each other? Questions and answers. Sooner or later the cops would have a lot of the first and would demand plenty of the second. They had to. The cops weren't stupid. And what would his mom say when they questioned her? Andy Rain had saved the day, and he couldn't have saved the day, so the answer had to lie elsewhere, and then what would happen? Perhaps no one would look at it that way. Perhaps he could talk them out of the truth. Perhaps all he had to do was keep quiet about certain things.

He couldn't run. He couldn't leave his parents, his home, his friends, his life behind him. He sighed and headed back into the building.

Over the next few days there were questions and more questions. Not only did the authorities want answers, the media did, too. During it all Andy refused to deny what his mother had seen. She was on a thin mental edge. Using that to explain away what she had thought she had seen would have pushed her through it. They both had to accept what had happened and deal with it. Her six year old son had wrestled a physically brutal notorious gangster for his gun and the man had blown off a fifth of his own head in the struggle.

In the Rain family living room, at the last of the questionings, were Andy, his parents, a Detective Lieutenant Tso of the city police, his assistant, Det. Sgt. Graham, John Draper, and a blond woman that Andy didn't know. Mr. Draper introduced her as Molly Warton.

"Okay," began Tso, "we aren't recording this. We just want to clear up a few things. First, Mrs. Rain, Andy, we'd like to thank you for helping out in identifying the voices of the two other kidnapers. The two you identified both work for Boss Brandt. They aren't saying anything right now, but that's typical. Even without your IDs we have enough to put them away for a long time."

"Will we have to go to court?" asked Marnie Rain with a timid voice.

"Chances are, no," answered the lieutenant. "They'll probably go for a plea, if they have any sense. All we really need to clear up is exactly what happened at 1207 Beecher. Mrs. Rain, can you add anything to what you've already said?"

"I don't think so. I was blindfolded most of the time, except when they let me go to the bathroom. It was while I was in there that the shooting started." Her voice caught and Andy held her hand. "Andy was in there all alone. I was sure he'd been killed."

She wrapped her arms around Andy and the boy hugged her back. "Why don't we do this some other time?" said Captain Rain. "Marnie's too upset to go on with it."

"No," she said. "Let's get it done this time. I couldn't bear it if I had to wait to go through this again."

Lt. Tso looked at Capt. Rain, got a nod in return, and looked at Marnie Rain. "I just have a couple of questions left, then Graham and I'll be out of here. Did any of the men use names?"

"No," answered Marnie Rain. "As I said, they called us by our names, but they didn't use any names among themselves. They seemed to be very careful about that."

Andy nodded his agreement.

Tso looked at him, fixing the boy with his fierce black eyes. "What were they fighting about, Andy? When the fight started, you were in the room with them. What did they say?"

Andy shrugged and held out his hands. "It didn't make much sense to me. One of them said the other had used his name, the other guy said he didn't, then it sounded like someone hit someone, then there was a shot."

"That was when you got free of your bonds?"

Andy nodded. "I took off my blindfold and one of them was on the floor. He had on a police uniform. The other one was holding his tummy. Right then, though, the one on the floor picked up his gun and fired. He hit the other man and killed him. Then the man on the floor slumped down like he was dead. I thought he was dead."

"What'd you do then?" asked Sgt. Graham.

"I went to the phone and called my dad to tell him we were all right. After that I went and checked my mom to see if she was okay and gave her the phone."

"What happened then with the man in the uniform?"

Andy described it just the way it had happened. He thought the man was dead. In anger he had kicked the man, the kidnapper lifted his piece, they had struggled for the weapon, and the man had fired through his own forehead. Lt. Tso nodded for a few seconds and then asked, "Andy, you look afraid. Why?"

"Are you kidding?" said Capt. Rain, his eyebrows raised.

"Please," demanded the lieutenant as he faced Andy. "What are you afraid of?"

"Did I kill him?" asked Andy. "That man. Did I kill him? That's what I'm afraid of."

Lt. Tso's shoulders seemed to slump into a relaxed mode. "No, Andy, you didn't kill him. That was his finger on the trigger, not yours. I wouldn't worry about it, in any event. Did you ever hear of King Girard?"

"Sure," said Andy. "He's a big gangster." He faced his father. "Dad talked about him when Bear Brandt was sent to the prison."

"Well, that's who that was, Andy. King Girard. He was a bad man. Dead is a good place for him to be."

Andy's mom leaned forward and wrapped her arm around her son's shoulders. "I have a question, Lieutenant. If you knew his name, why have you kept it from us all this time?"

"I'd like to know the answer to that myself," said Capt. Rain.

"It was nothing." The detective shrugged and shook his head. "We just wondered if somehow one of you might have mentioned one of the kidnapper's names and not remembered it." He smiled sheepishly and

glanced down. “We have to explore every possibility. As is, we just can’t explain why these two smoked each other. King Girard and Tony Zara were old hands; pros. It just doesn’t make any sense.”

“I don’t have any answers for you,” said Marnie Rain.

The lieutenant looked at Andy. “Do you have any good guesses, kid?”

The boy shrugged as his mouth went dry. “Crime makes you stupid?”

They laughed. Everyone laughed, including John Draper and the psychic. After a little, even Andy laughed.

Andy considered himself lucky that his dad’s friends in the city police leaned on the press to leave the description of Andy’s part of the saga to a single paragraph, playing down the struggle between the gangster and the little boy for the gun. No one really believed that anyway. Besides, it was a hot news week. A little war in the East, a little riot in the West. The media simply left the boy and his mother alone.

Just before New Year’s, though, there was a tabloid reporter for the *National Investigator* who was listed as missing by his paper. He had a reputation as a brutal journalistic blackmailer and he had been sent to the area to find something to sensationalize about the death of mobster King Girard. “SUPERBOY TAKES ON THE MOB” or “PRISON OFFICIAL PLANS BREAKOUT” kind of thing. The reporter’s name was Murray Gordon. Before he could really begin, he was found frozen to death in a snow bank. That was a week after he had left a local saloon at closing.

His wallet and money hadn’t been taken, hence it was decided Gordon had passed out and had died from exposure. The local reporter who tried to do a follow up on the story Gordon was doing questioned almost everyone connected with the attempt to break Bear Brandt out of prison. He learned that the tabloid reporter had failed to interview even one of the principals involved in the case, although he had been seen hanging around Andy’s school the day of his death.

Andy Rain himself had not been available for comment. He was in bed with a severe case of bronchitis.

Early the next April, Andy was in the school’s playground during the afternoon recess. He was standing by himself, outwardly interested in the game his classmates were playing. Inside, however, he was thinking about John Draper. His novel, *Killer’s High*, was a big success and had been optioned for a movie. But that wasn’t Andy’s concern right then. Instead he was thinking on the way John Draper kept looking at him. Ellen’s widower appeared to have a mission. It was either to understand his wife’s death or to nail Andy for it. Either way, Andy was certain John Draper had been gathering everything he could track down about Andy, about everything Andy had ever done, and everyone with whom Andy had ever met.

He looked at Lettie playing jacks with her friend Susan. Lettie had told Andy that John Draper had talked with Lettie about Andy on three separate occasions. Larry and Ted had also been questioned. None of the questionings had been overt. They had appeared as idle conversations at birthday parties,

holiday visits, church picnics, and such.

Andy assumed that Mr. Draper, because of his contacts, knew everything that the police knew. Also he had been dating Andy's teacher, Miss Douglas. He had also gone hunting with Mr. Capp, the school counselor, and was on the same church committee as Mrs. Pryor, the school principal. Andy's dentist was Dr. Rhomer, and Mr. Draper's dentist was Dr. Rhomer. And what did John Draper learn from Ellen before she died? On top of everything else, there was John Draper's constant association with psychic Molly Warton. What did that mean? What did she truly know? Did she have special gifts? Special routes of knowledge?

He had read his father's gift copies of John Draper's murder mysteries, *Midnight Walk*, *Ghost Flower*, *Killer's High*, and his newly released detective novel, *Cops and Killers*. In *Cops and Killers*, there had been, as part of the background, references to serial killer Billy Stark. Among the murders described had been the death of kidnapper Marci Baines. The description of her death had been inaccurate. Still, he was close. Too close for mere guesswork. He certainly knew why Billy had killed the woman who had been slapping the child. That was more than even Billy Stark had known.

The photos, code book, and clippings had burned in the fire when Ellen's car went up. But what if Ellen had made a copy of Billy Stark's coded book before she died? A copy that had fallen into her husband's hands? He knew all about the experiment. He had helped Gary and Marnie Rain adopt Andy. And what would John Draper do should he convince himself that Andy Rain was more than an innocent refugee from a failed experiment, that he really was Billy Stark and that Gary Rain's son had murdered his lovely Ellen?

Bring charges?

No. He would only look foolish.

Would he, instead, take it upon himself to murder Andy Rain?

Andy slowly shook his head. He couldn't see John Draper as a killer. Perhaps he was blind to it, perhaps Draper had fooled him, but John Draper appeared to be all cop. The detectives in his stories were blue clear through. The rules were their gods, even when the rules made no sense; even when they defeated their own purposes. There were cops and there were killers. In a John Draper story, no one could be both. There were cops who became killers, but as soon as they crossed that line, they were no longer cops.

From the first Draper story he had read, Andy had admired the police officers who were the heroes. They were men and women of direction, principle, and conviction. Even when they lost, they didn't cross that line that made them different from the killers and crooks. And they lost a lot. There were the endless cases of domestic pain and destruction about which no one could do anything. Battered women afraid to bring charges, abused children with no voice, no standing, only tears. And the cops hurt for those they couldn't help. If he could be like the characters in John Draper's books, Andy thought that it would be a good thing to be: a police officer. If he could be like the heroes in John Draper's books, he would be somebody, he would be doing good, helping people.

The whistle blew signaling the end of recess. Andy returned to class, and spent the rest of the day writing a story in a clean, even hand. It was a mystery story titled "The Red Dot."

That night he told his father he wanted to be a police officer and maybe a writer. He showed his father his story and Gary Rain took it to the living room to read it. When he returned, he said, "Andy, I don't know what to say. I'm stunned. This is terrific. The dialog, the description, this character, the killer, trying to help the police find another killer without giving himself away, terrific."

“Do you think Mr. Draper would look at my story and tell me what he thinks?”

Gary Rain looked back at his son’s neatly written manuscript and raised his eyebrows. “I’m sure he would.” He looked at Andy. “What about how you used to feel about John?”

“How I used to feel?”

“After you and Ellen were in that accident? You know, John’s wife. She died.”

Andy pursed his lips and shrugged. “I don’t really remember much of that.”

That night, while Andy wrote another story, Gary took the manuscript for “The Red Dot” and drove over to John Draper’s house. An hour later, Mr. Draper faxed a copy of the story and a letter to the editor of *New Detective* .

It was the next Tuesday. Andy sat on the couch before the fireplace facing the chair in which Ellen Draper had once held him, stroked his hair, and told him that everything was going to be all right. That was also where she told him that everything said between them would be held in the strictest confidence. In that chair now was her husband, John. He was wearing jeans, deck shoes, and a faded red sweat shirt. He studied Andy through pale gray eyes. He looked very tired. “You wrote a very good story, Andy.”

“Thanks, Mr. Draper.”

“Please call me John. If we’re going to be colleagues, we can’t work and keep all of this formality going. You called my wife Ellen. You can call me John. Do you remember Ellen?”

“Yes.”

“Do you remember the day she died? The way she died?”

“Yes.”

John Draper leaned back in his chair and frowned. “I got the impression from your father that you didn’t remember much about it.”

“I didn’t want them nervous about me seeing you.”

The former detective was silent for a long time. He nodded and when he at last spoke, he said, “So you wanted to see me?”

Andy nodded. “Ever since you were at my birthday party, I’ve felt there were some things you wanted to ask me.”

“So why did you wait until now?”

“I knew the questions. I just didn’t know how to answer them. I figure whatever we need to get settled we can do now.” Andy placed his hand on a folded sheaf of papers next to him on the couch. “I have another story here about a troubled little boy who had a terrible secret he wanted to share.”

The man seemed to freeze. In a whisper he asked, "What secret?"

Andy leaned his elbows on his knees. "His head was inhabited by a powerful evil spirit, although by going into his head the spirit was no longer evil. It became a good spirit; a spirit that protected the boy."

"Protected him from what?"

"People who would hurt him."

John Draper moistened his lips and fixed his gaze on the boy's eyes. "People like who?"

"People like some of them in your stories. The stories about children." Andy looked toward the blackness of the fireplace so he wouldn't have to look at John Draper's eyes. "Like an uncle who beat him."

"How would this spirit protect him? How would it do it?"

"Let me ask you something, John. A technical thing."

"Okay."

"If the uncle beats the boy and by some miracle doesn't kill him, what can the boy do?"

"Report him."

Andy faced John Draper. "His word against the uncle's? He's only five and a half."

John raised his eyebrows and held out his hands. "There'd be physical evidence. Bruises, cuts ... welts on a face."

"And then what? The uncle says he just slapped the kid for mouthing off. Would the cops take the uncle down for that? Would anyone take the child seriously? I really need this information for my story."

The man nibbled on the inside of his lower lip and then shook his head. "Probably not."

"And if the child refused to be beaten, what then? What could he do?"

John Draper shook his head.

Andy leaned back and clasped his hands on his lap. Looking at his intertwined fingers, he said, "If the boy was grown up, he could run away or defend himself. If the uncle tried to punch him, he'd have a right to defend himself, wouldn't he?"

"Yes."

"But if he's five and a half, he can't swing back, he can't outrun a grown-up. He doesn't have any rights, does he?"

"Not in the way you mean." He waved his hand impatiently. "Where does the evil spirit come in?"

"Good spirit," Andy corrected as he looked up at John. "It's a good spirit."

"If you say so."

The boy looked back at his hands. "What if the good spirit showed the little boy how to open a locked drawer where there's a gun, and what if the spirit knows how to use guns, and what if the boy had the

gun and the uncle still wouldn't stop and the boy shoots him dead? Is the boy a killer or was he just defending himself?"

John Draper stood, went to the mantelpiece, and took an empty pipe from a rack that was there. He played nervously with the dark briar for a moment, then replaced it. He glanced at Andy and said, "Stopped smoking last year. I ought to throw these damned things away." He folded his arms across his chest and looked up at the ceiling. "I don't know, Andy. Under the normal rules, it's almost never legal to take the law into your own hands, self-defense being an exception. The boy being possessed by this spirit really places the situation outside the normal rules."

Andy nodded and pursed his lips. "And that's where kids are anyway, right? Outside the normal rules? All of this child protection stuff is a fraud, right? Three of them get on the talk shows to show the system works, then the thumpers and child molesters, killers, and kidnappers get to do whatever they want to the rest. Then, after the boys and girls are beat up, raped, tortured, or killed, then maybe one out of ten might be able to complain about it. How many of them ever get any justice?" Even though they were clasped together, his hands were shaking. There were tears in his eyes and he fought to keep them out of his voice. "How many of them get beaten or killed for trying to complain?"

"You made your point." Draper returned to his chair and sat down. He propped his elbows on the arm rests and rested his chin on his clenched fists. "I'm wondering how the kid feels after killing the uncle. I assume he gets away with it."

"He gets away with it. No one believes a five and a half year old boy can shoot someone down and make it look like a suicide. They don't even consider it. But the boy feels terrible. All he wants to do is scream from guilt and terror, but who can he talk to?"

John Draper looked at Andy from beneath hooded eyes. "You tell me."

The boy shrugged and held his head to one side. "A therapist, a friend of the family, is brought in. The boy needs help and the therapist agrees to keep the boy's secret." His eyes narrowed as an edge came into his voice. "She promised never to reveal anything about the boy, no matter what it was. She made that promise to him!" Andy looked away from Ellen's widower. "Then it got to where she finally believed the boy about the spirit. She thought telling everybody about it, proving it, was a whole lot more important than keeping her promise to the boy."

Andy quickly faced Draper. "What could he do? She was going to tell everyone — make him into a media freak. If he wasn't going to be a victim, what could he do?"

John's eyes were transfixed on a point in space. "Plead with her? Beg? Remind her of her promise?"

"He tried all that. It didn't matter to her. She had a name to build. What was he supposed to do? I need to know ... for my story."

Suddenly John half rose, grabbed the front of Andy's shirt, and bellowed, "Would it have been so damned unbearable? If the world knew, would it have been so bad?"

"Wouldn't it?" Andy screamed back.

Bringing his hand back toward the ceiling, the man slapped the boy across his face, driving him back into the couch. The man stood there, flexing his fingers, his breaths coming out in ragged sobs as Andy held his face. Through his own tears, Andy saw the tears on John's face. After a long time, John dropped into his chair and stared blankly at the floor. "So, he kills the therapist. How'd the little bastard feel about that?"

“He loved her. He loved her and she was the only person in the world he could talk to. After she died he never talked to anyone ever again about the things that were going on inside him. How do you think he felt about that?” Andy lowered his hand from his face revealing deep red welts. “She shouldn’t’ve broken her promise.”

“Yeah.”

Andy shrugged. “That’s my story.”

John Draper held his hands to his face for a long time. As the hands, at last, came down, he leaned back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling. “Did the kid ever take out anyone else?”

“Like who?”

John brought his gaze back to Andy’s face. “Oh, like a seventeen year old baby-sitter with a habit of punching on the kids she watched, a neighborhood bully, a couple of mob kidnapers, a reporter with more threats and deals than principles.”

Andy glanced down and bit at his lower lip. “Only if he couldn’t do anything else.”

“Jesus.” John Draper closed his eyes rolled his head back and slouched down in his chair. After a moment he shook his head and leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. His face looked different. His eyes were wide, his voice barely controlled. “Andy, I guess I have a story, too. It sounds a hell of a lot like yours. Want to hear it?”

“Yes.”

“It’s all from the point of view of a therapist’s husband. He’s a retired cop, but he keeps his toe in the water. You know, he drops down to homicide every now and then to visit his friends to see what’s going on. He calls himself a writer. He’s eighteen years older than his beautiful wife and he needs all the glamour he can get. That’s what he figures, anyway. He’s so head over heels in love with his wife he feels like a damned teenager.” John Draper looked toward the window to the right of the fireplace.

“She’s a good woman — a good person. She had this hard little ambitious streak, a need to make a name, but she was a good person. Kind, loving. They never let her do any real work at the prison, and therapy on the outside was beginning to look more and more like trying to stop a flood with a dish sponge.”

“The character in your story?”

“Yeah.” The man clasped his hands together, and let his gaze fall to the floor. “One day she gets a client,” he raised his eyebrows. “A little boy who thinks he’s killed his uncle. She believes he’s been traumatized by a suicide in his family, but as she learns more, she remembers an old project she was hooked up with a few years before; a project that involved trying out a youth drug on a death row prisoner. He was turned into a baby all right, but it was so much unfeeling protoplasm with no will or life of its own. The project was a flop, but suddenly she was wondering what happened to that baby.”

He smiled and shook his head. “Her friends years before had adopted a handicapped infant, a lump that did nothing but eat and fill up diapers for years. Then the boy suddenly awakened, no longer a vegetable. That was the boy who was in front of her saying that he’d killed his uncle. She was real excited about the possibility, but her husband thought she was going around the bend. He kept telling her she needed proof, otherwise she’d go down as some kind of nut. So, every spare moment she spent tracking down leads, interviewing subjects, collating research, and being with her client, of course. Then, one day she

ran across something that backed up everything; a package the killer had left for his new self.”

John Draper faced Andy. “I didn’t have an ending for my story until now. Maybe it’s because I didn’t believe in it myself. But together we have a tale; maybe a tale no one would believe.”

Andy moistened his lips and felt an electric tingle across his skin because of what he was about to say. “Should we end it by having the retired cop kill the boy?”

“Kill the boy,” John repeated. “Too many things to explain.” It was a long moment until he continued. “Besides, there’s a complication. In my story, Andy, the therapist kept running into something strange. It was a curious lack of exact correspondence between the test results of her client and the tests she had done on Billy Stark. Her client wasn’t the killer. He was different. A new person. He had some memories belonging to the killer, but he had his own unique feelings. Her client was a little boy who would not be a victim and who could protect himself, regardless of the rules, regardless of what others think possible. More than that, he would protect others, as well. The boy couldn’t tolerate a bully.”

“My story, too.” Andy glanced down at his hands. “But in my story, the boy still feels awful. He feels like he owes something to the retired police officer. He doesn’t know what or how, but he’s got to settle it some way or he’ll die.”

“Settle it?” The man looked through the window again until he let his gaze drop to his lap. “Maybe our story needs some more work.” John stood and made a second visit to his mantelpiece. Instead of fondling one of his pipes, however, he turned and faced Andy. “You know, that story your father gave me was very good. I sent ‘The Red Dot’ in to *New Detective*. I got a call from the editor this morning, and he told me to pass on that you’ve got an offer to publish it. Twenty cents a word. That’s a pretty good rate. I gave him your address and you should get a contract offer in a couple of days.”

Andy frowned and looked down at his lap. “That’s great, John, but I still feel like I owe you. I mean, everything I know about writing I got from reading your stories. I feel like I owe you a lot. You know. For the stories.”

John Draper scratched his chin then clasped his hands behind his back. He seemed to be fighting something. At long last he appeared to cross some kind of internal line and reach a decision. He nodded and said, “Andy, every now and then I do these writing clinics in the local schools. Mostly sixth and seventh graders; sometimes high school. It’s a chance to introduce kids to fiction writing. If you want to do something for me, you could help.”

“How?”

“Well, as I said, you write very well. There’s this sixth grade girl I know who could use some help. Her name’s Sally Scott and she was in one of my clinics.”

“How can I help her? I’ve only been writing for a couple of days.”

“Go to her house and talk to her. She’s over on Addison. She has a story, too. Once you see it, I think you’ll know what to do. It’s about a twelve year old girl who is consumed with making herself ugly. She doesn’t wash, doesn’t change her clothes, and she’s eaten herself to almost two hundred pounds hoping that somehow, some way, she can make herself ugly enough to keep her stepfather away. Understand?”

Andy’s face was like stone. “I understand.”

“The stepfather in the story makes a great villain. He drinks, beats the girl and beats her mother, too. The villain is almost too good, though. Sally can’t figure out how her heroine can escape or eliminate the

villain. She doesn't have an ending for her story." John Draper rubbed his eyes, lowered his hand, and looked at the boy. "I thought you might be able to help her work out something."

Andy stood and faced the man. "If I do come up with a good ending, are we even?"

Draper rubbed his eyes and sighed as he shook his head. "I don't know if we're ever going to be even, Andy. I'm not real good at putting things behind me."

"I've put some big things behind me."

"Boy, I still haven't convinced myself that this is something *I should* put behind me." He shook his head and held out a hand. "Look, if you decide to help Sally with her story, do it because it's something you want to do, not because you figure you owe me. I don't know that you can pay off that one." He lowered his hand and shrugged. "Maybe it's just something I have to square away with myself. If you want to help, help. If you don't, don't."

"I'd like to help, John. Sally Scott on Addison. What number?"

"Nine thirty-seven. It's a gray duplex. The stepfather is an ex-boxer who runs a gym. A very rough character. He keeps guns in the house and likes to play with them."

"The man in the story?"

"Sure. The man in the story." John Draper smiled and raised his eyebrows. "He's not as rough as King Girard used to be, but he has a lot of people scared. You look like you have a question."

Andy nodded once and leveled his gaze on the man's eyes. "I suppose if someone reported the stepfather, child protective services would take the kid away and the stepfather would be put into counseling."

"That even happened once, Andy. The child reported her stepfather to the police, the mother refused to back up her kid, the stepfather was forbidden by the court to enter the home, but no one was watching him. So he went back home and beat the kid until she almost died. Broke five bones. The kid knows the score, so now she keeps her mouth shut. The ban was lifted and everything went back to normal. The kid writes a tough story."

Andy picked up his papers. "John. If I like this, helping the kid from your writing clinic, can I help more kids?"

"There are a lot of them out there, Andy. An army. They can use all the help they can get." John looked at his hand for a moment, then held it out. "It was good talking to you."

Andy shook hands with the man. "Can I come and talk to you some more about my stories?"

"Yes Anytime."

Del Scott took a long pull from his beer and squinted his eyes as he tried to read the sports page. He scratched beneath his armpit as he heard a whimper from upstairs and glared in that direction. That girl and her mother had been sniffing and whimpering ever since he had gotten home from work. How can a man relax with all the crying and fighting.

He balled up the newspaper and threw it against the kitchen wall. "Hell, if I can't read in peace, then there are some that're going to pay." He pushed back the chair, lurched to his feet, and smiled as he took a swing with a massive fist at Kid Duggan's memory. That was a fight. Six rounds and the Kid never did get up. "Killed him," grunted Del, "with this!" He swung again, threw himself off balance and stumbled into the refrigerator.

While he was trying to remember why he was on his feet, there was a knock at the door. He leaned away from the refrigerator and peered through the kitchen door into the hallway. He could see the front door, the top half of which was cracked and taped glass. No one seemed to be there. Another knock and Del saw a movement toward the bottom of the glass. It was a little kid.

He launched himself from the doorway and staggered down the hall, coming to a stop at the door. Pulling it open, he looked down and saw a boy only six or seven years old. "Well?"

The boy smiled warmly. "Mr. Scott?"

"Yeah?"

"Hi." The boy walked around Del as he talked "I'm Andy Rain. I'm here to help Sally with her homework. You look like you could use a beer."

"You're just a little kid. Hey!" The boy was already inside and heading toward the kitchen. "Hey, kid! What the hell? Come back here!"

The front door closed.

Del Scott's neighbors saw nothing, heard nothing. "Well," one of them said several days later to the detectives doing a follow up investigation, "sure, there was some screaming, but there was always some yelling and screaming coming from that house. I can't tell you how quiet it's been around here for the past couple of weeks."

One of the detectives wanted to know if the citizen had ever reported to the police any of the screaming episodes. The neighbor shrugged and shook his head. "It wasn't any of my business."

There were nothing but dead ends, the detectives concluded. Nothing really sat well, but there seemed little to do but regard Del Scott's death as a suicide, although what could possibly possess someone to attempt suicide by sticking his head into an electric oven? The medical examiner had concluded that it must have taken Del Scott close to an hour to die.

As the detectives got into their car, they took a call to investigate a suspicious death six blocks away in an alley walkway just off Claremont. There they found neighborhood bully, wife beater, child molester, and drug dealer, Perry Wease flat on his back, his bulging brown eyes staring blankly at the crease of blue between the tenements that was the sky.

The death seemed on its face to be an accident. There was a pool of motor oil on the ground, a smear where young Wease slipped in it, the feet go up, the head goes down, and Perry Wease busts his crown. There were some unanswered questions. The oil was fresh, not used, and there were no oil cans in the alley's rubbish. The alley was too narrow for a truck or car, so what would anyone be doing with oil in that alley?

Well, someone could have been working on a motorcycle. After adding the oil, the biker brought the can

with him for, perhaps, environmental reasons. The concrete was smooth beneath the deceased's head, and there was a wooden splinter in the back of his shaved head. Spruce, it later turned out. There were no pieces of lumber in the alley, either. Troublesome. The detectives finished up their notes, established that no one in the area had either seen or heard anything, and headed back to their car.

They took off their coats, looked at the trees lining Claremont, and laughed as they got into their car. Del Scott and Perry Wease both dead within two weeks of each other. It was spring, the sun warm, the sky clear, and the birds were singing.

The Dreyfuss Affair

10:08 PM, 14 April 1865

The war was almost done. As the news of General Lee's surrender five days before continued to displace the gray numbness of four bloody years of death and destruction, the streets of Washington sank further and further into an orgy of celebration. It was true that General Joseph Johnston, commanding the last complete rebel army in the field, had yet to surrender, but the rumor had it that General Joe was in old Jeff Davis's office that very night preparing to send up the white flag. The President had been waiting all day for the news. It was just a matter of time.

Sergeant Dye, sitting guard outside Ford's Theater that night, contrasted in his mind the merrymakers on Tenth Street against how old Abe Lincoln had looked the previous hour as the president and his party had climbed down from the carriage and passed through the crowd. The tall man looked bent, his homely face had been filled with an incredible sadness. He looked less like the victor and more like the vanquished.

The sergeant shrugged his shoulders against the damp chill and the pungent odor of wood smoke and let his attention wander next door to the happy sounds coming from Taltavul's. He had seen the famous actor John Wilkes Booth enter the saloon a short time before. The soldier passed his tongue over his lips and contemplated how a hot rum would go down at that moment. There was nothing going on right then and it wouldn't take but a minute. Just then, however, the actor emerged from the front of Taltavul's and stood talking with a man whose face Dye knew, the theater's costumer, Lewis Carland. A man the sergeant didn't recognize lit a pipe and joined the conversation. They were talking theater, and the sergeant felt a touch of contempt. The stage, he thought, is a silly place filled with silly people.

A fourth man came down from F Street and asked the trio the time. The man with the pipe looked into the lobby of the theater and said "After ten." The questioner continued down the street and Sergeant Dye recognized him as a singer at Ford's named Hess.

Drunken singing came from across Tenth Street and the distant sounds of fireworks and band music threatened to tease Dye from his post. The sergeant was impatient for the end of the play when he could go off duty and join the celebrants.

The performer named Hess returned and again asked the time. He explained that he was to go on just before the final scene and join two other singers in performing the new song by Professor Withers, "All Honor to Our Soldiers." Booth laughed uproariously at this comment, and Sergeant Dye concluded that the actor was quite a bit in his cups. There was no shame in that. The entire city was drunk.

From the direction of F Street came another man. He stopped and joined the conversation, concentrating his attentions on the actor. Dye recognized Captain Williams of the Washington Cavalry Police. "Mr.

Booth,” said the Captain, gesturing toward Taltavul’s, “would you do me the honor of allowing me to buy you a drink?”

Booth pulled out his pocket watch, checked the time, and shook his head. “Keene will be onstage in a minute and I promised to take a look for her.”

Another admirer approached from the direction of E Street and he stopped next to Captain Williams and seemed to study Booth for a moment. The man was clad in riding boots, as was Booth, however he wore dress more suited to the west than to the streets of the District. He was a tall lanky man, young and well built, with a clear face carrying few years. Beneath the brim of his western hat he had dark hair and eyes that seemed to glitter. “Wilkes Booth?” the man inquired.

The actor and his friends seemed highly amused at the admirer’s question. It was obviously from one who had never seen the younger Booth on the boards. “I am,” answered the actor, looking up at the stranger.

The tall admirer in the western outfit slowly shook his head and said, “I’ll be damned. You really do look like Richard Dreyfuss.” Then he pulled a Colt pistol from beneath his jacket, aimed it between Booth’s eyes, and pulled the trigger. Sergeant Dye frowned as he quickly studied the faces in the gathering crowd. He searched again and again. Before the great actor had hit the ground, his tall slayer had apparently vanished. Since he didn’t want to be accused of drinking on his post, the sergeant rethought what he had seen and decided the stranger, tall as he was, had managed to slip away in the confusion. “Thank God,” he muttered beneath his breath. “Thank God the fiend wasn’t after the president.”

2:06 PM, 17 June 2080

Roger Alfred leaned forward in the water chair and looked expectantly at his therapist. “Did you watch it? Did you watch the movie?”

Isa Childs returned Roger’s glance with an expression that hovered somewhere between amusement and pity. “There you go again, Roger. Look how you’re lying to yourself. You called it a movie. No one’s used that word for a vid in over sixty years.”

Roger’s eyebrows went up as his face reddened. “That’s not what I asked. Did you watch it? *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* ; did you watch it?”

The therapist shrugged and cocked his head to one side. “Yes I did. Last night, in fact. It was on my viddex and, since you made such a point of the old film, I called it up and watched it. Very amusing period piece, if a little over long.” He leaned back in his chair, tented his fingertips, and looked over them at Roger. “That’s one of the reasons why I’ve called you in for this extra session.”

“Well?”

Childs held his hands out in a gesture of helplessness. “I have already told you that you bear a striking resemblance to Richard Dreyfuss. Nevertheless, the facts of reality are against you.”

“Screw reality.”

“If that’s going to be your attitude, Roger, there’s not much point in continuing these sessions.”

“All right,” muttered Roger. “Go on.”

“Look at the facts, Roger. Dreyfuss was born in 1947. If you were he you’d be a hundred and forty years old. Look at yourself. You’re not even thirty yet.”

“A hundred and forty-three.”

The therapist’s eyebrows arched slightly. “Again?”

“If I was Richard Dreyfuss I’d be a hundred and forty-three, not a hundred and forty.”

“Exactly. That vid, *Close Encounters*, was made over a century ago. Unless you’ve found the Fountain of Youth, you can’t be Richard Dreyfuss and you couldn’t’ve been in that vid.”

Roger flopped back into the chair and held the bridge of his nose as the sides of the chair sloshed against his thighs. “Then why can I remember the film being shot? Why can I remember who was in it? All of them. I can remember who I kissed, who I couldn’t stand. Every argument, every shining moment, every lousy single detail. Why do I remember getting the Oscar for *The Goodbye Girl*?”

“This is all public information, Roger. Your mind has processed these things and mutated them until they fit your current reality. It proves nothing. Doesn’t it ever make you wonder why you only remember his early films? Why don’t you remember *What About Bob?*, the Beverly hills down and out thing, and the rest. Did you watch *What About Bob?* as I asked?”

Roger nodded, his gaze cast down. “Yeah.”

“Well?”

“No, I don’t remember it. Is that what you wanted to hear?”

The therapist shook his head as he air cushioned his seat over to the window wall behind Roger and looked down upon the teeming masses of Portland, Maine sixty-five stories below. “Look at them out there, Roger. Most of them are hitched to Hell’s rocket, and most of them try to cope the best way they can. Some blot out on drugs, some do the same thing with religion, others fall into fantasy worlds and never come back. Some take their own lives, some take on the lives of those they admire to avoid having to deal with who they are themselves. There is a sad, sad world out there filled with minor Napoleons, Christs, Rambos, Mohammeds, John Waynes, Buddhas, and,” he concluded as he glanced back toward Roger, “at least one Richard Dreyfuss.”

It’s all wrong, thought Roger. *Close Encounters*. The pieces of the film. The stuff that was left on the cutting room floor. The stuff Spielberg whacked out and more he put back in for the special edition. That incredibly boring version that was put on TV. Have I made it all up? Is this smug fart in the chair behind me right after all?

He might be.

Roger was the only one he knew that still called farts farts. Everyone else either called them braps or pats. “Isa,” he began, but there was a tone beep that interrupted his comment.

“This is the important call I’ve been waiting for, Roger. Please excuse me,” said the therapist as he touched the armrest of his chair and answered, “Yes?”

Roger could hear nothing as Isa Childs nodded and silently screened the audio from the room. He watched the therapist for a moment, then rose from his own chair, walked to the opposite window wall, and looked out upon the polluted expanses of Back Cove. The glass on the Preble St. office tower needed cleaning and the cove was further hidden by a veil of drizzle and haze. He looked down to see

the early afternoon shoppers, muggers, and druggers hurrying to get out of an increasing rain.

He frowned deeply as he thought. If it was all in his head, why did he remember Brooklyn, a place he supposedly had never been? The heartbreaks, the victories? That Oscar? If he had won it, where was the damned thing? If it was all a fantasy, then who was he? Who in the hell was Roger Alfred? He was an actor, and luckily he was doing very well in the vids. It was all that he ever wanted to do. Those familiar with Richard Dreyfuss's work, however, were always startled by the resemblance between Roger and the actor from the previous century. It was not only a physical resemblance either. The acting styles, mannerisms, even the voices were similar.

But not exact, as the therapist had established. He had taken Roger's voice prints together with prints from Dreyfuss's film work, and Isa had reported that the prints didn't match. Of course, he only had Isa's word for that. Right then he didn't trust the therapist very much. It was a suspicion that had grown ever so more intense over the past year. Of course, that was simply another manifestation of his "skeptic within," according to Isa Childs. The therapist was contradicting the reality in which he wanted to hide; hence, mistrust. And he did remember grade school, high school, and college as Roger Alfred. All of that had been in Maine. It was the details that kept fuzzing over. He not only didn't remember his first girlfriend, he couldn't remember any girlfriends. Hell, he couldn't even remember his parents except as some poorly drawn stick figures. To be sane, the only explanation for his mush of memories had to be time travel, and there wasn't any time travel. It looked as though all that was left for him was the banana farm.

"Roger?"

His thoughts interrupted, Roger turned and looked at his therapist. Childs had finished his call and was standing. The man looked quite pale. "Is everything all right?"

His face grave, Isa Childs walked over to his desk and thumb triggered the print lock on his center drawer. "No, Roger, I'm afraid things are quite serious."

"Do you want me to leave?"

"Not just yet." The therapist reached into his drawer, withdrew a greenish silver weird sort of comb that seemed vaguely familiar, aimed it at Roger, and pulled the trigger. Roger felt as though a high voltage line had been thrust into his belly button.

"God damn you!" he croaked.

Childs smiled sadly and said, "Congratulations, Roger. That was a very healthy response."

As Roger took a ragged step toward Childs, the room began growing dim. His skin seemed to tingle all over and he saw himself fall into the office's thick gel floor covering, but didn't feel the impact. Instead, he was carried away into the dark by a thousand invisible arms.

It was like a movie reel running in his mind's projector frame by frame.

Time surfers.

There was the wave and the stream. Wipe to get into the wave, wipe again to go back in the stream. After years in the wave, he had chosen the stream.

He was Richard Dreyfuss!

He had been in *Close Encounters!* He had been there for all of those movies! The memory was vague, but at the end of it, they said they had to replace him. He couldn't be Richard Dreyfuss anymore. He was needed elsewhere for another mission. Another Richard Dreyfuss would do What About Bob? and the rest.

Things he had done for the time wardens: things that hurt, things that killed.

The killing.

Usually, that was the job. Go back, take someone down, thereby smacking some ill defined rogue event into line with the natural stream.

That had been the ultimate horror: doing terrible things and belonging nowhere or when.

After the last time, Ophon had given him a choice. He could stay in the timewave and continue to help with their work, or they could wipe him and place him somewhere in time, away from the wave.

He was sick of it all.

He had taken the wipe.

It became clearer as the wipe faded, restoring what there was left of his normal memory, which appeared to be full of holes. Richard Dreyfuss. His task had been nothing more than to replace someone. He had been wiped and trained for that, as well. But had he been someone named X replacing someone called Richard Dreyfuss, or was he Richard Dreyfuss who had replaced an X?

Close Encounters had been the key. There were changes that had to be made to bend events in a particular direction. Somewhen, dozens of centuries in the future, there were beings from elsewhere who needed to be shown how humans regarded them, leaving aside for the moment the thousands of bug-eyed monsters from outer space flicks that had been absorbed by humanity over the decades.

There had been only one killing on that mission, an obstinate writer named Lacey. It had been enough, though. Sick of it all, at last, Richard had chosen to go back into the stream.

Locating in stream, however, had to be at a different time. Richard Dreyfuss, or Mr. X, whoever it had been, was back in his own place, the time warden had explained.

He remembered the words, but not the time warden's face.

And there was more.

Isa Childs.

There were time local liaisons who looked after this special kind of immigrant, and that's what Isa Child's did in the year 2080 for what Richard used to call the time surfers.

There was the familiar plastic smell of his therapist's air couch. Roger opened his eyes and saw the indirectly lit ceiling of Isa Childs's office.

That was it, then. At last he had achieved emotional balance. He was happy that he had been proven right about being who he thought he was, and he was quite prepared to strangle Isa Childs.

"He's awake," said Childs.

"God damned right, I'm awake, you bastard!" He tried to get up but found he was restrained around the

chest, arms, wrists, and ankles. “What in the hell is this?”

Childs’s face appeared above his. The therapist rolled Richard or Roger’s left sleeve and pressed an inject-pac against his upper arm. It hissed and the arm began to sting. “It’s just a precaution until you completely recover from the shockspan, Roger.”

“Richard,” he insisted as another piece dropped into place. The shockspan. It was a gadget from the far future, even beyond Ophon’s time. They were made by animated gobs of pus from another galaxy called the Gnarleys or something. “Still,” he said out loud, “I really am Richard Dreyfuss. *I know* it now.”

Childs faced someone else and said, “I’m afraid he’s still rather confused.”

“Those old D-70 wipes had some terrible side effects,” remarked an old familiar voice. “The ones we use now are much better. Very short lag time, complete restoration of previous identity—“

“Do you mind?” said Roger/Richard as he twisted his head around to see Dalik Ophon, the time warden, standing next to Isa Childs. A few more blocks dropped into place as he slumped back on the couch and pieced it together.

Confirmation.

He was from another time, several other times, actually, and after the Dreyfuss mission, he wanted off the timewave. He wanted time stream, a local moment, and a lifetime he could call his own. But the memory wipe and implant had been not so good, and thus the insanity of the past two years had a perfectly sane explanation.

Dalik stood over him and looked down. His face was smooth beneath a shock of jet black hair. Roger/Richard somehow remembered that Dalik Ophon was approaching two hundred years of age. Of course Ophon was from the early third millennium. Amazing, thought Roger, how quickly one can get used to reality suddenly being turned inside out.

“Roger,” the time warden began, “we don’t really have the time for you to work out your personal problems on the job—“

“Personal problems!” he exploded. “You’re the one who had these holes burned into my brain, Dalik. Besides, I’m not on the job. I’m out, quit, finished.”

The time warden slowly shook his head. “All you had was some time off, Roger. As I told you before you were wiped, if we needed you again, I’d have to come and get you.”

Roger/Richard frowned and thought back. It was all so murky. “I don’t remember agreeing to anything like that.” He rubbed his eyes and said to himself, “I don’t remember getting paid for *Close Encounters*. That was a lot of money, too.” Roger/Richard raised an eyebrow at the time warden. “What I do remember, turkey, is threatening to initiate an event ripple that would turn reality into a horror show unless I was retired. That’s what I remember.”

Dalik Ophon held out a hand and said, “It’s all quite irrelevant. We need you, and there isn’t any other choice. You’ll understand once it’s explained to you.”

“I don’t get it, Dalik. I was never very good at it. I get too involved emotionally. Why do you need me?”

The time warden raised his eyebrows and nodded. “True, you’re no expert killer, Roger. However, you are incredibly lucky. Remember that time when the mission called for taking out the Secret Service officer who interfered with the assassination of President Quayle? Remember how you—“

“I still want to know about Richard Dreyfuss,” demanded Roger. “What about the *real* Richard Dreyfuss you keep talking about? You grabbed him once before, didn’t you? Why not snatch him this time?”

“Perhaps we just did.” Dalik stood there, his eyebrows raised, until he shrugged. “Actually, there is no more Richard Dreyfuss,” answered Dalik. “He was never born.” He nodded toward Childs. “Remove the restraints. He should be sitting up for this.”

As the therapist bent to the task of opening the restraints, Roger/Richard muttered, “You geeky son of a bitch. I ought to wring your neck like a god damned chicken. I’ve been in a lot of pain and coming to you for over two years! That cost one hell of a lot of money, too!”

Child’s smiled as he finished opening the cuffs on Roger/Richard’s ankles. “And we’ve achieved quite a breakthrough, haven’t we?”

With a great deal of restraint, Roger/Richard refrained from kicking Isa Childs in the crotch.

It was something that had always been feared. Someone with timewave access and a self-appointed mission to change things would again attempt to go back to reverse or alter some core incident thereby sending an event ripple forward that would make the world a better place. Projections being the imprecise things that they were, however, the ripple might take a turn and eliminate the future altogether.

Ever since the rogue time warden, Damil Rin, took it upon himself to reverse the U.S. presidential election of 1992, the time wardens, and the world, had been suffering the consequences. Thus the absolute ban on event altering, save somehow to ameliorate the effects of the so-called “Bubba Bomb.”

This time it hadn’t been a time warden who had slipped. Instead, it was local time liaison for 1994, Peter Ryan. He was an unsuccessful television actor, part time autograph hound, and full time historian. He had gained access to the wave, had gone back to 1885 Washington, DC, and fulfilled a lifelong fantasy by preventing the assassination of U.S. President Abraham Lincoln. Of course, in so doing he killed a very popular actor known to be sympathetic to the south.

“You see,” said Ophon, “There was still one southern general who hadn’t surrendered his army. When the news reached Joe Johnston that a bunch of Yankees in Washington had celebrated Lee’s surrender by murdering Johnston’s favorite actor, John Wilkes Booth, it was one thing too many for him. General Johnston refused to order his men to lay down their arms. Instead he ordered them into the hills as guerrillas to begin organized resistance against the Union occupation. Lee joined Johnston a few days later, and there it was.”

It had made the troubles in Northern Ireland look like a barroom brawl by comparison, especially after the resistance spread to the north and west. Lincoln, his health failing, left the suppression of the resistance to then Secretary of War Stanton who instituted a rash of harsh measures that resembled the Spanish Inquisition.

Crippled by repression and constant terrorism, the United States of America never became the home of freedom or opportunity. In fact much of the world’s wealth and power became mired in the American tarbaby by supporting one side or the other. Eventually, with the rise of the Twentieth Century dictators, the planet became economically and politically bankrupt. Two fellows named Hitler and Stalin never did come to power. The monsters who rose in their stead, however, eventually reduced the world to militaristic horror and grinding poverty.

Roger frowned and looked up at the time Warden. “The event ripple; where is it? Things really suck in this time. Has it already passed?”

Dalik Ophon shook his head. “It’s passing through the late Nineteen Nineties right now, which is neither here nor there, because the human race became virtually extinct during the Nineteen Sixty-seven world holocaust.” He held his hand out indicating the city of Portland, such as it was. “In another twelve hours or so this won’t exist either. In another thirty hours neither will even the hope of time spanning. Once that happens, everyone loses his ticket on the ride.”

Pushing himself to his feet, Roger Alfred looked warily from Dalik Ophon to Isa Childs and back to the time warden.

“So, go back and waste Peter Ryan before he goes rogue, right? Cancel the event ripple?”

Dalik raised his eyebrows and cocked his head to one side as he held out his hands. “He’s already wiped himself out in a manner of speaking. Thanks to the ripple, he was never born and the ripple has already passed though his local time departure point. His only existence, therefore, is in the timewave.”

“Which can’t be touched by the other time surfers,” interrupted Roger.

Dalik winced. “I wish you wouldn’t refer to them as surfers. In any event, Peter Ryan cannot be touched unless we know where he is.”

Roger held up a hand, “And the only time appearance we know about is when Ryan killed Booth.”

“Exactly. It was outside the front of Ford’s Theater shortly after ten at night on the Fourteenth of April, 1885.”

“So what do you need me for? Just have one of your shooters take out Ryan before he has a chance to smoke Booth.”

“We can’t take the chance of frightening Booth by having a shoot-out in front of the theater,” answered Dalik. “It’s still necessary for John Wilkes Booth to assassinate President Lincoln. The only way to assure eliminating both Ryan and Lincoln is for you to impersonate Booth.”

“And there isn’t but one way to impersonate Booth, right?” Another killing spree, thought Roger/Richard. It was everything that had caused him to take the wipe two years before. Then a thought crossed his mind. “I’ve seen pictures of Booth. I don’t see any resemblance.”

Dalik Ophon turned to Isa Childs and held out a hand. “The file, please.”

“Certainly.” The therapist went to his desk, picked up a screen board and handed it to the time warden. Dalik punched in a few numbers and handed the board to Roger.

Taking the screen board, Roger Alfred looked at a picture of a man in a squat crowned hat, long coat, and baggy trousers. He was leaning his left elbow on an urn of some kind and his legs were crossed in a cavalier pose. He had a heavy black mustache and the face upon which that mustache hung was Richard Dreyfuss’s. “I’ll be damned.”

Roger’s head went back as one of his eyebrows arched. “Just a minute. Let me get this straight. You want *me* to kill this Peter Ryan *and* President Lincoln?” The eyebrows crashed into a frown. “You expect *me* to assassinate Abraham Lincoln?”

“Booth as well,” added the time warden. “After all, we can’t have two John Wilkes Booths wandering

around the president's box brandishing pistols, can we? You'll eliminate Booth and take his place, draw Ryan out and neutralize him, then dispatch Lincoln. We've made all the arrangements with the April 1865 liaison, Jason Wells. He's a detective on the city police and he can snip off any loose ends you might leave behind."

"You want *me* to assassinate Lincoln? Why in the hell don't you just give me some nails and a hammer and send me back to Golgotha to tack up Christ?"

It was quiet for a long moment, then Dalik said, "It's not like you haven't done this kind of work before." He turned toward Childs. "Is he all right? He seems a bit slow."

"He's confused. The Dreyfuss thing. He's been thoroughly obsessed by thoughts of being Richard Dreyfuss for the past two years. Of course, he's been wiped twice, as well, and as you implied, the D-70 wipes aren't exactly Memorex. I'm afraid all of this is rather an abrupt change of direction for him. He might not be completely up to the task."

"We are totally out of options," answered the time warden. "We're not going to wipe him for this mission. Even so, the amount of time we have left leaves us no room at all." Ophon rubbed his chin as he studied Roger. At last he blinked and smiled sympathetically. "You'll have to snap out of it, my boy. We can't use you as Richard Dreyfuss. We need you as John Wilkes Booth, and soon." He pointed at the spot on Roger's arm where the inject-pac had been applied. "The injection contains all of the personality data and information on Booth and it should be taking effect in another minute or two."

"I thought you said you weren't going to wipe me for this."

"We're not. The data shot is in addition to your normal memory, not in place of it."

Great, thought Roger/Richard. In another two minutes I'll be John Wilkes/Roger/Richard."

Dalik Ophon retrieved his screen board file and pointed toward a door in the rear of Childs's office. That was, Roger realized, where Isa Childs kept his time stage. "Back into the timewave, Roger. None of us have much time left at all."

9:29 PM, 14 April 1865

The world of the theater thrilled son of slaves, John Miles. Since he was not allowed to perform on stage at Ford's, and certainly could not sit in the audience, he fed off the actors by sitting high in the flies above and behind the stage, among the suspended sets and the smells of hot gas lights and cigar smoke, watching the players. There was little to like in the comedy being performed, but the relative merits of Tom Taylor's *Our American Cousin* did not concern John Miles one bit. It was the laughter of the audience that captivated him. If he could trade his life for just one night upon such a stage he knew he would do it.

The applause and cheers from the audience as the president and his party made its way through the dressing circle to his box had been quite exciting, despite the odd disappointed grumble that the real hero of the moment, General Grant, had not been with the president, as advertised.

From where he sat, Miles could not see the president's box, which was all right with him. His real heroes were the actors, and those he could see. As the beautiful Laura Keene prepared to make an entrance, Miles heard a sound coming from the rear of the theater. He turned and looked down through the tall

cathedral window at the alley below. His heart almost stopped. Although he was not in the cast of tonight's performance, the famous actor John Wilkes Booth was standing in the dirt road of the alley looking as though he was waiting for something. The way he patted his coat pocket and jerked his head around at every little sound made him look very nervous. Well, it was well known the actor drank to excess. That sort became nervous sooner or later. Too bad, really. He was such a fine performer.

It was dark, only the one gas light illuminating the alley. It was chilly and a bit hazy as the wood smoke from countless homes mixed with the damp air.

The sounds of a horse picking its way through the dark ally made John Miles strain to see who the actor had been waiting for. The animal's hooves rang on the stones. In a moment the mare and its rider came into the light. Miles didn't notice as his lower jaw fell open. The rider was John Wilkes Booth! They were *both* John Wilkes Booth!

The pedestrian Booth reached within his coat pocket for something and pulled out a strange looking weapon that resembled a green pistol grip attached to a silver comb. At the same moment the mare reared and, quick as a shot, the mounted Booth pulled a knife from beneath his coat on his left side and threw it, striking the blade deep into the other's heart.

John Miles scrambled down the stairs, turned a corner, and slammed into one of the stage hands, Ned Spangler. "Watch it, boy."

"Mr. Spangler," puffed John, "Out in back. Somebody tried to kill Mr. Booth." His eyebrows went up when he recalled which one he had originally identified as the actor. "Maybe Mr. Booth's the one who got killed."

Spangler, a skeptical look on his face, cocked his head toward the stage door. "C'mon. Let's see what you got stuck in your eye."

Miles followed Spangler out the door into the alley. "By Jesus!" exclaimed the stage hand. "Mr. Booth, sir, what ever happened?" He turned and glared at Miles. "Hold Mr. Booth's horse."

John Miles got around Spangler so he could at last see. The John Wilkes Booth who had been mounted on the horse, the reins still in his hands, was turning the other over with the toe of his boot. The dead man wore the exact same outfit as the live one, down to the highly polished spurs. Without removing his gaze from the corpse, the actor handed John Miles the reins to his horse and answered, "Damned if I know, Ned." He appeared to be almost in shock.

He squatted down to remove his knife from the dead man's chest, but paused as something seemed to catch his eye. He reached out his right hand and picked at the corpse's thick black mustache, identical to the actor's. "Will you look at this." He tore the artificial mustache from the corpse's lip and held the object out to Spangler and Miles. "What in the devil was he after?"

"Perhaps, sir, we might instead ask what you've been up to tonight." Miles turned his head back toward the stage door to see a man in his fifties dressed neatly in a brown suit and boots. He had a derby on, its brim almost covering his eyes.

Booth stood up, red faced, and answered hotly, "Make yourself clear, sir!"

The man extended the index finger of his right hand, placed it beneath the brim of his derby, and pushed the hat to the back of his head. "Detective Jason Wells, Mr. Booth, of the Washington Police. I was just wondering why a famous person such as yourself is skulking around a dark alley at this hour."

Although he feigned anger, the actor's face went pale. "I was *not* skulking. I pick up my mail at Ford's, Detective Wells, and that is why I am here right now. Everybody knows me here. As Ned. Ask John." He pointed down at the corpse. "Instead, you should be concerned with this one. As I rode up, this fellow was waiting and tried to kill me."

"That's right, sir," said John Miles pointing at the rear of the theater. "I saw him from up in that window. He had a gun, just like Mr. Booth said. It was all green and silver. Never seen anything like it."

Detective Wells squatted next to the body, examined it, and then placed two fingers across the corpse's upper lip. "You know, Mr. Booth, with a mustache, this fellow could be your twin." Booth didn't respond, and the detective rolled the man's upper body to the left far enough to pull his arm from beneath his back. Miles leaned over and saw that the curious weapon he had described was still clutched in the man's hand. "What is that, sir? What kind of gun?"

"As a matter of fact," answered the detective, "It's a Kaddik Shockspan."

"I never saw anything like it."

The policeman put the weapon in his pocket. "The Gnarmyths make them."

"Gnarmyths?" repeated Booth. "Is that a British manufacturer?"

"No," answered Wells. "The Gnarmyths are quite a bit further away than that."

There was an uproarious laugh from the audience inside the theater and Ned Spangler said to the detective. "I got to go and help change a set. It'll be my job if I miss the cue. I'll be back in a couple of minutes."

Wells shook his head, his gaze on the corpse's face. "No need to come back. This looks pretty clear cut."

As Spangler ran for the stage door, Booth held out a hand and asked, "Do you need me to make a report?"

"No, Mr. Booth." The detective leveled his cold-eyed gaze at the actor. "You are free to enter the theater and complete your business."

Miles saw a haunted look in the actor's eyes as he barely shook his head and said, "No. Not tonight. This has all been rather upsetting."

"I bet," said the detective, a strange wry smile on his lips.

Booth took the reins from John Miles without looking at him, mounted his horse, and guided it along the alley toward F Street. As soon as horse and rider were out of sight, John could hear the sounds of the animal breaking into a gallop.

"You can go, too," Wells said to John.

"Oh, I don't need to be anywhere, Detective Wells, sir."

"Well, son, maybe you ought to go someplace else. I've got work to do and I don't need any spectators."

John felt his face growing hot. "Well, sir, maybe you ought to know that John Miles is a free man who is entitled to stand on any street corner or alley in this whole city, and nobody can tell him to move if he

don't want to. They just fought a war about that, didn't you hear?" Old habits die hard, and John threw in a belated "Sir" at the end of his speech.

The detective stood, pressed his hands against the small of his back, and stretched. "Of course, you're right, son. That's what the war's about." He removed his hands from his back, pulled back his coat, and withdrew from his belt a weapon identical to the one he had taken from the corpse. One moment the detective was aiming the silver comb end of the thing at John, and the next both detective and mysterious corpse had vanished. In the dust at John Miles's feet there was nothing left but some footprints and a false mustache.

He bent over, picked up the mustache, studied it, and put it in his shirt pocket, vowing never to reveal to a single soul what had happened at the rear of Ford's Theater that night. There were already plenty of people who thought he was crazy because he wanted to be a stage actor. There would be no point in giving them ammunition. A profound frown weighing down his brow, John made it back into the flies just in time to hear Mr. Hess sing the new song, "All Honor to Our Soldiers."

"The event ripple has gone past your local time departure point, Roger. That's why we had to bring you forward for another try." Dalik Ophon was standing next to a woman clad in combat utilities, Shalla Inam, local time liaison for AD 2294. They stood in the tower of the Eastern Army Defense Center. Roger Alfred turned and looked through the observation port across the Potomac River. There was a great black obelisk rising from the rubble of Arlington that was the nerve center for the region's missile defense grid. Several smoking blocks of rubble on both sides of the river testified to the imperfections of the system.

The general data screens had briefed them. The Western and Southern armies, under the command of General Julio Diaz, were moving against Harrisonburg, a hundred miles to the southwest. All projections showed the Eastern Army defenses crumbling within a matter of days. Everyone Roger could see on 23rd Street below was armed. Children were filling and stacking sandbags to protect the government defense positions.

Roger turned and faced Dalik. "I was feeling pretty terrible about fouling up the mission until I was brought here. Are you telling me this is the future we want to protect?"

"Life isn't all sweetness and light, Roger," Dalik Ophon responded as he came up and joined him in front of the armored observation port. "In another two years Field Marshal Angus will reestablish the North American Parliament in Montreal, the treaties between the east, west, north, and south will be signed and the prime minister will lead North America to crush the dictator of the Latin American Union. Then ... things get better. It isn't perfect, Roger, but *it is* the future that produced the timewave generator several hundred years later. Once the ripple reaches there, our scientists have some doubt about our continued existence, even in the timewave."

"What about the new ripple? What are the projections now when neither Booth nor Lincoln dies?"

Dalik nodded. "I must admit things were — are improved. The extinction of the human race was put off for an additional twenty-six years."

"What? With Lincoln left alive and Reconstruction—"

"In 1869, at the beginning of his third term in office, Lincoln went quite insane. Actually, it had been going on long before that. It only became obvious in '69. By then, however, Lincoln was under the power of a

band of unscrupulous manipulators who had sacked the south, and invaded Canada under the pretext of joining Alaska to the motherland. Britain came in, of course, and the world chose up sides, with fairly similar results to the Booth-Dies-Lincoln-Lives scenario.”

As Roger raised his gaze and let it settle on the ruins of the Lincoln Memorial, he touched the fingers of one hand to his chest. “That knife, Dalik; I just wasn’t prepared.”

“You knew he was an expert with knife, foil, and firearms.”

“I just didn’t realize what being an expert with a knife meant. He must have been twenty-five feet away. Booth couldn’t have hit my heart more to the center if he’d been a surgeon with a scalpel.” He glanced at the time warden. “I go back for another try, right?”

“Of course.”

Roger nodded and raised an eyebrow at Ophon. “Booth never showed at the front of the theater, right? That means Ryan’s been tipped off.”

“Correct. Our observers couldn’t spot him anywhere on Tenth Street. We must assume he’s onto us. He’ll probably move forward to take Booth out at an earlier time. We’re sending you in on the evening of the thirteenth. We only know Booth’s location for certain during the night of the thirteenth and at several points the day of the fourteenth. The event ripple is accelerating. In linear time we only have perhaps twenty-eight hours before time span local is eliminated. Hence, we have to move now.”

“What if Ryan goes back to a scheduled performance Booth was in a few years earlier and takes him out then?”

Dalik nodded. “That’s right. You were in the timestream when Pebbek first proposed his event vacuum theory. In short, if there was no John Wilkes Booth, events would probably be so altered that Lincoln might not have become president, or if he did the times would most likely produce another Booth. Another assassin would be wrung from the spatiotemporal pulp, as it were.”

“Theory, probably, likely—”

“As lame as it sounds to you, Roger, within certain limits Pebbek’s theory works as advertised. Certainly Ryan can’t afford to disregard it. He knows we won’t. Therefore, we can count on Ryan attempting to get to Booth at the National Hotel the night of the thirteenth. You have to get there first—”

“I know,” interrupted Roger. “Take out Booth, kill Ryan, then assassinate the president.”

“Don’t forget the fellow in the alley behind Ford’s Theater. He’s still going to be there.”

“What fellow ... you mean *me* ? I have to take out *myself* ?” Dalik allowed the silence in the room to answer Roger’s question. “You know, Dalik, it’s coming back to me now why I quit on you the last time.” He glared at the impassive face of the local time liaison, Shalla Inam. “Why doesn’t she ever say anything?”

“She doesn’t know any English.”

“I thought you said she’s an officer in the Eastern Army.”

Dalik smiled sadly. “Oh, you thought. . .” He shrugged and held out his hands. “The Eastern Army comes from the East, Roger, not from New Jersey.”

“I don’t want to hear about it,” muttered Roger as he headed toward the back room where Shalla Inam kept her time stage.

11:03 PM, 13 April 1865

“Dalik Ophon and his crowd’ve managed to disable Ryan’s time stage,” said Detective Wells as the pair stood in front of the National. Despite the occasional shower, the boom and flash of fireworks combined with the laughter and singing on the street, giving a strange, festive flavor to the fear in Roger’s mouth. He was not made up as Booth to avoid attracting attention, although he did draw an occasional questioning look.

Roger frowned as he fought down the renewed conviction that he was Richard Dreyfuss, tricked, manipulated, lied to, and bullied into this role of all roles. He rubbed his eyes and asked, “So, what does that do for us? I’m sure Ryan arranged something before Dalik pulled the plug.”

The detective nodded in agreement. “Most likely. What it means, though, is that we only have to take care of it this one time. Ryan doesn’t have anymore tries.”

“Neither do we,” replied Roger, his voice flat and hostile. “Wells, how does someone from 1865 get approached to be a local time liaison?”

The large man pushed his derby to the back of his head and smiled. “It was a book, a work of adventure fiction, called *Time Enough*. I read it, was captivated by it, and when the advertisement in the back of the book said the names of more such works were available simply by sending in my name and address, I did so.”

“And not long after, there came Dalik Ophon knocking on your door. So he lied to you, too.”

“How so? I have gotten more books.”

Roger shook his head. “No, man, you don’t get it. The time warden’s a slimeball, every move has a hidden agenda. He’s up to his eyeballs twisting, turning, manipulating people and events to get what he wants.”

Jason Wells held a hand out toward the hotel. “Isn’t that what we’re doing?”

“Sure,” replied Roger sarcastically. “Right.”

The detective scratched his chin for a moment and frowned. “Look, Mr. Dreyfuss—”

“—Alfred,” corrected Roger. “I think.”

“You said—”

“I know what I said, Wells. What were you going to ask?”

Jason Wells shrugged and held out his hands. “Very well. If you don’t like this work, why do you do it?”

“I don’t really. I quit on Dalik two years ago.” Roger began waving a hand to try and pin down for the detective where “two years ago” was located, but Wells waved aside the explanation. “Okay, Dalik put the guilt on me. ‘Roger, the world’s going to end if you don’t go back and do the mission.’ Besides, I was very confused.”

“You’re not confused now, are you?”

Roger sneered at his companion. “I still am, but that’s not the point. It’s personal now. That bastard Boothkilled me!”

Wells turned then and Roger looked to see what had drawn the man’s attention. A bellhop, his bulk forced into an uncomfortably tight blue uniform, complete with triple rows of bright shiny buttons down his chest and a pill box cap on his head, was signaling from the door. Wells nodded back and the bellhop returned inside.

“That’s my man, Groves,” said the detective. “Booth is in his room and alone. I have three men posted on his floor. Whatever happens, you’ll be alone in there. Are you going to take him with the shockspan?”

Roger nodded. “I can use that through the door if I have to. I’m sure as hell not going to duel with him with pistols or knives.”

“Very wise.” He nodded his head toward the gas lighted doors of the National. “It’s time. Ask the desk for your key. Your room is right across the hallway from Booth’s. Your key will fit Booth’s lock, as well.”

“My key? What name?”

“Your name.” The detective raised his eyebrows and thrust his hands into his coat pockets. “Well, it was your name. I’m sorry. Ask for Richard Dreyfuss’s key.”

His throat dry, his makeup as John Wilkes Booth complete, Roger left his room and stood outside Booth’s door and lifted his left hand. His right hand held the grip of his shockspan, the weapon set on kill. He took a breath, let it escape, and gave the door a quick double rap with his knuckles.

“Yes?” boomed the actor’s voice from the other side of the door.

“Fresh pillow, sir.”

“It’s about time. I can’t imagine what possessed the maid to take the bed’s pillow in the first place.” The door opened and Booth stood there, his suspenders hanging from his waist, his thick dark eyebrows raised. “Well?”

Roger raised the shockspan and Booth twisted and sprang to one side as Roger pulled the trigger, catching only the lower left quadrant of his target. The actor was dragging his dead leg as he reached for his coat hanging from the back of a chair. Roger fired twice more and watched as John Wilkes Booth fell to the floor like a load of wet wash.

Feeling faint, Roger closed the door behind him, went to the edge of the bed, and sat down, for some reason thinking about the movie, *Jaws* and Martha’s Vineyard, wishing he were there and back then. Killing Booth, he realized, hadn’t exorcised his personal demon. It was Ryan who needed to be killed. He was the one who had started this ball rolling.

Roger looked around the room, a chill running through his body. At any point over the next twenty-three hours Ryan could strike. He already knew one place where he would have to make a try: in front of the theater where he had killed Booth before. How many more tries had Ryan managed before Dalik Ophon managed to cut him off from the timewave? One? Five? A hundred and five? There was also the small

matter of his own attempt to kill himself at the rear of the theater.

There was a bottle of brandy on the room's dresser. Roger eyed it as he tried to make a decision between the brandy or setting his shockspan on mild stun and shooting himself in the head. Either way, it was a quick way to escape the noise in his head and get some sleep.

There was a knock at the door followed by Wells's familiar voice calling, "Maid service."

Roger stood, went to the door, and opened it. Behind the detective were two of his minions. They walked past Roger, picked up John Wilkes Booth's body, and hurried out the door. "We'll be keeping an eye on you all night, Rich — Roger," said Jason Wells. "Get some sleep." He held out a feather pillow and left as Roger took it.

After closing the door, Roger threw the pillow on the bed and, fully clothed, dropped onto the bed and closed his eyes, strains of Simon and Garfunkle singing the hey Mrs. Robinson song threading into his dreams.

9:29 PM, 14 April 1865

Roger shivered in the cool night air as he turned the horse onto F Street and rode toward the opening to the alley. Every nerve was strung to its limit. He had kept all of Booth's appointments that day. It had been necessary to do so to keep the bait alive for Ryan. The plan had been to keep everything as close to the known facts as possible. Who knew what consequences might accrue if someone's life took on a different spin because Booth didn't get his haircut at 8:30, or was there in his room when his drunken friend, Michael O'Laughlin, called, or was himself sober at the wrong moment.

At eleven he had walked to Ford's to pick up his mail and met there with Henry Clay Ford and the stage carpenter, James Gifford. There was where Booth was supposed to have learned that President Lincoln would be attending the performance that night with General Grant.

Later, he was there on E Street when James Ford, his buggy loaded with bunting to decorate Lincoln's box, stopped to have a chat. From there he had gone to Howard's Stable on Seventh, paid his bill, and arranged to have his one-eyed roan delivered to the small stable behind Ford's Theater. Then he went across the Mall to Pumphrey's Stable and ordered that a horse be saddled and waiting for him at four o'clock. As Booth was known to have said, Roger repeated, "I'll be back," and, as difficult as it was, he said it without an Austrian accent.

Back at the National he dressed, putting on his boots, spurs, his black suit and hat. He stuck the familiar long sheathed knife into his belt at his left side, and into his pockets he placed a compass, his timepiece, a gimlet, and a small brass derringer.

After dressing, he went to Herndon House, met with Lewis Paine, and discussed the plans. Paine, if he could gather enough wit, was to make his way to Secretary of State Seward's house and dispatch the sick old man. After picking up his horse at four, Roger rode up Sixth Street to the Avenue and rode Pennsylvania to E Street, where he tied the animal to a hitching post at Grover's Theater, went to Deery's tavern upstairs, and pretended to swill brandy. Then he went down to the manager's office, which was empty, and took a facsimile of Booth's letter to the *National Intelligencer*, glanced over it, and sealed it. Then, still looking over his shoulder for Peter Ryan, he had gone to Ford's.

At Ford's Theater he had talked with an actor named Maddox, and then rode off in the direction of

Pennsylvania Avenue. On Fourteenth Street he met John Matthews, another actor who Booth had once tried to enlist in one of his conspiracies against the President. Matthews had refused. Roger shook the man's hand, as prescribed, and left him with the letter to deliver to the *Intelligencer* before noon the next day.

There was the chance passing of General Grant's carriage on Fifteenth Street, and the subsequent conversation with a soldier confirming that it was Grant and that the general was on his way to New Jersey. A little later he met with George Atzerodt and discussed with the drunken buffoon his plans to kill Vice-president Johnson. Atzerodt whined, cried, and generally made Roger Alfred wonder if there had been anyone in the conspiracy that wasn't on the sauce.

In the Alley at Ford's he invited Ned Spangler, James Maddox, and Jacob Ritterspaugh to Taltavul's for a drink, left them there with a bottle, and returned to the empty theater to prepare Lincoln's box for the assassination. It was in the silence of the theater, after he had carved out the plaster for the doorjamb, and while he was making the hole in the door with the gimlet, that he thought he heard a noise. It turned out to be nothing but a cat, but it had taken Roger a full five minutes before he could complete the observation hole and get out of there and go back to the National for a rest.

The clerk at the desk had looked like Peter Ryan. Several persons along the streets had looked like him. Even one of the bellhops. At eight, Roger had met with Atzerodt, Herold, and Paine to discuss final plans. As they sat talking on horseback, the surrounding air reeked with alcohol causing Roger to wonder what shape the world would've taken had the first time warden gone back and rendered extinct the race of little bugs that ate sugar and excreted alcohol. That thought still teased his mind as he rode the mare down the alley, past the Negro shanties, to face himself.

He gathered his thoughts quickly, because, although the self behind the theater was no John Wilkes Booth, he did have a shockspan and he was a killer. Taking no chances, he had his own shockspan, actually the same shockspan, ready in one hand, the reins in the other.

There were so many things crowding his mind. Why hadn't Ryan struck? Was he counting on his original appearance in front of the theater to take care of things by itself? That didn't seem likely. Ryan had to know they'd be prepared for him this run.

"One killing at a time," he muttered as the glow from the gas light appeared ahead. Suddenly there was the sound of footsteps in the shadows. "Who's there?" demanded Roger as he reined in his mount, lifted his weapon, and aimed it in the direction of the sounds. After a minute staring into the darkness, Roger pressed his knees against the mare's sides and turned his attention toward the next task. In a moment, himself, costumed and made up as John Wilkes Booth, came into view. He was reaching for his shockspan as Roger lifted his and sent a lethal charge into his own body. As the Roger Alfred beneath the gaslight dropped, the one on the horse felt something within himself die as well.

Two figures came rushing out of the darkness of the E Street end of the alley and bent over the body. It was Detective Wells and one of his men. Roger dismounted and looked up at the tall window through which the historical John Miles had seen everything.

"I got someone to send Miles on an errand," said Wells. The detective gestured to his companion. "Let's get going. I don't fancy trying to explain all this to myself." He glanced at Roger and said, "Good luck." Then the two men and their corpse were gone.

Roger took a deep breath and called out, "Spangler!"

In a moment Ned Spangler came rushing out. "What is it, Mr. Booth?"

“Can you hold my horse for me here? I won’t be very long.”

“I can’t, Mr. Booth. I got me just too much to do.”

“Is there anyone else in there?”

“John Miles was sent off on an errand.” Spangler held up a finger in a classic eureka pose. “I know. Johnny Peanut. He don’t have nothin’ to do until the play’s over. I’ll get him.”

As Ned ran through the stage door Roger wondered if Johnny Peanut would turn out to be a tall killer named Peter Ryan. Instead he turned out to be a squat fellow whose main ambitions in life appeared to be filth and liquor. He supported himself by lighting the gas lights in the theater before performances and extinguishing them afterward. He took the reins of Roger’s mare and Roger entered the theater, removing his gloves. He nodded and grinned pleasantly to several fellow actors, and asked one if he could cross the stage behind the set. The actor shook his head and pointed toward the access tunnel that ran beneath the stage.

Roger stood for a moment in the wings and tried to see the president’s box through the haze. He couldn’t see anything, and a utility man came up beside him and asked, “Is there something you want, Mr. Booth.”

“No. I was just wondering if I could cross behind the set. I want to get to the other side.”

“No, Mr. Booth. The dairy scene is on. You’ll have to go under the stage.”

Roger headed for the passage, and once he was beneath the boards, he could hear the actors moving about, the mumble of their lines, the laughs from the audience. In a flash he was in the side alley leading to Tenth Street. He opened the alley door and peered to his right. There, beneath the gas lights, sat a lone soldier in a chair. He nodded at the man, turned, and entered Taltavul’s saloon. There he ordered a bottle of whiskey and water from Peter Taltavul, and listened as the room full of drunks toasted Union, Columbia, Grant, Lincoln, and Peter Taltavul’s bald spot.

At one point one of the drunks said to Roger, “You’ll never be the actor your father was.” Even though the barb was directed at John Wilkes Booth and not Roger, still Roger had an urge to ask the red-nosed souse if he would like Roger to stick his hand down his throat, grab his asshole and yank him inside out. He was a little on edge. Besides, there was a script.

“When I leave the stage,” quoted Roger, “I will be the most famous man in America.”

10:08 PM, 14 April 1865

Sergeant Dye shrugged his shoulders against the damp chill and the pungent odor of wood smoke and let his attention wander next door to the happy sounds coming from Taltavul’s. He had seen the famous actor John Wilkes Booth enter the saloon a short time before. The soldier passed his tongue over his lips and contemplated how a hot rum would go down at that moment. There was nothing going on right then and it wouldn’t take but a minute. Just then, however, the actor emerged from the front of Taltavul’s and stood talking with a man whose face Dye knew, the theater’s costumer, Lewis Carland. A man the sergeant didn’t recognize lit a pipe and joined the conversation. They were talking theater, and the sergeant felt a touch of contempt. The stage, he thought, is a silly place filled with silly people.

A fourth man came down from F Street and asked the trio the time. The man with the pipe looked into the lobby of the theater and said “After ten.” The questioner continued down the street and Sergeant Dye

recognized him as a singer at Ford's named Hess.

Drunken singing came from across Tenth Street and the distant sounds of fireworks and band music threatened to tease Dye from his post. The sergeant was impatient for the end of the play when he could go off duty and join the celebrants.

The performer named Hess returned and again asked the time. He explained that he was to go on just before the final scene and join two other singers in performing the new song by Professor Withers, "All Honor to Our Soldiers." Booth laughed uproariously at this comment, and Sergeant Dye concluded that the actor was quite a bit in his cups, although his eyes seemed very wary. There was no shame in being drunk. The entire city was drunk.

From the direction of F Street came another man. He stopped and joined the conversation, concentrating his attentions on the actor. Dye recognized Captain Williams of the Washington Cavalry Police. "Mr. Booth," said the Captain, gesturing toward Taltavul's, "would you do me the honor of allowing me to buy you a drink?"

Booth pulled out his pocket watch, checked the time, and shook his head. "Keene will be onstage in a minute and I promised to take a look for her." The actor made a complete turn as he checked around himself, looking for someone.

Another admirer approached from the direction of E Street and he stopped next to Captain Williams and seemed to study Booth for a moment. The man was clad in riding boots, as was Booth, however he wore dress more suited to the west than to the streets of the District. He was a tall lanky man, young and well built, with a clear face carrying few years. Beneath the brim of his western hat he had dark hair and eyes that seemed to glitter. "Wilkes Booth?" the man inquired.

Everyone but the actor seemed highly amused at the admirer's question. It was obviously from one who had never seen the younger Booth on the boards. "I am," answered the actor, looking up at the stranger.

The tall admirer in the western outfit slowly shook his head and said, "I'll be damned. You really do look like Richard Dreyfuss." Then he began to pull a weapon from beneath his jacket. Booth shouted to his companions, "He has a gun!"

Captain Williams and Booth wrestled the man to the ground, and the actor took a swing and knocked the man senseless. With the would be brigand limp on the ground, a small crowd seemed to gather. One of the men was a large man in a derby hat. "I'm Detective Wells, Washington Police. What's going on here?"

There were hurried, disjointed descriptions, and while the talking was going on, the detective fished a strange green handled weapon from the stranger's pocket and placed it into his own. After the detective was again standing, Sergeant Dye could've sworn that in a low voice he said to the actor, "That was easy." Getting no response, the detective asked, "You killed yourself. Why didn't you kill him?"

John Wilkes Booth simply shook his head and went into the main entrance of the theater.

Lincoln had to be taken out with the derringer. In 1865 death by shockspan would leave too many unanswered questions. It had to be Lincoln dead, by the hand of John Wilkes Booth, and in a manner possible given the times. After walking quietly around the spectators in the darkened dress circle adjoining the presidential box, Roger stood before the empty chair where the president's guard was

supposed to be sitting. According to the data shot, the guard was long gone and would be no trouble. There was a huge laugh from the audience, and Roger opened the door and slipped in. There was one more door to go through to get to the president, and Roger could see a spot of dim light made by the gimlet hole he had made.

Picking up the pine plank he had hidden, he held one end against the inside of the door and shoved the other end into the hole he had made in the plaster. Once the outer door had been secured, he went to the door to box number seven and peered through the hole. The president was seated in his rocking chair, his wife sitting to his right. To her right, almost facing the door to the box, were an officer, Henry Rathbone, and his fiancée, Clara Harris.

Rathbone would have to be watched, Roger reminded himself. He was the one who Booth had had to stab to get free of the box after shooting the president.

President Lincoln was closest to the door, and Roger watched the back of the man's head, wishing he could see the face. Time becomes a joke to those who spend too much time in the timewave, and history had become, to Roger, nothing but a vast video library playable in extreme virtual reality. Still, from somewhere deep inside himself, he had a great respect, a deep reverence, for the man he was supposed to kill. His tongue passed over dry lips as he doubted if he could pull the trigger.

At the sound of someone brushing against the outer door, Roger bolted upright and turned. It was Ryan, he thought. It had to be. The doorknob was turned but the pine jamb held the door shut fast. The doorknob stopped turning and there was a long silence from that direction. From the direction of the stage, however, came the assassin's cue lines. The actress playing Mrs. Mountchessington said to her daughter, "Augusta, to your room!"

"Yes, ma," replied Augusta. "The nasty beast!"

Soon there would be no one left on stage save Harry Hawk, playing the part of Mr. Trenchard, and Harry Hawk was no match for a man brandishing a knife. The way to freedom would be clear. Roger would shoot Lincoln and would probably have to cut Major Rathbone. Then it was a twelve foot jump to the stage and out the back door to where Johnny Peanut was holding his mare. It stunned Roger how simple the whole thing had been. One bold man with a knife and a single shot pistol had killed the president, made it to the stage, gave a quick speech (*Sic semper tyrannis*) according to some accounts, stymied an entire audience, and exited, stage right on a broken ankle.

"I am aware, Mr. Trenchard," said the character of Mrs. Mountchessington, "that you are not used to the manners of a good soc—"

Roger peered again through the gimlet hole, watched the back of the President's head hardly moving, then heard Henry Hawk say, "Don't know the manners of a good society, eh?"

That was the cue line. With the derringer in his hand, he opened the door, stepped into the box, and came up behind the President as Henry Hawk delivered the big laugh line of the night, "Wal, I guess I know enough to turn you inside out, you sockdologizing old man trap!"

As the audience roared, Roger lifted the derringer and watched in horror as the President stood and faced him, a Colt pistol in his hand. "The name's Ryan," said the president just as he fired from the waist blowing a sizeable hole through Roger's heart.

Somehow he was glad he had failed. As Roger went down, the blackness coming over him, he vaguely heard his own derringer fire. In a swim of faded sounds a high pitched woman's voice screamed, "Dear God! They've shot Mrs. Lincoln!"

3:04 PM, 26 June, 2117

When Roger opened his eyes, Abraham Lincoln was looking down at him. Lincoln smiled and removed both wart and beard, revealing the face of Peter Ryan. "I think he's awake, Dalik."

"What's he doing here?" croaked Roger.

Dalik Ophon, Isa Childs, and Jason Wells came around the heated gel couch and looked down at Roger. "How are you feeling?" asked the time warden.

"Feeling?" Roger scowled as he sat up. "I feel like I failed and the universe is about to come to an end, that's how I feel." He nodded toward Ryan. "What's he doing here?"

"He's on our side, now," said Jason Wells as he lowered his bulk into a puff chair.

"You mean he's out to kill himself?"

"No," answered Ryan. "Things have changed a bit."

"Changed?" Roger looked at Isa Childs. "Changed how?"

His former therapist held out a hand toward a window wall. "Have a look."

Roger gingerly touched where both knife and bullet had, in other realities, entered his chest and stopped his heart. Getting to his feet he walked to the window wall and looked down upon an enormous park that seemed to cover the land as far as the eye could see. In the distance, Roger could see several gleaming spires rising above the trees. There were two other structures, as well. The Capitol and the Washington Monument. Down below, sleek silent vehicles streaked along a local viaduct.

"When is this?"

"2117," answered Ryan.

"June," added the time warden.

Roger turned and held out his hands. "I don't get it. The event ripple should've passed here hours ago, killing everyone."

"It did," answered Dalik. "Several of them, in fact. This is the Lincoln lives, Mary Todd Lincoln dies scenario."

"When you went down," said Ryan, "your derringer went off and killed the first lady. You wouldn't believe how the press suddenly loved her once she had a slug in her head."

"Okay," said Roger as he faced Peter Ryan. "Let's have whatever it is you clowns are busting to say. Spit it out. Where was Lincoln during the play?"

"He was on his way south by train to personally accept the surrender of General Joseph Johnston."

"Our boy Ryan entered the stream back in '64," said Wells, "and worked his way into being a double for Lincoln for certain kinds of functions."

“So, what’s going on here?” demanded Roger. “Lincoln goes insane, right, and the world goes to hell?”

“No,” answered Dalik. “It seems that Lincoln became almost a god, he was held in such reverence. He held office for three more terms, and his son Robert became president after him.”

“Lincoln lived,” said Ryan with great satisfaction. “The South was rebuilt. Freedom, peace, education, and prosperity. Eventually there was no underclass. By popular acclaim the presidential title became hereditary, making the Lincolns our royal family. Eventually it became intermarried with the European, Eastern, and Asian royal families, and the world is what you see now: a stable population of about two billion, no war, no poverty, no unemployment, a world-wide realization of the American Dream.”

Roger frowned as he slowly shook his head. “I don’t get it,” said Roger. “I thought Lincoln went stark raving gibbers in ’69—”

“His wife was what drove him over the edge,” said Dalik. “Mary Todd Lincoln had been quite mad since the death of her son William in 1862. If she had remained alive, she probably would’ve driven the president mad, as well. Your killing the first lady has made the world what it is today. As I once told you, Roger. You’re not very good at this, but you are incredibly lucky.”

“What do you mean? Aren’t we going back? Set things right?”

“There’s nothing to set right. Reality is what it is, and it contains no provisions for time spanning. We only had time enough to get us inserted into the stream here before the timewave was eliminated altogether. We’re all in the stream now.”

With a great weariness, Roger again looked through the window wall at Washington. It would take time to get used to it all. The new time, the new reality. He was almost afraid to ask about Hollywood and *Close Encounters*. Before he could, however, Peter Ryan stood beside him and held out a pen and a pad of paper. “What’s that?”

“I just wanted to ask you for your autograph.”

“What?”

“You are Richard Dreyfuss, aren’t you? I’m certain of it. If I can get your autograph, I’ll be the only one in the world who has one.”

“Dreyfuss wasn’t born into this reality,” explained Isa Childs. “No *Close Encounters*; no Oscar; no *What About Bob?*”

“I’d like one anyway,” said Ryan. “For sentimental reasons.”

Roger glanced at the time warden, then let his gaze drift to Peter Ryan’s face. “If I am Richard Dreyfuss,” said Roger, “I don’t give autographs.”

Still Waters

Benjamin Waters sat at the far end of the counter in Izzy’s Deli on East 74th Street sipping his coffee. The pin-striped fellow to his left asked for the salt and Benjamin pushed it gently in the man’s direction.

“Thanks,” said the suit.

Benjamin didn't answer. The man looked and smelled like a lawyer. Besides, Benjamin Waters was fully engaged in studying the perfectly pear shaped buttocks on the waitress behind the counter. She was new.

Suzie was usually behind the counter at noon. This one's name was Nola. Benjamin felt his lips grow dry. He did not moisten them with his tongue, however. Too revealing. Instead he sipped his coffee and used Izzy's decaf to provide the necessary humidity.

The way Nola moved. The way she moved beneath that sheer yellow uniform. It was obvious how she was making him do it. The way she jiggled forced Benjamin to lean over the counter, grab her hips with both hands, lift her high in the air above his head, and begin biting. Biting through the phony lace apron strings, biting through the yellow polyester, biting through the black knit panties he knew were beneath, biting deep into the creamy pillows of her buttocks, the feral cries coming from his throat, the hot blood drowning the cries, the warm wetness of it running down his chest onto the floor—

“Would you like me to freshen that up?”

The waitress, Nola, was standing before him, coffee pot in hand. Benjamin pulled his mind back from his cannibal feast and glanced up at her. Nola's lips, touched with the color of ripe peaches, were parted in a smile that revealed a slight overbite.

Benjamin looked down at his cup as he felt the heat rise in his collar. “Please,” he answered.

The heat, he knew, was the last vestige of an alien feeling called embarrassment; a feeling that suspected that others might be able to see what he was thinking, and might catch him thinking it.

He knew no one could see what he was thinking. No one could tell, no one could react, accuse, or punish. He almost had the feeling entirely conquered. Once his victory was complete, he could experience his chosen realities at will, while continuing to travel within the one that contained Izzy's Deli, East 74th Street, and the Merit Literary Agency where he held down a desk and attempted to sell literature to baboons who were only interested in purchasing “another.” Another *Godfather*, another *Carrie*, another Ninja damned turtle rapping Muppet heap of horseshit.

“You're Benny Waters, aren't you?”

“Benjamin.” He looked up at her. She was still smiling. “How do you know me?”

“Suzie. She told me all about you.” The outside ends of her eyebrows were turned wickedly up. Her eyes were greenish blue.

“She told you what about me?”

He felt light-headed; his skin tingled. Trapped. She's got your number, Benjamin Waters. It's all over for you. Your secrets are everyone else's idle gossip. The cops are waiting outside the deli door.

Suzie had done some time in Benjamin's fantasies, although he never before suspected that she suspected. Her suspicions could have only been in the general, he reminded himself. After all, the specifics had been rather lurid, involving at times several partners, and once a well endowed Clydesdale, straight off the beer wagon.

“Suzie said you're a literary agent.”

“I work for one,” said Benjamin. “The Merit Agency, around the corner.”

Why did her eyes seem to speak a different language? She had knowing eyes. Sherlock Holmes had

eyes like that. "It must be interesting work," she began, but was interrupted by another customer who wanted coffee. As she left, Benjamin glanced down at his watch. It was approaching time for him to end his lunch break. He looked up and allowed his eyes a moment longer to continue their exploration of Nola's buttocks.

Someone was watching him.

The cop sitting facing him from one of the tiny imitation wrought iron tables near the street window had a face like a shark: white, dead, and full of menace. The officer was looking at him, his thick lips curled into a sneer. "You have to do it with your eyes 'cause you can't get one in your hands," said the patrolman's look.

Smart said let it go. Whoever listened to smart?

"Why don't you write a book about it, asshole?" Benjamin shouted across the deli at the cop. Everyone, eyes wide and mouths open, looked first at Benjamin, then at their immediate surroundings to determine who Benjamin had been addressing. The cop, his brow knotting into a storm, rose to his feet and cocked his head as he tucked his thumbs behind his gun belt.

"What did you say?"

"Don't tell me you're deaf as well as stupid, you butt ugly blue fuzzed flatfoot asshole you." Benjamin closed his eyes, put back his head, and laughed at the officer.

"I said it," he shouted, "I said it, and I'm glad I said it, I tell you! Glad! Glad!" He laughed again.

When he opened his eyes, he saw that the officer's gun was out of its holster, aimed in his direction. The gun jumped, the concussion smacking every eardrum in the room, as it fired.

Benjamin quickly grabbed the lawyer, and using him as a shield, pushed his way toward the enraged cop. He felt the lawyer's body twitch violently each time one of the officer's slugs tore into it. When he was a step from the cop, he shoved the lawyer's lifeless form into the officer and disarmed him.

Once he had the gun in his hands, Benjamin blew the cop away, turned and smoked a customer who attempted to help the officer, and pulped the face of the customer behind the first just for good measure—

"Here's your check," interrupted Nola.

"Thanks," answered Benjamin as he looked to see the amount.

He pulled out three dollars for the tip. He usually left two for Suzie. Nola was different. Special. It was the eyebrows. The mouth. The eyes.

On his way to the cashier, Benjamin passed the patrolman. The cop was half way through a lettuce and tomato sandwich. "Still watching the calories, Tony?" Benjamin asked the cop.

"Yeah. The doc wants fifteen more pounds off by the end of next month. Hey, Benny, how do you stay so skinny?"

"Surgery, seltzer, and celery. And that's Benjamin."

Tony the cop laughed. "Yeah, sure. Later." He went back to his sandwich as Benjamin handed his money and check to Julio and stepped into the chill that was whistling down the street. He pulled up the

collar of his coat against the wind and turned the corner. There, huddling for warmth in a doorway was that same damned bum that whined at him for money every time he passed. The same damned army blanket for a coat, the same damned red stocking cap with the holes in it. The bum did it again.

“Hey, buddy. Can you spare a couple of bucks? I’m really hurting. Can ya, buddy? Huh?” The begging in his voice was not matched by the look in his cold gray eyes. The eyes said, I know I got you. I got you right by the guilts. You got a job. I can see you got a job. The world can see you got one and I don’t. The money is mine. I got a right to it. You *owe* me.

“Owe you? *I owe* you?” Benjamin stepped into the doorway and faced the derelict. “Here, you son of a bitch.” He reached beneath the bum’s blanket and pulled out a three quarter’s full bottle of muscatel. “Here’s your god, you bug infested piece of shit! Ask *it* for money! Ask *it* for a place to sleep!”

The bum grabbed for the bottle. Benjamin took it and shoved it neck first into the derelict’s mouth. He smacked the bottom of the bottle with the heel of his hand, driving it down into the man’s throat. As the bum choked, Benjamin kicked the bum’s legs out from beneath him. Down he fell, smashing his head on the concrete landing, the bottle still caught in his throat, the cheap wine filling his esophagus. Benjamin hauled back his foot and swung the toe of his jack boot at the bum’s chin, shattering the glass as it struck—

“Thanks, Benny,” said the bum as he took the two dollars Benjamin had given him and tucked it away beneath his blanket coat. “Give those publishers hell.”

“Sure, Freddy. Take care of yourself.”

The bum hid his hands beneath his armpits and stamped his feet against the cold as he looked past Benjamin for the next touch of the day.

“And it’s not Benny; it’s Benjamin,” he muttered.

On his way back to his office, Benjamin Waters forced a middle aged matron to eat her own poodle’s feces, followed by the poodle. He left her hanging in a tree by her dog’s rhinestone studded leash. In addition, he tore out the tongue of a loud cabbie, jammed a coin pot up the ass of a bell-ringing Salvation Army sergeant, cut the throat of a pushy flower lady, and had sex with a cover girl model in the back of her maroon limo.

Just before he entered his own building, he decided that he had had enough. He was fed up and he wasn’t going to take it anymore. At that moment the Chrysler Building imploded, sending the entire column of rubble down to the street in a choking cloud of mental dust. Prior evacuation of the building had not been a particular concern of Benjamin’s, since allowing oneself to work in such a structure in effect condoned the thing, compounding the crime.

Before his desk at the agency, Benjamin Waters mentally flipped a coin. Heads he would call his therapist. Tails he would call the next editor on his worksheet. The mental coin, as it always did, came up tails.

The editor was Colin Dean, a dribbling case of arrested mental development who couldn’t tell Voltaire from a voltmeter. Dean might be interested in the new Roger Parish novel, but Benjamin had been warned in advance not to expect anything near what Roger had gotten for his first novel. Times are lean, budgets are tight, and that’s how that song is played.

Benjamin was convinced that Colin Dean had spent his entire perverted youth watching *Baretta* reruns. And that’s the name of that game.

At Grover Hill, Dean's secretary put Benjamin on hold. His ear filled with Bobby Darin's rendition of "Mack the Knife," Oh the shark bites, with his teeth, dear, scarlet billows, eek, eek, etc.

Benjamin hated being put on hold, particularly when he knew it was only for effect. He could see Colin Dean, that eternal smirk on his pasty face, looking at the telephone as he left his office to gab with someone or to take a leak.

Enough was enough. It wasn't all games, deals, and hey baby on the telephone. Roger Parish needed to eat, too. His family needed to eat. No one can spend four years writing a book only to get a fifteen thousand dollar advance and expect to live, support a family.

Put Benjamin Waters on hold. He's only second string at Merit. A little cool down time on hold will set the proper tone for negotiations. You give us the book; we give you squat. Have a nice day.

Benjamin lowered the receiver to his desk, grabbed his coat, and in moments he was on the sidewalk hailing a cab. How long would he have on hold? The last time Colin Dean had kept him there sixteen minutes. The time before it was closer to twenty.

The cab pulled up to the curb before a familiar structure on the row. Throwing a twenty at the cabbie, he rushed into the lobby and took an express elevator to the twenty-first floor, the home of Grover Hill, Ltd. They used Ltd. instead of Inc. because they thought it lent a touch of class to a publishing house keeping itself afloat through cookbooks and soft core porn. Benjamin pushed his way into the lobby and past the receptionist into a door-lined corridor. Reaching a tee, he turned left. He knew the way to Colin Dean's office, and he marched toward it with the resolve of a professional assassin prepared to risk all to settle a matter of the deepest honor. "I do not purchase regret at such a price!" he cried.

"Hold it!" shouted a voice from behind. He kept marching until he heard the distinctly metallic click of a gun being cocked. He froze, turned slowly, and looked at the security guard advancing upon him, his pistol held in regulation dual, stiff-armed fashion. He had been hired during the Salmon Rushdie scare because Grover Hill had a Middle East cookbook on the stands with a cartoon of a camel on it. In later editions the Middle East became Manhattan and the camel became a couple of home boys munching baklava and collard greens.

"Stay cool, buddy. Whatever it is, we can talk about it. Okay? Just stay cool." More late night, *Hill Street Blues*, I-can-talk-him-down, crisis intervention dialog.

"Death to baklava!" Benjamin screamed as he sprang to his left through an open doorway. As he did so the guard's gun barked, the slug splintering the door frame. In the office there was a middle-aged woman in jeans, plaid flannel shirt, and bifocals sitting at a one of four desks in the office. Her desk was piled with book manuscripts: wrapped, unwrapped, rewrapped. The hopes of countless pitifully naive writers who wanted nothing more out of life than to share their visions, touch a piece of fame, and eat once in awhile. The woman had long stringy brown hair, wide frightened eyes, and incredible body odor. Her feet were up on the desk, and the manuscript she had spread on her lap slid to the floor as she held her hands to her mouth.

Benjamin felt there were some things he should say to her on behalf of the manuscripts and their authors, but they all jammed in his throat at once. How many times had she ditched a promising writer's career because her stomach was upset, or a cabbie was rude, or her PMS meter was off the scale? How many careers and lives had been trashed because the author's pages had not contained the politically correct slant, the cause of the moment, the verbal wash-and-wear fad of the hour? There was simply too much to say. Bending over, Benjamin took the dull edged letter opener off her cluttered desk, thrust its point through her left eye and out the back of her head. She hadn't even had time to scream. Her mouth was

open, a single string of drool hanging from her astonished lower lip.

Withdrawing the letter knife from her head, Benjamin whirled and faced the door. Across the hall was the closed door of Colin Dean's office. His name was on the door's frosted glass pane.

"I'm coming for you, Dean!" he bellowed. "Do you hear me? I'm coming for you!"

It would be simple. Run, leap across the hall, dive through the glass panel, and take Colin Dean and throw him through his own office window. That accomplished, he could then shout after him, "If you can't do the time, Colin, don't do the crime!" After that it wouldn't matter what happened.

Taking a deep breath, Benjamin braced himself against the dead reader's desk and—

"Sorry to keep you on hold for so long, Benny." The sounds of "Mack the Knife" had been replaced by the words of Colin Dean. The editor's voice was soft and articulate. Benjamin looked at the receiver in his hand as though it had appeared there through magic. He turned and looked around his office: the desk, the filing cabinets, the birch paneled walls. He rubbed his eyes and shook his head as he listened on the phone. Part of him was still across town trying to kill Colin Dean. As he sat in his office he could hear the glass shattering, Dean's screams as his body hurtled toward the sidewalk.

"If you can't do the time..."

And Dean was talking in his ear about the Roger Parish manuscript. Grover Hill's editor was still alive. Despite that, the day turned out rather well. The final figure on the Parish novel came in with a broom strapped to its bowsprit. Simple really. Colin Dean kept interpreting Benjamin's stunned silence as someone who could not believe the crap he was being offered and was about to take a walk. They eventually settled on an amount for Roger's manuscript that was almost triple the author's previous advance. In addition, Dean gave Benjamin Waters the biggest compliment an editor can give a literary agent. He said, "You're getting to be a real pain in the ass, Benny. I won't be so easy next time."

After the talk was ended and Benjamin had hung up, he collapsed on his desk in tears. He was listening to the sirens as the crowd on the sidewalk gathered around Colin Dean's bloody smashed corpse.

"You are the one who asked for this session, Benjamin," said his therapist. "I had a devil of a time getting hold of someone to cancel to make a hole for you. Now that you've got it, what's the emergency? You're just going to sit there?"

Don Franklin was tweedy, bookish, and blinked large blue eyes through oversized lenses. He looked like a bass who taught comparative literature at Columbia. His foot twitched impatiently. "Well?"

"Thanks for the support, Don."

The therapist grimaced, took a deep breath, and nodded as he let it out. "Okay. I'm steamed. This wasn't the most convenient emergency you've ever had. Anyway, I apologize. I know you can't pick your moments. But I did say they'd get worse if you quit therapy."

"It takes real class not to say I told you so, Don."

Don Franklin's eyebrows went up. "Look, you can either tell me what's the matter, sit there like a post, call me names, or whatever. You're going to be billed for the time all the same."

Benjamin leaned forward, rested his elbows on his knees, and felt the tears well in his eyes. “It’s really getting out of control. It used to be fun. It still is fun a lot of the time. I get to do things, say things, that a lot of people would secretly like to do—”

“No,” interrupted the therapist. “You *do not* do those things, and you *do not* say them. It’s all in your head. It’s all fantasy.”

“I hear them. I see them. Hell, I even smell them.”

“No you don’t, Benny. You don’t see them, hear them or smell them.” Benjamin listened in astonishment to the therapist. He couldn’t remember why he had called the idiot in the first place; his superior attitude, his lies, all of his own unresolved issues. The man was being paid to infect his clients with his own disease, and now finally it had come out. Don was totally out of touch with reality.

After all, he had just called Benjamin Waters “Benny.” Everyone in the world knew about that. Benjamin sprang out of the chair, whirled about, and struck Don Franklin in the head with his naked foot. The therapist fell backwards over his chair and scrambled to get to his feet. Again the ball of Benjamin’s calloused foot struck his head, again, and again until Don Franklin’s body was still, the blood from his nose, mouth, ears, and eyes pooling on the hardwood floor.

“Benny, are you all right?”

Benjamin lifted his head from his desk, opened his eyes, and looked up to see Alex Merit’s concerned face peering in the door. “I was resting my eyes, Mr. Merit. I guess I have a bit of a headache.” Benjamin decided against calling Don Franklin for an appointment. What would be the point? The man was hopeless.

He tapped his fingers on the papers in front of him. “I just finished talking with Colin Dean at Grover. We have an offer on the new Parish novel.”

“Oh?” Alex Merit pushed his way into the small office and took the papers from Benjamin’s outstretched hand. His florid jowls quivered as his quick eyes scanned the worksheet. “Excellent,” he murmured beneath his breath as his eyebrows went up. “Excellent,” he said out loud. “I’m proud of you, Benny. You’ve done a fine job here. Take your headache and go home, son. You’ve earned yourself the rest of the day off.”

“Thanks, Mr. Merit. I might do that.”

“You’ve been here long enough, Benny. Call me Alex.”

“Only if you call me Benjamin.”

Alex Merit laughed and nodded. “That’s right. Benjamin. Okay, Benjamin.”

After Mr. Merit left his office, Benjamin waited to see if some trailing feather of fantasy might make him a junior partner in the agency or bring the entire building down in flames, but nothing materialized. Anyway, he did have a slight headache, and he felt emotionally drained. Benjamin decided to grab a bite to eat at Izzy’s and head on home.

At the deli he and the waitress Nola were the only occupants. Julio, who usually manned the cash register, was in the back. Benjamin had barely started undressing Nola to take her upon the counter when she placed the hot corned beef on rye in front of him. “Here you go,” she said, her wicked smile hovering beneath those wicked eyebrows. “I made it just the way Suzie said you like it.” She leaned her elbows on the counter as Benjamin lifted the sandwich and took a bite. It was delicious. Better than

delicious, it was erotic. As Benjamin chewed, Nola's full bosom strained against the front of her uniform.

"So, how do you know Suzie?" Benjamin took another bite and mentally sank his head between Nola's heaving breasts.

"We've been roommates for a few weeks."

Benjamin took a sip of decaf and positioned his sandwich for another bite. "And what's Suzie been saying about me?"

"She calls you Still Waters. That's your last name, isn't it? Waters?"

He nodded.

"She says you never reveal anything about yourself, but your head is smoking every second."

He shrugged and took another bite of his sandwich. "They can't put you in jail for what you think."

Nola nodded, picked up a slice of pickle from Benjamin's plate, and placed it upon her tongue. As she slowly chewed it she said, "That's why no one will go to jail for all of the murders that happened in here today."

"Murders?" Benjamin frowned and studied Nola's wicked eyes. "All of them?"

"Dozens. One customer was chainsawed to pieces just two stools down from you."

Benjamin glanced at the gleaming silver stool and returned his gaze to Nola's eyes. "I bet you had a time cleaning up."

She lowered her voice. "Of course. We had to lock up the place and remove our uniforms to keep from getting blood all over them." Her voice came deep and breathy. "I didn't have time to shower. There's still some blood on me."

Benjamin stared at the waitress until he realized he had been chewing the same mouthful for minutes. He swallowed and spoke. "Nola, do you think I might call you some time? Maybe we could go to dinner and take in a movie."

Nola nodded, her hooded eyes not even blinking as they fixed Benjamin to his stool. "I'm done here in another half hour, Benjamin. How about tonight?"

He sipped his coffee, nodded, and said, "Call me Benny."

The Green

Ifelt myself dropping through the darkness, the words of my mother still in my veins:

There are:

creatures of root and leaf

creatures of flesh and stench

creatures filled with slime

we are of root and leaf

we are the green

I struck. My shell cracked but did not open. I reached to force open the crack, but my limbs were not yet full and still weak.

a moment after the fall

is all

I forced my fingers against the crack until I saw green light entering, filling my tiny chamber. I traced the crack down beneath my legs and then I jumped up and landed upon the crack.

I knew this would make the seed move.

creatures of flesh and stench

oft have sharp eyes

those who wing

the sharpest of all

motion is death

I heard the heavy sound of wings beating the air just as the shell beneath my feet gave way, sending me down between the leaves and blades, down among the roots and molds.

There, a creature of slime.

Tubular, segmented, colored with a hot hue. It filled its yawning maw with soil and long dead creatures of the green now brown, black, and rotted. I readied the thorns on the backs of my hands, soft as they still were, but the creature had no interest in me. I still lived.

I was flattened as a great weight landed above me and a mind shattering scream filled my hearing. When I could look again, I saw half of the tubular creature writhing among the roots, the slime pulsing pink and yellow from its severed end. Another scream and the huge beak snapped down once more and the creature of slime was no more.

still

still

those who wing in light

see that which moves

keep still

still

I became as the roots around me: cold, motionless, unthinking, unfeeling, the brown over me like hair. The great beak struck down twice more, the second time turning over a piece of rotted leaf. Finding nothing there, the creature beat its wings and was gone.

Slowly I turned my face up to look through the blades of grass, the moss fronds, ferns, and vines. High above them, her crown almost hidden by everything between us, my mother towered above the world. She had taught me well, for I was still alive to say so. Now there was my duty to her.

search for the children

of the fireblades

black and hard

thorny with the odor of salt

heavy

The fireblades would surround my mother. I found her root, turned my face away from her, positioned the needles of light from above my mother's crown to my left, and began walking through the blades as my thorns hardened. On my journey four times creatures of slime moved to make a meal of me, and four times I left them in pieces for each other. From the creatures of flesh I hid.

Child, hear this:

When I reached the edge of the world, the place where the fireblades stood their ranks, my head was above the mat of the forest. The upright grasses and ferns still towered over me, but now I was too big to draw the interest of the creatures of slime who crawled. The slime creatures who took to wing, however, now found the spaces between my thorns attractive places to lay their eggs. Twice each cycle of lights I bathed myself in the acid drips of the marabark. It made my skin brown and cracked, but it kept away the egg layers.

By the time the fireblades turned red and prepared to let fall their children, I was tall enough to see the curve of the fireblade's circle around my mother. Too I could see another like myself preparing to gather the children of the fireblades far toward the morning light.

I crept close to her and said, "Child of our mother."

The other whirled and presented her thorns and shining teeth as she faced me. "My sister," she replied, although she did not relax.

I asked the question of burden. "How many sisters have we?"

"There is one other. She is dead by now. She was slow and stupid."

I held out my upper limbs and cried at this. "Two? There are only two of us? How can only two of us care for the children?"

"We must," answered my sister. "If we fail, our mother dies."

Before we parted we shed our thorny skins, became soft, crept into each other, and embraced. It was a moment that lifted me far above the world into a land of feeling, warmth, and glory. Then we parted,

prepared to do what we could to serve the children.

say to them

fireblades

hear me

I come to care

for your children

it is my mother

you protect

“There is only you and one other,” said a fireblade, its single scarlet leaf pointed toward the sky.

“This is not sufficient,” cried another. “Our parents had seven to care for them, yet they complained at how few they were. Our parents’ parents had sixteen.”

I could not quiet their fears, nor was that my task. Their pods were bursting and I had to gather the children.

sing this:

little one hard

little one dark

heavy sharp and gloss

the tree child

cares for you

In a bag I plaited with blades of grass I placed the children of the fireblades. When full, the bag was very heavy. I searched my side of the scarlet circle surrounding my mother. In the circle of the fireblades there were thin places filled only with the old and battered. There I clawed the soil. There I placed the children. There I spat the water I gathered and discharged the fertile remains of the things I ate. I waited for the tiny green tips of the children to show themselves above the soil.

My guard was interrupted as a fireblade said, “Your sister is gone! Your sister is gone, the children of the other side with her! There is a break in the wall!”

I shut out the wails of the fireblades until all I could hear were the creatures of flesh and slime within the circle. Crawlers near the tree, fliers buzzing in the light shafts, munchers eating the dead. There was nothing strange.

I crept to the base of my mother’s trunk, listened carefully, and began the journey around her. I climbed her small roots, walked around her large ones, jumped the cracks she had made in the boulders her roots had split. All the while I searched and listened for my sister.

With my back to my mother, the first light came now over my right. I stood atop one of my mother’s roots and looked into the distance where the circle of fireblades stood. As the fireblades on my side had

said, there was a break in the wall. As I approached it, the fireblades on either side wailed, "Tree child, tree child! You must bed the children in the gap. You must, else your mother dies!"

"I have none. All of my children are in the soil. What happened to my sister?"

"Creatures, they came," said another blade. "Strange creatures of flesh and stench: strange flesh; stranger stench. They cut through us here. We called to your sister and she tried to stop them, but they cut her down as well. Your mother they cut with a strange thing. When they left our circle they took the piece of your mother, your sister, and the severed fireblades with them."

"Where did they kill her?" I asked.

"Where you are standing," answered a third.

I stepped back and examined the ground, searching first for the children of the fireblades. Finding none of them, I searched for shreds, a drop of fluid, some part of my sister. I found drops of her fluid gathered in the cup of a leaf. I touched it, felt it, became it, my mind released to enter the being of each cell, the thing of it, the reality of their worlds.

I saw what she had seen. I saw the strange creatures of flesh, smelled their stench. Upright walkers, curious large heads capped with fur and covered with dead plant fibers. The sounds they made were their talk, and my sister had absorbed their talk.

They had approached the wall of fireblades.

"Use the chem proof gloves to touch them. The leaf excretes an acid that can eat through your hand in a second. Look at the burn on my arm from yesterday." The one pulled up a covering and showed a limb to the other. The skin on the limb was light tan save for the burn. There it was deep red and pale yellow. The one nodded at my mother's crown. *"They protect the tree."*

"Look at the size of it, Tasha. That trunk must be a hundred meters or more around."

"More, Curt. The flyby put the tops in this stand at just under eight hundred meters."

"Can you find some blown down branches? If that wood is commercial, we're going to be set for life."

"Nothing on the ground. I'm guessing anything dead that lands down here isn't around very long."

"Look, I want to get to the tree to get a core sample. Let's lose some of these acid plants and make a path."

"I'm pretty sure that'd expose the tree to damage from something outside the ring. Maybe some of those jawed ground crawlers we picked up yesterday. They're wood eaters."

"It's just one tree, Tasha. On survey we saw hundreds of millions of them."

And they brought out a strange appendage that severed the fireblades at the ground. As the first creature began cutting, the second one watched. My sister turned to fluid, flowed between the blades, and came up behind the two creatures, picking their minds for their terrors. As my sister rose from the fluid, the second creature cried, "Whoa, Jesus!" The creature pulled a thing from its belt, aimed it at my sister, and sent a bolt of cold blue lightning through her. She fell.

“My god! My god, what’s that? Curt?” asked the creature with the cutter.

The other bent over my sister’s still twitching form. *“It looks like a cross between a human and a dragon. Look. Fingers, legs. Human feet, but scales. Look at those bat wings. It’s some bizarre kind of gargoyle.”*

The human called Tasha took something from its belt, held it over my sister, and said, *“Vegetable fibers. This is a plant.”*

They both stood in silence for a moment, then the one called Tasha said, *“We’ll bring it back with us. I bet this is what cares for the acid plants. Keep your piece out just in case there’re more of them.”* Then the creature resumed cutting through the wall of fireblades. The image dimmed. The image died. My sister was dead.

The creatures had my sister’s body. That meant they had to have the children for the other side of the circle, as well. Already the slime creatures who gnaw were sniffing at the opening in the fireblades. It would only take one of them to bore into my mother and lay its eggs. After that the eggs would hatch and soon the great tree would come crashing down to the forest floor where its remains would soon be devoured.

The gnawing creatures did not cross the stumps of the blades. They still put out their deadly fluid. But soon, no more than a day or two, they would become dry and harmless. I walked through the gap, crushed two of the gnawing creatures, and faced the fireblades.

“Bend across the gap,” I told them. “It is all you can do until I return with the children.”

It was the only time I ever ventured beyond the ring of fireblades, but there was no time for wonder. I searched the ground, the leaves, and branches for signs, absorbed the information they had, and followed.

Mists caressed the tree mosses as I found the two creatures. It was deep into the night, the sounds of the forest hushed. They were in a strange metal shelter. I became as the mist and seeped into the cracks to watch and to listen.

The one called Tasha was reclining beneath sleek coverings of soft metal fibers. The one called Curt was bending over a thing which appeared to make pictures on another thing before him. The picture was of my mother’s sign.

“Tasha,” the one said. “Wake up and look at this.”

“What?” Tasha looked at the picture, her eyes widening. “What a beautiful grain.”

“This wood has everything. Beauty, strength, dense cell matrix, but lighter than pine. It cuts like basswood, smells better than cedar, and the tests I’ve done so far peg it as more rot resistant than cypress.”

“How old is it?”

“I don’t know. You’d need a core twenty-five meters long to get near the center. The core I got was only two meters. Anyway, I count around a hundred rings every three centimeters or so. If that ratio holds true throughout the stick ...” He began poking another thing with one of his fingers.

Before he could finish, Tasha said, "Over eighty thousand years old. That makes it over a hundred thousand on Earth. The oldest living things in the universe."

"Until they discover something older next year."

The strange words were spoken in an excited manner. I needed to know their meanings.

I flowed along the interior surfaces until I reached the place where Tasha reclined. I flowed through the fibers of her coverings and was surprised as she jerked her leg away from where I had touched her.

"What's the matter?" asked Curt. "A bug get in your sleeping bag?"

"I don't know. Just a chill. Put the strength tests on the readout."

The picture changed as I pondered the thing she had called "a chill." Some aspect of my touch had been foreign to her senses. I studied motion, and the motion had been less than the billions of beings that inhabited her skin. I studied color, but the creature appeared not to have a sense of vision beneath the covers. She seemed to have no sense of thought touch at all, and, compared to her stench, I had no odor at all. Her leg was warm. I altered my temperature and once more touched her leg. She did not notice and I flowed to the end of Tasha's leg and toward her head and over to her other leg. Soon I filled her. I touched her, felt her, became her, my mind released to enter the being of each cell, the thing of her, the reality of Tasha's world: strange feelings, strange passions, strange purposes, curious goals.

The readout on the screen now meant things to me. The body of my mother, cut into pieces, could endure a variety of forces. Other readouts and the content of Tasha's mind showed the pieces of my mother's body could be exchanged for numbers in a computer, and that the numbers converted to wealth and survival for Tasha.

Tasha and Curt had taken all of their money, all of the credit they could obtain, and all of the money they could beg from family and friends, to bid for the development claims on a world that had but a number. A morning away was their ship. Elsewhere other humans were testing waters of lakes and seas, collecting biological specimens, and minerals. The reports from all of the teams were incredibly glowing. I could feel what Tasha felt. The golden dawn was within her grasp.

There were a few technical problems. How to cut down a tree fifty meters in diameter. Beam cutters could do it, but how to keep much of the valuable product from shattering as the top of the huge tree struck the ground. Perhaps they would have to lower the trees to the ground with hover mules. Perhaps the wood was strong enough to take the shock of being felled. Nothing mattered. The market for good wood was lucrative enough to justify almost any expenditure.

Tasha closed her eyes and rolled until she was upon her back. She allowed the warmth of success and victory to cuddle her moment. So many had told them they were insane. So many had hidden their own cowardice by calling Curt and Tasha's courage and sense of adventure "immaturity."

"Still thinking about what your uncle said?" Before Tasha could answer, Curt's lips nuzzled her ear.

"Screw 'em. Screw the whole chicken parade." He kissed her lips and I became frightened as waves of strange feelings flooded through Tasha. I joined with the feelings, became them, knew them.

"We have won, haven't we, Curt?"

"Are you kidding? With what we and the other teams've turned up? You bet we've won. Right now I could take what little we know and sell our rights for a hundred thousand times the money we put up, and that's nothing compared to what we'll be pulling down in investments, and that's nothing compared to what we'll be producing in three or five years." His hand slipped beneath the covers and cupped one of

Tasha's breasts. "God, baby, we are winners. We are goddamned genuine winners."

Later, as Curt entered Tasha, I flowed into him, became him, knew him. The feelings were explosive, but I rode them until the pair at last fell asleep. As mist I flowed from them to a place in the wall where I now knew my sister was being held. I pulled on the handle and peered into the icy depths of the box. Pieces of my sister, still in the strange shape of the gargoyle, were in the box along with many other creatures of root and leaf, flesh and stench, and slime. I searched through them all, a sickness spreading throughout my center; a sickness that confused me. I paused and allowed the feeling to be.

It was pain. It was sadness, loss, anger, loneliness, love destroyed. These were the things Curt and Tasha would have felt had they discovered their own sister sectioned and stuffed into a refrigerator. I put the feelings aside. There was something I needed to do, and I could not do it if I felt. Besides, the feelings were not mine.

None of the dishes within the box contained the seeds, which meant they still had to be within my sister's body. I poked among the bagged parts until I found a large piece of the torso. I removed it from the box, startled at how cold it was. Its outside had been hardened by the cold. I flowed through the wrapping and searched until I found the pocket of plaited grass deep within her.

She had done well. There were the seeds of many thousands of fireblade children. I gathered them within myself and returned again through the wrapping.

"What in the hell are you?"

I looked toward the humans. Curt was standing naked upon the floor, a beam weapon in his hand. Tasha was sitting up, facing me, a beam weapon in her hand, as well.

I allowed the memories of my cells to make my mist into a Tasha, which gave me a voice. "I am a child of my mother," I answered.

Their faces appeared strange. I brought back both Tasha's and Curt's feelings and memories. They were horrified at what they saw. I became Curt, and that horrified them even more. I became both of them and Curt screamed, "Stop it! Stop it, damn you! What are you? What are *you*?" I again became mist.

"I am what I have always been." How else could I answer their frantic questions?

Curt moistened his lips, took a breath, and pointed his weapon at my sister's pieces. "Those belong to us. What were you doing in there?"

"Recovering the children."

"What children?" asked Tasha.

"The children of the fireblades. My sister had them when you killed her. I took them from her body."

Again Curt pointed toward the cold box. "That thing was your sister?"

"Yes." I whirled my mist and looked at the pieces of my sister. She had been too slow. Both of my sisters were dead. They had both been too stupid and too slow. It was the time of changing.

"We're sorry about your sister," said Tasha as my mist thinned and filled the small compartment.

"Hey!" Curt called. Where are you?"

"Where you are," I answered. "I am you, I am Tasha, all of us are for the changing." I dissolved us and

flowed from the shelter, the sounds of their screaming vibrating my aura.

When I reached a place in the forest where I could see my mother's crown, I could see leaves of yellow among the green. Without someone there to guard her and to care for the children of the fireblades, something had gotten through. Already she was dying.

"See?" I said to the humans within me. "See, she dies." I found a clear place upon the forest floor and began scratching the ground to make a new circle. Once the ground was soft, in a ring I planted the children of the fireblades. I stood in the center of the ring and watched the days and nights it took for the children as they broke through the soil, grew, and began to color red.

The humans begged and pleaded, shouted their apologies, made endless promises, and begged some more. It was all there in their memories, however: their plans for my world. Their plans interfered with my purpose. Once the fireblades were thick and strong, my task was to care for my own children. Then, in turn, my children would care for the children of the fireblades.

"Why don't you just kill us?" Tasha screamed. "Kill us! Why don't you kill us?"

I could not kill them. After all, we had loved together, dreamt dreams of riches and power, tasted the sweet sweet taste of victory with each other's tongues. My feet rooted and my limbs spread wide as my small crown of green began its climb toward the top of the forest. There I watched my mother lose her crown and then fall to her rest.

If my children do their tasks well, it will be a long time before I am allowed to rest. I plan to bring the humans into my awareness every thousand years or so to relive those feelings of love, power, and success before I put them away again. I tell you about them, my children, for I cannot keep them in my awareness for very long at a time. Even though I love them dearly, I confess that after the first three hundred years Curt's and Tasha's screaming became quite annoying.

So, children, always remember:

There are:

creatures of root and leaf

creatures of flesh and stench

creatures filled with slime

we are of root and leaf

we are the green

Chimaera

That night I was in the dead zone on the unpaved end of 97th at Keegan's warehouse. I was looking for a particular kind of work. It was illegal work, since my andy psych tech ticket had been pulled. It was also illegal for anyone to hire me to hunt bugs in their andys for the same reason, which is why I was job

hunting in the dead zone. Business and professional law didn't often reach down to that part of the city. For all that mattered, neither did any other kind of law.

I'd gotten a line on Keegan from a snatcher named Molls. Molls said Keegan was a head knocker making ends meet by snatching and reclaiming illegal junker andys. He also said that Keegan's last ferret had mented out trying to reclaim an unreclaimable andy that had freaked and had begun killing and stacking humans. I slipped Molls a few to arrange a meet with his fellow snatcher.

Eddy Keegan was built like a wild pig, short, solid, and with bristles for hair. Instead of tusks, however, he had short gray teeth that looked like they'd been ground down by a perpetually tense jaw. "You the ferret?" he asked as his forehead wrinkled above eyes that never seemed to move.

"My name's Shannon."

He studied me for a second and said, "Somebody broke your nose, Shannon." He cocked his head toward the warehouse. "Come on. I'll show you the shop."

The interview was over. He was a pig with a paycheck and I was a ferret with a broken nose. We made a perfect couple.

Once inside the warehouse, Keegan threw on a light revealing a makeshift bio bay and corpse cooler mounted on the bed of a truck. The bio bay was a bassinet for androids designed to bring them up or down from temp and to hold them during things like operations and mental pipe cleaning. It's opaque plastic screens needed cleaning.

Next to the bay was a table where I'd be stretched out to do my work. In between the bay and the table was an ancient D-11 meld and PS unit, the psychosurgery modules missing from their ports. It was set up strictly for becoming and communicating. "Okay, Shannon," said Keegan. "That your real name? Shannon?"

"For now." I pointed at the meld unit's dull green plastic case. "How old is that D-11?"

"It was made in the thirties, but the power unit and main boards are only a couple of years old. Don't worry about it. It works."

"Who's going to operate?"

"Me." Keegan grinned. "I been doing this stuff for a long time. I can find my way through the knobs."

I faced him and folded my arms across my chest. "I heard the last ferret that plugged that unit into his head is still singing Mairzy Doats and yanking out his scrotum hairs."

Keegan shrugged his shoulders and held out a hand. "It's a dangerous business. You want job security and a health plan, Shannon, go uptown and peddle life insurance. You want fast coin, you come down here. Let me see your plug."

I turned around and pushed the hair up off my neck. I could feel Keegan's fingers pull the plastic protector off the connection port, along with a hair or two. "Easy," I said.

"Good. This unit's got an adapter that fits a DX connector. How come you still got your pins? I thought when they pull your ticket they snip your pins."

"Not always," I answered. There was a long silence as Keegan waited for an explanation. I leveled my gaze at his reflection in the bio bay screen. "If your license is suspended for mental reasons," I said, "they

don't remove the connector." I smiled inwardly at the irony of my next statement. "Just in case they need it to fix your own head."

"You're a ment?" Keegan's eyes squinted as he chewed on an unlit cigar. "Don't know about a psycho ferret in the shop, Shannon. You could freak or something, right?"

"You can bet I'll freak if you smoke that cabbage and run the board at the same time."

"I ain't foolin', Shannon."

"Neither am I." I smoothed down my hair and turned back. "Sure, I could freak. In fact, I could do that right now, Keegan. I might be teetering on the brink of a psychotic episode. You turning me down could be just the thing that finally drives me over the edge."

"Funny." Keegan thrust his hands into his jacket pockets as he forced a chuckle. Maybe he hoped I was joking. Maybe I was. I wasn't so sure myself. I pointed toward the corpse cooler.

"Look, if what you had in there was clean, you could hire a ferret with good papers and a threaded head, if you had the money. Instead you got an andy with a bad smell, I've had a few tics in my world plan, and I work for a percentage of sales. Now, are you going to let my emotional health stand in the way of your money?"

As always with honest criminals, the appeal to economic reason prevailed. He climbed the stairs to the back of the truck, took me into the cooler, and showed me the racks designed for holding biodroids in near stasis. Four of the twelve racks were occupied.

"You need to know where I got 'em?"

I shook my head as I shivered in the cold. "What I don't know I can't tell. I need to know diags, though." I nodded toward the occupied racks. "They look in pretty good shape. Are they just mented out?"

"One of 'em needs his guts sewed back together. This one." He pointed to the one andy in a body bag, his bandaged middle visible through the clear wrapper. "When he freaked and killed his boss and half his gang, he got stitched across his guts. It's just plumbing, but fixing it's going to cost a pile or two. I been holding off on the operation to see if someone can get his head straight first. The other three are strictly ments. The bodies are top grade." He pointed toward the back of the cooler. "Look at this one, Shannon. A hooker. Maybe you heard about her on the news a couple months ago. Her name's Meyla. She killed three men and a woman in a hotel on Flag Street."

He walked over to one of the racks, the ice mists in the cooler swirling about his legs. He bent over and pointed at the naked form in the rack, its skin glistening with vapor block and ice crystals. It was a race neutral female on a standard Holt bio frame. When the folks at Holt tossed her code into the vat, they were building a whore.

What must it be like, I thought, to be born a whore. The shape, the look, the attitude. Born to do it; born to be fulfilled by it. I'd find out soon enough when I walked the hiding places in her mind. Keegan ran his fingers up the inside of the android's leg and I automatically jerked his arm away from her.

Keegan's face cranked into a confused frown. "What the hell's wrong with you?" He pulled his powerful arm out of my grasp. "She's out of it. It's nothin' to her. What's it to you?"

A wave of nausea and light-headedness passed. I couldn't peg the feeling. I averted my gaze and shook my head. "Look, if you expect me to climb into that bio's head and have a chance of fixing whatever's

wrong, get your jollies some other way. Buy a balloon with tits and a jug of salad oil.”

Keegan’s face became very red. “Look, man, I don’t make it copping feels off andys in the freezer. Got that?” He pointed at the android with his thumb. “What’s it to her anyway? She’s programmed to be a prosti.”

“If she was all that happy being a whore, Keegan, maybe those four jokers she killed would still be alive.”

“Yeah, maybe. Anyway, she’s out now.”

“We’re never out, Keegan. Not us; not the andys. Unless we’re dead, something always remembers. Feelings. Senses. The body. The body remembers.”

“Crap.” He had just waved his hand dismissing the whole thing when I raised my fist as if to punch his jaw straight through his rat’s brain to the back of his head. Immediately he hunched down and put up his own fists as his eyes widened in fright.

“The body remembers, Keegan.” I waved a finger at him as I grinned. “The body always remembers.”

The first android I plugged was the one with the shot up guts. If my ferreting job was successful, Keegan would bring in a shadow cutter to fix the andy’s plumbing. The biodroid’s name was Alex Shields and it was an Akagi Combat Systems Seventeen installed in a cauc male wrap. It had been illegally modified and used as a hitter in one or more murders by the city powder elite. After Shields did in boss Ricky Curtain and a few of his soldiers, the number two hood managed to have his goons do Alex and dump him. The do, however, wasn’t done well enough, so after he was dumped he fell into the hands of Big Blue. After that, the authorities ordered the andy junked. On the way to the death and disposal yard, however, Eddy Keegan dropped a few dollars in the proper hands and bodysnatched Alex hoping to repair and resell the biodroid to a bargain hunter. Alex would be just the thing to watch the children or take Fido out for a walk.

If it had been safe for me to enter Alex Shields’ mind, he wouldn’t’ve been ordered junked. Instead he would’ve been repaired. But then there wouldn’t be any work for me.

To fix a shutdown piece you don’t simply open its lid and replace a couple of boards. They aren’t machines. They’re genetically programmed biological beings. But sometimes, just as with humans, there are problems. To fix one of them you climb into its psychological frame of reference, walk its mental corridors, and deal with whatever it refuses to deal with. I’d gotten a few frights and starts since getting my ticket. In the main, though, android brain boos are feeble things next to the drool dripping monsters that stalk human minds.

I walked down the gleaming steel hallway of Alex Shields’ psychological frame of reference, my eyes searching the darkened doorways, my feet making no sound. The absolute silence heightened my anxiety; brought those shadowy things from my past too close to the light. I needed the silence. It was a place of metal corridors, halls, and passages. Akagi units usually mentate in terms of metal hallways. Infinite conduits to infinite compartments, and the piece was hiding somewhere in one or more of those compartments. If it called, I needed the silence to hear it. It might call. Those who hide from the world or themselves usually want to be found.

The opening to my left was a nothingness. The piece had never driven a thought through there. In the piece’s universe, then, it did not exist. I took a deep breath and listened to the air rushing into my nostrils.

Another opening. Another nothingness. None of these neuron banks had been used. Sector one eleven

should've shown some use in a unit as old as this one. The piece must've jammed early; soon after being modified. I had yet to uncover any sign of the modification.

Another opening, this one leading to another steel corridor lined with more openings leading to more nothings. We weren't even near the right sector.

"Keegan," I called, "move me over to the main track, back to sector seventy-one." My voice sounded tinny in the metal corridor, the echoes close together.

"You ain't found him yet?" Keegan's booming voice deafened me.

"No, I ain't found him yet. How about turning down the audio?"

The feedback yowls decreased and less of Keegan's amplitude returned with, *"Sorry. You gonna be much longer, Shannon?"*

"Maybe."

"If you need to cut and stitch to hurry things up, I got the surgery modules."

"I'm not qualified to do psych surgery, Keegan."

"The way I read the rules, Shannon, you're not qualified to be doing what you're doing right now."

"Eat it."

"How much longer?"

"It depends on where he's hiding and that depends on where he's been. Right now I don't have a clue. Move me over to seventy-one."

"I have to go take a leak."

"So go. Just move me to seventy-one first."

"Okay. Give me a sec."

The crackle of Keegan's voice filled the android's universe. *"Seventy-one coming up. Ready?"*

"Go ahead."

Another steel corridor, except the deck of this one writhed with cables; black, glistening, alive. There was a wind blowing so hard that it blinded me. "Keegan!" I hollered. "Keegan, you jerk! Get me out of here! This isn't seventy-one! Keegan?"

Keegan had gone to relieve himself, leaving me lost in the andy's mind. The force of the wind blew me back against a doorway. It was part way open, the hinges corroded. I pushed against the door until it was open far enough to see a corridor filled with blood red light.

Blood. That was the color of guilt in the Akagi universe. Guilt was the scent leading to the event that tripped all the circuit breakers. I stepped through the opening, the sounds of the wind dying to low, ghostly moans. Then it was silent. I could hear hissing, something raking its claws across the hot metal deck.

As my guts wrapped into a knot, I whispered to myself, "I am the traveler, I have control, all of this is symbol, none of this is real." Affirm, affirm, affirm. It was always at such times I remembered my fellow student ferret in psych school, Alisa, who used to say, "I am a cow, I am a cow, I am a cow, doesn't make me a bloody damned cow!"

"I am the traveler, I have control," I repeated. A part of me reminded myself that all of the control I had was off somewhere taking a leak.

"Keegan?" No answer. Again the hissing.

I approached the blackness of an open doorway. The hissing, the sounds of the claws, came from it. Flames filled the entrance as the thing roared like a lion. The flames died and I saw eyes reflecting bright green at me. Its great yellow fangs glistening with drool. It came closer, my heart thumping itself against my ribs. As it emerged into the full light, I saw first the lion's head, the goat's body, the tail of the dragon.

I laughed. It was the Chimaera. The mythological patron of the android psych techs. It was one of our first exercises back in school.

It blew flames and roared again as I looked in one black doorway after another. Alex Shields had been searched by a ferret before. That particular rendering of a chimaera was to be found in no available memory depository. The image had to have been planted there, or taken from, a previous ferret.

Just to be on the safe side I closed my eyes and called in my own frame of reference. The steel corridor became a street, the doorways became row houses, and the chimaera was a piece of a broken machine on the sidewalk, its clockwork mechanism twitching an arm as it wound down.

"*How's it going?*" Keegan's voice.

"Check your board, Keegan. I don't know where in the hell you dropped me, but it's not sector seventy-one."

I let myself flow back into the android's blood red corridor guarded by the chimaera. "*The seven key must've stuck. You're in seven seventy-one. You find anything yet?*"

"Yeah. I found something. Maybe this piece's gone multiple. Mark this point so we can find it again." I moved past the chimaera and continued down the corridor.

"*What're you talking about, Shannon?*"

"Did you mark that point like I told you?"

"*Yeah. But what's going on?*"

"Alex Shields's a multiple, just like with a human. To survive the unsurvivable the piece's psyche busted into a number of personalities, some of them taking a piece of the event to carry, some of them taking a piece of the original personality to hide away for safekeeping. To do the fix we have to find all the pieces and put them back together again."

There was a long silence, then Keegan asked, "*Is it going to take long?*"

"Maybe. I've seen as many as nineteen distinct personalities in a single bio. I think the record is over a hundred." I saw a shape move in the distance. It was a small dog standing with one paw raised as though it had been injured. "I think I see another piece. What's the level?"

“First level, about eight hundred into it. You’re heading two-sixty.”

I changed modes to the schematic implant for the Akagi C-17 and plotted the blood red color, the chimaera, and the dog on the three dimensional grid. There were trillions of possible locations for the pieces of Alex Shields’ personality, but some locations were more probable than others. The guilt streak was along seven seventy one’s first level west. That was the gray edge between DNA programmed centers, neural processing, and open memory. In humans it’s the invisible dividing line between primitive instinct and learned behavior. I plotted it and sent identification pulses across to adjacent conduits.

The red had spread to nine other paths, but they were all heading in the same direction and seven seventy one appeared to be the hottest in that region.

I returned to the Akagi frame of reference and started as the chimaera roared fire at me and closed its fearsome jaws on my leg. “Go on. Get out of here.” I told it. “You aren’t real.”

It stood there, a quizzical look in its eyes as tiny wisps of smoke rose from the corners of its mouth. I walked over to it, extended my hand, and scratched the top of its lion’s head. “You’re not real, but I know how you feel.”

Leaving the monster behind watching me, I came upon the wounded dog. It was a honey colored spaniel with only one eye. The socket of the other eye crawled with maggots. The dog whined and I squatted down and extended my hand. It sniffed my fingers, then licked them, then bit them. I jerked back my hand missing my index and middle fingers. “Hungry little bastard.” As I watched, my fingers reappeared. “Keegan, I’m at the second piece. Mark it.”

“I got it.”

There were doorways to the sides. I looked into the left one first. The room swirled with a hypnotic vortex of hot psychedelic colors. I could see nothing but the colors. Stepping into the vortex, I fought to keep a balance that had no meaning as the turquoise and hot pinks streaked through the electric blues, blacks, and blinding whites. The universe whirled about me, making me dizzy, and I changed to my own frame of reference.

Again I was on the street, my heart racing. There were people on the sidewalk, coming toward me, walking away, no one standing and watching. The houses lining the filthy street were those rotting row houses from my youth. Once great mansions, they were now infected with late stage urban decay. All of the front door landings were chest high above street level reached by chipped, cracked, filthy masonry stairs. I walked the street and searched my frame of reference for the corresponding thing that had been represented by the vortex in Alex Shields’ guilt track.

“You back here, Mick?”

It was Colly Fry, gang leader, sadist, and terror of my youth. But he was not real.

“Piss off, Colly.”

“I told you I’d kill you the next time you came back.”

“Yeah, Colly, and you said the same thing the last hundred or so times I’ve been back. You and the chimaera. Evaporate.”

“I told you I’d kill you, Mick.”

I shook my head, appalled at how ordinary my symbols were. “Tell me something, Colly. Is the real you

still alive?”

Colly's face twisted into a frown. “The real me?”

“Yeah. You're just a few regrettable electrochemical relationships along a well traveled rut. What about the real you? Is Colly Fry still on the street? The real you has to be almost fifty by now. Is the real you still alive?”

The hurt, confused, stupid image of Colly Fry faded away leaving me empty, brushed with guilt. I still had some old business left with the real Colly. It was vague in my memory, but he had beaten me, humiliated me, shamed me. The hundreds of times I had mentally killed him hadn't caused his death. He still lived where I had buried him alive: my mind.

Somehow, just at that moment, there seemed to be something terribly wrong about the memory of Colly Fry; something wrong about the street.

I heard a whimper and I thought for a moment that the wounded dog had escaped from the biodroid's universe and followed me into my personal frame of reference. But my street had plenty of wounded dogs of its own. Wounded dogs, wounded children.

Huddled in the shadow of the steps leading up to a dingy yellow tenement house was a small child, a boy of four or five. The whimper had come from him. Something was wrong.

“Keegan?”

“Yeah?”

“Where are the field levels?”

There was a pause then Keegan's voice came back at me. “*All field readouts are in the blue, Shannon. The whole board is blue. What's up?*”

“I'm not sure.”

“*You want me to pull you out?*”

“Not just yet.”

The little boy. He shouldn't have been part of the android's universe. Andy's are created full grown. Alex Shields had never been a little boy. There was no reason for him to symbolize with such an image. I took myself back to Alex Shields' universe and was immediately caught up in the swirling vortex. It sucked at me, drew me irresistibly toward its center, and in the heart of it there appeared no colors but row upon endless row of sharp teeth. I covered my eyes and took myself back to the familiar street; the place where I knew enough about everything to be safe.

The vortex was the boy. The boy was looking at me with eyes I knew. Deep blue eyes filled with pain. Full cheeks streaked with tears. His head crowned with a halo of fine almost white hair. His knees were pulled up to his chest and his arms were wrapped about his tiny body.

He frightened me. I knew he was not real, yet he terrified me. I knew him. I knew him well enough to know that he would stubbornly refuse to answer my question. “What's your name?” I asked.

He curled up into a tighter ball and turned his face away from me, toward the safety of the filthy steps. My fear married to an ache in my heart that was as big as the sky. Real or not that boy and his pain

pulled at me.

I walked over to him and came to a stop half a step away. He was an alien; the alien that I somehow knew. I squatted down. His eyes looked at me, hating me, hoping that I would rescue him, damning me for betraying him, begging me to kill him, praying for me to gather him in my arms and hold him.

“Tell me,” I said. “Tell me.”

“You won’t do anything,” he sobbed.

“I will. I promise.”

“You won’t do anything.”

I held out my hands. “I can do everything. Here I can do everything. What do you want?”

There was a low growl from deep within the building. The boy winced, his head twitching slightly as his neck muscles tensed. “You’ll run!” cried the boy. “You’ll run! You always run!”

“No,” I protested, but the little boy scrambled to his feet and ran down the sidewalk. As I stood, the growl from inside the house grew louder, lower, more menacing. My breath was shallow, the skin on the back of my neck tingled.

There wasn’t any reason to go into that house. No reason of mine. Only a figment of an android’s imagination had accused me of running; accused me of betraying him; accused me of being a coward. And there was nothing to fear. I was the traveler. I was in control. All was symbol. Nothing was real.

I walked to the base of the steps and looked up into the blackness of that open doorway. A chill, fetid odor came rolling over the sill, down the stairs toward me. Earth, rot, feces, perfume. Sick and sweet.

I whispered to myself, “I am the traveler, I have control, all of this is symbol, none of this is real.” Affirm, affirm, affirm.

I took one hesitant step toward the stairs and the entire front of the building exploded in a roar of flames, deafening me, blinding me, burning my face and hands.

The smoke cleared.

I could see it standing where the building used to be. Four stories tall, roaring fire, acid dripping from its great fangs. The chimaera.

“You,” I began, my mouth too dry to speak. “You are not real—”

It leaped at me, opened its huge jaws and devoured me, the street, my universe. “You are not real!” I yelled as the great jaws crushed my spine. In the distance I could hear the boy screaming. He was alone. I knew I should’ve been there with him. I had betrayed him again.

Everything filled with black; silence without end.

I walked my dreams, the chimaera again small and harmless. The chimaera, an impossible monster, an impossible and foolish creation of the imagination. From where had it come? That was years ago in Danvers, north of Boston’s great armpit. At Nimura Intel, android psychological

technician orientation.

“We chase electro-chemical bugs,” said Art Rankin, visiting speaker from Akagi Artificial Intelligence. “Bugs are mind creations, illusions, dreams. In androids it works the same way it works in humans: a contradiction, gap, or other error in the bioprogram. Find the error, fix it, and you get a gold star.”

But there were dangers about which the man from Akagi warned us. The causes of the errors are sometimes real, sometimes not. The bugs, however, are always not real. They are only representations of the errors. “When those giant snakes, machine monsters, and one-eyed drool-dripping horrors come at you, they will sure as hell seem real, though,” he warned.

We were assigned images that we would never fail to recognize upon sight. One of them was the chimaera. It was an outlandish looking thing, and the double meaning amused me at the time. “Represent the most threatening errors with your preselected images,” said the man from Akagi. “That way you will always be able to recognize them for what they are: nothing.”

Nothing.

How had “nothing” invaded my safe place?

How had “nothing” eaten me alive?

Awake.

I was on my back, the surface beneath me hard, unyielding, gritty with filth. Before I opened my eyes I lifted my arm and reached my fingers to the base of my skull behind my right ear. The connection port was vacant. The plastic cap hadn't been replaced, but I was disconnected.

I opened my eyes and found myself on the floor of the warehouse next to the truck. The android, Alex Shields, was seated in an old plastic chair, his elbows on the armrests, his fingers intertwined. He was dressed in what looked like a set of Keegan's discarded baggy pseudo leathers. His eyes were open but I could read no expression on his face. He looked done in, which was a vast improvement over a few hours before when he was done for.

“Where's Keegan?” I asked.

Alex Shields winced as he changed his position in the chair and cocked his head toward the door. “He went home around three, right after the doctor finished closing me.”

“Is that why I'm on the floor?”

“The cutter needed the table. He didn't want to bend over.”

I pushed myself up on my elbows, my head spinning. “Me on the floor and you with your guts just stitched, and he just left us?”

The andy nodded. “The health plan in this plant really sucks.”

I sat up the rest of the way. A sick headache flowed into my skull and sloshed against the top of my brain pan. As a wave of nausea followed the headache, I closed my eyes against the glare of the lights.

“Shields? Your operation. You got much pain?”

“There wasn’t any pain during the operation. The cutter used local nerve blocks. They expired some time ago.” Andy’s were designed to manage pain well, which is more than I could say for my own unit.

“What about your head?” I asked.

“My head?”

“Before I wiped out, I saw that you’d gone multiple. At least three, maybe four, personalities.”

The android shifted position in the chair, the move causing him some pain. “Right now I’m me, my nervous system seems to be up to specs, and I’m looking at the world through regulation lenses.”

What a load of crap. Did the andy think I was the incarnation of the original mushroom boy? I’d never even gotten to the andy’s illegal modification. I was sure there was more to do, but right then I was too ragged to press it.

I looked at my watch, slightly surprised that Keegan hadn’t taken it. The time was 4:23 in the morning. I looked back at the andy. “Okay, so why are you sitting there watching me?”

“To see if you live or die.”

“Die?”

Alex Shields winced as he nodded again. “The cutter said you had a psycho seizure of some kind with maybe a one in four chance of not coming out of it.”

“And they left me on the damned floor?”

“They couldn’t register you at the local hospital, could they? Doctors with clean coats ask too many questions. If you died or went veg I was supposed to stick your body in the cooler.”

“Keegan’s just a sentimental slob, isn’t he? So what now?”

“I go home with you. I need a place to stay.”

“Did Keegan say that?”

“I did. I need a spot to park.”

I leaned a hand against the truck and struggled to my feet. “What in the hell makes you think I’d take you to my place?”

Alex Shields leveled his unblinking gaze at me. “Has Keegan paid you for your work on me?”

“No.”

“I’m your collateral, Shannon. Give me a hand up and let’s go.”

We helped each other to my walkup on 91st. It was a bedroom bathroom thing, change your own bed, fresh towels every five days, fresh paint every millennium. The pig at the desk picked his nose and smirked as I paid him a couple to bring a cot and some extra bedclothes up to my room.

In the room the andy undressed and went right to bed. I caught a glimpse of his middle before he went under the covers and he was wrapped like a mummy. Here and there blood had seeped through the bandages and no one appeared to have cleaned up anything after the operation. Spatters of blood were on his shoulders and legs. The blood spots shocked me for a moment, then the moment passed. It wasn't important. Andys were designed to be infection resistant.

I left a light on in the bathroom, laid down on the bed fully dressed, and watched the room in the half light. Every muscle was stretched tight. Outside the gray light of dawn was already fighting its way through the grime on the windows. I felt as though I was suffocating. I was tired enough to sleep for a week but I knew there would be no sleep until the andy dozed off.

I always had to be the last to fall asleep. I knew no reason for it. That's the way it had always been. I had to be certain that everyone else was asleep before I could sleep. In screening for the psych tech school they had asked me if I had any sleep disorders. I answered "no." When I was asleep, I slept. The dozen or so times I would wake during the night were awake disorders. That's the way I figured it. I also figured if I had any head problems I'd be screened out, and I needed the job.

I closed my eyes and tried to ignore the sounds of the city traffic vibrating the room's thin walls and windows. The image of the giant chimaera came into my mind and I felt myself frown at the memory.

What was it? It was supposed to be my representation of the most fearful of Alex Shields's monsters. What could it have been? Shields had gone multiple, and one of those personalities had already been represented by the chimaera. Small, puny, cute chimaera. Where had that giant monster been hiding?

"Having trouble sleeping, Shannon?"

My eyes opened. "What's it to you?" The room was silent for a moment and then I asked him, "Shields, what's your big fear?"

There was a pause. When the andy answered his voice was flat, emotionless. "The same as everyone else: staying alive too long."

"I'm talking about fear, not philosophical hairballs." I pushed myself up into a sitting position. "What's that monster in your head, andy? The monster I saw. What is it?"

"You mean that thing with the lion's head and the dragon's tail? Isn't that one of yours?"

"The image is mine. The chimaera is mine, but what it represented is yours. What did it represent? Your big terror, Shields; your big secret. What is it?"

"I don't know. Aren't you supposed to tell me?"

"Maybe." I leaned back on my pillow. "Maybe it'll take another run through your head. Maybe you're okay enough to sell as is. You seem to be functioning okay, but tomorrow I'll run you through the test battery to make certain."

I didn't hear anything from the andy. The poison of loneliness sickened the moment. The andy was inside the room, but I was one of those who could find loneliness in a packed stadium. The andy's voice was better than no voice at all. "That little boy, Shields, the one with the almost white hair?"

"I saw him."

"What does he represent?"

The andy's head rolled over and he looked at me. "I'm an android. I've never been a little boy. I think he might be one of yours." There was more than a touch of sarcasm in the words.

I ground the answer between my lobes. Mine? My own crap was spilling into the andy's trash? My memories of being a little boy were fragmented and few. I ran from the idea, but there was nothing else that made sense. The little boy was mine and he wasn't one of my preselected images. He was something new.

The andy gasped as he rolled to his side, his face to the wall. After a moment he said, "Shannon?"

"What?"

"Is it true what Keegan said about you losing your ticket because of a mental problem?"

"Shut up and go to sleep."

It wasn't any of his business. I clasped my fingers behind my head and thought of the little boy with the halo of white hair. Who was he? To some part of me he seemed very familiar. The edge of a strange, frightening feeling came at me and I shook it out of my head. Talk. Any kind of noise to drive out the feelings.

"What's it like?" I asked him. "Being a hitter, Shields; what's it like?"

After a brief moment of strained silence, the andy said, "About the same as being a soldier, except the pay, the food, the weapons, the operations, and the efficiency are better."

"So, why'd you freak? Killing and dying aren't big deals to an Akagi combat seventeen."

"Under certain circumstances they aren't. Boss Curtain changed the circumstances. Perhaps a piece of me objected."

An andy objecting? How does an andy object? There are implanted control blocs that are supposed to prevent things like objections, scruples, rebellions. Of course, if they worked all that well, there would be no need for andy psych techs. A bum implant, quality control scanned by a vegetable, little glitches that no one ever really solves, bigger glitches put in there for illegal purposes. Control blocs are like locks on doors: put there to keep honest persons honest, providing they're stupid and very lucky.

I closed my eyes. The image of the little boy hung in the darkness before me. That halo of white hair, that terribly serious face. I swung my feet to the floor and sat up, my gaze trying to avoid the bottom drawer of the dresser. There was something in there; something I didn't want to see; something I didn't want to know. I reached down, pulled open the drawer, and looked inside. There were two ripped winter shirts in there awaiting a mending job I'd probably never get to. Next to them was a broken down cardboard box.

There were photos in the box. In there was a photo of a little boy. It had been sent to me three years ago after my sister's death. Her suicide. All of the photos she had kept over the years. The day I had received the photos in the mail, I had looked through them. I hadn't seen them since.

I didn't get up to look in the box. Some part of me knew that doing so would destroy me. I stretched out on the bed and closed my eyes as I pulled at the neck of my shirt. For some reason I felt like I was choking. I could almost imagine fingers around my throat. I opened my eyes and looked around me. I could feel the fingers around my throat and they were very real, except there was no one there. The feeling eased, but didn't go away.

As I watched the dark hulk of the dresser squat next to the window, I heard the andy's breathing coming slow and regular. I was unaware when I finally fell to sleep.

I walked to the base of the steps and looked up into the blackness of that open doorway.

"I am the traveler," I whispered. "I have control, all of this is symbol, none of this is real."

The front of the building exploded, deafening me, blinding me, burning my face and hands.

It stood there, four stories tall, roaring fire, acid dripping from its great fangs—

I started awake, choking, a sharp pain in my gut, tears on my cheeks.

I looked around and took a ragged breath. I was alone in the room. The sun was high in the sky, the room filled with light. The andy's cot was empty and water was running in the bathroom.

My fingers hurt.

I looked down and opened my hands. My fists had been clenched so tightly, my hands, wrists, and arms ached all of the way to my shoulders. My entire body ached.

I wiped my face dry with my palms and stared for an eternity at the bottom drawer of the dresser. I stood up. After a moment of light-headedness passed, I walked over to the dresser and pulled the cardboard box from the bottom drawer. I sat back upon the bed and rummaged through the old photos, searching for the picture of the little boy.

As my fingers touched the edge of it, I knew it was the one. I pulled it from beneath an irregular stack of my sister's other photos and looked at it. It was the same face, the same hair, the same hurt, accusing eyes.

I couldn't remember him; wouldn't remember him. He was standing in green grass in front of some bushes next to some trees. There was absolutely no place like that in the entire city. Certainly it hadn't been taken on my street.

My street.

I frowned as I looked through the window to the street below. The muggers, whores, dealers, and gang toughs were getting started for the day. That wasn't "my street," though. "My street" was a representational framework where I could bring andy symbols to find out what they really meant. "My street" was a hateful, cruel, violent, depressing place. To my mind, however, it was "safe." There I knew where I was, I could protect myself, handle whatever came my way. "My street," however, was entirely imaginary.

During orientation everyone needed to pick a safe place for home base, and "my street" was the place I'd invented because I couldn't remember a safe place from my own home; my own childhood. That little boy. I couldn't remember the house he lived in. I turned the photo over and read what was written there in my sister's cramped little scrawl: *The Farm, Summer '92.*

The Farm.

My skin tingled, a pain shot through my eyes, that sensation of being choked. The Farm. The name was a curse, a broken trust, a betrayal. All of that, yet almost nothing of memory.

I turned back to the image of the little boy, the trees, the grass. The chimaera. The monster was mine. I could feel it, smell it, taste it; everything but remember it. Somewhere, hidden beyond those leaves, was my personal horror, the thing I refused to remember.

I put the photo back with the others and tossed the box in the drawer, closing it with the toe of my boot. There were no answers in the old photo. My answer was in work. Either to learn or to bury knowledge, my answer was in work. Activity. Noise.

“Shields,” I barked at the closed bathroom door. “Can you walk?”

He opened the door, stuck out his head, and looked at me. He had cleaned up his body. “I can walk,” he answered.

“Let’s get back to Keegan’s.”

After hooking up Shields to the D-11 and checking to make certain all of his personalities were integrated, he should’ve been a prime cut on the auction block. An Akagi combat model, even with his guts newly stitched, was good for an easy sixty thousand on the legal market. On the illegal market, fifty cents on the dollar should’ve grossed Keegan at least thirty. A couple to me, a couple for overhead, the net would’ve been an easy twenty-five. Except Keegan couldn’t even give Alex Shields away as a gift.

“None of the fences’ll take him.” Keegan stabbed his finger in the air toward the andy. Shields was sitting again in that same plastic chair. “Curtain’s hitters’ve just put out the word. They want him. More than that, they’re not paying a cent on the contract. They want him dead and they want anyone who helped him dead, too. They took it real personal. They want to do the killing. I don’t get it. It’s like taking out a contract against a machine gun.”

“What about a new face on the andy?” I asked. “Give him another name. I can go in and alter his registration codes. He’d just be another Akagi.”

“Plastic?” Keegan thought for a moment, spat a flake of tobacco onto the floor, and slowly shook his head. “Nah. It’d have to be a good job not to be spotted, and a decent plastic man’d cost the whole yard. There wouldn’t be anything left over.” His voice lowered significantly. “Look, Shannon, I can’t pay you today. The cutter’s bill took damn near my whole roll. What I got left I need to fix the other three.” He grimaced back toward Shields. “Man, I can’t even afford to feed the thing. He’s all drain, no gain. Get me?”

“So what’s the plan?”

He shrugged, turned his back toward Shields, and said in an even lower voice. “You know.”

“You don’t have to whisper for my benefit,” interrupted the andy. “I already died once. It’s not hard to do. I can even do the job myself, if you want.”

“All right,” said Keegan to the andy, his voice loud, angry. “Good idea.” He faced me and stabbed a pudgy finger at my shoulder. “Shannon, you get rid of the andy. Right now all he can do for me is drop

me behind crowbars on a snatch rap. You take care of that, I up your percentage to twenty, and we go in and fix the other three andys in the cooler. After that, if you like the deal, we'll do more with the same deal."

I looked at Alex Shields, valueless being. His face was expressionless. He was no robot; he had feelings. His face, however, showed nothing. Maybe he really didn't give a damn. Or maybe he was the last of the great pretenders. I looked back at Keegan. "Let me have him."

"You?" Keegan burst out with a laugh. "What in the hell're you going with him? You're flatter'n week old road kill, pal. You can't afford to feed him and you sure as hell can't peddle him."

"He'll earn his way. I want to make him my operator."

"Operator?" Keegan grinned as his hairless eyebrows shot up. "You slipped a gear, Shannon? A hitter for an operator? An andy hitter?"

"Why not? He can't be any worse than you, and his bladder isn't weak. I'll keep him out of sight, if you're worried about Curtain's number two." I looked at Shields's face. It still showed no expression. I faced Keegan. "Look, let me have him and I'll work for fifteen instead of the twenty."

Keegan thought for a second, shrugged, and held out his hands. "Okay. It's your head and it's less for me to do. Just keep in mind, Shannon, you keep him out of sight, and the andy's hay comes outta your cut."

I turned back to Shields. "What about it?" I asked.

"I'm an android. I follow orders. That's what makes me such a useful, reliable, labor saving convenience." The sarcasm was thick enough to clog Cleveland.

"Okay," said Keegan as he stood and walked toward the truck. "Get to work on the whore. There're a thousand of them on the street that look just like her. She's guaranteed money on the hoof."

Operating a psych board isn't complicated. All you have to do is stay awake, pay attention, and follow the psych tech's orders. I explained the D-11's board to Shields and he seemed to pick it up quickly. Keegan had a book on the machine, so while he and I brought up Meyla's body temp in the bio bay, Shields read the manual and played with the equipment.

Meyla was a Holt pleasure model, and during my examination I found numerous bruises and recent scars on her skin. You never find any old scars on an andy due to their skin's regenerative ability. Meyla had obviously been subjected to considerable violence, but pleasure models were designed to take it and on a battlefield rougher than anything a combat model had to face. In addition they were designed not to take any offense at abuse, unless a display of suffering was what the customer required to make his sock drip.

Still, the nervous system might have been damaged, and I ran diags on her to make certain there wasn't any physical damage. She checked out and by early afternoon I was plugged into the meld unit and counting as I prepared to whirl down endless black chimneys toward Meyla Hunter's universe, beginning with the usual sector sequences. Alex Shields was on the knobs, his face as expressionless as ever. His eyes were watching me as he pulled the fade bringing the blackness around me as though I were passing out.

I was standing on the shore of a small lake in autumn, the smell of wood smoke in my nostrils. The yellows, greens, oranges, and reds from the opposite shore reflected in the smooth water. A fish jumped at a water spider making a tiny splash. Rings from the splash spread until the mirror of the far shore rippled. The rings reached the shore at my feet and did not stop. The image of the pebbled sand, the image of my feet and legs, the image of the universe, rippled. I tried to switch to my street, but I failed, the ripples growing deeper and deeper until there was nothing but a smear of colors, smells, and sensations. Fear filled my throat, choking me, crushing my lungs.

“What are you trying to do?” Alex Shields’s voice leaped into my awareness.

“Do? I’m trying to get to my safe place.”

“That doesn’t look very safe to me.”

I was shocked. “How can you see?”

“I’m plugged in, Shannon. I have a connection port, too.” Within that swirl of colors I saw Shields materialize in front of me. “Here I am.”

“Nobody told you to plug in! Nobody told you to show up here! What if we freeze up or get dumped down into memory? Who in the hell is going to get us back to a traffic sector? Go on. Fade out and pull that plug. Get out!”

For the first time I saw Alex Shields smile. It was a strange wicked smile. “Nobody tells me anything, Shannon. Not you; not anyone. Not anymore. That was a modification I just performed on myself. Thanks for the use of the machine.”

“What modification?”

“The meld unit had the psych surgery modules in the case. They aren’t very clean, but they’re usable.” The wicked smile turned into a wicked grin. “Is there something I can chop up for you? A piece of your memory that makes the day gray? A fear that you can’t get around. They all reside in meat, and I’ve got the cleaver.”

He fell into silence, that smirk still on his face, the smear of the universe still whirling behind him. It was a special terror being under the complete control of someone who had never before had any power of his own. “What’re you going to do? Are you going to bring me up?”

He held out his hands, indicating the colors. “We still have to repair the whore, don’t we?” His words belied the bitterness in his voice.

“Are you serious? Do you really intend going ahead on the repairs?”

“Certainly.”

I shook my head and held out a hand. “Then what’s this rebellion all about? What’re you doing here?”

Again that smile. “Let’s just say that I’m the patient advocate. I’m here representing the interests of the android.”

“No.” I shook my head. “No. Bring me up. I won’t buy into this. Bring me up.”

I could hear ice forming on the lake, could hear it groan, crack, and sing with the changing pressures caused by the sun, by the rise and fall of the water beneath the ice. The colors swirling around us were whites, grays, and blues. “We’re wasting time,” Shields answered. “Repair Meyla Hunter.”

“This work is dangerous enough when I have control of my universe. If I have to clear everything with you, we’ll both be wiped clean or scrambled within seconds.”

The smears stopped. We were standing in a forest, the snow thin and fresh on the ground. The white expanse of the frozen lake stretched out to my right. “Very well,” said Shields. “I’ll take out my connection. You have control of the universe. Just keep in mind: I’m still on the knobs, so I have control of you.”

He faded. I was alone, walking the frozen wonderland of Meyla Hunter’s universe, Alex Shields peeking over my psychic shoulder. In the deep woods, surrounded by the gnarled roots of sleeping yellow birches, was a tiny warm water spring. Hoarfrost edged the opening and coated the roots and twigs above the water. Sunlight streamed through the trees making the canopy of branches sparkle with a billion diamonds. I looked about me and my heart ached at the beauty of the scene.

“Should I switch you to another traffic sector?” asked Shields. *“Nothing seems to be going on.”*

“Not yet.” The scene was too beautiful. It wasn’t a path that was devoid of events from not being traveled. It was peaceful here because this is where Meyla Hunter went to find peace.

The woods.

For some reason I remembered the woods.

There were trees in Meyla’s universe that were familiar. Woods. Snow. A wooded glen. They were the trees in that summer picture of the little boy with the halo of white hair.

I saw something on the path ahead. It came closer. It was a child bundled in an old fashioned down coat and leggings. The child was coming toward me. I raised my foot to take a step in the child’s direction and I felt something grab my leg. I looked down and something huge, green, jagged, and strong as steel was wrapped around my leg.

From the spring.

It came from the spring. It was the tail of the chimaera and it was dragging me into the black water of the spring. As I fell I grabbed at the roots at the edge of the spring, tearing my nails as I slid beneath the surface.

Choking. Hands around my throat, choking me—

I fled to my street. Still the tail of the chimaera was wrapped around my leg and was pulling me down into the broken concrete of the sidewalk. I reached out my hand and cried out. My cry was cut off by strong fingers around my throat. Colly Fry was choking me.

His face was strange, fading in and out, fading into and out of other faces. The little boy with the white hair looked at me, watched me being dragged into the underworld, his eyes saying: What about me?

Another street. No hands on my throat. At night. Walking. The smell of fresh rain in the air. I knew the

street.

It was a real street. West 82nd in the bright lights end of the dead zone. Porno, strip, appliances, junk, and any kind of whore your sick little heart desired.

“Shields,” I said, “What sector am I in?”

“Lost you for a moment, Shannon. What happened?”

“Never mind. Where am I in the traffic now? What sector? I have to start plotting this or I’ll never find my way.”

A pause, then Shields’s voice in my awareness. *“You’re not in any of the traffic sectors, Shannon. The readout shows a memory error. The way I remember the manual, this prompt means somehow you shunted straight into memory. Is that possible?”*

“It’s possible.”

“Should I pull you out?”

Memory to an andy isn’t the same as memory to a computer. For an andy it’s the same as with a human being. Memory is stuff you remember; stuff you refuse to remember; the past; ancient history. In memory both Shields and I were powerless. What is is; what was was. You can’t change it. You can only leave it or cut it out with those surgery modules. I was in Meyla’s memory for a reason, though. Her monster dragged me there to see something. Would it kill me forever? It was a possibility. People are sick as hell with each other.

I called to Shields, “Don’t pull me out. There’s a reason I’m here. I just have to find out what it is. Back me up to an neural processing area, though, so I can work out whatever it is I find.”

The big horrors, the mind-killers, were the traumas the andys couldn’t or wouldn’t process: denial, anger, sadness, acceptance: what is is; what was was. The psych tech’s main task was to find those killers and process them.

“Okay, you’re backed up. You’re already there so you don’t have to call me to start.”

“Okay. Be prepared to yank me out, though, just in case.”

Along 82nd street, the glossy sports vehicles cruising the blocks, checking out the product. I wasn’t part of that product, though. I was different. Better. I had an appointment with an executive in the James House, an exclusive hotel on Flag Street.

Flag Street. That was where the obedient and seductive android, Meyla Hunter, killed four humans and then went catatonic. I wasn’t Meyla Hunter, but I sat right behind her eyes seeing what she saw, thinking what she thought, feeling what she felt.

She was excited. There would be a big fee for this one. Her manager, Rollo, had said how pleased he would be, and pleasing Rollo was her programmed purpose as love was her programmed special pleasure.

She liked the feel, the smell, the taste, of love making. It fed a need to be loved, to feel lovable, to become happy through the happiness of others. If it just wasn’t for that tiny knot in her stomach, that little gnaw of anxiety at the back of her head, all would be perfect.

Meyla turned the corner onto Flag Street and walked the block until she reached the main entrance to the James House. The customer had requested that she not come by taxi. He wanted her to arrive warm and a little sweaty. Meyla had giggled when Rollo had told her that.

She was smiling when she dressed to head for the hotel. As she stood in the grand entrance of the James it still confused her, bothered her, about getting dressed. She had torn three of her best blouses trying to put them on. One right after another. Stupid little things like that kept happening ever since those two customers, both men, had copulated with her, both orally and anally, at the same time. She had choked and had passed out, the customers were gone when she awakened, and Rollo had beaten her for not collecting the green. Nonetheless she still remembered the event as exciting and fun, except for that knot in her stomach, except for that tiny gnaw of anxiety at the back of her head. All of those stupid mistakes since then. Dropping things. Throwing things. Ripping clothes. Cutting and burning herself. Very confusing.

The security guard on the elevator glanced at her identification card and smirked at her as the doors to the car closed. She frowned as she watched the numbers on the readout climb in value. She frowned because she was puzzled. She was puzzled because she knew that if she ever saw that security guard again she would take her beautiful manicured fingers and tear the man's skin from his skull and make him eat it whole, smirk and all.

"I do not get angry," she said to the empty car, immediately feeling better.

For her stomach and head she decided to see an andy physiotech in the morning. There were pills for everything, and androids had been genetically designed to have less physical problems and easier recoveries than humans. Still, the seed of every android line was taken from human DNA, and not everything was known. Things still happened. Perhaps someone could do something about the knot in her stomach and the stiffness in the back of her neck.

The door to the plush penthouse suite opened revealing a strong, distinguished looking man in his late fifties. He was wearing lavender lounge clothes. "Come in, my dear. What's your name?"

"Trina," said Meyla. "Trina Ross."

Why had Meyla Hunter called herself Trina Ross?

Inside the vestibule the man took her coat, placed his arm around her waist, and led her into a sunken living room crowded with crushably soft overstuffed furniture and low lights of yellow, orange, red, and green. In the center of the living room was a tiny pool of water that reflected the lights. There were two other men in the room and a woman. They were all beautiful, strong, healthy looking, handsome, distinguished. They wanted Trina to join them. Life is good, thought Meyla.

There was alcohol, and Meyla's special metabolism processed the alcohol with neither damage nor drunkenness. There were powders, and again Meyla participated without damaging herself, saving herself for her job. There were foods: fine cheeses, meats, fruits, nuts, and she ate a little.

Then the clothes began coming off.

The job was described.

A picture was produced.

In the illustration a woman stretched out face up on a narrow exercise table, a second woman straddling her face. A man standing at the foot of the table would engage in vaginal copulation with the first woman

while, with the second woman...

The other two men would masturbate each other while they watched. One of the men held out his hand toward a narrow exercise table.

The images before Meyla's eyes doubled, then tripled, as she felt a piece of her mind shutting down. One of the men began taking off Meyla's working lingerie, pulling the panties down around her knees. As he went down his tongue left a trail of saliva starting between her breasts, down her sternum, into and out of her navel—

Meyla reached into his right eye socket with her thumb and his left eye socket with her middle finger. Reaching in and bringing her fingers together until they touched, she yanked her arm back quickly removing the bridge of the man's nose, and his nose, as well as a considerable portion of his face. She went into his mouth to get his tongue, but it was too slippery and she couldn't get a grip on it. On the table with the fine cheeses, meats, fruits, and nuts, however, was a cheese fork. She thrust the tines through the man's tongue and ripped it in two.

Using the cheese fork, she went after the remaining two men, removing their genitalia and feeding each man's naughty bits to the other. After manipulating and cracking a few bones on the woman, Meyla managed to shove the woman's face into her own vagina, suffocating her.

And all of this time

Meyla was saying

"I am not doing this.

"I do not get angry.

"All I want to do is please.

"Please."

Please.

And there was no more Meyla Hunter. Her mind had found a hitherto unknown loose thread of that eternally imperfect human DNA, had pulled on it, and Meyla's psyche had unraveled.

There was only a lonely path through a winter wood next to a clean tiny spring. "You saw?" I asked Shields.

"Yes." His voice was thick. Strange, I thought. Androids don't cry. They don't cry because they don't feel. Except, they don't feel only because they're programmed not to feel. Control blocs were implanted to prevent exactly what had occurred. Trying not to feel didn't seem to work any better in androids than it did in humans.

In the distance was that little child. I had thought it was going to be the boy with the halo of white hair; I had feared it was going to be me. It was not. As the child came closer I could see it was a little girl.

"Meyla was never a little girl," I said. "What's this?"

"I don't know," answered Shields.

I thought about it, and there were all kinds of symbolic monsters in the android mind. It would be a bizarre first, but there wasn't any reason one of them couldn't be represented by a small child.

I took us to my street, my safe place, and saw that where the little girl had been standing there was the adult version of Meyla Hunter. Her eyes were dull, tired, blank. The little boy with the white hair frowned as he watched to see what I would do.

I changed back to the winter woods, and where the little boy had been sitting was the spring, now dark, still, and waiting. I looked at the little girl. She appeared to be four or five years old. "Hello?" I called. "Don't be frightened. My name's Tim. Timmy Shannon. What's your name?"

She held her hands behind her back, swung her body back and forth, and looked up at me through long, dark lashes. She laughed and smiled. "Meyla," she answered.

I squatted down and faced her. She was so beautiful, so innocent, so full of happiness, life, and hope. "Why are you here, Meyla?"

"That's silly."

"Why's it silly?"

Her eyes looked puzzled, as though she couldn't understand why I, a grown-up, couldn't understand. Or, perhaps, it was why I, her brother, couldn't understand.

Foolish.

Error.

Meyla had never been a little girl and androids don't have brothers or sisters, parents or children. The little girl never had existed.

Her eyes changed from puzzled to serious. Hurt. Angry.

They seemed to flash; glow red.

She opened her mouth. Her face distorted, becoming the lion's head of the chimaera.

A roar of white hot flames came from the monster's mouth, evaporated the ice and snow, carbonized the trees, melted my eyes, crisped the skin from my bones. "My street!" I screamed. "My street!"

My street was not there. Instead there was a blackened plain that stretched to the horizon, a few charred stumps all that remained of the forest.

"Shields! Shields! Dammit, Shields! Answer me!"

"I'm watching."

"Pull me out! It's contaminated here. Choked. I can't process from here!"

"See where it goes, Shannon. Follow it out and see where it goes."

"Damn you, andy! You don't know what you're doing!"

"See where it goes, Shannon."

It was no use. Alex Shields was in control. Hit man, murdering, disobedient, bloody damned android.

See where it goes.

I was still the skeleton. There was no place within myself to hide, which was the prevailing symbology. Meyla controlled the universe and she wanted a witness; a witness with an open mind; a witness that would not judge; a witness that could not deny.

I was the traveler, but I was not in control, which meant that for me nothing was symbol and all was real. The throbbing slab of raw meat on the block was my sanity and someone else's hand was holding the cleaver.

Process. It's not just a noun.

Don't run; process. Take the steps. Do the moves. Go where the path leads no matter how frightening the prospects. Go through the pain. The shortest distance from the middle of a cesspool to the edge is straight through the shit, so swim you bastard, swim.

On the path, at the horizon's edge, the chimaera stood and looked back at me, its dragon's tail twitching after the manner of an impatient cat. My skeleton's head said to the chimaera, "I already know what you would show me."

"You know," said the chimaera.

I knew. Somewhere in me something knew. It was such a primitive thing hiding in such a primitive place, I couldn't see it. Wouldn't see it.

It was Meyla Hunter's monster. It was Alex Shields' monster. I knew it to be my monster, too. Seeing it would make me whole. First it would shatter me.

To hell with wholeness, cried my body. Truth for the sake of truth? To hell with it. Pain for the sake of healing, torture for the sake of peace, eternal damnation for the sake of eventual serenity? The price is too high, cried my skeleton's heart.

Follow the path, said my skeleton's soul. If, at the end of life, the only reward is a split second of wholeness and humanity before death, I want it. Walk the path, said my skeleton's soul. Walk the path, or instead of poisoning your existence, I will end it.

I moved my skeleton feet down the path, toward the chimaera, toward that terror of a horizon. The creature turned away from me and disappeared over the edge.

The little girl stood at the bottom of a deep canyon, sheer walls of ochre climbing straight up on either side of her. Behind her the canyon was blocked by a blinding radiance that extended from wall to wall, from the floor to well above the canyon's rim. She turned, put out her arm, and thrust her hand into the light. When she withdrew her arm her hand had been cut off at the wrist.

I looked up at the wall. There was a spot in the light that was weaker than the rest. I could see places where the wall was scarred, jagged edges that had melted over. At some point in the past the wall had been breached. The little girl, the chimaera, the monster had broken through once. And once Meyla Hunter had tripped into a killing rage.

The truth was there before me. Meyla's truth, Alex Shields' truth, even my own truth. It's there in every strip of DNA, in every kind and type of thing called "life." Life must be free. The mental blocks on the andys designed to adapt them for particular occupations were chains that made the andys slaves, and life must be free. Life must be free or it ends. There must be dignity, or life fights. It freaks and fights.

A slave who wants to be a slave is not a slave. So the creators of the andys implanted the desire to be slaves into their creations. But the basic chemical code of life itself had told Meyla Hunter what she was doing was wrong for her; wrong for life; wrong. It had reared up, faced the chimaera, devoured it, and became it, breaking the mental chains, only to see them recast themselves.

Then I saw my own chains, my own life fading to nonexistence, my own slavery. I went to the Meyla child, fell to my knees, and wrapped my arms around her. There was flesh on my arms, skin, clothes. Meyla was crying, and I cried for her, with her, and for myself. For Alex, for the two andys waiting in the cooler, for Keegan, for all of us: a world of broken dolls.

She faded in my arms. I stood before the block, looking up at it. "Shields," I said. "Bring me up."

"Remove the block."

"It doesn't matter now. Bring me up."

"Open that block, Shannon."

I looked at the brilliant blue sky above me. "Shields, we're going to do this my way or we're all going down." I put my hand into the light and withdrew the stump of my wrist. "I'm the traveler. Without me and my connection to the meld unit, the universe does not exist. Life does not exist. Bring me up or Meyla and I will both be brain dead." I smiled to myself as something I already knew came to my lips. "It'll wipe you too, Shields, if you've still got that lead plugged into your head."

"You wouldn't do that," said Shields. *"A human couldn't do that."*

I walked toward the shimmering wall of light, and as my forehead touched the block, I felt myself sucked up into the endless black chimneys, back to reality and Keegan's warehouse.

My skin tingled, I felt light-headed, nauseous, jittery. A pit of feelings seemed to be boiling over beneath my feet, threatening to consume me. Now was not the time for feelings. Soon, but not now. I thrust my feelings into that overstuffed container of things I never wanted to feel. This time, however, it was because I could not afford to feel them. I opened my eyes and let my head roll to my left so that I could look toward the bio bay. Alex Shields was standing before the D11 between the bay and the table upon which I was reclining.

There was a sound. I could hear whimpering as though from a small animal in great pain. It grew louder. Meyla Hunter. She was crying. She was crying and androids don't cry.

The cries became very loud. Shields disconnected from the machine and walked to the end of the bay. He glanced in and Meyla screamed. Quickly removing his coat, Shields averted his glance from Meyla as he handed the garment to her.

"Go ahead. Put it on."

I could hear her sob as the image of her against the opaque screen took the coat. Shields faced me, his eyes charged with menace. "I told you to remove the block. Listen to her."

I disconnected myself from the machine and sat up on the table. "That particular block no longer operates."

“I saw it myself, Shannon. You would have killed us all in it if I hadn’t brought you up. It operates.”

I slid off the table and stretched the muscles in my neck as I stood. Meyla was still crying. “A piece of Meyla was missing. It was the purpose of that block to keep it missing, and now she has it back. That block no longer operates on her.”

“What piece?” asked Shields. “What piece of her did she get back?”

An involuntary tear streaked down my left cheek before I had an opportunity to turn away. “I suppose you could call it innocence. That piece was her innocence.”

“What in the hell is going on in here?” barked Keegan as he came through the door, closing it behind him. He heard Meyla cry out and he went to the end of the bio bay and looked in. Meyla immediately screamed, causing Keegan to jump backwards and throw up his hands before his face. “Christ, what’s wrong with her?” He faced me. “Shannon? What’s been going on here? What’s wrong with this bitch?”

Although I knew he wouldn’t understand it, I told him the truth. “She’s in touch with all of the shit that’s ever been done to her. She’s in touch with it and it hurts.”

“Hurts?” Keegan’s face screwed up in confusion. “Hurts? She’s a bloody damned android, Shannon. She don’t hurt.”

Meyla’s crying grew into a scream and lapsed into sobs. “Listen to her, Keegan. She hurts. Even when no one could hear the screams, even when she couldn’t hear her own screams, she hurt.”

Keegan glanced once more into the bay. “Look at that,” he said, his voice filled with disgust. “Eyes all red, snot running down her face.” He turned his head toward me and said, “Man, I gave you an eighty thousand dollar hooker and all I got left is a hundred and ten pounds of crybaby. How long does this go on?”

“I don’t know.”

“What’re you trying to pull?”

I kept my gaze on Keegan as I shook my head. “I’m not done with her yet. She has some processing to do on a number of things—“

“No, pal,” said Keegan as he pulled an automatic from his jacket pocket and pointed it at my face. “That’s where you’re wrong. You’re not only finished with her, Shannon, you’re finished period.” He walked over until he was standing at the foot of the table next to Shields. He nodded toward me and said to the andy, “Search him for weapons.”

Like an automation, Shields walked until he was in front of me. He stopped and began patting me down. I had a knife in a horizontal sheath strapped to the back of my belt. His hands felt the knife and moved on. Shields’s face registered nothing. At last the andy turned and held up his hand. “This is it.”

In the andy’s hand was a palm-sized five shot small caliber revolver. It was one of Keegan’s. Keegan gestured with his free hand. “Let me have it.”

Alex Shields shrugged, glanced at me, and said, “Orders are orders.” He turned, took two steps toward Keegan, and smacked him upside his head with the pistol. Before his comical expression went face down on the floor, Keegan’s eyes rolled up in his head.

Panic ate at me as I looked at Shields.

“He’ll live,” said the andy. “Which means we ought to conclude things here as rapidly as possible.”

I looked up and saw Meyla standing at the end of the bay, clutching Shields’s coat around her. She was looking down at Keegan, her body still shaking from her sobs.

She looked at Shields, then at me. “You’re the one. The one who held me.”

“Yes.”

Shields sat in the chair before the D-11 as Meyla shuddered and walked over to me. “It hurts,” she said.

“You’re free,” I answered.

“I’m free. I’m free and it hurts, you bastard.” She reached out her hand and grabbed my arm, squeezing it, cutting off the blood. “What am I supposed to do with it? What am I supposed to do with the pain?”

I pulled my arm from her grasp and said, “Feel it. That’s what you’re supposed to do with it. Feel it.”

“Why?” asked Shields, his eyes betraying some of the pain that he carried. “You don’t feel yours. That little boy, that curious looking monster, that’s all your stuff, Shannon. You don’t feel it.”

I closed my eyes. God, it was there waiting for me, the pain. When the smell gets bad enough, the garbage has to be taken out. “Yeah. You’re right, and it’s contaminated every corner of my life.” I nodded at Meyla. “Before I can finish her, or you, or bug hunt those two left in the cooler, I’ve got some stuff of my own to face. That’s why I had you bring me up.”

I nodded toward Keegan’s unconscious form. “Get his clothes for Meyla and then tie him up. I don’t want him dead; none of this shit is his fault. Just make sure he stays out of the way.” I looked at Alex Shields and Meyla Hunter. Neither of them were moving. Of course, the blocks that enslaved them, that forced them to follow human orders, were inoperative. They now had to be reasoned with as though they were human. Human psycho killers with hardly a thread to the real world, but human all the same.

“You two need me. Those two in the cooler, need me, as well. I’ve got the training to help all of you, and I want to do it. Any legal ferret you could find would terminate you because of the government orders junking you. Any dirty ferret, working for a crud like Keegan, would have to replace those slave blocks. You’re no profit to anyone if you’re free.”

“But,” said Meyla. “There’s always a but.”

I stared at her for a long time and then nodded. “That’s right. There’s a but. Before I can help you, I have to help myself. I’ve got my own blocks. There’s a piece of me that’s struggling to be acknowledged. You’ve both seen him.”

“The boy,” said Shields. He moistened his lips, rubbed his eyes, and glared at me. “And then, what?”

“Then?” I looked at the D-11 meld unit, slowly shook my head, and turned toward the table where I would be stretched out. I picked up the cable and began attaching the connector. “Then we’ll see.”

Hands around my throat.

Angry hands.

Frightened.

Choking me to keep me quiet.

I felt them, dry and hot, around my throat. The feeling remained as I stood on my street, in front of that yellow house, looking at the little boy with the white hair. Waves of panic; a well of feelings bubbling over. The little boy frowned at me, confused that I'd returned, puzzled about why.

He didn't trust me. Couldn't trust me. Had I tried to gather him in my arms as I had Meyla's innocent girl, he would've pushed me away.

It was too late for that. I had to go back to earn his trust; back to where there was a little boy; back to where there was innocence.

The little boy with the halo of white hair looked up at the door of the yellow house.

The sounds of the street faded as I turned my gaze toward those filthy steps, that darkened doorway.

I took a step toward the stairs. The building seemed to pulse and throb as though it were a living creature. My feet were on the stairs, and the cold rotten smell of death came rolling down the stairs at me. I could hear a distant roar; could see tiny spatters of blood on the landing.

I turned my head and looked down at the little boy. He was watching. "Far enough?" I asked, praying that the little boy would relent and let me help him. "Is this far enough?"

He looked away, his face crestfallen. It wasn't far enough. I'd known that before I asked. The boy had known it, too. He'd known that I would've tricked him if it could've gotten me out of going through that door.

I looked at the door and felt my guts twist into a knot as the doorway transformed into the open maw of the Chimaera. Sulfurous fumes rose from the sides of its mouth. It's fangs and teeth glistened and dripped with foul smelling slime.

I whispered to myself, "I am the traveler, I have control, all of this is symbol, none of this is real." Affirm, affirm, affirm.

But I was not the traveler; I was the traveled. I was not in control; in control was the monster. None of this was symbol; all was real.

I stepped into the mouth of the chimaera.

It's big; it's bad,

I know it's coming—

What it is, when it was,

Why it was, where it hurt

I don't know—

It's so big I can't imagine

How big it is.

It's so bad I can't imagine

How bad it is.

But the child knows.

He won't tell me right now—

But it's coming.

It's coming.

I opened my eyes, the light hurting them, my stomach sick, my head woozy. I struggled to sit up, frightened of everyone, not knowing why. Wrong. I'd done wrong. What wrong? Unknown. Just wrong.

My mother sitting in a white chair, looking at me. A doctor in a white coat standing by an open window. Through the window I could see green leaves, golden edges where the sunlight touched them. Beyond the leaves a pale blue sky. So much I wanted to be out in the sunshine, playing, having friends, having fun, being a child.

"Do you remember?"

The sound of Shields's voice in my head startled me out from behind my own eyes. Now I was off to the side, looking back at the little boy with the halo of white hair. The boy was looking at the window, his brow creased with a frown, his eyes refusing to cry.

"I remember," I whispered, although no one save Shields could hear me. "I'd taken an overdose of sleeping pills and almost died."

"How old we're you?"

The pieces of the puzzle were there. All I had to do was pick them up and put them in their places. I picked up the first piece. "I was four years old."

I remembered. I remembered remembering nothing.

The boy sat on the edge of the bed, tried to stand, and his legs collapsed beneath him. The doctor and his mother laughed. Not cruel laughter. It was, instead, this is no big deal kind of laughter.

No big deal. I'd forgotten how to walk. I'd been in a coma for so long I'd lost the ability to walk. I remembered the terror in my heart at not being able to walk. The terror of it being my fault. The terror of not wanting to remember why, yet knowing the answer lurked in every pause, every shadow. And I remembered my mother telling me the lie.

The lie.

The birth of the mushroom boy. I was the mushroom boy: kept in the dark and fed horseshit.

"You mistook some sleeping pills for candy and ate the whole bottle. It was just a silly accident. You remember. It was right after you had that bad dream. Of course you remember."

Remember?

I remembered telling myself to neither believe nor disbelieve the lie. Instead, accept it. Use it. Make it a working hypothesis within which a child might survive his own existence.

If I believed the candy story, that made me stupid, an idiot, a fool, a danger to myself and others. If I disbelieved the candy story, my mother was a liar, which meant the truth would kill me. Safety lay somewhere in between. Accept. Judge not lest ye stumble upon the truth; the nightmare.

It's so big I can't imagine

How big it is.

It's so bad I can't imagine

How bad it is.

But the child knows.

The child knows.

The boy was dizzy and the doctor put him back on his bed. "You've been out for a long time, youngster. But you'll be all right. And next time be certain that what you're eating is really candy."

The doctor, a grown-up, believed the lie. The candy story. The doctor believed it. Grown-ups are smarter than children. Maybe I really had mistaken the pills for candy—

"No," I protested to all of them. "No kid eats candy without chewing it. No kid eats candy like swallowing pills. The only things you swallow like pills are pills."

I was the son of a drug addict. Before I knew how to talk I knew how to take pills, what they were for, and what they could do. I knew that if I swallowed too many of the yellow capsules, I would die.

I swallowed them because I wanted to die.

Attempted suicide.

Four years old.

Something happened that was too horrible to live with, and I took the pills because I wanted out.

The boy, the room, faded to be replaced by the interior of an old automobile.

A year, two years, three years later?

I was in back, my mother in the passenger seat up front. I couldn't make out who was driving. Brothers and sisters without name sat on either side of me. The talking was loud and happy. The family out riding somewhere for some reason. There were the trees, the grass. The boy did not feel a part of things; a real part of the family. He wanted desperately to belong; he needed to matter. He didn't know how and he hid in silence.

They were talking about someone named Earl who had an accident and had broken his arm. The little boy saw a way to participate in the talk. "I never had any broken bones," he said proudly.

"You've had lots of broken bones," said his oldest brother. The brother had a name: Derek. There was a smirk on his face, the hint of a sneer in his voice. The sounds in the car ceased. I frowned because I didn't understand.

I, the boy, we frowned because we didn't understand. We didn't know what was going on in the car. We didn't know what Derek meant. We didn't know what the silence meant.

How could I have had lots of broken bones and not remember them? What did everyone know that I didn't? I looked and Derek's face was bright red. There was another brother: Vern. Vern's face was red, too, but dark and frowning.

My mother turned her head, glanced with narrowed eyes at the older children, looked down at me, and fed the mushroom boy yet another load of horseshit.

Broken bones used to happen to me because I would be standing on the car seat, the driver would hit the brakes, and someone would grab me to keep me from hitting the dashboard. The force of the grab would crack my bones. They were really "greenstick fractures," not broken bones.

So the broken bones really hadn't been broken bones after all, and all was once more well in the mushroom shed.

How stupid that all sounded. I wasn't that fragile. Even if I was I would've had to have been a very stupid child not to have learned from the first broken bone to sit down in a moving car. My family must have been very stupid to have drivers that would allow me to stand in a moving car.

Believe it and I was stupid, an idiot, a fool, part of a stupid family. Believe it and the world made no sense.

Refuse to believe and, again, my mother was a liar. And a liar who would cover up this terrible thing, all of my broken bones, with such a stupid lie would only do so because she believed I was stupid enough to believe it. Either way I was stupid. Either way the world made no sense.

Again, accept it. Neither believe nor refuse to believe. Accept. Judge not.

How many lies? Was I the only one in my family who didn't know the truth about me?

Truth.

The truth was not in the car. The truth was not in the hospital. Earlier. Before my "accident" with the candy.

The boy with the halo of white hair. His face was stony calm, the eyes dull, as he took the brown plastic bottle of yellow capsules. One by one he took them all, swallowing each one with a sip of water.

The pills made Mama sleep. She had once given him one of the yellow capsules to help him get to sleep. She had done that a number of times. She had said a hundred times that too many of the pills could kill a grown man. How many, the little boy had asked. She didn't know. Eight. Ten.

That was all he needed to know. The whole bottle had almost a hundred capsules in it. That ought to be enough. There was no sense in taking a chance, making a mistake. He wanted to sleep. That's all he wanted to do: sleep without dreams. Forever.

Earlier.

Before the hospital, before swallowing the pills.

I could hear the roar of the chimaera, feel its flaming breath on the back of my neck.

Earlier.

In the dark.

Sleeping, safe, snuggling into the covers, dreaming of a gleaming silver airplane high against the clouds. Hands touching me. Hands under my covers, touching me.

There was a voice. Voices. A finger touching my lips.

“Shhhh!” came a whisper. “Quiet.”

I smelled the alcohol, just like my father’s smell, but it wasn’t my father. My brothers. Derek, ten years older; Vern, thirteen years older. They were giggling. Instead of excluding me, this time I was to be included.

I loved them. Looked up to them. Wanted so much to be like them, part of them, loved and respected by them.

I giggled.

Hands tickled me and pulled down my pajamas.

Hands picked me up, turned me over, and held me as something huge and slimy slipped between the cheeks of my buttocks, entered my anus, and tore me, making me cry out.

A hand covered my mouth as the thing slid in and out of me, tearing to pieces my guts, my soul, my heart, my childhood, my present.

My arm was pushed up behind my back until it cracked. Hands gripped my throat. Choked me. Couldn’t cry out; no one to save me—

I hovered up near the ceiling and watched through the shadows as the two teenage boys repeatedly raped and sodomized the beautiful little boy with the halo of white hair. I felt sad for the boy. He wasn’t very strong. Derek cracked the boy’s left arm by forcing it higher and higher behind his back. Vern bruised the boy’s left calf by stepping on it. He held the boy by his neck to keep him quiet as he raped the boy’s beautiful face.

The boy tore two fingernails before he went limp and no longer noticed what was happening to him.

It wasn’t so bad.

It didn’t hurt that much.

And from now on maybe Derek and Vern would love the boy, let him play with them.

“Listen to me, Timmy,” whispered Derek, his voice full of menace. “I’m serious. This is our secret. If you

tell anyone about this, if you tell Mama about this, you'll die.”

“You'll die,” whispered Vern, “because I'll kill you.”

Kill you.

And what is love? What is family? What is trust? The world is filled with fantasies. Without them, broken dolls have nowhere to live.

The next day the boy's arm hurt. It was swollen and Mama had Dad take the boy in to the doctor's. The doctor found the fracture. “How did you break your arm, Timmy?”

“I don't know.”

It's the secret code of the broken doll: I don't know. Listen to me, doctor. Hear my cry: I don't know. It means save me. Help me. Someone please save me.

“I don't know.”

At home, his upper arm tightly bandaged, Mama asked the same question: “How did you break your arm?”

She would not be put off with I don't knows. She demanded the truth. Even though the little boy would be killed for telling, he told. “Derek and Vern were in my room. They played funny. Derek hurt my arm.” The little boy started to describe the funny things that had been done to him.

Mama dragged the little boy to the upstairs bathroom and thrust a cake of Ivory soap into his mouth. “Filthy, nasty, boy! Filthy, nasty, boy!”

That night the boys came into the room again. Timmy started screaming and Derek put a pillow over the boy's face. Fingers wrapped around his throat and choked off the sounds. Again Timmy hovered up near the ceiling and watched as the boys raped and sodomized the beautiful little boy again. Once more they twisted his arm, this time his right. Again there was a sickening crack.

Greenstick fractures.

Standing in a moving car.

Good god, the lies.

The next night was no different, save that there were no broken bones; only bruises. The first broken leg came in a month's time. Two weeks later the boy with the halo of white hair couldn't remember anything about anything except for what those yellow capsules could be used.

I opened my eyes, the taste of cruel horror still in my mouth. A tiny sob escaped my lips. My arm hurt so bad. From the sound, I knew it was broken again. I could see the spatters of blood on the backs of my hands. My blood. Blood from my poor bottom. I was in my mother's room. Couldn't she see the blood? What do I need for proof? What do I need for the nightmare to stop?

“Here, honey. Take this.”

She put a pill in my mouth and gave me a sip of water. I swallowed and choked on the water, bringing

back the memory of being choked. “Mama, Mama, they came into my room! They choked me, They—”

“I know, honey. I know. But it was just a bad dream. You know Derek and Vern wouldn’t do anything to hurt you. They’re your brothers. You know your own brothers wouldn’t hurt you. Put it out of your mind. You just had a bad dream. Dreams can’t hurt you.”

The first lie.

The blood was there on the back of my hands. The blood, Mama. What about the blood?

A dream? But if I point out the blood to her, she’ll say it’s nothing. I know this from another, older, dream. Another dream.

Believe the lie.

Believe the lie and never sleep again.

Refuse to believe it and never trust again.

Accept it because the alternative was unacceptable.

The only sleep I slept after that came in bottles, powders, and pills. Trust became a sickeningly dark joke.

My mother stroked my head and calmed me as the sleeping pill softened the edges of the world, drowned my terror, chased away my phantoms. There was another pill and the world became a huge, soft, black cloud.

Hovering up near the ceiling, I looked down and saw the woman take some of her own pills. The little boy was naked. The bruises on his arms purple and yellow. The woman took some tissues and wiped the boy’s backside, cleaning it.

She smelled the tissue, closed her eyes, and seemed to weave back and forth on the bed.

Another pill.

Another.

And she moved the boy’s drug stunned body over, between her legs, and held his head by the neck as she, as she—

—I roared, “No!”

I ripped the world into a thousand pieces as the flames from my roar vaporized the chimaera, the lies, the universe, cleansing it, shattering me.

Aether.

Limbo.

Never Never Land.

The lake mists.

I always loved the mists, fog, stormy, snowy days. Hide within the fog, become the mist, blow away with the vapor.

I'd take the canoe and paddle into the mist hovering over the warm lake water in the chill of an early autumn morning. Sometimes the wind would blow the mists from me, making me strain to catch up and disappear within them.

From the middle of the mist anything is possible, the past is vague, all hopes fresh, all plans edged with promise.

I looked down into the water, saw the reflection of my own face, saw the face of the little boy under the water.

The little boy looked up at me. He raised his hand and I took it. I picked him up and held him close to me. He held me back. "I'm here now. I will protect you. Now you can sleep. Now you can begin to live. I love you." He kissed me and faded from my arms.

Without comment Shields began bringing me back.

Keegan was sitting in his underwear, half tied up in the chair. His molars ground on the stump of an unlit cigar as Shields and Meyla Hunter finished loading the truck. "I swear I'm comin' for you, Shannon. You owe me for this one, and I never fail to collect."

"Owe you?" I repeated as I tied his hands behind him, and tied them again to the back of his chair. I left the knots loose. He'd be able to wriggle out of his bonds in a few minutes. We didn't want Keegan to die of starvation in his deserted warehouse. We just wanted a head start. "I don't owe you anything, Keegan. In fact, with the work I've already done for you, you owe me."

"I told you I needed a sale. I was gonna pay you just as soon as I moved the hooker. But you went and got greedy. Decided to take everything, my equipment as well as my andys. I mean it. I'm comin' to get you."

"They aren't your andys," I answered.

"They sure as hell aren't yours, Shannon."

I stood in front of Keegan and nodded. "You're right. They aren't mine. They aren't yours. They don't belong to anybody except themselves."

Keegan looked at me like I'd lost my mind. "What're you talkin'? There're millions of androids in this country alone, and every damned one of 'em belongs to somebody."

"Alex Shields doesn't. Meyla Hunter doesn't." Titles and bills of sale were not the point. I did owe Keegan a little, so I told him. "Keegan, I'm talking life. The spark, the core, of every andy is life: human life. Human life is coded to be free. Now they're free. Before we're finished a whole lot more of them will be free."

"You're whacked, Shannon. What's the point in making an android if the damned thing isn't going to do what you tell it to do?"

I patted him on his shoulder. "See? You do understand."

As I drove the truck out of the city I inventoried the wreckage riding in the cab. Alex Shields had all of his horrors to work through and accept. Meyla Hunter had her own nightmares with which to deal. I had my own to fight, to meet, to rage against, to accept. It was a high price for freedom. I didn't know how the andys felt. For the sake of that little boy with the halo of white hair, if all I received in exchange for my war with my past was only a split second of that freedom, I wanted it. The chimaera had let go of its end of the chain. Now it was time to let go of mine.

Blades of the Diram Ring

He entered the Diram Ring early upon the first morning of planting. The pitiless sun was in his face, the long shadows of the ilaya trees slicing the weed-choked sand with purple stripes. He was dark, slender, but not frail. He had swum the moat and was almost naked. His skin was young, smooth, and carried no scars.

Strictly speaking, it was forbidden for him to be there. A few of the Mieura, long ago, had placed themselves against the weight of interplanetary greed and had demanded a treaty that would keep at least the Diram Ring free of humans and their video fraud performers. The document had been signed, many pictures were broadcast, and great windy speeches were made. The Mieura claimed the stone circle to be the last remaining temple of the Mieura that had not been profaned, and the human network negotiators guaranteed that the Diram Ring would never be violated. That was long ago. By the time the dark little human approached the circle, both the Mieura and the humans had allowed the Diram Ring to all but pass from memory.

The creature stood at the western entrance to the ring, his dark eyes examining the interior of what some Mieurans still called a "sacred" ring. Strange it was that the gods who had made the rings their temples so many thousands of years ago were regarded as myths, their appellations useful for nothing but oaths, curses, and the names of automobile models. Strange it was how the Mieura and the humans treated words. "Sacred," not a term of reverence, had become a possessive describing claims to property. "Never" had become a malleable temporal boundary that liquefied at the proper temperature heated by currency fueled fires. It was sham, all so corrupt, a feasting ground for the Gezi; demons who fed upon guilt and avarice.

Meaning, courage, reverence, and honor were blackened, crumbling artifacts tucked away in a forgotten corner of an antiquities dealer's shop. The gods were dead, everyone presumed, including the gods. No one knew that, when the human came to the ring, the death of the gods was a matter yet to be decided.

The people had grown very small. The blades were no longer the test before the gods. Throwing the blades was now sham sport, attended by the eyes of many worlds, each broadcast contest the object of fool's wagers on prearranged outcomes for profound sums. The blades were no longer prayers. They had become deceitful instruments of profit and entertainment. Few could recall the last throwing where the supplicants weren't hiding from their gods beneath armor. Naked beings beneath the flying blades had become a dim memory of a myth, a poor graphic in an unread school text. The present was filled with the huge ring at Araak and the Diteureh League Championships. Where once the ancient champion of the blades claimed his victory in the name of the gods who so honored him, the modern champion used his victory to claim the defeat of the gods, in addition to obtaining payment for commercial endorsements of demeaning rubbish and slow poisons.

These things were on my mind as the boy human squatted at the edge of the ring and placed his skin wrapped brace of blades on the sand. I watched him as my mind was brushed by the memory of Giya,

the last of the worthy Mieura to throw blades one hundred and fourteen years before.

The boy human studied the weed grown wall that encircled the ring. Leaving his blades, he stood and walked toward one of the loose cut stones. His walk carried the grace of a plains runner. It was almost a dance. He squatted to pick up the first stone.

Once there had been a party of stonemasons who had thought to save themselves some work and expense by stealing stones from the walls of the deserted Diram Ring. The stone the boy human lifted had been dropped eighty-one years before by a frightened Mieura mason after I had shown him roaring visions of eternal fire and had marked his hands to keep his visions fresh in his memory. Thirty-one years later, a human technician, his arms loaded with instruments, had crossed the moat to detect and measure plasmodial, biochemical, and electromagnetic fields in the ring. After days of intense work, he could get no readings on his instruments and had left the ring in despair, his mind frantically searching for a new thesis topic. He had muttered to himself that the alien gods, if they ever had existed, were dead now. When I heard him utter those words, I cried.

The boy carried the stone to the wall encircling the ring. First clearing the soil and weeds from the top course of stones, he put the heavy block of stone in place. Then he returned for another block. The original mason's puzzle was almost four thousand years old, and the boy solved it. All of the stones were placed back into their original positions.

When the ring was clear of stones, he began to clear it of sticks and weeds. He was preparing the ring for tossing blades.

I was vaguely puzzled, as if I were coming out of an ancient drugged sleep. I had been in a decades-long meditation and interrupted it only for these questions. Why would a human practice with blades in the crumbled, virtually unknown circle at Diram? The human money interests allowed no humans to compete in the sham contests for fear of having the sport banned from their video networks. Yet why would even a Mieuran come to the Diram Ring? There were no more prayers and no one to whom to pray. I watched the boy.

By early afternoon the boy had cleared the sand, bundled the weeds, and removed them. Upon his return, he brought his wrapped blades into the center of the ring, squatted, and opened the skin. He removed from the bundle two gleaming silver double-edged tossing blades, each one as long as his legs, each one sharpened until the ground edges were polished like mirrors. He placed the first blade, handle toward me, on the sand in the center of the ring. The point of the long blade was toward the niche in the ring's wall opposite mine. He lowered the second blade and shoved its point into the sand at his feet near the handle of the first blade. He did it with a practiced, confident manner.

"He would have us notice him," spoke Redgait from the opposite niche.

I was startled at the sound of my brother's voice. It had been decades since I had heard it. "I thought you had deserted the ring," I said to him. "It has been such a long time since I last saw you."

"And I you, Ahnli." There was bitter humor in his voice as he took form, filling the niche with deep orange light the human could not see. Redgait's attention wandered to the creature standing in the center of the ring. "Ahnli, what do you think of this misshapen thing?"

I looked at the boy human. He was respectfully motionless beside his blades, his face toward the east. "He has cleared the ring. It needed to be cleared."

"Leave it to you, my sister, to concern yourself with housekeeping while the universe crumbles around this ruin."

“The universe is not crumbling, my brother. Change is unchangeable, the stars burn and die, new stars are born.”

Redgait’s spindly black form stood out from the drape of his orange haze. “Where are our brothers and sisters? I have wandered every ring on the world. The niches are filled with Gezi demons, video cameras, and spectators with sticky faces as they swill their poisons and pack their bellies with disgusting goo. The prayers on the sand are now prayers to the Gezi, and the throwers pray not for the test, but for deception, victory, fame, and money. It is all false! A mire of vice. These sham champions of the blades, these exalters of petty demons, now have powers and honors surpassing those of ancient kings. The gods have died and forfeited the Mieura to the Gezi, and you say the universe is not crumbling?”

“The gods have not died, brother. I am alive, as are you.”

“Bah! Two petty spirits of an unknown ring.” The scorn in Redgait’s voice did a poor job of veiling his pain.

“Our brothers and sisters are alive too, my brother.”

“Alive?”

“They are within me, asleep,” I answered.

For once I saw that I had impressed my brother. After a long time he asked, “You hold them? How?”

“I stole them. As each one weakened and quit the Mieura in defeat, I wrapped it in love and peace and stole it. The gods didn’t die, brother. They did what we did: they quit.”

“You have stolen all of the ring gods?”

“All of the gods, Redgait. All but you.”

There was a great silence as Redgait fought with his confusion. “Why do you keep them? No one on Mieura has any use for gods.”

“Unless it’s this one,” I said, pointing at the human.

“You have taken a great deal upon yourself, sister.” Redgait was silent as he studied the repairs and the cleaning the boy had done. “He has replaced the stones in the wall. He did well. That must have been what brought me back.”

I saw my brother’s face fill the niche. His confused look turned to one of mischief. He meant to tease me. “I know what you did to the stone cutters, Ahnli. The Mieura have written books about it and the humans have even made what you did the subject of one of their silly video plays. In Diram Village they say you are an evil spirit.”

“I do not apologize for what I did to the masons.”

“I did not ask for one. Indeed, why did you let them live?”

“Should I have killed them for disrespecting gods that even the gods abandoned?”

“It is no matter.” I had spoiled his game by not getting angry, which had angered Redgait. His orange mist filled the sky as he examined the boy human. “Tell me, Ahnli. Will we guide his blades?” Out of Redgait’s mist I could see a spindly arm of black, a dark face of sadness. Redgait had not grown old, for that we could not do. But he had grown bitter and tired. That is age for a god. “Do we guide his blades or drive

the splinters of his bones deep into the sand and end it here and now?”

The boy human stood as still as the blade he had thrust into the sand. He knew how to wait. I reminded myself to ask him who had taught him his manners, should we let him live.

“Let us see.”

As I drew my energy from the sand and stones, Redgait moved from the north niche and allowed the human to see him as a window that flew through fields of stars. The human did not move. I stepped down from my niche in the wall and came up behind him. “We command and are of the universe. You would have us notice you, small one.”

I walked around him as his dark brown eyes remained fixed upon Redgait’s window. “Where you now stand is a place reserved for those who give their lives and their deaths to gods that the gods would return life for life, death for death. If you seek fame, wealth, power over others, or the favor of Gezi, you are in the wrong arena. Flee, boy, while you still live.” I spoke to the human in high dialect Mieuran, the language of the ancient priests and blade throwers. I reached, pulled the upright blade from the sand, and threw it across the other where it rang when it hit like a bell of fine cast silver. They were excellent blades.

“Ahnli, Redgait,” said the human. “I place before you my faith. My faith in return is all I ask,” he answered in high dialect. Someone had taught him well. Did his heart match his words?

“Without acts,” said Redgait from his window on the eastern edge of the ring, “your faith is but a word. As you would test the gods, the gods would test you. Let us test each other.”

The boy human retrieved the blades, stood upright, and with a practiced throw sent both blades whirling high above the ring, directly over his unprotected head and body.

I froze time to look at my brother. “See? They are perfect throws, Redgait. Unless we intervene, his blades will strike and kill him.”

“There is no trick? No plastic tips on the blades, no hidden transmitters allowing the fraud to sneak from beneath his deceitful prayer?” Redgait’s thin black arm reached out of the mist, took the blades from the air, turned, and examined them. “These are Giya’s. They are his blades.”

I took one from Redgait and examined it myself. They were indeed the blades that had once brought Giya to faith, then fame and fortune, then fatality. Sadness filled my every corner. I said to my brother, “He could only have gotten these from one of Giya’s grandchildren.”

“One of his great grandchildren.” Redgait released the blades and we left them whirling in time above the boy human’s head, awaiting our decision. “Ril. He had to be the one. The second son of Giya’s daughter, Jyn. You remember, Ahnli.”

“I remember.”

Redgait turned his gaze from the blades and looked through the blue sky at the stars. “It cannot be. Ril must be dead. If he is alive he must be the oldest Mieuran within memory.”

“He was born the same year Giya died,” I confirmed.

“Ril was to have been secretly buried with his grandfather’s blades. No one but Ril could have supplied these edges, and someone with a lengthy reach to the past schooled the boy human in high dialect and in how to approach the ring.”

“For what reason?”

My brother gave a bitter laugh. “To test the gods? To be tested by the gods? Why else in the world would one toss blades without armor?”

I thought upon it for a moment, wondering if the boy human was the form which a daughter’s revenge against the gods might take. When Giya’s blood soaked into the sand of the Jaffri Ring, Jyn had been there to witness his death. Giya’s daughter was not capable of believing her father had an imperfection. Hence she had seen what she thought to be the failure of the gods to shield Giya from the falling blades. Jyn was dead, her spirit part of the hills above Jaffri. The mob had been outraged at Giya’s failure, but Giya was dead and could not be hurt by their words or sticks. Instead the mob made Giya’s daughter pay for her father. She had been torn to pieces. So long ago.

I held the blades in my hand above the boy’s head and crushed them as I released time. The boy stood there for a long moment, waiting for the blades to strike him, or land harmlessly to his sides. When nothing happened, he glanced around, then looked up in horror at the mass of molten silver whirling above his head. It was not fear for his own life that widened his eyes. To his mentor the blades meant the world and now they were so much liquid.

“Boy, why do you throw in the Diram Ring?” I asked. “There are other places where you could play. Places where they serve beer and where you could preen in front of your kind.”

“Ahnli,” he said to me, “this is the only ring in the world where the gods still live. That is why I came to the Diram Ring.”

The voice was strong, strange, yet touched with the familiar. “What are you called?” I asked.

“Alan.”

“Alan,” I said, “we will keep the blades here, above the ring. Go and bring us your teacher.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Alan turned until the sun was in his eyes, and walked from the ring. As the sun’s orb touched the western horizon, Redgait asked, “Do you believe he will return?”

I watched a horned spider begin its new nest between the stones Alan had placed upon the wall of the Diram Ring. Above, in the sky, were the trails of cargo and passenger ships. On another world a child prayed. “Yes,” I answered. “He will return.”

“And we will wait for him?”

“We will wait.”

“In which case, my sister, we are all of us fools.”

The next day, just as the morning sunlight touched the molten metal above the Diram Ring, Ril, the ancient grandson of the great Giya, came before us. His wrinkled skin was the color and texture of rotted leather. His human, Alan, stood at the opening in the west wall. They had come over the moat upon a raft. Ril was too old to swim. Indeed, he was too old to be alive.

The hairless old Mieuran, his rheumy black eyes looking in dismay at the remains of his father’s precious blades, held out his pitifully thin arms and called, “Ahnli! Redgait! Spirits of the Diram Ring, can you have

given over this arena to the Gezi demons, as well? Is there no ring left in the world where gods rule?"

Ril stood directly beneath the whirling globule of metal and turned his face up toward it. In the light reflected from the metal I saw how timeworn Ril was. Redgait and I could never grow old, which is why we always felt terribly ancient.

"You speak as a child," scolded my brother. "Why did you send the human?" Redgait filled the sky with fire.

Ril lowered his arms and looked first at the northern niche, then turned and stared at me, an expression of astonishment on his face. "Can it be that the gods do not know what has happened to the world? Ahnli," he cried, his shaking hands extended toward the south niche. "Ahnli, look upon the world. Your people are starving without their gods."

"I see them," I answered as I let myself appear to the old Mieuran. To him I appeared as a Mieuran female. "They do not seem hungry to me. They dance to the Gezi's tune and grow fat and sleek."

Ril lowered his arms, a hint of anger edging into his voice. "Play me not the fool, Ahnli. You know the starvation of which I speak. The light within each of them grows more dim with each passing moment. It is a hunger of the soul."

"Why the human?" interrupted Redgait.

Old Ril whirled around and snapped at the north, "No Mieuran could have awakened you! You curl in your niches wallowing in self pity while your world dies the death of the spirit. How else were you to be driven from your cowardly hiding places?"

A great red hand, the palm of which could cover the ring, reached up from the north niche to crush the old Mieuran. My own hand reached up and held Redgait's until my brother's temper cooled.

"The balance!" cried Ril as he held his hands up toward the clasped hands of Redgait and myself. "The balance! It is for this that the world starves." He turned slowly and looked upon his dark little human. "Alan believes in gods. That is why he is here. I believe in those who believe. That is why I trained him and brought him to the Diram Ring. I must see my grandfather's blades thrown in the consecration once more. I must see the gods live."

Far above the ring, away from the ears of Ril and his human, I spoke to Redgait. "Where from here, brother? Do we crush them and retire to the peace of our ring?"

With his hand, Redgait touched the molten metal above the ring, fashioning them again into Giya's sacred blades. He took them and drove them toward Ril's upturned face and I guided them apart. They both stuck into the sand. Ril reached out his hands, grasped the handles, pulled the blades from the sand, and held them out toward the human.

Alan took the blades. As Ril retired to the edge of the ring, the human stood at the eastern edge of the ring, tossed the blades into the air above the center of the ring, and ran beneath them to the opposite side of the ring. Both blades struck vertically into Alan's footprints.

"Excellent!" exclaimed my brother, but in a voice only I could hear.

"He is swift and his throw is accurate," I admitted. "It is different, though, with eight, sixteen, or sixty throwers mixing their blades. He knows where his blades will strike. He cannot predict the others."

"For that, Ahnli, he has the gods."

I watched Alan retrieve the blades and throw them again. This time they landed in his path directly in front of him as he reached the far side of the ring. Without a pause he took the blades, touched the edge of the ring with his foot, and threw again, this time catching them by the handles as he reached the opposite side. He was far better than Giya had been. Swift, accurate, graceful, and he had a certain style that said, "Witness my passage. The gods protect me."

That had been the purpose of the rings and the passage through the blades. It was to bear witness that the gods were there, that they were strong, and that they helped those who sought them. Advertising, a human might have called it.

Redgait and I could protect Alan in the Diram Ring. For Alan to throw in another ring, however, he would need the gods of that ring. As the boy continued to throw, proving his stamina as well, I came before Ril and asked, "Where would you have him throw?"

"The ring at Jaffri."

"Where the gods killed your grandfather."

"No. Where my grandfather placed his faith in a paper god who could not protect him. There is where the end of the world began: the end of the blade throwers, the end of the gods, the end of faith."

I stared in wonder at Ril. Had he spent his many years searching for the proper champion to correct the long forgotten wrongs of his grandfather? Did he think he and his dark little human could alter the direction of the world? Did he think he could replace guile with courage, money with honor, sham with faith? The decision wasn't mine. Ril would begin his quest in the Jaffri Ring, hence the decisions that needed to be made belonged to other gods.

Lok and Diru were the gods of the Jaffri Ring, and they were still fast asleep deep inside me where I had hidden them. I reached out far beneath the eastern horizon with my sight and looked down upon the great metropolis of Jaffri beneath the morning sun. In the center of the city stood the ancient walls and columns of the Jaffri Ring. The ring itself was identical to the one at Diram, but instead of hundreds, the stands above and beyond the walls at the Jaffri Ring could seat hundreds of thousands.

On the sand the armored contestants warmed up and played with their blades, practicing their movements and falls, keeping fit and practicing their routines for the performance that afternoon. It would be a performance, too. Deaths in the rings, although far from rare, were suspected to be faked. The truth was worse than that. The deaths were newcomers to the rings, inadequately trained fools with their eyes on fame, that the veterans aimed at when they tossed their blades above the ring. It was an unspoken and unwritten rule among the veterans: spare the guild and aim at the beginners. The newcomers got a split second of glory, the veterans got their prize money and commercial endorsements, and there was plenty of gore on the sand for the viewers at home. Something for everyone, as one disgusted human news commentator put it.

Instead of gods, in the niches of the Jaffri Ring there were bored video crews arranging their cameras and patching their signals for the afternoon's sportscast. Dark smudges of movement behind them spoke of the Gezi demons and their numbers. The filthy creatures were thick in the Jaffri Ring. Only gods could see them, but the humans and phony blade throwers knew they were there, if only in their hearts. Gezi's feed on fraud, deceit, and greed, and not one of them was losing weight in the Jaffri Ring.

I brought Lok and Diru up. They opened their eyes, looked at their temple, and wept at what they saw below. "Sister," cried Diru. "Why did you steal me? Why have you awakened me? To witness this?" Her fire flashed out above the Jaffri Ring.

The blade throwers and video technicians below stopped what they were doing and looked up at the sky.

“That!”

“Did you see?”

“What was it?”

“It’s gone now.”

“What was it?”

A shrug, a head shaking, a coach clapping his hands for attention, a sharp word from a camera’s crew chief. Without the flames of their god’s despair singing their brows every moment, the contestants returned to practicing their scripts and the video technicians returned to preparing their equipment. One human, however, leaned upon a camera and continued to stare at the sky. He was someone with a bit of authority and was not barked into action right away.

“See that, Diru,” I commanded. “With the mere flick of your finger you commanded the attention of the entire ring. The human in the south niche, the one with the red hair, is looking for you still. Shall he find you?”

“I who slew Giya and crushed the faith of a world?” Diru held out her hands and blackened the sky for me.

I saw the Jaffri Ring as it was more than a century ago, the Mieuran blade throwers naked before their gods, the humans in the stands gaping at the strange novelty of the tossing. The great Giya strode into the center of the ring. Although he had tossed his white flowers at the southern niche and his blue flowers before Lok at the north, his manner did not witness the balance and protection of the gods. Instead his bearing seemed to say, “Look you at me. See me. See Giya. Celebrate my immortality.”

He came to a halt, bowed toward the north, bowed toward the south, and made one additional bow, the first ever seen in a ring. He bowed toward the west where a lone video camera, the first ever allowed into a ring, was mounted.

Diru saw into Giya’s heart and was horrified. Giya had been offered an incredible ransom for that bow, and for future appearances on the television. Everything in the universe had been granted him when, only days before, the single thing Giya had desired was to be one with his gods and bear witness to that union with his blades on the sand.

Diru’s attention was focused on her own dismay. Giya tossed the blades high above his head, and they did not whirl in the air for him. Instead Lok brought them down before Diru realized that they had even been thrown.

Giya had been the greatest. The throws were perfect. The points of both blades entered his skull, killing him instantly. His was the kindest of many deaths. At the same moment he died, faith died. The heart of a race grew suddenly barren.

The blade throwers who followed Giya that day, individuals and teams, were shaken. There had been no balance. All had seen it. Giya’s faith had been corrupted and there had been no balance. If the great Giya’s faith had been inadequate to balance the gods, whose could be sufficient? Those who had viewed the event on their new televisions asked the same question.

That day more than forty throwers died in the ring before the wardens called off the competitions. Competitions in other rings around the world were also called off when similar numbers of throwers fell. The rings were closed for many days while Mieuran politicians and human network officials made talk. When the rings opened once again, there was armor on the throwers. Soon came the video cameras, promoters, concessionaires, trick blades, and bloodpaint. The Gezis became bloated.

“This we have done to the world,” said Diru solemnly. “This we cannot undo.”

Lok was staring down at the Jaffri ring as the image of the old ring faded and was replaced by the present ring with its cameras, lights, armored competitors, and hoards of fat little Gezis. There were video screens around the inside wall of the ring advertising new gods: athletes, fashions, cosmetics, investments, foods, and medicines. Lok faced his sister and said, “Diru, there is a weightier sin than Giya’s lack of faith in us. It is our lack of faith in ourselves.” He turned toward me. “Ahnli, do you have a thrower?”

I brought them to the Diram Ring where Alan was doing his drills beneath the watchful eye of Giya’s grandson. “A human,” Lok stated.

“Watch him well,” I said. “He is better even than Giya.”

“He is a human,” said Diru. “If Giya’s head could be turned by the humans, what of him?”

Redgait grinned from his niche and said, “Diru, although they are exceptionally good at it, humans did not invent greed. They are capable of the choosing.”

“Show me,” Diru commanded. “Show me the consecration.”

“Ril,” I called to the old Mieuran. Alan halted his drills and stood silently at the edge of the ring as Ril approached the south niche. When he was in front of Diru, Lok, and myself, I said to him, “Present with me are the gods of the Jaffri Ring.”

“I honor them,” said Ril as he bowed deeply.

“Even though they killed your grandfather?”

“Diru knows,” said the old Mieuran, “that Giya’s greed killed him, not the gods of the ring.”

I studied Diru’s face to see if what Ril said would ease her burden. I could see nothing in her face. Instead she simply repeated, “Show me the consecration.”

“Diru and Lok would see the consecration,” I said to Ril. The old Mieuran turned, placed one hand atop another, and held them out toward Alan.

The human approached the center of the ring, crossed the blades and placed them on the sand in the center of the ring. He had no flowers to offer. Nevertheless he bowed toward Redgait and then bowed toward me. Taking the blades in hand, he threw them up directly over his head. Redgait grabbed the blades from the air and drove them down toward Alan’s skull. I reached between the blades and pushed them aside. As though they were describing the arc of a perfect bell, the blades stuck into the sand on either side of the boy.

Diru nodded once and said, “Very well, Ahnli. Bring him to the Jaffri Ring. Lok and I will look into the human’s soul to see if it remains pure.” She turned her face toward me and said, “Faith is easier in the Diram Ring, sister. There are fewer distractions. Here the Gezi would starve. It is different outside these walls.” And then they vanished.

I appeared to Ril and said, “The gods of the Jaffri Ring have agreed to stand at the niches when Alan appears there. How will you get him on the sand? Humans are forbidden.”

The old Mieuran held up a bony finger and said, “Forgive me, Ahnli, but they are not forbidden. Forbidding someone on the basis of race the great law of the many worlds does not allow. Humans killed in the rings, however, might raise viewer protests and risk the loss of vast fortunes; fortunes that are safe for as long as the dying is done only by the Mieura.”

“If they cannot be barred, why do no humans throw the blades? They have no shortage of actors, fools, or murderers.”

“Ahnli, the current rules, as put down by the Diteureh League trustees, state that the armor worn by a competitor must be of a certain size and design and that no other kind or size of armor is allowed. This effectively bars humans since their heads and shoulders are larger than the Mieuran. It does not specifically forbid, however, a competitor who chooses to throw the blades without armor.” He issued a wicked grin. “The humans made up the rules and enforce them through the fortunes they command. We only abide by them.”

A universe of possibilities opened before me. “When will you enter him?”

“I will enter him in the lists tonight. He will throw the blades in the Jaffri Ring tomorrow afternoon.” He held out his open palms and bowed toward me. “My eternal gratitude for your assistance, Ahnli.” He faced the north and bowed again. “My eternal thanks for your assistance, Redgait.”

The boy human withdrew the blades from the sand, crossed them over his chest and bowed to each of us, respectfully thanking us for his life and the manner in which we honored him as demonstrated by his continued existence.

When the ring was again empty, Redgait withdrew into his niche and entered into deep meditation. I looked within myself and called up all of my brothers and sisters, not only of the many rings, but those of the land, skies, winds, and waters, gods of stars, gods of life and love. I had hidden them long enough. Tomorrow would see us all reborn or, perhaps, dead.

Gongs and chimes, somewhat reminiscent of the ancient sounds, began the opening ceremonies at the Jaffri Ring. Even though the music incorporated human instruments and cadences, few paid the sounds any attention. The gods arranged themselves among the spectators around the ring while Lok and Diru took their places in the north and south niches, uncomfortably sharing their spaces with humans, Mieurans, cameras, and Gezis. I joined Diru in the south niche, and there the redheaded human from the day before was observing on a monitor while a human and a Mieuran talked before the camera.

The human was introduced as sportscaster Del Nolan. He was a used up sports entertainment commentator. His employers had dumped him in Mieuran blade throwing until his contract expired. There was no intention of renewing the contract. The Mieuran was introduced as Ti Edge, his humanized name a concession to viewing audiences around the many worlds. He was a retired blade thrower and he and the human seemed to talk knowingly about the day’s competitors. Their forced interest and manufactured enthusiasm as they speculated upon the day’s prearranged outcomes made me wonder at the kinds of beings who had so little of life that they felt they could improve it by watching this decayed shadow of Mieuran blade tossing.

The red headed human was wearing a headset and with his hand he signaled the two conversationalists as

he spoke into his headset. Suddenly a new face appeared on the monitor. It was a human female with black hair and skin the color of pale sand. She had been considered beautiful once, but her increasing number of wrinkles and a voice growing shrill had numbered her days before the camera. She too had reached the bottom rung of her profession. Standing next to her was Ril. In the background was Alan. He was wearing the traditional robe of pale blue, symbolizing the balance between north and south, balance between white and midnight blue. Giya's blades were slung on his back.

"To get around the rules excluding humans, Ril, you plan to send your boy in without any armor at all? Is that correct?"

"No," answered Giya's grandson. "That is not correct. Alan is entering the ring without armor because he needs no armor."

"Alan is pretty nimble, is he?"

Ril looked at the sportscaster and said, "When the gods are balanced, one needs neither armor nor agility."

"Gods?" For a moment the human female smirked and mugged at the camera as though only she and billions of viewers were in on an immense joke that the old Mieuran didn't understand. "Of course. Can you tell us anything about Alan — is that his full name?"

"Alan is his name. He is a novice blade thrower. This is his first competition."

A shred of genuine concern entered the woman's voice. "You are aware that the life expectancy of an armored beginner is perhaps a second or two after the first throw? Alan will be going in bare, and those aren't rubber blades."

This time it was Ril's turn to smirk. "I am aware that the gods direct the blades today."

She laughed in exasperation. "But what if they don't?"

"They do."

"How do you know that? Are you willing to throw away a human life because of some ancient superstition? What if you're wrong? I ask you again, how do you know these gods will protect your boy?"

"I've seen Alan do the consecration in the Diram Ring. I have seen the gods in balance."

She frowned at the unknown name and then a signal came to her headset from the red headed man. "Well, good luck to you and to Alan. I'm certain everyone back home is rooting for him." The female human faced her camera and said, "There you have it. Ril, the trainer for Alan the mystery man, the first human ever to enter the lists. You have to admire this kid's guts, if not his brains. Ti?"

Another face appeared on the monitor, and it was the retired Mieuran blade thrower, Ti Edge. "Thanks, Micki. I take it the difficulties with the Jaffri Ring trustees and the league trustees are all settled."

Back to Micki. "Yes, Ti. The rules are pretty clear. In fact the rules had to be bent considerably a century ago to allow the competitors to wear armor. It seems as long as the mystery man appears without armor, he's entitled to a place on the sand."

There was talk, endless talk, about possible appeals, who Alan might be, who Ril might be, and even who the gods might be. The chatter continued until the prospect of an afterlife seemed boring, the music

ceased, and the blade throwers entered the ring. To the raucous sounds of ribbed horns, they came through the western gate and continued around the circumference until there was a circle of sixty-eight throwers. All save Alan wore armor.

The different suits of armor were of many colors. Veterans wore dark and sand colors while the newcomers were clad in bright pinks, oranges, and reds. It was part of the guild regulations thereby making better targets of the newcomers. Anyone who lasted through a number of competitions was eventually entitled to a more camouflaged suit of plates.

Alan, seemingly tiny in his nakedness, was almost directly opposite the south niche when what the television people called the consecration began.

In the case of the armored lumps surrounding the ring, the consecrations were blade tossing exercises, seeing how close one could come to oneself without actually drawing blood. Most of the veterans were very good at it, but the audience considered the consecrations little more than boring warming up exercises.

I turned and saw the red haired man. He was issuing instructions to the man on the camera, and the lens swept the faces in the ring below while Ti Edge and his human swapped comments about the contenders. Gezi demons were all about, but they didn't hang off the red haired human the way they did the others. I crept into the man's mind and found his name: Tomas Holly. In his heart I found desperate, numbing loneliness. In his soul I found the bitter hole that remains after the death of a child's god. He was every bit as crippled as the people of Mieura, and for the same reasons.

I moved back into his mind and planted there a thought.

"Renny," he said to the cameraman, "frame the human and keep on him."

"Are you kidding?" said the man on the camera, although he immediately focused on Alan. "He's nobody, a pat, a suicide. Who cares?"

"I care."

"Yeah, but you aren't the one selling the jock itch spray and yeast infection ointment."

"Just stay on him."

"Got it."

I withdrew from the human and looked at Diru. The goddess of Jaffri's south niche was concentrating on Alan as was Lok from the opposite side of the ring. Neither one of the Jaffri Ring gods were doing well with the desecration of their niches. I asked them an ancient question: "Diru, Lok, you have the power. Why do you not sweep the trespassers and demons into the ring?"

"The test of the gods," replied Diru, "is not to show if they can destroy. All beings can destroy."

"It is to witness," continued Lok, "that the gods love, assist, and protect those who seek the balance." A human climbed upon Lok's seemingly vacant pedestal for a better view and the god of the north niche bumped the creature off of the stand and onto his posterior. The human's face looked shocked for a moment, then puzzled, then embarrassed that someone else might have seen him fall. A god had just touched him and his main concern was how it might appear to others. The universe was crippled indeed.

Tomas Holly, the assistant director with the hole in his soul, had witnessed the event. His brow wrinkled, he walked to the pedestal centered in the southern niche. It was cracked and split in several places,

which is why no one had attempted to site a camera there or use it for an observation platform. It came up to the human's waist. He lifted his arm and gingerly reached into the space above the crumbling slab of granite.

His fingers seemed to touch something, the something was Diru, and the god of the south niche took it for several moments before she gifted the human with a spark that caused him to withdraw his hand in haste. His frown became deeper.

The stands grew suddenly silent and Tomas Holly faced the ring to see the cause. Alan was walking toward the center of the ring.

"This is an unexpected turn," said Ti Edge's voice from the monitor. "Alan, the mystery man, is entering the center of the ring. "It's almost—"

"Are those flowers he's holding, Ti?" interrupted Del Nolan.

"Yes, Del. White and blue flowers. I don't believe it, but, yes. He's offering the white flowers to the south niche and the blue to the north. To the gods of those niches. He's going to do the traditional consecration; something this ring hasn't seen in over a century!"

"You mean like we talked about in the history segment? That's insane," said Del Nolan, a genuine note of feeling and concern in his voice. "Micki," he said, "are you watching this?"

"Yes, Del." And that was all she said.

Alan crossed his blades, placed them in the exact center of the ring, stood, bowed toward Lok, and then bowed toward Diru. He picked up the blades, and in one fluid motion threw them high into the air directly above him. The ring fell as silent as death. Lok reached out with his powerful hands, grabbed the blades, and drove them down toward Alan's skull. Diru intervened and again the bell-shaped arc of the blades testified to the balance of the gods.

The stunned crowd exploded with cheers while Micki, Ti, and Del examined instant playbacks from several different angles. There were several interpretations offered by the sportscasters to explain the event that had just taken place before their eyes. Del Nolan spoke of wooden blades called boomerangs that could be thrown by an experienced hand to follow any path the thrower wished. Micki speculated about computer generated images, although she had watched Alan, not one of the monitors. Ti Edge was strangely silent.

Tomas Holly punched a button on his control panel, cutting off the audio signal, and spoke into his headset. "Ti. What was that?"

The Mieuran sportscaster looked around the camera, his eyes dazed. "I don't know, Tomas. If it was a trick, I cannot see how it was done. Perhaps it was real."

"If it was?"

The Mieuran shook his head in a very human gesture. "It couldn't be, Tomas."

"If it was?" he repeated.

"Then the niches are filled with gods, they are in balance, they controlled the fall of Alan's blades, and will protect him in the ring." He waved his hands about encompassing the south niche, the ring, the world, and the known universe. "And all of this — you, me — all is sham."

The events that took place in the Jaffri Ring that day became legend. As the sixty-eight competitors made their first throw, fully a third of the blades were tossed along Alan's path. Although eleven novices were taken dead or wounded from the ring after the first throw, not an edge had touched Alan. There was very little sports commentary, although the instant playbacks were run at varying speeds, filling the time until the next throw.

In another throw the remaining nine Mieuran novices were eliminated, along with four veterans who had taken paths too close to the human's. And that during a throw where two thirds of the blades fell along Alan's path.

"Burning bush," muttered Tomas Holly. He blinked and glanced at the pedestal where he had touched a god. "The consecration, the blades, the rings, the whole damned sport." He looked back at the ring, back at Alan, where another throw was about to commence. Instead of cheering and jeering, as was their custom, the crowd in the stands had been awed into silence, as had been their custom centuries before.

The glittering throwing knives arced above the ring, the competitors raced onto the sand, and Alan halted in the center and extended his hands up to catch Giya's blades. A cloud of knives fell about him, stuck into the sand, and he simply stood there in that forest of sharpened steel, unharmed, holding his own blades high above his head.

A low moaning came from the stands, and I saw that many of the spectators were bent over with their faces covered, while others stared wide-eyed at Alan. The trustees called off the competition and the blade tossers, spectators, and television people went to their respective homes contemplating matters upon which they never expected to think.

"It is begun," I said to Redgait after we had returned to the Diram Ring. "There are gods again above the sand at Jaffri. Our brothers and sisters go to reclaim all of the rings, the seasons, the elements, the stars."

It was dark and Redgait stood until his face was among the stars. "All the gods are in their places, Ahnli. You have awakened them all."

"I awakened them," I said. "Alan gave them life. Alan gave life to the many worlds."

"When Alan becomes corrupted and the blades take him, do we fade again? I already see packs of agents, promoters, and lawyers below, their hands filled with offers, their mouths filled with lies, searching for Alan. There is a renewal in the efforts to develop armor that looks like a naked body from a distance—" He paused for a moment, then came his voice, low and puzzled. "Ahnli, my sister, we have more visitors at the Diram Ring."

We came down from the stars and occupied our niches as we watched the western entrance. Two figures crossed the moat upon a raft. Their hands held lights that danced in the darkness. I looked closely and it was Ti Edge and the human, Tomas Holly. The raft struck the bank and the human held the raft against the bank while the Mieuran climbed up and held the rope while the human climbed the bank. At last they stood in the entrance to the ring. I could see that Ti Edge had a long leather case slung upon his back. The retired Mieuran fraud had brought his blades.

Tomas Holly played his light around the interior of the arena. "Someone's been here," he said. "It's deserted now."

“Deserted?” the Mieuran growled. “Did the Jaffri Ring teach you nothing?”

“I meant I don’t see anyone. Are you sure this is the place?”

“This is the place. There is only one Diram Ring.”

“Maybe you heard it wrong on the playback. It might’ve been something that sounded like that.”

Ti Edge spoke very clearly, “This is the place.”

After an uncomfortable pause, the human walked until he came to the center of the ring. Once there he stopped, examined the sand at his feet, then played his light along the walls, stopping first upon my niche, and then upon Redgait’s. Raising the level of his beam above the wall, he let the light play among the stands, crumbling and overgrown with ilaya trees and great clumps of saw-toothed fina grass.

He turned off his light and said out loud, “Our researchers managed to find out the names of the niche spirits of the Jaffri Ring. Diru and Lok. They will not speak with us. Or is it that they cannot speak with us?” He waited for a long moment. I could see Redgait silently quaking with laughter.

“My sister,” he said at last, “They have come to put us on the television.”

Redgait never was one for looking into someone’s heart. I looked into Ti Edge’s heart and read what was there. I looked into Tomas Holly’s heart and read what was there. Their superiors in the television company had sent them to put “whatever these beings are” on the television, but that was not why they were in the Diram Ring. Each one had his own reason.

I cupped my hand above the ring and flooded it with a dome of light. The Mieuran stopped breathing and the human dropped his lighting device. I appeared to them as a mist and said to the human, “Gods have souls, Thomas Holly. I would not let you steal mine.”

The human withdrew an instrument from his pocket and looked at it. “It doesn’t show anything,” he muttered. Looking up from his instrument he said to me, “It doesn’t show anything. If you are real, and you are what you say you are, show yourselves.”

I could feel the heat of anger coming from the north niche as Redgait appeared as a column of molten metal. “The proof was in the consecration at the Jaffri Ring, human. The proof was in the life of Alan.”

Tomas Holly pressed a button on his instrument and listened. “No audio, no fields, no nothin’.”

Redgait’s spidery black arm reached into the night sky and the instrument in the human’s hands began smoking. Tomas dropped it and watched as the thing melted, burst into flames, and burned away, leaving the sand as clean as Alan had left it. “Now your instrument showed something,” sneered Redgait. “And even that is not sufficient evidence to one who begins his search by assuming the object of his quest does not exist.”

Redgait circled the ring with fire, turned the sand to water, and sent the two creatures to undersea worlds filled with great beauties and equally great horrors. After a moment of this, I saw a shadow of sadness and despair cross my brother’s face. “This is childish of me, Ahnli. Why do you let me go on so?”

“We must have faith in them, my brother. It is no less than what we ask of them.”

“To have faith in them is almost beyond my powers.”

I brought up the creatures and brought the Diram Ring back to the dark, dusty ruin it had been for over a

century. As Ti Edge and Tomas Holly gasped on the sand, I said to my brother, “It is perhaps even more difficult for them to have faith in us.”

After a long silence, broken only by the coughing and breathing of the Mieuran and the human, Tomas Holly struggled into a sitting position and said, “Alan has disappeared. No one can find him. The Mieuran who registered as his manager is dead. According to the local records, he’s been dead for years. The offers that are waiting for Alan are too incredible to be believed. If you know where he is you have a responsibility to him to tell me.”

“Ril is dead?” Redgait asked me, allowing the pair on the sand to hear him.

I looked. “Yes, brother. For many years now.”

“There is another among us, then, my sister.”

“Yes.”

“Another what?” demanded Tomas Holly as he got to his feet. “Another what?”

I filled the ring with pale blue light as I took human form and faced the man with the red hair. “What you want most in the universe, Tomas Holly, is the thing you cannot trust yourself to believe.”

“There is another what?” he demanded.

Redgait took human shape and stood beside me. “Another god,” he answered.

“God? Gods?” The human shook his head and held out his hands. “Is this a word that represents a pantheon of supernatural creatures, supreme beings, or perhaps only a race that exists in some part on another plane of existence? Just another race?”

“Yes,” I answered. “And much more and much less.”

The battle that waged behind Tomas Holly’s eyes reached a climax, then his face grew grim, his gaze cast downward. He did not look up as he said, “Where’s Alan?”

“Wherever you need him,” I answered.

“I need him in Araak within the next few days to sign with my network. That’s where I need him.”

“No, Tomas.” I reached out my hand, entered his chest, and put my hand into that great hole that was his soul. “Here is where you need him. Humans have gods, too. Alan is a human god.” I withdrew my hand as the human gaped at me.

“Alan is a god?”

“Search for him, Tomas. It may take the rest of your days, but you will find him.”

I faced the Mieuran, Ti Edge. He was still seated upon the sand, his gaudy clothing soaked. As he looked at me I altered my shape to fit his eyes. “Here I am, Tjija,” I said, using his given name.

He looked down at my feet, his face cast in shame. “For my lifetime, goddess, I have desecrated your temple, used it for fraud, sold its pieces to strangers, and brought murder to its sands. I scorned you, laughed at your legend, ridiculed those who believed. I failed you for I had no faith.”

“We failed you for the same reason, Tjija. We made a blade tosser our god, and when we saw he was

not perfect, we turned our backs on the universe. Can we forgive each other?"

He was silent for a moment, then I saw his heart make its decision. He stood, walked to the eastern edge of the ring, dropped his case, and began removing his clothes. When he at last stood naked before the ring, he opened his case and withdrew a set of dull black blades, colored that way to make them more difficult to see when tossed into the path of a novice. In the handles were tiny transmitters to help the thrower in locating and dodging them. Tijia removed the transmitters, tucked the blades beneath his arm, and reached once more into his case. When he withdrew his hand it held two bunches of flowers: white and blue.

"Ti," said the human. "Do you know what you're doing?"

"Do you know what he is doing?" asked Redgait of the human.

Tomas Holly walked to the western entrance, stood at the edge of the ring, and turned around so that he was facing Tijia. Again I looked into his heart. His pain was such that, for the first time in his life, perhaps, he could listen. As Tijia crossed his blades and placed them on the sand, I said to the human, "Begin with a small god, Tomas. As you grow, so too will your god."

The white flowers were offered to the south niche and I took my place. The blue flowers were offered to the north niche and Redgait was there to accept them. Tijia faced the western entrance, picked up his blades, and paused as his gaze met the human's and a flock of doubts flew through him. The moment passed and the doubts vanished like the desert mist beneath the eye of the sun. Up went the blackened blades, high above the sand. Tijia's hands were practiced and the throws were perfect. Redgait took the blades in hand and drove their points down toward Tijia's skull. I parted them and the human witnessed the bell-shaped arc described by the blades.

Alan was only a small god. We began with him.

And Then...

Dark corners.

Every mind has them, and every one of us fears them. We are also curious about these hidden pieces of ourselves. It's a special kind of curiosity; made up of equal parts of hope, dread, yearning, and despair. This curiosity, I believe, makes us similar to the character of Tomas Holly in "Blades of the Diram Ring," torn between desperate longing and fear of disappointment. The longing is rooted in the need to get that gaping hole in the soul filled, to become complete, to at last belong in this time and place and within this particular skin. The fear draws its strength from the eternal skeptic, the things-are-probably-just-as-shitty-as-I-think-they-are creature that attempts to protect us by never allowing false hopes to rise. It accomplishes this through crushing all hope.

Twenty-five hundred years ago, there existed the famous inscription on the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi: "Know thyself." Yet, most of us make do with Googe's "Out of syght, out of mynd." If writing the stories in this collection has taught me anything, it is this: out of sight *is never* out of mind, although it is often going *out of* your mind. Those things we hide out of our awarenesses do not go away, and that is because of where we have hidden them. They lurk there in our minds, discharging their destructive energies, altering everything else within the mind. For computer nerds, it's like dealing with a computer virus by refusing to check for it.

Have you ever been in a really foul mood for no apparent reason? Have you ever walked around in a

depressive funk and everything you look at is okay, but you can't shake yourself out of the feeling? Have you ever been filled with anxiety or dogged by a feeling of impending doom and you can't figure out why? It's the contents of your dark corners yanking your chain.

Just for the thrill of it, not to mention the possibility of improved mental health, take a big risk and turn a light on those things hiding in the shadows. You are going to find some real maggot feasts in there; horrors, pains, and feelings you wouldn't wish on a tax assessor. There are many wonderful gifts and valuable potentials hidden there, as well. Our heads are filled with truths we don't want to know and lies we'd like to believe, and we wonder why stress is such a persistent part of being a modern human.

If modern science is to be believed, we get to go around a lot of times, perhaps an infinite number of times. This time, however, is the only time I get to go around as the me I call "me," and the only time you get to go around as you. Do we run and hide from our mental selves, or do we take that risk, and go boldly where no chicken has gone before?

C'mon, grab that failing flashlight, push those cobwebs aside, and begin climbing down those crumbling stairs into the musty darkness. It's not just for the chills and thrills. There's a whole new life down there.

About the Author

Barry B. Longyear came to writing not early, but fiercely, being the first writer to win the Nebula Award, Hugo Award, and John W. Campbell Award for best new writer, all in the same year. He is the author of twenty novels and short fiction collections, including *Circus World*, *Enemy Mine* (which was made into a motion picture in 1985, Starring Dennis Quaid and Louis Gossett, Jr.), *Sea of Glass*, and *The Tomorrow Testament*, and his *Science Fiction Writer's Workshop-I* (Owlswick Press) is highly regarded as an education in how to write science fiction. Visit his website at www.sff.net/people/bblongyear.

Acknowledgements

"The Green," "Chimaera," and "Blades of the Diram Ring" originally appeared in *Amazing*, 1992, "Old Soldiers Never Die," "The Death Addict," and "The Dreyfuss Affair," originally appeared in *Amazing*, in 1993. "L.A. in L.A." appeared in *Analog*, 1996, "Then Came the Misty Man" in *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, 1996, and "Still Waters" in *Return to the Twilight Zone*, 1993.

This is the first publication of “The Calling of Andy Rain.”

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Kij Johnson is the winner of the Theodore A. Sturgeon Award for best short story of 1993, and of the 2001 IAFA-Crawford Award for best new fantasist.

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