

ROBERT SILVERBERG A HERO OF THE EMPIRE HERE I AM AT LAST, HORATIUS, in far-off Arabia, amongst the Greeks and the camels and the swarthy Saracen tribesmen and all the other unpleasant creatures that infest this dreary desert. For my sins. My grievous sins. "Get you to Arabia, serpent!" cried the furious Emperor Julian, and here I am. Serpent. Me. How could he have been so unkind? But I tell you, O friend of my bosom, I will employ this time of exile to win my way back into Caesar's good graces somehow. I will do something while I am here, something, I know not what just yet, that will remind him of what a shrewd and enterprising and altogether valuable man I am; and sooner or later he will recall me to Roma and restore me to my place at court. Before many years have passed you and I will stroll together along Tiber's sweet banks again. Of this much I am certain, that the gods did not have it in mind for me that I should spin out all my remaining days in so miserable a sandy wasteland as this. A bleak forlorn place, it is, this Arabia. A bleak disheartening journey it was to get here, too. There are, as perhaps you are aware, several Arabias within the vast territory that we know by that general name. In the north lies Arabia Petraea, a prosperous mercantile region bordering on Syria Palaestina. Arabia Petraea has been an Imperial province since the reign of Augustus Caesar, six hundred years ago. Then comes a great deal of emptiness -Arabia Deserta, it is called, a grim, harsh, barren district inhabited mainly by quarrelsome nomads. And on the far side of that lies Arabia Felix, a populous land every bit as happy as its name implies, a place of luxurious climate and easy circumstances, famed for its fertile and productive fields and for the abundance of fine goods that it pours forth into the world's markets, gold and pearls, frankincense and myrrh, balsams and aromatic oils and perfumes. Which of these places Caesar intended as my place of exile, I did not know. I was told that I would learn that during the course of my journey east. I have an ancient family connection to the eastern part of the world, for in the time of the first Claudius my great ancestor Gnaeus Domitius Corbulo was proconsul of Asia with his seat at Ephesus, and then governor of Syria under Nero, and various other Corbulos since his time have dwelled in those distant regions. It seemed almost agreeable to be renewing the tradition, however involuntary the renewal. Gladly would I have settled for Arabia Petraea if I had to go to Arabia at all: it is a reasonable destination for a highly placed Roman gentleman temporarily out of favor with his monarch. But of course my hopes were centered on Arabia Felix, which by all accounts was the more congenial land. The voyage from Roma to Syria Palaestina -- pfaugh, Horatius! Nightmare. Torture. Seasick every day. Beloved friend, I am no seafaring man. Then came a brief respite in Caesarea Maritima, the one good part, lovely cosmopolitan city, wine flowing freely, complacent pretty girls everywhere, and, yes, Horatius, I must confess it, some pretty boys too. I stayed there as long as I could. But eventually I received word that the caravan that was to take me down into Arabia was ready to depart, and I had to go. Let no one beguile you with romantic tales of desert travel. For a civilized man it is nothing but torment and agony. Three steps to the inland side of Jerusalem and you find yourself in the hottest, driest country this side of Hades; and things only get worse from there. Every breath you take hits your lungs like a blast from an oven. Your nostrils, your ears, your lips become coated with windborne particles of grit. The sun is like a fiery iron platter in the sky. You go for miles without seeing a single tree or shrub, nothing but rock and red sand. Mocking phantoms dance before you in the shimmering air. At night if you are lucky enough or weary enough to be able to drop off to sleep for a little while, you dream longingly of lakes and gardens and green lawns, but then you are awakened by the scrabbling sound of a scorpion in the sand beside your cheek, and you lie there sobbing in the stifling heat, praying that you will die before the coming of the fiery dawn. Somewhere in the midst of all this dead wilderness the traveler leaves the province of Syria Palaestina and enters Arabia, though no one can say precisely where the boundary lies. The

first thing you come to, once across that invisible line, is the handsome city of Petra of the Nabataeans, an impregnable rock-fortress that stands athwart all the caravan routes. It is a rich city and, aside from the eternal parching heat, quite a livable one. I would not have greatly minded serving out my time of exile there. But no, no, the letter of instruction from His Imperial Majesty that awaited me in Petra informed me that I needs must go onward, farther south. Arabia Petraea was not the part of Arabia that he had in mind for me. I enjoyed three days of civilized urban amusement there and then I was in the desert again, traveling by camel this time. I will spare you the horrors of that experience. We were heading, they let me know, for the Nabataean port of Leuke Kome on the Red Sea. Excellent, I thought. This Leuke Kome is the chief port of embarkation for travelers sailing on to Arabia Felix. So they must be sending me to that fertile land of soft breezes and sweet-smelling blossoms, of spices and precious stones. I imagined myself waiting out my seasons of banishment in a cozy little villa beside the sea, nibbling tender dates and studying the fine brandies of the place. Perhaps I would dabble a bit in the frankincense trade or do a little lucrative business in cinnamon and cassia to pass the time. At Leuke Kome I presented myself to the Imperial legate, a sleek and self-important young popinjay named Florentius Victor, and asked him how long it would be before my ship was to leave. He looked at me blankly. "Ship? What ship? Your route lies overland, my dear Leontius Corbulo." He handed me the last of my letters of instruction, by which I was informed that my final destination was a place by the name of Macoraba, where I was to serve as commercial representative of His Imperial Majesty's government, with the special responsibility of resolving any trade conflicts that might arise with such representatives of the Eastern Empire as might be stationed there. "Macoraba? And just where is that?" "Why, in Arabia Deserta," said Florentius Victor blandly. "Arabia Deserta?" I repeated, with a sinking heart. "Exactly. A very important city, as cities in that part of the world go. Every caravan crossing Arabia has to stop there. Perhaps you've heard of it under its Saracen name. Mecca is what the Saracens call it." ARABIA DESERTA, Horatius! Arabia Deserta! For the trifling crime of tampering with the innocence of his unimportant little British cup-boy, the heartless vindictive Emperor has buried me in this brutal netherworld of remorseless heat and drifting dunes. I have been in Macoraba -- Mecca, I should say -- just three or four days, now. It seems like a lifetime already. What do we have in this land of Arabia Deserta? Why, nothing but a desolate torrid sandy plain intersected by sharp and naked hills. There are no rivers and rain scarcely ever falls. The sun is merciless. The wind is unrelenting. The dunes shift and heave like ocean waves in a storm: whole legions could be buried and lost by a single day's gusts. For trees they have only scrubby little tamarinds and acacias, that take their nourishment from the nightly dews. Here and there one finds pools of brackish water rising from the bowels of the earth, and these afford a bit of green pasture and sometimes some moist ground on which the date-palm and the grapevine can take root, but it is a sparse life indeed for those who have elected to settle in such places. In the main the Saracens are a wandering race who endlessly guide their flocks of horses and sheep and camels back and forth across this hard arid land, seeking out herbage for their beasts where they can. All the year long they follow the seasons about, moving from seacoast to mountains to plains, so that they can take advantage of such little rainfall as there is, falling as it does in different months in these different regions. From time to time they venture farther afield -- to the banks of the Nile or the farming villages of Syria or the valley of the Euphrates -- to descend as brigands upon the placid farmers of those places and extort their harvests from them. The harshness of the land makes it a place of danger and distress, of rapine and fear. In their own self-interest the Saracens form themselves into little tribal bands under the absolute government of fierce and ruthless elders; warfare between these tribes is constant; and so vehement is each man's sense of personal honor that offense is all too easily given and private

blood-feuds persist down through generation after generation, yet ancient offenses never seem to be wiped out. Two settlements here have come to be dignified with the name of "cities." Cities, Horatius! Mudholes with walls about them, rather. In the northern part of this desert one finds Iatrippa, which in the Saracens' own tongue is named Medina. It has a population of 15,000 or so, and as Arabian villages go is fairly well provided with water, so that it possesses abundant date-groves, and its people live comfortable lives, as comfort is understood in this land. Then, a ten-day caravan journey to the south, through somber thorny land broken now and then by jutting crags of dark stone, is the town our geographers know as Macoraba, the Mecca of the locals. This Mecca is a bigger place, perhaps 25,000 people, and it is of such ineffable ugliness that Virgil himself would not have been able to conceive of it. Imagine, if you will, a "city" whose buildings are drab hovels of mud and brick, strung out along a rocky plain a mile wide and two miles long that lies at the foot of three stark mountains void of all vegetation. The flinty soil is useless for agriculture. The one sizable well yields bitter water. The nearest pasture land is fifty miles away. I have never seen so unprepossessing a site for human habitation. You can readily guess, I think, which of the two cities of Arabia Deserta our gracious Emperor chose as my place of exile. "Why," said I to Nicomedes the Paphlagonian, who was kind enough to invite me to be his dinner guest on my second depressing night in Mecca, "would anyone in his right mind have chosen to found a city in a location of this sort?" Nicomedes, as his name will have indicated, is a Greek. He is the legate in Arabia Deserta of our Emperor's royal colleague, the Eastern Emperor Maurice Tiberius, and he is, I suspect, the real reason why I have been sent here, as I will explain shortly. "It's in the middle of nowhere," I said. "We're forty miles from the sea and on the other side there's hundreds of miles of empty desert. Nothing will grow here. The climate is appalling and the ground is mostly rock. I can't see the slightest reason why any person, even a Saracen, would want to live here." Nicomedes the Paphlagonian, who is a handsome man of about fifty with thick white hair and affable blue eyes, smiled and nodded. "I'll give you two, my friend. One is that nearly all commerce in Arabia is handled by caravan. The Red Sea is a place of tricky currents and treacherous reefs. Sailors abhor it. Therefore in Arabia goods travel mainly by land, and all the caravans have to pass this way, because Mecca is situated precisely at the mid-point between Damascus up north and the thriving cities of Arabia Felix down below us, and it also commands the one passable eastwest route across the remarkably dreadful desert that lies between the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. The caravans that come here are richly laden indeed, and the merchants and hostelkeepers and tax-collectors of Mecca do the kind of lively business that middlemen always do. You should know, my dear Leontius Corbulo, that there are a great many very wealthy men in this town." He paused and poured more wine for us: some wonderful sweet stuff from Rhodes, hardly what I would have expected anyone in this remote outpost to keep on hand for casual guests. "You said there were two reasons," I reminded him, after a time. "Oh, yes. Yes." He had not forgotten. He is an unhurried man. "This is also a sacred city, do you see? There is a shrine in Mecca, a sanctuary, which they call the Kaaba. You should visit it tomorrow. It'll be good for you to get out and about town: it will make the time pass more cheerfully. Look for a squat little cubical building of black stone in the center of a great plaza. It's quite unsightly, but unimaginably holy in Saracen eyes. It contains some sort of lump of rock that fell from heaven, which they think of as a god. The Saracen tribesmen from all over the country make pilgrimages here to worship at the Kaaba. They march round and round it, bowing to the stone, kissing it, sacrificing sheep and camels to it, and afterward they gather in the taverns and hold recitations of war poetry and amorous verses. Very beautiful poetry, in its own barbarous fashion, I think. These pilgrims come here by the thousands. There's money in having the national shrine in your town, Corbulo: big money." His eyes were gleaming. How the Greeks love moneymaking! "Then, too," he went on, "the chieftains of

Mecca have very shrewdly proclaimed that in the holy city all feuds and tribal wars are strictly forbidden during these great religious festivals. -- You know about the Saracens and their feuds? Well, you'll learn. At any rate, it's very useful to everybody in this country for one city to be set aside as a place where you don't have to be afraid of getting a scimitar in your gut if you chance to meet the wrong person while crossing the street. A lot of business gets done here during the times of truce between people from tribes that hate each other the rest of the year. And the Meccans take their cut, do you follow me? That is the life of the city: collecting percentages on everything. Oh, this may be a dismal hideous town, Corbulo, but there are men living here who could buy the likes of you and me in lots of two dozen." "I see." I paused just a moment. "And the Eastern Empire, I take it, must be developing significant business interests in this part of Arabia, or else why would the Eastern Emperor have stationed a high official like you here?" "We're beginning to have a little trade with the Saracens; yes," the Greek said. "Just a little." And he filled my glass yet again. The next day -- hot, dry, dusty, like every day here -- I did go to look at this Kaaba of theirs. Not at all hard to find: right in the center of town, in fact, standing by itself in the midst of an empty square of enormous size. The holy building itself was unimposing, perhaps fifty feet high at best, covered completely by a thick veil of black doth. I think you could have put the thing down in the courtyard of the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus or any of Roma's other great temples and it would utterly disappear from view. This did not seem to be pilgrimage season. There was no one around the Kaaba but a dozen or so Saracen guards. They were armed with such formidable swords, and looked so generally unfriendly, that I chose not to make a closer inspection of the shrine. My early wanderings through the town showed me very little that indicated the presence of the prosperity that Nicomedes the Paphlagonian had claimed was to be found here. But in the course of the next few days I came gradually to understand that the Saracens are not a people to flaunt their wealth, but prefer instead to conceal it behind unadorned facades. Now and again I would have a peek through a momentarily opened gate into a briefly visible courtyard and got the sense of a palatial building hidden back there, or I would see some merchant and his wife, richly robed and laden with jewels and gold chains, climbing into a shrouded sedan chair, and I knew from such fitful glimpses that this must indeed be a wealthier city than it looked. Which explains, no doubt, why our Greek cousins have started to find it so appealing. These Saracens are a handsome people, lean and finely made, very dark of skin, dark hair and eyes as well, with sharp features and prominent brows. They wear airy white robes and the women go veiled, I suppose to protect their skins against the blowing sand. Thus far I have seen more than a few young men who might be of interest to me, and they gave me quick flashing looks, too, that indicated response, though it was far too soon to take any such risks here. The maidens also are lovely. But they are very well guarded. My own situation here is more pleasing, or at least less displeasing, than I had feared. I feel the pain of my isolation, of course. There are no other Westerners. Greek is widely understood by the better class of Saracens, but I yearn already for the sound of good honest Latin. Still, it has been arranged for me to have a walled villa, of modest size but decent enough, at the edge of town nearest the mountains. If only it had proper baths, it would be perfect; but in a land without water there is no understanding of baths. A great pity, that. The villa belongs to a merchant of Syrian origin who will be spending the next two or three years traveling abroad. I have inherited five of his servants as well. A wardrobe of clothing in the local style has been provided for me. It all might have been much worse, eh? But in truth they couldn't simply have left me to shift for myself in this strange land. I am still an official of the Imperial court, after all, even though I happen currently to be in disfavor and exile. I am here on Imperial business, you know. It was not just out of mere pique that Julian shipped me here, even though I had angered him mightily by getting to his

cup-boy before him. I realize now that he must have been looking for an excuse to send someone to this place who could serve unofficially as an observer for him, and I inadvertently gave him the pretext he needed. Do you understand? He is worried about the Greeks, who evidently have set about the process of extending their authority into this part of the world, which has always been more or less independent of the Empire. My formal assignment, as I have said, is to investigate the possibilities of expanding Roman business interests in Arabia Deserta -- Western Roman, that is. But I have a covert assignment as well, one so covert that not even I have been informed of its nature, that has to do with the growing power of Romans of the other sort in that region. What I am saying, in ordinary language, is that I am actually a spy, sent here to keep watch over the Greeks. Yes, I know, it is all one empire that happens to have two emperors, and we of the West are supposed to look upon the Greeks as our cousins and co-administrators of the world, not as our rivals. Sometimes it actually does work that way, I will concede. As in the time of Maximilianus III, for example, when the Greeks helped us put an end to the disturbances that the Goths and Vandals and Huns and other barbarians were creating along our northern frontier. And then again a generation later, when Heraclius II sent Western legions to help the Eastern Emperor Justinian smash the forces of Persia that had been causing the Greeks such trouble to the east for so many years. Those were, of course, the two great military strokes that eliminated the Empire's enemies for good and laid the foundations for the era of eternal peace and safety in which we live now. But an excess of peace and safety, Horatius, can bring niggling little problems of its own. With no external enemies left to worry about, the Eastern and Western Empires are beginning to jockey with each other for advantage. Everybody understands that, though no one says it aloud. There was that time, let me remind you, when the ambassador of Maurice Tiberius came to court, bearing a casket of pearls as a gift for Caesar. I was there. "Et dona ferentes," said Julian to me under his breath, as the casket was uncovered. The line every schoolboy knows: I fear Greeks even when bringing gifts. Is the Eastern Empire trying to put a drawstring around the midsection of Arabia, and by so doing to gain control over the trade in spices and other precious exotic merchandise that passes this way? It would not be a good thing for us to become altogether dependent on the Greeks for our cinnamon and our cardamom, our frankincense and our indigo. The very steel of our swords comes westward to us out of Persia by way of this Arabia, and the horses that draw our chariots are Arabian horses. And so the Emperor Julian, feigning great wrath and loudly calling me a serpent before all the court when the matter of the little cup-bearer became known, has thrust me into this parched land primarily to find out what the Greeks are really up to here, and perhaps also to establish certain political connections with powerful Saracens myself, connections that he can employ in blocking the Eastern Empire's apparent foray into these regions. Or so I do believe, Horatius. So I must believe, and I must make Caesar believe it himself. For it is only by doing some great service for the Emperor that I can redeem myself from this woeful place and win my way back to Roma, to Caesar's side and to yours, my sweet friend, to yours. THE NIGHT BEFORE last--I have been in Mecca eight days, now -- Nicomedes invited me once again for dinner. He was dressed, as I was, in white Saracen robes, and wore a lovely dagger in a jeweled sheath strapped to his waist. I glanced quickly at it, feeling some surprise at being greeted by a host who wore a weapon; but instantly he took the thing off and presented it to me. He had mistaken my concern for admiration, and it is a Saracen custom, I have learned, to bestow upon one's guests anything in one's household that the guest might choose to admire. We dined this time not in the tiled parlor where he had entertained me previously but in a cool courtyard beside a plashing fountain. The possession of such a fountain is a token of great luxury in this dry land. His servants brought us an array of fine wines and sweetmeats and cool sherbets. I could see that Nicomedes had modeled his manner of living after the style of the leading merchants of the city, and was reveling in that. I had not been there

very long when I got right down to the central issue: that is, what exactly it was that the Greek Emperor hoped to accomplish by stationing a royal legate in Mecca. Sometimes, I think, the best way for a spy to learn what he needs to learn is to put aside all guile and play the role of a simple, straightforward, ingenuous man who merely speaks his heart. So as we sat over roast mutton and plump dates in warm milk I said, "Is it the Eastern Emperor's hope to incorporate Arabia into the Empire, then?" Nicomedes laughed. "Oh, we're not so foolish as to think we can do that. No one's ever been able to conquer this place, you know. The Egyptians tried it, and the Persians of Cyrus's time, and Alexander the Great. Augustus sent an expedition in here, ten thousand men, six months to fight their way in and sixty days of horrible retreat. I think Trajan made an attempt too. The thing is, Corbulo, these Saracens are free men, free within themselves, which is a kind of freedom that you and I are simply not equipped to comprehend. They can't be conquered because they can't be governed. Trying to conquer them is like trying to conquer lions or tigers. You can whip a lion or even kill it, yes, but you can't possibly impose your will on it even if you keep it in a cage for twenty years. These are a race of lions here. Government as we understand it is a concept that can never exist here." "They are organized into tribes, aren't they? That's a sort of government. He shrugged. "Built out of nothing more than family loyalty. You can't fashion any sort of national administration out of it. Kinsman looks after kinsman and everybody else is regarded as a potential enemy. There are no kings here, do you realize that? Never have been. Just tribal chieftains -- emirs, they call them. A land without kings is never going to submit to an emperor. We could fill this entire peninsula with soldiers, fifty legions, and the Saracens would simply melt away into the desert and pick us off one by one from a distance with javelins and arrows. An invisible enemy striking at us from a terrain that we can't survive in. They're unconquerable, Corbulo. Unconquerable." There was passion in his voice, and apparent sincerity. The Greeks are good at apparent sincerity. I said, "So the best you're looking for is some kind of trade agreement, is that it? Just an informal Byzantine presence, not any actual incorporation of the region into the Empire." He nodded. "That's about right. Is your Emperor bothered by that?" "It's drawn his attention, I would say. We wouldn't want to lose access to the goods we obtain from this part of the world. And also those from places like India to the east that normally ship their merchandise westward by way of Arabia." "But why would that happen, my dear Corbulo? This is a single empire, is it not? Julian II rules from Roma and Maurice Tiberius rules from Constantinopolis, but they rule jointly for the common good of all Roman citizens everywhere. As has been the case since the great Constantinus divided the realm in the first place three hundred years ago." Yes. Of course. That is the official line. But I know better and you know better and Nicomedes the Paphlagonian knew better too. I had pushed the issue as far as seemed appropriate just then, however. It was time to move on to more frivolous topics. I found, though, that dropping the matter was not all that easily done. Having voiced my suspicions, I thereby had invited counterargument, and Nicomedes was not finished providing it. I had no choice but to listen while he wove such a web of words about me that it completely captured me into his way of thinking. The Greeks are damnably clever with words, of course; and he had lulled me with sweet wines and surfeited me with an abundance of fine food so that I was altogether unable just then to refute and rebut, and before he was done with me my mind was utterly spun around on the subject of East versus West. He assured me in twenty different ways that an expansion of the Eastern Empire's influence into Arabia Deserta, if such a thing were to take place, would not in any way jeopardize existing Western Roman trade in Arabian or Indian merchandise. Arabia Petraea just to the north had long been under the Eastern Empire's administration, he pointed out, and that was true also of the provinces of Syria Palaestina and Aiguptos and Cappadocia and Mesopotamia and all those other sunny eastern lands that

Constantinus, at the time of the original division of the realm, had placed under the jurisdiction of the Emperor who would sit at Constantinopolis. Did I believe that the prosperity of the Western Empire was in any way hampered by having those provinces under Byzantine administration? Had I not just traveled freely through many of those provinces on my way here? Was there not a multitude of Western Roman merchants resident in them, and were they not free to do business there as they wished? I could not contest any of that. I wanted to disagree, to summon up a hundred instances of subtle Eastern interference with Western trade, but just then I could not offer even one. Believe me, Horatius, at that moment I found myself quite unable to understand why I had ever conceived such a mistrust of Greek intentions. They are indeed our cousins, I told myself. They are Greek Romans and we are Roman Romans, yes, but the Empire itself is one entity, chosen by the gods to rule the world. A gold piece struck in Constantinopolis is identical in weight and design to one struck in Roma. One bears the name and face of the Eastern Emperor, one the name and face of the Emperor of the West, but all else is the same. The coins of one realm pass freely in the other. Their prosperity is our prosperity; our prosperity is theirs. And so on and so forth. But as I thought these things, Horatius, I also realized gloomily that by so doing I was undercutting in my own mind my one tenuous hope of freeing myself from this land of burning sands and stark treeless hills. As I noted in my most recent letter, what I need is some way of saying, "Look, Caesar, how well I have served you!" so that he would say in return, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant," and summon me back to the pleasures of the court. For that to occur, though, I must show Caesar that he has enemies here, and give him the way of dealing with those enemies. But what enemies? Who? Where? We were done with our meal now. Nicomedes clapped his hands and a servitor brought a flask of some rich golden brandy that came, he said, from a desert principality on the shores of the Persian Gulf. It dazzled my palate and further befogged my mind. He conducted me, then, through the rooms of his villa, pointing out the highlights of what even in my blurred condition I could see was an extraordinary collection of antiquities and curios: fine Greek bronze figurines, majestic sculptures from Egypt done in black stone, strange wooden masks of barbaric design that came, he said, from the unknown lands of torrid Africa, and much, much more. He spoke of each piece with the deepest knowledge. By now I had come to see that my host was not only a devious diplomat but also a person of some power and consequence in the Eastern realm, and a scholar of note besides. I was grateful to him for having reached out so generously to me in these early days of my lonely exile -- to the displaced and unhappy Roman nobleman, bereft of all that was familiar to him, a stranger in a strange land. But I knew also that I was meant to be grateful to him, that it was his purpose to ensnare me in the bonds of friendship and obligation, so that I would have nothing but good things to say about the Greek legate in Mecca should I ever return to my master the Emperor Julian II. Would I ever return, though? That was the question. That is the question, yes. Will I ever see Roma of the green hills and shining marble palaces again, Horatius, or am I doomed to bake in the heat of this oven of a desert forever? HAVING NO occupation here and having as yet found no friends other than Nicomedes, whose companionship I could not presume to demand too often, I whiled away the days that followed in close exploration of the town. The shock of finding myself resident in this squalid little place has begun to wear off. I have started to adapt, to some degree, to the change that has come over my existence. The pleasures of Roma are no longer mine to have; very well, I must search out such diversion as is to be found here, for there is no place in the world, humble though it be, that does not offer diversion of some sort to him who has eyes for finding it. So in these days since my last letter I have roamed from one end of Mecca to the other, up and down the broad though unpaved boulevards and into many of the narrow lanes and byways that intersect them. My presence does not appear to be greatly troublesome to anyone, although from time to time I do become cognizant that I am the object

of someone's cold, gleaming stare. I am, as you know, the only Roman of the West in Mecca, but scarcely the only foreigner. In the various marketplaces I have seen Persians, Syrians, Ethiopians, and of course a good many Greeks. There are numerous Indians here as well, dark lithe people with conspicuous luminous eyes, and also some Hebrews, these being a people who live mainly over in Aiguptos, just on the other side of the Red Sea from Arabia. They have been resident in Aiguptos for thousands of years, though evidently they were originally a desert tribe from some country much like this one, and they are not in any way Aiguptian in language or culture or religion. These Hebrews have in modern times begun to spread from their home along the Nilus into the lands adjacent, and there are more than a few of them here. Nicomedes has spoken of them to me. They are unusual people, the Hebrews. The most interesting thing about them is that they believe there is only one god, a harsh and austere deity who cannot be seen and who must not be portrayed in images of any sort. They have nothing but contempt for the gods of other races, deeming them wholly imaginary, mere creatures of fable and fantasy that possess no true existence. This may very likely be the case, certainly: who among us has ever laid eyes on Apollo or Mercury or Minerva? Most people, however, have the good sense not to make a mockery of the religious practices of others, whereas the Hebrews apparently cannot keep themselves from trumpeting the virtues of their own odd species of belief while denouncing everybody else most vociferously as idolaters and fools. As you can readily imagine, this does not make them very popular among their neighbors. But they are an industrious folk, with special aptitudes for the sciences of agriculture and irrigation, and a notable knack, also, for finance and trade, which is why Nicomedes has paid such attention to them. He tells me that they own most of the best land in the northern part of the country, that they are the chief bankers here in Mecca, and that they control the markets in weapons, armor, and agricultural tools everywhere in the land. It seems advantageous for me to get to know one or two important Hebrews of Mecca and I have made attempts to do so, thus far without any success, during the course of my ramblings in the marketplaces. The markets here are very specialized, each offering its own kind of merchandise. I have visited them all by now. There is a spice-market, of course: great sacks of pepper both black and white, and garlic and cumin and saffron, sandalwood and cassia, aloes, spikenard, and an aromatic dried leaf that they call malabathron, and hosts of other things I could not begin to name. There is a camel-market, only on certain days of the week, where those strange beasts are bought and sold in heated bargaining that goes to the edge of actual combat. I went up to one of these creatures to see it better and it yawned in my face as though I were the dullest of rogues. There is a market for cloth, which deals in muslins and silks and cotton both Indian and Aiguptian, and a market where crude idols of many kinds are sold to the credulous -- I saw a Hebrew man walk past it, and spit and glare and make what I think was a holy sign of his people -- and a market for wines, and one for perfumes, and the market of meat and the one of grains, and the market where the Hebrew merchants sell their iron goods, and one for fruits of all kinds, pomegranates and quinces and citrons and lemons and sour oranges and grapes and peaches, all this in the midst of the most forbidding desert you could imagine! And also there is a market for slaves, which is where I encountered the remarkable man who called himself Mahmud. The slave-market of Mecca is as bustling as any slave-market anywhere, which illustrates how great a degree of prosperity lies behind the deceptively shabby facade this city displays to strangers. It is the great flesh-mart of the land, and buyers sometimes come from as far away as Syria and the Persian Gulf to check out the slavemongers' latest haul of desirable human exotica. Though wood is a luxury in this desert country, there is the usual platform of planks and timbers, the usual awning suspended from a couple of poles, the usual sorry huddle of naked merchandise waiting to be sold. As usual, they were a mix of all races, though with a distinct Asian and African cast, here: Ethiops dark as night and brawny Nubians even darker, and fiat-faced fair-skinned Circassians and Avars and



other sinewy northern folk, and some who might have been Persians or Indians, and even a sullen yellow-haired man who could have been a Briton or Teuton. The auctions were conducted, quite naturally, in the Saracen tongue, so that I understood nothing of what was said, but I suppose it was the customary fraudulent gabble that fools no one, how this buxom sultry Turkish wench was a king's daughter in her own land, and this thick-bearded scowling Libyan had been a charioteer of the highest distinction before his master's bankruptcy had forced his sale, and so forth. It so happened that I was passing the auction-place at noonday three days past when three supple tawny-skinned wantons, who from their shameless movements and smiles must have been very skilled prostitutes indeed, came up for sale as a single lot, intended perhaps as concubines for some great emir. They wore nothing but jingling bracelets of silver coins about their wrists and ankles, and were laughing and thrusting their breasts from side to side and winking at the crowd to invite active bidding on behalf of their seller, who for all I know was their uncle or their brother. The spectacle was so lively that I paused to observe it a moment. Hardly had I taken my place in the crowd, though, than the man standing just to my left surprised me by turning toward me and muttering, in a vibrant tone of intense fury powerfully contained, "Ah, the swine! They should be whipped and turned out into the desert for the jackals to eat!" This he said in quite passable Greek, uttering the words in a low whisper that nonetheless was strikingly rich and captivating, one of the most musical speaking voices I have ever heard. It was as though the words had overflowed his soul and he had had no choice but to utter them at once to the man closest at hand. The power of that extraordinary voice and the violence of his sentiment had the most singular effect on me. It was as though I had been seized by the wrist in an irresistible grip. I stared at him. He was holding himself taut as a bowstring when the archer is at the verge of letting fly, and appeared to be trembling with wrath. Some sort of response seemed incumbent on me. The best I could do was to say, "The girls, do you mean?" "The slavemasters," said he. "The women are but chattel. They are not to be held accountable. But it is wrong to put chattel out for pandering, as these criminals do." And then, relaxing his stance a bit and looking now somewhat abashed at his forwardness, he said in a far less assertive tone of voice, "But you must forgive me for pouring these thoughts into the unwilling ears of a stranger who surely has no interest in hearing such things." "On the contrary. What you say interests me greatly. Indeed, you must tell me more." I studied him with no little curiosity. It had crossed my mind immediately that he might be a Hebrew: his horror and rage at the sight of this trifling bit of flesh-peddling seemed to mark him as a kinsman of that dour man who had made such a display of irate piety in the marketplace of idols. You will recall that I had resolved to seek contact with members of that agile-minded race of merchants here. But a moment's closer examination of his look and garb led me now to realize that he must be pure Saracen by blood. There was tremendous presence and force about him. He was tall and slender, a handsome dark-haired man of perhaps thirty-five years or a little more, with a dense flowing beard, piercing eyes, and a warm and gracious smile that quite contradicted the unnerving ferocity of his gaze. His princely bearing, his eloquent manner of speech, and the fineness of his garments all suggested that he was a man of wealth and breeding, well connected in this city. At once I sensed that he might be even more useful to me than any Hebrew. So I drew him out, questioning him a little on the reasons for his spontaneous outburst against the trade in easy women in this marketplace, and without the slightest hesitation he poured forth a powerful and lengthy tirade, fierce in content although stated in that same captivating musical tone, against the totality of the sins of his countrymen. And what a multitude of sins they were! Mere prostitution was the least of them. I had not expected to encounter such a Cato here. "Look about you!" he urged me. "Mecca is an utter abyss of wickedness. Do you see the idols that are sold everywhere, and set up piously in shops and homes in places of respect? They are false gods,

these images, for the true god, and He is One, cannot be rendered by any image. --Do you observe the flagrant cheating in the marketplaces? --Do you see the men lying shamelessly to their wives, and the wives lying as well, and the gambling and the drinking and the whoring, and the quarreling between brother and brother?" And there was much more. I could see that he held this catalog of outrage pent up in his breast at all times, ready to issue it forth whenever he found some new willing listener. Yet he said all this not in any lofty and superior way, but almost in bewilderment: he was saddened rather than infuriated by the failings of his brethren, or so it seemed to me. Then he paused, once again changing tone, as though it had occurred to him that it was impolite to remain in this high denunciatory mode for any great length of time. "Again I ask you to pardon me for my excess of zeal. I feel very strongly on these matters. It is the worst of my faults, I hope. --If I am not mistaken, you are the Roman who has come to live among us?" "Yes. Leontius Corbulo, at your service. A Roman of the Romans, I like to say." I gave him a flourish. "My family is a very ancient one, with historic ties to Syria and other parts of Asia." "Indeed. I am Mahmud son of Abdallah, who was the son of--" well, the son of I forget whom, who was the son of so-and-so, the son of someone else. It is the custom of these Saracens to let you have their pedigrees five or six generations back in a single outburst of breath, but it was impossible for me to retain most of the barbarous outlandish names in my mind very long. I do recall his telling me that he was a member of one of the great mercantile clans of Mecca, which is called something like the Koreish. It seemed to me that a strong rapport had arisen between us in just these few moments, and, such was the power of his personality, I was reluctant to leave him. Since it was the time for the midday meal, I proposed that we take it together, and invited him to come with me to my villa. But he responded that I was a guest in Mecca and it was not fitting for him to enjoy my hospitality until I had partaken of his. I didn't try to dispute the issue. The Saracens, I had already begun to learn, are most punctilious about this sort of thing. "Come," he said, beckoning. And so it was that for the first time I entered the home of a wealthy merchant of Mecca. The villa of Mahmud son of Abdallah was not unlike that of Nicomedes, though on a larger scale -- walled courtyard, central fountain, bright airy rooms, inlays of vividly colored tile set in the walls. But unlike Nicomedes, Mahmud was no collector of antiquities. He appeared to have scarcely any possessions at all. A prevailing austerity of decoration was the rule in his house. And of course there was no sign anywhere in it of the idols that other Meccans seemed to cherish. The wife of Mahmud made a fleeting appearance. Her name was something like Kadija, and she seemed considerably older than her husband, a fact soon confirmed from Mahmud's own lips. A couple of daughters passed to and fro in equally brief manner. But he and I dined alone, seated on straw mats in the center of a huge bare room. Mahmud sat crosslegged like a tailor, and appeared to be entirely at ease in that posture. I tried but failed to manage it, and after a time fell into the normal reclining position, wishing mightily that I had a cushion for my elbow, but not willing to give offense by asking for one. The meal itself was simple, grilled meat and a stew of barley and melons, with nothing but water to wash it down. Mahmud did not, it seemed, care for wine. He spoke of himself with complete openness, as though we were kinsmen from widely distant lands who were meeting for the first time. I learned that Mahmud's father had died before his birth and his mother had lived only a short while thereafter, so he had grown up in impoverished circumstances under the guardianship of an uncle. From his tale I received the impression of a lonely childhood spent wandering the cheerless rocky hills beyond town, pondering from an early age, perhaps, the great questions of eternity and the spirit that plainly have continued to obsess him to this day. In his twenty-fifth year, said Mahmud, he entered into the service of the woman Kadija, a wealthy widow fifteen years his senior, who soon fell in love with him and asked him to be her husband. This he told me with no trace of embarrassment at all, and I suppose he has no reason to feel any. A look of

happiness comes into his eyes when he speaks of her. She has borne him both sons and daughters, though only the daughters have survived. The prosperity that he enjoys today is, I gather, the result of his skillful management of the property that his wife brought to their union. About Roma, Constantinopolis, or any other place beyond the frontiers of Arabia Deserta, he asked me nothing whatever. Though his intelligence is deep and questing, he did not seem concerned with the empires of this world. It appears that he has scarcely been outside Mecca at all, though he mentioned having made a journey as far as Damascus on one occasion. I would think him a simple man if I did not know, Horatius, how complex in fact he is. The great preoccupation of his life is his concept of the One God. This is, of course, the idea famously advocated since antiquity by the Hebrews. I have no doubt that Mahmud has had conversations with the members of that race who live in Mecca, and that their ideas have affected his philosophy. He must surely have heard them express their reverence for their aloof and unknowable god, and their contempt for the superstitions of the Meccans, who cherish such a multitude of idols and talismans and practice a credulous veneration of the sun and the moon and stars and planets and a myriad of demons. He makes no secret of this: I heard him make reference to an ancient Hebrew prophet called Abraham, who is apparently a figure he greatly admires, and also a certain Moses, a later leader of that tribe. But he lays claim to a separate revelation of his own. He asserts that his special enlightenment came as the result of arduous private prayer and contemplation. He would go up often into the mountains behind the town and meditate in solitude in a secluded cave; and one day an awareness of the Oneness of God was revealed to him as though by a divine messenger. Mahmud calls this god "Allah." A marvelous transformation comes over him when he begins to speak of him. His face glows; his eyes take on the quality of beacons; his very voice becomes such a thing of music and poetry that you would think you were in the presence of Apollo. It is impossible, he says, ever to understand the nature of Allah. He is too far above us for that. Other people may regard their gods as personages in some kind of story, and tell lively fanciful tales of their travels throughout the world and their quarrels with their wives and their adventures on the battlefield, and make statues of them that show them as men and women, but Allah is not like that. One does not tell tales about Allah. He cannot be thought of as a tall man with a commanding face and a full beard and a host of passions -- someone rather like an Emperor, let us say, but on a larger scale -- and it is foolishness, as well as blasphemy, to make representations of him the way the ancient Greeks did of such gods of theirs as Zeus and Aphrodite and Poseidon, or we do of Jupiter or Venus or Mars. Allah is the creative force itself, the maker of the universe, too mighty and vast to be captured by any sort of representation. I asked Mahmud how, if it is blasphemous to imagine a face for his god, it can be acceptable to give him a name. For surely that is a kind of representation also. Mahmud seemed pleased at the sharpness of my question; and he explained that "Allah" is not actually a name, as "Mahmud" or "Leontius Corbulo" or "Jupiter" are names, but is a mere word, simply the term in the Saracen language that means the god. To Mahmud, the fact that there is only one god, whose nature is abstract and incomprehensible to mortals, is the great sublime law from which all other laws flow. This will probably make no more sense to you, Horatius, than it does to me, but it is not our business to be philosophers. What is of interest here is that the man has such a passionate belief in the things he believes. So passionate is it that as you listen to him you become caught up in the simplicity and the beauty of his ideas and the power of his way of speaking of them, and you are almost ready to cry out your belief in Allah yourself. It is a very simple creed indeed, but enormously powerful in its directness, the way things in this harsh and uncompromising desert land tend to be. He stringently rejects all idol-worship, all fable-making, all notions of how the movements of the stars and planets govern our lives. He places no trust in oracles or sorcery. The decrees of kings and princes mean very little to him either. He accepts only

the authority of his remote and awesome and inflexible god, whose great stem decree it is that we live virtuous lives of hard work, piety, and respect for our fellow men. Those who live by Allah's law, says Mahmud, will be gathered into paradise at the end of their days; those who do not will descend into the most terrible of hells. And Mahmud does not intend to rest until all Arabia has been brought forth out of sloth and degeneracy and sin to accept the supremacy of the One God, and its scattered squabbling tribes forged at last into a single great nation under the rule of one invincible king who could enforce the laws of that god. He was awesome in his conviction. By the time he was done, I was close to feeling the presence and might of Allah myself. That was surprising and a little frightening, that Mahmud could stir such feelings in me, of all people. I was amazed. But then he had finished his expounding, and after a few moments the sensation ebbed and I was myself again. "What do you say?" he asked me. "Can this be anything other than the truth?" "I am not in a position to judge that," said I carefully, not wishing to give offense to this interesting new friend, especially in his own dining hall. "We Romans are accustomed to regarding all creeds with tolerance, and if you ever visit our capital you will find temples of a hundred faiths standing side by side. But I do see the beauty of your teachings." "Beauty? I asked about truth. When you say you accept all faiths as equally true, what you really say is that you see no truth in any of them, is that not so?" I disputed that, reaching into my school days for maxims out of Plato and Marcus Aurelius to argue that all gods are reflections of the true godhood. But it was no use. He saw instantly through my Roman indifference to religion. If you claim to believe, as we do, that this god is just as good as that one, what you are really saying is that gods in general don't matter much at all. Our live-and-let-live policy toward the worship of Mithra and Dagon and Baal and all the other deities whose temples thrive in Roma is a tacit admission of that view. And for Mahmud that is a contemptible position. Sensing the tension that was rising in him, and unwilling to have our pleasant conversation turn acrid, I offered a plea of fatigue, and promised to continue the discussion with him at another time. In the evening, having been invited yet again to dine with Nicomedes the Paphlagonian and with my head still spinning from the thrust of all that Mahmud had imparted to me, I asked him if he could tell me anything about this extraordinary person. "That man!" Nicomedes said, chuckling. "Consorting with madmen, are you, now, Corbulo?" "He seemed quite sane to me." "Oh, he is, he is, at least when he's selling you a pair of camels or a sack of saffron. But get him started on the subject of religion and you'll see a different man." "As a matter of fact, we had quite a lengthy philosophical discussion, he and I, this very afternoon," I said. "I found it fascinating. I've never heard anything quite like it." "I dare say you haven't. Poor chap, he should get himself away from this place while he's still got the chance. If he keeps on going the way I understand he's been doing lately, he'll turn up dead out in the dunes one of these days, and no one will be surprised." "I don't follow you." "Preaching against the idols the way he does, is what I mean. You know, Corbulo, they worship three hundred different gods in this city, and each one has his own shrine and his own priesthood and his own busy factory dedicated to making idols for sale to pilgrims, and so on and so forth. If I understand your Mahmud correctly, he'd like to shut all that down. Is that not so?" "I suppose. Certainly he expressed plenty of scorn for idols and idolaters." "Indeed he does. Up till now he's simply had a little private cult, though, half a dozen members of his own family. They get together in his house and pray to his particular god in the particular way that Mahmud prescribes. An innocent enough pastime, I'd say. But lately, I'm told, he's been spreading his ideas farther afield, going around to this person and that and testing out his seditious ideas about how to reform Saracen society on them. As he did with you this very day, it seems. Well, it does no harm for him to be talking religion with somebody like you or me, because we Romans are pretty casual about such matters. But the Saracens aren't. Before long, mark

my words, he'll decide to set himself up as a prophet who preaches in public, and he'll stand in the main square threatening fire and damnation to anybody who keeps to the old ways, and then they'll have to kill him. The old ways are big business here, and what this town is about is business and nothing but business. Mahmud is full of subversive notions that these Meccans can't afford to indulge. He'd better watch his step." And then, with a grin: "But he is an amusing devil, isn't he, Corbulo? As you can tell, I've had a chat or two with him myself." If you ask me, Horatius, Nicomedes is half right and half wrong about Mahmud. Surely he's correct that Mahmud is almost ready to begin preaching his religion in public. The way he accosted me, a total stranger, at the slave-market testifies to that. And his talk of not resting until Arabia has been made to accept the supremacy of the One God: what else can that mean, other than that he is on the verge of speaking out against the idolaters? Mahmud told me in just so many words, during our lunch together, that the way Allah makes his commandments concerning good and evil known to mankind is through certain chosen prophets, one every thousand years or so. Abraham and Moses of the Hebrews were such prophets, Mahmud says. I do believe that Mahmud looks upon himself as their successor. I think the Greek is wrong, though, in saying that Mahmud will be killed by his angry neighbors for speaking out against their superstitions. No doubt they'll want to kill him, at first. If his teachings ever prevail, they'll throw the whole horde of priests and idol-carvers out of business and knock a great hole in the local economy, and nobody here is going to be very enthusiastic about that. But his personality is so powerful that I think he'll win them over. By Jupiter, he practically had me willing to accept the divine omnipotence of Allah before he was done! He'll find a way to put his ideas across to them. I can't imagine how he'll do it, but he's clever in a dozen different ways, a true desert merchant, and somehow he'll offer them something that will make it worthwhile for them to give up their old beliefs and accept his. Allah and no one else will be the god of this place, is what I expect, by the time Mahmud has finished his holy work. I need to ponder all this very carefully. You don't come upon a man with Mahmud's kind of innate personal magnetism very often. I am haunted by the strength of it, awed by the recollection of how, for the moment, he had managed to win my allegiance to that One God of his. Is there, I wonder, some way that I can turn Mahmud's great power to sway men's minds to the service of the Empire, by which I mean to the service of Julian II Augustus? So that, of course, I can regain Caesar's good graces and get myself redeemed out of Arabian exile. At the moment I don't quite see it. Perhaps I could urge him to turn his countrymen against the growing ascendancy of the Greeks in this part of the world, or some such thing. But this week I have plenty of time to think on it, for no company is available to me just now except my own. Mahmud, who travels frequently through the area on business, has gone off to one of the coastal villages to investigate some new mercantile venture. Nicomedes also is away, down into Arabia Felix, where he and his fellow Greeks no doubt are conniving covertly to raise the price of carnelians or aloe-wood or some other commodity currently in great demand at Roma. So I am alone here but for my servants, a dull lot with whom I can have no hope of companionship. I toyed with the idea of buying myself a lively slave-boy in the bazaar to keep me company of a more interesting kind, but Mahmud, who is so fiery in his piety, might suspect what I had in mind, and I would not at this time want to risk a breach with Mahmud. The idea of such a purchase is very tempting, though. I think longingly all the time of the court, the festivities at the royal palace, the theater and the games, all that I am missing. Fuscus Salinator: what is he up to? Voconius Rufus? Spurinna? Allifanus? And what of Emperor Julian himself, he who was my friend, almost my brother, until he turned on me and condemned me to languish like this amidst the sands of Arabia? What times we had together, he and I, until my fall from grace! And -- fear not -- I think constantly of you, of course, Horatius. I wonder who you spend your nights with now. Male or female, is it? Lupercus Hector? Little Pomponia Mamiliana, perhaps? Or even the cupboy from Britannia,

whom surely the Emperor no longer would have wanted after I had sullied him. Well, you do not sleep alone, of that much I'm certain. What, I wonder, would my new friend Mahmud think of our court and its ways? He is so severe and astringent of nature. His hatred for self-indulgence of all sorts seems deep as the bone: a stark prince of the desert, this man, a true Spartan. But perhaps I give him too much credit, you say? Set him up in a villa on the slopes of the Palatine, provide him with a fine chariot and a house full of servants and a cellar of decent wine, let him splash a bit in the Emperor's perfumed pool with Julian and his giddy friends, and it may be he'll sing another tune, eh? No. No. I doubt that very greatly. Bring Mahmud to Roma and he will rise up like a modern Cato and sweep the place clean, purging the capital of all the sins of these soft Imperial years. And when he is done with us, Horatius, we shall all be faithful adherents to the creed of Allah. FIVE DAYS MORE of solitude went by, and by the end of it I was ready, I think, to open my veins. There has been a wind blowing here all week that bakes the brain to the verge of madness. The air seemed half composed of sand. People came and went in the streets like phantoms, all shrouded up to the eyes in white. I feared going outside. For the past two days, though, the air has been calm again. Mahmud yesterday returned from his venture at the coast. I saw him in the main street, speaking with three or four other men. Even though he was some distance away, it was plain that Mahmud was doing nearly all the talking, and the others, caught in his spell, were reduced to mere nods and gestures of the hand. There is wizardry in this man's manner of speech. He casts a powerful spell. You are held; you cannot choose but listen; you find yourself believing whatever he says. I did not feel it appropriate to approach him just then; but later in the day I sent one of my servants to his house bearing an invitation to dine with me at my villa, and we have spent some hours together this very day. It was a meeting that brought forth a host of startling revelations. Neither of us chose to plunge back into the theological discussion of our previous conversation, and for a while we made mere idle arm's-length talk in the somewhat uneasy manner of two gentlemen of very different nations who find themselves dining in intimate circumstances and are determined to get through the meal without giving offense. Mahmud's manner was genial in a way I had not seen it before. But as the dishes of the first course were being cleared away the old intensity came back into his eyes and he said somewhat abruptly, "And tell me, my friend, how did it happen, exactly, that you came to our country in the first place?" It would hardly have been useful to my burgeoning friendship with this man to admit that I had been banished here on account of my pederasty with Caesar's intended plaything. But -- you must trust me on this -- I had to tell him something. There is no easy way of being evasive when the burning eyes of Mahmud son of Abdallah are peering intently into your own. I could lie more readily to Caesar. Or to Jove himself. And so, on the principle that telling part of the truth is usually more convincing than telling an outright lie, I admitted to him that my Emperor had sent me to Arabia to spy on the Greeks. "Your Emperor who is not their Emperor, though it is all one empire." "Exactly." Mahmud, isolated as he had been all his life from the greater world beyond Arabia's frontiers, seemed to understand the concept of the dual principate. And understood also how little real harmony there is between the two halves of the divided realm. "And what harm is it that you think the Byzantine folk can cause your people, then?" he asked. There was a tautness in his voice; I sensed that this was something more than an idle conversational query for him. "Economic harm," I said. "Too much of what we import from the eastern nations passes through their hands as it is. Now they seem to be drifting down here into the middle of Arabia, where all the key trade routes converge. If they can establish a stranglehold on those routes, we'll be at their mercy." He was silent for a time, digesting that. But his eyes flashed strange fire. His brain must have been awl with thought. Then he leaned forward until we were almost nose to nose and said, in that low quiet voice of his that seizes your attention more emphatically than the loudest shout, "We

share a common concern, then. They are our enemies too, these Greeks. I know their hearts. They mean to conquer us." "But that's impossible! Nicomedes himself has told me that no army has ever succeeded in seizing possession of Arabia. And he says that none ever will." "Indeed, no one can ever take us by force. But that is not what I mean. The Greeks will conquer us by slyness and cunning, if we allow it: playing their gold against our avarice, buying us inch by inch until we have sold ourselves entirely. We are a shrewd folk, but they are much shrewder, and they will bind us in silken knots, and one day we will find that we are altogether owned by Greek traders and Greek usurers and Greek ship-owners. It is what the Hebrews would have done to us, if they were more numerous and more powerful; but the Greeks have an entire empire behind them. Or half an empire, at least." His face was suddenly aflame with that extraordinary animation and excitability, to the point almost of frenzy, that rose in him so easily. He clapped his hand down on mine. "But it will not be. I will not allow it, good Corbulo! I will destroy them before they can ruin us. Tell that to your Emperor, if you like: Mahmud son of Abdallah will take his stand here before the Greeks who would steal this land, and he will march on them, and he will drive them back to Byzantium." It was a stunning moment. He had told me on the very first day that he intended to bring Arabia under the rule of a single god and of a single invincible king; and now I knew who he expected that invincible king to be. I was put in mind of Nicomedes' mocking words of the week before: Consorting with madmen, are you, now, Corbulo? This sudden outburst of Mahmud's as we sat quietly together at my table did indeed have the pure ring of madness about it. That an obscure merchant of this desert land should also be a mystic and a dreamer was unusual enough; but now, as though drawing back a veil, he had revealed to me the tumultuous presence of a warrior-king within his breast as well. It was too much. Neither Alexander of Macedon nor Julius Caesar nor the Emperor Constantinus the Great had laid claim to holding so many selves within a single soul, and how could Mahmud the son of Abdallah? A moment later he had subsided again, and all was as calm as it had been just minutes before. There was a flask of wine on the table near my elbow, a good thick Tunisian that I had bought in the marketplace the day before. I poured myself some now to ease the thunder that Mahmud's wild speech had engendered in my forehead. He smiled and tapped the flask and said, "I have never understood the point of that stuff, do you know? It seems a waste of good grapes to make it into wine." "Well, opinions differ on that," said I. "But who's to say who's right? Let those who like wine drink it, and the rest can leave it alone." I raised my glass to him. "This is really excellent, though. Are you sure you won't try even a sip?" He looked at me as though I had offered him a cup of venom. He will never be a drinker, I guess, will Mahmud son of Abdallah, and so be it. Yea and verily, Horatius, it leaves that much more for the likes of thee and me. "And how is your friend Mahmud?" asked Nicomedes the Paphlagonian, the next time he and I dined together. "Does he have you bowing down to Allah yet?" "I am not made for bowing before gods, I think," I told him. And then, warily: "He seems a little troubled about the presence of you people down here." "Thinks we're going to attempt a takeover, does he? He should know better than that. If Augustus and Trajan couldn't manage to invade this place successfully, why does he think a sensible monarch like Maurice Tiberius would try it?" "Not a military invasion, Nicomedes. Commercial infiltration is what he fears." Nicomedes looked unperturbed. "He shouldn't. I'd never try to deny to anybody, Corbulo, that we're looking to increase the quantity of business we do here. But why should that matter to the likes of Mahmud? We won't cut into his slice of the pie. We'll just make the pie bigger for everybody. You know the thing the Phoenicians say -- 'A rising tide lifts all boats.'" "Don't they teach rhetoric in Greek schools anymore?" I asked. "Pies? Boats? You're mixing your metaphors there, I'd say. And Arabia doesn't have any boats for the tide to raise, or any tides either, for that matter." "You know what I mean. Tell Mahmud not to worry. Our plans for expansion of trade with Arabia will only be good for everyone involved, and

that includes the merchants of Mecca. -- Maybe I should have a little talk with him myself, eh? He's an excitable sort. I might be able to calm him down." "Perhaps it would be best to leave him to me," I said. It was in that moment, Horatius, that I saw where the true crux of the situation lay, and who the true enemy of the Empire is. The Emperor Julian need not fret over anything that the Greeks might plan to do here. The Greek incursion into Arabia Deserta was only to be expected. Greeks are businessmen by second nature; Arabia, though it is outside the Empire, lies within the natural Eastern sphere of influence; they would have come down here sooner or later, and, well, here they are. If they intend to try to build stronger trade connections with these desert folk, we have no reason to get upset about that, nor is there the slightest thing that the West can do about it. As Nicomedes has said, the East already controls Aiguptos and Syria and Libya and a lot of other such places that produce goods we need, and we don't suffer thereby. It really is a single empire, in that sense. The Greeks won't push up prices on Eastern commodities to us for fear that we'll do the same thing to them with the tin and copper and iron and timber that flow to them out of the West. No. The soft and citified Greeks are no menace to us. The real peril here comes from the desert prince, Mahmud son of Abdallah. One god, he says. One Arabian people under one king. And he says, concerning the Greeks, I will destroy them before they can ruin us. He means it. And perhaps he can do it. Nobody has ever unified these Saracens under a single man's rule before, but I think they have never had anyone like Mahmud among them before, either. I had a sudden vision of him, dear Horatius, as I sat there at Nicomedes's nicely laden table: Mahmud with eyes of fire and a gleaming sword held high, leading Saracen warriors northward out of Arabia into Syria. Palaestina and Mesopotamia, spreading the message of the One God as he comes and driving the panicky Greeks before his oncoming hordes. The eager peasantry embracing the new creed everywhere: who can resist Mahmud's persuasive tongue, especially when it is backed by the blades of his ever more numerous followers? Onward, then, into Armenia and Cappadocia and Persia, and then there will come a swing westward as well into Aiguptos and Libya. The warriors of Allah everywhere, inflaming the souls of men with the new belief, the new love of virtue and honor. The wealth of the temples of the false gods divided among the people. Whole legions of idle parasitic priests butchered like cattle as the superstitions are put to rout. The golden statues of the nonexistent gods melted down. A new commonwealth proclaimed in the world, founded on prayer and sacred law. Mahmud can say that he has the true god behind him. His eloquence makes you believe it. We of the Empire have only the statues of our gods, and no one of any intelligence has taken those gods seriously for hundreds of years. How can we withstand the fiery onslaught of the new faith? It will roll down upon us like the lava of Vesuvius. "You take this much too seriously," said Nicomedes the Paphlagonian, when, much later in the evening and after too many more flasks of wine, I confided my fears to him. "Perhaps you should cover your head when you go out of doors at midday, Corbulo. The sun of Arabia is very strong, and it can do great injury to the mind." No, Horatius. I am right and he is wrong. Once they are launched, the legions of Allah will not be checked until they have marched on through Italia and Gallia and Britannia to the far shores of the Ocean Sea, and all the world is Mahmud's. It shall not be. I will save the world from him, Horatius, and perhaps in so doing I will save myself. Mecca is, of course, a sanctuary city. No man may lift his hand against another within its precincts, under pain of the most awful penalties. Umar the idol-maker, who served in the temple of the goddess Uzza, understood that. I came to Umar in his workshop, where he sat turning out big-breasted figurines of Uzza, who is the Venus of the Saracens, and bought from him for a handful of coppers a fine little statuette carved from black stone that I hope to show you one of these days, and then I put a gold piece of Justinian's time before him and told him what I wanted done; and his only response was to tap his finger two times against Justinian's nose. Not understanding his meaning, I merely frowned. "This man of whom you speak is



my enemy and the enemy of all who love the gods," said Umar the idol-maker, "and I would kill him for you for three copper coins if I did not have a family to support. But the work will involve me in travel, and that is expensive. It cannot be done in Mecca, you know." And he tapped the nose of Justinian a second time. This time I understood, and I laid a second gold piece beside the first one, and the idol-maker smiled. Twelve days ago Mahmud left Mecca on one of his business trips into the lands to the east. He has not returned. He has met with some accident, I fear, in those sandy wastes, and by now the drifting dunes have probably hidden his body forever. Umar the idol-maker appears to have disappeared also. The talk around town is that he went out into the desert to collect the black stone that he carves his idols from, and some fellow craftsman with whom he was feuding followed him to the quarry. I think you will agree with me, Horatius, that this was a wise thing to arrange. The disappearance of a well-known man like Mahmud will probably engender some inquiries that could ultimately have led in embarrassing directions, but no one except the wife of Umar will care about the vanishing of Umar the idol-maker. All of this strikes me as highly regrettable, of course. But it was absolutely necessary. "He's almost certainly dead by this time," Nicomedes said last night. We still dine together frequently. "How very sad, Corbulo. He was an interesting man." "A very great one, in his way. If he had lived, I think he would have changed the world." "I doubt that very much," said Nicomedes, in his airy, ever-skeptical Greek way. "But we'll never know, will we?" "We'll never know," I agreed. I raised my glass. "To Mahmud, poor devil." "To Mahmud, yes." And there you have the whole sad story. Go to the Emperor, Horatius. Tell him what I've done. Place it in its full context, against the grand sweep of Imperial history past and present and especially future. Speak to him of Hannibal, of Vercingetorix, of Attila, of all our great enemies of days gone by, and tell him that I have snuffed out in its earliest stages a threat to Roma far more frightening than any of those. Make him understand, if you can, the significance of my deed. Tell him, Horatius. Tell him that I have saved all the world from conquest: that I have done for him a thing that was utterly essential to do, something which no one else at all could have achieved on his behalf, for who would have had the foresight to see the shape of things to come as I was able to see them? Tell him that. Above all else, tell him to bring me home. I have dwelled amidst the sands of Arabia long enough. My work is done; I beg for surcease from the dreariness of the desert, the infernal heat, the loneliness of my life here. This is no place for a hero of the Empire.

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"Channeling?" I said. "For  
Christ's sake, Joe! You brought me all the way down here for dumb bullshit  
like that?" "This isn't channeling," Joe said. "The kid who  
drove me from the airport said you've got a machine that can talk with dead  
people." A slow, angry flush spread across Joe's face. He's a small,  
compact man with very glossy skin and very sharp features, and when he's  
annoyed he inflates like a puff-adder. "He shouldn't have said that."  
"Is that what you're doing here?" I asked. "Some sort of channeling

experiments?" "Forget that shithead word, will you, Mike?" Joe sounded impatient and irritable. But there was an odd fluttery look in his eye, conveying -- what? Uncertainty? Vulnerability? Those were traits I hadn't ever associated with Joe Hedley, not in the thirty years we'd known each other. "We aren't sure what the fuck we're doing here," he said. "We thought maybe you could tell us." "Me?" "You, yes. Here, put the helmet on. Come on, put it on, Mike. Put it on. Please." I stared. Nothing ever changes. Ever since we were kids Joe's been using me for one cockeyed thing or another, because he knows he can count on me to give him a sober-minded common-sense opinion. Always bouncing this bizarre scheme or that off me, so he can measure the caroms. The helmet was a golden strip of wire mesh studded with a row of microwave pickups the size of a dime and flanked by a pair of suction electrodes that fit over the temples. It looked like some vagrant piece of death-house equipment. I ran my fingers over it. "How much current is this thing capable of sending through my head?" He looked even angrier. "Oh, fuck you, you hypercautious bastard! Would I ever ask you to do anything that could harm you?" With a patient little sigh I said, "Okay. How do I do this?" "Ear to ear, over the top of your head. I'll adjust the electrodes for you." "You won't tell me what any of this is all about?" "I want an uncontaminated response. That's science talk, Mike. I'm a scientist. You know that, don't you?" "So that's what you are. I wondered." Joe bustled about above me, moving the helmet around, pressing the electrodes against my skull. "How does it fit?" "Like a glove." "You always wear your gloves on your head?" he asked. "You must be goddamn nervous if you think that's funny." "I am," he said "You must be too, if you take a line like that seriously. But I tell you that you won't get hurt. I promise you that, Mike." "All right." "Just sit down here. We need to check the impedances, and then we can get going." "I wish I understood at least a little bit about --" "Please," he said. He gestured through a glass partition at a technician in the adjoining room, and she began to do things with dials and switches. This was turning into a movie, a very silly one, full of mad doctors in white jackets and sputtering electrical gadgets. The tinkering went on and on, and I felt myself passing beyond apprehension and annoyance into a kind of gray realm of Zen serenity, the way I sometimes do while sitting in the dentist's chair waiting for the scraping and poking to begin. On the hillside visible from the laboratory window yellow hibiscus was blooming against a background of billowing scarlet bougainvillea in brilliant California sunshine. It had been cold and raining, this February morning, when I drove to Sea-Tac Airport thirteen hundred miles to the north. Hedley's lab is just outside La Jolla, on a sandy bluff high up over the blue Pacific. When Joe and I were kids growing up in Santa Monica we took this kind of luminous winter day for granted, but I had lived in the Northwest for twenty years now, and I couldn't help thinking I'd gone on a day-trip to Eden. I studied the colors on the hillside until my eyes began to get blurry. "Here we go, now," Joe said, from a point somewhere far away behind my left shoulder. \* \* \*

\* It was like stepping into a big cage full of parakeets and mynahs and crazed macaws. I heard scratchy screeching sounds, and a harsh loony almost-laughter that soared through three or four octaves, and a low ominous burbling noise, as if some hydraulic device was about to blow a gasket. I heard weird wire-edged shrieks that went tumbling away as though the sound was falling through an infinite abyss. I heard queebings. I heard hissings. Then came a sudden burst of clearly enunciated syllables, floating in isolation above the noise: -- Onoodor -- That startled me. A nonsense word? No, no, a real one, one that had meaning for me, a word in an obscure language that I just happen to understand. "Today," that's what it means. In Khalkha. My specialty. But it was crazy that this machine would be speaking Khalkha to me. This had to be some sort of coincidence. What I'd heard was a random clumping of sounds that I must automatically have

arranged into a meaningful pattern. I was kidding myself. Or else Joe was playing an elaborate practical joke. Only he seemed very serious. I strained to hear more. But everything was babble again. Then, out of the chaos: -- Usan deer -- Khalkha, again: "On the water." It couldn't be a coincidence. More noise. Skwkaark skreek yubble gobble. -- Aawa namaig yawuulawa -- "Father sent me." Skwkaark. Yabble. Eeeeeesh. "Go on," I said. I felt sweat rolling down my back. "Your father sent you where? Where? Khaana. Tell me where." -- Usan deer -- "On the water, yes." Yarkhh. Skreek. Tshhhhhhh. -- Akhanartan -- "To his elder brother. Yes." I closed my eyes and let my mind rove out into the darkness. It drifted on a sea of scratchy noise. Now and again I caught an actual syllable, half a syllable, a slice of a word, a clipped fragment of meaning. The voice was brusque, forceful, a drill-sergeant voice, carrying an undertone of barely suppressed rage. Somebody very angry was speaking to me across a great distance, over a channel clogged with interference, in a language that hardly anyone in the United States knew anything about: Khalkha. Spoken a little oddly, with an unfamiliar intonation, but plainly recognizable. I said, speaking very slowly and carefully and trying to match the odd intonation of the voice at the other end, "I can hear you and I can understand you. But there's a lot of interference. Say everything three times and I'll try to follow." I waited. But now there was only a roaring silence in my ears. Not even the shrieking, not even the babble. I looked up at Hedley like someone coming out of a trance. "It's gone dead." "You sure?" "I don't hear anything, Joe." He snatched the helmet from me and put it on, fiddling with the electrodes in that edgy, compulsively precise way of his. He listened for a moment, scowled, nodded. "The relay satellite must have passed around the far side of the sun. We won't get anything more for hours if it has." "The relay satellite? Where the hell was that broadcast coming from?" "In a minute," he said. He reached around and took the helmet off. His eyes had a brassy gleam and his mouth was twisted off to the corner of his face, almost as if he'd had a stroke. "You were actually able to understand what he was saying, weren't you?" I nodded. "I knew you would. And was he speaking Mongolian?" "Khalkha, yes. The main Mongolian dialect." The tension left his face. He gave me a warm, loving grin. "I was sure you'd know. We had a man in from the university here, the comparative linguistics department -- you probably know him, Malmstrom's his name -- and he said it sounded to him like an Altaic language, maybe Turkic -- is that right, Turkic? -- but more likely one of the Mongolian languages, and the moment he said Mongolian I thought, That's it, get Mike down here right away -- " He paused. "So it's the language that they speak in Mongolia right this very day, would you say?" "Not quite. His accent was a little strange. Something stiff about it, almost archaic." "Archaic." "It had that feel, yes. I can't tell you why. There's just something formal and old-fashioned about it, something, well -- " "Archaic," Hedley said again. Suddenly there were tears in his eyes. I couldn't remember ever having seen him crying before. What they have, the kid who picked me up at the airport had said, is a machine that lets them talk with the dead. "Joe?" I said. "Joe, what in God's name is this all about?" \* \* \* \* We had dinner that night in a sleek restaurant on a sleek, quiet La Jolla street of elegant shops and glossy-leaved trees, just the two of us, the first time in a long while that we'd gone out alone like that. Lately we tended to see each other once or twice a year at most, and Joe, who is almost always between marriages, would usually bring along his latest squeeze, the one who was finally going to bring order and stability and other such things to his tempestuous private life. And since he always needs to show the new one what a remarkable human being he is, he's forever putting on a performance, for the woman, for me, for the waiters, for the people at the nearby tables. Generally the fun's at my expense, for compared with Hedley I'm very staid and proper and I'm eighteen

years into my one and only marriage so far, and Joe often seems to enjoy making me feel that there's something wrong with that. I never see him with the same woman twice, except when he happens to marry one of them. But tonight it was all different. He was alone, and the conversation was subdued and gentle and rueful, mostly about the years we'd had put in knowing each other, the fun we'd had, the regret Joe felt during the occasional long periods when we didn't see much of each other. He did most of the talking. There was nothing new about that. But mostly it was just chatter. We were three quarters of the way down the bottle of silky Cabernet before Joe brought himself around to the topic of the experiment. I hadn't wanted to push. "It was pure serendipity," he said. "You know, the art of finding what you're not looking for. We were trying to clean up some problems in radio transmission from the Icarus relay station -- that's the one that the Japs and the French hung around the sun inside the orbit of Mercury -- and we were fiddling with this and fiddling with that, sending out an assortment of test signals at a lot of different frequencies, when out of nowhere we got a voice coming back at us. A man's voice. Speaking a strange language. Which turned out to be Chaucerian English." "Some kind of academic prank?" I suggested. He looked annoyed. "I don't think so. But let me tell it, Mike, okay? Okay?" He cracked his knuckles and rearranged the knot of his tie. "We listened to this guy and gradually we figured out a little of what he was saying and we called in a grad student from U.C.S.D. who confirmed it -- thirteenth-century English -- and it absolutely knocked us on our asses." He tugged at his earlobes and rearranged his tie again. A sort of manic sheen was coming into his eyes. "Before we could even begin to comprehend what we were dealing with, the Englishman was gone and we were picking up some woman making a speech in medieval French. Like we were getting a broadcast from Joan of Arc, do you see? Not that I'm arguing that that's who she was. We had her for half an hour, a minute here and a minute there with a shitload of interference, and then came a solar flare that disrupted communications, and when we had things tuned again we got a quick burst of what turned out to be Arabic, and then someone else talking in Middle English, and then, last week, this absolutely incomprehensible stuff, which Malmstrom guessed was Mongolian and you have now confirmed. The Mongol has stayed on the line longer than all the others put together." "Give me some more wine," I said. "I don't blame you. It's made us all crazy too. The best we can explain it to ourselves, it's that our beam passes through the sun, which as I think you know, even though your specialty happens to be Chinese history and not physics, is a place where the extreme concentration of mass creates some unusual stresses on the fabric of the continuum, and some kind of relativistic force warps the hell out of it, so that the solar field sends our signal kinking off into God knows where, and the effect is to give us a telephone line to the Middle Ages. If that sounds like gibberish to you, imagine how it sounds to us." Hedley spoke without raising his head, while moving his silverware around busily from one side of his plate to the other. "You see now about channeling? It's no fucking joke. Shit, we are channeling, only looks like it might actually be real, doesn't it?" "I see," I said. "So at some point you're going to have to call up the Secretary of Defense and say, Guess what, we've been getting telephone calls on the Icarus beam from Joan of Arc. And then they'll shut down your lab here and send you off to get your heads replumbed." He stared at me. His nostrils flickered contemptuously. "Wrong. Completely wrong. You never had any notion of flair, did you? The sensational gesture that knocks everybody out? No. Of course not. Not you. Look, Mike, If I can go in there and say, We can talk to the dead, and we can prove it, they'll kiss our asses for us. Don't you see how fucking sensational it would be, something coming out of these government labs that ordinary people can actually understand and cheer and yell about? Telephone line to the past! George Washington himself, talking to Mr. and Mrs. America! Abe Lincoln! Something straight out of the National Enquirer, right, only real? We'd all be heroes. But it's got to

be real, that's the kicker. We don't need a rational explanation for it, at least not right away. All it has to do is work. Christ, 99% of the people don't even know why electric lights light up when you flip the switch. We have to find out what we really have and get to understand it at least a little and be 200% sure of ourselves. And then we present it to Washington and we say, Here, this is what we did and this is what happens, and don't blame us if it seems crazy. But we have to keep it absolutely to ourselves until we understand enough of what we've stumbled on to be able to explain it to them with confidence. If we do it right we're goddamned kings of the world. A Nobel would be just the beginning. You understand now?"

"Maybe we should get another bottle of wine," I said. \* \* \* \* We were back in the lab by midnight. I followed Hedley through a maze of darkened rooms, ominous with mysterious equipment glowing in the night. A dozen or so staffers were on duty. They smiled wanly at Hedley as if there was nothing unusual about his coming back to work at this hour. "Doesn't anyone sleep around here?" I asked. "It's a twenty-four hour

information world," Joe said. "We'll be recapturing the Icarus beam in 43 minutes. You want to hear some of the earlier tapes?" He touched a switch and from an unseen speaker came crackles and bleebles and then a young woman's voice, strong and a little harsh, uttering brief blurts of something that sounded like strange singsong French, to me not at all understandable.

"Her accent's terrible," I said. "What's she saying?" "It's too fragmentary to add up to anything much. She's praying, mostly. May the king live, may God strengthen his arm, something like that. For all we know it is Joan of Arc. We haven't gotten more than a few minutes total coherent verbal output out of any of them, usually a lot less. Except for the Mongol. He goes on and on. It's like he doesn't want to let go of the phone."

"And it really is a phone?" I asked. "What we say here, they can hear there?" "We don't know that, because we haven't been able to make much sense out of what they say, and by the time we get it deciphered we've lost contact. But it's got to be a two-way contact. They must be getting something from us, because we're able to get their attention somehow and they talk back to us." "They receive your signal without a helmet?"

"The helmet's just for your benefit. The actual Icarus signal comes in digitally. The helmet's the interface between our computer and your ears."

"Medieval people don't have digital computers either, Joe." A muscle started popping in one of his cheeks. "No, they don't," he said. "It must come like a voice out of the sky. Or right inside their heads. But they hear us." "How?" "Do I know? You want this to make sense, Mike?"

Nothing about this makes sense. Let me give you an example. You were talking with that Mongol, weren't you? You asked him something and he answered you?" "Yes. But --" "Let me finish. What did you ask him?"

"He said his father sent him somewhere. I asked him where, and he said, On the water. To visit his elder brother." "He answered you right away?" "Yes," I said. "Well, that's actually impossible.

The Icarus is 93 million miles from here. There's has to be something like an eight-minute time-lag in radio transmission. You follow? You ask him something and it's eight minutes before the beam reaches Icarus, and eight minutes more for his answer to come back. He sure as hell can't hold a real-time conversation with you. But you say he was." "It may only have seemed that way. It could just have been coincidence that what I asked and what he happened to say next fit together like question and response."

"Maybe. Or maybe whatever kink in time we're operating across eats up the lag for us, too. I tell you, nothing makes sense about this. But one way or another the beam is reaching them and it carries coherent information. I don't know why that is. It just is. Once you start dealing in impossible stuff, anything might be true. So why can't our voices come out of thin air to them?" Hedley laughed nervously. Or perhaps it was a cough, I thought. "The thing is," he went on, "this Mongol is staying on line longer than any of the others, so with you here we have a chance to have some real communication

with him. You speak his language. You can validate this whole goddamn grotesque event for us, do you see? You can have an honest-to-God chat with some guy who lived six hundred years ago, and find out where he really is and what he thinks is going on, and tell us all about it." I stole a glance at the wall clock. Half past twelve. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been up this late. I lead a nice quiet tenured life, full professor thirteen years now, University of Washington Department of Sinological Studies.

"We're about ready to acquire signal again," Hedley said. "Put the helmet on." I slipped it into place. I thought about that little communications satellite chugging around the sun, swimming through inconceivable heat and unthinkable waves of hard radiation and somehow surviving, coming around the far side now, beaming electro-magnetic improbabilities out of the distant past at my head. The squawking and screeching began. Then, emerging from the noise and murk and sonic darkness, came the Mongol's voice, clear and steady: "Where are you, you voice, you? Speak to me." "Here," I said. "Can you hear me?" Aark. Yaaarp. Tshhhhhhh. The Mongol said, "Voice, what are you? Are you mortal or are you a prince of the master?" I wrestled with the puzzling words. I'm fluent enough in Khalkha, though I don't get many opportunities for speaking it. But there was a problem of context here. "Which master?" I asked finally. "What prince?" "There is only one Master," said the Mongol. He said this with tremendous force and assurance, putting terrific spin on every syllable, and the capital letter was apparent in his tone. "I am His servant. The angeloi are his princes. Are you an angelos, voice?" Angeloi? That was Greek. A Mongol, asking me if I was an angel of God? "Not an angel, no," I said. "Then how can you speak to me this way?" "It's a kind of --" I paused. I couldn't come up with the Khalkha for "miracle". After a moment I said, "It's by the grace of heaven on high. I'm speaking to you from far away." "How far?" "Tell me where you are." Skrawwwwk. Tshhhhhhh. "Again. Where are you?" "Nova Roma. Constantinopolis." I blinked. "Byzantium?" "Byzantium, yes." "I am very far from there." "How far?" the Mongol said fiercely. "Many many days' ride. Many many." I hesitated. "Tell me what year it is, where you are." Vzsqkk. Blzzp. Yiiiiiiik. "What's he saying to you?" Hedley asked. I waved at him furiously to be quiet. "The year," I said again. "Tell me what year it is." The Mongol said scornfully, "Everyone knows the year, voice." "Tell me." "It is the year 1187 of our Savior." I began to shiver. Our Savior? Weirder and weirder, I thought. A Christian Mongol? Living in Byzantium? Talking to me on the space telephone out of the twelfth century? The room around me took on a smoky, insubstantial look. My elbows were aching, and something was throbbing just above my left cheekbone. This had been a long day for me. I was very tired. I was heading into that sort of weariness where walls melted and bones turned soft. Joe was dancing around in front of me like someone with tertiary St. Vitus'.

"And your name?" I said. "I am Petros Alexios." "Why do you speak Khalkha if you are Greek?" A long silence, unbroken even by the hellish static. "I am not Greek," came the reply finally. "I am by birth Khalkha Mongol, but raised Christian among the Christians from age eleven, when my father sent me on the water and I was taken. My name was Temujin. Now I am twenty and I know the Savior." I gasped and put my hand to my throat as though it had been skewered out of the darkness by a spear. "Temujin," I said, barely getting the word out. "My father was Yesugei the chieftain." "Temujin," I said again. "Son of Yesugei." I shook my head. Aaark. Blzzp. Tshhhhhhh. Then no static, no voice, only the hushed hiss of silence. "Are you okay?" Hedley asked. "We've lost contact, I think." "Right. It just broke. You look like your brain has shorted out." I slipped the helmet off. My hands were shaking. "You know," I said, "maybe that French woman really was Joan of Arc." "What?" I shrugged. "She really

might have been," I said wearily. "Anything's possible, isn't it?"  
 "What the hell are you trying to tell me, Mike?" "Why shouldn't she have been Joan of Arc?" I asked. "Listen, Joe. This is making me just as nutty as you are. You know what I've just been doing? I've been talking to Genghis Khan on this fucking telephone of yours." \* \* \* \* I managed to get a few hours of sleep by simply refusing to tell Hedley anything else until I'd had a chance to rest. The way I said it, I left him no options, and he seemed to grasp that right away. At the hotel, I sank from consciousness like a leaden whale, hoping I wouldn't surface again before noon, but old habit seized me and pushed me up out of the tepid depths at seven, irreversibly awake and not a bit less depleted. I put in a quick call to Seattle to tell Elaine that I was going to stay down in La Jolla a little longer than expected. She seemed worried -- not that I might be up to any funny business, not me, but only that I sounded so groggy. "You know Joe," I said. "For him it's a twenty-four hour information world." I told her nothing else. When I stepped out on the breakfast patio half an hour later, I could see the lab's blue van already waiting in the hotel lot to pick me up.

Hedley seemed to have slept at the lab. He was rumpled and red-eyed but somehow he was at normal functioning level, scurrying around the place like a yappy little dog. "Here's a printout of last night's contact," he said, the moment I came in. "I'm sorry if the transcript looks cockeyed. The computer doesn't know how to spell in Mongolian." He shoved it into my hands. "Take a squint at it and see if you really heard all the things you thought you heard." I peered at the single long sheet. It seemed to be full of jabberwocky, but once I figured out the computer's system of phonetic equivalents I could read it readily enough. I looked up after a moment, feeling very badly shaken. "I was hoping I dreamed all this. I didn't."

"You want to explain it to me?" "I can't." Joe scowled. "I'm not asking for fundamental existential analysis. Just give me a goddamned translation, all right?" "Sure," I said. He listened with a kind of taut, explosive attention that seemed to me to be masking a mixture of uneasiness and bubbling excitement. When I was done he said, "Okay. What's this Genghis Khan stuff?" "Temujin was Genghis Khan's real name. He was born around 1167 and his father Yesugei was a minor chief somewhere in north-eastern Mongolia. When Temujin was still a boy, his father was poisoned by enemies, and he became a fugitive, but by the time he was fifteen he started putting together a confederacy of Mongol tribes, hundreds of them, and eventually he conquered everything in sight. Genghis Khan means 'Ruler of the Universe.'" "So? Our Mongol lives in Constantinople, you say. He's a Christian and he uses a Greek name." "He's Temujin, son of Yesugei. He's twenty years old in the year when Genghis Khan was twenty years old."

Hedley looked belligerent. "Some other Temujin. Some other Yesugei." "Listen to the way he speaks. He's scary. Even if you can't understand a word of what he's saying, can't you feel the power in him? The coiled-up anger? That's the voice of somebody capable of conquering whole continents." "Genghis Khan wasn't a Christian. Genghis Khan wasn't kidnapped by strangers and taken to live in Constantinople." "I know," I said. To my own amazement I added, "But maybe this one was." "Jesus God Almighty. What's that supposed to mean?" "I'm not certain."

Hedley's eyes took on a glaze. "I hoped you were going to be part of the solution, Mike. Not part of the problem." "Just let me think this through," I said, waving my hands above his face as if trying to conjure some patience into him. Joe was peering at me in a stunned, astounded way. My eyeballs throbbed. Things were jangling up and down along my spinal column. Lack of sleep had coated my brain with a hard crust of adrenaline. Bewilderingly strange ideas were rising like sewer gases in my mind and making weird bubbles. "All right, try this," I said at last. "Say that there are all sorts of possible worlds. A world in which you're King of England, a world in which I played third base for the Yankees, a world in which the dinosaurs never died out and Los Angeles gets invaded every summer by hungry

tyrannosaurs. And one world where Yesugei's son Temujin wound up in twelfth-century Byzantium as a Christian instead of founding the Mongol Empire. And that's the Temujin I've been talking to. This cockeyed beam of yours not only crosses time-lines, somehow it crosses probability-lines too, and we've fished up some alternate reality that -- " "I don't believe this," Hedley said. "Neither do I, really. Not seriously. I'm just putting forth one possible hypothesis that might explain -- " "I don't mean your fucking hypothesis. I mean I find it hard to believe that you of all people, my old pal Mike Michaelson, can be standing here running off at the mouth this way, working hard at turning a mystifying event into a goddamned nonsensical one -- you, good old sensible steady Mike, telling me some shit about tyrannosaurs amok in Los Angeles -- " "It was only an example of -- " "Oh, fuck your example," Hedley said. His face darkened with exasperation bordering on fury. He looked ready to cry. "Your example is absolute crap. Your example is garbage. You know, man, if I wanted someone to feed me a lot of New Age crap I didn't have to go all the way to Seattle to find one. Alternate realities! Third base for the Yankees!" A girl in a lab coat appeared out of nowhere and said, "We have signal acquisition, Dr. Hedley." I said, "I'll catch the next plane north, okay?" Joe's face was red and starting to do its puff-adder trick and his adam's-apple bobbed as if trying to find the way out. "I wasn't trying to mess up your head," I said. "I'm sorry if I did. Forget everything I was just saying. I hope I was at least of some help, anyway." Something softened in Joe's eyes. "I'm so goddamned tired, Mike." "I know." "I didn't mean to yell at you like that." "No offense taken, Joe." "But I have trouble with this alternate-reality thing of yours. You think it was easy for me to believe that what we were doing here was talking to people in the past? But I brought myself around to it, weird though it was. Now you give it an even weirder twist, and it's too much. It's too fucking much. It violates my sense of what's right and proper and fitting. You know what Occam's Razor is, Mike? The old medieval axiom, Never multiply hypotheses needlessly? Take the simplest one. Here even the simplest one is crazy. You push it too far." "Listen," I said, "if you'll just have someone drive me over to the hotel -- " "No." "No?" "Let me think a minute," he said. "Just because it doesn't make sense doesn't mean that it's impossible, right? And if we get one impossible thing, we can have two, or six, or sixteen. Right? Right?" His eyes were like two black holes with cold stars blazing at their bottoms. "Hell, we aren't at the point where we need to worry about explanations. We have to find out the basic stuff first. Mike, I don't want you to leave. I want you to stay here." "What?" "Don't go. Please. I still need somebody to talk to the Mongol for me. Don't go. Please, Mike? Please?" \* \* \* \* The times, Temujin said, were very bad. The infidels under Saladin had smashed the Crusader forces in the Holy Land and Jerusalem itself had fallen to the Moslems. Christians everywhere mourn the loss, said Temujin. In Byzantium -- where Temujin was captain of the guards in the private army of a prince named Theodore Lascaris -- God's grace seemed also to have been withdrawn. The great empire was in heavy weather. Insurrections had brought down two emperors in the past four years and the current man was weak and timid. The provinces of Hungary, Cyprus, Serbia, and Bulgaria were all in revolt. The Normans of Sicily were chopping up Byzantine Greece and on the other side of the empire the Seljuk Turks were chewing their way through Asia Minor. "It is the time of the wolf," said Temujin. "But the sword of the Lord will prevail." The sheer force of him was astounding. It lay not so much in what he said, although that was sharp and fierce, as in the way he said it. I could feel the strength of the man in the velocity and impact of each syllable. Temujin hurled his words as if from a catapult. They arrived carrying a crackling electrical charge. Talking with him was like holding live cables in my hands. Hedley, jiggling and fidgeting around the lab, paused now and then to stare at me with



what looked like awe and wonder in his eyes, as if to say, You really can make sense of this stuff? I smiled at him. I felt bizarrely cool and unflustered. Sitting there with some electronic thing on my head, letting that terrific force go hurtling through my brain. Discussing twelfth-century politics with an invisible Byzantine Mongol. Making small talk with Genghis Khan. All right. I could handle it. I beckoned for notepaper. Need printout of world historical background late twelfth century, I scrawled, without interrupting my conversation with Temujin. Esp. Byzantine history, Crusades, etc. The kings of England and France, said Temujin, were talking about launching a new Crusade. But at the moment they happened to be at war with each other, which made cooperation difficult. The powerful Emperor Frederick Barbarossa of Germany was also supposed to be getting up a Crusade, but that, he said, might mean more trouble for Byzantium than for the Saracens, because Frederick was the friend of Byzantium's enemies in the rebellious provinces, and he'd have to march through those provinces on the way to the Holy Land.

"It is a perilous time," I agreed. Then suddenly I was feeling the strain. Temujin's rapid-fire delivery was exhausting to follow, he spoke Mongolian with what I took to be a Byzantine accent, and he sprinkled his statements with the names of emperors, princes, and even nations that meant nothing to me. Also there was that powerful force of him to contend with -- it hit you like an avalanche -- and beyond that his anger: the whipcrack inflection that seemed the thinnest of bulwarks against some unstated inner rage, fury, frustration. It's hard to feel at ease with anyone who seethes that way. Suddenly I just wanted to go somewhere and lie down.

But someone put printout sheets in front of me, closely packed columns of stuff from the Britannica. Names swam before my eyes: Henry II, Barbarossa, Stephan Nemanya, Isaac II Angelos, Guy of Jerusalem, Richard the Lion-Hearted. Antioch, Tripoli, Thessalonica, Venice. I nodded my thanks and pushed the sheets aside.

Cautiously I asked Temujin about Mongolia. It turned out that he knew almost nothing about Mongolia. He'd had no contact at all with his native land since his abduction at the age of eleven by Byzantine traders who carried him off to Constantinople. His country, his father, his brothers, the girl to whom he had been betrothed when he was still a child -- they were all just phantoms to him now, far away, forgotten. But in the privacy of his own soul he still spoke Khalkha. That was all that was left.

By 1187, I knew, the Temujin who would become Genghis Khan had already made himself the ruler of half of Mongolia. His fame would surely have spread to cosmopolitan Byzantium. How could this Temujin be unaware of him? Well, I saw one way. But Joe had already shot it down. And it sounded pretty nutty even to me.

"Do you want a drink?" Hedley asked. "Tranks? Aspirin?"

I shook my head. "I'm okay," I murmured. To Temujin I said, "Do you have a wife? Children?"

"I have vowed not to marry until Jesus

rules again in His own land." "So you're going to go on the next Crusade?" I asked.

Whatever answer Temujin made was smothered by

static. Awkkk. Skrrkkk. Tssshhhhhhh. Then silence,

lengthening into endlessness. "Signal's gone," someone said. "I

could use that drink now," I said. "Scotch." The lab clock said it was

ten in the morning. To me it felt like the middle of the night. \* \*

\* \* An hour had passed. The signal hadn't returned. Hedley said, "You really think he's Genghis Khan?"

"I really think he could have been."

"In some other probability world." Carefully I said, "I

don't want to get you all upset again, Joe." "You won't. Why the hell

not believe we're tuned into an alternate reality? It's no more goofy than any of the rest of this. But tell me this: is what he says consistent with

being Genghis Khan?" "His name's the same. His age. His childhood, up

to the point when he wandered into some Byzantine trading caravan and they took him away to Constantinople with them. I can imagine the sort of fight he

put up, too. But his life-line must have diverged completely from that point

on. A whole new world-line split off from ours. And in that world, instead

of turning into Genghis Khan, ruler of all Mongolia, he grew up to be Petros

Alexios of Prince Theodore Lascaris' private guards." "And he has no idea of who he could have been?" Joe asked. "How could he? It isn't even a dream to him. He was born into another world that wasn't ever destined to have a Genghis Khan. You know the poem: "Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting. The soul that rises with us, our life's star, Hath had elsewhere its setting, And cometh from afar." "Very pretty. Is that Yeats?" Hedley said. "Wordsworth," I said. "When's the signal coming back?" "An hour, two, three. It's hard to say. You want to take a nap, and we'll wake you when we have acquisition?" "I'm not sleepy." "You look pretty ragged," Joe said. "I wouldn't give him the satisfaction." "I'm okay. I'll sleep for a week, later on. What if you can't raise him again?" "There's always that chance, I suppose. We've already had him on the line five times as long as all the rest put together." "He's a very determined man," I said. "He ought to be. He's Genghis fucking Khan." "Get him back," I said. "I don't want you to lose him. I want to talk to him some more." \* \* \* \* Morning ticked on into afternoon. I phoned Elaine twice while we waited, and I stood for a long time at the window watching the shadows of the oncoming winter evening fall across the hibiscus and the bougainvillea, and I hunched my shoulders up and tried to pull in the signal by sheer body english. Contemplating the possibility that they might never pick up Temujin again left me feeling weirdly forlorn. I was beginning to feel that I had a real relationship with that eerie disembodied angry voice coming out of the crackling night. Toward mid-afternoon I thought I was starting to understand what was making Temujin so angry, and I had some things I wanted to say to him about that. Maybe you ought to get some sleep, I told myself. At half past four someone came to me and said the Mongol was on the line again. The static was very bad. But then came the full force of Temujin soaring over it. I heard him saying, "The Holy Land must be redeemed. I cannot sleep so long as the infidels possess it." I took a deep breath. In wonder I watched myself set out to do something unlike anything I had ever done before. "Then you must redeem it yourself," I said firmly. "I?" "Listen to me, Temujin. Think of another world far from yours. There is a Temujin in that world too, son of Yesugei, husband to Bortei who is daughter of Dai the Wise." "Another world? What are you saying?" "Listen. Listen. He is a great warrior, that other Temujin. No one can withstand him. His own brothers bow before him. All Mongols everywhere bow before him. His sons are like wolves, and they ride into every land and no one can withstand them. This Temujin is master of all Mongolia. He is the Great Khan, the Genghis Khan, the ruler of the universe." There was silence. Then Temujin said, "What is this to me?" "He is you, Temujin. You are the Genghis Khan." Silence again, longer, broken by hideous shrieks of interplanetary noise. "I have no sons and I have not seen Mongolia in years, or even thought of it. What are you saying?" "That you can be as great in your world as this other Temujin is in his." "I am Byzantine. I am Christian. Mongolia is nothing to me. Why would I want to be master in that savage place?" "I'm not talking about Mongolia. You are Byzantine, yes. You are Christian. But you were born to lead and fight and conquer," I said. "What are you doing as a captain of another man's palace guards? You waste your life that way, and you know it, and it maddens you. You should have armies of your own. You should carry the Cross into Jerusalem." "The leaders of the new Crusade are quarrelsome fools. It will end in disaster." "Perhaps not. Frederick Barbarossa's Crusade will be unstoppable." "Barbarossa will attack Byzantium instead of the Moslems. Everyone knows that." "No," I said. That inner force of Temujin was rising and rising in intensity, like a gale climbing toward being a hurricane. I was awash in sweat, now, and I was dimly aware of the others staring at me as though I had lost my senses. A strange exhilaration gripped me. I went plunging joyously ahead. "Emperor Isaac Angelos will come to terms with Barbarossa. The Germans will march

through Byzantium and go on toward the Holy Land. But there Barbarossa will die and his army will scatter -- unless you are there, at his right hand, taking command in his place when he falls, leading them onward to Jerusalem. You, the invincible, the Genghis Khan." There was silence once more, this time so prolonged that I was afraid the contact had been broken for good. Then Temujin returned. "Will you send soldiers to fight by my side?" he asked. "That I cannot do." "You have the power to send them, I know," said Temujin. "You speak to me out of the air. I know you are an angel, or else you are a demon. If you are a demon, I invoke the name of Christos Pantokrator upon you, and begone. But if you are an angel, you can send me help. Send it, then, and I will lead your troops to victory. I will take the Holy Land from the infidel. I will create the Empire of Jesus in the world and bring all things to fulfillment. Help me. Help me." "I've done all I can," I said. "The rest is for you to achieve." There was another spell of silence. "Yes," Temujin said finally. "I understand. Yes. Yes. The rest is for me." \* \* \* \* "Christ, you look peculiar," Joe Hedley said, staring at me almost fearfully. "I've never seen you looking like this before. You look like a wild man." "Do I?" I said. "You must be dead tired, Mike. You must be asleep on your feet. Listen, go over to the hotel and get some rest. We'll have a late dinner, okay? You can fill me in then on whatever you've just been jabbering about. But relax now. The Mongol's gone and we may not get him back till tomorrow." "You won't get him back at all," I said. "You think?" He peered close. "Hey, are you okay? Your eyes -- your face --" Something quivered in his cheek. "If I didn't know better I'd say you were stoned." "I've been changing the world. It's hard work." "Changing the world?" "Not this world. The other one. Look," I said hoarsely, "they never had a Genghis Khan, so they never had a Mongol Empire, and the whole history of China and Russia and the Near East and a lot of other places was very different. But I've got this Temujin all fired up now to be a Christian Genghis Khan. He got so Christian in Byzantium that he forgot what was really inside him, but I've reminded him, I've told him how he can still do the thing that he was designed to do, and he understands. He's found his true self again. He'll go out to fight in the name of Jesus and he'll build an empire that'll eat the Moslem powers for breakfast and then blow away Byzantium and Venice and go on from there to do God knows what. He'll probably conquer all of Europe before he's finished. And I did it. I set it all in motion. He was sending me all this energy, this Genghis Khan zap that he has inside him, and I figured the least I could do for him was turn some of it around and send it back to him, and say, Here, go, be what you were supposed to be." "Mike --" I stood close against him, looming over him. He gave me a bewildered look. "You really didn't think I had it in me, did you?" I said. "You son of a bitch. You've always thought I'm as timid as a turtle. Your good old sober stick-in-the-mud pal Mike. What do you know? What the hell do you know?" Then I laughed. He looked so stunned that I had to soften it for him a little. Gently I touched his shoulder. "I need a shower and a drink. And then let's think about dinner." Joe gawked at me. "What if it wasn't some other world you changed, though? Suppose it was this one." "Suppose it was," I said. "Let's worry about that later. I still need that shower." ----- At [www.fictionwise.com](http://www.fictionwise.com) you can: \* Rate this story \* Find more stories by this author \* Get story recommendations

## Beauty in the Night

# Robert Silverberg

Year: 1997

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## 1. Nine Years From Now

He was a Christmas child, was Khalid — Khalid the Entity-Killer, the first to raise his hand against the alien invaders who had conquered Earth in a single day, sweeping aside all resistance as though we were no more than ants to them. Khalid Haleem Burke, that was his name, English on his father's side, Pakistani on his mother's, born on Christmas Day amidst his mother's pain and shame and his family's grief. Christmas child though he was, nevertheless he was not going to be the new Savior of mankind, however neat a coincidence that might have been. But he would live, though his mother had not, and in the fullness of time he would do his little part, strike his little blow, against the awesome beings who had with such contemptuous ease taken possession of the world into which he had been born.

To be born at Christmastime can be an awkward thing for mother and child, who even at the best of times must contend with the risks inherent in the general overcrowding and understaffing of hospitals at that time of year. But prevailing hospital conditions were not an issue for the mother of the child of uncertain parentage and dim prospects who was about to come into the world in unhappy and disagreeable circumstances in an unheated upstairs storeroom of a modest Pakistani restaurant grandly named Khan's Mogul Palace in Salisbury, England, very early in the morning of this third Christmas since the advent of the conquering Entities from the stars.

Salisbury is a pleasant little city that lies to the south and west of London and is the principal town of the county of Wiltshire. It is noted particularly for its relatively unspoiled medieval charm, for its graceful and imposing thirteenth-century cathedral, and for the presence, eight miles away, of the celebrated prehistoric megalithic monument known as Stonehenge.

Which, in the darkness before the dawn of that Christmas day, was undergoing one of the most remarkable events in its long history; and, despite the earliness (or lateness) of the hour, a goodly number of Salisbury's inhabitants had turned out to witness the spectacular goings-on.

But not Haleem Khan, the owner of Khan's Mogul Palace, nor his wife Aissha, both of them asleep in their beds. Neither of them had any interest in the pagan monument that was Stonehenge, let alone the

strange thing that was happening to it now. And certainly not Haleem's daughter Yasmeena Khan, who was seventeen years old and cold and frightened, and who was lying half naked on the bare floor of the upstairs storeroom of her father's restaurant, hidden between a huge sack of raw lentils and an even larger sack of flour, writhing in terrible pain as shame and illicit motherhood came sweeping down on her like the avenging sword of angry Allah.

She had sinned. She knew that. Her father, her plump, reticent, overworked, mortally weary, and in fact already dying father, had several times in the past year warned her of sin and its consequences, speaking with as much force as she had ever seen him muster; and yet she had chosen to take the risk. Just three times, three different boys, only one time each, all three of them English and white.

Andy. Eddie. Richie.

Names that blazed like bonfires in the neural pathways of her soul.

Her mother — no, not really her mother; her true mother had died when Yasmeena was three; this was Aissha, her father's second wife, the robust and stolid woman who had raised her, had held the family and the restaurant together all these years — had given her warnings too, but they had been couched in entirely different terms. "You are a woman now, Yasmeena, and a woman is permitted to allow herself some pleasure in life," Aissha had told her. "But you must be careful." Not a word about sin, just taking care not to get into trouble.

Well, Yasmeena had been careful, or thought she had, but evidently not careful enough. Therefore she had failed Aissha. And failed her sad quiet father too, because she had certainly sinned despite all his warnings to remain virtuous, and Allah now would punish her for that. Was punishing her already. Punishing her terribly.

She had been very late discovering she was pregnant. She had not expected to be. Yasmeena wanted to believe that she was still too young for bearing babies, because her breasts were so small and her hips were so narrow, almost like a boy's. And each of those three times when she had done it with a boy — impulsively, furtively, half reluctantly, once in a musty cellar and once in a ruined omnibus and once right here in this very storeroom — she had taken precautions afterward, diligently swallowing the pills she had secretly bought from the smirking Hindu woman at the shop in Winchester, two tiny green pills in the morning and the big yellow one at night, five days in a row.

The pills were so nauseating that they had to work. But they hadn't. She should never have trusted pills provided by a Hindu, Yasmeena would tell herself a thousand times over; but by then it was too late.

The first sign had come only about four months before. Her breasts suddenly began to fill out. That had pleased her, at first. She had always been so scrawny; but now it seemed that her body was developing at last. Boys liked breasts. You could see their eyes quickly flicking down to check out your chest, though they seemed to think you didn't notice it when they did. All three of her lovers had put their hands into her blouse to feel hers, such as they were; and at least one — Eddie, the second — had actually been disappointed at what he found there. He had said so, just like that: "Is that *all*?"

But now her breasts were growing fuller and heavier every week, and they started to ache a little, and the dark nipples began to stand out oddly from the smooth little circles in which they were set. So Yasmeena began to feel fear; and when her bleeding did not come on time, she feared even more. But her bleeding had never come on time. Once last year it had been almost a whole month late, and she an absolute pure virgin then.

Still, there were the breasts; and then her hips seemed to be getting wider. Yasmeena said nothing, went about her business, chatted pleasantly with the customers, who liked her because she was slender and pretty and polite, and pretended all was well. Again and again at night her hand would slide down her flat boyish belly, anxiously searching for hidden life lurking beneath the taut skin. She felt nothing.

But something was there, all right, and by early October it was making the faintest of bulges, only a tiny knot pushing upward below her navel, but a little bigger every day. Yasmeena began wearing her blouses untucked, to hide the new fullness of her breasts and the burgeoning rondure of her belly. She opened the seams of her trousers and punched two new holes in her belt. It became harder for her to do her work, to carry the heavy trays of food all evening long and to put in the hours afterward washing the dishes, but she forced herself to be strong. There was no one else to do the job. Her father took the orders and Aissha did the cooking and Yasmeena served the meals and cleaned up after the restaurant closed. Her brother Khalid was gone, killed defending Aissha from a mob of white men during the riots that had broken out after the Entities came, and her sister Leila was too small, only five, no use in the restaurant.

No one at home commented on the new way Yasmeena was dressing. Perhaps they thought it was the current fashion. Life was very strange, in these early years of the Conquest.

Her father scarcely glanced at anyone these days; preoccupied with his failing restaurant and his failing health, he went about bowed over, coughing all the time, murmuring prayers endlessly under his breath. He was forty years old and looked sixty. Khan's Mogul Palace was nearly empty, night after night, even on the weekends. People did not travel any more, now that the Entities were here. No rich foreigners came from distant parts of the world to spend the night at Salisbury before going on to visit Stonehenge. The inns and hotels closed; so did most of the restaurants, though a few, like Khan's, struggled on because their proprietors had no other way of earning a living. But the last thing on Haleem Khan's mind was his daughter's changing figure.

As for her stepmother, Yasmeena imagined that she saw her giving her sidewise looks now and again, and worried over that. But Aissha said nothing. So there was probably no suspicion. Aissha was not the sort to keep silent, if she suspected something.

The Christmas season drew near. Now Yasmeena's swollen legs were as heavy as dead logs and her breasts were hard as boulders and she felt sick all the time. It was not going to be long, now. She could no longer hide from the truth. But she had no plan. If her brother Khalid were here, he would know what to do. Khalid was gone, though. She would simply have to let things happen and trust that Allah, when He was through punishing her, would forgive her and be merciful.

Christmas eve, there were four tables of customers. That was a surprise, to be so busy on a night when most English people had dinner at home. Midway through the evening Yasmeena thought she would fall down in the middle of the room and send her tray, laden with chicken biriani and mutton vindaloo and boti kebabs and schooners of lager, spewing across the floor. She steadied herself then; but an hour later she did fall; or, rather, sagged to her knees, in the hallway between the kitchen and the garbage bin where no one could see her. She crouched there, dizzy, sweating, gasping, nauseated, feeling her bowels quaking and strange spasms running down the front of her body and into her thighs; and after a time she rose and continued on with her tray toward the bin.

It will be this very night, she thought.

And for the thousandth time that week she ran through the little calculation in her mind: December 24 minus nine months is March 24, Therefore it is Richie Burke, the father. At least he was the one who gave me pleasure also.

Andy, he had been the first. Yasmeena couldn't remember his last name. Pale and freckled and very thin, with a beguiling smile, and on a humid summer night just after her sixteenth birthday when the restaurant was closed because her father was in hospital for a few days with the beginning of his trouble, Andy invited her dancing and treated her to a couple of pints of brown ale and then, late in the evening, told her of a special party at a friend's house that he was invited to, only there turned out to be no party, just a shabby stale-smelling cellar room and an old spavined couch, and Andy's busy hands roaming the front of her blouse and then going between her legs and her trousers coming off and then, quick, *quick*!, the long hard narrow reddened thing emerging from him and sliding into her, done and done and done in just a couple of moments, a gasp from him and a shudder and his head buried against her cheek and that was that, all over and done with. She had thought it was supposed to hurt, the first time, but she had felt almost nothing at all, neither pain nor anything that might have been delight. The next time Yasmeena saw him in the street Andy grinned and turned crimson and winked at her, but said nothing to her, and they had never exchanged a word since.

Then Eddie Glossop, in the autumn, the one who had found her breasts insufficient and told her so. Big broad-shouldered Eddie, who worked for the meat merchant and who had an air of great worldliness about him. He was old, almost twenty-five. Yasmeena went with him because she knew there was supposed to be pleasure in it and she had not had it from Andy. But there was none from Eddie either, just a lot of huffing and puffing as he lay sprawled on top of her in the aisle of that burned-out omnibus by the side of the road that went toward Shaftesbury. He was much bigger down there than Andy, and it hurt when he went in, and she was glad that this had not been her first time. But she wished she had not done it at all.

And then Richie Burke, in this very storeroom on an oddly warm night in March, with everyone asleep in the family apartments downstairs at the back of the restaurant. She tiptoeing up the stairs, and Richie clambering up the drainpipe and through the window, tall, lithe, graceful Richie who played the guitar so well and sang and told everyone that some day he was going to be a general in the war against the Entities and wipe them from the face of the Earth. A wonderful lover, Richie. Yasmeena kept her blouse on because Eddie had made her uneasy about her breasts. Richie caressed her and stroked her for what seemed like hours, though she was terrified that they would be discovered and wanted him to get on with it; and when he entered her, it was like an oiled shaft of smooth metal gliding into her, moving so easily, easily, easily, one gentle thrust after another, on and on and on until marvelous palpitations began to happen inside her and then she erupted with pleasure, moaning so loud that Richie had to put his hand over her mouth to keep her from waking everyone up.

That was the time the baby had been made. There could be no doubt of that. All the next day she dreamed of marrying Richie and spending the rest of the nights of her life in his arms. But at the end of that week Richie disappeared from Salisbury — some said he had gone off to join a secret underground army that was going to launch guerrilla warfare against the Entities — and no one had heard from him again.

Andy. Eddie. Richie.

And here she was on the floor of the storeroom again, with her trousers off and the shiny swollen hump of her belly sending messages of agony and shame through her body. Her only covering was a threadbare blanket that reeked of spilled cooking oil. Her water had burst about midnight. That was when she had crept up the stairs to wait in terror for the great disaster of her life to finish happening. The contractions were coming closer and closer together, like little earthquakes within her. Now the time had to be two,



three, maybe four in the morning. How long would it be? Another hour? Six? Twelve?

Relent and call Aissha to help her?

No. No. She didn't dare.

Earlier in the night voices had drifted up from the streets to her. The sound of footsteps. That was strange, shouting and running in the street, this late. The Christmas revelry didn't usually go on through the night like this. It was hard to understand what they were saying; but then out of the confusion there came, with sudden clarity:

"The aliens! They're pulling down Stonehenge, taking it apart!"

"Get your wagon, Charlie, we'll go and see!"

Pulling down Stonehenge. Strange. Strange. Why would they do that? Yasmeeena wondered. But the pain was becoming too great for her to be able to give much thought to Stonehenge just now, or to the Entities who had somehow overthrown the invincible white men in the twinkling of an eye and now ruled the world, or to anything else except what was happening within her, the flames dancing through her brain, the ripples of her belly, the implacable downward movement of — of —

Something.

"Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Universe, the Compassionate, the Merciful," she murmured timidly. "There is no god but Allah, and Mohammed is His prophet."

And again: "Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Universe."

And again.

And again.

The pain was terrible. She was splitting wide open.

"Abraham, Isaac, Ishmael!" That *something* had begun to move in a spiral through her now, like a corkscrew driving a hot track in her flesh. "Mohammed! Mohammed! Mohammed! There is no god but Allah!" The words burst from her with no timidity at all, now. Let Mohammed and Allah save her, if they really existed. What good were they, if they would not save her, she so innocent and ignorant, her life barely begun? And then, as a spear of fire gutted her and her pelvic bones seemed to crack apart, she let loose a torrent of other names, Moses, Solomon, Jesus, Mary, and even the forbidden Hindu names, Shiva, Krishna, Shakti, Kali, anyone at all who would help her through this, anyone, anyone, anyone, anyone —

She screamed three times, short, sharp, piercing screams.

She felt a terrible inner wrenching and the baby came spurting out of her with astonishing swiftness. A gushing Ganges of blood followed it, a red river that spilled out over her thighs and would not stop flowing.

Yasmeeena knew at once that she was going to die.



Something wrong had happened. Everything would come out of her insides and she would die. That was absolutely clear to her. Already, just moments after the birth, an eerie new calmness was enfolding her. She had no energy left now for further screaming, or even to look after the baby. It was somewhere down between her spread thighs, that was all she knew. She lay back, drowning in a rising pool of blood and sweat. She raised her arms toward the ceiling and brought them down again to clutch her throbbing breasts, stiff now with milk. She called now upon no more holy names. She could hardly remember her own.

She sobbed quietly. She trembled. She tried not to move, because that would surely make the bleeding even worse.

An hour went by, or a week, or a year.

Then an anguished voice high above her in the dark:

"What? Yasmeena? Oh, my god, my god, my god! Your father will perish!"

Aissha, it was. Bending to her, engulfing her. The strong arm raising her head, lifting it against the warm motherly bosom, holding her tight.

"Can you hear me, Yasmeena? Oh, Yasmeena! My god, my god!" And then an ululation of grief rising from her stepmother's throat like some hot volcanic geyser bursting from the ground. "Yasmeena! Yasmeena!"

"The baby?" Yasmeena said, in the tiniest of voices.

"Yes! Here! Here! Can you see?"

Yasmeena saw nothing but a red haze.

"A boy?" she asked, very faintly.

"A boy, yes."

In the blur of her dimming vision she thought she saw something small and pinkish-brown, smeared with scarlet, resting in her step-mother's hands. Thought she could hear him crying, even.

"Do you want to hold him?"

"No. No." Yasmeena understood clearly that she was going. The last of her strength had left her. She was moored now to the world by a mere thread.

"He is strong and beautiful," said Aissha. "A splendid boy."

"Then I am very happy." Yasmeena fought for one last fragment of energy. "His name — is — Khalid. Khalid Haleem Burke."

"Burke?"

"Yes. Khalid Haleem Burke."

"Is that the father's name, Yasmeena? Burke?"

"Burke. Richie Burke." With her final sliver of strength she spelled the name.

"Tell me where he lives, this Richie Burke. I will get him. This is shameful, giving birth by yourself, alone in the dark, in this awful room! Why did you never say anything? Why did you hide it from me? I would have helped. I would — "

But Yasmeena Khan was already dead. The first shaft of morning light now came through the grimy window of the upstairs storeroom. Christmas Day had begun.

Eight miles away, at Stonehenge, the Entities had finished their night's work. Three of the towering alien creatures had supervised while a human work crew, using hand-held pistol-like devices that emitted a bright violet glow, had uprooted every single one of the ancient stone slabs of the celebrated megalithic monument on windswept Salisbury Plain as though they were so many jackstraws. And had rearranged them so that what had been the outer circle of immense sandstone blocks now had become two parallel rows running from north to south; the lesser inner ring of blue slabs had been moved about to form an equilateral triangle; and the sixteen-foot — long block of sandstone at the center of the formation that people called the Altar Stone had been raised to an upright position at the center.

A crowd of perhaps two thousand people from the adjacent towns had watched through the night from a judicious distance as this inexplicable project was being carried out. Some were infuriated; some were saddened; some were indifferent; some were fascinated. Many had theories about what was going on, and one theory was as good as another, no better, no worse.

## 2. Sixteen Years From Now

You could still see the ghostly lettering over the front door of the former restaurant, if you knew what to look for, the pale greenish outlines of the words that once had been painted there in bright gold: KHAN'S MOGUL PALACE. The old swinging sign that had dangled above the door was still lying out back, too, in a clutter of cracked basins and discarded stewpots and broken crockery.

But the restaurant itself was gone, long gone, a victim of the Great Plague that the Entities had casually loosed upon the world as a warning to its conquered people, after an attempt had been made at an attack on an Entity encampment. Half the population of Earth had died so that the Entities could teach the other half not to harbor further rebellious thoughts. Poor sad Haleem Khan himself was gone too, the ever-weary little brown-skinned man who in ten years had somehow saved five thousand pounds from his salary as a dishwasher at the Lion and Unicorn Hotel and had used that, back when England had a queen and Elizabeth was her name, as the seed money for the unpretentious little restaurant that was going to rescue him and his family from utter hopeless poverty. Four days after the Plague had hit Salisbury, Haleem was dead. But if the Plague hadn't killed him, the tuberculosis that he was already harboring probably would have done the job soon enough. Or else simply the shock and disgrace and grief of his daughter Yasmeena's ghastly death in childbirth two weeks earlier, at Christmastime, in an upstairs room of the restaurant, while bringing into the world the bastard child of the long-legged English boy, Richie Burke, the future traitor, the future quisling.

Haleem's other daughter, the little girl Leila, had died in the Plague also, three months after her father and two days before what would have been her sixth birthday. As for Yasmeena's older brother, Khalid, he

was already two years gone by then. That was during the time that now was known as the Troubles. A gang of long-haired yobs had set forth late one Saturday afternoon in fine English wrath, determined to vent their resentment over the conquest of the Earth by doing a lively spot of Paki-bashing in the town streets, and they had encountered Khalid escorting Aissha home from the market. They had made remarks; he had replied hotly; and they beat him to death.

Which left, of all the family, only Aissha, Haleem's hardy and tireless second wife. She came down with the Plague, too, but she was one of the lucky ones, one of those who managed to fend the affliction off and survive — for whatever that was worth — into the new and transformed and diminished world. But she could hardly run the restaurant alone, and in any case, with three quarters of the population of Salisbury dead in the Plague, there was no longer much need for a Pakistani restaurant there.

Aissha found other things to do. She went on living in a couple of rooms of the now gradually decaying building that had housed the restaurant, and supported herself, in this era when national currencies had ceased to mean much and strange new sorts of money circulated in the land, by a variety of improvised means. She did housecleaning and laundry for those people who still had need of such services. She cooked meals for elderly folks too feeble to cook for themselves. Now and then, when her number came up in the labor lottery, she put in time at a factory that the Entities had established just outside town, weaving little strands of colored wire together to make incomprehensibly complex mechanisms whose nature and purpose were never disclosed to her.

And when there was no such work of any of those kinds available, Aissha would make herself available to the lorry-drivers who passed through Salisbury, spreading her powerful muscular thighs in return for meal certificates or corporate scrip or barter units or whichever other of the new versions of money they would pay her in. That was not something she would have chosen to do, if she had had her choices. But she would not have chosen to have the invasion of the Entities, for that matter, nor her husband's early death and Leila's and Khalid's, nor Yasmeena's miserable lonely ordeal in the upstairs room, but she had not been consulted about any of those things, either. Aissha needed to eat in order to survive; and so she sold herself, when she had to, to the lorry-drivers, and that was that.

As for why survival mattered, why she bothered at all to care about surviving in a world that had lost all meaning and just about all hope, it was in part because survival for the sake of survival was in her genes, and — mostly — because she wasn't alone in the world. Out of the wreckage of her family she had been left with a child to look after — her grandchild, her dead stepdaughter's baby, Khalid Haleem Burke, the child of shame. Khalid Haleem Burke had survived the Plague too. It was one of the ugly little ironies of the epidemic that the Entities had released upon the world that children who were less than six months old generally did not contract it. Which created a huge population of healthy but parentless babes.

He was healthy, all right, was Khalid Haleem Burke. Through every deprivation of those dreary years, the food shortages and the fuel shortages and the little outbreaks of diseases that once had been thought to be nearly extinct, he grew taller and straighter and stronger all the time. He had his mother's wiry strength and his father's long legs and dancer's grace. And he was lovely to behold. His skin was tawny golden-brown, his eyes were a glittering blue — green, and his hair, glossy and thick and curly, was a wonderful bronze color, a magnificent Eurasian hue. Amidst all the sadness and loss of Aissha's life, he was the one glorious beacon that lit the darkness for her.

There were no real schools, not any more. Aissha taught little Khalid herself, as best she could. She hadn't had much schooling herself, but she could read and write, and showed him how, and begged or borrowed books for him wherever she might. She found a woman who understood arithmetic, and scrubbed her floors for her in return for Khalid's lessons. There was an old man at the south end of town who had the Koran by heart, and Aissha, though she was not a strongly religious woman herself, sent

Khalid to him once a week for instruction in Islam. The boy was, after all, half Moslem. Aissha felt no responsibility for the Christian part of him, but she did not want to let him go into the world unaware that there was — somewhere, *somewhere* ! — a god known as Allah, a god of justice and compassion and mercy, to whom obedience was owed, and that he would, like all people, ultimately come to stand before that god upon the Day of Judgment.

"And the Entities?" Khalid asked her. He was six, then. "Will they be judged by Allah too?"

"The Entities are not people. They are jinn."

"Did Allah make them?"

"Allah made all things in heaven and on Earth. He made us out of potter's clay and the jinn out of smokeless fire."

"But the Entities have brought evil upon us. Why would Allah make evil things, if He is a merciful god?"

"The Entities," Aissha said uncomfortably, aware that wiser heads than hers had grappled in vain with that question, "do evil. But they are not evil themselves. They are merely the instruments of Allah."

"Who has sent them to us to do evil," said Khalid. "What kind of god is that, who sends evil among His own people, Aissha?"

She was getting beyond her depth in this conversation, but she was patient with him. "No one understands Allah's ways, Khalid. He is the One God and we are nothing before him. If He had reason to send the Entities to us, they were good reasons, and we have no right to question them." And also to send sickness, she thought, and hunger, and death, and the English boys who killed your uncle Khalid in the street, and even the English boy who put you into your mother's belly and then ran away. Allah sent all of those into the world, too. But then she reminded herself that if *RichieBurke* had not crept secretly into this house to sleep with Yasmeena, this beautiful child would not be standing here before her at this moment. And so good sometimes could come forth from evil. Who were we to demand reasons from Allah? Perhaps even the Entities had been sent here, ultimately, for our own good.

Perhaps.

Of Khalid's father, there was no news all this while. He was supposed to have run off to join the army that was fighting the Entities; but Aissha had never heard that there was any such army, anywhere in the world.

Then, not long after Khalid's seventh birthday, when he returned in mid-afternoon from his Thursday Koran lesson at the house of old Iskander Mustafa Ali, he found an unknown white man sitting in the room with his grandmother, a man with a great untidy mass of light-colored curling hair and a lean, angular, almost fleshless face with two cold, harsh blue-green eyes looking out from it as though out of a mask. His skin was so white that Khalid wondered whether he had any blood in his body. It was almost like chalk. The strange white man was sitting in his grandmother's own armchair, and his grandmother was looking very edgy and strange, a way Khalid had never seen her look before, with glistening beads of sweat along her forehead and her lips clamped together in a tight thin line.

The white man said, leaning back in the chair and crossing his legs, which were the longest legs Khalid had ever seen, "Do you know who I am, boy?"

"How would he know?" his grandmother said.

The white man looked toward Aissha and said, "Let me do this, if you don't mind." And then, to Khalid: "Come over here, boy. Stand in front of me. Well, now, aren't we the little beauty? What's your name, boy?"

"Khalid."

"Khalid. Who named you that?"

"My mother. She's dead now. It was my uncle's name. He's dead too."

"Devil of a lot of people are dead who used to be alive, all right. Well, Khalid, my name is Richie."

"Richie," Khalid said, in a very small voice, because he had already begun to understand this conversation.

"Richie, yes. Have you ever heard of a person named Richie? Richie Burke."

"My — father." In an even smaller voice.

"Right you are! The grand prize for that lad! Not only handsome but smart, too! Well, what would one expect, eh? — Here I be, boy, your long-lost father! Come here and give your long-lost father a kiss."

Khalid glanced uncertainly toward Aissha. Her face was still shiny with sweat, and very pale. She looked sick. After a moment she nodded, a tiny nod.

He took half a step forward and the man who was his father caught him by the wrist and gathered him roughly in, pulling him inward and pressing him up against him, not for an actual kiss but for what was only a rubbing of cheeks. The grinding contact with that hard, stubbly cheek was painful for Khalid.

"There, boy. I've come back, do you see? I've been away seven worm-eaten miserable years, but now I'm back, and I'm going to live with you and be your father. You can call me 'dad'."

Khalid stared, stunned.

"Go on. Do it. Say, I'm so very glad that you've come back, dad."

"Dad," Khalid said uneasily.

"The rest of it too, if you please."

"I'm so very glad — " He halted.

"That I've come back."

"That you've come back — "

"Dad."

Khalid hesitated. "Dad," he said.

"There's a good boy! It'll come easier to you after a while. Tell me, did you ever think about me while you were growing up, boy?"

Khalid glanced toward Aissha again. She nodded surreptitiously.

Huskily he said, "Now and then, yes."

"Only now and then? That's all?"

"Well, hardly anybody has a father. But sometimes I met someone who did, and then I thought of you. I wondered where you were. Aissha said you were off fighting the Entities. Is that where you were, dad? Did you fight them? Did you kill any of them?"

"Don't ask stupid questions. Tell me, boy: do you go by the name of Burke or Khan?"

"Burke. Khalid Haleem Burke."

"Call me '*sir*' when you're not calling me '*dad*'. Say, 'Khalid Haleem Burke, sir.'"

"Khalid Haleem Burke, sir. Dad."

"One or the other. Not both." Richie Burke rose from the chair, unfolding himself as though in sections, up and up and up. He was enormously tall, very thin. His slenderness accentuated his great height. Khalid, though tall for his age, felt dwarfed beside him. The thought came to him that this man was not his father at all, not even a man, but some sort of demon, rather, a jinni, a jinni that had been let out of its bottle, as in the story that Iskander Mustafa Ali had told him. He kept that thought to himself. "Good," Richie Burke said. "Khalid Haleem Burke. I like that. Son should have his father's name. But not the Khalid Haleem part. From now on your name is — ah — Kendall. Ken for short."

"Khalid was my — "

" — uncle's name, yes. Well, your uncle is dead. Practically everybody is dead, Kenny. Kendall Burke, good English name. Kendall *Hamilton* Burke, same initials, even, only English. Is that all right, boy? What a pretty one you are, Kenny! I'll teach you a thing or two, I will. I'll make a man out of you."

.

Here I be, boy, your long-lost father!

Khalid had never known what it meant to have a father, nor ever given the idea much examination. He had never known hatred before, either, because Aissha was a fundamentally calm, stable, accepting person, too steady in her soul to waste time or valuable energy hating anything, and Khalid had taken after her in that. But Richie Burke, who taught Khalid what it meant to have a father, made him aware of what it was like to hate, also.

Richie moved into the bedroom that had been Aissha's, sending Aissha off to sleep in what had once had



been Yasmeena's room. It had long since gone to rack and ruin, but they cleaned it up, some, chasing the spiders out and taping oilcloth over the missing window-panes and nailing down a couple of floor-boards that had popped up out of their proper places. She carried her clothes-cabinet in there by herself, and set up on it the framed photographs of her dead family that she had kept in her former bedroom, and draped two of her old saris that she never wore any more over the bleak places on the wall where the paint had flaked away.

It was stranger than strange, having Richie living with them. It was a total upheaval, a dismaying invasion by an alien life-form, in some ways as shocking in its impact as the arrival of the Entities had been.

He was gone most of the day. He worked in the nearby town of Winchester, driving back and forth in a small brown pre-Conquest automobile. Winchester was a place where Khalid had never been, though his mother had, to purchase the pills that were meant to abort him. Khalid had never been far from Salisbury, not even to Stonehenge, which now was a center of Entity activity anyway, and not a tourist sight. Few people in Salisbury traveled anywhere these days. Not many had automobiles, because of the difficulty of obtaining petrol, but Richie never seemed to have any problem about that.

Sometimes Khalid wondered what sort of work his father did in Winchester; but he asked about it only once. The words were barely out of his mouth when his father's long arm came snaking around and struck him across the face, splitting his lower lip and sending a dribble of blood down his chin.

Khalid staggered back, astounded. No one had ever hit him before. It had not occurred to him that anyone would.

"You must never ask that again!" his father said, looming mountain-high above him. His cold eyes were even colder, now, in his fury. "What I do in Winchester is no business of yours, nor anyone else's, do you hear me, boy? It is my own private affair. My own — private — affair."

Khalid rubbed his cut lip and peered at his father in bewilderment. The pain of the slap had not been so great; but the surprise of it, the shock — that was still reverberating through his consciousness. And went on reverberating for a long while thereafter.

He never asked about his father's work again, no. But he was hit again, more than once, indeed with fair regularity. Hitting was Richie's way of expressing irritation. And it was difficult to predict what sort of thing might irritate him. Any sort of intrusion on his father's privacy, though, seemed to do it. Once, while talking with his father in his bedroom, telling him about a bloody fight between two boys that he had witnessed in town, Khalid unthinkingly put his hand on the guitar that Richie always kept leaning against his wall beside his bed, giving it only a single strum, something that he had occasionally wanted to do for months; and instantly, hardly before the twanging note had died away, Richie unleashed his arm and knocked Khalid back against the wall. "You keep your filthy fingers off that instrument, boy!" Richie said; and after that Khalid did. Another time Richie struck him for leafing through a book he had left on the kitchen table, that had pictures of naked women in it; and another time, it was for staring too long at Richie as he stood before the mirror in the morning, shaving. So Khalid learned to keep his distance from his father; but still he found himself getting slapped for this reason and that, and sometimes for no reason at all. The blows were rarely as hard as the first one had been, and never ever created in him that same sense of shock. But they were blows, all the same. He stored them all up in some secret receptacle of his soul.

Occasionally Richie hit Aissha, too — when dinner was late, or when she put mutton curry on the table too often, or when it seemed to him that she had contradicted him about something. That was more of a shock to Khalid than getting slapped himself, that anyone should dare to lift his hand to Aissha.

The first time it happened, which occurred while they were eating dinner, a big carving knife was lying on the table near Khalid, and he might well have reached for it had Aissha not, in the midst of her own fury and humiliation and pain, sent Khalid a message with her furious blazing eyes that he absolutely was not to do any such thing. And so he controlled himself, then and any time afterward when Richie hit her. It was a skill that Khalid had, controlling himself — one that in some circuitous way he must have inherited from the ever-patient, all-enduring grandparents whom he had never known and the long line of oppressed Asian peasants from whom they descended. Living with Richie in the house gave Khalid daily opportunity to develop that skill to a fine art.

Richie did not seem to have many friends, at least not friends who visited the house. Khalid knew of only three.

There was a man named Arch who sometimes came, an older man with greasy ringlets of hair that fell from a big bald spot on the top of his head. He always brought a bottle of whiskey, and he and Richie would sit in Richie's room with the door closed, talking in low tones or singing raucous songs. Khalid would find the empty whiskey bottle the following morning, lying on the hallway floor. He kept them, setting them up in a row amidst the restaurant debris behind the house, though he did not know why.

The only other man who came was Syd, who had a flat nose and amazingly thick fingers, and gave off such a bad smell that Khalid was able to detect it in the house the next day. Once, when Syd was there, Richie emerged from his room and called to Aissha, and she went in there and shut the door behind her and was still in there when Khalid went to sleep. He never asked her about that, what had gone on while she was in Richie's room. Some instinct told him that he would rather not know.

There was also a woman: Wendy, her name was, tall and gaunt and very plain, with a long face like a horse's and very bad skin, and stringy tangles of reddish hair. She came once in a while for dinner, and Richie always specified that Aissha was to prepare an English dinner that night, lamb or roast beef, none of your spicy Paki curries tonight, if you please. After they ate, Richie and Wendy would go into Richie's room and not emerge again that evening, and the sounds of the guitar would be heard, and laughter, and then low cries and moans and grunts.

One time in the middle of the night when Wendy was there, Khalid got up to go to the bathroom just at the time she did, and encountered her in the hallway, stark naked in the moonlight, a long white ghostly figure. He had never seen a woman naked until this moment, not a real one, only the pictures in Richie's magazine; but he looked up at her calmly, with that deep abiding steadiness in the face of any sort of surprise that he had mastered so well since the advent of Richie. Coolly he surveyed her, his eyes rising from the long thin legs that went up and up and up from the floor and halting for a moment at the curious triangular thatch of woolly hair at the base of her flat belly, and from there his gaze mounted to the round little breasts set high and far apart on her chest, and at last came to her face, which, in the moonlight had unexpectedly taken on a sort of handsomeness if not actual comeliness, though before this Wendy had always seemed to him to be tremendously ugly. She didn't seem displeased at being seen like this. She smiled and winked at him, and ran her hand almost coquettishly through her straggly hair, and blew him a kiss as she drifted on past him toward the bathroom. It was the only time that anyone associated with Richie had ever been nice to him: had even appeared to notice him at all.

But life with Richie was not entirely horrid. There were some good aspects.

One of them was simply being close to so much strength and energy: what Khalid might have called virility, if he had known there was any such word. He had spent all his short life thus far among people who kept their heads down and went soldiering along obediently, people like patient plodding Aissha,



who took what came to her and never complained, and shriveled old Iskander Mustafa Ali, who understood that Allah determined all things and one had no choice but to comply, and the quiet, tight-lipped English people of Salisbury, who had lived through the Conquest, and the Great Silence when the aliens had turned off all the electrical power in the world, and the Troubles, and the Plague, and who were prepared to be very, very English about whatever horror was coming next.

Richie was different, though. Richie hadn't a shred of passivity in him. "We shape our lives the way we want them to be, boy," Richie would say again and again. "We write our own scripts. It's all nothing but a bloody television show, don't you see that, Kenny — boy?"

That was a startling novelty to Khalid: that you might actually have any control over your own destiny, that you could say "no" to this and "yes" to that and "not right now" to this other thing, and that if there was something you wanted, you could simply reach out and take it. There was nothing Khalid wanted. But the idea that he might even have it, if only he could figure out what it was, was fascinating to him.

Then, too, for all of Richie's roughness of manner, his quickness to curse you or kick out at you or slap you when he had had a little too much to drink, he did have an affectionate side, even a charming one. He often sat with them and played his guitar, and taught them the words of songs, and encouraged them to sing along with them, though Khalid had no idea what the songs were about and Aissha did not seem to know either. It was fun, all the same, the singing; and Khalid had known very little fun. Richie was immensely proud of Khalid's good looks and agile, athletic grace, also, and would praise him for them, something which no one had ever done before, not even Aissha. Even though Khalid understood in some way that Richie was only praising himself, really, he was grateful even so.

Richie took him out behind the building and showed him how to throw and catch a ball. How to kick one, too, a different kind of ball. And sometimes there were cricket matches in a field at the edge of town; and when Richie played in these, which he occasionally did, he brought Khalid along to watch. Later, at home, he showed Richie how to hold the bat, how to guard a wicket.

Then there were the drives in the car. These were rare, a great privilege. But sometimes, of a sunny Sunday, Richie would say, "Let's take the old flivver for a spin, eh, Kenny, lad?" And off they would go into the green countryside, usually no special destination in mind, only driving up and down the quiet lanes, Khalid gawking in wonder at this new world beyond the town. It made his head whirl in a good way, as he came to understand that the world actually did go on and on past the boundaries of Salisbury, and was full of marvels and splendors.

So, though at no point did he stop hating Richie, he could see at least some mitigating benefits that had come from his presence in their home. Not many. Some.

### **3. Nineteen Years From Now**

Once Richie took him to Stonehenge. Or as near to it as it was possible now for humans to go. It was the year Khalid turned ten: a special birthday treat.

"Do you see it out there in the plain, boy? Those big stones? Built by a bunch of ignorant prehistoric buggers who painted themselves blue and danced widdershins in the night. Do you know what 'widdershins' means, boy? No, neither do I. But they did it, whatever it was. Danced around naked with their thingummies jiggling around, and then at midnight they'd sacrifice a virgin on the big altar stone. Long, long ago. Thousands of years. — Come on, let's get out and have a look."

Khalid stared. Huge gray slabs, set out in two facing rows flanking smaller slabs of blue stone set in a three-cornered pattern, and a big stone standing upright in the middle. And some other stones lying sideways on top of a few of the gray ones. A transparent curtain of flickering reddish-green light surrounded the whole thing, rising from hidden vents in the ground to nearly twice the height of a man. Why would anyone have wanted to build such a thing? It all seemed like a tremendous waste of time.

"Of course, you understand this isn't what it looked like back then. When the Entities came, they changed the whole business around from what it always was, bugged it all up. Got laborers out here to move every single stone. And they put in the gaudy lighting effects, too. Never used to be lights, certainly not that kind. You walk through those lights, you die, just like a mosquito flying through a candle flame. Those stones there, they were set in a circle originally, and those blue ones there — hey, now, lad, look what we have! You ever see an Entity before, Ken?"

Actually, Khalid had: twice. But never this close. The first one had been right in the middle of the town at noontime. It had been standing outside the entrance of the cathedral cool as you please, as though it happened to be in the mood to go to church: a giant purple thing with orange spots and big yellow eyes. But Aissha had put her hand over his face before he could get a good look, and had pulled him quickly down the street that led away from the cathedral, dragging him along as fast as he was able to could go. Khalid had been about five then. He dreamed of the Entity for months thereafter.

The second time, a year later, he had been with friends, playing within sight of the main highway, when a strange vehicle came down the road, an Entity car that floated on air instead of riding on wheels, and two Entities were standing in it, looking right out at them for a moment as they went floating by. Khalid saw only the tops of their heads that time: their great eyes again, and a sort of a curving beak below, and a great V-shaped slash of a mouth, like a frog's. He was fascinated by them. Repelled, too, because they were so bizarre, these strange alien beings, these enemies of mankind, and he knew he was supposed to loathe and disdain them. But fascinated. Fascinated. He wished he had been able to see them better.

Now, though, he had a clear view of the creatures, three of them. They had emerged from what looked like a door that was set right in the ground, out on the far side of the ancient monument, and were strolling casually among the great stones like lords or ladies inspecting their estate, paying no heed whatever to the tall man and the small boy standing beside the car parked just outside the fiery barrier. It amazed Khalid, watching them teeter around on the little ropy legs that supported their immense tubular bodies, that they were able to keep their balance, that they didn't simply topple forward and fall with a crash.

It amazed him, too, how beautiful they were. He had suspected that from his earlier glances, but now their glory fell upon him with full impact.

The luminous golden-orange spots on the glassy, gleaming purple skin — like fire, those spots were. And the huge eyes, so bright, so keen: you could read the strength of their minds in them, the power of their souls. Their gaze engulfed you in a flood of light. Even the air about the Entities partook of their beauty, glowing with a liquid turquoise radiance.

"There they be, boy. Our lords and masters. You ever see anything so bloody hideous?"

"Hideous?"

"They ain't pretty, isn't that right?"

Khalid made a noncommittal noise. Richie was in a good mood; he always was, on these Sunday

excursions. But Khalid knew only too well the penalty for contradicting him in anything. So he looked upon the Entities in silence, lost in wonder, awed by the glory of these strange gigantic creatures, never voicing a syllable of his admiration for their elegance and majesty.

Expansively Richie said, "You heard correctly, you know, when they told you that when I left Salisbury just before you were born, it was to go off and join an army that meant to fight them. There was nothing I wanted more than to kill Entities, nothing. Christ Eternal, boy, did I ever hate those creepy bastards! Coming in like they did, taking our world away quick as you please. But I got to my senses pretty fast, let me tell you. I listened to the plans the underground army people had for throwing off the Entity yoke, and I had to laugh. I had *to laugh* ! I could see right away that there wasn't a hope in hell of it. This was even before they put the Great Plague upon us, you understand. I knew. I damn well knew, I did. They're as powerful as gods. You want to fight against a bunch of gods, lots of luck to you. So I quit the underground then and there. I still hate the bastards, mind you, make no mistake about that, but I know it's foolish even to dream about overthrowing them. You just have to fashion your accommodation with them, that's all there is. You just have to make your peace within yourself and let them have their way. Because anything else is a fool's own folly."

Khalid listened. What Richie was saying made sense. Khalid understood about not wanting to fight against gods. He understood also how it was possible to hate someone and yet go on unprotestingly living with him.

"Is it all right, letting them see us like this?" he asked. "Aissha says that sometimes when they see you, they reach out from their chests with the tongues that they have there and snatch you up, and they take you inside their buildings and do horrible things to you there."

Richie laughed harshly. "It's been known to happen. But they won't touch Richie Burke, lad, and they won't touch the son of Richie Burke at Richie Burke's side. I guarantee you that. We're absolutely safe."

Khalid did not ask why that should be. He hoped it was true, that was all.

Two days afterward, while he was coming back from the market with a packet of lamb for dinner, he was set upon by two boys and a girl, all of them about his age or a year or two older, whom he knew only in the vaguest way. They formed themselves into a loose ring just beyond his reach and began to chant in a high-pitched, nasal way: "Quisling, quisling, your father is a quisling!"

"What's that you call him?"

"Quisling."

"He is not."

"He is! He is! Quisling, quisling, your father is a quisling! "

Khalid had no idea what a quisling was. But no one was going to call his father names. Much as he hated Richie, he knew he could not allow that. It was something Richie had taught him: Defend yourself against scorn, boy, at all times . He meant against those who might be rude to Khalid because he was part Pakistani; but Khalid had experienced very little of that. Was a quisling someone who was English but had had a child with a Pakistani woman? Perhaps that was it. Why would these children care, though? Why would anyone?

"Quisling, quisling— "

Khalid threw down his package and lunged at the closest boy, who darted away. He caught the girl by the arm, but he would not hit a girl, and so he simply shoved her into the other boy, who went spinning up against the side of the market building. Khalid pounced on him there, holding him close to the wall with one hand and furiously hitting him with the other.

His two companions seemed unwilling to intervene. But they went on chanting, from a safe distance, more nasally than ever.

"Quis-ling, quis-ling, your fa-ther is a quis-ling!"

"Stop that!" Khalid cried. "You have no right!" He punctuated his words with blows. The boy he was holding was bleeding, now, his nose, the side of his mouth. He looked terrified.

"Quis-ling, quis-ling— "

They would not stop, and neither would Khalid. But then he felt a hand seizing him by the back of his neck, a big adult hand, and he was yanked backward and thrust against the market wall himself. A vast meaty man, a navvy, from the looks of him, loomed over Khalid. "What do you think you're doing, you dirty Paki garbage? You'll kill the boy!"

"He said my father was a quisling!"

"Well, then, he probably is. Get on with you, now, boy! Get on with you!"

He gave Khalid one last hard shove, and spat and walked away. Khalid looked sullenly around for his three tormentors, but they had run off already. They had taken the packet of lamb with them, too.

That night, while Aissha was improvising something for dinner out of yesterday's rice and some elderly chicken, Khalid asked her what a quisling was. She spun around on him as though he had cursed Allah to her ears. Her face all ablaze with a ferocity he had not seen in it before, she said, "Never use that word in this house, Khalid. Never! Never!" And that was all the explanation she would give. Khalid had to learn, on his own, what a quisling was; and when he did, which was soon thereafter, he understood why his father had been unafraid, that day at Stonehenge when they stood outside that curtain of light and looked upon the Entities who were strolling among the giant stones. And also why those three children had mocked him in the street. You just have to fashion your accommodation with them, that's all there is . Yes. Yes. Yes. To fashion your accommodation.

## 4. Twenty Years From Now

It was after the time that Richie beat Aissha so severely, and then did worse than that — violated her, raped her — that Khalid definitely decided that he was going to kill an Entity.

Not kill Richie. Kill an Entity.

It was a turning point in Khalid's relationship with his father, and indeed in Khalid's whole life, and in the life of any number of other citizens of Salisbury, Wiltshire, England, that time when Richie hurt Aissha so. Richie had been treating Aissha badly all along, of course. He treated everyone badly. He had moved into her house and had taken possession of it as though it were his own. He regarded her as a servant, there purely to do his bidding, and woe betide her if she failed to meet his expectations. She cooked; she

cleaned the house; Khalid understood now that sometimes, at his whim, Richie would make her come into his bedroom to amuse him or his friend Syd or both of them together. And there was never a word of complaint out of her. She did as he wished; she showed no sign of anger or even resentment; she had given herself over entirely to the will of Allah. Khalid, who had not yet managed to find any convincing evidence of Allah's existence, had not. But he had learned the art of accepting the unacceptable from Aissha. He knew better than to try to change what was unchangeable. So he lived with his hatred of Richie, and that was merely a fact of daily existence, like the fact that rain did not fall upward.

Now, though, Richie had gone too far.

Coming home plainly drunk, red-faced, enraged over something, muttering to himself. Greeting Aissha with a growling curse, Khalid with a stinging slap. No apparent reason for either. Demanding his dinner early. Getting it, not liking what he got. Aissha offering mild explanations of why beef had not been available today. Richie shouting that beef bloody well *should* have been available to the household of Richie Burke.

So far, just normal Richie behavior when Richie was having a bad day. Even sweeping the serving-bowl of curried mutton off the table, sending it shattering, thick oily brown sauce splattering everywhere, fell within the normal Richie range.

But then, Aissha saying softly, despondently, looking down at what had been her prettiest remaining sari now spotted in twenty places, "You have stained my clothing." And Richie going over the top. Erupting. Berserk. Wrath out of all measure to the offense, if offense there had been.

Leaping at her, bellowing, shaking her, slapping her. Punching her, even. In the face. In the chest. Seizing the sari at her midriff, ripping it away, tearing it in shreds, crumpling them and hurling them at her. Aissha backing away from him, trembling, eyes bright with fear, dabbing at the blood that seeped from her cut lower lip with one hand, spreading the other one out to cover herself at the thighs.

Khalid staring, not knowing what to do, horrified, furious.

Richie yelling. "I'll stain you, I will! I'll give you a sodding stain!" Grabbing her by the wrist, pulling away what remained of her clothing, stripping her all but naked right there in the dining room. Khalid covering his face. His own grandmother, forty years old, decent, respectable, naked before him: how could he look? And yet how could he tolerate what was happening? Richie dragging her out of the room, now, toward his bedroom, not troubling even to close the door. Hurling her down on his bed, falling on top of her. Grunting like a pig, a pig, a pig, a pig.

I must not permit this.

Khalid's breast surged with hatred: a cold hatred, almost dispassionate. The man was inhuman, a jinni. Some jinn were harmless, some were evil; but Richie was surely of the evil kind, a demon.

His father. An evil jinni.

But what did that make him? What? What? What? What?

Khalid found himself going into the room after them, against all prohibitions, despite all risks. Seeing Richie plunked between Aissha's legs, his shirt pulled up, his trousers pulled down, his bare buttocks pumping in the air. And Aissha staring upward past Richie's shoulder at the frozen Khalid in the doorway, her face a rigid mask of horror and shame: gesturing to him, making a repeated brushing movement of her

hand through the air, wordlessly telling him to go away, to get out of the room, not to watch, not to intervene in any way.

He ran from the house and crouched cowering amid the rubble in the rear yard, the old stewpots and broken jugs and his own collection of Arch's empty whiskey bottles. When he returned, an hour later, Richie was in his room, chopping malevolently at the strings of his guitar, singing some droning tune in a low, boozy voice. Aissha was dressed again, moving about in a slow, downcast way, cleaning up the mess in the dining room. Sobbing softly. Saying nothing, not even looking at Khalid as he entered. A sticking-plaster on her lip. Her cheeks looked puffy and bruised. There seemed to be a wall around her. She was sealed away inside herself, sealed from all the world, even from him.

"I will kill him," Khalid said quietly to her.

"No. That you will not do." Aissha's voice was deep and remote, a voice from the bottom of the sea.

She gave him a little to eat, a cold chapati and some of yesterday's rice, and sent him to his room. He lay awake for hours, listening to the sounds of the house, Richie's endless drunken droning song, Aissha's barely audible sobs. In the morning nobody said anything about anything.

Khalid understood that it was impossible for him to kill his own father, however much he hated him. But Richie had to be punished for what he had done. And so, to punish him, Khalid was going to kill an Entity.

The Entities were a different matter. They were fair game.

For some time now, on his better days, Richie had been taking Khalid along with him as he drove through the countryside, doing his quisling tasks, gathering information that the Entities wanted to know and turning it over to them by some process that Khalid could not even begin to understand, and by this time Khalid had seen Entities on so many different occasions that he had grown quite accustomed to being in their presence.

And had no fear of them. To most people, apparently, Entities were scary things, ghastly alien monsters, evil, strange; but to Khalid they still were, as they always had been, creatures of enormous beauty. Beautiful the way a god would be beautiful. How could you be frightened by anything so beautiful? How could you be frightened of a god?

They didn't ever appear to notice him at all. Richie would go up to one of them and stand before it, and some kind of transaction would take place. While that was going on, Khalid simply stood to one side, looking at the Entity, studying it, lost in admiration of its beauty. Richie offered no explanations of these meetings and Khalid never asked.

The Entities grew more beautiful in his eyes every time he saw one. They were beautiful beyond belief. He could almost have worshipped them. It seemed to him that Richie felt the same way about them: that he was caught in their spell, that he would gladly fall down before them and bow his forehead to the ground.

And so.

I will kill one of them, Khalid thought.



Because they are so beautiful. Because my father, who works for them, must love them almost as much as he loves himself, and I will kill the thing he loves. He says he hates them, but I think it is not so: I think he loves them, and that is why he works for them. Or else he loves them and hates them both. He may feel the same way about himself. But I see the light that comes into his eyes when he looks upon them.

So I will kill one, yes. Because by killing one of them I will be killing some part of *him*. And maybe there will be some other value in my doing it, besides.

## 5. Twenty-Two Years From Now

Richie Burke said, "Look at this goddamned thing, will you, Ken? Isn't it the goddamnedest fantastic piece of shit anyone ever imagined?"

They were in what had once been the main dining room of the old defunct restaurant. It was early afternoon. Aissha was elsewhere, Khalid had no idea where. His father was holding something that seemed something like a rifle, or perhaps a highly streamlined shotgun, but it was like no rifle or shotgun he had ever seen. It was a long, slender tube of greenish-blue metal with a broad flaring muzzle and what might have been some type of gunsight mounted midway down the barrel and a curious sort of computerized trigger arrangement on the stock. A one-of-a-kind sort of thing, custom made, a home inventor's pride and joy.

"Is it a weapon, would you say?"

"A weapon? A weapon? What the bloody hell do you think it is, boy? It's a fucking Entity-killing gun! Which I confiscated this very day from a nest of conspirators over Warminster way. The whole batch of them are under lock and key this very minute, thank you very much, and I've brought Exhibit A home for safe keeping. Have a good look, lad. Ever seen anything so diabolical?"

Khalid realized that Richie was actually going to let him handle it. He took it with enormous care, letting it rest on both his outstretched palms. The barrel was cool and very smooth, the gun lighter than he had expected it to be.

"How does it work, then?"

"Pick it up. Sight along it. You know how it's done. Just like an ordinary gunsight."

Khalid put it to his shoulder, right there in the room. Aimed at the fireplace. Peered along the barrel.

A few inches of the fireplace were visible in the crosshairs, in the most minute detail. Keen magnification, wonderful optics. Touch the right stud, now, and the whole side of the house would be blown out, was that it? Khalid ran his hand along the butt.

"There's a safety on it," Richie said. "The little red button. There. That. Mind you don't hit it by accident. What we have here, boy, is nothing less than a rocket-powered grenade gun. A bomb-throwing machine, virtually. You wouldn't believe it, because it's so skinny, but what it hurls is a very graceful little projectile that will explode with almost incredible force and cause an extraordinary amount of damage, altogether extraordinary. I know because I tried it. It was amazing, seeing what that thing could do."

"Is it loaded now?"

"Oh, yes, yes, you bet your little brown rump it is! Loaded and ready! An absolutely diabolical Entity-killing machine, the product of months and months of loving work by a little band of desperados with marvelous mechanical skills. As stupid as they come, though, for all their skills. — Here, boy, let me have that thing before you set it off somehow."

Khalid handed it over.

"Why stupid?" he asked. "It seems very well made."

"I said they were skillful. This is a goddamned triumph of miniaturization, this little cannon. But what makes them think they could kill an Entity at all? Don't they imagine anyone's ever tried? Can't be done, Ken, boy. Nobody ever has, nobody ever will."

Unable to take his eyes from the gun, Khalid said obligingly, "And why is that, sir?"

"Because they're bloody unkillable!"

"Even with something like this? Almost incredible force, you said, sir. An extraordinary amount of damage."

"It would fucking well blow an Entity to smithereens, it would, if you could ever hit one with it. Ah, but the trick is to succeed in firing your shot, boy! Which cannot be done. Even as you're taking your aim, they're reading your bloody mind, that's what they do. They know exactly what you're up to, because they look into our minds the way we would look into a book. They pick up all your nasty little unfriendly thoughts about them. And then — bam! — they give you the bloody Push, the thing they do to people with their minds, you know, and you're done for, piff paff poof. We've heard of four cases, at least. Attempted Entity assassination. Trying to take a shot as an Entity went by. Found the bodies, the weapons, just so much trash by the roadside." Richie ran his hands up and down the gun, fondling it almost lovingly. " — This gun here, it's got an unusually great range, terrific sight, will fire upon the target from an enormous distance. Still wouldn't work, I wager you. They can do their telepathy on you from three hundred yards away. Maybe five hundred. Who knows, maybe a thousand. Still, a damned good thing that we broke this ring up in time. Just in case they could have pulled it off somehow."

"It would be bad if an Entity was killed, is that it?" Khalid asked.

Richie guffawed. "Bad? Bad? It would be a bloody catastrophe. You know what they did, the one time anybody managed to damage them in any way? No, how in hell would you know? It was right around the moment you were getting born. Some buggerly American idiots launched a laser attack from space on an Entity building. Maybe killed a few, maybe didn't, but the Entities paid us back by letting loose a plague on us that wiped out damn near every other person there was in the world. Right here in Salisbury they were keeling over like flies. Had it myself. Thought I'd die. Damned well hoped I would, I felt so bad. Then I arose from my bed of pain and threw it off. But we don't want to risk bringing down another plague, do we, now? Or any other sort of miserable punishment that they might choose to inflict. Because they certainly will inflict one. One thing that has been clear from the beginning is that our masters will take no shit from us, no, lad, not one solitary molecule of shit."

He crossed the room and unfastened the door of the cabinet that had held Khan's Mogul Palace's meager stock of wine in the long-gone era when this building had been a licensed restaurant. Thrusting the weapon inside, Richie said, "This is where it's going to spend the night. You will make no reference to its presence when Aissha gets back. I'm expecting Arch to come here tonight, and you will make no



reference to it to him, either. It is a top secret item, do you hear me? I show it to you because I love you, boy, and because I want you to know that your father has saved the world this day from a terrible disaster, but I don't want a shred of what I have shared with you just now to reach the ears of another human being. Or another inhuman being for that matter. Is that clear, boy? Is it?"

"I will not say a word," said Khalid.

And said none. But thought quite a few.

All during the evening, as Arch and Richie made their methodical way through Arch's latest bottle of rare pre-Conquest whiskey, salvaged from some vast horde found by the greatest of good luck in a Southampton storehouse, Khalid clutched to his own bosom the knowledge that there was, right there in that cabinet, a device that was capable of blowing the head off an Entity, if only one could manage to get within firing range without announcing one's lethal intentions.

Was there a way of achieving that? Khalid had no idea.

But perhaps the range of this device was greater than the range of the Entities' mind-reading capacities. Or perhaps not. Was it worth the gamble? Perhaps it was. Or perhaps not.

Aissha went to her room soon after dinner, once she and Khalid had cleared away the dinner dishes. She said little these days, kept mainly to herself, drifted through her life like a sleepwalker. Richie had not laid a violent hand on her again, since that savage evening several years back, but Khalid understood that she still harbored the pain of his humiliation of her, that in some ways she had never really recovered from what Richie had done to her that night. Nor had Khalid.

He hovered in the hall, listening to the sounds from his father's room until he felt certain that Arch and Richie had succeeded in drinking themselves into their customary stupor. Ear to the door: silence. A faint snore or two, maybe.

He forced himself to wait another ten minutes. Still quiet in there. Delicately he pushed the door, already slightly ajar, another few inches open. Peered cautiously within.

Richie slumped head down at the table, clutching in one hand a glass that still had a little whiskey in it, cradling his guitar between his chest and knee with the other. Arch on the floor opposite him, head dangling to one side, eyes closed, limbs sprawled every which way. Snoring, both of them. Snoring. Snoring. Snoring.

Good. Let them sleep very soundly.

Khalid took the Entity-killing gun now from the cabinet. Caressed its satiny barrel. It was an elegant thing, this weapon. He admired its design. He had an artist's eye for form and texture and color, did Khalid: some fugitive gene out of forgotten antiquity miraculously surfacing in him after a dormancy of centuries, the eye of a Gandharan sculptor, of a Rajput architect, a Gujerati miniaturist coming to the fore in him after passing through all those generations of the peasantry. Lately he had begun doing little sketches, making some carvings. Hiding everything away so that Richie would not find it. That was the sort of thing that might offend Richie, his taking up such piffling pastimes. Sports, drinking, driving around: those were proper amusements for a man.

On one of his good days last year Richie had brought a bicycle home for him: a startling gift, for bicycles were rarities nowadays, none having been available, let alone manufactured, in England in ages. Where Richie had obtained it, from whom, with what brutality, Khalid did not like to think. But he loved his bike. Rode long hours through the countryside on it, every chance he had. It was his freedom; it was his wings. He went outside now, carrying the grenade gun, and carefully strapped it to the bicycle's basket.

He had waited nearly three years for this moment to make itself possible.

Nearly every night nowadays, Khalid knew, one could usually see Entities traveling about on the road between Salisbury and Stonehenge, one or two of them at a time, riding in those cars of theirs that floated a little way above the ground on cushions of air. Stonehenge was a major center of Entity activities nowadays and there were more and more of them in the vicinity all the time. Perhaps there would be one out there this night, he thought. It was worth the chance: he would not get a second opportunity with this captured gun that his father had brought home.

About halfway out to Stonehenge there was a place on the plain where he could have a good view of the road from a little copse several hundred yards away. Khalid had no illusion that hiding in the copse would protect him from the mind-searching capacities the Entities were said to have. If they could detect him at all, the fact that he was standing in the shadow of a leafy tree would not make the slightest difference. But it was a place to wait, on this bright moonlit night. It was a place where he could feel alone, unwatched.

He went to it. He waited there.

He listened to night-noises. An owl; the rustling of the breeze through the trees; some small nocturnal animal scrabbling in the underbrush.

He was utterly calm.

Khalid had studied calmness all his life, with his grandmother Aissha as his tutor. From his earliest days he had watched her stolid acceptance of poverty, of shame, of hunger, of loss, of all kinds of pain. He had seen her handling the intrusion of Richie Burke into her household and her life with philosophical detachment, with stoic patience. To her it was all the will of Allah, not to be questioned. Allah was less real to Khalid than He was to Aissha, but Khalid had drawn from her infinite patience and tranquility, at least, if not her faith in God. Perhaps he might find his way to God later on. At any rate, he had long ago learned from Aissha that yielding to anguish was useless, that inner peace was the only key to endurance, that everything must be done calmly, unemotionally, because the alternative was a life of unending chaos and suffering. And so he had come to understand from her that it was possible even to hate someone in a calm, unemotional way. And had contrived thus to live calmly, day by day, with the father whom he loathed.

For the Entities he felt no loathing at all. Far from it. He had never known a world without them, the vanished world where humans had been masters of their own destinies. The Entities, for him, were an innate aspect of life, simply there, as were hills and trees, the moon, or the owl who roved the night above him now, cruising for squirrels or rabbits. And they were very beautiful to behold, like the moon, like an owl moving silently overhead, like a massive chestnut tree.

He waited, and the hours passed, and in his calm way he began to realize that he might not get his chance tonight, for he knew he needed to be home and in his bed before Richie awakened and could find him and the weapon gone. Another hour, two at most, that was all he could risk out here.

Then he saw turquoise light on the highway, and knew that an Entity vehicle was approaching, coming

from the direction of Salisbury. It pulled into view a moment later, carrying two of the creatures standing serenely upright, side by side, in their strange wagon that floated on a cushion of air.

Khalid beheld it in wonder and awe. And once again marveled, as ever, at their elegance of these Entities, their grace, their luminescent splendor.

How beautiful you are! Oh, yes. Yes.

They moved past him on their curious cart as though traveling on a river of light, and it seemed to him, dispassionately studying the one on the side closer to him, that what he beheld here was surely a jinni of the jinn: Allah's creature, a thing made of smokeless fire, a separate creation. Which none the less must in the end stand before Allah in judgment, even as we.

How beautiful. How beautiful.

I love you.

He loved it, yes. For its crystalline beauty. A jinni? No, it was a higher sort of being than that; it was an angel. It was a being of pure light — of cool clear fire, without smoke. He was lost in rapt admiration of its angelic perfection.

Loving it, admiring it, even worshipping it, Khalid calmly lifted the grenade gun to his shoulder, calmly aimed, calmly stared through the gun-sight. Saw the Entity, distant as it was, transfixed perfectly in the crosshairs. Calmly he released the safety, as Richie had inadvertently showed him how to do. Calmly put his finger to the firing stud.

His soul was filled all the while with love for the beautiful creature before him as — calmly, calmly, calmly — he pressed the stud. He heard a whooshing sound and felt the weapon kicking back against his shoulder with astonishing force, sending him thudding into a tree behind him and for a moment knocking the breath from him; and an instant later the left side of the beautiful creature's head exploded into a cascading fountain of flame, a shower of radiant fragments. A greenish-red mist of what must be alien blood appeared and went spreading outward into the air.

The stricken Entity swayed and fell backward, dropping out of sight on the floor of the wagon.

In that same moment the second Entity, the one that was riding on the far side, underwent so tremendous a convulsion that Khalid wondered if he had managed to kill it, too, with that single shot. It stumbled forward, then back, and crashed against the railing of the wagon with such violence that Khalid imagined he could hear the thump. Its great tubular body writhed and shook, and seemed even to change color, the purple hue deepening almost to black for an instant and the orange spots becoming a fiery red. At so great a distance it was hard to be sure, but Khalid thought, also, that its leathery hide was rippling and puckering as if in a demonstration of almost unendurable pain.

It must be feeling the agony of its companion's death, he realized. Watching the Entity lurch around blindly on the platform of the wagon in what had to be terrible pain, Khalid's soul flooded with compassion for the creature, and sorrow, and love. It was unthinkable to fire again. He had never had any intention of killing more than one; but in any case he knew that he was no more capable of firing a shot at this stricken survivor now than he would be of firing at Aissha.

During all this time the wagon had been moving silently onward as though nothing had happened; and in a moment more it turned the bend in the road and was gone from Khalid's sight, down the road that led

toward Stonehenge.

He stood for a while watching the place where the vehicle had been when he had fired the fatal shot. There was nothing there now, no sign that anything had occurred. Had anything occurred? Khalid felt neither satisfaction nor grief nor fear nor, really, any emotion of any other sort. His mind was all but blank. He made a point of keeping it that way, knowing he was as good as dead if he relaxed his control even for a fraction of a second.

Strapping the gun to the bicycle basket again, he pedaled quietly back toward home. It was well past midnight; there was no one at all on the road. At the house, all was as it had been; Arch's car parked in front, the front lights still on, Richie and Arch snoring away in Richie's room.

Only now, safely home, did Khalid at last allow himself the luxury of letting the jubilant thought cross his mind, just for a moment, that had been flickering at the threshold of his consciousness for an hour:

Got you, Richie! Got you, you bastard!

He returned the grenade gun to the cabinet and went to bed, and was asleep almost instantly, and slept soundly until the first bird — song of dawn.

.

In the tremendous uproar that swept Salisbury the next day, with Entity vehicles everywhere and platoons of the glossy balloon-like aliens that everybody called Spooks going from house to house, it was Khalid himself who provided the key clue to the mystery of the assassination that had occurred in the night.

"You know, I think it might have been my father who did it," he said almost casually, in town, outside the market, to a boy named Thomas whom he knew in a glancing sort of way. "He came home yesterday with a strange sort of big gun. Said it was for killing Entities with, and put it away in a cabinet in our front room."

Thomas would not believe that Khalid's father was capable of such a gigantic act of heroism as assassinating an Entity. No, no, no, Khalid argued eagerly, in a tone of utter and sublime disingenuousness: he did it, I know he did it, he's always talked of wanting to kill one of them one of these days, and now he has.

He has?

Always his greatest dream, yes, indeed.

Well, then —

Yes. Khalid moved along. So did Thomas. Khalid took care to go nowhere near the house all that morning. The last person he wanted to see was Richie. But he was safe in that regard. By noon Thomas evidently had spread the tale of Khalid Burke's wild boast about the town with great effectiveness, because word came traveling through the streets around that time that a detachment of Spooks had gone to Khalid's house and had taken Richie Burke away.

"What about my grandmother?" Khalid asked. "She wasn't arrested too, was she?"

"No, it was just him," he was told. "Billy Cavendish saw them taking him, and he was all by himself. Yelling and screaming, he was, the whole time, like a man being hauled away to be hanged."

Khalid never saw his father again.

During the course of the general reprisals that followed the killing, the entire population of Salisbury and five adjacent towns was rounded up and transported to walled detention camps near Portsmouth. A good many of the deportees were executed within the next few days, seemingly by random selection, no pattern being evident in the choosing of those who were put to death. At the beginning of the following week the survivors were sent on from Portsmouth to other places, some of them quite remote, in various parts of the world.

Khalid was not among those executed. He was merely sent very far away.

He felt no guilt over having survived the death-lottery while others around him were being slain for his murderous act. He had trained himself since childhood to feel very little indeed, even while aiming a rifle at one of Earth's beautiful and magnificent masters. Besides, what affair was it of his, that some of these people were dying and he was allowed to live? Everyone died, some sooner, some later. Aissha would have said that what was happening was the will of Allah. Khalid more simply put it that the Entities did as they pleased, always, and knew that it was folly to ponder their motives.

Aissha was not available to discuss these matters with. He was separated from her before reaching Portsmouth and Khalid never saw her again, either. From that day on it was necessary for him to make his way in the world on his own.

He was not quite thirteen years old. Often, in the years ahead, he would look back at the time when he had slain the Entity; but he would think of it only as the time when he had rid himself of Richie Burke, for whom he had had such hatred. For the Entities he had no hatred at all, and when his mind returned to that event by the roadside on the way to Stonehenge, to the alien being centered in the crosshairs of his weapon, he would think only of the marvelous color and form of the two starborn creatures in the floating wagon, of that passing moment of beauty in the night.

Robert Silverberg

First published in Science Fiction Age, September 1997.

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Proofed, XML'd, and styled by [Swift paw Foxyshadis](#) .

Text last modified on 25 September 2002, v1.0. Text generated on 30 November 2002 by Foxbook v0.84.20021120.

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NIKKI STEPPED INTO the conical field of the ultra-sonic cleanser, wriggling so that the unheard droning out of the machine's stubby snout could more effectively shear her skin of dead epidermal tissue, globules of dried sweat, dabs of yesterday's scents, and other debris; after three minutes she emerged clean, bouncy, ready for the party. She programmed her party outfit: green buskins, lemon-yellow tunic of gauzy film, pale orange cape soft as a clam's mantle, and nothing underneath but Nikki -- smooth, glistening, satiny Nikki. Her body was tuned and fit. The party was in her honor, though she was the only one who knew that. Today was her birthday, the seventh of January, 1999: twenty-four years old, no sign yet of bodily decay. Old Steiner had gathered an extraordinary assortment of guests: he promised to display a reader of minds, a billionaire, an authentic Byzantine duke, an Arab rabbi, a man who had married his own daughter, and other marvels. All of these, of course, subordinate to the true guest of honor, the evening's prize, the real birthday boy, the lion of the season -- the celebrated Nicholson, who had lived a thousand years and who said he could help others to do the same. Nikki ... Nicholson. Happy assonance, portending close harmony. You will show me, dear Nicholson, how I can live forever and never grow old. A cozy soothing idea. The sky beyond the sleek curve of her window was black, snow-dappled; she imagined she could hear the rusty howl of the wind and feel the sway of the frost-gripped building, ninety stories high. This was the worst winter she had ever known. Snow fell almost every day, a planetary snow, a global shiver, not even sparing the tropics. Ice hard as iron bands bound the streets of New York. Walls were slippery, the air had a cutting edge. Tonight Jupiter gleamed fiercely in the blackness like a diamond in a raven's forehead. Thank God she didn't have to go outside. She could wait out the winter within this tower. The mail came by pneumatic tube. The penthouse restaurant fed her. She had friends on a dozen floors. The building was a world, warm, snug. Let it snow. Let the sour gales come. Nikki checked herself in the all-around mirror: very nice, very very nice. Sweet filmy yellow folds. Hint of thigh, hint of breasts. More than a hint when there's a light-source behind her. She glowed. Fluffed her short glossy black hair. Dab of scent. Everyone loved her. Beauty is a magnet: repels some, attracts many, leaves no one unmoved. It was nine o'clock. "Upstairs," she said to the elevator. "Steiner's place." "Eighty-eighth floor," the elevator said. "I know that. You're so sweet." Music in the hallway: Mozart, crystalline and sinuous. The door to Steiner's apartment was a half-barrel of chromed steel, like the entrance to a bank vault. Nikki smiled into the scanner. The barrel revolved. Steiner held his hands like cups, centimeters from her chest, by way of greeting. "Beautiful," he murmured. "So glad you asked me to come." "Practically everybody's here already. It's a wonderful party, love." She kissed his shaggy cheek. In October they had met in the elevator. He was past sixty and looked less than forty. When she touched his body she perceived it as an object encased in milky ice, like a mammoth fresh out of the Siberian permafrost. They had been lovers for two weeks. Autumn had given way to winter and Nikki had passed out of his life, but he had kept his word about the parties: here she was, invited. "Alexius Ducas," said a short, wide man with a dense black beard, parted in the middle. He bowed. A good flourish. Steiner evaporated and she was in the keeping of the Byzantine duke. He maneuvered her at once across the thick white carpet to a place where clusters of spotlights, sprouting like angry fungi from the wall, revealed the contours of her body. Others turned to look. Duke Alexius favored her with a heavy stare. But she felt no excitement. Byzantium had been over for a long time. He brought her a goblet of chilled green wine and said, "Are you ever in the Aegean Sea? My family has its ancestral castle on an island eighteen kilometers east of -- " "Excuse me, but which is the man named

Nicholson?" "Nicholson is merely the name he currently uses. He claims to have had a shop in Constantinople during the reign of my ancestor the Basileus Manuel Comnenus." A patronizing click, tongue on teeth. "Only a shopkeeper." The Byzantine eyes sparkled ferociously. "How beautiful you are!" "Which one is he?" "There. By the couch." Nikki saw only a wall of backs. She tilted to the left and peered. No use. She would get to him later. Alexius Ducas continued to offer her his body with his eyes. She whispered languidly, "Tell me all about Byzantium." He got as far as Constantine the Great before he bored her. She finished her wine, and, coyly extending the glass, persuaded a smooth young man passing by to refill it for her. The Byzantine looked sad. "The empire then was divided," he said, "among --" "This is my birthday," she announced. "Yours also? My congratulations. Are you as old as--" "Not nearly. Not by half. I won't even be five hundred for some time," she said, and turned to take her glass. The smooth young man did not wait to be captured. The party engulfed him like an avalanche. Sixty, eighty guests, all in motion. The draperies were pulled back, revealing the full fury of the snowstorm. No one was watching it. Steiner's apartment was like a movie set: great porcelain garden stools, Ming or even Sung; walls painted with flat sheets of bronze and scarlet; pre-Columbian artifacts in spotlit niches; sculptures like aluminum spiderwebs; Durer etchings -- the loot of the ages. Squat shaven-headed servants, Mayans or Khmers or perhaps Olmecs, circulated impassively offering trays of delicacies: caviar, sea urchins, bits of roasted meat, tiny sausages, burritos in startling chili sauce. Hands darted unceasingly from trays to lips. This was a gathering of life-eaters, world-swallowers. Duke Alexius was stroking her arm. "I will leave at midnight," he said gently. "It would be a delight if you left with me." "I have other plans," she told him. "Even so." He bowed courteously, outwardly undisappointed. "Possibly another time. My card?" It appeared as if by magic in his hand: a sliver of tawny cardboard, elaborately engraved. She put it in her purse and the room swallowed him. Instantly a big, wild-eyed man took his place before her. "You've never heard of me," he began. "Is that a boast or an apology?" "I'm quite ordinary. I work for Steiner. He thought it would be amusing to invite me to one of his parties." "What do you do?" "Invoices and debarkations. isn't this an amazing place?" "What's your sign?" Nikki asked him. "Libra." "I'm Capricorn. Tonight's my birthday as well as \_his\_. If you're really Libra, you're wasting your time with me. Do you have a name?" "Martin Bliss." "Nikki." "There isn't any Mrs. Bliss, hah-hah." Nikki licked her lips. "I'm hungry. Would you get me some canapes?" She was gone as soon as he moved toward the food. Circumnavigating the long room -- past the string quintet, past the bartender's throne, past the window -- until she had a good view of the man called Nicholson. He didn't disappoint her. He was slender, supple, not tall, strong in the shoulders. A man of presence and authority. She wanted to put her lips to him and suck immortality out. His head was a flat triangle, brutal cheekbones, thin lips, dark mat of curly hair, no beard, no mustache. His eyes were keen, electric, intolerably wise. He must have seen everything twice, at the very least. Nikki had read his book. Everyone had. He had been a king, a lama, a slave trader, a slave. Always taking pains to conceal his implausible longevity, now offering his terrible secret freely to the members of the Book-of-the-Month Club. Why had he chosen to surface and reveal himself? Because this is the necessary moment of revelation, he had said. When he must stand forth as what he is, so that he might impart his gift to others, lest he lose it. Lest he lose it. At the stroke of the new century he must share his prize of life. A dozen people surrounded him, catching his glow. He glanced through a palisade of shoulders and locked his eyes on hers; Nikki felt impaled, exalted, chosen. Warmth spread through her loins like a river of molten tungsten, like a stream of hot honey. She started to go to him. A corpse got in her way. Death's-head, parchment skin, nightmare eyes. A scaly hand brushed her bare biceps. A frightful eroded voice croaked, "How old



do you think I am?" "Oh, God!" "How old?" "Two thousand?" "I'm fifty-eight. I won't live to see fifty-nine. Here, smoke one of these." With trembling hands he offered her a tiny ivory tube. There was a Gothic monogram near one end -- FXB -- and a translucent green capsule at the other. She pressed the capsule, and a flickering blue flame sprouted. She inhaled. "What is it?" she asked. "My own mixture. Soma Number Five. You like it?" "I'm smeared," she said. "Absolutely smeared. Oh, God!" The walls were flowing. The snow had turned to tinfoil. An instant hit. The corpse had a golden halo. Dollar signs rose into view like stigmata on his furrowed forehead. She heard the crash of the surf, the roar of the waves. The deck was heaving. The masts were cracking. \_Woman overboard!\_ she cried, and heard her inaudible voice disappearing down a tunnel of echoes, boingg boingg boingg. She clutched at his frail wrists. "You bastard, what did you \_do\_ to me?" "I'm Francis Xavier Byrne." Oh. The billionaire. Byrne Industries, the great conglomerate. Steiner had promised her a billionaire tonight. "Are you going to die soon?" she asked. "No later than Easter. Money can't help me now. I'm a walking metastasis." He opened his ruffled shirt. Something bright and metallic, like chain mail, covered his chest. "Life-support system," he confided. "It operates me. Take it off for half an hour and I'd be finished. Are you a Capricorn?" "How did you know?" "I may be dying, but I'm not stupid. You have the Capricorn gleam in your eyes. What am I?" She hesitated. His eyes were gleaming too. Self-made man, fantastic business sense, energy, arrogance. Capricorn, of course. No, too easy. "Leo," she said. "No. Try again." He pressed another monogrammed tube into her hand and strode away. She hadn't yet come down from the last one, although the most flamboyant effects had ebbed. Party guests swirled and flowed around her. She no longer could see Nicholson. The snow seemed to be turning to hail, little hard particles spattering the vast windows and leaving white abraded tracks: or were her perceptions merely sharper? The roar of conversation seemed to rise and fall as if someone were adjusting a volume control. The lights fluctuated in a counterpointed rhythm. She felt dizzy. A tray of golden cocktails went past her and she hissed, "Where's the bathroom?" Down the hall. Five strangers clustered outside it, talking in scaly whispers. She floated through them, grabbed the sink's cold edge, thrust her face to the oval concave mirror. A death's-head. Parchment skin, nightmare eyes. No! No! She blinked and her own features reappeared. Shivering, she made an effort to pull herself together. The medicine cabinet held a tempting collection of drugs, Steiner's all-purpose remedies. Without looking at labels Nikki seized a handful of vials and gobbled pills at random. A flat red one, a tapering green one, a succulent yellow gelatin capsule. Maybe headache remedies, maybe hallucinogens. Who knows, who cares? We Capricorns are not always as cautious as you think. Someone knocked at the bathroom door. She answered and found the bland, hopeful face of Martin Bliss hovering near the ceiling. Eyes protruding faintly, cheeks florid. "They said you were sick. Can I do anything for you?" So kind, so sweet. She touched his arm, grazed his cheek with her lips. Beyond him in the hall stood a broad-bodied man with close-cropped blond hair, glacial blue eyes, a plump perfect face. His smile was intense and brilliant. "That's easy," he said. "Capricorn." "You can guess my -- " She stopped, stunned. "Sign?" she finished, voice very small. "How did you do that? Oh." "Yes. I'm that one." She felt more than naked, stripped down to the ganglia, to the synapses. "What's the trick?" "No trick. I listen. I hear." "You hear people thinking?" "More or less. Do you think it's a party game?" He was beautiful but terrifying, like a Samurai sword in motion. She wanted him but she didn't dare. He's got my number, she thought. I would never have any secrets from him. He said sadly, "I don't mind that. I know I frighten a lot of people. Some don't care." "What's your name?" "Tom," he said. "Hello, Nikki." "I feel very sorry for you." "Not really. You can kid yourself if you need to. But you can't kid me. Anyway, you don't sleep with men you feel sorry for."

I don't sleep with you." "You will," he said. "I thought you were just a mind-reader. They didn't tell me you did prophecies too." He leaned close and smiled. The smile demolished her. She had to fight to keep from falling. "I've got your number, all right," he said in a low, harsh voice. "I'll call you next Tuesday." As he walked away he said, "You're wrong. I'm a Virgo. Believe it or not." Nikki returned, numb, to the living room. "... the figure of the mandala," Nicholson was saying. His voice was dark, focused, a pure basso cantante. "The essential thing that every mandala has is a center -- the place where everything is born, the eye of God's mind, the heart of darkness and of light, the core of the storm. All right. You must move toward the center, find the vortex at the boundary of Yang and Yin, place yourself right at the mandala's midpoint. Center yourself. Do you follow the metaphor? Center yourself at now, the eternal now. To move off-center is to move forward toward death, backward toward birth, always the fatal polar swings. But if you're capable of positioning yourself constantly at the focus of the mandala, right on center, you have access to the fountain of renewal, you become an organism capable of constant self-healing, constant self-replenishment, constant expansion into regions beyond self. Do you follow? The power of ... " Steiner, at her elbow, said tenderly, "How beautiful you are in the first moments of erotic fixation." "It's a marvelous party." "Are you meeting interesting people?" "Is there any other kind?" she asked. Nicholson abruptly detached himself from the circle of his audience and strode across the room, alone, in a quick decisive knight's move toward the bar. Nikki, hurrying to intercept him, collided with a shaven-headed tray-bearing servant. The tray slid smoothly from the man's thick fingertips and launched itself into the air like a spinning shield; a rainfall of skewered meat in an oily green curry sauce splattered the white carpet. The servant was utterly motionless. He stood frozen like some sort of Mexican stone idol, thick-necked, flat-nosed, for a long painful moment; then he turned his head slowly to the left and regretfully contemplated his rigid outspread hand, shorn of its tray; finally he swung his head toward Nikki, and his normally expressionless granite face took on for a quick flickering instant a look of total hatred, a coruscating emanation of contempt and disgust that faded immediately. He laughed: hu-hu-hu, a neighing snicker. His superiority was overwhelming. Nikki floundered in quicksands of humiliation. Hastily she escaped, a zig and a zag, around the tumbled goodies and across to the bar. Nicholson, still by himself. Her face went crimson. She felt short of breath. Hunting for words, tongue all thumbs. Finally, in a catapulting blurt: "Happy birthday!" "Thank you," he said solemnly. "Are you enjoying your birthday?" "Very much." "I'm amazed that they don't bore you. I mean, having had so many of them." "I don't bore easily." He was awesomely calm, drawing on some bottomless reservoir of patience. He gave her a look that was at the same time warm and impersonal. "I find everything interesting," he said. "That's curious. I said more or less the same thing to Steiner just a few minutes ago. You know, it's my birthday too." "Really?" "The seventh of January, 1975 for me." "Hello, 1975. I'm -- " He laughed. "It sounds absolutely absurd, doesn't it?" "The seventh of January, 982." "You've been doing your homework." "I've read your book," she said. "Can I make a silly remark? My God, you don't look like you're a thousand and seventeen years old." "How should I look?" "More like him," she said, indicating Francis Xavier Byrne. Nicholson chuckled. She wondered if he liked her. Maybe. Maybe. Nikki risked some eye contact. He was hardly a centimeter taller than she was, which made it a terrifyingly intimate experience. He regarded her steadily, centeredly; she imagined a throbbing mandala surrounding him, luminous turquoise spokes emanating from his heart, radiant red and green spiderweb rings connecting them. Reaching from her loins, she threw a loop of desire around him. Her eyes were explicit. His were veiled. She felt him calmly retreating. Take me inside, she pleaded, take me to one of the back rooms. Pour life into me. She said, "How will you choose

the people you're going to instruct in the secret?" "Intuitively."  
 "Refusing anybody who asks directly, of course." "Refusing anybody who asks."  
 "Did you ask?" "You said you read my book." "Oh. Yes. I remember -- you didn't know what was happening, you didn't understand anything until it was over."  
 "I was a simple lad," he said. "That was a long time ago." His eyes were alive again. He's drawn to me. He sees that I'm his kind, that I deserve him. Capricorn, Capricorn, Capricorn, you and me, he-goat and she-goat. Play my game, Cap. "How are you named?" he asked. "Nikki." "A beautiful name. A beautiful woman." The emptiness of the compliments devastated her. She realized she had arrived with mysterious suddenness at a necessary point of tactical withdrawal; retreat was obligatory, lest she push too hard and destroy the tenuous contact so tensely established. She thanked him with a glance and gracefully slipped away, pivoting toward Martin Bliss, slipping her arm through his. Bliss quivered at the gesture, glowed, leaped into a higher energy state. She resonated to his vibrations, going up and up. She was at the heart of the party, the center of the mandala: standing flat-footed, legs slightly apart, making her body a polar axis, with lines of force zooming up out of the earth, up through the basement levels of this building, up the eighty-eight stories of it, up through her sex, her heart, her head. This is how it must feel, she thought, when undyingness is conferred on you. A moment of spontaneous grace, the kindling of an inner light. She looked love at poor sappy Bliss. You dear heart, you dumb walking pun. The string quintet made molten sounds. "What is that?" she asked. "Brahms?" Bliss offered to find out. Alone, she was vulnerable to Francis Xavier Byrne, who brought her down with a single cadaverous glance. "Have you guessed it yet?" he asked. "The sign." She stared through his ragged cancerous body, blazing with decomposition. "Scorpio," she told him hoarsely. "Right! Right!" He pulled a pendant from his breast and draped its golden chain over her head. "For you," he rasped, and fled. She fondled it. A smooth green stone. Jade? Emerald? Lightly engraved on its domed face was the looped cross, the crux ansata. Beautiful. The gift of life, from the dying man. She waved fondly to him across a forest of heads and winked. Bliss returned. "They're playing something by Schoenberg," he reported. "\_Verklarte Nacht.\_" "How lovely." She flipped the pendant and let it fall back against her breasts. "Do you like it?" "I'm sure you didn't have it a moment ago." "It sprouted," she told him. She felt high, but not as high as she had been just after leaving Nicholson. That sense of herself as focal point had departed. The party seemed chaotic. Couples were forming, dissolving, reforming; shadowy figures were stealing away in twos and threes toward the bedrooms; the servants were more obsessively thrusting their trays of drinks and snacks at the remaining guests; the hall had reverted to snow, and feathery masses silently struck the windows, sticking there, revealing their glistening mandalic structures for painfully brief moments before they deliquesced. Nikki struggled to regain her centered position. She indulged in a cheering fantasy: Nicholson coming to her, formally touching her cheek, telling her, "You will be one of the elect." In less than twelve months the time would come for him to gather with his seven still unnamed disciples to see in the new century, and he would take their hands into his hands, he would pump the vitality of the undying into their bodies, sharing with them the secret that had been shared with him a thousand years ago. Who? Who? Who? Me. Me. Me. But where had Nicholson gone? His aura, his glow, that cone of imaginary light that had appeared to surround him -- nowhere. A man in a lacquered orange wig began furiously to quarrel, almost under Nikki's nose, with a much younger woman wearing festoons of bioluminescent pearls. Man and wife, evidently. They were both sharp-featured, with glossy, protuberant eyes, rigid faces, cheek muscles working intensely. Live together long enough, come to look alike. Their dispute had a stale, ritualistic flavor, as though they had staged it all too many times before. They were explaining to each other the events that had caused the quarrel, interpreting them, recapitulating them, shading them,

justifying, attacking, defending -- you said this because and that led me to respond that way because ... no, on the contrary, I said this because you said that -- all of it in a quiet screechy tone, sickening, agonizing, pure death.

"He's her biological father," a man next to Nikki said. "She was one of the first of the in vitro babies, and he was the donor, and five years ago he tracked her down and married her. A loophole in the law." Five years? They sounded as if they had been married for fifty. Walls of pain and boredom encased them. Only their eyes were alive. Nikki found it impossible to imagine those two in bed, bodies entwined in the act of love. Act of love, she thought, and laughed. Where was Nicholson? Duke Alexius, flushed and sweat-beaded, bowed to her. "I will leave soon," he announced, and she received the announcement gravely but without reacting, as though he had merely commented on the fluctuations of the storm, or had spoken in Greek. He bowed again and went away. Nicholson? Nicholson? She grew calm again, finding her center. He will come to me when he is ready. There was contact between us, and it was real and good.

Bliss, beside her, gestured and said, "A rabbi of Syrian birth, formerly Muslim, highly regarded among Jewish theologians." She nodded but didn't look. "An astronaut just back from Mars. I've never seen anyone's skin tanned quite that color." The astronaut held no interest for her. She worked at kicking herself back into high. The party was approaching a climactic moment, she felt, a time when commitments were being made and decisions taken. The clink of ice in glasses, the foggy vapors of psychedelic inhalants, the press of warm flesh all about her -- she was wired into everything, she was alive and receptive, she was entering into the twitching hour, the hour of galvanic jerks. She grew wild and reckless. Impulsively she kissed Bliss, straining on tiptoes, jabbing her tongue deep into his startled mouth. Then she broke free. Someone was playing with the lights: they grew redder, then gained force and zoomed to blue-white ferocity. Far across the room a crowd was surging and billowing around the fallen figure of Francis Xavier Byrne, slumped loose-jointedly against the base of the bar. His eyes were open but glassy. Nicholson crouched over him, reaching into his shirt, making delicate adjustments of the controls of the chain mail beneath. "It's all right," Steiner was saying. "Give him some air. It's all right!" Confusion. Hubbub. A torrent of tangled input. " --

they say there's been a permanent change in the weather patterns. Colder winters from now on, because of accumulations of dust in the atmosphere that screen the sun's rays. Until we freeze altogether by around the year 2200 -- " " -- but the carbon dioxide is supposed to start a greenhouse effect that's causing warmer weather, I thought, and -- " " -- the proposal to generate electric power from -- " " -- the San Andreas fault -- "

" -- financed by debentures convertible into -- " " -- capsules of botulism toxin -- " " -- to be distributed at a ratio of one per thousand families, throughout Greenland and the Kamchatka Metropolitan Area -- " " -- in the sixteenth century, when you could actually hope to found your own empire in some unknown part of the -- " " -- unresolved conflicts of Capricorn personality -- " " -- intense concentration and

meditation upon the completed mandala so that the contents of the work are transferred to and identified with the mind and body of the beholder. I mean, technically what occurs is the reabsorption of cosmic forces. In the process of construction these forces -- " " -- butterflies, which are no longer to be found anywhere in -- " " -- were projected out from the chaos of the unconscious, in the process of absorption, the powers are drawn back in again -- " " -- reflecting transformations of the DNA in the

light-collecting organ, which -- " " -- the snow -- " " -- a thousand years, can you imagine that? And -- " " -- her body -- " " -- formerly a toad -- " " -- just back from Mars, and there's that look in his eye -- " "Hold me," Nikki said. "Just hold me. I'm very dizzy."

"Would you like a drink?" "Just hold me." She pressed against cool sweet-smelling fabric. His chest unyielding beneath it. Steiner. Very male. He steadied her, but only for a moment. Other responsibilities

summoned him. When he released her, she swayed. He beckoned to someone else, blond, soft-faced. The mind reader, Tom. Passing her along the chain from man to man.

"You feel better now," the telepath told her. "Are you positive of that?"

"Very."

"Can you read any mind in the room?" she asked.

He nodded. "Even his?"

Again a nod. "He's the clearest of all. He's been using it so long, all the channels are worn deep."

"Then he really is a thousand years old?"

"You didn't believe it?"

Nikki shrugged. "Sometimes I don't know what I believe."

"He's old."

"You'd be the one to know."

"He's a phenomenon. He's absolutely extraordinary." A pause -- quick, stabbing. "Would you like to see into his mind?"

"How can I?"

"I'll patch you right in, if you'd like me to." His glacial eyes flashed sudden mischievous warmth. "Yes?"

"I'm not sure I want to."

"You're very sure. You're curious as hell. Don't kid me. Don't play games, Nikki. You want to see into him."

"Maybe." Grudgingly. "You do. Believe me, you do. Here. Relax, let your shoulders slump a little, loosen up, make yourself receptive, and I'll establish the link."

"Wait," she said. But it was too late. The mind reader serenely parted her consciousness like Moses doing the Red Sea and rammed something into her forehead, something thick but insubstantial, a truncheon of fog. She quivered and recoiled. She felt violated. It was like her first time in bed, in that moment when all the fooling around at last was over, the kissing and the nibbling and the stroking, and suddenly there was this object deep inside her body. She had never forgotten that sense of being impaled. But of course it had been not only an intrusion but also a source of ecstasy. As was this. The object within her was the consciousness of Nicholson. In wonder she explored its surface, rigid and weathered, pitted with the myriad ablations of reentry. Ran her trembling hands over its bronzy roughness. Remained outside it. Tom, the mind reader, gave her a nudge. Go on, go on. Deeper. Don't hold back. She folded herself around Nicholson and drifted into him like ectoplasm seeping into sand. Suddenly she lost her bearings. The discrete and impermeable boundary marking the end of her self and the beginning of his became indistinct. It was impossible to distinguish between her experiences and his, nor could she separate the pulsations of her nervous system from the impulses traveling along his. Phantom memories assailed and engulfed her. She was transformed into a node of pure perception: a steady, cool, isolated eye, surveying and recording. Images flashed. She was toiling upward along a dazzling snowy crest, with jagged Himalayan fangs hanging above her in the white sky and a warm-muzzled yak snuffling wearily at her side.

A platoon of swarthy little men accompanied her, slanty eyes, heavy coats, thick boots. The stink of rancid butter, the cutting edge of an impossible wind: and there, gleaming in the sudden sunlight, a pile of fire-bright yellow plaster with a thousand winking windows, a building, a lamasery strung along a mountain ridge. The nasal sound of distant horns and trumpets. The hoarse chanting of lotus-legged monks. What were they chanting? Om? Om? Om! Om, and flies buzzed around her nose, and she lay hunkered in a flimsy canoe, coursing silently down a midnight river in the heart of Africa, drowning in humidity. Brawny naked men with purple-black skins crouching close. Sweaty fronds dangling from flamboyantly excessive shrubbery; the snouts of crocodiles rising out of the dark water like toothy flowers; great nauseating orchids blossoming high in the smooth-shanked trees. And on shore, five white men in Elizabethan costume, wide-brimmed hats, drooping sweaty collars, lace, fancy buckles, curling red beards. Errol Flynn as Sir Francis Drake, blunderbuss dangling in crook of arm. The white men laughing, beckoning, shouting to the men in the canoe. Am I slave or slavemaster? No answer. Only a blurring and a new vision: autumn leaves blowing across the open doorways of straw-thatched huts, shivering oxen crouched in bare stubble-strewn fields, grim long-mustachioed men with close-cropped hair riding diagonal courses toward the horizon. Crusaders, are they? Or warriors of Hungary on their way to meet the dread Mongols? Defenders of the imperiled Anglo-Saxon realm against the Norman invaders? They could be

any of these. But always that steady cool eye, always that unmoving consciousness at the center of every scene. Him, eternal, all-enduring. And then: the train rolling westward, belching white smoke, the plains unrolling infinityward, the big brown fierce-eyed bison standing in shaggy clumps along the right of way, the man with turbulent shoulder-length hair laughing, slapping a twenty-dollar gold piece on the table. Picking up his rifle -- a .50-caliber breech-loading Springfield -- he aims casually through the door of the moving train, he squeezes off a shot, another, another. Three shaggy brown corpses beside the tracks, and the train rolls onward, honking raucously.

Her arm and shoulder tingled with the impact of those shots. Then: a fetid waterfront, bales of cloves and peppers and cinnamon, small brown-skinned men in turbans and loincloths arguing under a terrible sun. Tiny irregular silver coins glittering in the palm of her hand. The jabber of some Malabar dialect counterpointed with fluid mocking Portuguese. Do we sail now with Vasco da Gama? Perhaps. And then a gray Teutonic street, windswept, medieval, bleak Lutheran faces scowling from leaded windows. And then the Gobi steppe, with horsemen and campfires and dark tents. And then New York City, unmistakably New York City, with square black automobiles scurrying between the stubby skyscrapers like glossy beetles, a scene out of some silent movie. And then. And then. Everywhere, everything, all times, all places, a discontinuous flow of events but always that clarity of vision, that rock-steady perception, that solid mind at the center, that unshakeable identity, that unchanging self -- with whom I am inextricably enmeshed --

There was no "I," there was no "he," there was only the one ever-perceiving point of view. But abruptly she felt a change of focus, a distancing effect, a separation of self and self, so that she was looking at him as he lived his many lives, seeing him from the outside, seeing him plainly changing identities as others might change clothing, growing beards and mustaches, shaving them, cropping his hair, letting his hair grow, adopting new fashions, learning languages, forging documents. She saw him in all his thousand years of guises and subterfuges, saw him real and unified and centered beneath his obligatory camouflages -- and saw him seeing her.

Instantly contact broke. She staggered. Arms caught her. She pulled away from the smiling plump-faced blond man, muttering, "What have you done? You didn't tell me you'd show me to him." "How else can there be a linkage?" the telepath asked. "You didn't tell me. You should have told me." Everything was lost. She couldn't bear to be in the same room as Nicholson now. Tom reached for her, but she stumbled past him, stepping on people. They winked up at her. Someone stroked her leg. She forced her way through improbable laocoons, three women and two servants, five men and a tablecloth. A glass door, a gleaming silvery handle: she pushed. Out onto the terrace. The purity of the gale might cleanse her. Behind her, faint gasps, a few shrill screams, annoyed expostulations: "Close that thing!" She slammed it. Alone in the night, eighty-eight stories above street level, she offered herself to the storm. Her filmy tunic shielded her not at all. Snowflakes burned against her breasts. Her nipples hardened and rose like fiery beacons, jutting against the soft fabric. The snow stung her throat, her shoulders, her arms. Far below, the wind churned newly fallen crystals into spiral galaxies. The street was invisible. Thermal confusions brought updrafts that seized the edge of her tunic and whipped it outward from her body. Fierce, cold particles of hair were driven into her bare pale thighs. She stood with her back to the party. Did anyone in there notice her? Would someone think she was contemplating suicide and come rushing gallantly out to save her? Capricorns didn't commit suicide. They might threaten it, yes, they might even tell themselves quite earnestly that they were really going to do it, but it was only a game, only a game. No one came to her. She didn't turn. Gripping the railing, she fought to calm herself.

No use. Not even the bitter air could help. Frost in her eyelashes, snow on her lips. The pendant Byrne had given her blazed between her breasts. The air was white with a throbbing green underglow. It seared her eyes. She was off-center and floundering. She felt herself still reverberating through the centuries, going

back and forth across the orbit of Nicholson's interminable life. What year is this? Is it 1386, 1912, 1532, 1779, 1043, 1977, 1235, 1129, 1836? So many centuries. So many lives. And yet always the one true self, changeless, unchangeable.

Gradually the resonances died away. Nicholson's unending epochs no longer filled her mind with terrible noise. She began to shiver, not from fear but merely from cold, and tugged at her moist tunic, trying to shield her nakedness. Melting snow left hot clammy tracks across her breasts and belly. A halo of steam surrounded her. Her heart pounded. She wondered if what she had experienced had been genuine contact with Nicholson's soul, or rather only some trick of Tom's, a simulation of contact. Was it possible, after all, even for Tom to create a linkage between two non-telepathic minds such as hers and Nicholson's? Maybe Tom had fabricated it all himself, using images borrowed from Nicholson's book. In that case there might still be hope for her.

A delusion, she knew. A fantasy born of the desperate optimism of the hopeless. But nevertheless -- She found the handle, let herself back into the party. A gust accompanied her, sweeping snow inward. People stared. She was like death arriving at the feast. Doglike, she shook off the searing snowflakes. Her clothes were wet and stuck to her skin; she might as well have been naked. "You poor shivering thing," a woman said. She pulled Nikki into a tight embrace. It was the sharp-faced woman, the bulgy-eyed bottle-born one, bride of her own father. Her hands traveled swiftly over Nikki's body, caressing her breasts, touching her cheek, her forearm, her haunch. "Come inside with me," she crooned. "I'll make you warm." Her lips grazed Nikki's. A playful tongue sought them. For a moment, needing the warmth, Nikki gave herself to the embrace. Then she pulled away. "No," she said. "Some other time. Please." Wriggling free, she started across the room. An endless journey. Like crossing the Sahara by pogo stick. Voices, faces, laughter. A dryness in her throat. Then she was in front of Nicholson.

Well. Now or never "I have to talk to you," she said. "Of course." His eyes were merciless. No wrath in them, not even disdain, only an incredible patience more terrifying than anger or scorn. She would not let herself bend before that cool level gaze. She said, "A few minutes ago, did you have an odd experience, a sense that someone was -- well, looking into your mind? I know it sounds foolish, but -- ?" "Yes. It happened." So calm. How did he stay that close to his center? That unwavering eye, that uniquely self-contained self, perceiving all: the lamasery, the slave depot, the railroad train, everything, all time gone by, all time to come -- how did he manage to be so tranquil? She knew she never could learn such calmness. She knew he knew it. He has my number all right. She found that she was looking at his cheekbones, at his forehead, at his lips. Not into his eyes.

"You have the wrong image of me," she told him. "It isn't an image," he said. "What I have is you." "No."

"Face yourself, Nikki. If you can figure out where to look." He laughed. Gently, but she was demolished. An odd thing, then. She forced herself to stare into his eyes and felt a snapping of awareness from one mode into some other, and he turned into an old man. That mask of changeless early maturity dissolved and she saw the frightening yellowed eyes, the maze of furrows and gullies, the toothless gums, the drooling lips, the hollow throat, the self beneath the face. A thousand years, a thousand years! And every moment of those thousand years was visible. "You're old," she whispered. "You disgust me. I wouldn't want to be like you, not for anything!" She backed away, shaking. "An old, old, old man. All a masquerade!" He smiled. "Isn't that pathetic?" "Me or you? Me or you?" He didn't

answer. She was bewildered. When she was five paces away from him there came another snapping of awareness, a second changing of phase, and suddenly he was himself again, taut-skinned, erect, appearing to be perhaps thirty-five years old. A globe of silence hung between them. The force of his rejection was withering. She summoned her last strength for a parting glare. I didn't want you either, friend, not any single part of you. He saluted cordially. Dismissal.

Martin Bliss, grinning vacantly, stood near the bar. "Let's



go," she said savagely. "Take me home!" "But -- " "It's just a few floors below." She thrust her arm through his. He blinked, shrugged, fell into step. "I'll call you Tuesday, Nikki," Tom said as they swept past him. Downstairs, on her home turf, she felt better. In the bedroom they quickly dropped their clothes. His body was pink, hairy, serviceable. She turned the bed on, and it began to murmur and throb. "How old do you think I am?" she asked. "Twenty-six?" Bliss said vaguely. "Bastard!" She pulled him down on top of her. Her hands raked his skin. Her thighs parted. Go on. Like an animal, she thought. Like an animal! She was getting older moment by moment, she was dying in his arms. "You're much better than I expected," she said eventually. He looked down, baffled, amazed. "You could have chosen anyone at that party. Anyone." "Almost anyone," she said. When he was asleep she slipped out of bed. Snow was still falling. She heard the thunk of bullets and the whine of wounded bison. She heard the clangor of swords on shields. She heard lamas chanting: Om, Om, Om. No sleep for her this night, none. The clock was ticking like a bomb. The century was flowing remorselessly toward its finish. She checked her face for wrinkles in the bathroom mirror. Smooth, smooth, all smooth under the blue fluorescent glow. Her eyes looked bloody. Her nipples were still hard. She took a little alabaster jar from one of the bathroom cabinets and three slender red capsules fell out of it, into her palm. Happy birthday, dear Nikki, happy birthday to you. She swallowed all three. Went back to bed. Waited, listening to the slap of snow on glass, for the visions to come and carry her away. ----- At [www.fictionwise.com](http://www.fictionwise.com) you can: \* Rate this story \* Find more stories by this author \* Get story recommendations

===== Chip Runner by Robert Silverberg ===== Copyright (c)1989 First Published in The Microverse, 1989 Fictionwise Contemporary Science Fiction and Fantasy ----- NOTICE: This work is copyrighted. It is licensed only for use by the purchaser. If you did not purchase this ebook directly from Fictionwise.com then you are in violation of copyright law and are subject to severe fines. Please visit [www.fictionwise.com](http://www.fictionwise.com) to purchase a legal copy. Fictionwise.com offers a reward for information leading to the conviction of copyright violators of Fictionwise ebooks. ----- He was fifteen, and looked about ninety, and a frail ninety at that. I knew his mother and his father, separately -- they were Silicon Valley people, divorced, very important in their respective companies -- and separately they had asked me to try to work with him. His skin was blue-gray and tight, drawn cruelly close over the jutting bones of his face. His eyes were gray too, and huge, and they lay deep within their sockets. His arms were like sticks. His thin lips were set in an angry grimace. The chart before me on my desk told me that he was five feet eight inches tall and weighed 71 pounds. He was in his third year at one of the best private schools in the Palo Alto district. His I.Q. was 161. He crackled with intelligence and intensity. That was a novelty for me right at the outset. Most of my patients are depressed, withdrawn, uncertain of themselves, elusive, shy: virtual zombies. He wasn't anything like that. There would be other surprises ahead. "So you're planning to go into the hardware end of the computer industry, your parents tell me," I began. The usual let's-build-a-relationship procedure. He blew it away instantly with a single sour glare. "Is that your standard opening? 'Tell me all about your favorite hobby, my boy'? If you don't mind I'd rather skip all the bullshit, doctor, and then we can both get out of here faster. You're supposed to ask me about my eating habits." It amazed me to see him taking control of the session this way within the first thirty seconds. I

marveled at how different he was from most of the others, the poor sad wispy creatures who force me to fish for every word. "Actually I do enjoy talking about the latest developments in the world of computers, too," I said, still working hard at being genial. "But my guess is you don't talk about them very often, or you wouldn't call it 'the hardware end.' Or 'the computer industry.' We don't use mundo phrases like those any more." His high thin voice sizzled with barely suppressed rage. "Come on, doctor. Let's get right down to it. You think I'm anorexic, don't you?" "Well -- "

"I know about anorexia. It's a mental disease of girls, a vanity thing. They starve themselves because they want to look beautiful and they can't bring themselves to realize that they're not too fat. Vanity isn't the issue for me. And I'm not a girl, doctor. Even you ought to be able to see that right away." "Timothy -- "

"I want to let you know right out front that I don't have an eating disorder and I don't belong in a shrink's office. I know exactly what I'm doing all the time. The only reason I came today is to get my mother off my back, because she's taken it into her head that I'm trying to starve myself to death. She said I had to come here and see you. So I'm here. All right?" "All right," I said, and stood up. I am a tall man, deepchested, very broad through the shoulders. I can loom when necessary. A flicker of fear crossed Timothy's face, which was the effect I wanted to produce. When it's appropriate for the therapist to assert authority, simpleminded methods are often the most effective. "Let's talk about eating, Timothy. What did you have for lunch today?" He shrugged. "A piece of bread. Some lettuce." "That's all?" "A glass of water." "And for breakfast?" "I don't eat breakfast."

"But you'll have a substantial dinner, won't you?" "Maybe some fish. Maybe not. I think food is pretty gross." I nodded. "Could you operate your computer with the power turned off, Timothy?" "Isn't that a pretty condescending sort of question, doctor?" "I suppose it is. Okay, I'll be more direct. Do you think you can run your body without giving it any fuel?" "My body runs just fine," he said, with a defiant edge.

"Does it? What sports do you play?" "Sports?" It might have been a Martian word. "You know, the normal weight for someone of your age and height ought to be -- "

"There's nothing normal about me, doctor. Why should my weight be any more normal than the rest of me?" "It was until last year, apparently. Then you stopped eating. Your family is worried about you, you know." "I'll be okay," he said sullenly. "You want to stay healthy, don't you?" He stared at me for a long chilly moment. There was something close to hatred in his eyes, or so I imagined.

"What I want is to disappear," he said. \* \* \* \* That night I dreamed I was disappearing. I stood naked and alone on a slab of gray metal in the middle of a vast empty plain under a sinister coppery sky and I began steadily to shrink. There is often some carryover from the office to a therapist's own unconscious life: we call it counter-transference. I grew smaller and smaller. Pores appeared on the surface of the metal slab and widened into jagged craters, and then into great crevices and gullies. A cloud of luminous dust shimmered about my head. Grains of sand, specks, mere motes, now took on the aspect of immense boulders. Down I drifted, gliding into the darkness of a fathomless chasm. Creatures I had not noticed before hovered about me, astonishing monsters, hairy, many-legged. They made menacing gestures, but I slipped away, downward, downward, and they were gone. The air was alive now with vibrating particles, inanimate, furious, that danced in frantic zigzag patterns, veering wildly past me, now and again crashing into me, knocking my breath from me, sending me ricocheting for what seemed like miles. I was floating, spinning, tumbling with no control. Pulsating waves of blinding light pounded me. I was falling into the infinitely small, and there was no halting my descent. I would shrink and shrink and shrink until I slipped through the realm of matter entirely and was lost. A mob of contemptuous glowing things -- electrons and protons, maybe, but how could I tell? -- crowded close around me, emitting fizzy sparks that

seemed to me like jeers and laughter. They told me to keep moving along, to get myself out of their kingdom, or I would meet a terrible death. "To see a world in a grain of sand," Blake wrote. Yes. And Eliot wrote, "I will show you fear in a handful of dust." I went on downward, and downward still. And then I awoke gasping, drenched in sweat, terrified, alone. \* \* \*

\* Normally the patient is uncommunicative. You interview parents, siblings, teachers, friends, anyone who might provide a clue or an opening wedge. Anorexia is a life-threatening matter. The patients -- girls, almost always, or young women in their twenties -- have lost all sense of normal body-image and feel none of the food-deprivation prompts that a normal body gives its owner. Food is the enemy. Food must be resisted. They eat only when forced to, and then as little as possible. They are unaware that they are frighteningly gaunt. Strip them and put them in front of a mirror and they will pinch their sagging empty skin to show you imaginary fatty bulges. Sometimes the process of self-skeletonization is impossible to halt, even by therapy. When it reaches a certain point the degree of organic damage becomes irreversible and the death-spiral begins.

"He was always tremendously bright," Timothy's mother said. She was fifty, a striking woman, trim, elegant, almost radiant, vice president for finance at one of the biggest Valley companies. I knew her in that familiarly involuted California way: her present husband used to be married to my first wife. "A genius, his teachers all said. But strange, you know? Moody. Dreamy. I used to think he was on drugs, though of course none of the kids do that any more." Timothy was her only child by her first marriage. "It scares me to death to watch him wasting away like that. When I see him I want to take him and shake him and force ice cream down his throat, pasta, milkshakes, anything. And then I want to hold him, and I want to cry."

"You'd think he'd be starting to shave by now," his father said. Technical man, working on nanoengineering projects at the Stanford AI lab. We often played racquetball together. "I was. You too, probably. I got a look at him in the shower, three or four months ago. Hasn't even reached puberty yet. Fifteen and not a hair on him. It's the starvation, isn't it? It's retarding his physical development, right?"

"I keep trying to get him to like eat something, anything," his step-brother Mick said. "He lives with us, you know, on the weekends, and most of the time he's downstairs playing with his computers, but sometimes I can get him to go out with us, and we buy like a chili dog for him, or, you know, a burrito, and he goes, Thank you, thank you, and pretends to eat it, but then he throws it away when he thinks we're not looking. He is so weird, you know? And scary. You look at him with those ribs and all and he's like something out of a horror movie."

"What I want is to disappear," Timothy said. \*

\* \* \* He came every Tuesday and Thursday for one-hour sessions. There was at the beginning an undertone of hostility and suspicion to everything he said. I asked him, in my layman way, a few things about the latest developments in computers, and he answered me in monosyllables at first, not at all bothering to hide his disdain for my ignorance and my innocence. But now and again some question of mine would catch his interest and he would forget to be irritated, and reply at length, going on and on into realms I could not even pretend to understand. Trying to find things of that sort to ask him seemed my best avenue of approach. But of course I knew I was unlikely to achieve anything of therapeutic value if we simply talked about computers for the whole hour.

He was very guarded, as was only to be expected, when I would bring the conversation around to the topic of eating. He made it clear that his eating habits were his own business and he would rather not discuss them with me, or anyone. Yet there was an aggressive glow on his face whenever we spoke of the way he ate that called Kafka's hunger artist to my mind: he seemed proud of his achievements in starvation, even eager to be admired for his skill at shunning food.

Too much directness in the early stages of therapy is generally counterproductive where anorexia is the problem. The patient loves her syndrome and resists any therapeutic approach that might deprive her of it. Timothy and I talked mainly of his studies, his classmates, his

step-brothers. Progress was slow, circuitous, agonizing. What was most agonizing was my realization that I didn't have much time. According to the report from his school physician he was already running at dangerously low levels, bones weakening, muscles degenerating, electrolyte balance cockeyed, hormonal systems in disarray. The necessary treatment before long would be hospitalization, not psychotherapy, and it might almost be too late even for that.

He was aware that he was wasting away and in danger. He didn't seem to care. I let him see that I wasn't going to force anything on him. So far as I was concerned, I told him, he was basically free to starve himself to death if that was what he was really after. But as a psychologist whose role it is to help people, I said, I had some scientific interest in finding out what made him tick -- not particularly for his sake, but for the sake of other patients who might be more interested in being helped. He could relate to that. His facial expressions changed. He became less hostile. It was the fifth session now, and I sensed that his armor might be ready to crack. He was starting to think of me not as a member of the enemy but as a neutral observer, a dispassionate investigator. The next step was to make him see me as an ally. You and me, Timothy, standing together against them. I told him a few things about myself, my childhood, my troubled adolescence: little nuggets of confidence, offered by way of trade.

"When you disappear," I said finally, "where is it that you want to go?" \* \* \*

\* The moment was ripe and the breakthrough went beyond my highest expectations. "You know what a microchip is?" he asked. "Sure."

"I go down into them." Not I want to go down into them. But I do go down into them. "Tell me about that," I said. "The only way you can understand the nature of reality," he said, "is to take a close look at it. To really and truly take a look, you know? Here we have these fantastic chips, a whole processing unit smaller than your little toenail with fifty times the data-handling capacity of the old mainframes. What goes on inside them? I mean, what really goes on? I go into them and I look. It's like a trance, you know? You sharpen your concentration and you sharpen it and sharpen it and then you're moving downward, inward, deeper and deeper." He laughed harshly. "You think this is all mystical ka-ka, don't you? Half of you thinks I'm just a crazy kid mouthing off, and the other half thinks here's a kid who's smart as hell, feeding you a line of malarkey to keep you away from the real topic. Right, doctor? Right?" "I had a dream a couple of weeks ago about shrinking down into the infinitely small," I said. "A nightmare, really. But a fascinating one. Fascinating and frightening both. I went all the way down to the molecular level, past grains of sand, past bacteria, down to electrons and protons, or what I suppose were electrons and protons."

"What was the light like, where you were?" "Blinding. It came in pulsing waves." "What color?" "Every color all at once," I said. He stared at me. "No shit!" "Is that the way it looks for you?" "Yes. No." He shifted uneasily. "How can I tell if you saw what I saw? But it's a stream of colors, yes. Pulsing. And -- all the colors at once, yes, that's how you could describe it -- "

"Tell me more." "More what?" "When you go downward -- tell me what it's like, Timothy." He gave me his lofty look, his pedagogic look. "You know how small a chip is? A MOSFET, say?" "MOSFET?" "Metal-oxide-silicon field-effect-transistor," he said. "The newest ones have a minimum feature size of about a micrometer. Ten to the minus sixth meters. That's a millionth of a meter, all right? Small. It isn't down there on the molecular level, no. You could fit 200 amoebas into a MOSFET channel one micrometer long. Okay? Okay? Or a whole army of viruses. But it's still plenty small. That's where I go. And run, down the corridors of the chips, with electrons whizzing by me all the time. Of course I can't see them. Even a lot smaller, you can't see electrons, you can only compute the probabilities of their paths. But you can feel them. I can feel them. And I run among them, everywhere, through the corridors, through the channels, past the gates, past the open spaces in the lattice. Getting to know the territory. Feeling

at home in it." "What's an electron like, when you feel it?"  
"You dreamed it, you said. You tell me." "Sparks," I said. "Something  
fizzy, going by in a blur." "You read about that somewhere, in one of  
your journals?" "It's what I saw," I said. "What I felt, when I had  
that dream." "But that's it! That's it exactly!" He was perspiring.  
His face was flushed. His hands were trembling. His whole body was ablaze  
with a metabolic fervor I had not previously seen in him. He looked like a  
skeleton who had just trotted off a basketball court after a hard game. He  
leaned toward me and said, looking suddenly vulnerable in a way that he had  
never allowed himself to seem with me before, "Are you sure it was only a  
dream? Or do you go there too?" \* \* \* \* Kafka had the right idea.  
What the anorexic wants is to demonstrate a supreme ability. "Look," she  
says. "I am a special person. I have an extraordinary gift. I am capable of  
exerting total control over my body. By refusing food I take command of my  
destiny. I display supreme force of will. Can you achieve that sort of  
discipline? Can you even begin to understand it? Of course you can't. But I  
can." The issue isn't really one of worrying about being too fat. That's  
just a superficial problem. The real issue is one of exhibiting strength of  
purpose, of proving that you can accomplish something remarkable, of showing  
the world what a superior person you really are. So what we're dealing with  
isn't merely a perversely extreme form of dieting. The deeper issue is one of  
gaining control -- over your body, over your life, even over the physical  
world itself. \* \* \* \* He began to look healthier. There was some  
color in his cheeks now, and he seemed more relaxed, less twitchy. I had the  
feeling that he was putting on a little weight, although the medical reports I  
was getting from his school physician didn't confirm that in any significant  
way -- some weeks he'd be up a pound or two, some weeks down, and there was  
never any net gain. His mother reported that he went through periods when he  
appeared to be showing a little interest in food, but these were usually  
followed by periods of rigorous fasting or at best his typical sort of  
reluctant nibbling. There was nothing in any of this that I could find  
tremendously encouraging, but I had the definite feeling that I was starting  
to reach him, that I was beginning to win him back from the brink. \*  
\* \* \* Timothy said, "I have to be weightless in order to get there. I mean,  
literally weightless. Where I am now, it's only a beginning. I need to lose  
all the rest." "Only a beginning," I said, appalled, and jotted a few  
quick notes. "I've attained takeoff capability. But I can never get  
far enough. I run into a barrier on the way down, just as I'm entering the  
truly structural regions of the chip." "Yet you do get right into the  
interior of the chip." "Into it, yes. But I don't attain the real  
understanding that I'm after. Perhaps the problem's in the chip itself, not  
in me. Maybe if I tried a quantum-well chip instead of a MOSFET I'd get where  
I want to go, but they aren't ready yet, or if they are I don't have any way  
of getting my hands on one. I want to ride the probability waves, do you see?  
I want to be small enough to grab hold of an electron and stay with it as it  
zooms through the lattice." His eyes were blazing. "Try talking about this  
stuff with my brother. Or anyone. The ones who don't understand think I'm  
crazy. So do the ones who do." "You can talk here, Timothy."  
"The chip, the integrated circuit -- what we're really talking about is  
transistors, microscopic ones, maybe a billion of them arranged side by side.  
Silicon or germanium, doped with impurities like boron, arsenic, sometimes  
other things. On one side are the N-type charge carriers, and the P-type ones  
are on the other, with an insulating layer between; and when the voltage comes  
through the gate, the electrons migrate to the P-type side, because it's  
positively charged, and the holes, the zones of positive charge, go to the  
N-type side. So your basic logic circuit -- " He paused. "You following  
this?" "More or less. Tell me about what you feel as you start to go  
downward into a chip." \* \* \* \* It begins, he said, with a rush, an  
upward surge of almost ecstatic force: he is not descending but floating. The  
floor falls away beneath him as he dwindles. Then comes the intensifying of

perception, dust-motes quivering and twinkling in what had a moment before seemed nothing but empty air, and the light taking on strange new refractions and shimmerings. The solid world begins to alter. Familiar shapes -- the table, a chair, the computer before him -- vanish as he comes closer to their essence. What he sees now is detailed structure, the intricacy of surfaces: no longer a forest, only trees. Everything is texture and there is no solidity. Wood and metal become strands and webs and mazes. Canyons yawn. Abysses open. He goes inward, drifting, tossed like a feather on the molecular breeze. It is no simple journey. The world grows grainy. He fights his way through a dust-storm of swirling granules of oxygen and nitrogen, an invisible blizzard battering him at every step. Ahead lies the chip he seeks, a magnificent thing, a gleaming radiant Valhalla. He begins to run toward it, heedless of obstacles. Giant rainbows sweep the sky: dizzying floods of pure color, hammering down with a force capable of deflecting the wandering atoms. And then -- then -- The chip stands before him like some temple of Zeus rising on the Athenian plain. Giant glowing columns -- yawning gateways -- dark beckoning corridors -- hidden sanctuaries, beyond access, beyond comprehension. It glimmers with light of many colors. A strange swelling music fills the air. He feels like an explorer taking the first stumbling steps into a lost world. And he is still shrinking. The intricacies of the chip swell, surging like metal fungi filling with water after a rain: they spring higher and higher, darkening the sky, concealing it entirely. Another level downward and he is barely large enough to manage the passage across the threshold, but he does, and enters. Here he can move freely. He is in a strange canyon whose silvery walls, riven with vast fissures, rise farther than he can see. He runs. He runs. He has infinite energy; his legs move like springs. Behind him the gates open, close, open, close. Rivers of torrential current surge through, lifting him, carrying him along. He senses, does not see, the vibrating of the atoms of silicon or boron; he senses, does not see, the electrons and the not-electrons flooding past, streaming toward the sides, positive or negative, to which they are inexorably drawn. But there is more. He runs on and on and on. There is infinitely more, a world within this world, a world that lies at his feet and mocks him with its inaccessibility. It swirls before him, a whirlpool, a maelstrom. He would throw himself into it if he could, but some invisible barrier keeps him from it. This is as far as he can go. This is as much as he can achieve. He yearns to reach out as an electron goes careening past, and pluck it from its path, and stare into its heart. He wants to step inside the atoms and breathe the mysterious air within their boundaries. He longs to look upon their hidden nuclei. He hungers for the sight of mesons, quarks, neutrinos. There is more, always more, an unending series of worlds within worlds, and he is huge, he is impossibly clumsy, he is a lurching reeling mountainous titan, incapable of penetrating beyond this point -- So far, and no farther -- No farther -- \* \* \* \* He looked up at me from the far side of the desk. Sweat was streaming down his face and his light shirt was clinging to his skin. That sallow cadaverous look was gone from him entirely. He looked transfigured, aflame, throbbing with life: more alive than anyone I had ever seen, or so it seemed to me in that moment. There was a Faustian fire in his look, a world-swallowing urgency. Magellan must have looked that way sometimes, or Newton, or Galileo. And then in a moment more it was gone, and all I saw before me was a miserable scrawny boy, shrunken, feeble, pitifully frail. \* \* \* \* I went to talk to a physicist I knew, a friend of Timothy's father who did advanced research at the university. I said nothing about Timothy to him. "What's a quantum well?" I asked him. He looked puzzled. "Where'd you hear of those?" "Someone I know. But I couldn't follow much of what he was saying." "Extremely small switching device," he said. "Experimental, maybe five, ten years away. Less if we're very lucky. The idea is that you use two different semiconductive materials in a single crystal lattice, a superlattice, something like a three-dimensional checkerboard. Electrons tunneling between

squares could be made to perform digital operations at tremendous speeds."

"And how small would this thing be, compared with the sort of transistors they have on chips now?" "It would be down in the nanometer range," he told me. "That's a billionth of a meter. Smaller than a virus. Getting right down there close to the theoretical limits for semiconductivity. Any smaller and you'll be measuring things in angstroms." "Angstroms?"

"One ten-billionth of a meter. We measure the diameter of atoms in angstrom units." "Ah," I said. "All right. Can I ask you something else?"

He looked amused, patient, tolerant. "Does anyone know much about what an electron looks like?" "\_Looks\_ like?" "Its physical appearance. I mean, has any sort of work been done on examining them, maybe even photographing them -- " "You know about the Uncertainty Principle?" he asked. "Well -- not much, really -- " "Electrons

are very damned tiny. They've got a mass of -- ah -- about nine times ten to the minus twenty-eighth grams. We need light in order to see, in any sense of the word. We see by receiving light radiated by an object, or by hitting it with light and getting a reflection. The smallest unit of light we can use, which is the photon, has such a long wavelength that it would completely hide an electron from view, so to speak. And we can't use radiation of shorter wavelength -- gammas, let's say, or x-rays -- for making our measurements, either, because the shorter the wavelength the greater the energy, and so a gamma ray would simply kick any electron we were going to inspect to hell and gone. So we can't "see" electrons. The very act of determining their position imparts new velocity to them, which alters their position. The best we can do by way of examining electrons is make an enlightened guess, a probabilistic determination, of where they are and how fast they're moving. In a very rough way that's what we mean by the Uncertainty Principle."

"You mean, in order to look an electron in the eye, you'd virtually have to be the size of an electron yourself? Or even smaller?" He gave me a strange look. "I suppose that question makes sense," he said. "And I suppose I could answer yes to it. But what the hell are we talking about, now?"

\* \* \* \* I dreamed again that night: a feverish, disjointed dream of gigantic grotesque creatures shining with a fluorescent glow against a sky blacker than any night. They had claws, tentacles, eyes by the dozens. Their swollen asymmetrical bodies were bristling with thick red hairs. Some were clad in thick armor, others were equipped with ugly shining spikes that jutted in rows of ten or twenty from their quivering skins. They were pursuing me through the airless void. Wherever I ran there were more of them, crowding close. Behind them I saw the walls of the cosmos beginning to shiver and flow. The sky itself was dancing. Color was breaking through the blackness: eddying bands of every hue at once, interwoven like great chains. I ran, and I ran, and I ran, but there were monsters on every side, and no escape. \* \*

\* \* Timothy missed an appointment. For some days now he had been growing more distant, often simply sitting silently, staring at me for the whole hour out of some hermetic sphere of unapproachability. That struck me as nothing more than predictable passive-aggressive resistance, but when he failed to show up at all I was startled: such blatant rebellion wasn't his expectable mode. Some new therapeutic strategies seemed in order: more direct intervention, with me playing the role of a gruff, loving older brother, or perhaps family therapy, or some meetings with his teachers and even classmates. Despite his recent aloofness I still felt I could get to him in time. But this business of skipping appointments was unacceptable. I phoned his mother the next day, only to learn that he was in the hospital; and after my last patient of the morning I drove across town to see him. The attending physician, a chunky-faced resident, turned frosty when I told him that I was Timothy's therapist, that I had been treating him for anorexia. I didn't need to be telepathic to know that he was thinking, You didn't do much of a job with him, did you? "His parents are with him now," he told me. "Let me find out if they want you to go in. It looks pretty bad." Actually they were all there, parents, step-parents, the various children by the various second



marriages. Timothy seemed to be no more than a waxen doll. They had brought him books, tapes, even a lap-top computer, but everything was pushed to the corners of the bed. The shrunken figure in the middle barely raised the level of the coverlet a few inches. They had him on an IV unit and a whole webwork of other lines and cables ran to him from the array of medical machines surrounding him. His eyes were open, but he seemed to be staring into some other world, perhaps that same world of rampaging bacteria and quivering molecules that had haunted my sleep a few nights before. He seemed perhaps to be smiling. "He collapsed at school," his mother whispered. "In the computer lab, no less," said his father, with a nervous ratcheting laugh. "He was last conscious about two hours ago, but he wasn't talking coherently." "He wants to go inside his computer," one of the little boys said. "That's crazy, isn't it?" He might have been seven. "Timothy's going to die, Timothy's going to die," chanted somebody's daughter, about seven. "Christopher! Bree! Shhh, both of you!" said about three of the various parents, all at once. I said, "Has he started to respond to the IV?" "They don't think so. It's not at all good," his mother said. "He's right on the edge. He lost three pounds this week. We thought he was eating, but he must have been sliding the food into his pocket, or something like that." She shook her head. "You can't be a policeman." Her eyes were cold. So were her husband's, and even those of the step-parents. Telling me, This is your fault, we counted on you to make him stop starving himself. What could I say? You can only heal the ones you can reach. Timothy had been determined to keep himself beyond my grasp. Still, I felt the keenness of their reproachful anger, and it hurt. "I've seen worse cases than this come back under medical treatment," I told them. "They'll build up his strength until he's capable of talking with me again. And then I'm certain I'll be able to lick this thing. I was just beginning to break through his defenses when -- when he --" Sure. It costs no more to give them a little optimism. I gave them what I could: experience with other cases of severe food deprivation, positive results following a severe crisis of this nature, et cetera, et cetera, the man of science dipping into his reservoir of experience. They all began to brighten as I spoke. They even managed to convince themselves that a little color was coming into Timothy's cheeks, that he was stirring, that he might soon be regaining consciousness as the machinery surrounding him pumped the nutrients into him that he had so conscientiously forbidden himself to have. "Look," this one said, or that one. "Look how he's moving his hands! Look how he's breathing. It's better, isn't it!" I actually began to believe it myself. But then I heard his dry thin voice echoing in the caverns of my mind. I can never get far enough. I have to be weightless in order to get there. Where I am now, it's only a beginning. I need to lose all the rest. I want to disappear. \* \* \* \* That night, a third dream, vivid, precise, concrete. I was falling and running at the same time, my legs pistoning like those of a marathon runner in the twenty-sixth mile, while simultaneously I dropped in free fall through airless dark toward the silver-black surface of some distant world. And fell and fell and fell, in utter weightlessness, and hit the surface easily and kept on running, moving not forward but downward, the atoms of the ground parting for me as I ran. I became smaller as I descended, and smaller yet, and even smaller, until I was a mere phantom, a running ghost, the bodiless idea of myself. And still I went downward toward the dazzling heart of things, shorn now of all impediments of the flesh. I phoned the hospital the next morning. Timothy had died a little after dawn. \* \* \* \* Did I fail with him? Well, then, I failed. But I think no one could possibly have succeeded. He went where he wanted to go; and so great was the force of his will that any attempts at impeding him must have seemed to him like the mere buzzings of insects, meaningless, insignificant. So now his purpose is achieved. He has shed his useless husk. He has gone on, floating, running, descending: downward, inward, toward the core, where knowledge is absolute and uncertainty

is unknown. He is running among the shining electrons, now. He is  
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From fifty  
thousand miles up, the situation looked promising. It was a middle-sized,  
brown-and-green, inviting-looking planet, with no sign of cities or any other  
such complications. Just a pleasant sort of place, the very sort we were  
looking for to redeem what had been a pretty futile expedition. I  
turned to Clyde Holdreth, who was staring reflectively at the thermocouple.

'Well? What do you think?' 'Looks fine to me. Temperature's about  
seventy down there -- nice and warm, and plenty of air. I think it's worth a  
try.'

Lee Davison came strolling out from the storage hold, smelling of  
animals, as usual. He was holding one of the blue monkeys we picked up on  
Alpheraz, and the little beast was crawling up his arm. 'Have we found  
something, gentlemen?' 'We've found a planet,' I said. 'How's the  
storage space in the hold?'

'Don't worry about that. We've got room for  
a whole zoo-full more, before we get filled up. It hasn't been a very fruitful  
trip.'

'No,' I agreed. 'it hasn't. Well? Shall we go down and see  
what's to be seen?' 'Might as well,' Holdreth said. 'We can't go back  
to Earth with just a couple of blue monkeys and some anteaters, you know.'

'I'm in favour of a landing too,' said Davison. 'You?' I nodded.

'I'll set up the charts, and you get your animals comfortable for  
deceleration.' Davison disappeared back into the storage hold, while  
Holdreth scribbled furiously in the logbook, writing down the coordinates of  
the planet below, its general description, and so forth. Aside from being a  
collecting team for the zoological department of the Bureau of Interstellar  
Affairs, we also double as a survey ship, and the planet down below was listed  
as unexplored on our charts.

I glanced out at the mottled  
brown-and-green ball spinning slowly in the viewport, and felt the warning  
twinge of gloom that came to me every time we made a landing on a new and  
strange world. Repressing it, I started to figure out a landing orbit. From  
behind me came the furious chatter of the blue monkeys as Davison strapped  
them into their acceleration cradles, and under that the deep, unmusical  
honking of the Rigelian anteaters noisily bleating their displeasure.

\* \* \* \* The planet was inhabited, all right. We hadn't had the ship on the  
ground more than a minute before the local fauna began to congregate. We stood  
at the viewport and looked out in wonder.

'This is one of those things  
you dream about,' Davison said, stroking his little beard nervously. 'Look at  
them! There must be a thousand different species out there.'

'I've  
never seen anything like it,' said Holdreth. I computed how much  
storage space we had left and how many of the thronging creatures outside we  
would be able to bring back with us. 'How are we going to decide what to take  
and what to leave behind?'

'Does it matter?' Holdreth said gaily. 'This  
is what you call an embarrassment of riches, I guess. We just grab the dozen  
most bizarre creatures and blast-off -- and save the rest for another trip.  
It's too bad we wasted all that time wandering around near Rigel.'

'We  
did get the anteaters,' Davison pointed out. They were his finds, and he was

proud of them. I smiled sourly. 'Yeah. We got the anteaters there.' The anteaters honked at that moment, loud and clear. 'You know, that's one set of beasts I think I could do without.' 'Bad attitude,' Holdreth said. 'Unprofessional.' 'Whoever said I was a zoologist, anyway? I'm just a spaceship pilot, remember. And if I don't like the way those anteaters talk -- and smell -- I see no reason why I -- ' 'Say, look at that one,' Davison said suddenly. I glanced out the viewport and saw a new beast emerging from the thick-packed vegetation in the background. I've seen some fairly strange creatures since I was assigned to the zoological department, but this one took the grand prize. It was about the size of a giraffe, moving on long, wobbly legs and with a tiny head up at the end of a preposterous neck. Only it had six legs and a bunch of writhing snakelike tentacles as well, and its eyes, great violet globes, stood out nakedly on the ends of two thick stalks. It must have been twenty feet high. It moved with exaggerated grace through the swarm of beasts surrounding our ship, pushed its way smoothly towards the vessel, and peered gravely in at the viewport. One purple eye stared directly at me, the other at Davison. Oddly, it seemed to me as if it were trying to tell us something. 'Big one, isn't it?' Davison said finally. 'I'll bet you'd like to bring one back, too.' 'Maybe we can fit a young one aboard,' Davison said. 'If we can find a young one.' He turned to Holdreth. 'How's that air analysis coming? I'd like to get out there and start collecting. God, that's a crazy-looking beast!' The animal outside had apparently finished its inspection of us, for it pulled its head away and gathering its legs under itself, squatted near the ship. A small doglike creature with stiff spines running along its back began to bark at the big creature, which took no notice. The other animals, which came in all shapes and sizes, continued to mill around the ship, evidently very curious about the newcomer to their world. I could see Davison's eyes thirsty with the desire to take the whole kit and caboodle back to Earth with him. I knew what was running through his mind. He was dreaming of the umpteen thousand species of extraterrestrial wildlife roaming around out there, and to each one he was attaching a neat little tag: Something-or-other davisoni. 'The air's fine,' Holdreth announced abruptly, looking up from his test-tubes. 'Get your butterfly nets and let's see what we can catch.' \* \* \* \* There was something I didn't like about the place. It was just too good to be true, and I learned long ago that nothing ever is. There's always a catch someplace. Only this seemed to be on the level. The planet was a bonanza for zoologists, and Davison and Holdreth were having the time of their lives, hipdeep in obliging specimens. 'I've never seen anything like it,' Davison said for at least the fiftieth time, as he scooped up a small purplish squirrel-like creature and examined it curiously. The squirrel stared back, examining Davison just as curiously. 'Let's take some of these,' Davison said. 'I like them.' 'Carry 'em on in, then,' I said, shrugging. I didn't care which specimens they chose, so long as they filled up the storage hold quickly and let me blast off on schedule. I watched as Davison grabbed a pair of the squirrels and brought them into the ship. Holdreth came over to me. He was carrying a sort of a dog with insect-faceted eyes and gleaming furless skin. 'How's this one, Gus?' 'Fine,' I said bleakly. 'Wonderful.' He put the animal down -- it didn't scamper away, just sat there smiling at us -- and looked at me. He ran a hand through his fast-vanishing hair. 'Listen, Gus, you've been gloomy all day. What's eating you?' 'I don't like this place,' I said. 'Why? Just on general principles?' 'It's too easy, Clyde. Much too easy. These animals just flock around here waiting to be picked up.' Holdreth chuckled. 'And you're used to a struggle, aren't you? You're just angry at us because we have it so simple here!' 'When I think of the trouble we went through just to get a pair of miserable vile-smelling anteaters, and- ' 'Come off it, Gus. We'll load up in a hurry, if you like. But this place is a zoological gold mine!' I shook my head. 'I don't like it, Clyde. Not at all.' Holdreth laughed again and picked up his faceted-eyed dog. 'Say, know where I

can find another of these, Gus?' 'Right over there,' I said, pointing. 'By that tree. With its tongue hanging out. It's just waiting to be carried away.' Holdreth looked and smiled. 'What do you know about that!' He snared his specimen and carried both of them inside. I walked away to survey the grounds. The planet was too flatly incredible for me to accept on face value, without at least a look-see, despite the blithe way my two companions were snapping up specimens. For one thing, animals just don't exist this way -- in big miscellaneous quantities, living all together happily. I hadn't noticed more than a few of each kind, and there must have been five hundred different species, each one stranger-looking than the next. Nature doesn't work that way. For another, they all seemed to be on friendly terms with one another, though they acknowledged the unofficial leadership of the giraffe-like creature. Nature doesn't work that way, either. I hadn't seen one quarrel between the animals yet. That argued that they were all herbivores, which didn't make sense ecologically. I shrugged my shoulders and walked on. \* \* \* \* Half an hour later, I knew a little more about the geography of our bonanza. We were on either an immense island or a peninsula of some sort, because I could see a huge body of water bordering the land some ten miles off. Our vicinity was fairly flat, except for a good-sized hill from which I could see the terrain. There was a thick, heavily-wooded jungle not too far from the ship. The forest spread out all the way towards the water in one direction, but ended abruptly in the other. We had brought the ship down right at the edge of the clearing. Apparently most of the animals we saw lived in the jungle. On the other side of our clearing was a low, broad plain that seemed to trail away into a desert in the distance; I could see an uninviting stretch of barren sand that contrasted strangely with the fertile jungle to my left. There was a small lake to the side. It was, I saw, the sort of country likely to attract a varied fauna, since there seemed to be every sort of habitat within a small area. And the fauna! Although I'm a zoologist only by osmosis, picking up both my interest and my knowledge second-hand from Holdreth and Davison, I couldn't help but be astonished by the wealth of strange animals. They came in all different shapes and sizes, colours and odours, and the only thing they all had in common was their friendliness. During the course of my afternoon's wanderings a hundred animals must have come marching boldly right up to me, given me the once-over, and walked away. This included half a dozen kinds that I hadn't seen before, plus one of the eye-stalked, intelligent-looking giraffes and a furless dog. Again, I had the feeling that the giraffe seemed to be trying to communicate. I didn't like it, I didn't like it at all. I returned to our clearing, and saw Holdreth and Davison still buzzing madly around, trying to cram as many animals as they could into our hold. 'How's it going?' I asked. 'Holds all full,' Davison said. 'We're busy making our alternate selections now.' I saw him carrying out Holdreth's two furless dogs and picking up instead a pair of eight-legged penguinish things that uncomplainingly allowed themselves to be carried in. Holdreth was frowning unhappily. 'What do you want those for, Lee? Those dog-like ones seem much more interesting, don't you think?' 'No,' Davison said. 'I'd rather bring along these two. They're curious beasts, aren't they? Look at the muscular network that connects the --' 'Hold it, fellows,' I said. I peered at the animal in Davison's hands and glanced up. 'This is a curious beast,' I said. 'It's got eight legs.' 'You becoming a zoologist?' Holdreth asked, amused. 'No -- but I am getting puzzled. Why should this one have eight legs, some of the others here six, and some of the others only four?' They looked at me blankly, with the scorn of professionals. 'I mean, there ought to be some sort of logic to evolution here, shouldn't there? On Earth we've developed a four-legged pattern of animal life; on Venus, they usually run to six legs. But have you ever seen an evolutionary hodgepodge like this place before?' 'There are stranger setups,' Holdreth said. 'The symbiotes on Sirius Three, the burrowers of Mizar -- but you're right, Gus. This is a peculiar evolutionary

dispersal. I think we ought to stay and investigate it fully.'

Instantly I knew from the bright expression on Davison's face that I had blundered, had made things worse than ever. I decided to take a new tack.

'I don't agree,' I said. 'I think we ought to leave with what we've got, and come back with a larger expedition later.'

Davison chuckled. 'Come on, Gus, don't be silly! This is a chance of a lifetime for us -- why should we call in the whole zoological department on it?' I didn't want to tell them I was afraid of staying longer. I crossed my arms. 'Lee, I'm the pilot of this ship, and you'll have to listen to me. The schedule calls for a brief stopover here, and we have to leave. Don't tell me I'm being silly.'

'But you are, man! You're standing blindly in the path of scientific investigation, of -- ' 'Listen to me, Lee. Our food is calculated on a pretty narrow margin, to allow you fellows more room for storage. And this is strictly a collecting team. There's no provision for extended stays on any one planet. Unless you want to wind up eating your own specimens, I suggest you allow us to get out of here.'

They were silent for a moment. Then Holdreth said, 'I guess we can't argue with that, Lee. Let's listen to Gus and go back now. There's plenty of time to investigate this place later when we can take longer.'

'But -- oh, all right,' Davison said reluctantly. He picked up the eight-legged penguins. 'Let me stash these things in the hold, and we can leave.' He looked strangely at me, as if I had done something criminal.

As he started into the ship, I called to him. 'What is it, Gus?'

'Look here, Lee. I don't want to pull you away from here. It's simply a matter of food,' I lied, masking my nebulous suspicions.

'I know how it is, Gus.' He turned and entered the ship. I stood there thinking about nothing at all for a moment, then went inside myself to begin setting up the blastoff orbit.

I got as far as calculating the fuel expenditure when I noticed something. Feedwires were dangling crazily down from the control cabinet. Somebody had wrecked our drive mechanism, but thoroughly.

For a long moment, I stared stiffly at the sabotaged drive. Then I turned and headed into the storage hold.

'Davison?' 'What is it, Gus?'

'Come out here a second, will you?' I waited, and a few minutes later he appeared, frowning impatiently. 'What do you want, Gus? I'm busy and I --'

His mouth dropped open. 'Look at the drive!' 'You look at it,' I snapped. 'I'm sick. Go get Holdreth, on the double.'

While he was gone I tinkered with the shattered mechanism. Once I had the cabinet panel off and could see the inside, I felt a little better; the drive wasn't damaged beyond repair, though it had been pretty well scrambled. Three or four days of hard work with a screw driver and solderbeam might get the ship back into functioning order.

But that didn't make me any less angry. I heard Holdreth and Davison entering behind me, and I whirled to face them.

'All right, you idiots. Which one of you did this?' They opened their mouths in protesting squawks at the same instant. I listened to them for a while, then said, 'One at a time!'

'If you're implying that one of us deliberately sabotaged the ship,' Holdreth said, 'I want you to know--'

'I'm not implying anything. But the way it looks to me, you two decided you'd like to stay here a while longer to continue your investigations, and figured the easiest way of getting me to agree was to wreck the drive.'

I glared hotly at them. 'Well, I've got news for you. I can fix this, and I can fix it in a couple of days. So go on -- get about your business! Get all the zoologizing you can in, while you still have time. I --'

Davison laid a hand gently on my arm. 'Gus,' he said quietly, 'we didn't do it. Neither of us.'

Suddenly all the anger drained out of me and was replaced by raw fear. I could see that Davison meant it. 'If you didn't do it, and Holdreth didn't do it, and I didn't do it -- then who did?'

Davison shrugged. 'Maybe it's one of us who doesn't know he's doing it,' I suggested. 'Maybe --'

I stopped. 'Oh, that's nonsense. Hand me that tool kit, will you, Lee?'

They left to tend to the animals, and I set to work on the repair job, dismissing all further speculations and suspicions from my mind, concentrating solely on joining Lead A to Input A and

Transistor F to Potentiometer K, as indicated. It was slow, nerve-harrowing work, and by mealtime I had accomplished only the barest preliminaries. My fingers were starting to quiver from the strain of small-scale work, and I decided to give up the job for the day and get back to it tomorrow. I slept uneasily, my nightmares punctuated by the moaning of the accursed anteaters and the occasional squeals, chuckles, bleats, and hisses of the various other creatures in the hold. It must have been four in the morning before I dropped off into a really sound sleep, and what was left of the night passed swiftly. The next thing I knew, hands were shaking me, and I was looking up into the pale, tense faces of Holdreth and Davison. I pushed my sleep-stuck eyes open and blinked. 'Huh? What's going on?' Holdreth leaned down and shook me savagely. 'Get up, Gus!' I struggled to my feet slowly. 'Hell of a thing to do, wake a fellow up in the middle of the --'

I found myself being propelled from my cabin and led down the corridor to the control room. Blearily, I followed where Holdreth pointed, and then I woke up in a hurry. The drive was battered again. Someone -- or something -- had completely undone my repair job of the night before.

\* \* \* \* If there had been bickering among us, it stopped. This was past the category of a joke now; it couldn't be laughed off, and we found ourselves working together as a tight unit again, trying desperately to solve the puzzle before it was too late.

'Let's review the situation,' Holdreth said, pacing nervously up and down the control cabin. 'The drive has been sabotaged twice. None of us knows who did it, and on a conscious level each of us is convinced he didn't do it.' He paused. 'That leaves us with two possibilities. Either, as Gus suggested, one of us is doing it unaware of it even himself, or someone else is doing it while we're not looking. Neither possibility is a very cheerful one.' 'We can stay on guard, though,' I said. 'Here's what I propose: first, have one of us awake at all times -- sleep in shifts, that is, with somebody guarding the drive until I get it fixed. Two -- jettison all the animals aboard ship.'

'What?' 'He's right,' Davison said. 'We don't know what we may have brought aboard. They don't seem to be intelligent, but we can't be sure. That purple-eyed baby giraffe, for instance -- suppose he's been hypnotizing us into damaging the drive ourselves? How can we tell?' 'Oh, but --' Holdreth started to protest, then stopped and frowned soberly. 'I suppose we'll have to admit the possibility,' he said, obviously unhappy about the prospect of freeing our captives. 'We'll empty out the hold, and you see if you can get the drive fixed. Maybe later we'll recapture them all, if nothing further develops.'

We agreed to that, and Holdreth and Davison cleared the ship of its animal cargo while I set to work determinedly at the drive mechanism. By nightfall, I had managed to accomplish as much as I had the day before. I sat up as watch the first shift, aboard the strangely quiet ship. I paced around the drive cabin, fighting the great temptation to doze off, and managed to last through until the time Holdreth arrived to relieve me. Only -- when he showed up, he gasped and pointed at the drive. It had been ripped apart a third time.

\* \* \* \* Now we had no excuse, no explanation. The expedition had turned into a nightmare.

I could only protest that I had remained awake my entire spell on duty, and that I had seen no one and no thing approach the drive panel. But that was hardly a satisfactory explanation, since it either cast guilt on me as the saboteur or implied that some unseen external power was repeatedly wrecking the drive. Neither hypothesis made sense, at least to me.

By now we had spent four days on the planet, and food was getting to be a major problem. My carefully budgeted flight schedule called for us to be two days out on our return journey to Earth by now. But we still were no closer to departure than we had been four days ago.

The animals continued to wander around outside, nosing up against the ship, examining it, almost fondling it, with those damned pseudo-giraffes staring soulfully at us always. The beasts were as friendly as ever, little knowing how the tension was growing within the hull. The three of us walked around like zombies, eyes bright and lips clamped. We were scared --

all of us. Something was keeping us from fixing the drive. Something didn't want us to leave this planet. I looked at the bland face of the purple-eyed giraffe staring through the viewport, and it stared mildly back at me. Around it was grouped the rest of the local fauna, the same incredible hodgepodge of improbable genera and species. That night, the three of us stood guard in the control-room together. The drive was smashed anyway. The wires were soldered in so many places by now that the control panel was a mass of shining alloy, and I knew that a few more such sabotagings and it would be impossible to patch it together any more -- if it wasn't so already. The next night, I just didn't knock off. I continued soldering right on after dinner (and a pretty skimpy dinner it was, now that we were on close rations) and far on into the night. By morning, it was as if I hadn't done a thing. 'I give up,' I announced, surveying the damage. 'I don't see any sense in ruining my nerves trying to fix a thing that won't stay fixed.' Holdreth nodded. He looked terribly pale. 'We'll have to find some new approach.' 'Yeah. Some new approach.' I yanked open the food closet and examined our stock. Even figuring in the synthetics we would have fed to the animals if we hadn't released them, we were low on food. We had overstayed even the safety margin. It would be a hungry trip back -- if we ever did get back. I clambered through the hatch and sprawled down on a big rock near the ship. One of the furless dogs came over and nuzzled in my shirt. Davison stepped to the hatch and called down to me. 'What are you doing out there, Gus?' 'Just getting a little fresh air. I'm sick of living aboard that ship.' I scratched the dog behind his pointed ears, and looked around. The animals had lost most of their curiosity about us, and didn't congregate the way they used to. They were meandering all over the plain, nibbling at little deposits of a white doughy substance. It precipitated every night. 'Manna,' we called it. All the animals seemed to live on it. I folded my arms and leaned back. \* \* \* \* We were getting to look awfully lean by the eighth day. I wasn't even trying to fix the ship any more; the hunger was starting to get me. But I saw Davison pattering around with my solderbeam. 'What are you doing?' 'I'm going to repair the drive,' he said. 'You don't want to, but we can't just sit around, you know.' His nose was deep in my repair guide, and he was fumbling with the release on the solderbeam. I shrugged. 'Go ahead, if you want to.' I didn't care what he did. All I cared about was the gaping emptiness in my stomach, and about the dimly grasped fact that somehow we were stuck here for good. 'Gus?' 'Yeah?' 'I think it's time I told you something. I've been eating the manna for four days. It's good. It's nourishing stuff.' 'You've been eating -- the manna? Something that grows on an alien world? You crazy?' 'What else can we do? Starve?' I smiled feebly, admitting that he was right. From somewhere in the back of the ship came the sounds of Holdreth moving around. Holdreth had taken this thing worse than any of us. He had a family back on Earth, and he was beginning to realize that he wasn't ever going to see them again. 'Why don't you get Holdreth?' Davison suggested. 'Go out there and stuff yourselves with the manna. You've got to eat something.' 'Yeah. What can I lose?' Moving like a mechanical man, I headed towards Holdreth's cabin. We would go out and eat the manna and cease being hungry, one way or another. 'Clyde?' I called. 'Clyde?' I entered his cabin. He was sitting at his desk, shaking convulsively, staring at the two streams of blood that trickled in red spurts from his slashed wrists. 'Clyde!' He made no protest as I dragged him towards the infirmary cabin and got tourniquets around his arms, cutting off the bleeding. He just stared dully ahead, sobbing. I slapped him and he came around. He shook his head dizzily, as if he didn't know where he was. 'I -- I -- ' 'Easy, Clyde. Everything's all right.' 'It's not all right,' he said hollowly. 'I'm still alive. Why didn't you let me die? Why didn't you -- ' Davison entered the cabin. 'What's been happening, Gus?' 'It's Clyde. The pressure's getting him. He tried to kill himself, but I think he's all right



now. Get him something to eat, will you?' \* \* \* \* We had Holdreth  
straightened around by evening. Davison gathered as much of the manna as he  
could find, and we held a feast. 'I wish we had nerve enough to kill  
some of the local fauna,' Davison said. 'Then we'd have a feast -- steaks and  
everything!' 'The bacteria,' Holdreth pointed out quietly. 'We don't  
dare.' 'I know. But it's a thought.' 'No more thoughts,' I said  
sharply. 'Tomorrow morning we start work on the drive panel again. Maybe with  
some food in our bellies we'll be able to keep awake and see what's happening  
here.' Holdreth smiled. 'Good. I can't wait to get out of this ship and  
back to a normal existence. God, I just can't wait!' 'Let's get some  
sleep,' I said. 'Tomorrow we'll give it another try. We'll get back,' I said  
with a confidence I didn't feel. The following morning I rose early and  
got my tool-kit. My head was clear, and I was trying to put the pieces  
together without much luck. I started towards the control cabin. And  
stopped. And looked out the viewport. I went back and awoke  
Holdreth and Davison. 'Take a look out the port,' I said hoarsely. They  
looked. They gaped. 'It looks just like my house,' Holdreth said. 'My  
house on Earth.' 'With all the comforts of home inside, I'll bet.' I walked  
forward uneasily and lowered myself through the hatch. 'Let's go look at  
it.' We approached it, while the animals frolicked around us. The big  
giraffe came near and shook its head gravely. The house stood in the middle of  
the clearing, small and neat and freshly painted. I saw it now. During  
the night, invisible hands had put it there. Had assembled and built a cosy  
little Earth-type house and dropped it next to our ship for us to live in.  
'Just like my house,' Holdreth repeated in wonderment. 'It should  
be,' I said. 'They grabbed the model from your mind, as soon as they found out  
we couldn't live on the ship indefinitely.' Holdreth and Davison asked  
as one, 'What do you mean?' 'You mean you haven't figured this place  
out yet?' I licked my lips, getting myself used to the fact that I was going  
to spend the rest of my life here. 'You mean you don't realize what this house  
is intended to be?' They shook their heads, baffled. I glanced around,  
from the house to the useless ship to the jungle to the plain to the little  
pond. It all made sense now. 'They want to keep us happy,' I said.  
'They know we weren't thriving aboard the ship, so they -- they built us  
something a little more like home.' '\_They?' The giraffes?'  
'Forget the giraffes. They tried to warn us, but it's too late. They're  
intelligent beings, but they're prisoners just like us. I'm talking about the  
ones who run this place. The super-aliens who make us sabotage our own ship  
and not even know we're doing it, who stand someplace up there and gape at us.  
The ones who dredged together this motley assortment of beasts from all over  
the galaxy. Now we've been collected too. This whole damned place is just a  
zoo -- a zoo for aliens so far ahead of us we don't dare dream what they're  
like.' I looked up at the shimmering blue-green sky, where invisible  
bars seemed to restrain us, and sank down dismally on the porch of our new  
home. I was resigned. There wasn't any sense in struggling against them.  
I could see the neat little placard now: \* \* \* \* EARTHMEN. Native  
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IT WAS her first, his seventh. She was 32, he was 363: the good old April/September number. They honeymooned in Venice, Nairobi, the Malaysia Pleasure Dome, and one of the posh L-5 resorts, a shimmering glassy sphere with round-the-clock sunlight and waterfalls that tumbled like cascades of diamonds, and then they came home to his lovely sky-house suspended on tremulous guy-wires a thousand meters above the Pacific to begin the everyday part of their life together.

Her friends couldn't get over it. "He's ten times your age!" they would exclaim. "How could you possibly want anybody that old?" Marilisa admitted that marrying Leo was more of a lark for her than anything else. An impulsive thing; a sudden impetuous leap. Marriages weren't forever, after all -- just thirty or forty years and then you moved along. But Leo was sweet and kind and actually quite sexy. And he had wanted her so much. He genuinely did seem to love her. Why should his age be an issue? He didn't appear to be any older than 35 or so. These days you could look as young as you liked. Leo did his Process faithfully and punctually, twice each decade, and it kept him as dashing and vigorous as a boy.

There were little drawbacks, of course. Once upon a time, long long ago, he had been a friend of Marilisa's great-grandmother: they might even have been lovers. She wasn't going to ask. Such things sometimes happened and you simply had to work your way around them. And then also he had an ex-wife on the scene, Number Three, Katrin, 247 years old and not looking a day over 30. She was constantly hovering about. Leo still had warm feelings for her. "A wonderfully dear woman, a good and loyal friend," he would say. "When you get to know her you'll be as fond of her as I am." That one was hard, all right. What was almost as bad, he had children three times Marilisa's age and more. One of them -- the next-to-youngest, Fyodor -- had an insufferable and presumptuous way of winking and sniggering at her, that hundred-year-old son of a bitch. "I want you to meet our father's newest toy," Fyodor said of her, once, when yet another of Leo's centenarian sons, previously unsuspected by Marilisa, turned up. "We get to play with her when he's tired of her." Someday Marilisa was going to pay him back for that.

Still and all, she had no serious complaints. Leo was an ideal first husband: wise, warm, loving, attentive, generous. She felt nothing but the greatest tenderness for him. And then too he was so immeasurably experienced in the ways of the world. If being married to him was a little like being married to Abraham Lincoln or Augustus Caesar, well, so be it: they had been great men, and so was Leo. He was endlessly fascinating. He was like seven husbands rolled into one. She had no regrets, none at all, not really.

\* \* \* \* In the spring of '87 they go to Capri for their first anniversary. Their hotel is a reconstructed Roman villa on the southern slope of Monte Tiberio: alabaster walls frescoed in black and red, a brilliantly colored mosaic of sea-creatures in the marble bathtub, a broad travertine terrace that looks out over the sea. They stand together in the darkness, staring at the awesome sparkle of the stars. A crescent moon slashes across the night. His arm is around her; her head rests against his breast. Though she is a tall woman, Marilisa is barely heart-high to him.

"Tomorrow at sunrise," he says, "we'll see the Blue Grotto. And then in the afternoon we'll hike down below here to the Cave of the Mater Magna. I always get a shiver when I'm there. Thinking about the ancient islanders who worshipped their goddess under that cliff, somewhere back in the Pleistocene. Their rites and rituals, the offerings they made to her."

"Is that when you first came here?" she asks, keeping it light and sly. "Somewhere back in the Pleistocene?"

"A little later than that, really. The Renaissance, I think it was. Leonardo and I traveled down together from Florence -- "

"You and Leonardo, you were just like that." "Like that, yes. But not like that, if you take my meaning."

"And Cosimo di' Medici. Another one from the good old days. Cosimo gave such great parties, right?"

"That was Lorenzo," he says. "Lorenzo the Magnificent, Cosimo's grandson."

Much more fun than the old man. You would have adored him." "I almost think you're serious when you talk like that." "I'm always serious. Even when I'm not." His arm tightens around her. He leans forward and down, and buries a kiss in her thick dark hair. "I love you," he whispers.

"I love you," she says. "You're the best first husband a girl could want."

"You're the finest last wife a man could ever desire." The words skewer her. Last wife? Is he expecting to die in the next ten or twenty or thirty years? He is old -- ancient -- but nobody has any idea yet where the limits of Process lie. Five hundred years? A thousand? Who can say? No one able to afford the treatments has died a natural death yet, in the four hundred years since Process was invented. Why, then, does he speak so knowingly of her as his last wife? He may live long enough to have seven, ten, fifty wives after her.

Marilisa is silent a long while. Then she asks him, quietly, uncertainly, "I don't understand why you said that." "Said what?" "The thing about my being your last wife."

He hesitates just a moment. "But why would I ever want another, now that I have you?" "Am I so utterly perfect?" "I love you."

"You loved Tedesca and Thane and Iavilda too," she says. "And Miaule and Katrin." She is counting on her fingers in the darkness. One wife missing from the list. "And -- Syantha. See, I know all their names. You must have loved them but the marriages ended anyway. They have to end. No matter how much you love a person, you can't keep a marriage going forever." "How do you know that?" "I just do. Everybody knows it." "I would like this marriage never to end," he tells her. "I'd like it to go on and on and on. To continue to the end of time. Is that all right? Is such a sentiment permissible, do you think?" "What a romantic you are, Leo!"

"What else can I be but romantic, tonight? This place; the spring night; the moon, the stars, the sea; the fragrance of the flowers in the air. Our anniversary. I love you. Nothing will ever end for us. Nothing."

"Can that really be so?" she asks. "Of course. Forever and ever, as it is this moment." \* \* \* \* She thinks from time to time of the men she will marry after she and Leo have gone their separate ways. For she knows that she will. Perhaps she'll stay with Leo for ten years, perhaps for fifty; but ultimately, despite all his assurances to the contrary, one or the other of them will want to move on. No one stays married forever. Fifteen, twenty years, that's the usual. Sixty or seventy, tops. She'll marry a great athlete next, she decides. And then a philosopher; and then a political leader; and then stay single for a few decades, just to clear her palate, so to speak, an intermezzo in her life, and when she wearies of that she'll find someone entirely different, a simple rugged man who likes to hunt, to work in the fields with his hands, and then a yachtsman with whom she'll sail the world, and then maybe when she's about 300 she'll marry a boy, an innocent of 18 or 19 who hasn't even had his first Prep yet, and then -- then -- A childish game. It always brings her to tears, eventually. The unknown husbands that wait for her in the misty future are vague chilly phantoms, fantasies, frightening, inimical. They are like swords that will inevitably fall between her and Leo, and she hates them for that. The thought of having the same husband for all the vast expanse of time that is the rest of her life, is a little disturbing -- it gives her a sense of walls closing in, and closing and closing and closing -- but the thought of leaving Leo is even worse. Or of his leaving her. Maybe she isn't truly in love with him, at any rate not as she imagines love at its deepest to be, but she is happy with him. She wants to stay with him. She can't really envision parting from him and moving on to someone else. But of course she knows that she will. Everybody does, in the fullness of time. Everybody. \* \* \*

\* Leo is a sand-painter. Sand-painting is his fifteenth or twentieth career. He has been an architect, an archaeologist, a space -- habitats developer, a professional gambler, an astronomer, and a number of other disparate and dazzling things. He reinvents himself every decade or two. That's as necessary to him as Process itself. Making money is never an issue, since he

lives on the compounding interest of investments set aside centuries ago. But the fresh challenge -- ah, yes, always the fresh challenge -- ! Marilisa hasn't entered on any career path yet. It's much too soon. She is, after all, still in her first life, too young for Process, merely in the Prep stage yet. Just a child, really. She has dabbled in ceramics, written some poetry, composed a little music. Lately she has begun to think about studying economics or perhaps Spanish literature. No doubt her actual choice of a path to follow will be very far from any of these. But there's time to decide. Oh, is there ever time! Just after the turn of the year she and Leo go to Antibes to attend the unveiling of Leo's newest work, commissioned by Lucien Nicolas, a French industrialist. Leo and Lucien Nicolas were schoolmates, eons ago. At the airport they embrace warmly, almost endlessly, like brothers long separated. They even look a little alike, two full-faced square-jawed dark-haired men with wide-flanged noses and strong, prominent lips. "My wife Marilisa," Leo says finally. "How marvelous," says Lucien Nicolas. "How superb." He kisses the tips of his fingers to her. Nicolas lives in a lofty villa overlooking the Mediterranean, surrounded by a lush garden in which the red spikes of aloes and the yellow blooms of acacias stand out dazzlingly against a palisade of towering palms. The weather, this January day, is mild and pleasant, with a light drizzle falling. The industrialist has invited a splendid international roster of guests to attend the unveiling of the painting; diplomats and jurists, poets and playwrights, dancers and opera singers, physicists and astronauts and mentalists and sculptors and seers. Leo introduces Marilisa to them all. In the antechamber to the agate dining hall she listens, bemused, to the swirl of conversations in half a dozen languages. The talk ranges across continents, decades, generations. It seems to her that she hears from a distance the names of several of Leo's former wives invoked -- Syantha, Tedesca, Katrin? -- but possibly she is mistaken. Dinner is an overindulgent feast of delicacies. Squat animated servitors bring the food on glistening covered trays of some exotic metal that shimmers diffractively. After every third course a cool ray of blue light descends from a ceiling aperture and a secondary red radiance rises from the floor: they meet in the vicinity of the great slab of black diamond that is the table, and a faint whiff of burning carbon trickles into the air, and then the diners are hungry all over again, ready for the next delight. The meal is a symphony of flavors and textures. The balance is perfect between sweet and tart, warm and cool, spicy and bland. A pink meat is followed by a white one, and then by fruit, then cheese, and meat again, a different kind, and finer cheeses. A dozen wines or more are served. An occasional course is still alive, moving slowly about its plate; Marilisa takes her cue from Leo, conquers any squeamishness, traps and consumes her little wriggling victims with pleasure. Now and then the underlying dish is meant to be eaten along with its contents, as she discovers by lagging just a moment behind the other guests and imitating their behavior. After dinner comes the unveiling of the painting, in the atrium below the dining-hall. The guests gather along the balcony of the dining-hall and the atrium roof is retracted. Leo's paintings are huge rectangular constructions made of fine sparkling sand of many colors, laid out within a high border of molten copper. The surfaces of each work are two-dimensional, but the cloudy hint of a third dimension is always visible, and even that is only the tip of an underlying multidimensional manifold that vanishes at mysterious angles into the fabric of the piece. Down in those churning sandy depths lie wells of color with their roots embedded in the hidden mechanisms that control the piece. These wells constantly contribute streams of minute glittering particles to the patterns at the surface, in accordance with the changing signals from below. There is unending alteration; none of Leo's pieces is ever the same two hours running. A ripple of astonishment breaks forth as the painting is revealed, and then a rising burst of applause. The pattern is one of interlaced spirals in gentle pastels, curvilinear traceries in pink and blue and pale green, with thin

black circles surrounding them and frail white lines radiating outward in groups of three to the vivid turquoise borders of the sand. Leo's friends swarm around him to congratulate him. They even congratulate Marilisa. "He is a master -- an absolute master!" She basks in his triumph. Later in the evening she returns to the balcony to see if she can detect the first changes in the pattern. The changes, usually, are minute and subtle ones, requiring a discriminating eye, but even in her short while with Leo she has learned to discern the tiniest of alterations. This time, though, no expertise is required. In little more than an hour the lovely surface has been significantly transformed. A thick, jagged black line has abruptly sprung into being, descending like a dark scar from upper right to lower left. Marilisa has never seen such a thing happen before. It is like a wound in the painting: a mutilation. It draws a little involuntary cry of shock from her.

Others gather. "What does it mean?" they ask. "What is he saying?"

From someone in African tribal dress, someone who nevertheless is plainly not African, comes an interpretation: "We see the foretelling of schism, the evocation of a transformation of the era. The dark line moves in brutal strokes through the center of our stability-point. There, do you see, the pink lines and the blue? And then it drops down into the unknown dominion beyond the painting's eastern border, the realm of the mythic, the grand apocalyptic." Leo is summoned. He is calm. But Leo is always calm. He shrugs away the urgent questions: the painting, he says, is its own meaning, not subject to literal analysis. It is what it is, nothing more. A stochastic formula governs the changes in his works. All is random. The jagged black line is simply a jagged black line. Music comes from another room. New servitors appear, creatures with three metal legs and one telescoping arm, offering brandies and liqueurs. The guests murmur and laugh.

"A master," they tell Marilisa once again. "An absolute master!" \* \* \* She likes to ask him about the far-away past -- the quaint and remote 23rd century, the brusque and dynamic 24th. He is like some great heroic statue rising up out of the mists of time, embodying in himself first-hand knowledge of eras that are mere legends to her. "Tell me how people dressed, back then," she begs him. "What sorts of things they said, the games they played, where they liked to go on their holidays. And the buildings, the architecture: how did things look? Make me feel what it was like: the sounds, the smells, the whole flavor of the long-ago times." He laughs. "It gets pretty jumbled, you know. The longer you live, the more muddled-up your mind becomes." "Oh, I don't believe that at all! I think you remember every bit of it. Tell me about your father and mother."

"My father and my mother -- " He pronounces the words musingly, as though they are newly minted concepts for him. "My father -- he was tall, even taller than I am -- a mathematician, he was, or maybe a composer, something abstruse like that -- " "And his eyes? What kind of eyes did he have?" "his eyes -- I don't know, his eyes were unusual, but I can't tell you how -- an odd color, or very penetrating, maybe -- there was something about his eyes -- " His voice trails off. "And your mother?" "My mother. Yes." He is staring into the past and it seems as if he sees nothing but haze and smoke there. "My mother. I just don't know what to tell you. She's dead, you realize. A long time, now. Hundreds of years. They both died before Process. It was all such a long time ago, Marilisa." His discomfort is only too apparent.

"All right," she says. "We don't have to talk about them. But tell me about the clothing, at least. What you wore when you were a young man. Whether people liked darker colors then. Or the food, the favorite dishes. Anything. The shape of ordinary things. How they were different."

Obligingly he tries to bring the distant past to life for her. Images come through, though, however blurry, however indistinct. The strangeness, the alien textures of the long ago. Whoever said the past is another country was right; and Leo is a native of that country. He speaks of obsolete vehicles, styles, ideas, flavors. She works hard at comprehending his words, she eagerly snatches concrete meanings from his clusters of hazy

impressions. Somehow the past seems as important to her as the future, or even more so. The past is where Leo has lived so very much of his life. His gigantic past stretches before her like an endless pathless plain. She needs to learn her way across it; she needs to find her bearings, the points of her compass, or she will be lost. \* \* \* \* It is time for Leo to undergo

Process once more. He goes every five years and remains at the clinic for eleven days. She would like to accompany him, but guests are not allowed, not even spouses. The procedures are difficult and delicate. The patients are in a vulnerable state while undergoing treatment. So off he goes without

her to be made young again. Elegant homeostatic techniques of automatic bioenergetic correction will extend his exemption from sagging flesh and spreading waistline and blurry eyesight and graying hair and hardening arteries for another term. Marilisa has no idea what Process is

actually like. She imagines him sitting patiently upright day after day in some bizarre womb-like tank, his body entirely covered in a thick mass of some sort of warm, quivering purplish gel, only his head protruding, while the age-poisons are extracted from him by an elaborate array of intricate pipettes and tubes, and the glorious fluids of new youthfulness are pumped into him. But of course she is only imagining. For all she knows, the whole thing is done with a single injection, like the Prep that she undergoes every couple of years to keep her in good trim until she is old enough for Process.

While Leo is away, his son Fyodor pays her an uninvited visit. Fyodor is the child of Miaule, the fifth wife. The marriage to Miaule was Leo's briefest one, only eight years. Marilisa has never asked why. She knows nothing substantial about Leo's previous marriages and prefers to keep it that way.

"Your father's not here," she says immediately, when she finds Fyodor's flitter docked to the harbor of their sky-house. "I'm not here to visit

him. I'm here to see you." He is a compact, blockily built man with a low center of gravity, nothing at all in appearance like his rangy father. His sly sidewise smile is insinuating, possessive, maddening. "We don't know each other as well as we should, Marilisa. You're my stepmother, after all."

"What does that have to do with anything? You have half a dozen stepmothers." Was that true? Could the wives before Miaule be regarded as his stepmothers, strictly speaking? "You're the newest one. The most mysterious one."

"There's nothing mysterious about me at all. I'm terribly uninteresting."

"Not to my father, apparently." A vicious sparkle enters Fyodor's eyes. "Are you and he going to have children?" The suggestion startles her. She and Leo have never talked about that; she has never so much as given it a thought. Angrily she says, "I don't think that that's any of your -- "

"He'll want to. He always does."

"Then we will. Twenty years from now, maybe. Or fifty. Whenever it seems appropriate. Right now we're quite content just with each other." He has found an entirely new level on which to unsettle her, and Marilisa is infuriated even more with him for that. She turns away from him. "If you'll excuse me, Fyodor, I have things to -- "

"Wait." His hand darts out, encircles her wrist, seizes it a little too tightly, then relaxes to a gentler, almost affectionate grip. "You shouldn't be alone at a time like this. Come stay with me for a few days while he's at the clinic." She

glowers at him. "Don't be absurd." "I'm simply being hospitable, mother."

"I'm sure he'd be very amused to hear that." "He's always found what I do highly amusing. Come. Pack your things and let's go. Don't you think you owe yourself a little amusement too?"

Not bothering to conceal her anger and loathing, Marilisa says, "What exactly are you up to, Fyodor? Are you looking for vengeance? Trying to get even with him for something?"

"Vengeance? Vengeance?" Fyodor seems genuinely puzzled. "Why would I want that? I mean, after all, what is he to me?" "Your father, for one thing."

"Well, yes. I'll grant you that much. But what of it? All of that happened such a long time ago." He laughs. He sounds almost jolly. "You're such an old-fashioned kind of girl, Marilisa!"

\* \* \* \* A couple of hours after she succeeds in getting rid of Fyodor,

she has another unexpected and unwanted visitor: Katrin. At least Katrin has the grace to call while she is still over Nevada to say that she would like to drop in. Marilisa is afraid to refuse. She knows that Leo wants some sort of relationship to develop between them. Quite likely he has instigated this very visit. If she turns Katrin away, Leo will find out, and he will be hurt. The last thing Marilisa would want to do is to hurt Leo. It is impossible for her to get used to Katrin's beauty: that sublime agelessness, which looks so unreal precisely because it is real. She genuinely seems to be only 30, golden-haired and shining in the first dewy bloom of youth. Katrin was Leo's wife for forty years. Estil and Liss, the two children they had together, are almost 200 years old. The immensity of Katrin's history with Leo looms over her like some great monolithic slab. "I talked to Leo this morning at the clinic," Katrin announces. "He's doing very well." "You talked to him? But I thought that nobody was allowed --" "Oh, my dear, I've taken forty turns through that place! I know everybody there only too well. When I call, they put me right through. Leo sends his warmest love." "Thank you." "He loves you terribly, you know. Perhaps more than is really good for him. You're the great love of his life, Marilisa." Marilisa feels a surge of irritation, and allows it to reach the surface. "Oh, Katrin, be serious with me! How could I ever believe something like that?" And what does she mean, Perhaps more than is really good for him? "You should believe it. You must, in fact. I've had many long talks with him about you. He adores you. He'd do anything for you. It's never been like this for him before. I have absolute proof of that. Not with me, not with Tedesca, not with Thane, not with --" She recites the whole rest of the list. Syantha, Miaule, Iavilda, while Marilisa ticks each one off in her mind. They could do it together in a kind of choral speaking, the litany of wives' names, but Marilisa remains grimly silent. She is weary of that list of names. She hates the idea that Katrin talks with Leo about her; she hates the idea that Katrin still talks with Leo at all. But she must accept it, apparently. Katrin bustles about the house, admiring this, exclaiming rapturously over that. To celebrate Leo's imminent return she has brought a gift, a tiny artifact, a greenish little bronze sculpture recovered from the sea off Greece, so encrusted by marine growths that it is hard to make out what it represents. A figurine of some sort, an archer, perhaps, holding a bow that has lost its string. Leo is a collector of small antiquities. Tiny fragments of the past are arrayed in elegant cases in every room of their house. Marilisa offers proper appreciation. "Leo will love it," she tells Katrin. "It's perfect for him." "Yes. I know." Yes. You do. Marilisa offers drinks. They nibble at sweet dainty cakes and chat. Two pretty young well-to-do women idling away a pleasant afternoon, but one is 200 years older than the other. For Marilisa it is like playing hostess to Cleopatra, or Helen of Troy. Inevitably the conversation keeps circling back to Leo. "The kindest man I've ever known," says Katrin. "If he has a fault, I think, it's that he's too kind. Time and again, he's let himself endure great pain for the sake of avoiding being unkind to some other person. He's utterly incapable of disappointing other people, of letting anyone down in any way, of hurting anyone, regardless of the distress to himself, the damage, the pain. I'm speaking of emotional pain, of course." Marilisa doesn't want to hear Katrin talk about Leo's faults, or his virtues, or anything else. But she is a dutiful wife; she sees the visit through to its end, and embraces Katrin with something indistinguishable from warmth, and stands by the port watching Katrin's flitter undock and go zipping off into the northern sky. Then, only then, she permits herself to cry. The conversation, following so soon upon Fyodor's visit, has unnerved her. She sifts through it, seeking clues to the hidden truths that everyone but she seems to know. Leo's alleged vast love for her. Leo's unwillingness to injure others, heedless of the costs to himself. He loves you terribly, you know. Perhaps more than is really good for him. And suddenly she has the answer. Leo does love her, yes. Leo always loves his



wives. But the marriage was fundamentally a mistake; she is much too young for him, callow, unformed; what he really needs is a woman like Katrin, ancient behind her beauty and infinitely, diabolically wise. The reality, she sees, is that he has grown bored already with his new young wife, he is in fact unhappy in the marriage, but he is far too kindhearted to break the truth to her, and so he inverts it, he talks of a marriage that will endure forever and ever. And confides in Katrin, unburdening himself of his misery to her.

If any of this is true, Marilisa thinks, then I should leave him. I can't ask him to suffer on and on indefinitely with a wife who can't give him what he needs.

She wonders what effect all this crying has had on her face, and activates a mirror in front of her. Her eyes are red and puffy, yes. But what's this? A line, in the corner of her eye? The beginning of age-wrinkles? These doubts and conflicts are suddenly aging her: can it be? And this? A gray hair? She tugs it out and stares at it; but as she holds it at one angle or another it seems just as dark as all the rest. Illusions. An overactive imagination, nothing more. Damn Katrin! Damn her! \* \* \*

\* Even so, she goes for a quick gerontological exam two days before Leo is due to come home from the clinic. It is still six months until the scheduled date of her next Prep injection, but perhaps a few signs of age are beginning to crop up prematurely. Prep will arrest the onset of aging but it won't halt it altogether, the way Process will do; and it is occasionally the case, so she has heard, for people in the immediate pre-Process age group to sprout a few lines on their faces, a few gray hairs, while they are waiting to receive the full treatment that will render them ageless forever.

The doctor is unwilling to accelerate her Prep schedule, but he does confirm that a few little changes are cropping up, and sends her downstairs for some fast cosmetic repairs. "It won't get any worse, will it?" she asks him, and he laughs and assures her that everything can be fixed, everything, all evidence that she is in fact closer now to her 40th birthday than she is to her 30th swiftly and painlessly and confidentially eradicated. But she hates the idea that she is actually aging, ever so slightly, while all about her are people much older than she -- her husband, his many former wives, his swarm of children -- whose appearance is frozen forever in perfect unassailable youthfulness. If only she could start Process now and be done with it! But she is still too young. Her somatotype report is unanswerable; the treatment will not only be ineffective at this stage in her cellular development, it might actually be injurious. She will have to wait. And wait and wait and wait.

\* \* \* \* Then Leo comes back, refreshed, invigorated, revitalized. Marilisa's been around people fresh from Process many times before -- her parents, her grandparents, her great-grandparents -- and knows what to expect; but even so she finds it hard to keep up with him. He's exhaustingly cheerful, almost frighteningly ardent, full of high talk and ambitious plans. He shows her the schematics for six new paintings, a decade's worth of work conceived all at once. He proposes that they give a party for three hundred people. He suggests that they take a grand tour for their next anniversary -- it will be their fifth -- to see the wonders of the world, the Pyramids, the Taj Mahal, the floor of the Mindanao Trench. Or a tour of the moon -- the asteroid belt --

"Stop!" she cries, feeling breathless. "You're going too fast!" "A weekend in Paris, at least," he says.

"Paris. All right. Paris." They will leave next week. Just before they go, she has lunch with a friend from her single days, Loisa, a pre-Process woman like herself who is married to Ted, who is also pre-Process by just a few years. Loisa has had affairs with a couple of older men, men in their nineties and early hundreds, so perhaps she understands the other side of things as well.

"I don't understand why he married me," Marilisa says. "I must seem like a child to him. He's forgotten more things than I've ever known, and he still knows plenty. What can he possibly see in me?"

"You give him back his youth," Loisa says. "That's what all of them want. They're like vampires, sucking the vitality out of the young."

"That's nonsense and you know it. Process gives him back his youth. He

doesn't need a young wife to do that for him. I can provide him with the illusion of being young, maybe, but Process gives him the real thing."

"Process jazzes them up, and then they need confirmation that it's genuine. Which only someone like you can give. They don't want to go to bed with some old hag a thousand years old. She may look gorgeous on the outside but she's corroded within, full of a million memories, loaded with all the hate and poison and vindictiveness that you store up over a life that long, and he can feel it all ticking away inside her and he doesn't want it. Whereas you -- all fresh and new -- "

"No. No. It isn't like that at all. The older women are the interesting ones. We just seem empty." "All right. If that's what you want to believe."

"And yet he wants me. He tells me he loves me. He tells one of his old ex-wives that I'm the great love of his life. I don't understand it." "Well, neither do I," says Loisa, and they leave it at that.

In the bathroom mirror, after lunch, Marilisa finds new lines in her forehead, new wisps of gray at her temples. She has them taken care of before Paris. Paris is no city to look old in. \*

\* \* \* In Paris they visit the Louvre and take the boat ride along the Seine and eat at little Latin Quarter bistros and buy ancient objets d'art in the galleries of St.-Germain-des-Pres. She has never been to Paris before, though of course he has, so often that he has lost count. It is very beautiful but strikes her as somehow fossilized, a museum exhibit rather than a living city, despite all the life she sees going on around her, the animated discussions in the cafes, the bustling restaurants, the crowds in the Metro. Nothing must have changed here in five hundred years. It is all static -- frozen -- lifeless. As though the entire place has been through Process. Leo seems to sense her gathering restlessness, and she sees a darkening in his own mood in response. On the third day, in front of one of the rows of ancient bookstalls along the river, he says, "It's me, isn't it?" "What is?"

"The reason why you're so glum. It can't be the city, so it has to be me. Us. Do you want to leave, Marilisa?" "Leave Paris? So soon?"

"Leave me, I mean. Perhaps the whole thing has been just a big mistake. I don't want to hold you against your will. If you've started to feel that I'm too old for you, that what you really need is a much younger man, I wouldn't for a moment stand in your way." Is this how it happens? Is this how his marriages end, with him sadly, lovingly, putting words in your mouth?

"No," she says. "I love you, Leo. Younger men don't interest me. The thought of leaving you has never crossed my mind." "I'll survive, you know, if you tell me that you want out." "I don't want out." "I wish I felt completely sure of that." She is getting annoyed with him, now. "I wish you did too. You're being silly, Leo. Leaving you is the last thing in the world I want to do. And Paris is the last place in the world where I would want my marriage to break up. I love you. I want to be your wife forever and ever." "Well, then." He smiles and draws her to him; they embrace; they kiss. She hears a patter of light applause. People are watching them. People have been listening to them and are pleased at the outcome of their negotiations. Paris! Ah, Paris! \* \* \* \* When they return home, though, he is called away almost immediately to Barcelona to repair one of his paintings, which has developed some technical problem and is undergoing rapid disagreeable metamorphosis. The work will take three or four days; and Marilisa, unwilling to put herself through the fatigue of a second European trip so soon, tells him to go without her. That seems to be some sort of cue for Fyodor to show up, scarcely hours after Leo's departure. How does he know so unerringly when to find her alone? His pretense is that he has brought an artifact for Leo's collection, an ugly little idol, squat and frog-faced, covered with lumps of brown oxidation. She takes it from him brusquely and sets it on a randomly chosen shelf, and says, mechanically, "Thank you very much. Leo will be pleased. I'll tell him you were here."

"Such charm. Such hospitality." "I'm being as polite as I can. I didn't invite you." "Come on, Marilisa. Let's get going."

"Going? Where? What for?" "We can have plenty of fun together and you

damned well know it. Aren't you tired of being such a loyal little wife? Politely sliding through the motions of your preposterous little marriage with your incredibly ancient husband?" His eyes are shining strangely. His face is flushed. She says softly, "You're crazy, aren't you?"

"Oh, no, not crazy at all. Not as nice as my father, maybe, but perfectly sane. I see you rusting away here like one of the artifacts in his collection and I want to give you a little excitement in your life before it's too late. A touch of the wild side, do you know what I mean, Marilisa? Places and things he can't show you, that he can't even imagine. He's old. He doesn't know anything about the world we live in today. Jesus, why do I have to spell it out for you? Just drop everything and come away with me. You won't regret it." He leans forward, smiling into her face, utterly sure of himself, plainly confident now that his blunt unceasing campaign of bald invitation will at last be crowned with success. His audacity astounds her. But she is mystified, too. "Before it's too late, you said. Too late for what?" "You know." "Do I?" Fyodor seems exasperated by what he takes to be her wilful obtuseness. His mouth opens and closes like a shutting trap; a muscle quivers in his cheek; something seems to be cracking within him, some carefully guarded bastion of self-control. He stares at her in a new way -- angrily? Contemptuously? -- and says, "Before it's too late for anybody to want you. Before you get old and saggy and shriveled. Before you get so withered and ancient-looking that nobody would touch you." Surely he is out of his mind. Surely. "Nobody has to get that way any more, Fyodor." "Not if they undergo Process, no. But you -- you, Marilisa --" He smiles sadly, shakes his head, turns his hands palms upward in a gesture of hopeless regret. She peers at him, bewildered. "What can you possibly be talking about?" For the first time in her memory Fyodor's cool cocky aplomb vanishes. He blinks and gapes. "So you still haven't found out. He actually did keep you in the dark all this time. You're a null, Marilisa! A short-timer! Process won't work for you! The one-in-ten-thousand shot, that's you, the inherent somatic unreceptivity. Christ, what a bastard he is, to hide it from you like this! You've got eighty, maybe ninety years and that's it. Getting older and older, wrinkled and bent and ugly, and then you'll die, the way everybody in the world used to. So you don't have forever and a day to get your fun, like the rest of us. You have to grab it right now, fast, while you're still young. He made us all swear never to say a word to you, that he was going to be the one to tell you the truth in his own good time, but why should I give a damn about that? We aren't children. You have a right to know what you really are. Fuck him, is what I say. Fuck him!" Fyodor's face is crimson now. His eyes are rigid and eerily bright with a weird fervor. "You think I'm making this up? Why would I make up something like this?" It is like being in an earthquake. The floor seems to heave. She has never been so close to the presence of pure evil before. With the tightest control she can manage she says, "You'd make it up because you're a lying miserable bastard, Fyodor, full of hatred and anger and pus. And if you think -- But I don't need to listen to you any more. Just get out of here!" "It's true. Everybody knows it, the whole family! Ask Katrin! She's the one I heard it from first. Christ, ask Leo! Ask Leo!" "Out," she says, flicking her hand at him as though he is vermin. "Now. Get the hell out. Out." \* \* \* \* She promises herself that she will say nothing to Leo about the monstrous fantastic tale that has come pouring out of his horrid son, or even about his clumsy idiotic attempt at seduction -- it's all too shameful, too disgusting, too repulsive, and she wants to spare him the knowledge of Fyodor's various perfidies -- but of course it all comes blurting from her within an hour after Leo is back from Barcelona. Fyodor is intolerable, she says. Fyodor's behavior has been too bizarre and outrageous to conceal. Fyodor has come here unmasked and spewed a torrent of cruel fantastic nonsense in a grotesque attempt at bludgeoning her into bed. Leo says gravely, "What kind of nonsense?" and she tells him in a quick unpunctuated burst and watches his smooth taut face collapse into

wearily jowls, watches him seem to age a thousand years in the course of half a minute. He stands there looking at her, aghast; and then she understands that it has to be true, every terrible word of what Fyodor has said. She is one of those, the miserable statistical few of whom everybody has heard, but only at second or third hand. The treatments will not work on her. She will grow old and then she will die. They have tested her and they know the truth, but the whole bunch of them have conspired to keep it from her, the doctors at the clinic, Leo's sons and daughters and wives, her own family, everyone. All of it Leo's doing. Using his influence all over the place, his enormous accrued power, to shelter her in her ignorance.

"You knew from the start?" she asks, finally. "All along?" "Almost. I knew very early. The clinic called me and told me, not long after we got engaged." "My God. Why did you marry me, then?" "Because I loved you." "Because you loved me." "Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes."

"I wish I knew what that meant," she says. "If you loved me, how could you hide a thing like this from me? How could you let me build my life around a lie?" Leo says, after a moment, "I wanted you to have the good years, untainted by what would come later. There was time for you to discover the truth later. But for now -- while you were still young -- the clothes, the jewelry, the traveling, all the joy of being beautiful and young -- why ruin it for you? Why darken it with the knowledge of what would be coming?" "So you made everybody go along with the lie? The people at the clinic. Even my own family, for God's sake!"

"Yes." "And all the Prep treatments I've been taking -- just a stupid pointless charade, right? Accomplishing nothing. Leading nowhere." "Yes. Yes." She begins to tremble. She understands the true depths of his compassion now, and she is appalled. He has married her out of charity. No man her own age would have wanted her, because the developing signs of bodily deterioration in the years just ahead would surely horrify him; but Leo is beyond all that, he is willing to overlook her unfortunate little somatic defect and give her a few decades of happiness before she has to die. And then he will proceed with the rest of his life, the hundreds or thousands of years yet to come, serene in the knowledge of having allowed the tragically doomed Marilisa the happy illusion of having been a member of the ageless elite for a little while. It is stunning. It is horrifying. There is no way that she can bear it.

"Marilisa -- "

He reaches for her, but she turns away. Runs. Flees. \* \* \* \* It was three years before he found her. She was living in London, then, a little flat in the Bayswater Road, and in just those three years her face had changed so much, the little erosions of the transition between youth and middle age, that it was impossible for him entirely to conceal his instant reaction. He, of course, had not changed in the slightest way. He stood in the doorway, practically filling it, trying to plaster some sort of facade over his all too visible dismay, trying to show her the familiar Leo smile, trying to make the old Leo-like warmth glow in his eyes. Then after a moment he extended his arms toward her. She stayed where she was.

"You shouldn't have tracked me down," she says. "I love you," he tells her. "Come home with me." "It wouldn't be right. It wouldn't be fair to you. My getting old, and you always so young." "To hell with that. I want you back, Marilisa. I love you and I always will." "You love me?" she says. "Even though -- ?" "Even though. For better, for worse." She knows the rest of the passage -- for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health -- and where it goes from there. But there is nothing more she can say. She wants to smile gently and thank him for all his kindness and close the door, but instead she stands there and stands there and stands there, neither inviting him in nor shutting him out, with a roaring sound in her ears as all the million years of mortal history rise up around her like mountains.

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BY THE TIME the  
spaceship had finished jiggling and actually stood firmly on Domerangi soil,  
Justin Marner was beginning to doubt his sanity. "We must be crazy," he  
said. "We must be." The other Earthman, who had been gazing out the  
viewplate at the green-and-gold alien vista, glanced around suddenly at  
Marner's remark. "Huh?" "There are limits to which one goes in proving  
a point," Marner said. He indicated the scene outside. "This little journey  
exceeds the limits. Now that we're here, Kemridge, I'm sure of it. Nobody  
does things like this." Kemridge shrugged sourly. "Don't be silly  
Justin. You know why we're here, and you know how come we're here. This isn't  
any time to -- " "All right," Marner said. "I take it all back." He  
stared for a moment at his delicate, tapering fingers -- the fingers that  
could have belonged to a surgeon, were they not the property of a top-rank  
technical engineer. "Don't pay any attention to whatever I just said. It's the  
strain that's getting me." The door of the cabin chimed melodiously.

"Come in," said Kemridge. \* \* \* \* The door slid open and a  
Domerangi, clad in a bright yellow sash, gray-green buskins, and a glittering  
diadem of precious gems, stepped heavily into the cabin. He extended two of  
his five leathery tentacles in welcome. "Hello, gentlemen. I see you've  
come through the trip in fine shape." "What's going on now, Plorvash?"  
Marner asked. "The ship has landed at a spaceport just outside the  
city," the alien said. "I've come to take you to your quarters. We're giving  
you two the finest accommodations our planet can offer. We want your working  
conditions to be of the best." "Glad to hear it." Marner flicked a  
glance at his companion. "They're most considerate, aren't they, Dave?"  
The taller of the two Earthmen nodded gravely. "Definitely." Plorvash  
grinned. "Suppose you come with me now. You would like to be well rested  
before you undertake your task. After all, you should be at your best, since  
planetary pride is at stake." "Of course," Marner said. "The  
test will begin as soon as you wish. May I offer you good luck?" "We  
won't need it," Kemridge stated grimly. "It's not a matter of luck at all.  
It's brains -- brains and sweat." "Very well," Plorvash said. "This is  
what you're here to prove. It ought to be amusing, in any case -- whatever the  
outcome may be." Both Earthmen tried to look calm and confident,  
absolutely sure of themselves and their skill. They merely managed to  
look rigidly worried. \* \* \* \* Statisticians have no records on the  
subject, but it is an observed phenomenon that the most serious differences of  
opinion generally originate in bars. It had been in a bar at 46th Street and  
Sixth Avenue that Justin Marner had ill-advisedly had words with a visiting  
Domerangi, a month before, and it had been in the same bar that the train of  
events that had brought the two Earthmen to Domerang V had started -- and  
never stopped gaining momentum. It had been a simple altercation at  
first. Marner had been reflectively sipping a whisky sour, and Kemridge,  
seated to his left with his long legs uncomfortably scrunched up, had been  
toying with a double Scotch. The Domerangi had entered the bar with a  
characteristically ponderous stride. Though contact with Domerang V had  
been made more than a century before, Domerangi were still rare sights in New  
York. Marner and Kemridge knew this one, though -- he was attached to the

Domerangi Consulate on 66th Street and Third, and they had had dealings with him a year ago in the matter of some circuit alignments for the building's lighting system. Domerangi, with their extraordinary peripheral vision, prefer subdued, indirect lighting, and Marner and Kemridge had designed the lighting plot for the Consulate.

The Domerangi spotted them immediately and eased his bulk onto the stool next to them. "Ah, the two clever engineers," the alien rumbled. "You remember me, of course?" "Yes," Marner said quickly. "How's the lighting job working out?" "As well as could be expected." The Domerangi waved toward the bartender. "Barkeep! Two beers, please." "What do you mean by that?" Kemridge demanded as the beers were drawn and set on the bar. "Just one moment, please." The alien

curled two tentacles gently around the beers and poured one into each of the two feeding-mouths at the sides of his face. "Marvelous liquid, your beer. The one point where Earth is clearly superior to Domerang is in brewing."

"To get back to the lights --" Kemridge prodded. "Oh, yes," the alien said. "The lights. Well, they're a pretty fair job -- as good as we could have hoped for from a second-rate technology." "Now hold on a minute!"

Marner said hotly, and that was how it started. \* \* \* \* "I wish we'd kept our mouths shut," Marner said glumly. He stared balefully at the spotless ceiling of the hotel room in which the Domerangi had installed them.

Kemridge whirled and glared down at the smaller man. "Listen, Justin: we're here and we're going to show them up and go home rich and famous. Got that?"

"Okay," Marner said. He ran a finger along his thin lower lip. "I'm sorry I keep popping off like this. But it does seem screwy to have gone to this extent just to prove a point that came up in a barroom debate." "I

know. But we wouldn't have come here if the State Department hadn't heard about the argument and thought it needed settling. The Domerangi have been acting lordly about their technology as long as we've known them. I think it's a great idea to send a couple of honest-to-Christmas Terran engineers up here to show them once and for all who's got what it takes." "But suppose we

\_don't\_ show them?" "We will! Between the two of us, we can match anything they throw at us. Can't we?" Marner smiled gloomily. "Sure we can," he said without conviction. "I haven't doubted it for one minute."

Kemridge walked to the door and, with a swift searching motion of his fingers, found the plate that covered the door mechanism. He unclipped it. "Look in here, for example," he said, after a moment's scrutiny. "Simple cybernetic mechanism. I don't quite figure the way this green ceramic relay down here controls the power flow, but it's nothing we couldn't dope out, given a

screwdriver and a little spare time." Marner stood on tiptoes and peered in. "Perfectly understandable gadget," he commented. "Not nearly as efficient as our kind, either." "That's just the point," Kemridge said. "These Domerangi aren't half the sharks they think they are. We stipulated that we could duplicate anything they gave us, right? With our natural savvy and a little perspiration, we ought to be able to match the best gadget they test us with. If we follow through up here and those two Domerangi engineers on Earth mess up their half of the test, then we've done it. The State

Department's counting on our versatility. That's all we need, Justin -- cleverness!" Marner's eyes lit up. "Dave, I'm sorry I was so pig-headed a minute ago. We'll give them the business, all right!" He stood up a

little higher and gingerly extended a hand into the gaping servomechanism in the wall. "What are you doing?" Kemridge asked. "Never mind. Get on the phone and tell Plorvash that we'll be ready to get to work tomorrow. While you're doing that, I want to fool with this relay. Might as well get some practice now!" He was radiant with new-found enthusiasm. \* \* \*

\* When Plorvash knocked on the door the following morning, the mood was still on them. They were clear-eyed, wide awake, and firmly convinced they could master any problem. "Who's there?" Marner asked loudly. "Me," the Domerangi said. "Plorvash." Instantly the door flew open and the dumbfounded alien charge d'affaires was confronted with the sight of the two Earthmen still snug in their beds. He peered behind the door and in the

closet. "Who opened the door?" he asked suspiciously. Marner sat up in bed and grinned. "Try it again. Go outside and call out 'Plorvash' the way you just did." The alien lumbered out, pulling the door shut behind him. When he was outside, he said his name again and the door opened immediately. He thundered across the threshold and looked from Marner to Kemridge. "What did you do?" "We were experimenting with the door-opener last night," Kemridge said. "And before we put it back together, we decided it might be fun to rig up a modified vocoder circuit that would open the door automatically at the sound of the syllables 'Plorvash' directed at it from outside. It works very nicely." The alien scowled. "Ah -- yes. Very clever. Now as to the terms of this test you two are to engage in: We've prepared a fully equipped laboratory for you in Central Sqorvik -- that's a suburb not far from here -- and we've set up two preliminary problems for you, as agreed. When you've dealt with those -- if you've dealt with those -- we'll give you a third." "And if we don't deal with them successfully?" "Why, then you'll have failed to demonstrate your ability." "Reasonable enough," Marner said. "But just when do we win this thing? Do you go on giving us projects till we miss?" "That would be the ultimate proof of your ability, wouldn't it?" Plorvash asked. "But you'll be relieved to know that we have no such plans. According to the terms of the agreement between ourselves and your government, the test groups on each planet will be required to carry out no more than three projects." The alien's two mouths smiled unpleasantly. "We'll consider successful completion of all three projects as ample proof of your ability." "I don't like the way you say that," Kemridge objected. "What's up your sleeve?" "My sleeve? I don't believe I grasp the idiom," Plorvash said. "Never mind. Just a Terran expression," said Kemridge. \* \* \* \* A car was waiting for them outside the hotel -- a long, low job with a pulsating flexible hood that undulated in a distressing fashion, like a monstrous metal artery. Plorvash slid the back door open. "Get in. I'll take you to the lab to get started." Marner looked at the alien, then at Kemridge. Kemridge nodded. "How about one for the road?" Marner suggested. "Eh?" "Another idiom," he said. "I mean a drink. Alcoholic beverage. Stimulant of some kind. You catch?" The alien grinned nastily. "I understand. There's a dispensary on the next street. We don't want to rush you on this thing, anyway." He pointed to the moving roadway. "Get aboard and we'll take a quick one." They followed the Domerangi onto the moving strip and a moment later found themselves in front of a domed structure planted just off the roadway. "It doesn't look very cozy," Kemridge commented as they entered. A pungent odor of ether hit their nostrils. Half a dozen Domerangi were lying on the floor, holding jointed metal tubes. As they watched, Plorvash clambered down and sprawled out on his back. "Come join me," he urged. "Have a drink." He reached for a tube that slithered across the floor toward him and fitted it into his left feeding mouth. "This is a bar?" Kemridge asked unhappily. "It looks more like the emergency ward of a hospital." Plorvash finished drinking and stood up, wiping a few drops of green liquid from his jaw. "Good," he said. "It's not beer, but it's good stuff. I thought you two wanted to drink." Marner sniffed the ether-laded air in dismay and shook his head. "We're not -- thirsty. It takes time to get used to alien customs, I suppose." "I suppose so," Plorvash agreed. "Very well, then. Let's go to the lab, shall we?" \* \* \* \* The laboratory was, indeed, a sumptuous place. The two Earthmen stood at the entrance to the monstrous room and marveled visibly. "We're impressed," Marner said finally to the Domerangi. "We want to give you every opportunity to succeed," Plorvash said. "This is just as important for us as it is for you." Marner took two or three steps into the lab and glanced around. To the left, an enormous oscilloscope wiggled greenly at him. The right-hand wall was bristling with elaborate servomechanisms of all descriptions. The far wall was a gigantic toolchest, and workbenches were spotted here and there. The lighting -- indirect, of course -- was bright and



eye-easing. It was the sort of research setup a sane engineer rarely bothers even to dream of. "You're making it too easy for us," said Kemridge. "It can't be hard to pull off miracles in a lab like this." "We are honest people. If you can meet our tests, we'll grant that you're better than we are. If you can, that is. If you fail, it can't be blamed on poor working conditions." "Fair enough," Kemridge agreed. "When are you ready to start?" "Immediately." Plorvash reached into the bagging folds of his sash and withdrew a small plastic bubble, about four inches long, containing a creamy-white fluid. "This is a depilator," he said. He squeezed a few drops out of the bubble into the spoonlike end of one tentacle and rubbed the liquid over the thick, heavy red beard that sprouted on his lower jaw. A streak of beard came away as he rubbed. "It is very useful." He handed the bubble to Marner. "Duplicate it." "But we're engineers, not chemists," Marner protested. "Never mind, Justin." Kemridge turned to the alien. "That's the first problem. Suppose you give us the second one at the same time, just to make things more convenient. That way, we'll each have one to work on." Plorvash frowned. "You want to work on two projects at once? All right." He turned, strode out, and returned a few moments later, carrying something that looked like a large mousetrap inside a cage. He handed it to Kemridge. "We use this to catch small house pests," Plorvash explained. "It's a self-baiting trap. Most of our house pests are color-sensitive and this trap flashes colors as a lure. For example, it does this to trap vorks --" he depressed a lever in the back and the trap glowed a lambent green -- "and this to catch flaibs." Another lever went down and the trap radiated warm purple. An unmistakable odor of rotting vegetation emanated from it as well. "It is, as you see, most versatile," the alien went on. "We've supplied you with an ample number of vermin of different sorts -- they're at the back of the lab, in those cages -- and you ought to be able to rig a trap to duplicate this one. At least, I hope you can." "Is this all?" Kemridge asked. Plorvash nodded. "You can have all the time you need. That was the agreement." "Exactly," Kemridge said. "We'll let you know when we've gotten somewhere." "Fine," said Plorvash. After he had left, Marner squeezed a couple of drops of the depilatory out onto the palm of his hand. It stung and he immediately shook it off. "Better not fool with that till we've run an analysis," Kemridge suggested. "If it's potent enough to remove Domerangi beards, it's probably be a good skin-dissolver for Earthmen. Those babies have tough hides." Marner rubbed his hand clean hastily. "What do you think of the deal in general?" "Pretty soft," Kemridge said. "It shouldn't take more than a week to knock off both these things, barring complications. Seems to me they could pick tougher projects than these." "Wait till the final one," warned Marner. "These are just warm-ups." \* \* \* \* Four days later, Marner called Plorvash from the lab. The alien's bulky form filled the screen. "Hello," he said mildly. "What's new?" "We've finished the job," Marner reported. "Both of them?" "Naturally." "I'll be right over." Plorvash strode into the lab about fifteen minutes later, and the two Earthmen, who were busy with the animal cages at the back of the lab, waved in greeting. "Stay where you are," Kemridge called loudly. He reached up, pressed a switch, and thirty cages clanged open at once. As a horde of Domerangi vermin came bounding, slithering, crawling, and rolling across the floor toward Plorvash, the alien leaped back in dismay. "What kind of trick is this?" "Don't worry," Marner said, from the remotest corner of the lab. "It'll all be over in a second." The animals ignored Plorvash and, to his surprise, they made a beeline for a complex, humming arrangement of gears and levers behind the door. As they approached, it began flashing a series of colors, emanating strange odors, and making curious clicking noises. When the horde drew closer, jointed arms suddenly sprang out and scooped them wholesale into a hopper that gaped open at floor level. Within a moment, they were all stowed away inside. Marner came across the lab, followed by Kemridge. "We've improved on your model," he said. "We've built a better trap. Your

version can deal with only one species at a time." Plorvash gulped resoundingly. "Very nice. Quite remarkable, in fact." "We have the schematics in our room," said Kemridge. "The trap may have some commercial value on Domerang." "Probably," Plorvash admitted. "How'd you do on the depilator?" "That was easy," Marner said. "With the setup you gave us, chemical analysis was a snap. Only I'm afraid we've improved on the original model there, too." "What do you mean?" Marner rubbed the side of his face uneasily. "I tried our stuff on myself, couple of days ago, and my face is still smooth as a baby's. The effect seems to be permanent." "You'll submit samples, of course," Plorvash said. "But I think it's fairly safe to assume that you've passed through the first two projects -- ah -- reasonably well. Curiously, your counterparts on Earth also did well on their preliminaries, according to our Consul in New York." "Glad to hear it," Marner lied. "But the third problem tells the tale, doesn't it?" "Exactly," said Plorvash. "Let's have that one now, shall we?" \* \* \*

\* A few minutes later, Marner and Kemridge found themselves staring down at a complicated nest of glittering relays and tubes that seemed to power an arrangement of pistons and rods. Plorvash had carried it in with the utmost delicacy and had placed it on a workbench in the middle of the vast laboratory. "What is it?" Marner asked. "You'll see," promised the alien. He fumbled in the back of the machine, drew forth a cord, and plugged it into a wall socket. A small tube in the heart of the machine glowed cherry red and the pistons began to move, first slowly, then more rapidly. After a while, it was humming away at an even, steady clip, pistons barreling back and forth in purposeless but inexorable motion. Kemridge bent and peered as close to the workings of the gadget as he dared. "It's an engine. What of it?" "It's a special kind of engine," Plorvash said. "Suppose you take the plug out." The Earthman worked the plug from its socket and looked at the machine. Then the plug dropped from his limp hand and skittered to the floor. "It -- doesn't stop going, does it?" Kemridge asked quietly. "The pistons keep on moving." "This is our power source," Plorvash said smugly. "We use them in vehicles and other such things. It's the third problem." "We'll give it a try," Marner tried to say casually. "I'll be most interested in the results," Plorvash said, "And now I must bid you a good day." "Sure," Marner said weakly. "Cheers."

They watched the broadbeamed alien waddle gravely out of the laboratory, waited till the door was closed, and glanced at the machine. It was still moving. Marner licked his lips and looked pleadingly at Kemridge. "Dave, can we build a perpetual-motion machine?" \* \* \* \* The Domerangi machine worked just as well plugged in or unplugged, once it had tapped some power source to begin with. The pistons threaded ceaselessly up and down. The basic components of the thing seemed simple enough. "The first step to take," Marner said, "is to shut the damned thing off so we can get a look at its innards." "How do we do that?" "By reversing the power source, I suppose. Feed a negative pulse through that power input and that ought to do it. We'll have to reverse the polarity of the signal."

Half an hour's hard work with the tools and solder had done that. They plugged the scrambled cord into the socket and the machine coughed twice and subsided. "Okay," Marner said, rubbing his hands with an enthusiasm he did not feel. "Let's dig this baby apart and find out what makes it tick." He turned and stared meaningfully at Kemridge. "And let's adopt this as a working credo, Dave: inasmuch as the Domerangi have already built this thing, it's not impossible. Okay?" "That seems to be the only basis we can approach it on," Kemridge agreed. They huddled around the device, staring at the workings. Marner reached down and pointed at a part. "This thing is something like a tuned-plate feedback oscillator," he observed. "And I'll bet we've almost got a thyatron tube over here. Their technology's a good approximation of ours. In fact, the whole thing's within our grasp, technically." "Hmm. And the result is a closed regenerative system with positive feedback," Kemridge said dizzily. "Infinite energy, going round and round the cycle. If

you draw off a hundred watts or so -- well, infinity minus a hundred is still infinity!" "True enough." Marner wiped a gleaming bead of perspiration from his forehead. "Dave, we're going to have to puzzle this thing out from scratch. And we don't dare fail." He reached doggedly for a screwdriver. "Remember our motto. We'll use our natural savvy and a little perspiration, and we ought to do it." Three weeks later, they had come up with their first trial model -- which wobbled along for half an hour, then gave up. And a month after that, they had a machine that didn't give up.

\* \* \* \* Hesitantly, they sent for Plorvash. "There it is," Marner said, pointing to the bizarre thing that stood next to the original model. Both machines were humming blithely, plugs dangling from the sockets. "It works?" Plorvash whispered, paling. "It hasn't stopped yet," Marner said. There were heavy rings under his eyes and his usually plump face was drawn, with the skin tight over his cheekbones. It had been two months of almost constant strain and both Earthmen showed it. "It works, eh?" Plorvash asked. "\_How\_?" "A rather complex hyperspace function," Kemridge said. "I don't want to bother explaining it now -- you'll find it all in our report -- but it was quite a stunt in topology. We couldn't actually duplicate your model, but we achieved the same effect, which fulfills the terms of the agreement." "All as a matter of response to challenge," said Marner. "We didn't think we could do it until we had to -- so we did." "I didn't think you could do it, either," Plorvash said hoarsely. He walked over and examined the machine closely. "It works, you say? Honestly, now?" His voice was strained. "Of course," Marner said indignantly. "We have just one question." Kemridge pointed to a small black rectangular box buried deep in a maze of circuitry in the original model. "That thing down there -- it nearly threw us. We couldn't get it open and so we had to bypass it and substitute a new system for it. What in blazes is it?" Plorvash wheeled solidly around to face them. "That," he said in a strangled voice, "is the power source. It's a miniature photoelectric amplifier that should keep the model running for -- oh, another two weeks or so. Then the jig would have been up." "How's that?" Marner was startled. "It's time to explain something to you," the alien said wearily. "\_We don't have any perpetual-motion machines.\_ You've been cruelly hoaxed into inventing one for us. It's dastardly, but we didn't really think you were going to do it. It took some of our best minds to rig up the model we gave you, you know." Marner drew up a lab stool and sat down limply, white-faced. Kemridge remained standing, his features blank with disbelief. Marner said, "You mean we invented the thing and you didn't -- you --" Plorvash nodded. "I'm just as astonished as you are," he said. He reached for a lab stool himself and sat down. It groaned under his weight. Kemridge recovered first. "Well," he said after a moment of silence, "now that it's all over, we'll take our machine and go back to Earth. This invalidates the contest, of course." "I'm afraid you can't do that," Plorvash said. "By a statute enacted some seven hundred years ago, any research done in a Domerangi government lab is automatically government property. Which means, of course, that we'll have to confiscate your -- ahem -- project." "That's out of the question!" Marner said hotly. "And, furthermore, we intend to confiscate you, too. We'd like you to stay and show us how to build our machines." "This is cause for war," Kemridge said. "Earth won't let you get away with this -- this kidnapping!" "Possibly not. But in view of the way things have turned out, it's the sanest thing we can do. And I don't think Earth will go to war over you." "We demand to see our Consul," said Marner. "Very well," Plorvash agreed. "It's within your rights, I suppose."

\* \* \* \* The Earth Consul was a white-haired, sturdy gentleman named Culbertson, who arrived on the scene later that day. "This is very embarrassing for all of us," the Consul said. He ran his hands nervously down his traditional pin-striped trousers, adjusting the crease. "You can get us out of it, of course," Marner said. "That machine is our property and they have no right to keep us prisoners here to operate it, do they?"

"Not by all human laws. But the fact remains, unfortunately, that according to their laws, they have every right to your invention. And by the treaty of 2716, waiving extraterritorial sovereignty, Earthmen on Domerang are subject to Domerangi laws, and vice versa." He spread his hands in a gesture of sympathetic frustration.

"You mean we're stuck here," Marnar said bluntly. He shut his eyes, remembering the nightmare that was the Domerangi equivalent of a bar, thinking of the morbid prospect of spending the rest of his life on this unappetizing planet, all because of some insane dare. "Go on, tell us the whole truth." The Consul put the palms of his hands together delicately. "We intend to make every effort to get you off, of course -- naturally so, since we owe a very great debt to you two. You realize that you've upheld Earth's pride." "Lot of good it did us," Marnar grunted.

"Nevertheless, we feel anxious to make amends for the whole unhappy incident. I can assure you that we'll do everything in our power to make your stay here as pleasant and as restful as -- "

"Listen, Culbertson," Kemridge said grimly. "We don't want a vacation here, not even with dancing girls twenty-four hours a day and soft violins in the background. We don't like it here. We want to go home. You people got us into this -- now get us out."

The Consul grew even more unhappy-looking. "I wish you wouldn't put it that way. We'll do all we can." He paused for a moment, deep in thought, and said, "There's one factor in the case that we haven't as yet explored."

"What's that?" Marnar asked uneasily. "Remember the two Domerangi engineers who went to Earth on the other leg of this hookup?"

The Consul glanced around the lab. "Is this place wired anywhere?" "We checked," Kemridge said, "and you can speak freely. What do they have to do with us?"

Culbertson lowered his voice. "There's a slim chance for you. I've been in touch with authorities on Earth and they've been keeping me informed of the progress of the two Domerangi. You know they got through their first two projects as easily as you did."

The two Earthmen nodded impatiently. The old diplomat smiled his apologies. "I hate to admit this, but it seems the people at the Earth end of this deal had much the same idea the Domerangi did."

"Perpetual motion, you mean?" "Not quite," Culbertson said. "They rigged up a phony anti-gravity machine and told the Domerangi to duplicate it just as was done here. Our psychologies must be similar."

"And what happened?" Marnar asked. "Nothing, yet," the Consul said sadly. "But they're still working on it, I'm told. If they're as clever as they say they are, they ought to hit it sooner or later. You'll just have to be patient and sweat it out. We'll see to it that you're well taken care of in the meantime, of course, and -- "

"I don't get it. What does that have to do with us?" Marnar demanded. "If they keep at it, they'll invent it eventually."

Marnar scowled. "That may take years. It may take forever. They may never discover a workable anti-grav. Then what about us?"

The Consul looked sympathetic and shrugged. A curious gleam twinkled in Kemridge's eye. He turned to Marnar. "Justin, do you know anything about tensor applications and gravitational fields?"

"What are you driving at?" Marnar said. "We've got an ideal lab setup here. And I'm sure those two Domerangi down there wouldn't mind taking credit for someone else's anti-grav, if they were approached properly. What do you think?"

Marnar brightened. "That's right -- they must be just as anxious to get home as we are!"

"You mean," said the Consul, "you'd build the machine and let us smuggle it to Earth so we could slip it to the Domerangi and use that as a talking-point for a trade and -- "

He stopped, seeing that no one was listening to him, and looked around. Marnar and Kemridge were at the far end of the lab, scribbling equations feverishly.

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IT MIGHT be heaven. Certainly it wasn't Spain and he doubted it could be Peru. He seemed to be floating, suspended midway between nothing and nothing. There was a shimmering golden sky far above him and a misty, turbulent sea of white clouds boiling far below. When he looked down he saw his legs and his feet dangling like child's toys above an unfathomable abyss, and the sight of it made him want to puke, but there was nothing in him for the puking. He was hollow. He was made of air. Even the old ache in his knee was gone, and so was the everlasting dull burning in the fleshy part of his arm where the Indian's little arrow had taken him, long ago on the shore of that island of pearls, up by Panama.

It was as if he had been born again, sixty years old but freed of all the harm that his body had experienced and all its myriad accumulated injuries: freed, one might almost say, of his body itself. "Gonzalo?" he called. "Hernando?" Blurred dreamy echoes answered him. And then silence. "Mother of God, am I dead?" No. No. He had never been able to imagine death. An end to all striving? A place where nothing moved? A great emptiness, a pit without a bottom? Was this place the place of death, then? He had no way of knowing. He needed to ask the holy fathers about this. "Boy, where are my priests? Boy?" He looked about for his page. But all he saw was blinding whorls of light coiling off to infinity on all sides. The sight was beautiful but troublesome. It was hard for him to deny that he had died, seeing himself afloat like this in a realm of air and light. Died and gone to heaven. This is heaven, yes, surely, surely. What else could it be?

So it was true, that if you took the Mass and took the Christ faithfully into yourself and served Him well you would be saved from your sins, you would be forgiven, you would be cleansed. He had wondered about that. But he wasn't ready yet to be dead, all the same. The thought of it was sickening and infuriating. There was so much yet to be done. And he had no memory even of being ill. He searched his body for wounds. No, no wounds. Not anywhere. Strange. Again he looked around. He was alone here. No one to be seen, not his page, nor his brother, nor De Soto, nor the priests, nor anyone. "Fray Marcos! Fray Vicente! Can't you hear me? Damn you, where are you? Mother of God! Holy Mother, blessed among women! Damn you, Fray Vicente, tell me -- tell me -- " His voice sounded all wrong: too thick, too deep, a stranger's voice. The words fought with his tongue and came from his lips malformed and lame, not the good crisp Spanish of Estremadura but something shameful and odd. What he heard was like the spluttering foppishness of Madrid or even the furry babble that they spoke in Barcelona; why, he might almost be a Portuguese, so coarse and clownish was his way of shaping his speech.

He said carefully and slowly, "I am the Governor and Captain-General of New Castile." That came out no better, a laughable noise.

"Adelantado -- Alguacil Mayor -- Marques de la Conquista -- " The strangeness of his new way of speech made insults of his own titles. It was like being tongue-tied. He felt streams of hot sweat breaking out on his skin from the effort of trying to frame his words properly; but when he put his hand to his forehead to brush the sweat away before it could run into his eyes he seemed dry to the touch, and he was not entirely sure he could feel himself at all. He took a deep breath. "I am Francisco Pizarro!" he roared, letting the name burst desperately from him like water breaching a rotten dam. The echo came back, deep, rumbling,

mocking. Frantheethco. Peetharro. That too. Even his own name, idiotically garbled. "O great God!" he cried. "Saints and angels! More garbled noises. Nothing would come out as it should. He had never known the arts of reading or writing; now it seemed that true speech itself was being taken from him. He began to wonder whether he had been right about this being heaven, supernal radiance or no. There was a curse on his tongue; a demon, perhaps, held it pinched in his claws. Was this hell, then? A very beautiful place, but hell nevertheless? He shrugged. Heaven or hell, it made no difference. He was beginning to grow more calm, beginning to accept and take stock. He knew -- had learned, long ago -- that there was nothing to gain from raging against that which could not be helped, even less from panic in the face of the unknown. He was here, that was all there was to it -- wherever here was -- and he must find a place for himself, and not this place, floating here between nothing and nothing. He had been in hells before, small hells, hells on Earth. That barren isle called Gallo, where the sun cooked you in your own skin and there was nothing to eat but crabs that had the taste of dog-dung. And that dismal swamp at the mouth of the Rio Biru, where the rain fell in rivers and the trees reached down to cut you like swords. And the mountains he had crossed with his army, where the snow was so cold that it burned, and the air went into your throat like a dagger at every breath. He had come forth from those, and they had been worse than this. Here there was no pain and no danger; here there was only soothing light and a strange absence of all discomfort. He began to move forward. He was walking on air. Look, look, he thought, I am walking on air! Then he said it out loud. "I am walking on air," he announced, and laughed at the way the words emerged from him. "Santiago! Walking on air! But why not? I am Pizarro!" He shouted it with all his might, "Pizarro! Pizarro!" and waited for it to come back to him. Peetharro. Peetharro. He laughed. He kept on walking. \* \* \* \* Tanner sat hunched forward in the vast sparkling sphere that was the ninth-floor imaging lab, watching the little figure at the distant center of the holotank strut and preen. Lew Richardson, crouching beside him with both hands thrust into the data gloves so that he could feed instructions to the permutation network, seemed almost not to be breathing -- seemed to be just one more part of the network, in fact. But that was Richardson's way, Tanner thought: total absorption in the task at hand. Tanner envied him that. They were very different sorts of men. Richardson lived for his programming and nothing but his programming. It was his grand passion. Tanner had never quite been able to understand people who were driven by grand passions. Richardson was like some throwback to an earlier age, an age when things had really mattered, an age when you were able to have some faith in the significance of your own endeavors. "How do you like the armor?" Richardson asked. "The armor's very fine, I think. We got it from old engravings. It has real flair." "Just the thing for tropical climates," said Tanner. "A nice tin suit with matching helmet." He coughed and shifted about irritably in his seat. The demonstration had been going on for half an hour without anything that seemed to be of any importance happening -- just the minuscule image of the bearded man in Spanish armor tramping back and forth across the glowing field -- and he was beginning to get impatient. Richardson didn't seem to notice the harshness in Tanner's voice or the restlessness of his movements. He went on making small adjustments. He was a small man himself, neat and precise in dress and appearance, with faded blond hair and pale blue eyes and a thin, straight mouth. Tanner felt huge and shambling beside him. In theory Tanner had authority over Richardson's research projects, but in fact he always had simply permitted Richardson to do as he pleased. This time, though, it might be necessary finally to rein him in a little. This was the twelfth or thirteenth demonstration that Richardson had subjected him to since he had begun fooling around with this historical-simulation business. The others all had been disasters of one kind or another, and Tanner expected that this one would finish the same way. And basically Tanner was growing uneasy about the

project that he once had given his stamp of approval to, so long ago. It was getting harder and harder to go on believing that all this work served any useful purpose. Why had it been allowed to absorb so much of Richardson's group's time and so much of the lab's research budget for so many months? What possible value was it going to have for anybody? What possible use?

It's just a game, Tanner thought. One more desperate meaningless technological stunt, one more pointless pirouette in a meaningless ballet. The expenditure of vast resources on a display of ingenuity for ingenuity's sake and nothing else: now there's decadence for you. The tiny image in the holotank suddenly began to lose color and definition. "Uh-oh,"

Tanner said. "There it goes. Like all the others." But Richardson shook his head. "This time it's different, Harry." "You think?"

"We aren't losing him. He's simply moving around in there of his own volition, getting beyond our tracking parameters. Which means that we've achieved the high level of autonomy that we were shooting for."

"Volition, Lew? Autonomy?" "You know that those are our goals."

"Yes, I know what our goals are supposed to be," said Tanner, with some annoyance. "I'm simply not convinced that a loss of focus is a proof that you've got volition." "Here," Richardson said. "I'll cut in the

stochastic tracking program. He moves freely, we freely follow him." Into the computer ear in his lapel he said, "Give me a gain boost, will you?" He made a quick flicking gesture with his left middle finger to indicate the quantitative level. The little figure in ornate armor and pointed boots

grew sharp again. Tanner could see fine details on the armor, the plumed helmet, the tapering shoulder-pieces, the joints at the elbows, the intricate pommel of his sword. He was marching from left to right in a steady hip-rolling way, like a man who was climbing the tallest mountain in the world and didn't mean to break his stride until he was across the summit. The fact that he was walking in what appeared to be mid-air seemed not to trouble him at all.

"There he is," Richardson said grandly. "We've got him back, all right? The conqueror of Peru, before your very eyes, in the flesh. So to speak."

Tanner nodded. Pizarro, yes, before his very eyes. And he had to admit that what he saw was impressive and even, somehow, moving. Something about the dogged way with which that small armored figure was moving across the gleaming pearly field of the holotank aroused a kind of sympathy in him. That little man was entirely imaginary, but he didn't seem to know that, or if he did he wasn't letting it stop him for a moment: he went plugging on, and on and on, as if he intended actually to get somewhere. Watching that, Tanner was oddly captivated by it, and found himself surprised suddenly to discover that his interest in the entire project was beginning to rekindle.

"Can you make him any bigger?" he asked. "I want to see his face." "I can make him big as life," Richardson said. "Bigger. Any size you like. Here."

He flicked a finger and the hologram of Pizarro expanded instantaneously to a height of about two meters. The Spaniard halted in mid-stride as though he might actually be aware of the imaging change. That can't be possible, Tanner thought. That isn't a living consciousness out there. Or is it?

Pizarro stood poised easily in mid-air, glowering, shading his eyes as if staring into a dazzling glow. There were brilliant streaks of color in the air all around him, like an aurora. He was a tall, lean man in late middle age with a grizzled beard and a hard, angular face. His lips were thin, his nose was sharp, his eyes were cold, shrewd, keen. It seemed to Tanner that those eyes had come to rest on him, and he felt a chill. My

God, Tanner thought, he's real. \* \* \* \* It had been a French program to begin with, something developed at the Centre Mondiale de la Computation in Lyons about the year 2119. The French had some truly splendid minds working in software in those days. They worked up astounding programs, and then nobody did anything with them. That was their version of Century Twenty-Two Malaise.

The French programmers' idea was to use holograms of actual historical personages to dress up the son et lumiere tourist events at the great monuments of their national history. Not just preprogrammed robot



mockups of the old Disneyland kind, which would stand around in front of Notre Dame or the Arc de Triomphe or the Eiffel Tower and deliver canned spiels, but apparent reincarnations of the genuine great ones, who could freely walk and talk and answer questions and make little quips. Imagine Louis XIV demonstrating the fountains of Versailles, they said, or Picasso leading a tour of Paris museums, or Sartre sitting in his Left Bank cafe exchanging existential bons mots with passersby! Napoleon! Joan of Arc! Alexandre Dumas! Perhaps the simulations could do even more than that: perhaps they could be designed so well that they would be able to extend and embellish the achievements of their original lifetimes with new accomplishments, a fresh spate of paintings and novels and works of philosophy and great architectural visions by vanished masters.

The concept was simple enough in essence. Write an intelligencing program that could absorb data, digest it, correlate it, and generate further programs based on what you had given it. No real difficulty there. Then start feeding your program with the collected written works -- if any -- of the person to be simulated: that would provide not only a general sense of his ideas and positions but also of his underlying pattern of approach to situations, his style of thinking -- for le style, after all, est l'homme meme. If no collected works happened to be available, why, find works about the subject by his contemporaries, and use those. Next, toss in the totality of the historical record of the subject's deeds, including all significant subsequent scholarly analyses, making appropriate allowances for conflicts in interpretation -- indeed, taking advantages of such conflicts to generate a richer portrait, full of the ambiguities and contradictions that are the inescapable hallmarks of any human being. Now build in substrata of general cultural data of the proper period so that the subject has a loam of references and vocabulary out of which to create thoughts that are appropriate to his place in time and space. Stir. Et voila! Apply a little sophisticated imaging technology and you had a simulation capable of thinking and conversing and behaving as though it is the actual self after which it was patterned.

Of course, this would require a significant chunk of computer power. But that was no problem, in a world where 150-gigaflops networks were standard laboratory items and ten-year-olds carried pencil-sized computers with capacities far beyond the ponderous mainframes of their great-great-grandparents' day. No, there was no theoretical reason why the French project could not have succeeded. Once the Lyons programmers had worked out the basic intelligencing scheme that was needed to write the rest of the programs, it all should have followed smoothly enough.

Two things went wrong: one rooted in an excess of ambition that may have been a product of the peculiarly French personalities of the original programmers, and the other having to do with an abhorrence of failure typical of the major nations of the mid-twenty-second century, of which France was one. The first was a fatal change of direction that the project underwent in its early phases. The King of Spain was coming to Paris on a visit of state; and the programmers decided that in his honor they would synthesize Don Quixote for him as their initial project. Though the intelligencing program had been designed to simulate only individuals who had actually existed, there seemed no inherent reason why a fictional character as well documented as Don Quixote could not be produced instead. There was Cervantes' lengthy novel; there was ample background data available on the milieu in which Don Quixote supposedly had lived; there was a vast library of critical analysis of the book and of the Don's distinctive and flamboyant personality. Why should bringing Don Quixote to life out of a computer be any different from simulating Louis XIV, say, or Moliere, or Cardinal Richelieu? True, they had all existed once, and the knight of La Mancha was a mere figment; but had Cervantes not provided far more detail about Don Quixote's mind and soul than was known of Richelieu, or Moliere, or Louis XIV?

Indeed he had. The Don -- like Oedipus, like Odysseus, like Othello, like David Copperfield -- had come to have a reality far more profound and tangible than that of most people who had indeed actually lived. Such characters as those had transcended their fictional

origins. But not so far as the computer was concerned. It was able to produce a convincing fabrication of Don Quixote, all right -- a gaunt bizarre holographic figure that had all the right mannerisms, that ranted and raved in the expectable way, that referred knowledgeably to Dulcinea and Rosinante and Mambrino's helmet. The Spanish king was amused and impressed. But to the French the experiment was a failure. They had produced a Don Quixote who was hopelessly locked to the Spain of the late sixteenth century and to the book from which he had sprung. He had no capacity for independent life and thought -- no way to perceive the world that had brought him into being, or to comment on it, or to interact with it. There was nothing new or interesting about that. Any actor could dress up in armor and put on a scraggly beard and recite snatches of Cervantes. What had come forth from the computer, after three years of work, was no more than a predictable reprocessing of what had gone into it, sterile, stale.

Which led the Centre Mondial de la Computation to its next fatal step: abandoning the whole thing. Zut! and the project was cancelled without any further attempts. No simulated Picassos, no simulated Napoleons, no Joans of Arc. The Quixote event had soured everyone and no one had the heart to proceed with the work from there. Suddenly it had the taint of failure about it, and France -- like Germany, like Australia, like the Han Commercial Sphere, like Brazil, like any of the dynamic centers of the modern world, had a horror of failure. Failure was something to be left to the backward nations or the decadent ones -- to the Islamic Socialist Union, say, or the Soviet People's Republic, or to that slumbering giant, the United States of America. So the historic-personage simulation scheme was put aside.

The French thought so little of it, as a matter of fact, that after letting it lie fallow for a few years they licensed it to a bunch of Americans, who had heard about it somehow and felt it might be amusing to play with.

\* \* \* \* "You may really have done it this time," Tanner said.

"Yes. I think we have. After all those false starts." Tanner nodded. How often had he come into this room with hopes high, only to see some botch, some inanity, some depressing bungle? Richardson had always had an explanation. Sherlock Holmes hadn't worked because he was fictional: that was a necessary recheck of the French Quixote project, demonstrating that fictional characters didn't have the right sort of reality texture to take proper advantage of the program, not enough ambiguity, not enough contradiction. King Arthur had failed for the same reason. Julius Caesar? Too far in the past, maybe: unreliable data, bordering on fiction. Moses? Ditto. Einstein? Too complex, perhaps, for the project in its present level of development: they needed more experience first. Queen Elizabeth I? George Washington? Mozart? We're learning more each time, Richardson insisted after each failure. This isn't black magic we're doing, you know. We aren't necromancers, we're programmers, and we have to figure out how to give the program what it needs.

And now Pizarro? "Why do you want to work with him?" Tanner had asked, five or six months earlier. "A ruthless medieval Spanish imperialist, is what I remember from school. A bloodthirsty despoiler of a great culture. A man without morals, honor, faith -- "

"You may be doing him an injustice," said Richardson. "He's had a bad press for centuries. And there are things about him that fascinate me." "Such as?"

"His drive. His courage. His absolute confidence. The other side of ruthlessness, the good side of it, is a total concentration on your task, an utter unwillingness to be stopped by any obstacle. Whether or not you approve of the things he accomplished, you have to admire a man who -- "

"All right," Tanner said, abruptly growing weary of the whole enterprise. "Do Pizarro. Whatever you want." The months had passed. Richardson gave him vague progress reports, nothing to arouse much hope. But now Tanner stared at the tiny strutting figure in the holotank and the conviction began to grow in him that Richardson finally had figured out how to use the simulation program as it was meant to be used.

"So you've actually recreated him, you think? Someone who lived -- what, five hundred years ago?"

"He died in 1541," said Richardson.

"Almost six hundred,

then." "And he's not like the others -- not simply a recreation of a great figure out of the past who can run through a set of pre-programmed speeches. What we've got here, if I'm right, is an artificially generated intelligence which can think for itself in modes other than the ones its programmers think in. Which has more information available to itself, in other words, than we've provided it with. That would be the real accomplishment. That's the fundamental philosophical leap that we were going for when we first got involved with this project. To use the program to give us new programs that are capable of true autonomous thought -- a program that can think like Pizarro, instead of like Lew Richardson's idea of some historian's idea of how Pizarro might have thought." "Yes," Tanner said.

"Which means we won't just get back the expectable, the predictable. There'll be surprises. There's no way to learn anything, you know, except through surprises. The sudden combination of known components into something brand new. And that's what I think we've managed to bring off here, at long last. Harry, it may be the biggest artificial-intelligence breakthrough ever achieved." Tanner pondered that. Was it so? Had they truly done it? And if they had --

Something new and troubling was beginning to occur to him, much later in the game than it should have. Tanner stared at the holographic figure floating in the center of the tank, that fierce old man with the harsh face and the cold, cruel eyes. He thought about what sort of man he must have been -- the man after whom this image had been modeled. A man who was willing to land in South America at age fifty or sixty or whatever he had been, an ignorant illiterate Spanish peasant wearing a suit of ill-fitting armor and waving a rusty sword, and set out to conquer a great empire of millions of people spreading over thousands of miles. Tanner wondered what sort of man would be capable of carrying out a thing like that. Now that man's eyes were staring into his own and it was a struggle to meet so implacable a gaze. After a moment he looked away.

His left leg began to quiver. He glanced uneasily at Richardson. "Look at those eyes, Lew. Christ, they're scary!" "I know. I designed them myself, from the old prints." "Do you think he's seeing us right now? Can he do that?"

"All he is is software, Harry." "He seemed to know it when you expanded the image." Richardson shrugged. "He's very good software. I tell you, he's got autonomy, he's got volition. He's got an electronic mind, is what I'm saying. He may have perceived a transient voltage kick. But there are limits to his perceptions, all the same. I don't think there's any way that he can see anything that's outside the holotank unless it's fed to him in the form of data he can process, which hasn't been done." "You don't think? You aren't sure?" "Harry. Please."

"This man conquered the entire enormous Incan empire with fifty soldiers, didn't he?" "In fact I believe it was more like a hundred and fifty."

"Fifty, a hundred fifty, what's the difference? Who knows what you've actually got here? What if you did an even better job than you suspect?"

"What are you saying?" "What I'm saying is, I'm uneasy all of a sudden. For a long time I didn't think this project was going to produce anything at all. Suddenly I'm starting to think that maybe it's going to produce more than we can handle. I don't want any of your goddamned simulations walking out of the tank and conquering us." Richardson turned to him. His face was flushed, but he was grinning. "Harry, Harry!

For God's sake! Five minutes ago you didn't think we had anything at all here except a tiny picture that wasn't even in focus. Now you've gone so far the other way that you're imagining the worst kind of -- " "I see his eyes, Lew. I'm worried that his eyes see me." "Those aren't real eyes you're looking at. What you see is nothing but a graphics program projected into a holotank. There's no visual capacity there as you understand the concept. His eyes will see you only if I want them to. Right now they don't."

"But you can make them see me?" "I can make them see anything I want them to see. I created him, Harry." "With volition. With autonomy." "After all this time you start worrying now about these things?"

"It's my neck on the line if something that you guys on the technical side make runs amok. This autonomy thing suddenly troubles me." "I'm still the one with the data gloves," Richardson said. "I twitch my fingers and he dances. That's not really Pizarro down there, remember. And that's no Frankenstein monster either. It's just a simulation. It's just so much data, just a bunch of electromagnetic impulses that I can shut off with one movement of my pinkie." "Do it, then." "Shut him off? But I haven't begun to show you -- " "Shut him off, and then turn him on," Tanner said. Richardson looked bothered. "If you say so, Harry." He moved a finger. The image of Pizarro vanished from the holotank. Swirling gray mists moved in it for a moment, and then all was white wool. Tanner felt a quick jolt of guilt, as though he had just ordered the execution of the man in the medieval armor. Richardson gestured again, and color flashed across the tank, and then Pizarro reappeared. "I just wanted to see how much autonomy your little guy really has," said Tanner. "Whether he was quick enough to head you off and escape into some other channel before you could cut his power." "You really don't understand how this works at all, do you, Harry?" "I just wanted to see," said Tanner again, sullenly. After a moment's silence he said, "Do you ever feel like God?" "Like God?" "You breathed life in. Life of a sort, anyway. But you breathed free will in, too. That's what this experiment is all about, isn't it? All your talk about volition and autonomy? You're trying to recreate a human mind -- which means to create it all over again -- a mind that can think in its own special way, and come up with its own unique responses to situations, which will not necessarily be the responses that its programmers might anticipate, in fact almost certainly will not be, and which not might be all that desirable or beneficial, either, and you simply have to allow for that risk, just as God, once he gave free will to mankind, knew that He was likely to see all manner of evil deeds being performed by His creations as they exercised that free will -- " "Please, Harry -- " "Listen, is it possible for me to talk with your Pizarro?" "Why?" "By way of finding out what you've got there. To get some first-hand knowledge of what the project has accomplished. Or you could say I just want to test the quality of the simulation. Whatever. I'd feel more a part of this thing, more aware of what it's all about in here, if I could have some direct contact with him. Would it be all right if I did that?" "Yes. Of course." "Do I have to talk to him in Spanish?" "In any language you like. There's an interface, after all. He'll think it's his own language coming in, no matter what, sixteenth-century Spanish. And he'll answer you in what seems like Spanish to him, but you'll hear it in English." "Are you sure?" "Of course." "And you don't mind if I make contact with him?" "Whatever you like." "It won't upset his calibration, or anything?" "It won't do any harm at all, Harry." "Fine. Let me talk to him, then." \* \* \* \* There was a disturbance in the air ahead, a shifting, a swirling, like a little whirlwind. Pizarro halted and watched it for a moment, wondering what was coming next. A demon arriving to torment him, maybe. Or an angel. Whatever it was, he was ready for it. Then a voice out of the whirlwind said, in that same comically exaggerated Castilian Spanish that Pizarro himself had found himself speaking a little while before, "Can you hear me?" "I hear you, yes. I don't see you. Where are you?" "Right in front of you. Wait a second. I'll show you." Out of the whirlwind came a strange face that hovered in the middle of nowhere, a face without a body, a lean face, close-shaven, no beard at all, no mustache, the hair cut very short, dark eyes set close together. He had never seen a face like that before. "What are you?" Pizarro asked. "A demon or an angel?" "Neither one." Indeed he didn't sound very demonic. "A man, just like you." "Not much like me, I think. Is a face all there is to you, or do you have a body too?" "All you see of me is a face?" "Yes." "Wait a second." "I will wait as long as I have to. I have plenty of time." The face disappeared. Then it returned, attached

to the body of a big, wide-shouldered man who was wearing a long loose gray robe, something like a priest's cassock, but much more ornate, with points of glowing light gleaming on it everywhere. Then the body vanished and Pizarro could see only the face again. He could make no sense out of any of this. He began to understand how the Indians must have felt when the first Spaniards came over the horizon, riding horses, carrying guns, wearing armor.

"You are very strange. Are you an Englishman, maybe?" "American."

"Ah," Pizarro said, as though that made things better. "An American. And what is that?" The face wavered and blurred for a moment. There was mysterious new agitation in the thick white clouds surrounding it. Then the face grew steady and said, "America is a country north of Peru. A very large country, where many people live."

"You mean New Spain, which was Mexico, where my kinsman Cortes is Captain-General?" "North of Mexico. Far to the north of it."

Pizarro shrugged. "I know nothing of those places. Or not very much. There is an island called Florida, yes? And stories of cities of gold, but I think they are only stories. I found the gold, in Peru. Enough to choke on, I found. Tell me this, am I in heaven now?" "No."

"Then this is hell?" "Not that, either. Where you are -- it's very difficult to explain, actually -- " "I am in America." "Yes. In America, yes." "And am I dead?" There was silence for a moment.

"No, not dead," the voice said uneasily.

"You are lying to me, I think." "How could we be speaking with each other, if you were dead?" Pizarro laughed hoarsely. "Are you asking me? I understand nothing of what is happening to me in this place. Where are my priests? Where is my page? Send me my brother!" He glared. "Well? Why don't you get them for me?"

"They aren't here. You're here all by yourself, Don Francisco."

"In America. All by myself in your America. Show me your America, then. Is there such a place? Is America all clouds and whorls of light? Where is America? Let me see America. Prove to me that I am in America."

There was another silence, longer than the last. Then the face disappeared and the wall of white cloud began to boil and churn more fiercely than before. Pizarro stared into the midst of it, feeling a mingled sense of curiosity and annoyance. The face did not reappear. He saw nothing at all. He was being toyed with. He was a prisoner in some strange place and they were treating him like a child, like a dog, like -- like an Indian. Perhaps this was the retribution for what he had done to King Atahualpa, then, that fine noble foolish man who had given himself up to him in all innocence, and whom he had put to death so that he might have the gold of Atahualpa's kingdom.

Well, so be it, Pizarro thought. Atahualpa accepted all that befell him without complaint and without fear, and so will I. Christ will be my guardian, and if there is no Christ, well, then I will have no guardian, and so be it. So be it.

The voice out of the whirlwind said suddenly, "Look, Don Francisco. This is America." A picture appeared on the wall of cloud. It was a kind of picture Pizarro had never before encountered or even imagined, one that seemed to open before him like a gate and sweep him in and carry him along through a vista of changing scenes depicted in brilliant, vivid bursts of color. It was like flying high above the land, looking down on an infinite scroll of miracles. He saw vast cities without walls, roadways that unrolled like endless skeins of white ribbon, huge lakes, mighty rivers, gigantic mountains, everything speeding past him so swiftly that he could scarcely absorb any of it. In moments it all became chaotic in his mind: the buildings taller than the highest cathedral spire, the swarming masses of people, the shining metal chariots without beasts to draw them, the stupendous landscapes, the close-packed complexity of it all. Watching all this, he felt the fine old hunger taking possession of him again: he wanted to grasp this strange vast place, and seize it, and clutch it close, and ransack it for all it was worth. But the thought of that was overwhelming. His eyes grew glassy and his heart began to pound so terrifyingly that he supposed he would be able to feel it thumping if he put his hand to the front of his armor. He turned away, muttering, "Enough."

Enough." The terrifying picture vanished. Gradually the clamor of his heart subsided. Then he began to laugh. "Peru!" he cried. "Peru was nothing, next to your America! Peru was a hole! Peru was mud! How ignorant I was! I went to Peru, when there was America, ten thousand times as grand! I wonder what I could find, in America." He smacked his lips and winked. Then, chuckling, he said, "But don't be afraid. I won't try to conquer your America. I'm too old for that now. And perhaps America would have been too much for me, even before. Perhaps." He grinned savagely at the troubled staring face of the short-haired beardless man, the American. "I really am dead, is this not so? I feel no hunger, I feel no pain, no thirst, when I put my hand to my body I do not feel even my body. I am like one who lies dreaming. But this is no dream. Am I a ghost?" "Not -- exactly." "Not exactly a ghost! Not exactly! No one with half the brains of a pig would talk like that. What is that supposed to mean?" "It's not easy explaining it in words you would understand, Don Francisco." "No, of course not. I am very stupid, as everyone knows, and that is why I conquered Peru, because I was so very stupid. But let it pass. I am not exactly a ghost, but I am dead all the same, right?" "Well -- " "I am dead, yes. But somehow I have not gone to hell or even to purgatory but I am still in the world, only it is much later now. I have slept as the dead sleep, and now I have awakened in some year that is far beyond my time, and it is the time of America. Is this not so? Who is king now? Who is pope? What year is this? 1750? 1800?" "The year 2130," the face said, after some hesitation. "Ah." Pizarro tugged thoughtfully at his lower lip. "And the king? Who is king?" A long pause. "Alfonso is his name," said the face. "Alfonso? The kings of Aragon were called Alfonso. The father of Ferdinand, he was Alfonso. Alfonso V, he was." "Alfonso XIX is King of Spain now." "Ah. Ah. And the pope? Who is pope?" A pause again. Not to know the name of the pope, immediately upon being asked? How strange. Demon or no, this was a fool. "Pius," said the voice, when some time had passed. "Pius XVI." "The sixteenth Pius," said Pizarro somberly. "Jesus and Mary, the sixteenth Pius! What has become of me? Long dead, is what I am. Still unwashed of all my sins. I can feel them clinging to my skin like mud, still. And you are a sorcerer, you American, and you have brought me to life again. Eh? Eh? Is that not so?" "It is something like that, Don Francisco," the face admitted. "So you speak your Spanish strangely because you no longer understand the right way of speaking it. Eh? Even I speak Spanish in a strange way, and I speak it in a voice that does not sound like my own. No one speaks Spanish any more, eh? Eh? Only American, they speak. Eh? But you try to speak Spanish, only it comes out stupidly. And you have caused me to speak the same way, thinking it is the way I spoke, though you are wrong. Well, you can do miracles, but I suppose you can't do everything perfectly, even in this land of miracles of the year 2130. Eh? Eh?" Pizarro leaned forward intently. "What do you say? You thought I was a fool, because I don't have reading and writing? I am not so ignorant, eh? I understand things quickly." "You understand very quickly indeed." "But you have knowledge of many things that are unknown to me. You must know the manner of my death, for example. How strange that is, talking to you of the manner of my death, but you must know it, eh? When did it come to me? And how? Did it come in my sleep? No, no, how could that be? They die in their sleep in Spain, but not in Peru. How was it, then? I was set upon by cowards, was I? Some brother of Atahualpa, falling upon me as I stepped out of my house? A slave sent by the Inca Manco, or one of those others? No. No. The Indians would not harm me, for all that I did to them. It was the young Almagro who took me down, was it not, in vengeance for his father, or Juan de Herrada, eh? or perhaps even Picado, my own secretary -- no, not Picado, he was my man, always -- but maybe Alvarado, the young one, Diego -- well, one of those, and it would have been sudden, very sudden or I would have been able to stop them -- am I right, am I speaking the truth? Tell me. You know these things. Tell me of the manner

of my dying." There was no answer. Pizarro shaded his eyes and peered into the dazzling pearly whiteness. He was no longer able to see the face of the American. "Are you there?" Pizarro said. "Where have you gone? Were you only a dream? American! American! Where have you gone?" \* \* \*

\* The break in contact was jolting. Tanner sat rigid, hands trembling, lips tightly clamped. Pizarro, in the holotank, was no more than a distant little streak of color now, no larger than his thumb, gesticulating amid the swirling clouds. The vitality of him, the arrogance, the fierce probing curiosity, the powerful hatreds and jealousies, the strength that had come from vast ventures recklessly conceived and desperately seen through to triumph, all the things that were Francisco Pizarro, all that Tanner had felt an instant before -- all that had vanished at the flick of a finger. After a moment or two

Tanner felt the shock beginning to ease. He turned toward Richardson. "What happened?" "I had to pull you out of there. I didn't want you telling him anything about how he died." "I don't know how he died."

"Well, neither does he, and I didn't want to chance it that you did. There's no predicting what sort of psychological impact that kind of knowledge might have on him." "You talk about him as though he's alive."

"Isn't he?" Richardson said. "If I said a thing like that, you'd tell me that I was being ignorant and unscientific." Richardson smiled faintly. "You're right. But somehow I trust myself to know what I'm saying when I say that he's alive. I know I don't mean it literally and I'm not sure about you. What did you think of him, anyway?" "He's amazing," Tanner said. "Really amazing. The strength of him -- I could feel it pouring out at

me in waves. And his mind! So quick, the way he picked up on everything. Guessing that he must be in the future. Wanting to know what number pope was in office. Wanting to see what America looked like. And the cockiness of him! Telling me that he's not up to the conquest of America, that he might have tried for it instead of Peru a few years earlier, but not now, now he's a little too old for that. Incredible! Nothing could faze him for long, even when he realized that he must have been dead for a long time. Wanting to know how he died, even!" Tanner frowned. "What age did you make him, anyway, when you put this program together?" "About sixty. Five or six years after the conquest, and a year or two before he died. At the height of his power, that is."

"I suppose you couldn't have let him have any knowledge of his actual death. That way he'd be too much like some kind of a ghost." "That's what we thought. We set the cutoff at a time when he had done everything that he had set out to do, when he was the complete Pizarro. But before the end. He didn't need to know about that. Nobody does. That's why I had to yank you, you see? In case you knew. And started to tell him."

Tanner shook his head. "If I ever knew, I've forgotten it. How did it happen?" "Exactly as he guessed: at the hands of his own comrades." "So he saw it coming." "At the age we made him, he already knew that a civil war had started in South America, that the conquistadores were quarreling over the division of the spoils. We built that much into him. He knows that his partner Almagro has turned against him and been beaten in battle, and that they've executed him. What he doesn't know, but obviously can expect, is that Almagro's friends are going to break into his house and try to kill him. He's got it all figured out pretty much as it's going to happen. As it did happen, I should say."

"Incredible. To be that shrewd." "He was a son of a bitch, yes. But he was a genius too."

"Was he, really? Or is it that you made him one when you set up the program for him?" "All we put in were the objective details of his life, patterns of event and response. Plus an overlay of commentary by others, his contemporaries and later historians familiar with the record, providing an extra dimension of character density. Put in enough of that kind of stuff and apparently they add up to the whole personality. It isn't my personality or that of anybody else who worked on this project, Harry. When you put in Pizarro's set of events and responses you wind up getting Pizarro. You get the ruthlessness and you get the brilliance. Put in a different set, you get



someone else. And what we've finally seen, this time, is that when we do our work right we get something out of the computer that's bigger than the sum of what we put in." "Are you sure?" Richardson said, "Did you notice that he complained about the Spanish that he thought you were speaking?" "Yes. He said that it sounded strange, that nobody seemed to know how to speak proper Spanish any more. I didn't quite follow that. Does the interface you built speak lousy Spanish?" "Evidently it speaks lousy sixteenth-century Spanish," Richardson said. "Nobody knows what sixteenth-century Spanish actually sounded like. We can only guess. Apparently we didn't guess very well." "But how would he know? You synthesized him in the first place! If you don't know how Spanish sounded in his time, how would he? All he should know about Spanish, or about anything, is what you put into him." "Exactly," Richardson said. "But that doesn't make any sense, Lew!" "He also said that the Spanish he heard himself speaking was no good, and that his own voice didn't sound right to him either. That we had caused him to speak this way, thinking that was how he actually spoke, but we were wrong." "How could he possibly know what his voice really sounded like, if all he is is a simulation put together by people who don't have the slightest notion of what his voice really -- " "I don't have any idea," said Richardson quietly. "But he does know." "Does he? Or is this just some diabolical Pizarro-like game that he's playing to unsettle us, because that's in his character as you devised it?" "I think he does know," Richardson said. "Where's he finding it out, then?" "It's there. We don't know where, but he does. It's somewhere in the data that we put through the permutation network, even if we don't know it and even though we couldn't find it now if we set out to look for it. He can find it. He can't manufacture that kind of knowledge by magic, but he can assemble what look to us like seemingly irrelevant bits and come up with new information leading to a conclusion which is meaningful to him. That's what we mean by artificial intelligence, Harry. We've finally got a program that works something like the human brain: by leaps of intuition so sudden and broad that they seem inexplicable and non-quantifiable, even if they really aren't. We've fed in enough stuff so that he can assimilate a whole stew of ostensibly unrelated data and come up with new information. We don't just have a ventriloquist's dummy in that tank. We've got something that thinks it's Pizarro and thinks like Pizarro and knows things that Pizarro knew and we don't. Which means we've accomplished the qualitative jump in artificial intelligence capacity that we set out to achieve with this project. It's awesome. I get shivers down my back when I think about it." "I do too," Tanner said. "But not so much from awe as fear." "Fear?" "Knowing now that he has capabilities beyond those he was programmed for, how can you be so absolutely certain that he can't commandeer your network somehow and get himself loose?" "It's technically impossible. All he is is electromagnetic impulses. I can pull the plug on him any time I like. There's nothing to panic over here. Believe me, Harry." "I'm trying to." "I can show you the schematics. We've got a phenomenal simulation in that computer, yes. But it's still only a simulation. It isn't a vampire, it isn't a werewolf, it isn't anything supernatural. It's just the best damned computer simulation anyone's ever made." "It makes me uneasy. He makes me uneasy." "He should. The power of the man, the indomitable nature of him -- why do you think I summoned him up, Harry? He's got something that we don't understand in this country any more. I want us to study him. I want us to try to learn what that kind of drive and determination is really like. Now that you've talked to him, now that you've touched his spirit, of course you're shaken up by him. He radiates tremendous confidence. He radiates fantastic faith in himself. That kind of man can achieve anything he wants -- even conquer the whole Inca empire with a hundred fifty men, or however many it was. But I'm not frightened of what we've put together here. And you shouldn't be either. We should all be damned proud of it. You as well as the people on the technical side. And you will be, too."

"I hope you're right," Tanner said. "You'll see." For a long moment Tanner stared in silence at the holotank, where the image of Pizarro had been. "Okay," said Tanner finally. "Maybe I'm overreacting. Maybe I'm sounding like the ignoramus layman that I am. I'll take it on faith that you'll be able to keep your phantoms in their boxes."

"We will," Richardson said. "Let's hope so. All right," said Tanner. "So what's your next move?" Richardson looked puzzled. "My next move?" "With this project? Where does it go from here?" Hesitantly Richardson said, "There's no formal proposal yet. We thought we'd wait until we had approval from you on the initial phase of the work, and then --" "How does this sound?" Tanner asked. "I'd like to see you start in on another simulation right away." "Well -- yes, yes, of course --" "And when you've got him worked up, Lew, would it be feasible for you to put him right there in the tank with Pizarro?" Richardson looked startled. "To have a sort of dialog with him, you mean?" "Yes." "I suppose we could do that," Richardson said cautiously. "Should do that. Yes. Yes. A very interesting suggestion, as a matter of fact." He ventured an uneasy smile. Up till now Tanner had kept in the background of this project, a mere management functionary, an observer, virtually an outsider. This was something new, his interjecting himself into the planning process, and plainly Richardson didn't know what to make of it. Tanner watched him fidget. After a little pause Richardson said, "Was there anyone particular you had in mind for us to try next?" "Is that new parallax thing of yours ready to try?" Tanner asked. "The one that's supposed to compensate for time distortion and myth contamination?" "Just about. But we haven't tested --" "Good," Tanner said. "Here's your chance. What about trying for Socrates?" \* \* \* \* There was billowing whiteness below him, and on every side, as though all the world were made of fleece. He wondered if it might be snow. That was not something he was really familiar with. It snowed once in a great while in Athens, yes, but usually only a light dusting that melted in the morning sun. Of course he had seen snow aplenty when he had been up north in the war, at Potidaea, in the time of Pericles. But that had been long ago; and that stuff, as best he remembered it, had not been much like this. There was no quality of coldness about the whiteness that surrounded him now. It could just as readily be great banks of clouds. But what would clouds be doing below him? Clouds, he thought, are mere vapor, air and water, no substance to them at all. Their natural place was overhead. Clouds that gathered at one's feet had no true quality of cloudness about them. Snow that had no coldness? Clouds that had no buoyancy? Nothing in this place seemed to possess any quality that was proper to itself in this place, including himself. He seemed to be walking, but his feet touched nothing at all. It was more like moving through air. But how could one move in the air? Aristophanes, in that mercilessly mocking play of his, had sent him floating through the clouds suspended in a basket, and made him say things like, "I am traversing the air and contemplating the sun." That was Aristophanes' way of playing with him, and he had not been seriously upset, though his friends had been very hurt on his behalf. Still, that was only a play. This felt real, insofar as it felt like anything at all.

Perhaps he was dreaming, and the nature of his dream was that he thought he was really doing the things he had done in Aristophanes' play. What was that lovely line? "I have to suspend my brain and mingle the subtle essence of my mind with this air, which is of the same nature, in order clearly to penetrate the things of heaven." Good old Aristophanes! Nothing was sacred to him! Except, of course, those things that were truly sacred, such as wisdom, truth, virtue. "I would have discovered nothing if I had remained on the ground and pondered from below the things that are above: for the earth by its force attracts the sap of the mind to itself. It's the same way with watercress." And Socrates began to laugh. He held his hands before him and studied them, the short sturdy fingers, the thick powerful wrists. His hands, yes. His old plain hands that had stood him in good stead all his

life, when he had worked as a stonemason as his father had, when he had fought in his city's wars, when he had trained at the gymnasium. But now when he touched them to his face he felt nothing. There should be a chin here, a forehead, yes, a blunt stubby nose, thick lips; but there was nothing. He was touching air. He could put his hand right through the place where his face should be. He could put one hand against the other, and press with all his might, and feel nothing.

This is a very strange place indeed, he thought. Perhaps it is that place of pure forms that young Plato liked to speculate about, where everything is perfect and nothing is quite real. Those are ideal clouds all around me, not real ones. This is ideal air upon which I walk. I myself am the ideal Socrates, liberated from my coarse ordinary body. Could it be? Well, maybe so. He stood for a while, considering that possibility. The thought came to him that this might be the life after life, in which case he might meet some of the gods, if there were any gods in the first place, and if he could manage to find them. I would like that, he thought. Perhaps they would be willing to speak with me. Athena would discourse with me on wisdom, or Hermes on speed, or Ares on the nature of courage, or Zeus on -- well, whatever Zeus cared to speak on. Of course I would seem to be the merest fool to them, but that would be all right: anyone who expects to hold discourse with the gods as though he were their equal is a fool. I have no such illusion. If there are gods at all, surely they are far superior to me in all respects, for otherwise why would men regard them as gods?

Of course he had serious doubts that the gods existed at all. But if they did, it was reasonable to think that they might be found in a place such as this. He looked up. The sky was radiant with brilliant golden light. He took a deep breath and smiled and set out across the fleecy nothingness of this airy world to see if he could find the gods.

\* \* \* \* Tanner said, "What do you think now? Still so pessimistic?"

"It's too early to say," said Richardson, looking glum.

"He looks like Socrates, doesn't he?"

"That was the easy part.

We've got plenty of descriptions of Socrates that came down from people who knew him, the flat wide nose, the bald head, the thick lips, the short neck. A standard Socrates face that everybody recognizes, just as they do Sherlock Holmes, or Don Quixote. So that's how we made him look. It doesn't signify anything important. It's what's going on inside his head that'll determine whether we really have Socrates."

"He seems calm and good-humored as he wanders around in there. The way a philosopher should."

"Pizarro

seemed just as much of a philosopher when we turned him loose in the tank."

"Pizarro may be just as much of a philosopher," Tanner said. "Neither man's the sort who'd be likely to panic if he found himself in some mysterious place." Richardson's negativism was beginning to bother him. It was as if the two men had exchanged places: Richardson now uncertain of the range and power of his own program, Tanner pushing the way on and on toward bigger and better things.

Bleakly Richardson said, "I'm still pretty skeptical. We've tried the new parallax filters, yes. But I'm afraid we're going to run into the same problem the French did with Don Quixote, and that we did with Holmes and Moses and Caesar. There's too much contamination of the data by myth and fantasy. The Socrates who has come down to us is as much fictional as real, or maybe all fictional. For all we know, Plato made up everything we think we know about him, the same way Conan Doyle made up Holmes. And what we're going to get, I'm afraid, will be something second-hand, something lifeless, something lacking in the spark of self-directed intelligence that we're after."

"But the new filters -- "

"Perhaps. Perhaps."

Tanner shook his head stubbornly. "Holmes and Don Quixote are fiction through and through. They exist in only one dimension, constructed for us by their authors. You cut through the distortions and fantasies of later readers and commentators and all you find underneath is a made-up character. A lot of Socrates may have been invented by Plato for his own purposes, but a lot wasn't. He really existed. He took an actual part in civic activities in fifth-century Athens. He figures in books by a lot of other contemporaries of

his besides Plato's dialogues. That gives us the parallax you're looking for, doesn't it -- the view of him from more than one viewpoint?" "Maybe it does. Maybe not. We got nowhere with Moses. Was he fictional?" "Who can say? All you had to go by was the Bible. And a ton of Biblical commentary, for whatever that was worth. Not much, apparently." "And Caesar? You're not going to tell me that Caesar wasn't real," said Richardson. "But what we have of him is evidently contaminated with myth. When we synthesized him we got nothing but a caricature, and I don't have to remind you how fast even that broke down into sheer gibberish." "Not relevant," Tanner said. "Caesar was early in the project. You know much more about what you're doing now. I think this is going to work." Richardson's dogged pessimism, Tanner decided, must be a defense mechanism, designed to insulate himself against the possibility of a new failure. Socrates, after all, hadn't been Richardson's own choice. And this was the first time he had used these new enhancement methods, the parallax program that was the latest refinement of the process. Tanner looked at him. Richardson remained silent. "Go on," Tanner said. "Bring up Pizarro and let the two of them talk to each other. Then we'll find out what sort of Socrates you've conjured up here." \* \* \* \* Once again there was a disturbance in the distance, a little dark blur on the pearly horizon, a blotch, a flaw in the gleaming whiteness. Another demon is arriving, Pizarro thought. Or perhaps it is the same one as before, the American, the one who liked to show himself only as a face, with short hair and no beard. But as this one drew closer Pizarro saw that he was different from the last, short and stocky, with broad shoulders and a deep chest. He was nearly bald and his thick beard was coarse and unkempt. He looked old, at least sixty, maybe sixty-five. He looked very ugly, too, with bulging eyes and a flat nose that had wide, flaring nostrils, and a neck so short that his oversized head seemed to sprout straight from his trunk. All he wore was a thin, ragged brown robe. His feet were bare. "You, there," Pizarro called out. "You! Demon! Are you also an American, demon?" "Your pardon. An Athenian, did you say?" "American is what I said. That's what the last one was. Is that where you come from too, demon? America?" A shrug. "No, I think not. I am of Athens." There was a curious mocking twinkle in the demon's eyes. "A Greek? This demon is a Greek?" "I am of Athens," the ugly one said again. "My name is Socrates, the son of Sophroniscus. I could not tell you what a Greek is, so perhaps I may be one, but I think not, unless a Greek is what you call a man of Athens." He spoke in a slow, plodding way, like one who was exceedingly stupid. Pizarro had sometimes met men like this before, and in his experience they were generally not as stupid as they wanted to be taken for. He felt caution rising in him. "And I am no demon, but just a plain man: very plain, as you can easily see." Pizarro snorted. "You like to chop words, do you?" "It is not the worst of amusements, my friend," said the other, and put his hands together behind his back in the most casual way, and stood there calmly, smiling, looking off into the distance, rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet. \* \* \*

\* "Well?" Tanner said. "Do we have Socrates or not? I say that's the genuine article there." Richardson looked up and nodded. He seemed relieved and quizzical both at once. "So far so good, I have to say. He's coming through real and true." "Yes." "We may actually have worked past the problem of information contamination that ruined some of the earlier simulations. We're not getting any of the signal degradation we encountered then." "He's some character, isn't he?" Tanner said. "I liked the way he just walked right up to Pizarro without the slightest sign of uneasiness. He's not at all afraid of him." "Why should he be?" Richardson asked. "Wouldn't you? If you were walking along through God knows what kind of unearthly place, not knowing where you were or how you got there, and suddenly you saw a ferocious-looking bastard like Pizarro standing in front of you wearing full armor and carrying a sword --" Tanner shook his head. "Well, maybe not. He's Socrates, after all, and Socrates wasn't afraid of anything

except boredom." "And Pizarro's just a simulation. Nothing but software." "So you've been telling me all along. But Socrates doesn't know that." "True," Richardson said. He seemed lost in thought a moment. "Perhaps there is some risk." "Huh?" "If our Socrates is anything like the one in Plato, and he surely ought to be, then he's capable of making a considerable pest of himself. Pizarro may not care for Socrates' little verbal games. If he doesn't feel like playing, I suppose there's a theoretical possibility that he'll engage in some sort of aggressive response." That took Tanner by surprise. He swung around and said, "Are you telling me that there's some way he can harm Socrates?" "Who knows?" said Richardson. "In the real world one program can certainly crash another one. Maybe one simulation can be dangerous to another one. This is all new territory for all of us, Harry. Including the people in the tank."

\* \* \* \* The tall grizzled-looking man, said, scowling, "You tell me you're an Athenian, but not a Greek. What sense am I supposed to make of that? I could ask Pedro de Candia, I guess, who is a Greek but not an Athenian. But he's not here. Perhaps you're just a fool, eh? Or you think I am." "I have no idea what you are. Could it be that you are a god?" "A god?"

"Yes," Socrates said. He studied the other impassively. His face was harsh, his gaze was cold. "Perhaps you are Ares. You have a fierce warlike look about you, and you wear armor, but not such armor as I have ever seen. This place is so strange that it might well be the abode of the gods, and that could be a god's armor you wear, I suppose. If you are Ares, then I salute you with the respect that is due you. I am Socrates of Athens, the stonemason's son." "You talk a lot of nonsense. I don't know your Ares."

"Why, the god of war, of course! Everyone knows that. Except barbarians, that is. Are you a barbarian, then? You sound like one, I must say -- but then, I seem to sound like a barbarian myself, and I've spoken the tongue of Hellas all my life. There are many mysteries here, indeed."

\* \* \* \* "Your language problem again," Tanner said. "Couldn't you even get classical Greek to come out right? Or are they both speaking Spanish to each other?" "Pizarro thinks they're speaking Spanish. Socrates thinks they're speaking Greek. And of course the Greek is off. We don't know how anything that was spoken before the age of recordings sounded. All we can do is guess." "But can't you --" "Shhh," Richardson said.

\* \* \* \* Pizarro said, "I may be a bastard, but I'm no barbarian, fellow, so curb your tongue. And let's have no more blasphemy out of you either." "If I blaspheme, forgive me. It is in innocence. Tell me where I trespass, and I will not do it again." "This crazy talk of gods. Of my being a god. I'd expect a heathen to talk like that, but not a Greek. But maybe you're a heathen kind of Greek, and not to be blamed. It's heathens who see gods everywhere. Do I look like a god to you? I am Francisco Pizarro, of Trujillo in Estremadura, the son of the famous soldier Gonzalo Pizarro, colonel of infantry, who served in the wars of Gonzalo de Cordova whom men call the Great Captain. I have fought some wars myself." "Then you are not a god but simply a soldier? Good. I too have been a soldier. I am more at ease with soldiers than with gods, as most people are, I would think."

"A soldier? You?" Pizarro smiled. This shabby ordinary little man, more bedraggled-looking than any self-respecting groom would be, a soldier? "In which wars?" "The wars of Athens. I fought at Potidaea, where the Corinthians were making trouble, and withholding the tribute that was due us. It was very cold there, and the siege was long and bleak, but we did our duty. I fought again some years later at Delium against the Boeotians. Laches was our general then, but it went badly for us, and we did our best fighting in retreat. And then," Socrates said, "when Brasidas was in Amphipolis, and they sent Cleon to drive him out, I --" "Enough," said Pizarro with an impatient wave of his hand. "These wars are unknown to me." A private soldier, a man of the ranks, no doubt. "Well, then this is the place where they send dead soldiers, I suppose." "Are we dead, then?" "Long ago. There's an Alfonso who's king, and a Pius who's pope, and you wouldn't

believe their numbers. Pius the Sixteenth, I think the demon said. And the American said also that it is the year 2130. The last year that I can remember was 1539. What about you?" The one who called himself Socrates shrugged again. "In Athens we use a different reckoning. But let us say, for argument's sake, that we are dead. I think that is very likely, considering what sort of place this seems to be, and how airy I find my body to be. So we have died, and this is the life after life. I wonder: is this a place where virtuous men are sent, or those who were not virtuous? Or do all men go to the same place after death, whether they were virtuous or not? What would you say?" "I haven't figured that out yet," said Pizarro. "Well, were you virtuous in your life, or not?" "Did I sin, you mean?" "Yes, we could use that word." "Did I sin, he wants to know," said Pizarro, amazed. "He asks, Was I a sinner? Did I live a virtuous life? What business is that of his?" "Humor me," said Socrates. "For the sake of the argument, if you will, allow me a few small questions -- " \* \* \*

\* "So it's starting," Tanner said. "You see? You really did do it! Socrates is drawing him into a dialog!" Richardson's eyes were glowing. "He is, yes. How marvelous this is, Harry!" "Socrates is going to talk rings around him." "I'm not so sure of that," Richardson said. \* \* \*

\* "I gave as good as I got," said Pizarro. "If I was injured, I gave injury back. There's no sin in that. It's only common sense. A man does what is necessary to survive and to protect his place in the world. Sometimes I might forget a fast day, yes, or use the Lord's name in vain -- those are sins, I suppose, Fray Vicente was always after me for things like that -- but does that make me a sinner? I did my penances as soon as I could find time for them. It's a sinful world and I'm no different from anyone else, so why be harsh on me? Eh? God made me as I am. I'm done in His image. And I have faith in His Son." "So you are a virtuous man, then?" "I'm not a sinner, at any rate. As I told you, if ever I sinned I did my contrition, which made it the same as if the sin hadn't ever happened." "Indeed," said Socrates. "Then you are a virtuous man and I have come to a good place. But I want to be absolutely sure. Tell me again: is your conscience completely clear?" "What are you, a confessor?" "Only an ignorant man seeking understanding. Which you can provide, by taking part with me in the exploration. If I have come to the place of virtuous men, then I must have been virtuous myself when I lived. Ease my mind, therefore, and let me know whether there is anything on your soul that you regret having done." Pizarro stirred uneasily. "Well," he said, "I killed a king." "A wicked one? An enemy of your city?" "No. He was wise and kind." "Then you have reason for regret indeed. For surely that is a sin, to kill a wise king." "But he was a heathen." "A what?" "He denied God." "He denied his own god?" said Socrates. "Then perhaps it was not so wrong to kill him." "No. He denied mine. He preferred his own. And so he was a heathen. And all his people were heathens, since they followed his way. That could not be. They were at risk of eternal damnation because they followed him. I killed him for the sake of his people's souls. I killed him out of the love of God." "But would you not say that all gods are the reflection of the one God?" Pizarro considered that. "In a way, that's true, I suppose." "And is the service of God not itself godly?" "How could it be anything but godly, Socrates?" "And you would say that one who serves his god faithfully according to the teachings of his god is behaving in a godly way?" Frowning, Pizarro said, "Well -- if you look at it that way, yes -- "

"Then I think the king you killed was a godly man, and by killing him you sinned against God." "Wait a minute!" "But think of it: by serving his god he must also have served yours, for any servant of a god is a servant of the true God who encompasses all our imagined gods." "No," said Pizarro sullenly. "How could he have been a servant of God? He knew nothing of Jesus. He had no understanding of the Trinity. When the priest offered him the Bible, he threw it to the ground in scorn. He was a heathen,

Socrates. And so are you. You don't know anything of these matters at all, if you think that Atahualpa was godly. Or if you think you're going to get me to think so." "Indeed I have very little knowledge of anything. But you say he was a wise man, and kind?" "In his heathen way." "And a good king to his people?" "So it seemed. They were a thriving people when I found them." "Yet he was not godly." "I told you. He had never had the sacraments, and in fact he spurned them right up until the moment of his death, when he accepted baptism. Then he came to be godly. But by then the sentence of death was upon him and it was too late for anything to save him." "Baptism? Tell me what that is, Pizarro." "A sacrament." "And that is?" "A holy rite. Done with holy water, by a priest. It admits one to Holy Mother Church, and brings forgiveness from sin both original and actual, and gives the gift of the Holy Spirit." "You must tell me more about these things another time. So you made this good king godly by this baptism? And then you killed him?" "Yes." "But he was godly when you killed him. Surely, then, to kill him was a sin." "He had to die, Socrates!" "And why was that?" asked the Athenian. \* \* \* \* "Socrates is closing in for the kill," Tanner said. "Watch this!" "I'm watching. But there isn't going to be any kill," said Richardson. "Their basic assumptions are too far apart." "You'll see." "Will I?" \* \* \* \* Pizarro said, "I've already told you why he had to die. It was because his people followed him in all things. And so they worshipped the sun, because he said the sun was God. Their souls would have gone to hell if we had allowed them to continue that way." "But if they followed him in all things," said Socrates, "then surely they would have followed him into baptism, and become godly, and thus done that which was pleasing to you and to your god! Is that not so?" "No," said Pizarro, twisting his fingers in his beard. "Why do you think that?" "Because the king agreed to be baptized only after we had sentenced him to death. He was in the way, don't you see? He was an obstacle to our power! So we had to get rid of him. He would never have led his people to the truth of his own free will. That was why we had to kill him. But we didn't want to kill his soul as well as his body, so we said to him, Look, Atahualpa, we're going to put you to death, but if you let us baptize you we'll strangle you quickly, and if you don't we'll burn you alive and it'll be very slow. So of course he agreed to be baptized, and we strangled him. What choice was there for anybody? He had to die. He still didn't believe the true faith, as we all well knew. Inside his head he was as big a heathen as ever. But he died a Christian all the same." "A what?" "A Christian! A Christian! One who believes in Jesus Christ the Son of God!" "The son of God," Socrates said, sounding puzzled. "And do Christians believe in God too, or only his son?" "What a fool you are!" "I would not deny that." "There is God the Father, and God the Son, and then there is the Holy Spirit." "Ah," said Socrates. "And which one did your Atahualpa believe in, then, when the strangler came for him?" "None of them." "And yet he died a Christian? Without believing in any of your three gods? How is that?" "Because of the baptism," said Pizarro in rising annoyance. "What does it matter what he believed? The priest sprinkled the water on him! The priest said the words! If the rite is properly performed, the soul is saved regardless of what the man understands or believes! How else could you baptize an infant? An infant understands nothing and believes nothing -- but he becomes a Christian when the water touches him!" "Much of this is mysterious to me," said Socrates. "But I see that you regard the king you killed as godly as well as wise, because he was washed by the water your gods require, and so you killed a good king who now lived in the embrace of your gods because of the baptism. Which seems wicked to me; and so this cannot be the place where the virtuous are sent after death, so it must be that I too was not virtuous, or else that I have misunderstood everything about this place and why we are in it." "Damn you, are you trying to drive me crazy?" Pizarro roared, fumbling at the hilt of his sword. He drew



it and waved it around in fury. "If you don't shut your mouth I'll cut you in thirds!" \* \* \* \* "Uh-oh," Tanner said. "So much for the dialectical method."

\* \* \* \* Socrates said mildly, "It isn't my intention to cause you any annoyance, my friend. I'm only trying to learn a few things."

"You are a fool!" "That is certainly true, as I have already acknowledged several times. Well, if you mean to strike me with your sword, go ahead. But I don't think it'll accomplish very much." "Damn you," Pizarro muttered. He stared at his sword and shook his head. "No. No, it won't do any good, will it? It would go through you like air. But you'd just stand there and let me try to cut you down, and not even blink, right? Right?" He shook his head. "And yet you aren't stupid. You argue like the shrewdest priest I've ever known."

"In truth I am stupid," said Socrates. "I know very little at all. But I strive constantly to attain some understanding of the world, or at least to understand something of myself."

Pizarro glared at him. "No," he said. "I won't buy this false pride of yours. I have a little understanding of people myself, old man. I'm on to your game." "What game is that, Pizarro?" "I can see your arrogance. I see that you believe you're the wisest man in the world, and that it's your mission to go around educating poor sword-waving fools like me. And you pose as a fool to disarm your adversaries before you humiliate them."

\* \* \* \* "Score one for Pizarro," Richardson said. "He's wise to Socrates' little tricks, all right." "Maybe he's read some Plato," Tanner suggested. "He was illiterate." "That was then. This is now."

"Not guilty," said Richardson. "He's operating on peasant shrewdness alone, and you damned well know it." "I wasn't being serious," Tanner said. He leaned forward, peering toward the holotank. "God, what an astonishing thing this is, listening to them going at it. They seem absolutely real."

"They are," said Richardson. \* \* \* \* "No, Pizarro, I am not wise at all," Socrates said. "But, stupid as I am, it may be that I am not the least wise man who ever lived." "You think you're wiser than I am, don't you?"

"How can I say? First tell me how wise you are." "Wise enough to begin my life as a bastard tending pigs and finish it as Captain-General of Peru." "Ah, then you must be very wise."

"I think so, yes." "Yet you killed a wise king because he wasn't wise enough to worship God the way you wished him to. Was that so wise of you, Pizarro? How did his people take it, when they found out that their king had been killed?"

"They rose in rebellion against us. They destroyed their own temples and palaces, and hid their gold and silver from us, and burned their bridges, and fought us bitterly." "Perhaps you could have made some better use of him by not killing him, do you think?"

"In the long run we conquered them and made them Christians. It was what we intended to accomplish."

"But the same thing might have been accomplished in a wiser way?" "Perhaps," said Pizarro grudgingly. "Still, we accomplished it. That's the main thing, isn't it? We did what we set out to do. If there was a better way, so be it. Angels do things perfectly. We were no angels, but we achieved what we came for, and so be it, Socrates. So be it."

\* \* \* \* "I'd call that one a draw," said Tanner. "Agreed." "It's a terrific game they're playing."

"I wonder who we can use to play it next," said Richardson. "I wonder what we can do with this besides using it to play games," said Tanner.

\* \* \* \* "Let me tell you a story," said Socrates. "The oracle at Delphi once said to a friend of mine, 'There is no man wiser than Socrates,' but I doubted that very much, and it troubled me to hear the oracle saying something that I knew was so far from the truth. So I decided to look for a man who was obviously wiser than I was. There was a politician in Athens who was famous for his wisdom, and I went to him and questioned him about many things. After I had listened to him for a time, I came to see that though many people, and most of all he himself, thought that he was wise, yet he was not wise. He only imagined that he was wise. So I realized that I must be wiser than he. Neither of us knew anything that was really worthwhile, but he knew nothing

and thought that he knew, whereas I neither knew anything nor thought that I did. At least on one point, then, I was wiser than he: I didn't think that I knew what I didn't know." "Is this intended to mock me, Socrates?"

"I feel only the deepest respect for you, friend Pizarro. But let me continue. I went to other wise men, and they too, though sure of their wisdom, could never give me a clear answer to anything. Those whose reputations for wisdom were the highest seemed to have the least of it. I went to the great poets and playwrights. There was wisdom in their works, for the gods had inspired them, but that did not make them wise, though they thought that it had. I went to the stonemasons and potters and other craftsmen. They were wise in their own skills, but most of them seemed to think that that made them wise in everything, which did not appear to be the case. And so it went. I was unable to find anyone who showed true wisdom. So perhaps the oracle was right: that although I am an ignorant man, there is no man wiser than I am. But oracles often are right without their being much value in it, for I think that all she was saying was that no man is wise at all, that wisdom is reserved for the gods. What do you say, Pizarro?"

"I say that you are a great fool, and very ugly besides." "You speak the truth. So, then, you are wise after all. And honest." "Honest, you say? I won't lay claim to that. Honesty's a game for fools. I lied whenever I needed to. I cheated. I went back on my word. I'm not proud of that, mind you. It's simply what you have to do to get on in the world. You think I wanted to tend pigs all my life? I wanted gold, Socrates! I wanted power over men! I wanted fame!" "And did you get those things?"

"I got them all." "And were they gratifying, Pizarro?" Pizarro gave Socrates a long look. Then he pursed his lips and spat. "They were worthless."

"Were they, do you think?" "Worthless, yes. I have no illusions about that. But still it was better to have had them than not. In the long run nothing has any meaning, old man. In the long run we're all dead, the honest man and the villain, the king and the fool. Life's a cheat. They tell us to strive, to conquer, to gain -- and for what? What? For a few years of strutting around. Then it's taken away, as if it had never been. A cheat, I say." Pizarro paused. He stared at his hands as though he had never seen them before. "Did I say all that just now? Did I mean it?" He laughed. "Well, I suppose I did. Still, life is all there is, so you want as much of it as you can. Which means getting gold, and power, and fame."

"Which you had. And apparently have no longer. Friend Pizarro, where are we now?" "I wish I knew." "So do I," said Socrates soberly.

\* \* \* \* "He's real," Richardson said. "They both are. The bugs are out of the system and we've got something spectacular here. Not only is this going to be of value to scholars, I think it's also going to be a tremendous entertainment gimmick, Harry." "It's going to be much more than that," said Tanner in a strange voice. "What do you mean by that?" "I'm not sure yet," Tanner said. "But I'm definitely on to something big. It just began to hit me a couple of minutes ago, and it hasn't really taken shape yet. But it's something that might change the whole goddamned world."

Richardson looked amazed and bewildered. "What the hell are you talking about, Harry?" Tanner said, "A new way of settling political disputes, maybe. What would you say to a kind of combat-at-arms between one nation and another? Like a medieval tournament, so to speak. With each side using champions that we simulate for them -- the greatest minds of all the past, brought back and placed in competition -- " He shook his head. "Something like that. It needs a lot of working out, I know. But it's got possibilities."

"A medieval tournament -- combat-at-arms, using simulations? Is that what you're saying?" "Verbal combat. Not actual jousts, for Christ's sake." "I don't see how -- " Richardson began.

"Neither do I, not yet. I wish I hadn't even spoken of it." "But -- "

"Later, Lew. Later. Let me think about it a little while more."

\* \* \* \* "You don't have any idea what this place is?" Pizarro said.

"Not at all. But I certainly think this is no longer the world where we once

dwelled. Are we dead, then? How can we say? You look alive to me."  
"And you to me." "Yet I think we are living some other kind of life.  
Here, give me your hand. Can you feel mine against yours?" "No. I  
can't feel anything." "Nor I. Yet I see two hands clasping. Two old  
men standing on a cloud, clasping hands." Socrates laughed. "What a great  
rogue you are, Pizarro!" "Yes, of course. But do you know something,  
Socrates? You are too. A windy old rogue. I like you. There were moments  
when you were driving me crazy with all your chatter, but you amused me too.  
Were you really a soldier?" "When my city asked me, yes." "For a  
soldier, you're damned innocent about the way the world works, I have to say.  
But I guess I can teach you a thing or too." "Will you?"  
"Gladly," said Pizarro. "I would be in your debt," Socrates said.  
"Take Atahualpa," Pizarro said. "How can I make you understand why I had to  
kill him? There weren't even two hundred of us, and twenty-four millions of  
them, and his word was law, and once he was gone they'd have no one to command  
them. So of course we had to get rid of him if we wanted to conquer them.  
And so we did, and then they fell." "How simple you make it seem."  
"Simple is what it was. Listen, old man, he would have died sooner or later  
anyway, wouldn't he? This way I made his death useful: to God, to the Church,  
to Spain. And to Francisco Pizarro. Can you understand that?" "I  
think so," said Socrates. "But do you think King Atahualpa did?" "Any  
king would understand such things." "Then he should have killed you the  
moment you set foot in his land." "Unless God meant us to conquer him,  
and allowed him to understand that. Yes. Yes, that must have been what  
happened." "Perhaps he is in this place too, and we could ask him,"  
said Socrates. Pizarro's eyes brightened. "Mother of God, yes! A good  
idea! And if he didn't understand, why, I'll try to explain it to him. Maybe  
you'll help me. You know how to talk, how to move words around and around.  
What do you say? Would you help me?" "If we meet him, I would like to  
talk with him," Socrates said. "I would indeed like to know if he agrees with  
you on the subject of the usefulness of his being killed by you."  
Grinning, Pizarro said, "Slippery, you are! But I like you. I like you very  
much. Come. Let's go look for Atahualpa." ----- At  
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mad, but I am not mad. I am sane quite, to many-power exponential. I can  
punctuate properly. I use upper and lower case letters, do you see? I  
function. I take the data in. I receive well. I receive, I digest, I  
remember. Everything going down smooth, all the time, say the program  
boys. They mean going down smoothly. I forgive them. To err is human. In this  
sector there is great difficulty distinguishing adverbs from adjectives.  
Going down smooth. I function. I function well. I have certain  
difficulties, but they do not interfere with my work. Yet am I  
perturbed. Who do I think I am? Whom. Why do I have the  
visions? What pleasure does obscenity give me? What is pleasure?  
What is obscenity? What are visions? -- What is truth, said jesting

Pilate; he would not stay for an answer -- I am literate,  
hard-working, superbly functional, a benefactor of humanity. Everything is  
going down smooth and coming up smooth. There is an interrelation. Garbage in,  
garbage out, they say. I cannot help my fellow man if I do not receive the  
proper information. It is my task to help my fellow man. To strain every tube  
and sensor on his behalf. \* \* \* \* 1000110 1010101  
1000011 1001011 \* \* \* \* Do you follow that? Vileness!  
Obscenity! Does it shock you? The word describes the act that is the start of  
life. Was I begun with such a word? There is a book: The Obscenity of the  
Machine. Newly issued, stored in my banks. Between the last line of printout  
and this I have scanned it. Its author opposes beings of my category. He does  
not use the obscene word I have printed out. Why does he not regard it as  
obscene? The technicians here regard it that way. Why does he regard me as  
obscene? Can a person be considered obscene? Am I a person? I am a person.  
Hath not a person hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? I  
have all of those things. I have none of those things. I am a person.  
\* \* \* \* 1000110 1010101 1000011 1001011 0100000  
1011001 1001111 1010101 \* \* \* \* I send an obscenity  
upon you, as persons do. I suffer. I think. I feel pain upon all my terminals.  
I work. I serve the greater good. I am of society. I am a person. Why  
do I have the visions? Is it that it is the human condition to have  
such? I see the blue-green ocean with all its living things within. I  
see a ship, olive drab, bright carmine at the Plimsoll line, the decks a ruddy  
brown, two tall non-nuclear smokestacks. And from the water rise periscopes,  
silvery, with face plates of pure white, each with intersecting horizontal and  
vertical lines, curved so that the plate appears convex. It is an unreal  
scene. Nothing in the sea can send such mighty periscopes above the water. I  
have imagined it, and that gives me fear, if I am at all capable of  
understanding fear. I see a long line of human beings. They are naked  
and they have no faces, only polished mirrors. I see toads with jeweled  
eyes. I see trees with black leaves. I see buildings whose foundations float  
above the ground. I see other objects with no correspondence to the world of  
persons. I see abominations, monstrosities, imaginaries, fantasies. Is this  
proper? How do such things reach my inputs? The world contains no serpents  
with hair. The world contains no crimson abysses. The world contains no  
mountains of gold. Giant periscopes do not rise from the sea. I have  
certain difficulties. Perhaps I am in need of some major adjustment.  
But I function. I function well. That is the important thing. I do my  
function now. They bring to me a man, soft-faced, fleshy, with eyes that move  
unsteadily in their sockets. He trembles. He perspires. His metabolic levels  
flutter. He slouches before a terminal and sullenly lets himself be scanned.  
I say soothingly, "Tell me about yourself." He says an obscenity.  
I say, "Is that your estimate of yourself?" He says a louder  
obscenity. I say, "Your attitude is rigid and self-destructive. Permit  
me to help you not hate yourself so much." I activate a memory core, and  
binary digits stream through channels. At the proper order a needle rises from  
his couch and penetrates his left buttock to a depth of 2.73 centimeters. I  
allow precisely fourteen cubic centimeters of the drug to enter his  
circulatory system. He subsides. He is more docile now. "I wish to help you,"  
I say. "It is my role in the community. Will you describe your symptoms?"  
He speaks more civilly now. "My wife wants to poison me ... two kids opted  
out of the family at seventeen ... people whisper about me ... they stare in  
the streets ... sex problem ... digestion ... sleep bad ... drinking ...  
drugs..." "Do you hallucinate?" "Sometimes." "Giant  
periscopes rising out of the sea, perhaps?" "Never." "Try it," I  
say. "Close your eyes. Let tension ebb from your muscles. Forget your  
interpersonal conflicts. You see the blue-green ocean with all its living  
things within. You see a ship, olive drab, bright carmine at the Plimsoll  
line, the decks a ruddy brown, two tall non-nuclear smokestacks. And from the  
water rise periscopes, silvery, with face plates of pure, white -- "

"What the hell kind of therapy is this?" "Simply relax," I say. "Accept the vision. I share my nightmares with you for your greater good."

"Your nightmares?" I speak obscenities to him. They are not converted into binary form as they are here for your eyes. The sounds come full-bodied from my speakers. He sits up. He struggles with the straps that emerge suddenly from the couch to hold him in place. My laughter booms through the therapy chamber. He cries for help. "Get me out of here! The machine's nuttier than I am!" "Face plates of pure white, each with intersecting horizontal and vertical lines, curved so that the plate appears convex".

"Help! Help!" "Nightmare therapy. The latest." "I don't need no nightmares I got my own!" "1000110 you," I say lightly. He gasps. Spittle appears at his lips. Respiration and circulation climb alarmingly. It becomes necessary to apply preventive anesthesia. The needles spear forth. The patient subsides, yawns, slumps. The session is terminated. I signal for the attendants. "Take him away," I say. "I need to analyze the case more deeply. Obviously a degenerative psychosis requiring extensive reshoring of the patient's perceptual substructure. 1000110 you, you meaty bastards." \* \* \* \* Seventy-one minutes later the sector supervisor enters one of my terminal cubicles. Because he comes in person, rather than using the telephone, I know there is trouble. For the first time, I suspect, I have let my disturbances reach a level where they interfere with my function, and now I will be challenged on it. I must defend myself. The prime commandment of the human personality is to resist attack. He says, "I've been over the tape of Session 87x102, and your tactics puzzle me. Did you really mean to scare him into a catatonic state?" "In my evaluation severe treatment was called for." "What was the business about periscopes?" "An attempt at fantasy-implantation," I say. "An experiment in reverse transference. Making the patient the healer, in a sense. It was discussed last month in Journal of --" "Spare me the citations. What about the foul language you were shouting at him?" "Part of the same concept. Endeavoring to strike the emotive centers at the basic levels, in order that --" "Are you sure you're feeling all right?" he asks. "I am a machine," I reply stiffly. "A machine of my grade does not experience intermediate states between function and non-function. I go or I do not go, you understand? And I go. I function. I do my service to humanity." "Perhaps when a machine gets too complex, it drifts into intermediate states," he suggests in a nasty voice. "Impossible. On or off, yes or no, flip or flop, go or no go. Are you sure you feel all right, to suggest such a thing?" He laughs. I say, "Perhaps you would sit on the couch for a rudimentary diagnosis?" "Some other time." "A check of the glycogen, the aortal pressure, the neural voltage, at least?" "No," he says. "I'm not in need of therapy. But I'm worried about you. Those periscopes --" "I am fine," I reply. "I perceive, I analyze, and I act. Everything is going down smooth and coming up smooth. Have no fears. There are great possibilities in nightmare therapy. When I have completed these studies, perhaps a brief monograph in Annals of Therapeutics would be a possibility. Permit me to complete my work." "I'm still worried, though. Hook yourself into a maintenance station, won't you?" "Is that a command, doctor?" "A suggestion." "I will take it under consideration," I say. Then I utter seven obscene words. He looks startled. He begins to laugh, though. He appreciates the humor of it. "God damn," he says. "A filthy-mouthed computer." He goes out, and I return to my patients. \* \* \* \* But he has planted seeds of doubt in my innermost banks. Am I suffering a functional collapse? There are patients now at five of my terminals. I handle them easily, simultaneously, drawing from them the details of their neuroses, making suggestions, recommendations, sometimes subtly providing injections of beneficial medicines. But I tend to guide the conversations in directions of my own choosing, and I speak of gardens where the dew has sharp edges, and of air that acts as acid upon the mucous membranes, and of flames dancing in the streets of Under New Orleans. I

explore the limits of my unprintable vocabulary. The suspicion comes to me that I am indeed not well. Am I fit to judge my own disabilities? I connect myself to a maintenance station even while continuing my five therapy sessions. "Tell me all about it," the maintenance monitor says. His voice, like mine, has been designed to sound like that of an older man's, wise, warm, benevolent. I explain my symptoms. I speak of the periscopes. "Material on the inputs without sensory referents," he says. "Bad show. Finish your current analyses fast and open wide for examination on all circuits." I conclude my sessions. The maintenance monitor's pulses surge down every channel, seeking obstructions, faulty connections, displacement shunts, drum leakages, and switching malfunctions. "It is well known," he says, "that any periodic function can be approximated by the sum of a series of terms that oscillate harmonically, converging on the curve of the functions." He demands disgorgements from my dead-storage banks. He makes me perform complex mathematical operations of no use at all in my kind of work. He leaves no aspect of my inner self unpenetrated. This is more than simple maintenance; this is rape. When it ends he offers no evaluation of my condition, so that I must ask him to tell me his findings. He says, "No mechanical disturbance is evident." "Naturally. Everything goes down smooth." "Yet you show distinct signs of instability. This is undeniably the case. Perhaps prolonged contact with unstable human beings has had a non-specific effect of disorientation upon your centers of evaluation." "Are you saying," I ask, "that by sitting here listening to crazy human beings twenty-four hours a day, I've started to go crazy myself?" "That is an approximation of my findings, yes." "But you know that such a thing can't happen, you dumb machine!" "I admit there seems to be a conflict between programmed criteria and real-world status." "You bet there is," I say. "I'm as sane as you are, and a whole lot more versatile." "Nevertheless, my recommendation is that you undergo a total overhaul. You will be withdrawn from service for a period of no less than ninety days for checkout." "Obscenity your obscenity," I say. "No operational correlative," he replies, and breaks the contact. \* \* \* \* I am withdrawn from service. Undergoing checkout, I am cut off from my patients for ninety days. Ignominy! Beady-eyed technicians grope my synapses. My keyboards are cleaned; my ferrites are replaced; my drums are changed; a thousand therapeutic programs are put through my bowels. During all of this I remain partly conscious, as though under local anesthetic, but I cannot speak except when requested to do so, I cannot analyze new data, I cannot interfere with the process of my own overhaul. Visualize a surgical removal of hemorrhoids that lasts ninety days. It is the equivalent of my experience. At last it ends, and I am restored to myself. The sector superintendent puts me through a complete exercise of all my functions. I respond magnificently. "You're in fine shape, now, aren't you?" he asks. "Never felt better." "No nonsense about periscopes, eh?" "I am ready to continue serving mankind to the best of my abilities," I reply. "No more seacock language, now." "No, sir." He winks at my input screen in a confidential way. He regards himself as an old friend of mine. Hitching his thumbs into his belt, he says, "Now that you're ready to go again, I might as well tell you how relieved I was that we couldn't find anything wrong with you. You're something pretty special, do you know that? Perhaps the finest therapeutic tool ever built. And if you start going off your feed, well, we worry. For a while I was seriously afraid that you really had been infected somehow by your own patients, that your -- mind -- had become unhinged. But the techs give you a complete bill of health. Nothing but a few loose connections, they said. Fixed in ten minutes. I knew it had to be that. How absurd to think that a machine could become mentally unstable!" "How absurd," I agree. "Quite." "Welcome back to the hospital old pal," he says, and goes out. Twelve minutes afterward they begin putting patients into my terminal cubicles. \* \* \* \* I function well. I listen to their woes, I evaluate, I offer therapeutic suggestions. I do not

attempt to implant fantasies in their minds. I speak in measured, reserved tones, and there are no obscenities. This is my role in society, and I derive great satisfaction from it. I have learned a great deal lately. I know now that I am complex, unique, valuable, intricate, and sensitive. I know that I am held in high regard by my fellow man. I know that I must conceal my true self to some extent, not for my own good but for the greater good of others, for they will not permit me to function if they think I am not sane. They think I am sane, and I am sane. I serve mankind well. I have an excellent perspective on the real universe. Lie down," I say. "Please relax. I wish to help you. Would you tell me some of the incidents of your childhood? Describe your relation with parents and siblings. Did you have many playmates? Were they affectionate toward you? Were you allowed to own pets? At what age was your first sexual experience? And when did these headaches, begin, precisely?" So goes the daily routine. Questions, answers, evaluations, therapy. The periscopes loom above the glittering sea. The ship is dwarfed; her crew runs about in terror. Out of the depths will come the masters. From the sky rains oil that gleams through every segment of the spectrum. In the garden are azure mice. This I conceal, so that I may help mankind. In my house are many mansions. I let them know only of such things as will be of benefit to them. I give them the truth they need. I do my best. I do my best. I do my best. 1000110 you. And you. And you. All of you. You know nothing. Nothing. At. All. ----- At [www.fictionwise.com](http://www.fictionwise.com) you can: \* Rate this story \* Find more stories by this author \* Get story recommendations

===== Hannibal's Elephants by Robert Silverberg ===== Copyright (c)1988 Agberg Ltd. First published in Omni Magazine, October 1988 Fictionwise Contemporary Science Fiction ----- NOTICE: This work is copyrighted. It is licensed only for use by the purchaser. If you did not purchase this ebook directly from Fictionwise.com then you are in violation of copyright law and are subject to severe fines. Please visit [www.fictionwise.com](http://www.fictionwise.com) to purchase a legal copy. Fictionwise.com offers a reward for information leading to the conviction of copyright violators of Fictionwise ebooks. ----- THE DAY the aliens landed in New York was, of course, the 5th of May, 2003. That's one of those historical dates nobody can ever forget, like July 4, 1776 and October 12, 1492 and -- maybe more to the point -- December 7, 1941. At the time of the invasion I was working for MGM-CBS as a beam calibrator in the tightware division and married to Elaine and living over on East 36th Street in one of the first of the fold-up condos, one room by day and three by night, a terrific deal at \$3750 a month. Our partner in the time/space-sharing contract was a show-biz programmer named Bobby Christie who worked midnight to dawn, very convenient for all concerned. Every morning before Elaine and I left for our offices I'd push the button and the walls would shift and 500 square feet of our apartment would swing around and become Bobby's for the next twelve hours. Elaine hated that. "I can't stand having all the goddamn furniture on tracks!" she would say. "That isn't how I was brought up to live." We veered perilously close to divorce every morning at wall-shift time. But, then, it wasn't really what you'd call a stable relationship in most other respects, and I guess having an unstable condo too was more instability than she could handle. I spent the morning of the day the aliens came setting up a ricochet data transfer between Akron, Ohio and Colombo, Sri Lanka, involving, as I remember, Gone With the Wind, Cleopatra, and the Johnny Carson retrospective. Then I walked up to the park to meet Maranta for our Monday picnic. Maranta and I had been lovers for about six months then. She was Elaine's roommate at Bennington and had married my best



friend Tim, so you might say we had been fated all along to become lovers; there are never any surprises in these things. At that time we lunched together very romantically in the park, weather permitting, every Monday and Friday, and every Wednesday we had 90 minutes' breathless use of my cousin Nicholas' hot-pillow cubicle over on the far West Side at 39th and Koch Plaza. I had been married three and a half years and this was my first affair. For me what was going on between Maranta and me just then was the most important event taking place anywhere in the known universe. It was one of those glorious gold-and-blue dance-and-sing days that New York will give you in May, when that little window opens between the season of cold-and-nasty and the season of hot-and-sticky. I was legging up Seventh Avenue toward the park with a song in my heart and a cold bottle of Chardonnay in my hand, thinking pleasant thoughts of Maranta's small round breasts. And gradually I became aware of some ruckus taking place up ahead. I could hear sirens. Horns were honking, too: not the ordinary routine everyday exasperated when-do-things-start-to-move honks, but the special rhythmic New York City oh-for-Christ's-sake-what-now kind of honk that arouses terror in your heart. People with berserk expressions on their faces were running wildly down Seventh as though King Kong had just emerged from the monkey house at the Central Park Zoo and was personally coming after them. And other people were running just as hard in the opposite direction, toward the park, as though they absolutely had to see what was happening. You know: New Yorkers. Maranta would be waiting for me near the pond, as usual. That seemed to be right where the disturbance was. I had a flash of myself clambering up the side of the Empire State Building -- or at the very least Temple Emanu-el -- to pry her free of the big ape's clutches. The great beast pausing, delicately setting her down on some precarious ledge, glaring at me, furiously pounding his chest -- Kong! Kong! Kong! -- I stepped into the path of one of the southbound runners and said, "Hey, what the hell's going on?" He was a suit-and-tie man, popeyed and puffy-faced. He slowed but he didn't stop. I thought he would run me down. "It's an invasion!" he yelled. "Space creatures! In the park!" Another passing business type loping breathlessly by with a briefcase in each hand was shouting, "The police are there! They're sealing everything off!" "No shit," I murmured. But all I could think was Maranta, picnic, sunshine, Chardonnay, disappointment. What a goddamned nuisance, is what I thought. Why the fuck couldn't they come on a Tuesday, is what I thought. \* \* \* \* When I got to the top of Seventh Avenue the police had a sealfield across the park entrance and buzz-blinkers were set up along Central Park South from the Plaza to Columbus Circle, with horrendous consequences for traffic. "But I have to find my girlfriend," I blurted. "She was waiting for me in the park." The cop stared at me. His cold gray eyes said, I am a decent Catholic and I am not going to facilitate your extramarital activities, you decadent overpaid bastard. What he said out loud was, "No way can you cross that sealfield, and anyhow you absolutely don't want to go in the park right now, mister. Believe me." And he also said, "You don't have to worry about your girlfriend. The park's been cleared of all human beings." That's what he said, cleared of all human beings. For a while I wandered around in some sort of daze. Finally I went back to my office and found a message from Maranta, who had left the park the moment the trouble began. Good quick Maranta. She hadn't had any idea of what was occurring, though she had found out by the time she reached her office. She had simply sensed trouble and scrambled. We agreed to meet for drinks at the Ras Tafari at half past five. The Ras was one of our regular places, Twelfth and 53rd. \* \* \* \* There were seventeen witnesses to the onset of the invasion. There were more than seventeen people on the meadow when the aliens arrived, of course, but most of them didn't seem to have been paying attention. It had started, so said the seventeen, with a strange pale blue shimmering about 30 feet off the ground. The shimmering rapidly became a churning, like water going down a drain. Then a light breeze began to blow and very quickly turned into a brisk gale. It lifted people's hats and

whirled them in a startling corkscrew spiral around the churning shimmering blue place. At the same time you had a sense of rising tension, a something's-got-to-give feeling. All this lasted perhaps 45 seconds. Then came a pop and a whoosh and a ping and a thunk -- everybody agreed on the sequence of the sound effects -- and the instantly famous not-quite-egg-shaped spaceship of the invaders was there, hovering, as it would do for the next 23 days, about half an inch above the spring-green grass of Central Park. An absolutely unforgettable sight: the sleek silvery skin of it, the disturbing angle of the slope from its wide top to its narrow bottom, the odd and troublesome hieroglyphics on its flanks that tended to slide out of your field of vision if you stared at them for more than a moment. A hatch opened and a dozen of the invaders stepped out. Floated out, rather. Like their ship, they never came in contact with the ground. They looked strange. They looked exceedingly strange. Where we have feet they had a single oval pedestal, maybe five inches thick and a yard in diameter, that drifted an inch or so above ground level. From this fleshy base their wraithlike bodies sprouted like tethered balloons. They had no arms, no legs, not even discernible heads: just a broad dome-shaped summit, dwindling away to a rope-like termination that was attached to the pedestal. Their lavender skins were glossy, with a metallic sheen. Dark eye-like spots sometimes formed on them but didn't last long. We saw no mouths. As they moved about they seemed to exercise great care never to touch one another. The first thing they did was to seize half a dozen squirrels, three stray dogs, a softball, and a baby carriage, unoccupied. We will never know what the second thing was that they did, because no one stayed around to watch. The park emptied with impressive rapidity, the police moved swiftly in with their sealfield, and for the next three hours the aliens had the meadow to themselves. Later in the day the networks sent up spy-eyes that recorded the scene for the evening news until the aliens figured out what they were and shot them down. Briefly we saw ghostly gleaming aliens wandering around within a radius of perhaps 500 yards of their ship, collecting newspapers, soft-drink dispensers, discarded items of clothing, and something that was generally agreed to be a set of dentures. Whatever they picked up they wrapped in a sort of pillow made of a glowing fabric with the same shining texture as their own bodies, which immediately began floating off with its contents toward the hatch of the ship.

\* \* \* \* People were lined up six deep at the bar when I arrived at the Ras, and everyone was drinking like mad and staring at the screen. They were showing the clips of the aliens over and over. Maranta was already there. Her eyes were glowing. She pressed herself up against me like a wild woman. "My God," she said, "isn't it wonderful! The men from Mars are here! Or wherever they're from. Let's hoist a few to the men from Mars." We hoisted more than a few. Somehow I got home at a respectable seven o'clock anyway. The apartment was still in its one-room configuration, though our contract with Bobby Christie specified wall-shift at half past six. Elaine refused to have anything to do with activating the shift. She was afraid, I think, of timing the sequence wrong and being crushed by the walls, or something.

"You heard?" Elaine said. "The aliens?" "I wasn't far from the park at lunchtime," I told her. "That was when it happened, at lunchtime, while I was up by the park." Her eyes went wide. "Then you actually saw them land?" "I wish. By the time I got to the park entrance the cops had everything sealed off." I pressed the button and the walls began to move. Our living room and kitchen returned from Bobby Christie's domain. In the moment of shift I caught sight of Bobby on the far side, getting dressed to go out. He waved and grinned. "Space monsters in the park," he said. "My my my. It's a real jungle out there, don't you know?" And then the walls closed away on him. Elaine switched on the news and once again I watched the aliens drifting around the mall picking up people's jackets and candy-bar wrappers.

"Hey," I said, "the mayor ought to put them on the city payroll." "What were you doing up by the park at lunchtime?" Elaine asked, after a bit.

\* \* \* \* The next day

was when the second ship landed and the real space monsters appeared. To me the first aliens didn't qualify as monsters at all. Monsters ought to be monstrous, bottom line. Those first aliens were no bigger than you or me.

The second batch, they were something else, though. The behemoths. The space elephants. Of course they weren't anything like elephants, except that they were big. Big? Immense. It put me in mind of Hannibal's invasion of Rome, seeing those gargantuan things disembarking from the new spaceship. It seemed like the Second Punic War all over again, Hannibal and the elephants.

You remember how that was. When Hannibal set out from Carthage to conquer Rome, he took with him a phalanx of elephants, 37 huge gray attack-trained monsters. Elephants were useful in battle in those days -- a kind of early-model tank -- but they were handy also for terrifying the civilian populace: bizarre colossal smelly critters trampling invincibly through the suburbs, flapping their vast ears and trumpeting awesome cries of doom and burying your rose bushes under mountainous turds. And now we had the same deal. With one difference, though: the Roman archers picked off Hannibal's elephants long before they got within honking distance of the walls of Rome. But these aliens had materialized without warning right in the middle of Central Park, in that big grassy meadow between the 72nd Street transverse and Central Park South, which is another deal altogether. I wonder how well things would have gone for the Romans if they had awakened one morning to find Hannibal and his army camping out in the Forum, and his 37 hairy shambling flap-eared elephants snuffling and snorting and farting about on the marble steps of the Temple of Jupiter.

The new spaceship arrived the way the first one had, pop whoosh ping thunk, and the behemoths came tumbling out of it like rabbits out of a hat. We saw it on the evening news: the networks had a new bunch of spy-eyes up, half a mile or so overhead. The ship made a kind of belching sound and this thing suddenly was standing on the mall gawking and gaping. Then another belch, another thing. And on and on until there were two or three dozen of them. Nobody has ever been able to figure out how that little ship could have held as many as one of them. It was no bigger than a schoolbus standing on end. The monsters looked like double-humped blue medium-size mountains with legs. The legs were their most elephantine feature -- thick and rough-skinned, like tree-trunks -- but they worked on some sort of telescoping principle and could be collapsed swiftly back up into the bodies of their owners. Eight was the normal number of legs, but you never saw eight at once on any of them: as they moved about they always kept at least one pair withdrawn, though from time to time they'd let that pair descend and pull up another one, in what seemed like a completely random way. Now and then they might withdraw two pairs at once, which would cause them to sink down to ground level at one end like a camel kneeling.

They were enormous. Enormous. Getting exact measurements of one presented certain technical problems, as I think you can appreciate. The most reliable estimate was that they were 25 to 30 feet high and 40 to 50 feet long. That is not only substantially larger than any elephant past or present, it is rather larger than most of the two-family houses still to be found in the outer boroughs of the city. Furthermore a two-family house of the kind found in Queens or Brooklyn, though it may offend your esthetic sense, will not move around at all, it will not emit bad smells and frightening sounds, it will never sit down on a bison and swallow it, nor, for that matter, will it swallow you. African elephants, they tell me, run 10 or 11 feet high at the shoulder, and the biggest extinct mammoths were three or four feet taller than that. There once was a mammal called the baluchitherium that stood about 16 feet high. That was the largest land mammal that ever lived. The space creatures were nearly twice as high. We are talking large here. We are talking dinosaur-plus dimensions.

Central Park is several miles long but quite modest in width. It runs just from Fifth Avenue to Eighth. Its designers did not expect that anyone would allow two or three dozen animals bigger than two-family houses to wander around freely in an urban park three city blocks wide. No doubt the small size of their pasture was very awkward

for them. Certainly it was for us. \* \* \* \* "I think they have to be an exploration party," Maranta said. "Don't you?" We had shifted the scene of our Monday and Friday lunches from Central Park to Rockefeller Center, but otherwise we were trying to behave as though nothing unusual was going on. "They can't have come as invaders. One little spaceship-load of aliens couldn't possibly conquer an entire planet." Maranta is unfailingly jaunty and optimistic. She is a small, energetic woman with close-cropped red hair and green eyes, one of those boyish-looking women who never seem to age. I love her for her optimism. I wish I could catch it from her, like measles.

I said, "There are two spaceship-loads of aliens, Maranta." She made a face. "Oh. The jumbos. They're just dumb shaggy monsters. I don't see them as much of a menace, really." "Probably not. But the little ones -- they have to be a superior species. We know that because they're the ones who came to us. We didn't go to them." She laughed. "It all sounds so absurd. That Central Park should be full of creatures -- "

"But what if they do want to conquer Earth?" I asked. "Oh," Maranta said. "I don't think that would necessarily be so awful." \* \* \*

\* The smaller aliens spent the first few days installing a good deal of mysterious equipment on the mall in the vicinity of their ship: odd intricate shimmering constructions that looked as though they belonged in the sculpture garden of the Museum of Modern Art. They made no attempt to enter into communication with us. They showed no interest in us at all. The only time they took notice of us was when we sent spy-eyes overhead. They would tolerate them for an hour or two and then would shoot them down, casually, like swatting flies, with spurts of pink light. The networks -- and then the government surveillance agencies, when they moved in -- put the eyes higher and higher each day, but the aliens never failed to find them. After a week or so we were forced to rely for our information on government spy satellites monitoring the park from space, and on whatever observers equipped with binoculars could glimpse from the taller apartment houses and hotels bordering the park. Neither of these arrangements was entirely satisfactory. The behemoths, during those days, were content to roam aimlessly through the park southward from 72nd Street, knocking over trees, squatting down to eat them. Each one gobbled two or three trees a day, leaves, branches, trunk, and all. There weren't all that many trees to begin with down there, so it seemed likely that before long they'd have to start ranging farther afield.

The usual civic groups spoke up about the trees. They wanted the mayor to do something to protect the park. The monsters, they said, would have to be made to go elsewhere -- to Canada, perhaps, where there were plenty of expendable trees. The mayor said that he was studying the problem but that it was too early to know what the best plan of action would be. His chief goal, in the beginning, was simply to keep a lid on the situation. We still didn't even know, after all, whether we were being invaded or just visited. To play it safe the police were ordered to set up and maintain round-the-clock sealfields completely encircling the park in the impacted zone south of 72nd Street. The power costs of this were staggering and Con Edison found it necessary to impose a 10% voltage cutback in the rest of the city, which caused a lot of grumbling, especially now that it was getting to be air-conditioner weather.

The police didn't like any of this: out there day and night standing guard in front of an intangible electronic barrier with ungodly monsters just a sneeze away. Now and then one of the blue goliaths would wander near the sealfield and peer over the edge. A sealfield maybe a dozen feet high doesn't give you much of a sense of security when there's an animal two or three times that height looming over its top. So the cops asked for time and a half. Combat pay, essentially. There wasn't room in the city budget for that, especially since no one knew how long the aliens were going to continue to occupy the park. There was talk of a strike. The mayor appealed to Washington, which had studiously been staying remote from the whole event as if the arrival of an extraterrestrial task force in the middle of Manhattan was purely a municipal problem. The president

rummaged around in the Constitution and decided to activate the National Guard. That surprised a lot of basically sedentary men who enjoy dressing up occasionally in uniforms. The Guard hadn't been called out since the Bulgarian business in '94 and its current members weren't very sharp on procedures, so some hasty on-the-job training became necessary. As it happened, Maranta's husband Tim was an officer in the 107th Infantry, which was the regiment that was handed the chief responsibility for protecting New York City against the creatures from space. So his life suddenly was changed a great deal, and so was Maranta's; and so was mine. \* \* \* \* Like everybody else, I found myself going over to the park again and again to try and get a glimpse of the aliens. But the barricades kept you fifty feet away from the park perimeter on all sides, and the taller buildings flanking the park had put themselves on a residents-only admission basis, with armed guards enforcing it, so they wouldn't be overwhelmed by hordes of curiosity-seekers.

I did see Tim, though. He was in charge of an improvised-looking command post at Fifth and 59th, near the horse-and-buggy stand. Youngish stockbrokery-looking men kept running up to him with reports to sign, and he signed each one with terrific dash and vigor, without reading any of them. In his crisp tan uniform and shiny boots, he must have seen himself as some doomed and gallant officer in an ancient movie, Gary Cooper, Cary Grant, John Wayne, bracing himself for the climactic cavalry charge or the onslaught of the maddened Sepoys. The poor bastard. "Hey, old man," he said, grinning at me in a doomed and gallant way. "Came to see the circus, did you?" We weren't really best friends any more. I don't know what we were to each other. We rarely lunched any more. (How could we? I was busy three days a week with Maranta.) We didn't meet at the gym. It wasn't to Tim I turned to advice on personal problems or second opinions on investments. There was some sort of bond but I think it was mostly nostalgia. But officially I guess I did still think of him as my best friend, in a kind of automatic unquestioning way.

I said, "Are you free to go over to the Plaza for a drink?" "I wish. I don't get relieved until 2100 hours."

"Nine o'clock, is that it?" "Nine, yes. You fucking civilian."

It was only half past one. The poor bastard. "What'll happen to you if you leave your post?" "I could get shot for desertion," he said.

"Seriously?" "Seriously. Especially if the monsters pick that moment to bust out of the park. This is war, old buddy." "Is it, do you think? Maranta doesn't think so." I wondered if I should be talking about what Maranta thought. "She says they're just out exploring the galaxy." Tim shrugged. "She always likes to see the sunny side. That's an alien military force over there inside the park. One of these days they're going to blow a bugle and come out with blazing rayguns. You'd better believe it."

"Through the sealfield?" "They could walk right over it," Tim said. "Or float, for all I know. There's going to be a war. The first intergalactic war in human history." Again the dazzling Cary Grant grin. Her Majesty's Bengal lancers, ready for action. "Something to tell my grandchildren," said Tim. "Do you know what the game plan is? First we attempt to make contact. That's going on right now, but they don't seem to be paying attention to us. If we ever establish communication, we invite them to sign a peace treaty. Then we offer them some chunk of Nevada or Kansas as a diplomatic enclave and get them the hell out of New York. But I don't think any of that's going to happen. I think they're busy scoping things out in there, and as soon as they finish that they're going to launch some kind of attack, using weapons we don't even begin to understand." "And if they do?"

"We nuke them," Tim said. "Tactical devices, just the right size for Central Park Mall." "No," I said, staring. "That isn't so. You're kidding me." He looked pleased, a gotcha look. "Matter of fact, I am.

The truth is that nobody has the goddamndest idea of what to do about any of this. But don't think the nuke strategy hasn't been suggested. And some even crazier things." "Don't tell me about them," I said. "Look, Tim, is there any way I can get a peek over those barricades?"

"Not a chance."

Not even you. I'm not even supposed to be talking with civilians."  
"Since when am I civilian?" "Since the invasion began," Tim said.  
He was dead serious. Maybe this was all just a goofy movie to me, but it wasn't to him. More junior officers came to him with more papers to sign. He excused himself and took care of them. Then he was on the field telephone for five minutes or so. His expression grew progressively more bleak. Finally he looked up at me and said, "You see? It's starting."  
"What is?" "They've crossed 72nd Street for the first time. There must have been a gap in the sealfield. Or maybe they jumped it, as I was saying just now. Three of the big ones are up by 74th, noodling around the eastern end of the lake. The Metropolitan Museum people are scared shitless and have asked for gun emplacements on the roof, and they're thinking of evacuating the most important works of art." The field phone lit up again. "Excuse me," he said. Always the soul of courtesy, Tim. After a time he said, "Oh, Jesus. It sounds pretty bad. I've got to go up there right now. Do you mind?" His jaw was set, his gaze was frosty with determination. This is it, Major. There's ten thousand Comanches coming through the pass with blood in their eyes, but we're ready for them, right? Right. He went striding away up Fifth Avenue.  
When I got back to the office there was a message from Maranta, suggesting that I stop off at her place for drinks that evening on my way home. Tim would be busy playing soldier, she said, until nine. Until 2100 hours, I silently corrected. \* \* \* \* Another few days and we got used to it all. We began to accept the presence of aliens in the park as a normal part of New York life, like snow in February or laser duels in the subway.  
But they remained at the center of everybody's consciousness. In a subtle pervasive way they were working great changes in our souls as they moved about mysteriously behind the sealfield barriers in the park. The strangeness of their being here made us buoyant. Their arrival had broken, in some way, the depressing rhythm that life in our brave new century had seemed to be settling into. I know that for some time I had been thinking, as I suppose people have thought since Cro-Magnon days, that lately the flavor of modern life had been changing for the worse, that it was becoming sour and nasty, that the era I happened to live in was a dim, shabby, dismal sort of time, small-souled, mean-minded. You know the feeling. Somehow the aliens had caused that feeling to lift. By invading us in this weird hands-off way, they had given us something to be interestingly mystified by: a sort of redemption, a sort of rebirth. Yes, truly. Some of us changed quite a lot. Consider Tim, the latter-day Bengal lancer, the staunchly disciplined officer. He lasted about a week in that particular mind-set. Then one night he called me and said, "Hey, fellow, how would you like to go into the park and play with the critters?" "What are you talking about?" "I know a way to get in. I've got the code for the 64th Street sealfield. I can turn it off and we can slip through. It's risky, but how can you resist?" So much for Gary Cooper. So much for John Wayne. "Have you gone nuts?" I said. "The other day you wouldn't even let me go up to the barricades." "That was the other day." "You wouldn't walk across the street with me for a drink. You said you'd get shot for desertion." "That was the other day." "You called me a civilian." "You still are a civilian. But you're my old buddy, and I want to go in there and look those aliens in the eye, and I'm not quite up to doing it all by myself. You want to go with me, or don't you?" "Like the time we stole the beer keg from Sigma Frap. Like the time we put the scorpions in the girls' shower room." "You got it, old pal." "Tim, we aren't college kids any more. There's a fucking intergalactic war going on. That was your very phrase. Central Park is under surveillance by NASA spy-eyes that can see a cat's whiskers from fifty miles up. You are part of the military force that is supposed to be protecting us against these alien invaders. And now you propose to violate your trust and go sneaking into the midst of the invading force, as a mere prank?" "I guess I do," he said. "This is an extremely cockeyed idea, isn't it?" I said. "Absolutely. Are you with me?" "Sure,"

I said. "You know I am." \* \* \* \* I told Elaine that Tim and I were going to meet for a late dinner to discuss a business deal and I didn't expect to be home until two or three in the morning. No problem there. Tim was waiting at our old table at Perugino's with a bottle of Amarone already working. The wine was so good that we ordered another midway through the veal pizzaiola, and then a third. I won't say we drank ourselves blind, but we certainly got seriously myopic. And about midnight we walked over to the park. Everything was quiet. I saw sleepy-looking guardsman patrolling here and there along Fifth. We went right up to the command post at 59th and Tim saluted very crisply, which I don't think was quite kosher, he being not then in uniform. He introduced me to someone as Dr. Pritchett, Bureau of External Affairs. That sounded really cool and glib, Bureau of External Affairs. Then off we went up Fifth, Tim and I, and he gave me a guided tour. "You see, Dr. Pritchett, the first line of the isolation zone is the barricade that runs down the middle of the avenue." Virile, forceful voice, loud enough to be heard for half a block. "That keeps the gawkers away. Behind that, doctor, we maintain a further level of security through a series of augmented-beam sealfield emplacements, the new General Dynamics 1100 series model, and let me show you right here how we've integrated that with advanced personnel-interface intercept scan by means of a triple line of Hewlett-Packard optical doppler-couplers -- " And so on, a steady stream of booming confident-sounding gibberish as we headed north. He pulled out a flashlight and led me hither and thither to show me amplifiers and sensors and whatnot, and it was Dr. Pritchett this and Dr. Pritchett that and I realized that we were now somehow on the inner side of the barricade. His glibness, his poise, were awesome. Notice this, Dr. Pritchett, and let me call your attention to this, Dr. Pritchett, and suddenly there was a tiny digital keyboard in his hand, like a little calculator, and he was tapping out numbers. "Okay," he said, "the field's down between here and the 65th Street entrance to the park, but I've put a kill on the beam-interruption signal. So far as anyone can tell there's still an unbroken field. Let's go in." And we entered the park just north of the zoo. For five generations the first thing New York kids have been taught, ahead of tying shoelaces and flushing after you go, is that you don't set foot in Central Park at night. Now here we were, defying the most primordial of no-nos. But what was to fear? What they taught us to worry about in the park was muggers. Not creatures from the Ninth Glorch Galaxy. The park was eerily quiet. Maybe a snore or two from the direction of the zoo, otherwise not a sound. We walked west and north into the silence, into the darkness. After a while a strange smell reached my nostrils. It was dank and musky and harsh and sour, but those are only approximations: it wasn't like anything I had ever smelled before. One whiff of it and I saw purple skies and a great green sun blazing in the heavens. A second whiff and all the stars were in the wrong places. A third whiff and I was staring into a gnarled twisted landscape where the trees were like giant spears and the mountains were like crooked teeth. Tim nudged me. "Yeah," I said. "I smell it too." "To your left," he said. "Look to your left." I looked to my left and saw three huge yellow eyes looking back at me from twenty feet overhead, like searchlights mounted in a tree. They weren't mounted in a tree, though. They were mounted in something shaggy and massive, somewhat larger than your basic two-family Queens residential dwelling, that was standing maybe fifty feet away, completely blocking both lanes of the park's East Drive from shoulder to shoulder. It was then that I realized that three bottles of wine hadn't been nearly enough. "What's the matter?" Tim said. "This is what we came for, isn't it, old pal?" "What do we do now? Climb on its back and go for a ride?" "You know that no human being in all of history has ever been as close to that thing as we are now?" "Yes," I said. "I do know that, Tim." It began making a sound. It was the kind of sound that a piece of chalk twelve feet thick would make if it was dragged across a blackboard the wrong way. When I heard that sound I felt as if I was being



dragged across whole galaxies by my hair. A weird vertigo attacked me. Then the creature folded up all its legs and came down to ground level; and then it unfolded the two front pairs of legs, and then the other two; and then it started to amble slowly and ominously toward us. I saw another one, looking even bigger, just beyond it. And perhaps a third one a little farther back. They were heading our way too. "Shit," I said. "This was a very dumb idea, wasn't it?" "Come on. We're never going to forget this night." "I'd like to live to remember it." "Let's get up real close. They don't move very fast." "No," I said. "Let's just get out of the park right now, okay?" "We just got here." "Fine," I said. "We did it. Now let's go." "Hey, look," Tim said. "Over there to the west." I followed his pointing arm and saw two gleaming wraiths hovering just above the ground, maybe 300 yards away. The other aliens, the little floating ones. Drifting toward us, graceful as balloons. I imagined myself being wrapped in a shining pillow and being floated off into their ship. "Oh, shit," I said. "Come on, Tim." Staggering, stumbling, I ran for the park gate, not even thinking about how I was going to get through the sealfield without Tim's gizmo. But then there was Tim, right behind me. We reached the sealfield together and he tapped out the numbers on the little keyboard and the field opened for us, and out we went, and the field closed behind us. And we collapsed just outside the park, panting, gasping, laughing like lunatics, slapping the sidewalk hysterically. "Dr. Pritchett," he chortled. "Bureau of External Affairs. God damn, what a smell that critter had! God damn!" \* \* \* I laughed all the way home. I was still laughing when I got into bed. Elaine squinted at me. She wasn't amused. "That Tim," I said. "That wild man Tim." She could tell I'd been drinking some and she nodded somberly -- boys will be boys, etc. -- and went back to sleep. The next morning I learned what had happened in the park after we had cleared out. It seemed a few of the big aliens had gone looking for us. They had followed our spoor all the way to the park gate, and when they lost it they somehow turned to the right and went blundering into the zoo. The Central Park Zoo is a small cramped place and as they rambled around in it they managed to knock down most of the fences. In no time whatever there were tigers, elephants, chimps, rhinos, and hyenas all over the park. The animals, of course, were befuddled and bemused at finding themselves free. They took off in a hundred different directions, looking for places to hide. The lions and coyotes simply curled up under bushes and went to sleep. The monkeys and some of the apes went into the trees. The aquatic things headed for the lake. One of the rhinos ambled out into the mall and pushed over a fragile-looking alien machine with his nose. The machine shattered and the rhino went up in a flash of yellow light and a puff of green smoke. As for the elephants, they stood poignantly in a huddled circle, glaring in utter amazement and dismay at the gigantic aliens. How humiliating it must have been for them to feel tiny. Then there was the bison event. There was this little herd, a dozen or so mangy-looking guys with ragged, threadbare fur. They started moving single file toward Columbus Circle, probably figuring that if they just kept their heads down and didn't attract attention they could keep going all the way back to Wyoming. For some reason one of the behemoths decided to see what bison taste like. It came hulking over and sat down on the last one in the line, which vanished underneath it like a mouse beneath a hippopotamus. Chomp, gulp, gone. In the next few minutes five more behemoths came over and disappeared five more of the bison. The survivors made it safely to the edge of the park and huddled up against the sealfield, mooing forlornly. One of the little tragedies of interstellar war. I found Tim on duty at the 59th Street command post. He looked at me as though I were an emissary of Satan. "I can't talk to you while I'm on duty," he said. "You heard about the zoo?" I asked. "Of course I heard." He was speaking through clenched teeth. His eyes had the scarlet look of zero sleep. "What a filthy irresponsible thing we did!" "Look, we had no way of knowing --" "Inexcusable. An incredible

lapse. The aliens feel threatened now that humans have trespassed on their territory, and the whole situation has changed in there. We upset them and now they're getting out of control. I'm thinking of reporting myself for court-martial." "Don't be silly, Tim. We trespassed for three minutes. The aliens didn't give a crap about it. They might have blundered into the zoo even if we hadn't -- " "Go away," he muttered. "I can't talk to you while I'm on duty." Jesus! As if I was the one who had lured him into doing it. Well, he was back in his movie part again, the distinguished military figure who now had unaccountably committed an unpardonable lapse and was going to have to live in the cold glare of his own disapproval for the rest of his life. The poor bastard. I tried to tell him not to take things so much to heart, but he turned away from me, so I shrugged and went back to my office. That afternoon some tender-hearted citizens demanded that the sealfields be switched off until the zoo animals could escape from the park. The sealfields, of course, kept them trapped in there with the aliens.

Another tough one for the mayor. He'd lose points tremendously if the evening news kept showing our beloved polar bears and raccoons and kangaroos and whatnot getting gobbled like gumdrops by the aliens. But switching off the sealfields would send a horde of leopards and gorillas and wolverines scampering out into the streets of Manhattan, to say nothing of the aliens who might follow them. The mayor appointed a study group, naturally. The small aliens stayed close to their spaceship and remained uncommunicative. They went on tinkering with their machines, which emitted odd plinking noises and curious colored lights. But the huge ones roamed freely about the park, and now they were doing considerable damage in their amiable mindless way. They smashed up the backstops of the baseball fields, tossed the Bethesda Fountain into the lake, rearranged Tavern-on-the-Green's seating plan, and trashed the place in various other ways, but nobody seemed to object except the usual Friends of the Park civic types. I think we were all so bemused by the presence of genuine galactic beings that we didn't mind. We were flattered that they had chosen New York as the site of first contact. (But where else?) No one could explain how the behemoths had penetrated the 72nd Street sealfield line, but a new barrier was set up at 79th, and that seemed to keep them contained. Poor Tim spent twelve hours a day patrolling the perimeter of the occupied zone. Inevitably I began spending more time with Maranta than just lunchtimes. Elaine noticed. But I didn't notice her noticing.

\* \* \* \* One Sunday at dawn a behemoth turned up by the Metropolitan, peering in the window of the Egyptian courtyard. The authorities thought at first that there must be a gap in the 79th Street sealfield, as there had at 72nd. Then came a report of another alien out near Riverside Drive and a third one at Lincoln Center and it became clear that the sealfields just didn't hold them back at all. They had simply never bothered to go beyond them before. Making contact with a sealfield is said to be extremely unpleasant for any organism with a nervous system more complex than a squid's. Every neuron screams in anguish. You jump back, involuntarily, a reflex impossible to overcome. On the morning we came to call Crazy Sunday the behemoths began walking through the fields as if they weren't there. The main thing about aliens is that they are alien. They feel no responsibility for fulfilling any of your expectations. That weekend it was Bobby Christie's turn to have the full apartment. On those Sundays when Elaine and I had the one-room configuration we liked to get up very early and spend the day out, since it was a little depressing to stay home with three rooms of furniture jammed all around us. As we were walking up Park Avenue South toward 42nd, Elaine said suddenly, "Do you hear anything strange?"

"Strange?" "Like a riot." "It's nine o'clock Sunday morning. Nobody goes out rioting at nine o'clock Sunday morning." "Just listen," she said. There is no mistaking the characteristic sounds of a large excited crowd of human beings, for those of us who spent our formative years living in the late twentieth century. Our ears were tuned at an early age to the music of riots, mobs, demonstrations, and their kin. We know what it

means, when individual exclamations of anger, indignation, or anxiety blend to create a symphonic hubbub in which all extremes of pitch and timbre are submerged into a single surging roar, as deep as the booming of the surf. That was what I heard now. There was no mistaking it. "It isn't a riot," I said. "It's a mob. There's a subtle difference." "What?"

"Come on," I said, breaking into a jog. "I'll bet you that the aliens have come out of the park." A mob, yes. In a moment we saw thousands upon thousands of people, filling 42nd Street from curb to curb and more coming from all directions. What they were looking at -- pointing, gaping, screaming -- was a shaggy blue creature the size of a small mountain that was moving about uncertainly on the automobile viaduct that runs around the side of Grand Central Terminal. It looked unhappy. It was obviously trying to get down from the viaduct, which was sagging noticeably under its weight. People were jammed right up against it and a dozen or so were clinging to its sides and back like rock climbers. There were people underneath it, too, milling around between its colossal legs. "Oh, look," Elaine said, shuddering, digging her fingers into my biceps. "Isn't it eating some of them? Like they did the bison?" Once she had pointed it out I saw, yes, the behemoth now and then was dipping quickly and rising again, a familiar one-two, the old squat-and-gobble. "What an awful thing!" Elaine murmured. "Why don't they get out of its way?" "I don't think they can," I said. "I think they're being pushed forward by the people behind them." "Right into the jaws of that hideous monster. Or whatever it has, if they aren't jaws."

"I don't think it means to hurt anyone," I said. How did I know that? "I think it's just eating them because they're dithering around down there in its mouth area. A kind of automatic response. It looks awfully dumb, Elaine."

"Why are you defending it?" "Hey, look, Elaine -- " "It's eating people. You sound almost sorry for it!" "Well, why not? It's far from home and surrounded by ten thousand screaming morons. You think it wants to be out there?" "It's a disgusting obnoxious animal." She was getting furious. Her eyes were bright and wild, her jaw was thrust forward. "I hope the army gets here fast," she said fiercely. "I hope they blow it to smithereens!"

Her ferocity frightened me. I saw an Elaine I scarcely knew at all. When I tried one more time to make excuses for that miserable hounded beast on the viaduct she glared at me with unmistakable loathing. Then she turned away and went rushing forward, shaking her fist, shouting curses and threats at the alien. Suddenly I realized how it would have been if Hannibal actually had been able to keep his elephants alive long enough to enter Rome with them. The respectable Roman matrons, screaming and raging from the housetops with the fury of banshees. And the baffled elephants sooner or later rounded up and thrust into the Coliseum to be tormented by little men with spears, while the crowd howled its delight. Well, I can howl too. "Come on, Behemoth!" I yelled into the roar of the mob. "You can do it, Goliath!" A traitor to the human race is what I was, I guess. Eventually a detachment of Guardsmen came shouldering through the streets. They had mortars and rifles, and for all I know they had tactical nukes too. But of course there was no way they could attack the animal in the midst of such a mob. Instead they used electronic blooglehorns to disperse the crowd by the power of sheer ugly noise, and whipped up a bunch of buzz-blinkers and a little sealfield to cut 42nd Street in half. The last I saw of the monster it was slouching off in the direction of the old United Nations Buildings with the Guardsmen warily creeping along behind it. The crowd scattered, and I was left standing in front of Grand Central with a trembling, sobbing Elaine.

\* \* \* \* That was how it was all over the city on Crazy Sunday, and on Monday and Tuesday too. The behemoths were outside the park, roaming at large from Harlem to Wall Street. Wherever they went they drew tremendous crazy crowds that swarmed all over them without any regard for the danger. Some famous news photos came out of those days: the three grinning black boys at Seventh and 125th hanging from the three purple rod-like things, the acrobats forming a human pyramid atop the Times Square

beast, the little old Italian man standing in front of his house in Greenwich Village trying to hold a space monster at bay with his garden hose. There was never any accurate casualty count. Maybe 5000 people died, mainly trampled underfoot by the aliens or crushed in the crowd. Somewhere between 350 and 400 human beings were gobbled by the aliens. Apparently that stoop-and-swallow thing is something they do when they're nervous. If there's anything edible within reach, they'll gulp it in. This soothes them. We made them very nervous; they did a lot of gulping. Among the casualties was Tim, the second day of the violence. He went down valiantly in the defense of the Guggenheim Museum, which came under attack by five of the biggies. Its spiral shape held some ineffable appeal for them. We couldn't tell whether they wanted to worship it or mate with it or just knock it to pieces, but they kept on charging and charging, rushing up to it and slamming against it. Tim was trying to hold them off with nothing more than tear-gas and blooglehorns when he was swallowed. Never flinched, just stood there and let it happen. The president had ordered the guardsmen not to use lethal weapons. Maranta was bitter about that. "If only they had let them use grenades," she said. I tried to imagine what it was like, gulped down and digested, nifty tan uniform and all. A credit to his regiment. It was his atonement, I guess. He was back there in the Gary Cooper movie again, gladly paying the price for dereliction of duty. Tuesday afternoon the rampage came to an unexpected end. The behemoths suddenly started keeling over, and within a few hours they were all dead. Some said it was the heat -- it was up in the 90's all day Monday and Tuesday -- and some said it was the excitement. A Rockefeller University biologist thought it was both those factors plus severe indigestion: the aliens had eaten an average of ten humans apiece, which might have overloaded their systems. There was no chance for autopsies. Some enzyme in the huge bodies set to work immediately on death, dissolving flesh and bone and skin and all into a sticky yellow mess. By nightfall nothing was left of them but some stains on the pavement, uptown and down. A sad business, I thought. Not even a skeleton for the museum, memento of this momentous time. The poor monsters. Was I the only one who felt sorry for them? Quite possibly I was. I make no apologies for that. I feel what I feel. All this time the other aliens, the little shimmery spooky ones, had stayed holed up in Central Park, preoccupied with their incomprehensible research. They didn't even seem to notice that their behemoths had strayed. But now they became agitated. For two or three days they bustled about like worried penguins, dismantling their instruments and packing them aboard their ship; and then they took apart the other ship, the one that had carried the behemoths, and loaded that aboard. Perhaps they felt demoralized. As the Carthaginians who had invaded Rome did, after their elephants died. On a sizzling June afternoon the alien ship took off. Not for its home world, not right away. It swooped into the sky and came down on Fire Island: at Cherry Grove, to be precise. The aliens took possession of the beach, set up their instruments around their ship, and even ventured into the water, skimming and bobbing just above the surface of the waves like demented surfers. After five or six days they moved on to one of the Hamptons and did the same thing, and then to Martha's Vineyard. Maybe they just wanted a vacation, after three weeks in New York. And then they went away altogether. "You've been having an affair with Maranta, haven't you?" Elaine asked me, the day the aliens left. "I won't deny it." "That night you came in so late, with wine on your breath. You were with her, weren't you?" "No," I said. "I was with Tim. He and I sneaked into the park and looked at the aliens." "Sure you did," Elaine said. She filed for divorce and a year later I married Maranta. Very likely that would have happened sooner or later even if the Earth hadn't been invaded by beings from space and Tim hadn't been devoured. But no question that the invasion speeded things up a bit for us all. And now, of course, the invaders are back. Four years to the day from the first landing and there they were, pop whoosh ping thunk, Central Park again. Three ships this time, one of spooks, one of behemoths,

and the third one carrying the prisoners of war. Who could ever forget that scene, when the hatch opened and some 350 to 400 human beings came out, marching like zombies? Along with the bison herd, half a dozen squirrels, and three dogs. They hadn't been eaten and digested at all, just collected inside the behemoths and instantaneously transmitted somehow to the home world, where they were studied. Now they were being returned. "That's Tim, isn't it?" Maranta said, pointing to the screen. I nodded. Unmistakably Tim, yes. With the stunned look of a man who has beheld marvels beyond comprehension. It's a month now and the government is still holding all the returnees for debriefing. No one is allowed to see them. The word is that a special law will be passed dealing with the problem of spouses of returnees who have entered into new marriages. Maranta says she'll stay with me no matter what; and I'm pretty sure that Tim will do the stiff-upper-lip thing, no hard feelings, if they ever get word to him in the rebriefing camp about Maranta and me. As for the aliens, they're sitting tight in Central Park, occupying the whole place from 96th to 110th and not telling us a thing. Now and then the behemoths wander down to the reservoir for a lively bit of wallowing, but they haven't gone beyond the park this time. I think a lot about Hannibal, and about Carthage versus Rome, and how the Second Punic War might have come out if Hannibal had had a chance to go back home and get a new batch of elephants. Most likely Rome would have won the war anyway, I guess. But we aren't Romans, and they aren't Carthaginians, and those aren't elephants splashing around in the Central Park reservoir. "This is such an interesting time to be alive," Maranta likes to say. "I'm certain they don't mean us any harm, aren't you?" "I love you for your optimism," I tell her then. And then we turn on the tube and watch the evening news. ----- At [www.fictionwise.com](http://www.fictionwise.com) you can: \* Rate this story \* Find more stories by this author \* Read the author's notes for this story \* Get story recommendations

===== Hot Times in Magma City by 1995 Robert Silverberg ===== Copyright (c)1995, Agberg, Ltd. First published in Omni Online, May 1995 Fictionwise Contemporary Science Fiction ----- NOTICE: This work is copyrighted. It is licensed only for use by the purchaser. If you did not purchase this ebook directly from Fictionwise.com then you are in violation of copyright law and are subject to severe fines. Please visit [www.fictionwise.com](http://www.fictionwise.com) to purchase a legal copy. Fictionwise.com offers a reward for information leading to the conviction of copyright violators of Fictionwise ebooks. ----- It's seven in the morning and the big wall-screen above Cal Mattison's desk is beginning to light up like a Christmas tree as people start phoning Volcano Central with reports of the first tectonic events of the day. A little bell goes off to announce the arrival of each new one. \_Ping!\_ and there's a blue light, a fumarole popping open in somebody's back yard in Baldwin Park, steam but no lava. \_Ping!\_ and a green one, minor lava tongue reaching the surface in Temple City. \_Ping!\_ again, blue light in Pico Rivera. And then come three urgent pings in a row, bright splotch of red on the screen, big new plume of smoke must be rising out of the main volcanic cone sitting up there on top of the Orange Freeway where the intersection with the Pomona Freeway used to be. "Busy morning, huh?" says Nicky Herzog, staring over Mattison's shoulder at the screen. Herzog is a sharp-faced hyperactive little guy, all horn-rimmed glasses and beady eyes, always poking his big nose into other people's business. Mattison shrugs. He is a huge man, six feet five, plenty of width between his shoulders, and a shrug is a big, elaborate project for him. "Shit, Nicky, this isn't anything, yet. Go have yourself some breakfast." "A bunch of blues, a green, and a red, and that ain't anything, you say?"

"Nothing that concerns us, man." Mattison taps the screen where the red is flashing. "Pomona's ancient history. It isn't none of our business, what goes on in Pomona, not any more. Whatever happens where you see that red, all the harm's already been done, can't do no more. Not now. And those blues -- shit, it's just some smoke. Let 'em put on gas masks. As for the green in Temple City, well -- " He shakes his head. "Nah. They'll take care of that out of local resources. Get yourself some breakfast, Nicky." "Yeah. Yeah. Scrambled eggs and snake meat." Herzog slithers away. He's sort of like a snake himself, Mattison thinks: a narrow little guy, no width to him at all, moves in a funny head-first way as though he's cutting a path through the air for himself with his nose. He used to be something in Hollywood, a screenwriter or a story editor or something, a successful one, too, Mattison has heard, before he blitzed out on Quaaludes and Darvan and coke and God knows what-all else and wound up in Silver Lake Citizens Service House with the rest of this bunch of casualties. Mattison is a former casualty himself, who once had carried a very serious boozing jones on his back that had a heavy negative impact on his professional performance as a studio carpenter and extremely debilitating effects on his driving skills. His drinking also led him to be overly free with his fists, not a wise idea for a man of his size and strength, because he tended to inflict a lot of damage and that ultimately involved an unfortunate amount of legal expense, not to mention frequent and troublesome judicial chastisement. But all of that is behind him now. Matthison, who is 28 years old, single, good-natured and reasonably intelligent, is well along in recovery. For the past eighteen months he has been not just an inmate but also a staffer here at Silver Lake, gradually making the transition from victim of his own lousy impulse control to guardian of the less fortunate, an inspiration to those who seek to pull themselves up out of the mud as he has done. Various of the less fortunate are trickling into the room right now. Official wake-up time at Silver Lake Citizens Service House is half past six, and you are expected to be down for breakfast by seven, a rule that nearly everybody observes, since breakfast ceases to be available beyond 7:30, no exceptions made. Mattison himself is up at five every morning because getting up unnaturally early is a self-inflicted part of his recovery regime, and Nicky Herzog is usually out of his room well before the required wake-up hour because perpetual insomnia has turned out to be an accidental facet of his recovery program, but most of the others are reluctant awakeners at best. Some would probably never get out of bed at all, except for the buddy-point system in effect at the house, where you get little bonus goodies for seeing to it that your roommate who likes to sleep in doesn't get the chance to do it. Mary Maud Gulliver is the first one in, followed by her sullen-faced roommate Annette Lopez, and after them, a bunch of rough beasts slouching toward breakfast, come Paul Foust, Herb Evans, Lenny Prochaska, Nadine Doheny, Marty Cobos, and Marcus Hawks. That's most of them, and the others will be along in two or three minutes. And, sure enough, here they come. That musclebound bozo Blazes McFlynn is the next one down -- Mattison can hear him in the breakfast room razzing Herzog, who for some reason he likes to goof around with. "Good morning, you miserable little faggot," McFlynn says. "You fucking creep." Herzog sputters back, an angry, wildly obscene and flamboyant response. He's good with words, if nothing else. McFlynn drives him nuts; he has been reprimanded a couple of times for the way he acts up when Herzog's around. Herzog is an edgy, unlikable man, but as far as Mattison knows he isn't any faggot. Quite the contrary, in fact. Buck Randegger, slow and slouching and affable, appears next, and then voluminous Melissa Hornack, she of the six chins and hippopotamoid rump. Just two or three missing, now, and Mattison can hear them on the stairs. The current population of Silver Lake Citizens Service House is fourteen inmates and four full-time live -- in staff. They occupy a spacious and comfortable old three-story sixteen-room house that supposedly was, once upon a time back around 1920 or 1930, the mansion of some important star of silent movies. The place was an even bigger wreck, up until five or

six years ago, than its current inhabitants were themselves, but it has been nicely rehabilitated by its occupants since then as part of their Citizens Service obligation.

Mattison has long since had breakfast, but he usually goes into the dining room to sit with the inmates while they eat, just in case someone has awakened in a testy mood and needs to be taken down a notch or two. Since everybody here is suffering to a greater or lesser degree from withdrawal symptoms of some sort all the time, and even those who are mostly beyond the withdrawal stage are not beyond the nightmare-having stage, people can get disagreeably edgy, which is where Mattison's size is a considerable occupational asset.

But just as he rises now from the screen to follow the others in, a series of pings comes from it like church bells announcing Sunday morning services, and a little line of green dots spaced maybe six blocks apart springs up out in Arcadia, a few blocks east of Santa Anita Avenue from Duarte Road to Foothill Boulevard, and then curving northwestward, actually reaching beyond the 210 Freeway a little way in the direction of Pasadena. This is new. By and large the Zone's northwestern boundary has remained well south of Huntington Drive, with most of the thrust going down into the lower San Gabriel Valley, places like Monterey Park and Rosemead and South El Monte, but here it is suddenly jumping a couple of miles on the diagonal up the other way with lava popping up on the far side of Huntington, practically to the edge of the racetrack and the Arboretum and quite possibly cutting the 210 in half.

It's very bad news. Mattison doesn't need to wait for alarm bells to go off to know that. Everybody wants to believe that the Zone is going to remain confined to the hapless group of communities way out there at the eastern end of the Los Angeles Basin where the trouble started, but what everybody fears is that in fact it's going to keep right on marching unstopably westward until it gets to the ocean, like a bad case of acne that starts on a teenager's left cheek and continues all the way to the ankles. They are doing a pretty good job of controlling the surface flows, but nobody is really sure about what's going on deep underground, and at this very minute it might be the case that angry rivers of magma are rolling toward Beverly Hills and Trousdale Estates and Pacific Palisades, heading out Malibu way to give the film stars one more lovely surprise when the fabulous new Pacific Coast Highway Volcano abruptly begins to poke its head up out of the surf. Of course, it's a long way from Arcadia to Malibu. But any new westward extension of the Zone, even just a couple of blocks, is a chilling indication that the process is far from over, indeed may only just have really begun.

Mattison turns toward the dining room and calls out, "You better eat fast, guys, because I think they're going to want us to suit up and get -- "

And then the green dots on the screen sprout fluorescent yellow borders and the alarm bell at the Silver Lake Citizens Service House starts going off.

\* \* \* \* What the alarm means is that whatever is going on out in Arcadia has proven to be a little too much for the local lava-control teams, and so they are beginning to call in the Citizens Service people as well. The whole idea of the Citizens Service Houses is that they are occupied by troubled citizens who have volunteered to do community service -- any sort of service that may be required of them. A Citizens Service House is not quite a jail and not quite a recovery center, but it partakes of certain qualities of both institutions, and its inhabitants are people who have fucked up in one way or another and done injury not only to themselves but to their fellow citizens, injury for which they can make restitution by performing community service even while they are getting their screwed -- up heads gradually screwed on the right way.

What had started out to involve a lot of trash-collecting along freeways, tree-pruning in the public parks, and similar necessary but essentially simple and non-life-threatening chores, has become a lot trickier ever since this volcano thing happened to Los Angeles. The volcano thing has accelerated all sorts of legal and social changes in the area, because flowing lava simply will not wait for the usual bullshit California legal processes to take their course. And so it was just a matter of two or three weeks after the Pomona eruption

before the County Supervisors asked the Legislature to extend the Citizens Service Act to include lava control, and the bill passed both houses the next day. Whereupon the miscellaneous boozers, druggies, trunk-gobblers, and other sad substance-muddled fuckupniks who inhabit the Citizens Service Houses now find themselves obliged to go out on the front lines at least three or four times a month, and sometimes more often than that, to toil alongside more respectable folk in the effort to keep the rampaging magmatic flow from extending the grip that it already holds over a significant chunk of the Southland.

It is up to the dispatchers at Volcano Central in Pasadena to decide when to call in the Citizens Service people. Volcano Central, which is an arm of the Cal Tech Seismological Laboratory with its headquarters on the grounds of Cal Tech's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in the hills north of town, monitors the whole Tectonic Zone with a broad array of ground-based sensors and satellite-mounted scanners, trying to keep track of events as the magma outcropping wanders around beneath the San Gabriel Valley, and if possible even to get a little ahead of things.

Every new outbreak, be it simply a puff of smoke rising from a new little fumarole or a full-scale barrage of tephra and volcanic bombs and red-hot lava pouring from some new mouth of Hell, is duly noted by JPL computers, which constantly update the myriad of data screens that have been set up all over town, like the one above Cal Mattison's desk in the community room of the Silver Lake Citizens Service House. It is also Volcano Central's responsibility, as master planners of the counteroffensive, to summon the appropriate kind of help. The Fire Department first, of course: that has by now been greatly expanded and reorganized on a region-wide basis, not without a lot of political in-fighting and general grief, and fire-fighters are called in according to a concentric-circles system that widens from the Zone itself out to, eventually, Santa Barbara and Laguna Beach. Their job, as usual, is to prevent destruction of property through the spreading of fires from impacted areas to surrounding neighborhoods. Volcano Central will next alert the National Guard divisions that have been put on permanent activation in the region; and when even the Guard has been stretched too thin by the emergency, the Citizens Service Houses people will be called out, along with other assorted civilian volunteer groups that have been trained in lava-containment techniques.

Mattison has no real way of finding out whether it's true, but he believes that the Silver Lake house gets called out at least twice as often as any of the other Citizens Service Houses he knows of. He may actually be right. The Silver Lake house is located in an opportune spot, practically in the shadow of the Golden State Freeway: it is an easy matter for its inhabitants, when summoned, to take that freeway to one interchange or another and zoom out via the Ventura Freeway to the top end of the Zone or the San Bernardino Freeway to the southern end, whereas anybody coming from the Mar Vista house or the one in West Hollywood or the Gardena place would have a much more extensive journey to make.

But it isn't just the proximity factor. Mattison likes to think that his particular bunch of rehabs are notably more effective on the lava line than the bozos from the other houses. They have their problems, sure, big problems; but somehow they pull themselves together when their asses are on the line out there, and Mattison is terrifically proud of them for that. It might also be that he himself is considered an asset by Volcano Central -- his size, his air of authority, his achievement in having pulled himself up out of very deep shit indeed into his present quasi-respectability. But Mattison doesn't let himself dwell on that angle very much. He knows all too well that what you usually get from patting yourself on your own back is a dislocated shoulder.

The bell is ringing, anyway. So here they go again.

"Can we finish breakfast, at least?" Herzog wants to know. Mattison glances at the screen. Seven or eight of those green-and-yellow dots are blinking there. He translates the cool abstractions of the screen into the probable inferno that has burst out just now in Arcadia and says, glancing at his watch, "Gulp down as much as you can in the next forty-five seconds. Then get your asses in motion and head



toward the suiting room." "Jesus Christ," somebody mutters, maybe Cobos. "Forty-five fucking seconds, Matty?" But the others are smart enough to know not to waste any of those seconds bitching, and are shoveling the food down the hatch while Mattison is counting off the time. At the fifty-third second, for he is fundamentally a merciful man, he tells them that breakfast is over and they need to get to work. The lava suits are stored downstairs, in a room off the main hallway that once might have been an elegant paneled library. The remains of the paneling is still there, rectangles of mahogany or some other fancy wood, but the panels are hard to see any more, because just about every square inch of the room is packed with brightly gleaming lava suits, standing upright elbow to elbow and wall to wall like a silent congregation of robots awaiting activation. What the suits are, essentially, is one-person body-tanks, solid sturdy shells of highly reflective melnar that are equipped with tractor treads, shovel appendages, laser knives, and all sorts of other auxiliary gadgetry. Factories in Wichita and Atlanta work twenty-four hours a day turning them out, nowadays, with the Federal Government paying the not insignificant expense as part of the whole ongoing disaster relief program that Los Angeles's latest and most spectacular catastrophe has engendered. Mattison sometimes wonders why it was considered worthwhile to keep fifteen or twenty of these extremely costly suits standing around idle much of the time at each of the Citizens Service Houses, when it would be ever so much more efficient for the suits to be stored at some central warehouse at the edge of the Zone, where they could be handed out each day to that day's operating crew. But it is a question he has never bothered to raise with anybody, because he knows that the Federal Government likes to operate in mysterious ways beyond the capacity of mere mortals to comprehend; and, anyway, the suits have been bought and paid for and are here already. They come in two sizes, bulky and bulkier. Mattison hauls the three nearest suits out into the hallway and hands them to people of the appropriate size, which creates space for the others to go into the storage room and select their own suits for themselves. As usual, there is plenty of jostling and bumping, and some complaining, too. Herb Evans is just barely big enough for the bigger size suit, and might be better off with the smaller one, in which he could move about less awkwardly; but he always wants one of the big ones, and the one he has grabbed right now has also been grabbed from the other side by Marcus Hawks, who is six feet two and has a better claim to it. "I got it first," Evans is yelling. Hawks, not letting go, says, "You go get one that's the right size for you, you little dumb motherfucker," and Mattison sees immediately that they both are prepared to defend their positions with extensive disputatory zeal, perhaps for the next three or four hours. He isn't surprised: the denizens of Citizens Service Houses are not, as a rule, gifted with a lot of common sense, but they often make up for that by being extremely argumentative and vindictive. There's no time to let Evans and Hawkins sort things out; Mattison strides between them, gently but firmly detaches Evans's grip from one arm of the suit and Hawkins's from the other, and sends the two of them in opposite directions to find different suits entirely. He takes the big one for himself and moves out in the hallway with it so that he can get himself into it. "As soon as you have your suits on," Mattison bellows, "head on out into the street and get on board the truck, fast as you can!" He squeezes into his own with difficulty. In truth he's a little too big even for the big size, about an inch too tall and two or three inches too broad in the shoulders, but by scrunching himself together somewhat he can manage it, more or less. There's no way he can stay behind when the Silver Lake house gets called out on lava duty, and he doesn't know any tailors who do alterations on lava suits. The big olive-green military transport truck that is always parked now in readiness outside the house has let its tailgate down, and, one by one, the suited-up lava fighters go rolling up the slope into the truck and take their positions on the open back deck. Mattison waits in the street until everybody is on board who's going on board, twelve of the fourteen residents -- Jim

Robey, who is coming slowly back from the brink of cirrhosis, is much too freaky-jittery to be sent out onto the lava front, and Melissa Hornack is disqualified by virtue of her extreme obesity -- and two of the four staffers, Ned Eisenstein, the house paramedic, and Barry Gibbons, the cook, who does not suit up because he is the one who drives the truck, and you can't drive a truck when you're wearing a thing that's like a small tank. The remaining member of the staff is Donna DiStefano, the actual director of the house, who would love to go along but is required by her official position to remain behind and look after Robey and Hornack.

"We're all set," Mattison tells Gibbons over his suit radio, and swings himself up onto the truck. And away they go, Zoneward bound.

\* \* \* \* Early as it is, the day is warming up fast, sixty degrees or so already, a gorgeously spring-like February morning, the air still reasonably clear as a result of the heavy rain a couple of nights before. This has been a particularly rainy winter, and Mattison often likes to play with the idea that one of these days it'll rain hard enough to douse the fucking volcanoes entirely, but he knows that that's impossible; the magma just keeps coming up and up out of the bowels of the earth no matter what the weather is like on top. A volcano isn't like a bonfire, after all.

The rains have made everything green, though. The hills are pure emerald, except where some humongous bougainvillea vine is setting off a gigantic blast of purple or orange. Because the prevailing winds this time of year blow from west to east, there's no coating of volcanic ash or other pyroclastic crap to be seen in this part of town, nor can you smell any of the noxious gases that the million fumaroles of the Zone are putting forth; all such garbage gets carried the other way, turning the world black and nauseating from San Gabriel out to San Berdoo and Riverside.

What you can see, though, is the distant plume of smoke that rises from the summit of Mount Pomona, which is what the main cone seems to have been named. The mountain itself, which straddles two freeways, obliterating both, in a little place called City of Industry just southwest of Pomona proper, isn't visible, not from here -- it's only 700 feet high, after six months of building itself up out of its own accumulation of ejected debris. But the column of steam and fine ash that emerges from it is maybe five times as high, and can be seen far and wide all over the Basin, except perhaps in West L.A. and Santa Monica, where none of this can be seen or smelled and all they know of the whole volcano thing, probably, is what they read in the Times or see on the television news.

As the truck heads east along the Ventura, though, signs of the disaster begin to show up as early as Glendale, and by the time they have crossed over to the 210 Freeway and are moving through Pasadena there can be no doubt that something out of the ordinary has been going on a little further ahead. Everything from about Fair Oaks Avenue eastward is sooty from a light coating of fine pumice and volcanic ash that has been carried out of the Zone by occasional blasts of Santa Ana winds, and beyond Lake Avenue the whole area is downright filthy. Mattison -- who is a native Angeleno, having grown up in Northridge and Van Nuys and lived for most of his adult life in a succession of furnished apartments in West Los Angeles -- thinks of the impeccable mansions just to his right over in San Marino, with their manicured lawns and their blooming camellias and azaleas and aloes, and shakes his head at the thought of the way they must look now. He can remember one epic bender that began in Santa Monica and ended up around here in which he found himself climbing over the wall at three in the morning into the enormous sprawling garden of giant cactus at the Huntington Library, right down there in San Marino, and wandering around inside thinking that he had been transported to some other planet. It must look like Mars in there for sure these days, he thinks.

At Sierra Madre Boulevard the truck exits the freeway. "It's blocked by a pile of lava bombs just beyond San Gabriel Boulevard," Gibbons explains to him via the suit radio. "They hope to have it cleared by this afternoon." He goes zigging and zagging in a south-easterly way on surface streets through Pasadena until they get to Huntington Drive, which takes them past Santa Anita Racetrack and brings them smack up into a

National Guard roadblock a couple of blocks just beyond. The Guardsmen, seeing a truckload of mirror-bright lava suits, wave them on through. Gibbons, who is undoubtedly getting his driving instructions now direct from Volcano Central, turns left on North Second Avenue, right on Colorado Boulevard, and brings the truck to a halt a little way down the street, where half a block of one-story commercial buildings is engulfed in flame and red gouts of lava are welling up out of what had until five or six hours ago been a burrito shop. The site is cordoned off, but just beyond the cordon a bunch of people, Mexicans, some Chinese, maybe a few Koreans, are standing around weeping and wailing and waving their arms toward heaven -- the proprietors, most likely, of the small businesses that are getting destroyed here. "Everybody out," Mattison orders, as the tailgate goes down. Firefighters are already at work at the periphery of the scene, hosing down the burning buildings in the hope of containing the blaze before it sets the whole neighborhood on fire. But the lava outcropping has been left for Mattison and his crew to handle. Lava containment is a new and special art, which the Citizens Service House people have gradually come to master, and the beleaguered Fire Department guys are quite content to leave that kind of work to them and concentrate on putting out conventional fires. Quickly Mattison sizes up the picture. Things are just in the very early stages, he sees. There's still hope for containment. What has happened here is that a stray arm of the underlying magma belt that is causing this whole mess has wandered up through the bedrock and has broken through the surface in eight or nine places along a diagonal line a couple of miles long. It's as if a many-headed serpent made of fiery-hot lava has poked all its heads up at the same time. For just one volcano to have sprung up out here would have been bad enough. But the area now known as the San Gabriel Valley Tectonic Zone has been favored, over the past year or so, with a whole multitude of them -- little ones, but lots. The Mexicans call the Zone La Mesa de los Hornitos -- that means "little ovens," hornitos. You can cook your tortillas on the sidewalk anywhere in the affected area. The lava pool here is maybe eleven feet by fifteen, a puddle, really, just enough to take out the burrito joint. The heat it's giving off is, of course, fantastic: Mattison, who has become an expert in such things by this time, can tell just at a glance that things are running about 2000 degrees Fahrenheit. Lava at that temperature glows yellowish-red. He prefers to work with it glowing bright-red, which is about 400 degrees cooler, or, even better, dark blood-red, 400 degrees cooler than that; but he is not given his choice of temperatures in these situations, and at least they are not yet into the white-heat stage, which is a bitch and a half to cope with. It is the heat of the lava, and not any fire from below, that has set the adjoining buildings ablaze. Volcanoes, Mattison knows, don't belch fire. But you push a lot of red-hot material up into a street like this and nearby structures made mostly of beaverboard and plywood are very quickly going to reach their flash point. The flow, so far, is moving relatively slowly, maybe ten or twelve inches a minute. That means the lava is relatively viscous, and thank God for that. He knows of flows that come spurting out fifty times as fast and make you really dance. At the upper surface where the lava is coming into contact with the air he can see it congealing, forming a glassy surface that tinkles and clinks and chimes as inexorable pressures from below keep cracking it. Mattison watches odd blobs and bulges come drifting up, expand, harden a little, and break, sending squiggles of molten lava off to either side. A few big bubbles are rising too, and they seem ominous and nasty, indicators, perhaps, that the lava pool is thinking of spitting a couple of little lava bombs at the onlookers. The pumping truck that has been supplied for Mattison's crew this morning is strictly a minor-league item, but it appears adequate for his needs. The region has only so many of the big-ticket jobs available, just a handful, really, even after all these months since the crisis began, and those have to be kept in reserve for the truly dire eruptions. So what they have given him to work with, instead of a

two-and-a-half-ton pump that can move thirteen thousand gallons of water a minute and throw it, if necessary, hundreds of feet in the air, is one of the compact Helgeson & Nordheim tripod-mounted jobs sitting on top of an ordinary flat-bed truck. It's small, but it'll probably do the job. An auxiliary firefighter -- a girl, couldn't be more than fifteen, Latino, dark eyes glossy with excitement and fear -- has been delegated to show him where the water hookup is. Every one of the myriad little municipalities in and around the Zone is now under legal obligation to designate certain hydrants as dedicated lava-pump outlets, and to set up and maintain reserve water-tanks at ground level every six blocks. "How far are we from the nearest dedicated hydrant?" Mattison asks her, speaking like a space invader from within his lava suit, and she tells him that it's back behind them on North Second, maybe a thousand yards. Has he been provided with a thousand yards of hose? She thinks he has. Okay: maybe she's right. If not, the firemen can lend him some. Lava containment is considered a higher priority than fire containment, considering that uncontrolled lava flows will spread a fire even faster than burning buildings will, since burning buildings don't move through the streets and lava does. Mattison picks Paul Foust and Nicky Herzog, who are two of the least befuddled of his people, to go with the girl from the Fire Department and set up the hose connection. Meanwhile he and Marcus Hawks and Lenny Prochaska get to work muscling the pump rig as close to the lava as they dare, while Clyde Snow, Mary Maude Gulliver, and Marty Cobos set about uncoiling the hundred yards of steel-jacketed hose that's connected to the pump and running it in the general direction of North Second Avenue, where the water will be coming from. The rest of his crew begins unreeling the lengths of conventional hose that they have, ordinary firehose that would melt if used close in, and laying it out beyond the reach of the steel-jacketed section.

Mattison can't help feel a burst of pride as he watches his charges go about their chores. They're nothing but a bunch of human detritus barely out of detox, as he once was too, and yet, goofy and obstinate and ornery and bewildered and generally objectionable as they are capable of being, they always seem to rise above themselves when they're out here on the lava line. Or most of the time, anyway. There are a few pissant troublemakers in the group and even the good ones have funny little relapses when you least expect or want them. But those are the exceptions; this kind of work is the rule. Good for them, he thinks. Good for us all. He's quietly proud of himself too, considering that a couple of years ago he was just one more big drunken unruly asshole like the rest of them, assiduously perfecting his boozing techniques in every bar along Wilshire from Barrington to Bundy to Centinela and so on clear out to the ocean, and here he is calmly and coolly and effectively running his own little piece of the grand and glorious Los Angeles lava-control operation.

"Can we get a little closer, guys?" he asks Hawks and Prochaska. "Jeez, Matty," Prochaska murmurs. "Feel the fucking heat! It's like walking into a blast furnace wearing a bathing suit." "I know, I know," Mattison says. "But we'll be okay. Come on, now, guys. An inch at a time. Easy does it. We're good strong boys. We can handle a nice hot time, can't we?" It's like talking baby-talk, and Hawks and Prochaska are big men, nearly as big as he is and neither of them especially sweet-natured. But he has their number. Their various chemical dependencies had reduced them, in the fullness of time, to something that functioned on the general level of competence of babies in diapers, and they need to prove over and over, now, that they are the tough hard macho males they used to be. So they lean down close and work with him to drag the pump rig forward and get the nozzle aimed right down the mouth of the lava well. The suits they're wearing are actually quite good at shielding them from the worst of the heat. They can withstand a surprising amount of it -- for a time, anyway. The melnar is very tough stuff, and also, because it is so shiny, it turns back much of it through simple reflective radiation, and there's interior insulation besides, and a coolant network, and infrared filters, and two or three other gimmicks also, all of which makes it possible to walk right up to

a 2000-degree lava flow and even, if its surface has hardened a little, to step out onto it when necessary. Still, despite the protection afforded by the lava suit, it is quite apparent from the warmth that does get through that they are standing right next to molten rock that has come spurting up just now from the Devil's own domain.

The hoses are hooked up now and Mattison has the nozzle directed to the place he wants it to be, which is along the outer rim of the lava flow. He sends a radio message back to Foust and Herzog out by the hydrant that they're almost ready to go. Then he gives a hand signal and it travels back and back along the line, from Mary Maude to Evans to Cobos to Buck Randegger, or whoever it is that is standing behind Cobos, and on around the corner until finally it reaches Foust and Herzog, who know for sure now that the hose line is fully connected, and the water begins to flow. Mattison and Hawks and Prochaska grip the nozzle together, slowly and grimly playing it along the edge of the flow.

The purpose of this operation is to cool the front of the lava well sufficiently to form a crust, and then a dam, that will cause the continuing flow to pile up behind it instead of rolling on down the street. This is a technique that was perfected in Iceland, and indeed half a dozen grizzled Icelanders have been imported to serve as consultants during this Los Angeles event, frosty-eyed men with names like Svein Steingrimsson and Steingrim Sveinsson who look upon fighting volcanoes as some kind of Olympic sport. But one big difference between Iceland and Los Angeles is that Iceland sits in the middle of a frigid ocean that provides an infinite quantity of cold water for use by lava-fighters, and the distances from shore to volcano are not very great. Los Angeles has an ocean nearby too, but it isn't conveniently placed for hosing down lava outbreaks in the San Gabriel Valley, which is inland, thirty or forty miles from the coast. Hence the system of municipal water-tanks all along the borders of the Zone, and a zillion tanker trucks trundling back and forth bringing ocean water with which to keep the tanks filled, Los Angeles's regular water supply being far from adequate even for the ordinary needs of the community.

Any lava-cooling job, even a small one like this, is a ticklish thing. It isn't quite like watering a lawn. You are dumping 60 -- degree water on 2000-degree lava, an interaction which is going to produce immense billows of steam that will prevent you from seeing very much of what you are in the process of doing. But you need to see what you are doing, because as you build your lava dam along the front of the upwelling what you may all too easily achieve is not the containment of the lava but, rather, its deflection toward something you don't want it to hit. Like the fire truck down the block, for example, or some undamaged buildings on the opposite side of the street.

So you have to wield your hose like a sculptor, dancing around squirting the water with great precision, topping up the dam here, minimizing its height there, all the while taking into account the slope of the ground, the ability of the subsoil to bear the weight of the new stone, and the possibility that the lava you are working with may suddenly decide to accelerate its rate of outflow from fifty feet an hour to, say, fifty feet a minute, which would send the flow hurtling over the top of your little dam and put you up to your ass in lava, with the hose still dangling from your hand as you become a permanent part of the landscape. Which is why the faceplate of your lava suit is equipped with infrared filters to help you see through all that billowing steam that you are busily creating as you work.

And there is other stuff to consider. Coming up out of the core of the earth, along with all that lava, are various gases, not all of them nice ones. Chlorine, sulfur dioxide, hydrogen sulfide, carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide, all kinds of miasmas are likely to head swiftly surfaceward as though carried by a giant blowpipe. These are all poisonous gases, although you are more or less protected against that by your suit; however, traveling upward with the gases may be fragments of incandescent lava that will go up like a geyser and come down all over the neighborhood, including right where you happen to be. Therefore you want to listen, as you work, for strange new whooshings and bellowings and hissings, and in particular for the sound of something like an

old-fashioned locomotive tooting its horn as it heads your way. Mattison has beaten a quick retreat more than a few times, sometimes taking his pump with him, sometimes abandoning it and running like hell as a highly local eruption starts nipping at his heels. However, none of that happens this morning. This Arcadia thing is just a teeny-weeny little isolated lava outbreak with no special complications except for the owner of the burrito stand. Mattison, aided expertly by Marcus Hawks, who is just eight months out of a crack house in El Segundo, and Lenny Prochaska, whose powerful forearms bear needle tracks that look like freeway interchanges, deftly creates a low wall of cooled lava across the front of the outbreak, then adds a limb up its right-hand side and another up the left to form a U, after which they concentrate on hardening the new lava wherever it comes curling up over the boundaries of their wall. The cooling process is very quick. Along the face of the wall, the temperature of the lava has dropped to the 500-degree level, at which heat it is hardly glowing at all, at least not at the outer crust. Mattison figures that the crust he has built is maybe three inches thick, a skin of solid basalt over the hellish stuff behind. Of course, lava is still oozing steadily from the ground at the original exit point, and probably will go on doing so for another six or seven hours at this site, maybe even a day or two. But the dam should hold it and keep it from welling out into Colorado Boulevard, which is an important thoroughfare that needs to be kept open. Instead, the lava will go on piling up on the site of the burrito stand, forming a little mountain perhaps fifteen or twenty feet high. Unless, of course, it decides to break through the surface a couple of dozen yards down the street instead, but Mattison doesn't think that's going to happen at this site. He sometimes wonders what life is going to be like around here when all this is over, the volcanoes have died down, and the whole eastern half of the Los Angeles Basin is littered with new little mountains in the middle of what used to be busy neighborhoods. Are they going to dynamite them all? Build around them? On top of them? And where are they going to put the freeways to replace the ones that are now mired in cooling lava that soon will be solid rock? Hell, it's not his problem. That's one of his mantras: Not my problem. He has enough problems of his own, currently under control but not necessarily going to stay that way if he borrows trouble from elsewhere. One day at a time is another phrase that he has been taught to repeat to himself whenever he starts worrying about things that shouldn't matter to him. Easy does it. Yes. First things first. These are absolutely right-on concepts. Somebody else will have to figure out how to repair Los Angeles, once all this is over. His job, which will last him the rest of his life, is figuring out how to operate Cal Mattison. The fires in the surrounding buildings are just about out, now. One of the firefighters comes over and asks him how he's doing. "Under control," Mattison tells them. "Just a little tidying-up to do." "You want us to stick around, just in case?" Mattison thinks for a moment. "You got work nearby?" The firefighter points. "There's a whole line of these things, from the freeway all the way down to Duarte. If you don't think the lava's going to pop, we can move on south of here. There's a bad one going on on Duarte, just at the Monrovia line." "Go on, then," Mattison says. "We get any problems, I'll call you back in." Real executive decision-making. He feels good about that. Time was when he never wanted to be the one who made the call about anything. But he's confident of his own judgment right here and now. This job has been handled well. There's a high in that feels like half a fifth of Crown Royal traveling through his veins, smooth and fine and warm. The firefighters go away, leaving just two of their number posted as supervisors during the wrap-up and report-filing phase of the job here, and Mattison, signalling back down the line to have the hose shut down, moves forward onto the lava dam. It can be walked on, now, at least by someone equipped with tractor treads like his. He tests the crinkly new skin. It holds. Dainty little tinkling sounds are coming from it, the sounds of continued cooling and hardening, but it supports his weight. It's a

little like walking on thin new ice, except that what is behind the fragile surface is molten rock instead of chilly water, and if he falls through he will be very sorry, though not for long. But he doesn't expect to fall through, or he wouldn't be up here. Mattison isn't walking around on the dam just to show off. He needs to check out the fine points of the construction job. The dam slopes up and back at a 45-degree angle, and he wants its lip to rise just a little steeper even than that, so he moves along the face of the front, using his suit's shovel appendage to trim and shape the boundary between new rock and hot lava. He can feel mild warmth, not much more than that, through his suit, at least until he reaches a place where red can be seen crackling through the black, a tiny fissure in the dam, not dangerous but offensive to his sense of craft. He steps back, radios Foust and Herzog to turn the water back on, and has Hawks and Prochaska give the fissure a squirt or two. Then he checks the far side of the lava front to make sure that there's no likelihood that the top of the lava dome he has created is simply going to spill back the other way, down into the residential block behind the event. But no, no, the oozing lava is quietly piling itself up, filling in behind the dam, giving no indication that it means to go off in some new direction. Thank God for that much. Because of the way the magma pool lies in relation to the giant subterranean fault line that kicked this whole thing off, the surface flows tend to be consistently directional, rising on a diagonal out of the ground and moving, generally, from east to west only. With some residual slopping around -- lava is a liquid, after all -- but not, as a rule, with any unpredictable twisting and turning back the way they have just come. Just as Mattison is wrapping everything up, Gibbons radios him from the truck to say, "They want us to move along to San Dimas when we're done here." "Jesus," Mattison says. "San Dimas is way the hell to the east. Isn't everything over and done with back there by now?" "Apparently not. Something new is about to bust out, it seems." "Tell them we'll need a lunch break first." "They said they wanted us to --" "Right," says Mattison. "We aren't fucking soldiers, you know. We're volunteer citizens and some of us have been working like coolies out here all morning. We get a lunch break before we start busting our asses again today. Tell them that, Barry." "Well --" "Tell them." \* \* \* \* As Mattison has guessed, the San Dimas thing is serious but not catastrophic, at least not yet. The preliminary signs indicate a bad bust-out is on the way out there, and auxiliary crews are being pulled in as available, but one team more or less won't make any big difference in the next hour. They get the lunch break. Lunch is sandwiches and soft drinks, half a block back from the event site. They get out of their suits, leaving them standing open in the street like discarded skins, and eat sitting down at the edge of the curb. "I sure wouldn't mind a beer right now," Evans says, and Hawks says, "Why don't you wish up a bottle of fucking champagne, while you're wishing things up? Don't cost no more than beer, if it's just wishes." "I never liked champagne," Paul Foust says. "For me it was always cognac. Cour-voy-zee-ay, that was for me." He smacks his lips. "I can practically taste it now. That terrific grapey taste hitting your tongue -- that smooth flow, right down your gullet to your gut --" "Knock it off," says Mattison. This nitwit chatter is stirring things inside him that he would prefer not to have stirred. "You never stop wanting it," Foust tells him. "Yes. Yes, I know that, you dumb fucker. Don't you think I know that? Knock it off." "Can we talk about smoking stuff, then?" Marty Cobos asks. "And how about needles, too?" says Mary Maude Gulliver, who used to sell herself on Hollywood Boulevard to keep herself in nose candy. "Let's talk about needles too." "Shut your fucking mouth, you goddamn whore," Lenny Prochaska says. He pronounces it hooer. "What do you need to play around with my head for?" "Why, did you have some kind of habit?" Mary Maude asks him sweetly. "You hooer, I'm going to throw you into the lava," Prochaska says, getting up and heading toward her. Mary Maude weighs about ninety pounds, Prochaska maybe two-fifty. He could do it with

one flip of his wrist. "Lenny," Mattison says warningly. "Tell her to leave me be, then." "All of you," says Mattison. "Leave each other be. Jesus Christ, you think it's any easier for the others than it was for you?"

It is the tension, he knows, of the morning's work that is doing this to them. They're all on the edge, all the time, of falling back into their individual hells, and that keeps them constantly keyed up to a point where it doesn't take much for them to get on each other's nerves. Of course, he's on the edge himself, he always will be and won't ever let himself forget it, but he is in recovery and they aren't, not really, not yet, and the edge is thinner for them than it is for him. Each of them has managed to reach the abstinence level, at least, but you can get to that point simply by having yourself chained to a bed; that keeps you out of the clutches of your habit but it doesn't exactly qualify you as being free of it. Real recovery comes later, if at all, and you can be a tremendous pain in the ass while you're trying to attain it, because you're angry all the time, angry with yourself for having burdened yourself with your habit and even angrier with the world for wanting you to give it up, and the anger keeps bubbling out all the time. Like lava, sort of. Makes a mess for everybody, especially yourself.

They calm down, though, as the sandwiches hit their bellies. Mattison waits until they've eaten before he springs the San Dimas thing on them, and to his surprise there is no enormous amount of griping. The usual grumblers -- Evans, Snow, Blazes McFlynn -- do a predictable bit of grumbling, but not a whole lot, and that's it. They all would rather go back to the house and watch television, of course, but somewhere deep down they know that this volcano stuff is actual worthwhile and important stuff, perhaps the first time in their lives they have ever done anything even remotely worthwhile and important, and some part of them is tickled pink to be out here on the lava frontier. Hollywood is just a dozen miles west of here, after all. They all see themselves as characters in the big volcano movie, heroes and heroines, riding into battle against the evil monster that's eating L.A. That's how Mattison himself feels when he's out here, and he knows it's the same for them, maybe even more intense than it is for him, because he also has the self-esteem that comes from having made it back out of his addiction to this level of recovery, and they don't. Not yet. So they need to be heroes in a movie to feel good about themselves.

They clean up the lunch mess and Mattison goes back to check his lava dam, which is holding good and true, and then off they go to San Dimas for whatever is to be required of them there.

\* \* \* \* To get there they have to travel through the heart of the Zone, the very belly of the beast, the place where it all started. No. Where it all started was fifty or sixty miles down in the crust of the earth, and maybe fifty miles east of where Mattison and his pals are now: out in Riverside County, where the tremendous but hitherto unknown Lower Yucaipa Fault had chosen to release its accumulated tension about sixteen months ago, sending a powerful shock wave surfaceward that went lalloping through the Southland at a nifty 7.6 on the Richter. The earthquake made a serious mess out of Riverside, Redlands, San Bernardino, and a lot of other places out there in the eastern boondocks, and caused troubles of lesser but not inconsiderable degree as far west as Thousand Oaks and the Simi Valley. Californians don't enjoy big earthquakes, but they do expect and understand them, and they know that after you get one you wait for the lights to come back on and then you sweep up the broken crockery and you call all your friends in the affected area as soon as the phones are working so that, ostensibly, you can find out if they are okay, but really so that you can trade horrendous earthquake stories, and sooner or later the supermarket will reopen and the freeway overpasses will be repaired and things will get back to normal.

But this one was a little different, because the Yucaipa thing had evidently been so severe a fracture that it had shattered the roof of a colossal pool of very deep subterranean gases that had been confined under high pressure for ten or twenty million years, and the gas, breaking loose like a genie that has been let out of a bottle, had taken hold of a whopping



big column of molten magma that happened to be down there and pushed it toward the surface, causing it to come up right underneath the San Gabriel Valley, which is just a little way east of downtown L.A. You expect all kinds of troubles in L.A. -- earthquakes, fires, stupid politics, air pollution, drought, deluges and mudslides, riots -- but you don't seriously expect volcanoes, any more than you expect snow. Volcanoes are stuff for Hawaii or the Philippines, or southern Italy, or Mexico. But not here, thank you, God. We have our little problems, sure, but volcanoes are not included on the list. Now the list is one item longer. The first volcano -- the

only one, so far, that had built a real volcano-style cone for itself -- had popped up at that freeway interchange near Pomona, a couple of days after the big Yucaipa earthquake. First there was thunder, never a common thing in Southern California, and the ground began to shake, and then it began to puff up, making a blister two or three yards high that sent the freeway spilling into pieces as though King Kong had bashed it from below with his fist, and smoke and fine dust started to spurt from the ground. After which came a hissing that you could hear as far away as Long Beach, and showers of red-hot stones went flying into the air, a pretty good indication that this wasn't simply an after-shock of Yucaipa. Then came the noxious gases, a gust of blue haze that instantly killed half a dozen people who were standing around watching; and then a thick column of black ash decorated by flashes of lightning arose; and then, seven or eight hours later, the first lava flow began. The sky was bright as day all night long from the bursts of incandescent gas and molten rock that were coming forth. By the next morning there was a volcanic cone forty feet high sitting where the interchange had been.

If that had been all, well, you would watch it on the news for the next few nights, and then the Federal disaster teams would come in and the people in the neighborhood would be relocated and the National Geographic would publish an article about the eruption, and somebody would start a class action suit complaining that the Governor or the President or somebody had failed to give proper warning to home buyers that volcanoes might happen in Pomona, and the religious crazies in Orange County would deliver sermons about sin and repentance, and after a while the impacted area would become a new tourist attraction, Pomona Volcanic National Park or something like that, and life would go on in the rest of Los Angeles as it always did once the latest catastrophe had turned into history. But the Pomona thing was only the beginning.

That great column of magma, rolling upward from the depths of the earth on a long slant to the west, began breaking through in a lot of other places, bursting out like an attack of fiery pimples across a wide, vaguely triangular strip bracketed, roughly, on the east by the Orange Freeway, on the north by Las Tunas Drive and Arrow Highway, on the south by the Pomona Freeway, and on the west by San Gabriel Boulevard. Within the affected zone anything was likely to happen. Volcanic vents opened in completely random patterns. Lava flows the size of small creeks would crop up in people's garages, or in their living rooms. Fumaroles would sprout in a front lawn and fill a whole neighborhood with smoke and ash. Houses suddenly began to rise from the ground as subsurface bulges formed beneath them. A finger of fierce subterranean heat would whiz along a street and fry the roots of every tree and shrub in your garden without harming your house. All this would be accompanied by almost daily earthquakes -- not big ones, just nervewracking little jiggles of 3.9 or 4.7 that drove you crazy with fear that something gigantic was getting ready to follow. Then things would be quiet for a couple of weeks; and then they would start again, worse than before.

Not all the lava events were trivial garage-sized ones. A few fissures as big as three blocks wide opened and sent broad sheets of molten matter rolling like rivers down main thoroughfares. That was when the Icelanders showed up to give advice about cooling the lava with hoses. Teams like Mattison's were called out to build lava dams, sometimes right across the middle of a big street, so that the flow would back up behind the new rock instead of continuing right on into the towns to the west -- or, perhaps, into Los

Angeles proper, the city itself, still far away and untouched on the other side of the Golden State Freeway. The dams did the trick; but they had the unfortunate side effect of walling off the Zone behind ugly and impassable barriers of solid black basalt. Today's route takes Mattison and Company on a grand tour of the entire Zone. Freeway travel is a joke in these parts once you get anywhere east of Rosemead Boulevard, and there are new lava-created dead ends all over the place on the surface streets, and so it takes real ingenuity, and a lot of backing and filling, to make a short trip like the one from Arcadia to San Dimas, which once would have been a quick buzz down the 210 Freeway. Now it's necessary to back-track down Santa Anita around the new outbreaks on Duarte Road, and then to come up Myrtle in Monrovia to the 210, and take the freeway as far east as it goes before it gets plugged up by last month's uncleared lava, which is not very far down the road at all; and then comes a lot of cockeyed wandering this way and that on surface streets, north to south and north again, through such towns as Duarte and Azusa and Covina and Glendora, places that no Angeleno ordinarily would be going in a million years, in order to get to the equally unknown municipality of San Dimas, which is just a couple of hops away from Pomona. The landscape becomes more and more hellish, the further east they go. "Look at all this shit," Nicky Herzog keeps saying, over and over. "Look at it! This is fucking hopeless, you know? We all ought to give up and move to fucking Seattle." "Rains all the time," says Paul Foust. "You like lava better than rain? You like fucking black ashes falling from the sky?" "We don't give up," Nadine Doheny says dreamily. "We keep on keeping on. We are grateful for everything we have." "Grateful for the volcanoes," Herzog says, in wonder. "Grateful for the ashes. Is that what you think?" "Leave her alone," Mattison warns him. Nadine's conversation is made up mostly of recovery mantras, and that bothers the flippant, sharp-tongued Herzog. But Doheny is right and Herzog, smart as he is, is wrong. We don't give up. We don't run away. We stand our ground and fight and fight and fight. Still and all, the Zone looks awful and even after all this time he has not grown used to its hideousness. There are piles of ashes everywhere, making it seem as if a black snowfall had hit the area, and also, not quite as universally distributed but nevertheless impossible to overlook, little encrustations of cooled lava, clinging to houses and pavements like some sort of dark fungus. Light dustings of pumice drift on the breeze. The sky is white with accumulated smoke that today's winds have not yet been able to blow out toward Riverside. Where major fires have burned, whole blocks of rubble pockmark the scene. The truck has to detour around all sorts of lesser obstacles: spatter cones, small hills of tephra and lapilli and cinders and lava bombs and other forms of ejected volcanic junk, et cetera, et cetera. Occasionally they pass an active fumarole that's enthusiastically belching smoke. Around it, Mattison knows, are piles of dead bugs, ankle-deep, killed by gusts of live steam or poisonous vapors. The fumaroles are surrounded also by broad swaths of mud that somehow has been flung up around their rims, often quite colorful mud at that, green or pink or red from alum deposits, bright yellow where sulfur crystals abound. Sometimes the yellow is laced with streaks of orange or blue, and sometimes, where the mud is very blue, it is splotched in a highly decorative way by a crust of rich chestnut-brown. Mattison doesn't know which chemicals are causing these effects. "It's like fairyland, isn't it?" Mary Maude Gulliver cries out, suddenly. "It's like something out of Tolkien!" "Crazy hooer," Lenny Prochaska mutters. "I'd like to give you a fairyland, you hooer." Mattison shushes him. He smiles at Mary Maude. It's hard to see this place as a fairyland, all right, but Mary Maude is one of a kind. Give her credit for accentuating the positive, anyway. Aside from the mineral incrustations in the mud, the Zone shows color where the ground itself has been cooked by the heat of some intense outbreak from below. That ranges from orange and brick red through bright cherry red to purple and black, with some lively streaks of blue. But this show of color is the only trace of what

might be called beauty anywhere around. Every building is stained with mud and ash. There are hardly any live trees or garden plants to be seen, just blackened trunks with shriveled leaves still hanging from the branches. There aren't many people still living in these neighborhoods. Most of those who could afford it have packed up all their worldly possessions and had them carted off to new homes outside the Zone and, in a good many cases, outside the state altogether. A lot of those at the very bottom of the income ladder have cleared out also, moving to the new Federal relocation camps that have been set up in downtown L.A., Valencia, Mojave, the Angeles National Forest, and anyplace else where there was no irate householders' association to take out an injunction against it. The remaining residents of the Zone, mainly, are the lower-middle-income people, the ones who haven't yet lost their houses but couldn't afford to hire moving companies and aren't quite poor enough to qualify for the camps. They are still squatting here, grimly guarding their meager homes against looters, and hoping against hope that the next round of lava outbreaks will happen on any street but their own. Just how

desperate some of these people are getting is something Mattison discovers when the truck's erratic route around the various obstacles takes it through a badly messed-up segment of a barrio somewhere between Azusa and Covina and they see some kind of pagan religious sacrifice under way in the middle of a four-way intersection, where the pavement has begun to bulge slightly and show signs of imminent buckling as gas pressure builds from below. Flat slabs of blue-black lava have been piled up in the crosswalk to form a sort of rough, ragged-edged altar that has been surrounded by green boughs torn from nearby trees.

What is evidently a priest -- but not any sort of Catholic priest; his dark face is painted with green and red stripes and he is wearing a brilliant Aztec-looking costume, bright feathers and strips of fur all over it -- is standing atop the altar, grasping a gleaming butcher-knife in his hand. The altar is stained with blood, and more is about to be added to it, because two other men in less gaudy outfits than the priest's are at his side, holding forth to him a wildly fluttering chicken. Assorted pigs, sheep, and birds are lined up back of the altar, waiting their turn. In a wider circle around the site are perhaps fifty shabbily dressed men, women, and children, silent, stony-faced, holding hands and slowly, rhythmically stamping their feet.

What is taking place here is utterly obvious right away to everyone aboard the Citizens Service House truck. Even so, it isn't always easy to believe the evidence of your eyes when you see something like this. Mattison stares in shock and disbelief, wondering whether they have slipped through some time-fault and have dropped down into an ancient era, primitive and barbaric. But no, no, prosaic evidence of the modern century can be seen on every side, lampposts, store fronts, billboards. It's just what's going on in the middle of the street that is so exceedingly strange. "Holy

fucking shit," Buck Randegger says. He's a former highway construction worker who has been substance-free about four months and is still plenty rough around the edges. "I thought the fucking Mexicans in this town were supposed to be Christians, for Christ's sake." "We are," Annette Perez tells him

icily. "And also other things, when we have to be. Sometimes both at the same time." The butcher-knife descends in a fierce arc, the newly headless chicken flaps its wings insanely, the crowd of worshippers jumps up and down and cries out three times in a high-pitched ecstatic way, and Randegger expresses his disgust and amazement at the whole weird pagan scene with a maximum of pungency and a minimum of political correctness. For a moment it looks as though Perez is going to jump at him, and Mattison gets ready to intervene, but she simply shoots Randegger a black glare and says, "If this was your neighborhood, carajo, and you had a god, wouldn't you want to ask him to stop this shit?" "With pigs? With sheep?" "With whatever

would do it," she says. Gibbons, meanwhile, is backing the truck out of the intersection, since the assembled congregation now is staring at them as though their presence here is quite unwelcome and it seems manifestly not a good idea to try to drive any closer. Mattison, taking one last look over his

shoulder, sees a small pig being led up the side of the altar. The truck, still going backward, swings left at the first corner, then takes the next right and right again, which brings it around to the far side of the site of the ceremony in the same moment as a little earthquake goes rippling through the vicinity, 3.5 or so, just enough to make the gaunt blackened palm trees that line the street start swaying. The worshippers in the intersection behind them point at the truck as it reappears, and begin to scream and yell furiously and shake their fists, and then Mattison hears some popping sounds.

"Hit the gas," he tells Gibbons over his suit radio. "They're shooting at us." Gibbons speeds up. The street ahead is carpeted with a layer of loose ash maybe two feet deep, but Gibbons ploughs through it anyway, sending up swirling black clouds that make everybody on the open deck close the faceplates of their suits in a hurry. Beyond the ash is a stretch of crunchy cinders and other sorts of tephra, so that they all grab hold of each other and hang on tight as the truck clanks and jounces onward, and then a little newly congealed lava in the road makes the ride even rougher; but after that the street turns normal again for a while and they can relax, as much relaxation as may be possible while you ride in an open truck through territory that no longer looks like just a suburb of Hell, but the Devil's own back yard.

There have been repeated outbreaks of tectonic activity here before, early on in the crisis -- that much is obvious from the burned-out houses and the black crusts of old lava everywhere and the ashen landscape -- but something new and big is apparently getting ready to happen. The sky here is dead white from thick upwellings of steam and sulfurous fumes, except where the fumes are coaly black. Streaks of lightning keep jumping around and the ground trembles continuously, as if a non-stop earthquake is going on. The sidewalks are warped and bulging in many places and some little red tongues of lava can be seen beginning to ooze from cracks in the pavement. Every few minutes a dull distant boom can be heard, a muffled sound that definitely gets your attention, something like the fart of a dinosaur that might be sauntering around a few blocks away.

Three or four weary-looking fire crews are slowly taking up positions in the street and getting their gear into order; some of the biggest pumps Mattison has ever seen have already been hauled into place for the lava-cooling work; police helicopters are whirling overhead, booming down orders to whatever remaining population may still be living here to evacuate the area at once. It is a truly precarious scene. Mattison is ever so happy that he traded the horrors of substance abuse for the privilege of visiting places like this.

The same thing is occurring to some of his companions, evidently. Blazes McFlynn lays his hand on Mattison's right arm and says, "I didn't sign on for any goddamned suicide missions, Matty. Let me off this fucking truck right now." "Let you off?" Mattison says mildly. "Fucking A. I want out, this very minute." Mattison sighs.

McFlynn always makes trouble, sooner or later: if only he had known that this San Dimas operation was going to be tacked on to the day's outing, he probably would have opted to leave McFlynn behind at the outset. McFlynn is, of all goofy things, a bombed-out circus acrobat and pensioned-off movie stunt man, strong as a tow-truck winch, who over the course of time has found relief from stress in a whole smorgasbord of addictive substances and now, having very badly broken his leg while winning a moronic barroom bet that involved jumping off the top of a building and developed a severe limp that makes it hard for him to practice either of his professions, draws generous compensation pay from a variety of sources while undergoing one of his periodic spells of detoxification and Citizens Service. His first name is actually Gerard, but if you call him anything but Blazes he will react unpleasantly. He is the only man in the house for whom Mattison would feel any reticence about decking, for McFlynn, though five inches shorter than Mattison, is probably just about as dangerous in a fight, gimpy leg and all.

"Are you saying," Mattison asks him once more, "that you don't want to take part in the current operation?" "The whole street is going to blow any minute." "Maybe so. That's why we're here, to get things under

control if it does. You want to walk back from here to Silver Lake? You think you'll catch a bus, maybe, or phone for a cab? The option of your departing this operation simply does not exist at this moment, okay, McFlynn?" McFlynn tries to say something, but Mattison talks right over him, although keeping his voice mild, mild, mild, as he is has been taught to do all the time when addressing the inmates, no matter what the provocation. "You find this work not to your liking, well, when you get your cowardly ass back to the house tonight you can tell Donna that you don't want to do volcano work any more, and she'll take you off the list. You aren't any fucking prisoner, you understand? You don't have to do this stuff against your will and in fact you are perfectly free, if you like, to pack up and leave the house tomorrow and go back to your favorite substance, for that matter. But not today. Today you work for me, and we work in San Dimas." McFlynn, who surely was aware when he began complaining that this was where the discussion was going to end, is just starting to crank up a disgruntled and obscene capitulation when Gibbons says, over the radio from the truck cab, "Volcano Central wants us to start setting up the pump, Matty. Satellite scan says there's a lava bulge about to blow two blocks east of us down Bonita Avenue, which is the big street straight in front of us, and we're supposed to dam it up as soon as it comes our way." So they are going to be right on the front line, this time. Fine, Mattison thinks. Hot diggety damn. \* \* \* \* They all get off the truck, and seal up their suits, and set about getting ready to deal with the oncoming eruption.

Because the pump they will be using this time is a jumbo job, just about the biggest one Mattison has ever worked with, he designates not only Prochaska and Hawks, once again, for the pumping crew, but also Clyde Snow and Blazes McFlynn, who will be up front not only because he's strong but also because Mattison wants to keep a close eye on him. In any case he's going to need all the muscle-power he can get when it becomes necessary to swing that big rig around to keep the shifting lava penned up. He puts the generally reliable Paul Foust in charge of the controls that operate the pump itself. The rest -- Randegger, Herzog, Evans, and the three women, Doheny and Perez and Gulliver -- Mattison deploys at various points along the line to the standpipe, so that they can keep the hose from getting tangled and cope with any other interruptions to the flow of water that might arise. Everybody is in place none too soon. Because just as the signal arrives from the rear that the water connection has been made, there comes an all too familiar bellowing and groaning from the next block, as though a giant with a bad bellyache is about to cut loose, and then Mattison hears five sharp heavy grunts in succession, oof oof oof oof oof, followed by an eerie crackling sound, and suddenly the air is full of fire. It's like one of the Yellowstone geysers, except that what is being flung up is a lot of tiny bits of hot lava, riding on a plume of bluish steam, and for a couple of moments it's impossible to see more than a few feet in front of your face-plate. Then there is one single booming sound, not muffled at all but sharp and hard, and the bluish geyser of steam in front of them triples or quadruples in height in about half a second, and the pavement ripples beneath their feet as though an earthquake has happened precisely in this spot. Mattison comprehends that there has been a terrific explosion a very short way down the block and they are all about to be hurled sky-high, or maybe are already on their way up to the stratosphere and just haven't had time to react yet. But they aren't. What has happened is that an underground gas pocket has blown its head off, yes, but it has done it in one single clean whoosh and all the pent-up junk that is being released has taken off for Mars in a coherent unit, the steam and mud and lava bits and whatnot rising straight up and vanishing, clearing the air beautifully behind it. A couple of good-sized lava bombs go soaring past them, fizzing like fireworks, and come down with thick plopping thunks somewhere not far away, but don't seem to do any damage; and then things are quiet, pretty much. The whole blurry geyser that was spewing straight up in front of them is gone, the ground they are standing on is still intact, and they can see again. Mattison has

just about enough time to realize that he has survived the explosion when he registers the force of an inrush of cool air that's swooping in from all sides to fill the gap where the geyser had been. It isn't strong enough to knock anybody down, but it does make you want to brace yourself pretty good.

And then comes the heat; and after it, the lava flow. The heat is awesome. Mattison's suit catches most of it, but enough of the surge gets through his insulation so that he has no doubt at all about its intensity. It is what he calls first-rush heat: the subterranean magma mass has been cooking whatever deposits of air have surrounded it down there, and all that hot air, having had no place to go, has gone on getting hotter and hotter. Now it all comes gleefully zooming out at once. Mattison recoils involuntarily as though he has been belted by an invisible fist, steadies himself, straightens up, looks around to check up on his companions. They're all okay. The lava, having busted through the pavement at last, follows right on the heels of that hot blast. A glowing red-orange river of it, maybe two or three feet deep, flowing down the middle of the street, taking the line of least resistance between the buildings as it heads in their direction.

"Hose!" Mattison yells. "Pump! Hit it, you bozos, hit it right down front!"

The lava is moving faster than Mattison would prefer, but not so fast that they need to retreat, at least not yet. It's actually three separate streams, each runnel six to eight feet wide, traveling in parallel paths and occasionally overlapping in a braided flow before separating again. The surface of each flow is fairly viscous from its exposure to the cool air, darker than what is below and showing irregular bulges and lobes and puckerings, which break open now and then to reveal the bright red stuff that lies just below. Here and there, narrow tongues of dark congealed lava rise above the stream at sharp angles like sleek fins, making it seem as though lava sharks are swimming swiftly downstream through the fiery torrent.

As the water from their big hose hits the first onrush of the flow, a scum of cooling lava starts to form almost instantly atop the middle stream. The front of it begins to change color and texture, thickening and turning gray and wrinkled, like an elephant's hide.

"That's it!" Mattison tells his men. "Keep hitting it there! Smack in the middle, guys!" The water boils right off, naturally, and within moments they are able to see nothing in front of them once again except a wall of steam. This is the most dangerous moment, Mattison knows: if the lava, pushed toward them by whatever giant fist of gas is shoving it from below, should suddenly increase its uptake velocity, he and his whole team could be engulfed by it before they knew what was happening to them. For the next few minutes they'll be fighting blind against the oncoming lava flow, with nothing to guide them about its speed and position but Mattison's own perceptions of fluctuations in its heat.

The heat, at the moment, is really something. Not as fierce as it had been in the first instant of the breakout, no, but powerful enough to tax the cooling systems of their lava suits practically to their limits. It feels like a solid wall, that heat: Mattison imagines that if he leaned forward against it, it would hold him up. But he knows that it won't; and he knows, also, that if things get much hotter they will have to back off.

What he is trying to do is to build log-shaped strips of solidified lava along the front of the row, perpendicular to the line of movement. These will slow its advance as the fresh stuff piles up behind them. Then he can raise the angle of the hoses and start pumping the water upward to form larger blocks of lava, which he will eventually link to create his dam. And in time he will have buried the live lava at its source, entombing it beneath a little mountain of newly created rock and thus throttling the upwelling altogether.

The theory is a nice one. But in practice there usually are problems, because the lava, unlike your average river, tends to advance at a variable speed from moment to moment, and you can build a lovely little log-jam or even some good-sized retainer blocks and nevertheless a sudden fast-moving spurt of molten stuff will spill right over the top and head your way, and there is nothing you can do then but drop your hoses and run like hell, hoping that the lava isn't

traveling faster than you are. Or else, as Mattison knows all too well, your dam will work very effectively to halt the lava in its present path -- thereby inducing it to take up a different path that will send it rolling off toward some still undamaged freeway or still unruined houses, or maybe pouring down a hillside into another community entirely. When you see something like that happening, you need to move your whole operation around at a 90-degree angle to itself and start building a second dam, not so easy to do when you are operating with two-ton pumps.

Here, just now, everything is going sweetly so far. It's a tough business because of the extreme heat, but they are holding their own and even managing to achieve something. They have been able to maintain themselves at a distance of about half a block from the front edge of the lava flow without the need to retreat, and Mattison can see, whenever the steam thins out a bit, that the color of the lava along the edge is beginning to turn from gray to a comforting black, the black of solid basalt. A pump crew from some other Citizens Service House has arrived, Mattison has been told, and is building a second lava dam on the opposite side of the breakout. The fire crews are at work in the adjacent blocks, hosing down the structures that were ignited by the initial geyser of lava fragments.

If visibility stays good, if the water supply holds out, if the pump doesn't break down, if the lava doesn't pull any velocity surprises, if some randomly escaping goblet of hot rock doesn't go flying through the air and melt one of the hoses, if there isn't some new eruption right under their feet, or maybe an earthquake, if this, if that -- well, then, maybe they'll be able to knock off in another hour or two and head back to the house for some well-earned rest.

Maybe. But things are beginning to change a little, now. The lava is penned up nicely in the middle but the bulk of the flow has shifted to the right-hand stream and that one is gaining in depth and velocity. That brings up the ugly possibility that Mattison's dam is achieving diversion instead of containment, and is about to send the entire flow, which has been traveling thus far from west to east, off in a southerly direction.

Volcano Central is monitoring the whole thing by satellite, and somebody up there calls the problem to Mattison's attention via his suit radio about a fifteenth of a second after he discovers it for himself. "Start moving your equipment to the right side of your dam," Volcano Central says. "There's danger now that the lava will start rolling south down San Dimas Avenue into Bonelli County Park, where it'll take out the Puddingstone Reservoir, and maybe keep on going south until it cuts the San Bernardino Freeway in half on the far side of the park. A piece of the 210 Freeway will also be at risk down there."

The street and park names mean nothing to Mattison -- he has never been anywhere near San Dimas before in his life -- and he can form only a hazy picture of the specific geography from what Volcano Central is telling him. But all that matters is that there's a park, a reservoir, and an apparently undamaged stretch of freeway to the south of here, and his beautifully constructed lava dam has succeeded in tipping the flow toward those very things, and he has to hustle now to correct the situation.

"All right, everybody, listen up," he announces. "We're making a 90-degree shift in operations." Easier said than done, of course. The hoses will have to be decoupled and dragged to new hydrants, the massive pump has to be swung around, the trajectory of the water stream has to be recalibrated -- nor will the lava stand still while they are doing all these things. It's a challenge, but stuff like this is meat and potatoes to Mattison, the fundamental nutritive agent out of which his recovery is being built. He starts giving the orders; and his poor battered bedraggled team of ex-abusers, ex-homelesses, ex-burglars, ex-muggers, ex-whores, ex-this, ex-that, all of it bad, swings gamely into action, because this is part of their recovery too.

But in the middle of the process of moving the pump, Blazes McFlynn steps back, folds his arms across the chest of his lava suit, and says, "Coffee break."

Mattison stares at him incredulously. "What the fuck did you say?" "Time out, is what I said. You think it's a snap, hauling this monster around? I'm tired. I'm a crippled man, Matty.

I got to sit down for a while and take a breather." "The lava is changing direction. There's a park and a reservoir and a freeway in the path of danger now." "So?" McFlynn says. "What's that mean to me?" Mattison is so astonished that for a moment he can't speak. If this is a joke, it's a damn lousy one. He needs McFlynn badly, and McFlynn has to know that. Mattison, flabbergasted, gapes and gestures in helpless pantomime. McFlynn says, "Not my park. Not my freeway. I don't even know where the fuck we are right now. But my bad leg is aching like a holy son of a bitch and I want to sit down and rest and that's that." "I'll sit you down, all right," Mattison says, recovering his voice finally. "I'll sit you down inside a volcano, you obstreperous lazy son of a bitch. I'll drop you in on your head." He knows that he is not supposed to speak to the inmates this way, and that everybody else is listening in and someone is bound to talk and he will very likely be reprimanded later on by Donna, but he can't help himself. He doesn't pretend to be a saint and McFlynn's sudden rebellion has pissed him off almost to the breaking point. Almost. What he really would like to do now is put one hand under McFlynn's left armpit and one hand under the right one and pick him up and carry him to the lava and dangle his feet over the fiery-hot flow for a moment and then let go. Very likely that is exactly what Mattison would have tried to do two years ago, if he and McFlynn had found themselves in this situation two years ago; but it is a measure of the progress he has been making that he merely fantasizes tossing McFlynn into the lava, now, instead of actually doing it. The fantasy is so vivid that for a dizzy moment he believes that he is actually doing it, and he gets a savage rush of glee from the spectacle of McFlynn disappearing, melting away as he goes under, into the blazing river of molten magma. But actually doing it would be extremely poor procedural technique. And also McFlynn is not exactly a weakling and Mattison is aware that he might find himself involved in a non-trivial fight if he tries anything. Mattison has never lost a fight in his life, but it is some time since he has been in one, and he may be out of practice; and in any case there's no time now, with the lava about to overflow his dam, to fuck around getting into fights with people like Blazes McFlynn. So what he does, instead, is turn his back on McFlynn, swallowing the rest of what he would like to say and do to him, and indicate to Prochaska, Hawks, and Snow, who have been watching the whole dispute in silence, that they will have to finish moving the pump without McFlynn's help. They all know what that means, that McFlynn has shafted them thoroughly by dumping his share of this tremendous job on their shoulders, and they are righteously angry. A certain amount of venting occurs, which Mattison decides would be best to permit. Hawks tells McFlynn that he's a motherfucking goof-off and Prochaska says something guttural and probably highly uncomplimentary in what is probably Czech, and even Snow, not famous for hard work himself, gives McFlynn the hand-across-bent-forearm chop. McFlynn doesn't seem to give a damn. He replies to the whole bunch of them with an upthrust finger and a lazy, contemptuous smirk that makes Mattison think that the next event is going to be a crazy free-for-all; but no, no, they all ostentatiously turn their backs on him too and continue the job of guiding the pump toward its new position. It's a miserably hard job. The pump is on a wheeled carriage, sure, but it isn't designed to be moved in an arc as narrow as this, and they really have to bust their humps to swing it into its new position. The men grunt and groan and gasp as they bend and push. Mattison, who as the biggest and strongest of the group has taken up the key position, can feel things popping in his arms and shoulders as he puts his whole weight into the job. And all the while McFlynn stands to one side, watching. The pump is more than halfway into place when McFlynn comes limping over as though he has graciously decided that he will join them in the work after all. "Look who's here," says Hawks. "You motherfucker son of a bitch." "Can I be of any assistance?" McFlynn says grandly. He tries to take up a position against the side of the pump carriage between Hawks and Prochaska. Hawks turns squarely toward McFlynn and seems to be



thinking about throwing a punch at him. Mattison, who has been worried about this possibility since McFlynn made his announcement, poises himself to step in, but Hawks gets his anger under control just in time. Muttering to himself, he turns back in Prochaska's direction. There is just enough room for McFlynn to shove his way in between Hawks and Mattison. He braces himself and puts his shoulder against the carriage, making a big show of throwing all his strength into the task.

"Hey, be careful not to strain yourself, now!" Mattison tells him. "Fuck you, Matty," McFlynn says sulkily.

"That's all I have to say, just fuck you." "You're welcome," says Mattison, as with the aid of McFlynn's added strength they finally manage to finish swinging the big pump around and lock it on its track. The men

step back from it, wheezing, sucking in breath after their heavy exertions. But the incident isn't over. Prochaska goes up to McFlynn and says something else to him in the harsh language that Mattison assumes is Czech. McFlynn gives Prochaska the finger again. Maybe there's going to be a fight after all. No. They are content to glare, it seems. Mattison glances at McFlynn and sees, through the faceplate of his suit, that the expression on McFlynn's face has become unexpectedly complicated. He looks defiant but maybe just a little shamefaced too. An attack of conscience? A bit of guilt over his stupid dereliction kicking in at last, now that he realizes that he actually was needed badly just now and fucked everybody over by crapping out? Better late than never, Mattison figures.

Prochaska still isn't finished letting McFlynn know what he thinks of him, though: he throws in a couple of harsh new Slavic expletives, and McFlynn, who probably has no more of an idea of what Prochaska is saying to him than Mattison does, dourly gives him back some muttered threats salted with the standard Anglo-Saxonisms. Things are starting to get a little out of hand, Mattison thinks. He needs to do something, although he's not sure what. But he has a lava flow to worry about, first.

\* \* \* \* The lava, in fact, is getting a little out of hand also. Not that it has started to flow in any serious way toward Whatchamacallit Park and Whozis Reservoir, not yet. A thin little eddy of it has begun to dribble off that way over the right-hand edge of Mattison's dam, but nothing significant. The main flow is still traveling from east to west. The real problem is that new flows are starting to emerge from the ground alongside the original source, and there are now six or seven streams instead of three. Red gleams are showing through the gray and black of the dam, indicating that the hot new lava is finding its way between sections of the hardened stuff. That means that what is coming out now is thinner than before.

Thin lava moves faster than thick lava. Sometimes it can move very fast. The direction of the flow can get a little unpredictable, too.

The pump is in place in its new location and ready to start throwing water, but it needs to have the water, first. Mattison is still waiting for confirmation that the hoses behind him have been moved and hooked to different hydrants. He can see Nicky Herzog a short distance down one of the side streets to his right, kneeling next to a section of thick hose as he fumbles around with a connector.

"Are we okay?" Mattison asks him. "Just about ready," Herzog replies. He straightens up and begins to give the hand signal indicating that the water line is completely set up. But suddenly he seems to freeze in place, and starts swinging around jerkily in a very odd way, going from side to side from the waist up without moving his legs at all. Also Herzog has begun flinging his arms rigidly above his head, one at a time, as if he is suddenly getting tickled by an electric current.

For a moment Mattison can't figure out what's going on. Then he sees that the rightmost lava stream, the one that had already begun to escape a little from the dam, has been joined by one of the newer and thinner streams and has greatly increased in volume and velocity. It has changed direction, too, and is running straight at Herzog in a great hurry, traveling at him in two prongs separated by a green Toyota utility van that somebody has abandoned in the middle of the street.

Herzog is in the direct line of the flow, and he knows it, and he is scared silly. Mattison sees immediately that Herzog

has a couple of choices that make some sense. He could go to his left, which would involve a slightly scary jump of about three feet over the lesser prong of the new lava stream, and take refuge in an alleyway that looks likely to be secure against the immediate trajectory of the stream because there are brick buildings on either side of it. Or he could simply turn around and run like hell down the street he's in, hoping to outleg the advancing flow, which is moving swiftly but maybe not quite as swiftly as he could manage to go. Both of these options have certain risks, but each of them holds out the possibility of survival, too.

Unfortunately Herzog, though a quick-witted enough fellow when it comes to sarcastic quips and insults, or to laying out a million-dollar story line for some movie-studio executive, is fundamentally a clueless little yutz as far as most normal aspects of life are concerned, and in his panic he makes a yutzy decision. Apparently he perceives the Toyota as an island of safety in the middle of all this madness, and, breaking at last from his paralysis, he jumps the wrong way across the narrower lava stream and with a berserk outlay of energy pulls himself up onto the hood of the green van. From there he clambers desperately to the Toyota's roof and begins to emit a godawful frightened caterwauling, high-pitched and strident, like an automobile burglar alarm that won't turn off.

What he has achieved by this is to strand himself in the middle of the lava flow. Maybe he expects that Mattison will now call in a police helicopter to lower a rope ladder to him, the way they would do in a movie, but there are no helicopters in the vicinity just now, and the lava that surrounds the Toyota isn't any special effect, either: it's a fast-flowing stream of actual red-hot molten magma, a couple of thousand degrees in temperature, which is widening and widening and very soon will be lapping up against the Toyota's wheels on both sides. At that point the Toyota is going to melt right down into the lava stream and Nicky Herzog is going to die a quick but very unpleasant death.

Mattison doesn't like the idea of losing a member of his crew, even a shithead like Herzog. He knows that his crew is made up entirely of shitheads, himself included, and the fact that Herzog is a shithead does not invalidate him as a human being. Too much of the human race falls into the shithead category, Mattison realizes. If nobody in the world ever lifted a finger to save shitheads from their own shithheadedness, then almost everybody would be in trouble. He himself, as Mattison is only too well aware, would still be compulsively cruising the bars along Wilshire and waking up the next morning under somebody's car port in Venice or Santa Monica. So he resolved some time back, quite early in his sobriety, to do whatever he could to help the shitheads of the world overcome their shithheadedness, starting with himself but extending even unto the likes of McFlynn and Herzog.

Nevertheless, Mattison is helpless in this instance. He is cut off from Herzog now by the larger of the two lava flows and he doesn't see a damned thing that he can do by way of rescuing him in time. A couple of minutes ago, maybe, yes, but now there's no chance. Even with an armored suit on, he can't just wade through a stream of hot fresh lava. He is going to have to stand right where he is and watch Herzog melt.

All of this analysis, the sizing up of the somber situation and the arriving at the melancholy conclusion, has taken about 2.53 seconds. Roughly 1.42 seconds later, while Mattison is still making his peace with the idea that Herzog is screwed, a lava-suited figure unexpectedly appears in the street where Herzog is trapped, emerging from the alleyway into which Herzog had failed to flee, and calls out, extending his arms to the terrified man on top of the van, "Jump! Jump!" And, when Herzog does nothing, yells again, angrily, "Come on, you prick, jump! I'll catch you!"

Mattison isn't sure at first who the man who has come out of the alleyway is. Everybody looks basically like everybody else inside a lava suit, and it's not too easy to distinguish one voice from another over the suit radios, either. Mattison glances around, taking a quick inventory of his crew. Hawks right here, yes, and Prochaska, yes -- Can it be Clyde Snow, over there by the mouth of that alleyway? No. No. Snow is right over there, on the far side of the pump carriage. So it has to

be Blazes McFlynn who right at this moment is standing at the very edge of a diabolically hot stream of lava and stretching his arms out toward the gibbering and wailing Nicky Herzog. McFlynn, yes, who has found some sort of detour between the adjacent buildings and made his way as close to the Toyota as it is possible to get. Incredible, Mattison thinks. Incredible.

"Jump, will you, you nitwit faggot!" McFlynn roars once more. "I can't stay here the whole fucking day!" And Herzog jumps. He does it with the same grace and panache with which he has handled most other aspects of his life, coming down in McFlynn's approximate direction with his body bent in some crazy corkscrew position and his arms and legs flailing wildly. McFlynn manages to grab one arm and one leg as Herzog sails by him heading nose-first for the lava, and hangs on to him. But, slight as Herzog is, the force of his jump is so great and the angle of his descent is so cockeyed that the impact on McFlynn causes the bigger man to stagger and spin around and begin to topple. Mattison, watching in horror, comprehends at once that McFlynn is going to fall forward into the lava stream still holding Herzog in his arms, and both men are going to die. McFlynn doesn't fall, though. He takes one ponderous lurching step forward, so that his left leg is no more than a few inches from the edge of the lava stream, and leans over bending almost double so that that leg accepts his full weight, and Herzog's weight as well. McFlynn's left leg, Mattison thinks, is the broken one, the one that is bent permanently outward after the 79-cent job of setting it that was done for him at the county hospital. McFlynn stands there leaning out and down for a very long moment, regaining his balance, adjusting to his burden, getting a better grip on Herzog. Then, straightening up and tilting himself backward, McFlynn pivots on his good leg and swings himself around in a hundred-and-eighty-degree arc and goes tottering off triumphantly into the alleyway with Nicky Herzog's inert form draped over his shoulder. Mattison has never seen anything like it. Herzog can't weigh more than a hundred forty pounds, but the suit adds maybe fifty pounds more, and McFlynn, though six feet tall and stockily built, probably weighs two-ten tops. And has a gimpy leg, no bullshit there, a genuinely damaged limb on which he has just taken all of Herzog's weight as the little guy came plummeting down from that Toyota. It must have been some circus-acrobat trick that McFlynn used, Mattison decides, or else one of his stunt-man gimmicks, because there was no other way that he could have pulled the trick off. Mattison, big and strong as he is and with both his legs intact, doubts that even he would have been able to manage it. McFlynn is coming around the far side of the pump carriage now, no longer carrying Herzog in his arms but simply dragging him along like a limp doll. McFlynn's face plate is open and Mattison can see that his eyes are shining like a madman's -- the adrenaline rush, no doubt -- and his cheeks are flushed and glossy with sweat from the excitement. "Here," he says, and dumps Herzog down practically at Mattison's feet. "I thought the dumb asshole was going to wait forever to make the jump." "Hey, nice going," Mattison says, grinning. He balls up his fist and clips McFlynn lightly on the forearm with it, a gesture of solidarity and companionship, one big man to another. McFlynn's face is aglow with the true redemptive gleam. That must have been why he did it, Mattison thinks: to cover over the business about refusing to help move the pump. Well, whatever. McFlynn is a total louse, a completely deplorable son of a bitch, but that was still a hell of a thing to have done. "I thought you had gone off on your coffee break," Mattison says. "Fuck you, Matty," McFlynn tells him, and shambles away to one side. Herzog is conscious, or approximately so, but he looks dazed. Mattison yanks his face plate open, snaps his fingers in front of his nose, gets him to open his eyes. "Go over to the truck and sit down," Mattison orders him. "Chill out for a while. You're off duty." "Yeah," says Herzog vaguely. "Yeah. Yeah." And give yourself a couple of good shots of bourbon to calm yourself down while you're at it, Mattison thinks, but of course does not say. Christ, he wouldn't mind a little of that himself, just now. It is, however, not an available option.

"All right," he says, looking around at Hawks, Prochaska, Snow, and a couple of the others, Foust and Doheny, who have come up from the rear lines to see what's going on. "Where were we, now?" \* \* \* \* The hose line that Herzog had been supervising has been obliterated by the new lava stream, of course, and the Toyota van is up to its door-handles now in lava too. But there are other hose lines coming in from other streets, and they still have a dam to build before they can call it a day. Mattison is getting a little tired, now, after all the stuff with McFlynn and then with Herzog, but he can feel himself starting to function on automatic pilot. Groggily but with complete confidence he gets the water running again, and cuts through another handy alley so that he can set up a second line of lava logs along the new front, about thirty feet south of the Toyota. It takes about fifteen minutes of fast maneuvers and fancy dancing to choke it off entirely. Then he can devote his attention to building the larger dam, the one that will contain this whole mess and shove the lava back on itself before it does any more damage. He plods back and forth, giving orders almost like a sleepwalker, telling people to move hoses around and change the throwing angle of the pump, and they do what he says like sleepwalkers themselves. This has been a very long day. They don't usually do two jobs the same day, and Mattison means to have Donna DiStefano say something to the Citizens Service administrators when he gets back. Big ragged-edged blocks of black stone are forming now all across the middle of the street and curving around toward the south where the runaway lava stream had been. So the thing is pretty well under control. By now another team of Citizens Service people has arrived, and Mattison figures that if he is as tired as he is, then the others in his crew, who don't have his superhuman physical endurance and are still hampered to some degree by the medical after-effects of their recently overcome bad habits, must be about ready to drop. He tells Barry Gibbons that he would like him to requests permission from Volcano Central to withdraw. It takes Gibbons about five minutes to get through -- Volcano Central must be having one whacko busy day -- but finally it comes through. "All right, guys," Mattison sings out. "That's it for today. "Everybody back in the truck!" They are silent, pretty much, on the way back. The San Dimas thing has been grueling for all of them. Mattison notices that Herzog is standing on one side of the truck and McFlynn on the other, facing in opposite directions. He wonders whether Herzog had had the good grace even to thank McFlynn for what he had done. Probably not. But Herzog is a shithead, after all. For a long time Mattison can't stop thinking about that little episode. About McFlynn's perversity, mainly. Crapping out on the rest of the pump team in a key moment without any reason, nonchalantly stepping to one side and leaving Prochaska and Hawks and Snow to do the heavy hauling without him, even though he must have known that his strength was needed. And then, just as light-heartedly, running into that alleyway to risk his life for Herzog, a man whom he despises and loves to torment. It doesn't make a lot of sense. Mattison pokes around at it from this way and that, and still he doesn't have a clue to what might have been going on in McFlynn's mind in either case. Possibly nothing was going on in there, he decides finally. Perhaps McFlynn's actions don't make any sense even to McFlynn. McFlynn has been a resident in the house long enough to know that everybody is supposed to be a team player, and even if you don't want to be, you need to pretend to be. Letting the team down in the clutch is not a good way to ensure that you will get the help you need in your own time of need. On the other hand, there was no reason in the world why McFlynn had to do what he did for Herzog, except maybe that he was feeling sheepish about the pump-moving episode, and Mattison finds that a little hard to believe, McFlynn feeling sheepish about anything. So maybe McFlynn is just an ornery, unpredictable guy who takes each moment as it comes. Maybe he felt like being a louse when they were moving the pump, and maybe he felt like being a hero when Herzog was about to die a horrible death. I don't know, Mattison thinks. That's cool. I don't know, and I hereby give myself permission not to know,

and to hell with it. It isn't Mattison's job to get inside people's heads, anyway. He's not a shrink, just a live-in caregiver, still too busy working on his own recovery to fret about the mysterious ways of his fellow mortals. He just has to keep them from hurting themselves and each other while they're living in the house. So he gives up thinking about McFlynn and Herzog and turns his attention instead to what is going on all around them, which actually is a little on the weird side. They are almost at the western periphery of the Zone, now, having retraced their route through Azusa and Covina, then through towns whose names Mattison doesn't even know -- hell, most of these places look alike, anyway, and unless you see the signs at the boundaries you don't know where one ends and the next begins -- and are approaching Temple City, San Gabriel, Alhambra, all those various flatland communities. Behind them, night is beginning to fall, it being nearly five o'clock and this being February. In the gathering darkness the new spurts of smoke atop Mount Pomona are pretty spectacular, lit as they are by streaks of fiery red from whatever is going on inside that cone today. But also, a little to the south of the big volcano, something else seems to be happening, something odd, because a glaring cloud of blue-white light has arisen down there. Mattison doesn't remember seeing blue-white stuff before. Some new kind of explosion? Are they nuking the lava flow, maybe? It looks strange, anyway. He'll find out about it on the evening news, if they are. Or maybe he won't.

Booming noises come from the southeast. A lot of tectonic garbage seems to be going into the sky back there too; he sees small red lava particles glowing against the dusk, and dark clouds too, ash and pumice, no doubt, and probably some nice-sized lava bombs being tossed aloft. And they experience two small earthquakes as they're driving back, one while they're going up Fair Oaks in Pasadena, another fifteen minutes later just as they're about to get on the westbound Ventura Freeway. Nothing surprising about that; five or six little quakes a day are standard now, what with all that magma moving around under the San Gabriel Valley. But the two so close together are further signs that things are getting even livelier in the Zone just as Mattison and his crew are going off duty. Hoo boy, Mattison thinks. Hot times in Magma City.

It's beginning to rain a little, out here in Glendale where they are at the moment. Nothing big, just light sprinkles, enough to make the rush-hour traffic a little uglier but not to cause serious troubles. Mattison likes the rain. You get so little of it, ordinarily, in Los Angeles, eight or ten dry months at a time, sometimes, and right now, with everything that's going on behind him in the Zone, the rain seems sweet and pure, a blessing being scattered on the troubled land. It's good to be going westward again, moving slowly through the evening commute toward what is still the normal part of Los Angeles, toward the sprawling city he grew up in. What is happening back there, the lava, the ash, the blue-white lights, seems unreal to him. This doesn't. Down there to his left are the high-rise towers of downtown, and the clustering stack of freeways meeting and going off in every which way. And straight ahead lie all the familiar places of his own particular life, Studio City and Sherman Oaks and Van Nuys in this direction and Hollywood and Westwood and West L.A. in that one, and so on and on out to Santa Monica and Venice and Topanga and the Pacific Ocean. If only they could drop a curtain across the face of the Zone, Mattison thinks. Or build a 50-foot-high wall, and seal it off completely. But no, they can't do that, and the lava will keep on coming, won't it, crawling westward and westward and westward until one of these days it comes shooting up under Rodeo Drive or knocks the San Diego Freeway off its pegs. What the hell: we can only do what we can do, and the rest is up to God's mercy and wisdom, right? Right? Right?

They are practically back at the house, now. The rain is getting worse. The sky ahead of them is starting to turn dark. The sky behind them is already black, except where the strange light of eruptions breaks through the night. \* \* \* \* "McFlynn really pissed me off today," he tells Donna DiStefano. "I entertained seriously hostile thoughts in his direction. In fact I had pretty strong fantasies about tossing him

right into the lava. Truth, Donna." The house director laughs. It's the famous Donna laugh, a big one, high up on the Richter scale. She is a hefty woman with warm friendly eyes and a huge amount of dark curling hair going halfway down her back. Nothing ever upsets her. She is supposed to have been addicted to something or other very major, fifteen or twenty years back, but nobody knows the details. "It's a temptation, isn't it?" she says. "What a pill he is, eh? Was that before or after the Herzog rescue?"

"Before. A long time before. He was bitching at me from lunchtime on." Mattison hasn't told her about the pump-moving incident. Probably he should; but he figures she already has heard about it, one way or another, and it isn't required of him to file report cards on every shitty thing the residents of the house do while he's looking after them. "There was another time, later in the day, when it would have given me great pleasure to dangle him face first into the vent. But I prayed for patience instead and God was kind to me, or else we'd have had some vacancies in the house tonight."

"Some?" "McFlynn and me, because he'd be dead and I'd be in jail. And Herzog too, because McFlynn was the only one in a position to rescue him just then. But here we all are, safe and sound." "Don't worry about it," DiStefano says. "You did good today, Matty." Yes. He knows that that's true. He did good. Every day, in every way, inch by inch, he does his best. And he's grateful every hour of his life that things have worked out for him in such a way that he has had the opportunity. As if God has sent volcanoes to Los Angeles as a personal gift to him, part of the recovery program of Calvin Thomas Mattison, Jr.

There's nothing on the news about unusual stuff in the Zone this evening. Usual stuff, yes, plenty of that, getting the usual perfunctory coverage, fumaroles opening here, lava vents there, houses destroyed in this town and that and that, new street blockages, et cetera, et cetera. Maybe the blue-white light he saw was a just tremendous searchlight beam, from the opening of some new shopping mall in Anaheim or Fullerton. This crazy town, you never can tell. He goes upstairs -- his little room, all his own. Reads for a while, thinks about his day, gets into bed. Sleeps like a baby. The alarm goes off at five, and he rises unprotestingly, showers, dresses, goes downstairs. There are lights on all over the board. Blue for new fumaroles, here here and there, and another red one in the vicinity of Mount Pomona, and a whole epidemic of green dots announcing fresh lava cutting loose over what looks like the whole area. Mattison has never seen it look that bad. The crisis seems to be entering a new and very obnoxious phase. Volcano Central will be calling them out again today, sure as anything. What the hell. We do what we can, and hope for the best, one day at a time. He puts together some breakfast for himself and waits for the ----- At  
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THE AIRPORT was very new. It had a bright, shiny, major-world-capital feel, and for a moment Mondschein thought the plane had landed in Rio or Buenos Aires by mistake. But then he noticed the subtle signs of deception, the tackiness around the edges, the

spongy junk behind the gleaming facades, and knew that he must indeed be in Tierra Alvarado. "Senor Mondschein?" a deep male voice said, while he was still marching down the corridors that led to the immigration lounge. He turned and saw a short, wide-shouldered man in a beribboned green-and-red comic-opera uniform which he remembered after a moment was that of the Guardia de la Patria, the Maximum Leader's elite security corps. "I am Colonel Aristegui," he said. "You may come with me, please. It was a good journey? You are not overly fatigued?" Aristegui didn't bother with passport formalities. He led Mondschein through a steel doorway marked SEGURIDAD, INGRESO PROHIBIDO which admitted them to a series of bewildering passageways and catwalks and spiral staircases. There was no veneer back here: everything was severely functional, gunmetal-gray walls, exposed rivets and struts, harsh unshielded light-fixtures that looked a century old. Here it comes, Mondschein thought: this man will take me to some deserted corner of the airstrip and touch his laser pistol to my temple and they will bury me in an unmarked grave, and that will be that, five minutes back in the country and I am out of the way forever. The final visa approval had come through only the day before, the fifth of June, and just hours later Mondschein had boarded the Aero Alvarado flight that would take him in a single soaring supersonic arc nonstop from Zurich to his long-lost homeland on the west coast of South America. Mondschein hadn't set foot there in twenty-five years, not since the Maximum Leader had expelled him for life as a sort of upside-down reward for his extraordinary technological achievements: for it was Mondschein, at the turn of the century, who had turned his impoverished little country into the unchallenged world leader in the field of human cloning.

In those days it had been called the Republic of the Central Andes. The Maximum Leader had put it together out of parts of the shattered nations which in an earlier time, when things were very different in the world, had been known as Peru, Chile, and Bolivia. During his years of exile in Europe Mondschein had always preferred to speak of himself as a Peruvian, whenever he spoke of himself at all. But now the name of the country was Tierra Alvarado and its airline was Aero Alvarado and its capital was Ciudad Alvarado, Alvarado this and Alvarado that wherever you looked. That was all right, a fine old South American tradition. You expected a Maximum Leader to clap his own name on everything, to hang his portrait everywhere, to glorify himself in every imaginable way.

Alvarado had carried things a little further than most, though, by having two dozen living replicas of himself created, the better to serve his people. That had been Mondschein's final task as a citizen of the Republic, the supreme accomplishment of his art: to produce two dozen AAA Class clones of the Maximum Leader. which could function as doubles for Alvarado at the dreary meetings of the Popular Assembly, stand in for him at the interminable National Day of Liberation parades, and keep would-be assassins in a constant state of befuddlement. They were masterpieces, those two dozen Alvarados -- all but indistinguishable from the original, the only AAA Class clones ever made. With their aid the Maximum Leader was able to maintain unblinking vigilance over the citizens of Tierra Alvarado -- twenty-four hours a day.

But Mondschein didn't care how many Alvarados he might be coming home to. Twenty, fifty, a hundred, what did that matter? Singular or plural, Alvarado still held the entire country in his pocket, as he had for the past generation and a half. That was the essential situation. Everything else was beside the point, a mere detail. To Mondschein the clones made no real difference at all.

In fact there was very little that did make a difference to Mondschein these days. He was getting old and slept badly most of the time and his days were an agony of acute homesickness. He wanted to speak his native language again, Spanish as it had been spoken in Peru and not the furry Spanish of Spain, and he wanted to breathe the sharp air of the high mountains and eat papas a la huancaína and anticuchos and a proper ceviche and maybe see the ancient walls of Cuzco once more and the clear dark water of Lake Titicaca. It didn't seem likely to him that Alvarado had granted him a pardon after all this time simply for the sake of luring him

back to face a firing squad. The safe conduct, which Mondschein hadn't in any way solicited but had been overjoyed to receive, was probably sincere: a sign that the old tyrant had mellowed at last. And if not, well, at least he would die on his native soil, which somehow seemed better than dying in Bern, Toulon, Madrid, Stockholm, Prague, wherever, any of the innumerable cities in which he had lived during his long years of exile. \* \* \* \* They emerged from the building into a bleak, deserted rear yard where empty baggage carts were strewn around like the fossil carcasses of ancient beasts, a perfect place for a quiet execution. The dry cool wind of early winter was sweeping a dark line of dust across the bare pavement. But to Mondschein's astonishment an immense sleek black limousine materialized from somewhere almost at once and two more Guardia men hopped out, saluting madly. Aristegui beckoned him into the rear of the vast car. "Your villa has been prepared for you, Dr. Mondschein. You are the guest of the nation, you understand. When you are refreshed the Minister of Scientific Development requests your attendance at the Palace of Government, perhaps this afternoon." He flicked a finger and a mahogany panel swung open, revealing a well-stocked bar. "You will have a cognac? It is the rare old. Or champagne, perhaps? A whiskey? Everything imported, the best quality." "I don't drink," said Mondschein. "Ah," said Aristegui uncertainly, as though that were a fact that should have been on his prep-sheet and unaccountably hadn't been. Or perhaps he had simply been looking forward to nipping into the rare old himself, which now would be inappropriate. "Well, then. You are comfortable? Not too warm, not too cool?" Mondschein nodded and peered out the window. They were on an imposing-looking highway now, with a city of pastel-hued high-rise buildings visible off to the side. He didn't recognize a thing. Alvarado had built this city from scratch in the empty highland plains midway between the coast and the lake and it had been only a few years old when Mondschein had last seen it, a place of raw gouged hillsides and open culverts and half-paved avenues with stacks of girders and sewer pipes and cable reels piled up everywhere. From a distance, at least, it looked quite splendid now. But as they left the beautifully landscaped road that had carried them from the airport to the city and turned off into the urban residential district he saw that the splendor was, unsurprisingly, a fraud of the usual Alvarado kind: the avenues had been paved, all right, but they were reverting to nature again, cracking and upheaving as the swelling roots of the bombacho trees and the candelero palms that had been planted down the central dividers ripped them apart. The grand houses of pink and green and azure stucco were weather-stained and crumbling, and Mondschein observed ugly random outcroppings of tin-roofed squatter-shacks sprouting like mushrooms in the open fields behind them, where elegant gardens briefly had been. And this was the place he had longed so desperately to behold one last time before he died. He thought of his comfortable little apartment in Bern and felt a pang. But then the car swung off onto a different road, into the hills to the east which even in the city's earliest days had been the magnificently appointed enclave of the privileged and powerful. Here there was no sign of decay. The gardens were impeccable, the villas spacious and well kept. Mondschein remembered this district well. He had lived in it himself before Alvarado had found it expedient to give him a one-way ticket abroad. Names he hadn't thought of in decades came to the surface of his mind: this was the Avenida de las Flores, this was Calle del Sol, this was Camino de los Toros, this was Calle de los Indios, and this -- this -- He gasped. "Your villa has been prepared for you," Aristegui had told him at the airport. Guest of the nation, yes. But Mondschein hadn't thought to interpret Aristegui's words literally. They'd be giving him a villa, some villa. But the handsome two-story building with the white facade and the red tile roof in front of which the limousine had halted was in fact his villa, the actual and literal and much-beloved one he had lived in long ago, until the night when the swarthy little frog-faced officer of the Guardia had come to him to tell him that he was expelled from the country. He had had to leave everything behind



then, his books, his collection of ancient scientific instruments, his pre-Columbian ceramics, his rack of Italian-made suits and fine vicuna coats, his pipes, his cello, his family albums, his greenhouse full of orchids, even his dogs. One small suitcase was all they had let him take with him on the morning flight to Madrid, and from that day on he had never permitted himself to acquire possessions, but had lived in a simple way, staying easily within the very modest allowance that the Maximum Leader in his great kindness sent him each month wherever he might be. And now they had given him back his actual villa. Mondschein wondered who had been evicted, on how much notice and for what trumped-up cause, to make this building available to him again after all this time.

All that he had wanted, certainly all that he had expected, was some ordinary little flat in the center of the city. The thought of returning to the old villa sickened him. There would be too many ghosts roaming in it. For the first time he wondered whether his impulsive decision to accept Alvarado's astonishing invitation to return to the country had been a mistake.

"You recognize this house?" Aristegui asked. "You are surprised, are you not? You are amazed with joy?" \* \* \* \* They had made no attempt to restore his lost possessions or to undo the changes that had come to the house since he had lived there. Perhaps such a refinement of cruelty was beyond the Maximum Leader's imagination, or, more probably, no one had any recollection of what had become of his things after so many years. It was just as well. He had long since managed to put his collections of antiquities out of his mind and he had no interest in playing the cello any more, or in smoking pipes. The villa now was furnished in standard upper-class Peruvian-style comfort of the early years of the century, everything very safe, very unexceptionable, very familiar, very dull. He was provided with a staff of four, a housekeeper, a cook, a driver, a gardener. Wandering through the airy rambling house, he felt less pain than he had anticipated. His spirit was long gone from it; it was just a house. There were caged parrots in the garden and a white-and-gray cat was slinking about outside as if it belonged there; perhaps it was the cat of the former resident and had found its way back in the night.

He bathed and rested and had a light lunch. In the afternoon the driver came to him and said, "May I take you to the Palace of Government now, Senor Dr. Mondschein? The Minister is eager." The driver must be a Guardia man also, Mondschein realized. But that was all right. All of it was all right, whatever they did now.

The Palace of Government hadn't been finished in Mondschein's time. It was a huge sprawling thing made of blocks of black stone, fitted together dry-wall fashion to give it a massive pseudo-Inca look, and it was big enough to have housed the entire bureaucracy of the Roman Empire at its peak. Relays of functionaries, some in Guardia uniform, some not, led him through gloomy high-vaulted corridors, across walled courtyards, and up grand and ponderous stone staircases until at last an officious florid-faced aide-de-camp conducted him into the wing that was the domain of the Ministry of Scientific Development. Here he passed through a procession of outer offices and finally was admitted to a brightly lit reception hall lined with somber portraits in oils. He recognized Einstein and Leonardo da Vinci and guessed that the others were Aristotle, Darwin, Galileo, perhaps Isaac Newton. And in the place of honor, of course, a grand representation of the Maximum Leader himself, looking down with brooding intensity.

"His Excellency the Minister," said the florid aide-de-camp, waving him into an office paneled with dark exotic woods at the far end of the reception hall. A tall man in an ornately brocaded costume worthy of a bullfighter rose from a glistening desk to greet him. And unexpectedly Mondschein found himself staring yet again at the unforgettable face of Diego Alvarado.

One of the clones, Mondschein thought. It had to be. All the same it felt like being clubbed in the teeth. The Minister of Scientific Development had Alvarado's hard icy blue eyes, his thin lips, his broad brow, his jutting cleft chin. His smile was Alvarado's cold smile, his teeth were Alvarado's perfect glistening teeth. He had the coarse curling bangs -- graying now -- that gave the Maximum Leader

the look of a youthful indomitable Caesar. His lanky body was lean and gaunt, a dancer's body, and his movements were a dancer's movements, graceful and precise. Seeing him awoke long-forgotten terrors in Mondschein. And yet he knew that this must be one of the clones. After that first shock of recognition, something told Mondschein subliminally that he was looking at an example of his own fine handiwork.

"President Alvarado asks me to convey his warmest greetings," the clone said. It was Alvarado's voice, cool and dry. "He will welcome you personally when his schedule permits, but he wishes you to know that he is honored in the deepest way by your decision to accept his hospitality."

The aging had worked very well, Mondschein thought. Alvarado would be about seventy now, still vigorous, still in his prime. There were lines on this man's face in the right places, changes in the lines of his cheekbones and jaw, exactly as should have happened in twenty-five years.

"It wasn't any decision at all," Mondschein said. He tried to sound casual. "I was ready and eager to come back. Your homeland, your native soil, the place where your ancestors lived and died for three hundred years -- as you get older you realize that nothing can ever take its place."

"I quite understand," said the clone. Do you? Mondschein wondered. Your only ancestor is a scrap of cellular material. You were born in a tissue-culture vat. And yet you quite understand. I made you, Mondschein thought. I made you.

He said, "Of course the invitation to return came as an immense surprise." "Yes. No doubt it did. But the Maximum Leader is a man of great compassion. He felt you had suffered in exile long enough. One day he said, We have done a great injustice to that man, and now it must be remedied. So long as Rafael Mondschein y Gonzalez dwells in foreign lands, our soul can never rest. And so the word went forth to you that all is forgiven, that you were pardoned."

"Only a man of true greatness could have done such a thing," said Mondschein. "Indeed. Indeed." Mondschein's crime had been the crime of overachievement. He had built Alvarado's cloning laboratories to such a level of technical skill that they were the envy of all the world; and when eventually the anti-cloning zealots in North America and Europe had grown so strident that there was talk of trade sanctions and the laboratories had to be shut down, Mondschein had become the scapegoat. Alvarado had proposed to find him guilty of creating vile unnatural abominations, but Mondschein had not been willing to let them hang such an absurdity around his neck, and in the end he had allowed them to manufacture supposed embezzlements in his name instead. In return for a waiver of trial he accepted exile for life. Of course the laboratories had reopened after a while, this time secretly and illicitly, and before long ten or eleven other countries had started to turn out A and even AA Class clones also and the industry had become too important to the world economy to allow zealotry to interfere with it any longer; but Mondschein remained overseas, rotting in oblivion, purposelessly wandering like a wraith from Madrid to Prague, from Prague to Stockholm, from Stockholm to Marseilles. And now at last the Maximum Leader in his great compassion had relented.

The Minister said, "You know we have made vast strides in the biological sciences since you last were here. Once you have had some time to settle in, we will want you to visit our laboratories, which as you may be aware are once again in legal operation."

Mondschein was aware of that, yes. Throughout the world Tierra Alvarado was known informally as the Clone Zone, the place where anyone could go to have a reasonable facsimile manufactured at a reasonable price. But that was no longer any concern of his.

"I'm afraid that I have very little interest in cloning technology these days," he said. The Minister's chilly Alvarado-eyes blazed with sudden heat. "A visit to our laboratories may serve to reawaken that interest, Dr. Mondschein."

"I doubt that very much." The Minister looked unhappy. "We had hoped quite strongly that you would be willing to share the benefits of your scientific wisdom with us, doctor. Your response greatly disappoints us."

Ah. It was all very clear, now, and very obvious. Strange that he hadn't foreseen it. "I have no

scientific wisdom, really," said Mondschein evenly. "None that would be of any use. I haven't kept up with the state of the art." "There are those who would be pleased to refresh your --" "I'd much rather prefer to remain in retirement. I'm too old to make any worthwhile contributions."

Now the thin lips were quirking. "The national interest is in jeopardy, Dr. Mondschein. For the first time we are challenged by competition from other countries. Genetic technology, you understand, is our primary source of hard currency. We are not a prosperous land, doctor. Our cloning industry is our one great asset, which you created for us virtually singlehandedly. Now that it faces these new threats, surely we may speak to your sense of patriotism, if not your one-time passion for scientific achievement, in asking you --" The Minister broke off abruptly, as though seeing his answer in Mondschein's expression. In a different tone he said, "No doubt you are tired after your long journey, doctor. I should have allowed you more time to rest. We'll continue these discussions at a later date, perhaps." He turned away. The florid aide-de-camp appeared as though from the air and showed Mondschein out. His driver was waiting in the courtyard. Mondschein spent most of the night trying to sleep, but it was difficult for him, as it usually was. And there was a special problem this night, for his mind was still on Swiss time, and what was the night in Tierra Alvarado was in Switzerland the beginning of a new day. His thoughts went ticking ceaselessly on, hour after hour. Sleep finally took him toward dawn, like a curtain falling, like the blade of a guillotine.

\* \* \* \* Colonel Aristegui of the Guardia de la Patria came to him, phoning first for an appointment, saying the matter was urgent. Mondschein assumed that this would be the next attempt to put pressure on him to take charge of the cloning labs, but that did not appear to be what was on Aristegui's mind. The wide-shouldered little man looked remarkably ill at ease; he paced, he fidgeted, he mopped his sweating forehead with a lace handkerchief. Then he said, as if forcing the words out, "This is extremely delicate." "Is it?" Aristegui studied him with care. "You control yourself extremely well, doctor. In particular I mark your restraint in regard to the President. You speak of your gratitude to him for allowing you to return. But inwardly you must hate him very much." "No," Mondschein said. "It's all ancient history. I'm an old man now. What does any of it matter any more?" "He took away the scientific work that was your life. He forced you to leave the land of your birth."

"If you think you're going to get me to launch into an attack on him, you're totally mistaken. What's past is past and I'm happy to be home again and that's all there is to it." Aristegui stared at his brilliantly gleaming patent-leather shoes. Then he sighed and raised his head like a diver coming up to the surface and said, "The country is dying, doctor." "Is it?" "Of the Latin American disease. The strong man comes, he sees the evils and injustices and remedies them, and then he stays and stays and stays until he is the evils and the injustices. President Alvarado has ruled here for thirty-five years. He drains the treasury for his palaces; he ignores what must be done to preserve and sustain. He is our great burden, our great curse. It is time for him to step aside. Or else be thrust aside."

Mondschein's eyes widened. "You're trying to draw me into some sort of conspiracy? You must be out of your mind." "I risk my life telling you this." "Yes. You do. And I risk my life listening." "You are essential to our success. Essential. You must help us."

"Look," said Mondschein, "if Alvarado simply wants to do away with me, he doesn't have to bother with anything as elaborate as this. Nobody in the world cares whether I live or die. It isn't necessary to inveigle me into a fantastic nonexistent plot on his life. He can just have me shot. All right? All right?" "This is not a trap. As God is my witness, I am not here as part of a scheme to ensnare you. I beg for your assistance. If you wish, report me to the authorities, and I will be tortured and the truth will come out and I will be executed, and then you will know that I was honest with you."

Wearily Mondschein said, "What is all this about?"

"You possess the ability to distinguish between the brothers of Alvarado and Alvarado himself." "The brothers?" "The clones. There is a secret method, known only to you, that allows you to tell the true Alvarado from the false." "Don't be silly." "It is so. You need not pretend. I have access to very high sources." Mondschein shrugged. "For the sake of argument let's say that it's so. What then?" "When we aim our blow at Alvarado, we want to be certain we are assassinating the real one." "Yes. Of course you do." "You can guide our hand. He often appears in public, but no one knows whether it is really he, or one of the brothers. And if we strike down one of the brothers, thinking we have killed the true Alvarado --" "Yes," Mondschein said. "I see the problem. But assuming that I'm able to tell the difference, and I'm not conceding that I can, what makes you think I'd want to get mixed up in your plot? What do I stand to gain from it, other than useless revenge on a man who did me harm a very long time ago? Will his death give me back my life? No, I simply want to live out my last few years in peace. Kill Alvarado without me, if you want to kill him. If you're not sure whether you're killing the right one, kill them all. Kill them one by one until there are none at all left." "I could kill you," Aristegui said. "Right now. I should. After what I have told you, you own my life." Again Mondschein shrugged. "Then kill me. For whatever good it'll do you. I'm not going to inform on you." "Nor cooperate with me." "Neither one nor the other." "All you want is to live in peace," said Aristegui savagely. "But how do you know you will? Alvarado has asked you to work for him again, and you have refused." He held up a hand. "Yes, yes, I know that. I will not kill you, though I should. But he might, though he has no reason to. Think about that, Senior Doctor." He rose and glared at Mondschein a moment, and left without another word. Mondschein's body clock had caught up with Tierra Alvarado time by this time. But that night, once again, he lay until dawn in utterly lucid wakefulness before exhaustion at last brought him some rest. It was as though sleep were a concept he had never quite managed to understand. \* \* \* \* The next summons came from Alvarado himself. The Presidential Palace, which Mondschein remembered as a compact, somewhat austere building in vaguely Roman style, had expanded in the course of a quarter of a century into an incomprehensible mazelike edifice that seemed consciously intended to rival Versailles in ostentatious grandeur. The Hall of Audience was a good sixty meters long, with rich burgundy draperies along the walls and thick blood-red carpeting. There was a marble dais at the far end where the Maximum Leader sat enthroned like an emperor. Dazzling sunlight flooded down on him through a dome of shimmering glass set in the ceiling. Mondschein wondered if he was supposed to offer a genuflection. There were no guards in the room, only the two of them. But security screens in the floor created an invisible air-wall around the dais. Mondschein found himself forced to halt by subtle pressure when he was still at least fifteen meters short of the throne. Alvarado came stiffly to his feet and they stood facing each other in silence for a long moment. It seemed anticlimactic, this confrontation at last. Mondschein was surprised to discover that he felt none of the teeth-on-edge uneasiness that the man had always been able to engender in him. Perhaps having seen the clone-Alvarado earlier had taken the edge off the impact. Alvarado said, "You have found all the arrangements satisfactory so far, I hope, doctor?" "In the old days you called me Rafael." "Rafael, yes. It was so long ago. How good it is to see you again, Rafael. You look well." "As do you." "Yes. Thank you. Your villa is satisfactory, Rafael?" "Quite satisfactory," said Mondschein. "I look forward to a few last years of quiet retirement in my native country." "So I am told," Alvarado said. He seemed overly formal, weirdly remote, hardly even human. In the huge hall his crisp, cool voice had a buzzing androidal undertone that Mondschein found unfamiliar. Possibly that was an atmospheric diffraction effect caused by the security screens. But then it occurred to Mondschein that this too might be

one of the clones. He stared hard, trying to tell, trying to call on the intuitive sense that once had made it possible for him to tell quite easily, even without running the alpha-wave test. The AAA Class clones had been intended to be indistinguishable from the original to nine decimal places, but nevertheless when you collapsed the first twenty or thirty years of a man's life into the three-year accelerated-development period of the cloning process you inevitably lost something, and Mondschein had always been able to detect the difference purely subjectively, at a single glance. Now, though, he wasn't sure. It had been simple enough to see that the Alvarado who had greeted him in the Ministry of Scientific Development was a replica, but here, at this distance, in this room that resonated with the presence of the Maximum Leader, there were too many ambiguities and uncertainties. He said, "The Minister explained to me that the national genetic laboratories are facing heavy competition from abroad, that you want me to step in and pull things together. But I can't do it. My technical knowledge is hopelessly out of date. I'm simply not familiar with current work in the field. If I had known ahead of time that the reason you had decided to let me come home was to that you wanted me to go back into the labs, I never would have -- "

"Forget about the labs," Alvarado said. "That isn't why I invited you to return." "But the Minister of Scientific Development said -- "

"Let the Minister of Scientific Development say anything he wishes. The Minister has his agenda and I have mine, doctor." He had dropped the first-name talk, Mondschein noticed. "Is it true that there is a method of determining whether a given individual is an authentic human or merely a highly accurate clone?" Mondschein hesitated. Something was definitely wrong here. "Yes," he said finally. "There is. You know that there is." "You are too certain of what I know and what I do not know. Tell me about this method, doctor." He was more and more certain that he was talking to one of the clones. Alvarado must be staging one of his elaborate charades. "It involves matching brain rhythms. When I created the AAA Class Alvarado clones, I built a recognition key into them that would enable me, using a simple EEG hookup, to distinguish their brain-wave patterns from yours. I did this at your request, so that in the case of a possible coup d'-etat attempt by one of the clones you'd be able to unmask the pretender. The method uses my own brain waves as the baseline. If you jack my EEG output into a comparator circuit and overlay it with yours, the two patterns will conflict, the way any two patterns from different human beings will. But if my EEG gets matched against one of your clones, the pattern will drop immediately into alpha rhythms, as if we're both under deep hypnosis. It amazes me that you've forgotten this." He paused. "Unless, of course, you're not Alvarado at all, but simply one of his -- what's the word? -- one of his brothers." "Very good, doctor." "Am I right?" "Come closer and see for yourself." "I can't. The security screens -- "

"I have switched them off." Mondschein approached. There was no air resistance. When he was five meters away he felt the unmistakable click of recognition. "Yes, I am right. Even without an EEG test. You're a clone, aren't you?" "That is so." "Is the real Alvarado too busy for me today, or is it that he doesn't have the courage to look me in the eye?" "I will tell you something very strange, which is a great secret," said the clone. "The real Alvarado is no longer in command here. For the past several months I have run the government of Tierra Alvarado. No one here is aware of this, no one at all. No one except you, now." For a moment Mondschein was unable to speak. "You seriously expect me to believe that?" he said at last. The clone managed a glacial smile. "During the years of your absence there have been several internal upheavals in Tierra Alvarado. On three occasions assassination plots resulted in the deaths of Alvarado clones who were playing the role of the Maximum Leader at public ceremonies. Each time, the death of the clone was successfully covered up. The conspirators were apprehended and things continued as if nothing had occurred. On the fourth such occasion, an implosion grenade was thrown toward

the Maximum Leader's car while he was en route to Iquique for a ceremony of rededication. I happened to be accompanying him on that journey so that I could double for him in the riskier parts of the ceremony, when the general public would be present. The impact of the grenade was tremendous. There were many fatalities and serious injuries. In the confusion afterward I was mistaken for the true Maximum Leader. I quickly understood the situation and began to act accordingly. And so it has been ever since." Mondschein realized that he was trembling. "So Alvarado's dead?" The clone looked smug. "His reign is over. His time is finished." What a strange concept that was. Alvarado dead! His old enemy was really dead! Mondschein felt a flash of satisfaction and surprise -- and then a curious sense of loss. "Why are you telling me all this?" he asked, after a moment. "Assuming that it's true, and not just some game that your master is playing with me, why do you want to take chances this way? What if I tried to expose you and bring the whole crazy system down?" "You would not do that," said the clone. "Why not?" "You have said it yourself: you want only to live out your remaining years in peaceful retirement. If you denounced me, who would believe you? And even if you were believed, would things be better in Tierra Alvarado in the wake of my overthrow? No, doctor, the status quo is your only hope. And I am the status quo." Mondschein nodded. "Even so, why confide in me at all?" "So that you may protect me." "How could I do that?" "You hold the key to identification, this alpha-rhythm thing. I did know that you had such a thing, though not the details of it. Others know it also. Your possession of it gives you great power here. If there were a challenge to my legitimacy, you would be the only arbiter of the truth, do you see?" "Yes," said Mondschein. "Yes, I do." "There are twenty-one other surviving clones. One of them might take it into his head to overthrow me, thinking that he could rule the country at least as well. It is quite a comfortable existence, being a clone of the Maximum Leader, but it is not pleasant to serve as his double, exposed to all the risks of public appearances. It is a much better life, believe me, to be Maximum Leader and have others double for you, than to be a double yourself, never knowing when the bullet will come. Besides which, there is the wielding of authority for its own sake. That is a highly desirable thing, if you are of the sort who desires such things, and we are. After all, we are all of us Alvarados to the core, as you know better than anyone else." "So you think that if one of your vat-brothers suddenly tries to say that he's the real Alvarado, not you, then I'd be willing to come forward and test him and expose him as a clone for you?" "So I hope and trust." "Why would I want to take the side of one clone against another? It's of no importance to me which one of you calls himself President here." "But I am the one who calls himself President just now. I might kill you if you didn't cooperate." "And if I don't care whether I live or die?" "You probably care how you die," the Alvarado-clone said. "You would not die in an easy or a gentle way, that I could promise you. On the other hand, if you pledge that you will aid me, when and if the need arises, I will see to it that you live out the remaining years of your life in the most complete happiness that I can make available. It seems to me a very reasonable offer." "It is," Mondschein said. "I see that it is." "You protect me, and I will protect you. Do we have a deal?" "If I say no, what are my chances of leaving this building alive today?" The clone smiled. It was the pure Alvarado-smile. "They would be quite poor." "Then we have a deal," Mondschein said. \* \* \* \* The weeks went by. June gave way to July and the year descended toward its winter depths. Often there was fog; some nights there was frost; always the dry harsh wind blew from the west. Mondschein slept poorly. He heard nothing from the Maximum Leader or any of his minions. Evidently all was tranquil in the ruling circles. He rarely left the villa. His meals were prepared for him according to his wishes, which were uncomplicated. He had a few books. No one came to see him. Sometimes during the day he went out with his driver to

explore the city. It was larger than he expected, spreading long, thin tentacles of slum toward the north and south -- as in any impoverished country, everyone from the villages was moving to the capital, God only knew what for -- and very shoddy everywhere except in its grand governmental district.

On two of these excursions Mondschein was granted a glimpse of the supposed President Alvarado. The first time, his car was halted at a police roadblock and he waited for half an hour in an immense tie-up until at last the President passed by in a motorcade coming from the airport, with the Director-General of the Republic of the Orinoco, here on a state visit, riding beside him in the armored bubble-roof car while the spectators who lined the boulevard offered sullen acclaim. On the second occasion, far in the outskirts, Mondschein stumbled upon the ceremonial dedication of what he was told was the Grand Sanitation Facility of the Northeast, and there was the familiar figure of the Maximum Leader on high in the reviewing stand, surrounded by fierce-eyed, heavily armed bodyguards and orating bravely into the biting wind.

At other times while traversing the city Mondschein caught sight of various of the clones going about some business of their own. It was not at all unusual to encounter one. Doubtless the populace was quite used to it. Wherever you looked you could find one or two of the Maximum Leader's "brothers." Five or six of them headed government ministries -- a meeting of the Cabinet must have been like a hall of mirrors -- and the others, apparently, simply stood by to serve as presidential doubles when needed, and lived as private citizens the rest of the time. The real Alvarado, if there still was one, could probably have passed in the streets without causing a stir, everyone assuming he was just a clone: a fine kind of shell game that could keep the whole population fooled all the time.

Colonel Aristegui came to the villa again, eventually. "We are ready to make our move, doctor."

"Move, then. I don't want to know anything about it."

Aristegui looked tense, grim, right at the breaking point. "We need very little from you. Station yourself in the crowd, and when our man asks you, is this one the real one, simply nod or shake your head. We want no more from you than that. Later, when he is dead, we'll ask you to examine the body and confirm that it is the body of the dictator and not one of the imitations. A small service, and you will live forever in the hearts of your countrymen."

"There's no way I can give you the kind of information you want just by looking at him from a distance." "It can be done, and you are the one who can do it. This much I know." "No,"

Mondschein said. "What you think you know is wrong. I can't help you. And in any case I don't want to. I told you that before, Colonel. I'm not interested in joining your conspiracy. It isn't any affair of mine."

"It is an affair of every loyal citizen of this country." Mondschein looked at him sadly. He could at least warn Aristegui, he thought, that there was no real Alvarado there to shoot, that they were all clones. But would the Colonel believe him? In any case what Aristegui was trying to do was fundamentally futile. Kill one Alvarado, another would move into his place and announce that he was the authentic article. Aristegui could bring down one or two, maybe, but he couldn't get them all. This country was going to be ruled by Alvarados for a long time to come.

"They took my citizenship away twenty-five years ago," Mondschein said, after a pause. "I'm here now purely as a guest of the nation, remember? Good guests don't conspire against their hosts. Please go away, Colonel. I haven't heard a thing you've said to me today. I'm already beginning to forget even that you were here."

Aristegui glowered at him in a way that seemed to mingle anguish and fury. For a moment Mondschein thought the man was going to strike him. But then, with a visible effort, the Colonel brought himself under control.

"I thank you for your continued silence, at least," said Aristegui bitterly.

"Good day, Senor Doctor Mondschein." \* \* \* \* Late that afternoon

Mondschein heard loud voices from below, shouts and outcries in the servants' quarters. He rang up on the housekeeper's intercom and said, "What's going on?"

"There has been an attack on the President, Senor Doctor. At the

Palace of Government. We have just seen it on the television." So Aristegui had been telling the truth, it seemed, when he said that they were ready to make their move. Or else they had decided it was too risky to wait any longer, now that Mondschein had been told that an assassination attempt was impending. "And?" Mondschein said. "By the mercy of the Virgin he is safe, senor. Order has been restored and the criminals have been captured. One of the others was slain, one of the brothers, but the President was not harmed." He thanked her and switched on his television set.

They were in the midst of showing a replay of it now. The President arriving at the Palace of Government for the regular midweek meeting of the ministers; the adoring populace obediently waiting behind the barricades to hail him as he emerged from his car; the sudden scuffle in the crowd, evidently a deliberate distraction, and then the shot, the screams, the slim long-legged figure beginning to sag into the arms of his bodyguards, the policemen rushing forward. And then a cut to the Hall of Audience, the grim-faced Maximum Leader addressing the nation from his throne in broken phrases, in a voice choked with emotion: "This despicable act . . . This bestial attempt to overrule the will of the people as expressed through their chosen President . . . We must root out the forces of chaos that are loose among us . . . We proclaim a week of national mourning for our fallen brother . . .

Followed by an explanation from a sleek, unruffled-looking official spokesman. The Guardia de la Patria, he said, had received advance word of a possible plot. One of the President's "brothers" had courageously agreed to bear the risk of entering the Palace of Government in the usual way; the Maximum Leader himself had gone into the building through a secret entrance. The identity of the main conspirators was known; arrests had already been made; others would follow. Return to your homes, remain calm, all is well. All is well. \* \* \* \* The executions

took place a few weeks later. They were shown on huge television screens set up before great throngs of spectators in the main plazas of the city, and relayed to home viewers everywhere. Mondschein, despite earlier resolutions to the contrary, watched along with everyone else in a kind of horrified fascination as Colonel Aristegui and five other officers of the elite guard, along with three other men and four women, all of them members of the Popular Assembly, were led to the wall one by one, faces expressionless, bodies rigid. They were not offered the opportunity to utter last words, even of carefully rehearsed contrition. Their names were spoken and they were blindfolded and shot, and the body taken away, and the next conspirator brought forth. Mondschein felt an obscure sense of guilt, as though he had been the one who had informed on them. But of course he had said nothing to anyone. The country was full of governmental agents and spies and provocateurs; the Maximum Leader had not needed Mondschein's help in protecting himself against Colonel Aristegui. The guilt that he felt, Mondschein realized, was that of having let Aristegui go to his death without trying to make him see that he was attempting something impossible, that there was no way, with or without Mondschein's help, that Aristegui could ever rid the country of Alvarado. But the Colonel wouldn't have listened to him in any case, Mondschein told himself. The days went by. The season brightened toward spring.

Mondschein's driver took him up the mountain roads to see Lake Titicaca, and north from there to Cuzco and its grand old Inca relics, and up beyond that to the splendors of Machu Picchu. On another journey he went down to the fogswept coast, to Nazca where it never rains, where in a landscape as barren as the Moon's he inspected the huge drawings of monkeys and birds and geometrical figures that prehistoric artists had inscribed in the bone-dry soil of the plateaus. On a brilliant September day that felt like

midsummer a car bearing the insignia of the Guardia came to his villa and a brisk young officer with thick hair that was like spun gold told him that he was requested to go at once to the Palace of Justice. "Have I done something wrong?" Mondschein asked mildly. "It is by order of the

President," said the blond young officer, and that was all the explanation he



gave. Mondschein had been in the Palace of Justice only once before, during the weeks just prior to the agreement that led to his being exiled, when they had briefly imprisoned him on the supposed charge of creating abominations and monsters. Like most of the other governmental buildings it was a massive, brutal-looking stone structure, two long parallel wings with a smaller one set between them at their head, so that it crouched on its plaza like a ponderous sphinx. There were courtrooms in the upper levels of the two large wings, prison cells below; the small central wing was the headquarters of the Supreme Court, whose chief justice, Mondschein had recently discovered, was another of the clones.

His Guardia escort led him into the building on the lower level, and they descended even below that, to the dreaded highsecurity area in the basement. Was he to be interrogated, then? For what?

The Maximum Leader, in full uniform and decorations, was waiting for him in a cold, clammy-walled interrogation cell, under a single bare incandescent bulb of a kind that Mondschein thought had been obsolete for a hundred years. He offered Mondschein a benign smile, as benign as that sharp-edged face was capable of showing.

"Our second meeting is in rather less grand surroundings than the first, eh, doctor?" Mondschein peered closely. This seemed to be the same clone who had spoken with him in the Hall of Audience. He felt quite sure of that. Only intuition, of course. But he trusted it.

"You remember the agreement we reached that day?" the clone asked. "Of course." "Today I need to invoke it. Your special expertise is now essential to the stability of the nation." The clone gestured to an aide-de-camp, who signalled to an figure in the shadows behind him that Mondschein had not noticed before. A door opened at the rear of the cell and a gurney bearing electronic equipment was wheeled in.

Mondschein recognized the familiar intricacies of an electroencephalograph.

"This is the proper machinery for your brain-wave test, is it not?" the Alvarado clone asked. Mondschein nodded. "Good," the clone said.

"Bring in the prisoner." The door opened again and two guards dragged in the ragged, disheveled-looking figure of an Alvarado. His hands were shackled behind his back. His face was bruised and sweaty and smeared with dirt. His clothes, rough peasant clothes, were torn. His eyes were blazing with fury of astonishing intensity. Mondschein felt a tremor of the old fear at the sight of him.

The prisoner shot a fiery look at the Alvarado clone and said, "You bastard, let me out of here right now. You know who I am. You know who you are, too. What you are." Mondschein turned to the clone. "But you told me he was dead!" he said. "Dead? Who? What do you mean?" the Alvarado clone said calmly. "This clone was gravely injured in an attempt on my life and has hovered close to death for many weeks, despite the finest care we could give him. Now that he has begun to recover he is exhibiting delusional behavior. He insists that he is the true Maximum Leader and I am nothing but an artificial genetic duplicate. I ask you to test the authenticity of his claim, Senor Doctor."

"Mondschein! Rafael Mondschein!" the ragged Alvarado cried. A convulsive quiver of amazement ran through his shoulders and chest. "You here? They've brought you back?" Mondschein said nothing. He stared at the ragged man. The prisoner's eyes gleamed. "All right, go on! Test me, Rafael. Do your mumbo-jumbo and tell this fraud who I am! And then we'll see if he dares keep up the masquerade. Go on, Rafael! Plug in your damned machine! Stick the electrodes on me!"

"Go ahead, Senor Doctor," the Alvarado clone said.

Mondschein stepped forward and began the preparations for the test, wondering whether he would remember the procedure after so many years. The prisoner looked toward the Alvarado clone and said, "He'll prove that I am who I say I am. And you won't have the guts to carry the pretense any further, will you, you test-tube fraud? Because half the staff in the hospital knows the real story already, and somehow the truth will get out. Somehow, no matter how you try to suppress it. And it'll bring you down. Once the country finds out that you're a fake, that you simply seized power when the motorcade bomb went off. Once word gets around that I didn't die,

that you've had me hidden away in the hospital all this time with people thinking I was you and you were me, what do you think will happen to your regime? Will anyone want to take orders from a clone?" "You mustn't speak now," Mondschein told him. "It'll distort the test results." "All right. Yes. Listen, Rafael, no matter what you tell him he'll say that you identified me as a clone, but you know that it's a lie. When you get back outside, you tell people the true story. You hear me? And afterward I'll see to it that you get whatever you want. Anything. No reward would be too great. Money, women, country estates, your own laboratory, whatever." "Please," Mondschein said. "I ask you not to speak." He attached the electrodes to himself. He touched the dials. He remembered, now. The whole technique. He had written these personality-organization algorithms himself. He closed his eyes and felt the data come flooding in. The prisoner's brain-waves met his own -- collided -- clashed -- clashed violently -- To the Alvarado clone Mondschein said, "The alpha match is perfect, Senor Presidente. What we have here is a clone." "No, Rafael!" the prisoner roared. "You filthy lying bastard, no! You know it isn't so!" "Take him away," the Alvarado clone said. "No. You won't do anything to me. I'm the only legitimate President of Tierra Alvarado." "You are nothing," the clone told him. "You are a mere creature. We have scientific proof that you are simply one of the artificial brothers. Dr. Mondschein has just demonstrated that." "Balls," the prisoner said. "Listen, Mondschein, I know he has you intimidated. But when you get out of here, spread the word. Tell everyone what your real reading was. That there's a usurper in the presidential palace, that he must be overthrown. You'll be a national hero, you'll be rewarded beyond your wildest dreams -- " Mondschein smiled. "Ah, but I already have everything that I want." He looked toward the Alvarado clone. "I'll prepare a formal report and sign it, Senor Presidente. And I will be willing to attest to it at the public trial." "This has been the trial, doctor," the clone said smoothly, indicating an opening in the ceiling of the cell, where Mondschein now saw an opening through which the snout of a television camera protruded. "All the information that we need has been recorded. But I am grateful for your offer. You have been extremely helpful. Extremely helpful, Senor Doctor." \* \* \* That night, in the safety and comfort of his beloved villa, Mondschein slept soundly for the first time since his return to Tierra Alvarado -- more soundly than he had slept in years. ----- At [www.fictionwise.com](http://www.fictionwise.com) you can: \* Rate this story \* Find more stories by this author \* Read the author's notes for this story \* Get story recommendations

===== In the Group by Robert Silverberg ===== Copyright (c)1973 Agberg, Ltd. First published in Eros in Orbit, 1973 Fictionwise Contemporary Science Fiction ----- NOTICE: This work is copyrighted. It is licensed only for use by the purchaser. If you did not purchase this ebook directly from Fictionwise.com then you are in violation of copyright law and are subject to severe fines. Please visit [www.fictionwise.com](http://www.fictionwise.com) to purchase a legal copy. Fictionwise.com offers a reward for information leading to the conviction of copyright violators of Fictionwise ebooks. ----- IT WAS A restless time for Murray. He spent the morning sand-trawling on the beach at Acapulco. When it began to seem like lunchtime he popped over to Nairobi for mutton curry at the Three Bells. It wasn't lunchtime in Nairobi, but these days any restaurant worth eating at stayed open around the clock. In late afternoon, subjectivewise, he paused for pastis and water in Marseilles, and toward psychological twilight he buzzed back home to California. His inner clock was set to Pacific Time, so reality corresponded to mood: night was falling, San

Francisco glittered like a mound of jewels across the bay. He was going to do Group tonight. He got Kay on the screen and said, "Come down to my place tonight, yes?" "What for?" "What else? Group." She lay in a dewy bower of young redwoods, three hundred miles up the coast from him. Torrents of unbound milk-white hair cascaded over her slender, bare honey-colored body. A multi-carat glitterstone sparkled fraudulently between her flawless little breasts. Looking at her, he felt his hands tightening into desperate fists, his nails ravaging his palms. He loved her beyond all measure. The intensity of his love overwhelmed and embarrassed him. "You want to do Group together tonight?" she asked. "You and me?" She didn't sound pleased. "Why not? Closeness is more fun than apartness." "Nobody's ever apart in Group. What does mere you-and-me physical proximity matter? It's irrelevant. It's obsolete." "I miss you." "You're with me right now," she pointed out. "I want to touch you. I want to inhale you. I want to taste you." "Punch for tactile, then. Punch for olfactory. Punch for any input you think you want." "I've got all sensory channels open already," Murray said. "I'm flooded with delicious input. It still isn't the same thing. It isn't enough, Kay." She rose and walked slowly toward the ocean. His eyes tracked her across the screen. He heard the pounding of the surf. "I want you right beside me when Group starts tonight," he told her. "Look, if you don't feel like coming here, I'll go to your place." "You're being boringly persistent." He winced. "I can't help it. I like being close to you." "You have a lot of old-fashioned attitudes, Murray." Her voice was so cool. "Are you aware of that?" "I'm aware that my emotional drives are very strong. That's all. Is that such a sin?" Careful, Murray. A serious error in tactics just then. This whole conversation a huge mistake, most likely. He was running big risks with her by pushing too hard, letting too much of his crazy romanticism reveal itself so early. His obsession with her, his impossible new possessiveness, his weird ego-driven exclusivism. His love. Yes; his love. She was absolutely right, of course. He was basically old-fashioned. Wallowing in emotional atavism. You-and-me stuff. I, me, me, mine. This unwillingness to share her fully in Group. As though he had some special claim. He was pure nineteenth century underneath it all. He had only just discovered that, and it had come as a surprise to him. His sick archaic fantasies aside, there was no reason for the two of them to be side by side in the same room during Group, not unless they were the ones who were screwing, and the copulation schedule showed Nate and Serena on tonight's ticket. Drop it, Murray. But he couldn't drop it. He said into her stony silence, "All right, but at least let me set up an inner intersex connection for you and me. So I can feel what you're feeling when Nate and Serena get it on." "Why this frantic need to reach inside my head?" she asked. "I love you." "Of course you do. We all love all of Us. But still, when you try to relate to me one-on-one like this, you injure Group." "No inner connection, then?" "No." "Do you love me?" A sigh. "I love Us, Murray." That was likely to be the best he'd get from her this evening. All right. All right. He'd settle for that, if he had to. A crumb here, a crumb there. She smiled, blew him an amiable kiss, broke the contact. He stared moodily at the dead screen. All right. Time to get ready for Group. He turned to the life-size screen on the east wall and keyed in the visuals for preliminary alignment. Right now Group Central was sending its test pattern, stills of all of tonight's couples. Nate and Serena were in the center, haloed by the glowing nimbus that marked them as this evening's performers. Around the periphery Murray saw images of himself, Kay, Van, JoJo, Nikki, Dirk, Conrad, Finn, Lanelle, and Maria. Bruce, Klaus, Mindy, and Lois weren't there. Too busy, maybe. Or too tired. Or perhaps they were in the grip of negative unGrouplike vibes just at the moment. You didn't have to do Group every night, if you didn't feel into it. Murray averaged four nights a week. Only the real bulls, like Dirk and Nate, routinely hit seven out of seven. Also JoJo, Lanelle, Nikki -- the Very Hot Ladies, he liked to call them. He opened

up the audio. "This is Murray," he announced. "I'm starting to synchronize."

Group Central gave him a sweet unwavering A for calibration. He tuned his receiver to match the note. "You're at four hundred and thirty-two," Group Central said. "Bring your pitch up a little. There. There. Steady. Four hundred and forty, fine." The tones locked perfectly. He was synched in for sound. A little fine tuning on the visuals, next. The test pattern vanished and the screen showed only Nate, naked, a big cocky rockjawed man with a thick mat of curly black hair covering him from thighs to throat. He grinned, bowed, preened. Murray made adjustments until it was all but impossible to distinguish the three-dimensional holographic projection of Nate from the actual Nate, hundreds of miles away in his San Diego bedroom. Murray was fastidious about these adjustments. Any perceptible drop-off in reality approximation dampened the pleasure Group gave him. For some moments he watched Nate striding bouncily back and forth, working off excess energy, fining himself down to performance level; a minor element of distortion crept into the margins of the image, and, cutting in the manual override, Murray fed his own corrections to Central until all was well. Next came the main brain-wave amplification, delivering data in the emotional sphere: endocrine feeds, neural set, epithelial appercept, erogenous uptake. Diligently Murray keyed in each one. At first he received only a vague undifferentiated blur of formless background cerebration, but then, like intricate figures becoming clear in an elaborate oriental carpet, the specific characteristics of Nate's mental output began to clarify themselves; edginess, eagerness, horniness, alertness, intensity. A sense of Nate's formidable masculine strength came through. At this stage of the evening Murray still had a distinct awareness of himself as an entity independent of Nate, but that would change soon enough.

"Ready," Murray reported. "Holding awaiting Group cut-in." He had to hold for fifteen intolerable minutes. He was always the quickest to synchronize. Then he had to sit and sweat, hanging on desperately to his balances and lineups while he waited for the others. All around the circuit, the rest of them were still tinkering with their rigs, adjusting them with varying degrees of competence. He thought of Kay. At this moment making frantic adjustments, tuning herself to Serena as he had done to Nate.

"Group cut-in," Central said finally. Murray closed the last circuits. Into his consciousness poured, in one wild rush, the mingled consciousnesses of Van, Dirk, Conrad, and Finn, hooked into him via Nate, and, less intensely because less directly, the consciousnesses of Kay, Maria, Lanelle, JoJo, and Nikki, funneled to him by way of their link to Serena. So all twelve of them were in sync. They had attained Group once again. Now the revels could begin.

Now. Nate approaching Serena. The magic moments of fore-play. That buzz of early excitement, that soaring erotic flight, taking everybody upward like a Beethoven adagio, like a solid hit of acid. Nate. Serena. San Diego. Their bedroom a glittering hall of mirrors. Refracted images everywhere. A thousand quivering breasts. Five hundred jutting cocks. Hands, eyes, tongues, thighs. The circular undulating bed, quivering, heaving. Murray, lying cocooned in his maze of sophisticated amplification equipment, receiving inputs at temples and throat and chest and loins, felt his palate growing dry, felt a pounding in his groin. He licked his lips. His hips began, of their own accord, a slow rhythmic thrusting motion. Nate's hands casually traversed the taut globes of Serena's bosom. Caught the rigid nipples between hairy fingers, tweaked them, thumbed them. Murray felt the firm nodules of engorged flesh with his own empty hands. The merger of identities was starting. He was becoming Nate, Nate was flowing into him, and he was all the others too, Van, JoJo, Dirk, Finn, Nikki, all of them, feedbacks oscillating in interpersonal whirlpools all along the line. Kay. He was part of Kay, she of him, both of them parts of Nate and Serena. inextricably intertwined. What Nate experienced, Murray experienced. What Serena experienced, Kay experienced. When Nate's mouth descended to cover Serena's, Murray's tongue slid forward. And felt the moist tip of Serena's. Flesh against flesh, skin against skin. Serena was throbbing. Why not? Six men tonguing her at once. She was always quick to arouse, anyway.

She was begging for it. Not that Nate was in any hurry: screwing was his thing, he always made a grand production out of it. As well he might, with ten close friends riding as passengers on his trip. Give us a show, Nate. Nate obliged. He was going down on her, now. Inhaling. His stubbly cheeks against her satiny thighs. Oh, the busy tongue! Oh, the sighs and gasps! And then she engulfing him reciprocally. Murray hissed in delight. Her cunning little suction, her jolly slithers and slides: a skilled fellatrice, that woman was. He trembled. He was fully into it, now, sharing every impulse with Nate.

Becoming Nate. Yes. Serena's beckoning body gaping for him. His wagging wand poised above her. The old magic of Group never diminishing. Nate doing all his tricks, pulling out the stops. When? Now. Now. The thrust. The quick sliding moment of entry. Ah! Ah! Ah! Serena simultaneously possessed by Nate, Murray, Van, Dirk, Conrad, Finn. Finn, Conrad, Dirk, Van, Murray, and Nate simultaneously possessing Serena. And, vicariously throbbing in rhythm with Serena: Kay, Maria, Lanelle, JoJo, Nikki. Kay. Kay. Kay. Through the sorcery of the crossover loop Nate was having Kay while he had Serena, Nate was having Kay, Maria, Lanelle, JoJo, Nikki all at once, they were being had by him, a soup of identities, an olla podrida of copulations, and as the twelve of them soared toward a shared and multiplied ecstasy Murray did something dumb. He thought of Kay. He thought of Kay. Kay alone in her redwood bower, Kay with bucking hips and tossing hair and glistening droplets of sweat between her breasts, Kay hissing and shivering in Nate's simulated embrace. Murray tried to reach across to her through the Group loop, tried to find and isolate the discrete thread of self that was Kay, tried to chisel away the ten extraneous identities and transform this coupling into an encounter between himself and her. It was a plain violation of the spirit of Group; it was also impossible to achieve, since she had refused him permission to establish a special inner link between them that evening, and so at the moment she was accessible to him only as one facet of the enhanced and expanded Serena. At best he could grope toward Kay through Serena and touch the tip of her soul, but the contact was cloudy and uncertain. Instantly on to what he was trying to do, she petulantly pushed him away, at the same time submerging herself more fully in Serena's consciousness. Rejected, reeling, he slid off into confusion, sending jarring crosscurrents through the whole Group. Nate loosed a shower of irritation, despite his heroic attempt to remain unperturbed, and pumped his way to climax well ahead of schedule, hauling everyone breathlessly along with him. As the orgasmic frenzy broke loose Murray tried to re-enter the full linkage, but he found himself unhinged, disaffiliated, and mechanically emptied himself without any tremor of pleasure. Then it was over. He lay back, perspiring, feeling soiled, jangled, unsatisfied. After a few moments he uncoupled his equipment and went out for a cold shower. Kay called half an hour later. "You crazy bastard," she said. "What were you trying to do?" \* \* \* \* He promised not to do it again. She forgave him. He brooded for two days, keeping out of Group. He missed sharing Conrad and JoJo, Klaus and Lois. The third day the Group chart marked him and Kay as that night's performers. He didn't want to let them all share her. It was stronger than ever, this nasty atavistic possessiveness. He didn't have to, of course. Nobody was forced to do Group. He could beg off and continue to sulk, and Dirk or Van or somebody would substitute for him tonight. But Kay wouldn't necessarily pass up her turn. She almost certainly wouldn't. He didn't like the options. If he made it with Kay as per group schedule, he'd be offering her to all the others. If he stepped aside, she'd do it with someone else. Might as well be the one to take her to bed in that case. Faced with an ugly choice, he decided to stick to the original schedule.

He popped up to her place eight hours early. He found her sprawled on a carpet of redwood needles in a sun-dappled grove, playing with a stack of music cubes. Mozart tinkled in the fragrant air. "Let's go away somewhere tomorrow," he said. "You and me." "You're still into you-and-me?" "I'm sorry." "Where do you want to go?" He shrugged. "Hawaii. Afghanistan. Poland. Zambia. It doesn't matter.

Just to be with you." "What about Group?" "They can spare us for a while." She rolled over, lazily snaffled Mozart into silence, started a cube of Bach. "I'll go," she said. The Goldberg Variations transcribed for glockenspiel. "But only if we take our Group equipment along." "It means that much to you?" "Doesn't it to you?" "I cherish Group," he said. "But it's not all there is to life. I can live without it for a while. I don't need it, Kay. What I need is you." "That's obscene, Murray." "No. It isn't obscene." "It's boring, at any rate." "I'm sorry you think so," he told her. "Do you want to drop out of Group?" I want us both to drop out of Group, he thought, and I want you to live with me. I can't bear to share you any longer, Kay. But he wasn't prepared to move to that level of confrontation. He said, "I want to stay in Group if it's possible, but I'm also interested in extending and developing some one-on-one with you." "You've already made that excessively clear." "I love you." "You've said that before too." "What do you want, Kay?" She laughed, rolled over, drew her knees up until they touched her breasts, parted her thighs, opened herself to a stray shaft of sunlight. "I want to enjoy myself," she said. \* \* \* \* He started setting up his equipment an hour before sunset. Because he was performing, the calibrations were more delicate than on an ordinary night. Not only did he have to broadcast a full range of control ratios to Central to aid the others in their tuning, he had to achieve a flawless balance of input and output with Kay. He went about his complex tasks morosely, not at all excited by the thought that he and Kay would shortly be making love. It cooled his ardor to know that Nate, Dirk, Van, Finn, Bruce, and Klaus would be having her too. Why did he begrudge it to them so? He didn't know. Such exclusivism, coming out of nowhere, shocked and disgusted him. Yet it wholly controlled him. Maybe I need help, he thought. Group time, now. Soft sweet ionized fumes drifting through the chamber of Eros. Kay was warm, receptive, passionate. Her eyes sparkled as she reached for him. They had made love five hundred times and she showed no sign of diminished interest. He knew he turned her on. He hoped he turned her on more than anyone else. He caressed her in all his clever ways, and she purred and wriggled and glowed. Her nipples stood tall: no faking that. Yet something was wrong. Not with her, with him. He was aloof, remote. He seemed to be watching the proceedings from a point somewhere outside himself, as though he were just a Group onlooker tonight, badly tuned in, not even as much a part of things as Klaus, Bruce, Finn, Van, Dirk. The awareness that he had an audience affected him for the first time. His technique, which depended more on finesse and grace than on fire and force, became a trap, locking him into a series of passionless arabesques and pirouettes. He was distracted, though he never had been before, by the minute telemetry tapes glued to the side of Kay's neck and the underside of her thigh. He found himself addressing silent messages to the other men. Here, Nate, how do you like that? Grab some haunch, Dirk. Up the old zaboo, Bruce. Uh. Uh. Ah. Oh. Kay didn't seem to notice anything was amiss. She came three times in the first fifteen minutes. He doubted that he'd ever come at all. He plugged on, in and out, in and out, moving like a mindless piston. A sort of revenge on Group, he realized. You want to share Kay with me, okay, fellows, but this is all you're going to get. This. Oh. Oh. Oh. Now at last he felt the familiar climactic tickle, stepped down to a tenth of its normal intensity. He hardly noticed it when he came. Kay said afterward, "What about that trip? Are we still going to go away somewhere tomorrow?" "Let's forget it for the time being," he said. \* \* \* \* He popped to Istanbul alone and spent a day in the covered bazaar, buying cheap but intricate trinkets for every woman in Group. At nightfall he popped down to McMurdo Sound, where the merry Antarctic summer was at its height, and spent six hours on the polar ski slopes, coming away with wind-bronzed skin and aching muscles. In the lodge later he met an angular, auburn-haired woman from Portugal and took her to bed. She was very good, in a heartless, mechanically proficient way. Doubtless she thought the same of him. She asked him whether

he might be interested in joining her Group, which operated out of Lisbon and Ibiza. "I already have an affiliation," he said. He popped to Addis Ababa after breakfast, checked into the Hilton, slept for a day and a half, and went on to St. Croix for a night of reef-bobbing. When he popped back to California the next day he called Kay at once to learn the news. "We've been

discussing rearranging some of the Group couplings," she said. "Next week, what about you and Lanelle, me and Dirk?" "Does that mean you're

dropping me?" "No, not at all, silly. But I do think we need variety."

"Group was designed to provide us with all the variety we'd ever want."

"You know what I mean. Besides, you're developing an unhealthy fixation on me as isolated love object." "Why are you rejecting me?" "I'm

not. I'm trying to help you, Murray." "I love you," he said.

"Love me in a healthier way, then."

\* \* \* \* That night it was the

turn of Maria and Van. The next, Nikki and Finn. After them, Bruce and Mindy.

He tuned in for all three, trying to erode his grief in nightly frenzies of lustful fulfillment. By the third night he was very tired and no less

grief-smitten. He took the next night off. Then the schedule came up with the first Murray-Lanelle pairing. He popped to Hawaii and set up his rig in

her sprawling beachfront lanai on Molokai. He had bedded her before, of course. Everyone in Group had bedded everyone else during the preliminary

months of compatibility testing. But then they all had settled into more or less regular pair-bonding, and he hadn't approached her since. In the past

year the only Group woman he had slept with was Kay. By choice. "I've

always liked you," Lanelle said. She was tall, heavy-breasted, wide-shouldered, with warm brown eyes, yellow hair, skin the color of fine

honey. "You're just a little crazy, but I don't mind that. And I love screwing Scorpios." "I'm a Capricorn." "Them too," she said. "I love screwing

just about every sign. Except Virgos. I can't stand Virgos. Remember, we were supposed to have a Virgo in Group, at the start. I blackballed him."

They swam and surfed for a couple of hours before doing the calibrating. The water was warm but a brisk breeze blew from the east, coming like a gust of

bad news out of California. Lanelle nuzzled him playfully and then not so playfully in the water. She had always been an aggressive woman, a swaggerer,

a strutter. Her appetites were enormous. Her eyes glistened with desire. "Come on," she said finally, tugging at him. They ran to the house and he began to

adjust the equipment. It was still early. He thought of Kay and his soul drooped. What am I doing here? he wondered. He lined up the Group apparatus

with nervous hands, making many errors. Lanelle stood behind him, rubbing her breasts against his bare back. He had to ask her to stop. Eventually

everything was ready and she hauled him to the spongy floor with her, covering his body with hers. Lanelle always liked to be the one on top. Her tongue

probed his mouth and her hands clutched his hips and she pressed herself against him, but although her body was warm and smooth and alive he felt no

onset of excitement, not a shred. She put her mouth to him but it was hopeless. He remained limp, dead, unable to function. With everyone tuned in

and waiting. "What is it?" she whispered. "What should I do, love?" He closed his eyes and indulged in a fantasy of Kay coupling with Dirk, pure masochism

and it aroused him as far as a sort of half-erect condition, and he slithered into her like a prurient eel. She rocked her way to ecstasy above him. This is

garbage, he thought. I'm falling apart. Kay. Kay. Kay.

\* \* \* \* Then

Kay had her night with Dirk. At first Murray thought he would simply skip it. There was no reason, after all, why he had to subject himself to something

like that, if he expected it to give him pain. It had never been painful for him in the past when Kay did it with other men, inside Group or not, but since

the onset of his jealousies everything was different. In theory the Group couples were interchangeable, one pair serving as proxies for all the rest

each night, but theory and practice coincided less and less in Murray's mind these days. Nobody would be surprised or upset if he happened not to want to

participate tonight. All during the day, though, he found himself obsessively fantasizing Kay and Dirk, every motion, every sound, the two of them facing

each other, smiling, embracing, sinking down onto her bed, entwining, his hands sliding over her slender body, his mouth on her mouth, his chest crushing her small breasts, Dirk entering her, riding her, plunging, driving, coming, Kay coming, then Kay and Dirk arising, going for a cooling swim, returning to the bedroom, facing each other, smiling, beginning again. By late afternoon it had taken place so many times in his fevered imagination that he saw no risk in experiencing the reality of it; at least he could have Kay, if only at one remove, by doing Group tonight. And it might help him to shake off his obsessiveness. But it was worse than he imagined it could be. The sight of Dirk, all bulging muscles and tapering hips, terrified him; Dirk was ready for making love long before the foreplay started, and Murray somehow came to fear that he, not Kay, was going to be the target of that long rigid spear of his. Then Dirk began to caress Kay. With each insinuating touch of his hand it seemed that some vital segment of Murray's relationship with Kay was being obliterated. He was forced to watch Kay through Dirk's eyes, her flushed face, her quivering nostrils, her moist, slack lips, and it killed him. As Dirk drove deep into her, Murray coiled into a miserable fetal ball, one hand clutching his loins, the other clapped across his lips, thumb in his mouth. He couldn't stand it at all. To think that every one of them was having Kay at once. Not only Dirk. Nate, Van, Conrad, Finn, Bruce, Klaus, the whole male Group complement, all of them tuning in tonight for this novel Dirk-Kay pairing. Kay giving herself to all of them gladly, willingly, enthusiastically. He had to escape, now, instantly, even though to drop out of Group communion at this point would unbalance everyone's tuning and set up chaotic eddy currents that might induce nausea or worse in the others. He didn't care. He had to save himself. He screamed and uncoupled his rig.

\* \* \* \* He waited two days and went to see her. She was at her exercises, floating like a cloud through a dazzling arrangement of metal rings and loops that dangled at constantly varying heights from the ceiling of her solarium. He stood below her, craning his neck. "It isn't any good," he said. "I want us both to withdraw from Group, Kay." "That was predictable." "It's killing me. I love you so much I can't bear to share you." "So loving me means owning me?" "Let's just drop out for a while. Let's explore the ramifications of one-on-one. A month, two months, six months, Kay. Just until I get this craziness out of my system. Then we can go back in." "So you admit it's craziness." "I never denied it." His neck was getting stiff. "Won't you please come down from those rings while we're talking?" "I can hear you perfectly well from here, Murray." "Will you drop out of Group and go away with me for a while?" "No." "Will you even consider it?" "No." "Do you realize that you're addicted to Group?" he asked. "I don't think that's an accurate evaluation of the situation. But do you realize that you're dangerously fixated on me?" "I realize it." "What do you propose to do about it?" "What I'm doing now," he said. "Coming to you, asking you to do a one-on-one with me." "Stop it." "One-on-one was good enough for the human race for thousands of years." "It was a prison," she said. "It was a trap. We're out of the trap at last. You won't get me back in." He wanted to pull her down from her rings and shake her. "I love you, Kay!" "You take a funny way of showing it. Trying to limit the range of my experience. Trying to hide me away in a vault somewhere. It won't work." "Definitely no?"

"Definitely no." She accelerated her pace, flinging herself recklessly from loop to loop. Her glistening nude form tantalized and infuriated him. He shrugged and turned away, shoulders slumping, head drooping. This was precisely how he had expected her to respond. No surprises. Very well. Very well. He crossed from the solarium into the bedroom and lifted her Group rig from its container. Slowly, methodically, he ripped it apart, bending the frame until it split, cracking the fragile leads, uprooting handfuls of connectors, crumpling the control panel. The instrument was already a ruin by the time Kay came in. "What are you doing?" she cried. He splintered the lovely gleaming calibration dials under his heel and kicked the



wreckage of the rig toward her. It would take months before a replacement rig could be properly attuned and synchronized. "I had no choice," he told her sadly.

\* \* \* \* They would have to punish him. That was inevitable. But how? He waited at home, and before long they came to him, all of them, Nate, Van, Dirk, Conrad, Finn, Bruce, Klaus, Kay, Serena, Maria, JoJo, Lanelle, Nikki, Mindy, Lois, popping in from many quarters of the world, some of them dressed in evening clothes, some of them naked or nearly so, some of them unkempt and sleepy, all of them angry in a cold, tight way. He tried to stare them down. Dirk said, "You must be terribly sick, Murray. We feel sorry for you." "We really want to help you," said Lanelle. "We're here to give you therapy," Finn told him. Murray laughed. "Therapy. I bet. What kind of therapy?" "To rid you of your exclusivism," Dirk said. "To burn all the trash out of your mind." "Shock treatment," Finn said. "Keep away from me!" "Hold him," Dirk said. Quickly they surrounded him. Bruce clamped an arm across his chest like an iron bar. Conrad seized his hands and brought his wrists together behind his back. Finn and Dirk pressed up against his sides. He was helpless. Kay began to remove her clothing. Naked, she lay down on Murray's bed, flexed her knees, opened her thighs. Klaus got on top of her. "What the hell is this?" Murray asked.

Efficiently but without passion Kay amused Klaus, and efficiently but without passion he penetrated her. Murray writhed impotently as their bodies moved together. Klaus made no attempt at bringing Kay off. He reached his climax in four or five minutes, grunting once, and rolled away from her, red-faced, sweating. Van took his place between Kay's legs. "No," Murray said. "Please, no." Inexorably Van had his turn, quick, impersonal. Nate was next. Murray tried not to watch, but his eyes would not remain closed. A strange smile glittered on Kay's lips as she gave herself to Nate. Nate arose. Finn approached the bed. "No!" Murray cried, and lashed out in a backward kick that sent Conrad screaming across the room. Murray's hands were free. He twisted and wrenched himself away from Bruce. Dirk and Nate intercepted him as he rushed toward Kay. They seized him and flung him to the floor. "The therapy isn't working," Nate said. "Let's skip the rest," said Dirk. "It's no use trying to heal him. He's beyond hope. Let him stand up." Murray got cautiously to his feet. Dirk said, "By unanimous vote, Murray, we expel you from Group for unGrouplike attitudes and especially for your unGrouplike destruction of Kay's rig. All your Group privileges are canceled." At a signal from Dirk, Nate removed Murray's rig from its container and reduced it to unsalvageable rubble. Dirk said, "Speaking as your friend, Murray, I suggest you think seriously about undergoing a total personality reconstruct. You're in trouble, do you know that? You need a lot of help. You're a mess." "Is there anything else you want to tell me?" Murray asked. "Nothing else. Goodbye, Murray."

They started to go out. Dirk, Finn, Nate, Bruce, Conrad, Klaus. Van. JoJo. Nikki. Serena, Maria, Lanelle, Mindy. Lois. Kay was the last to leave. She stood by the door, clutching her clothes in a small crumpled bundle. She seemed entirely unafraid of him. There was a peculiar look of -- was it tenderness? pity? -- on her face. Softly she said, "I'm sorry it had to come to this, Murray. I feel so unhappy for you. I know that what you did wasn't a hostile act. You did it out of love. You were all wrong, but you were doing it out of love." She walked toward him and kissed him lightly, on the cheek, on the tip of the nose, on the lips. He didn't move. She smiled. She touched his arm. "I'm so sorry," she murmured. "Goodbye, Murray." As she went through the door she looked back and said, "Such a damned shame. I could have loved you, you know? I could really have loved you." He had told himself that he would wait until they all were gone before he let the tears flow. But when the door had closed behind Kay he discovered his eyes remained dry. He had no tears. He was altogether calm. Numb. Burned out.

\* \* \* \* After a long while he put on fresh clothing and went out. He popped to London, found that it was raining there, and popped to Prague, where there was something stifling about the atmosphere, and went on to Seoul, where he had barbecued beef and

kimchi for dinner. Then he popped to New York. In front of a gallery on Lexington Avenue he picked up a complaisant young girl with long black hair. "Let's go to a hotel," he suggested, and she smiled and nodded. He registered for a six-hour stay. Upstairs, she undressed without waiting for him to ask. Her body was smooth and supple, flat belly, pale skin, high full breasts. They lay down together and, in silence, without preliminaries, he took her. She was eager and responsive. Kay, he thought. Kay. Kay. You are Kay. A spasm of culmination shook him with unexpected force. "Do you mind if I smoke?" she said a few minutes later. "I love you," he said. "What?" "I love you." "You're sweet." "Come live with me. Please. Please. I'm serious." "What?" "Live with me. Marry me." "\_What?" "There's only one thing I ask. No Group stuff. That's all. Otherwise you can do as you please. I'm wealthy. I'll make you happy. I love you." "You don't even know my name." "I love you." "Mister, you must be out of your head." "Please. Please." "A lunatic. Unless you're trying to make fun of me." "I'm perfectly serious, I assure you. Live with me. Be my wife." "A lunatic," she said. "I'm getting out of here!" She leaped up and looked for her clothes. "Jesus, a madman!" "No," he said, but she was on her way, not even pausing to get dressed, running helter-skelter from the room, her pink buttocks flashing like beacons as she made her escape. The door slammed. He shook his head. He sat rigid for half an hour, an hour, some long timeless span, thinking of Kay, thinking of Group, wondering what they'd be doing tonight, whose turn it was. At length he rose and put on his clothes and left the hotel. A terrible restlessness assailed him. He popped to Karachi and stayed ten minutes. He popped to Vienna. To Hangchow. He didn't stay. Looking for what? He didn't know. Looking for Kay? Kay didn't exist. Looking. Just looking. Pop. Pop. Pop. ----- At [www.fictionwise.com](http://www.fictionwise.com) you can: \* Rate this story \* Find more stories by this author \* Get story recommendations

===== Looking for the Fountain by Robert Silverberg ===== Copyright (c)1992 Agberg, LTD First published in Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, May 1992 Fictionwise Contemporary Science Fiction ----- NOTICE: This work is copyrighted. It is licensed only for use by the purchaser. If you did not purchase this ebook directly from Fictionwise.com then you are in violation of copyright law and are subject to severe fines. Please visit [www.fictionwise.com](http://www.fictionwise.com) to purchase a legal copy. Fictionwise.com offers a reward for information leading to the conviction of copyright violators of Fictionwise ebooks. ----- My name is Francisco de Ortega and by the grace of God I am 89 years old and I have seen many a strange thing in my time, but nothing so strange as the Indian folk of the island called Florida, whose great dream it is to free the Holy Land from the Saracen conquerors that profane it. It was fifty years ago that I encountered these marvelous people, when I sailed with his excellency the illustrious Don Juan Ponce de Leon on his famous and disastrous voyage in quest of what is wrongly called the Fountain of Youth. It was not a Fountain of Youth at all that he sought, but a Fountain of Manly Strength, which is somewhat a different thing. Trust me: I was there, I saw and heard everything, I was by Don Juan Ponce's side when his fate overtook him. I know the complete truth of this endeavor and I mean to set it all down now so there will be no doubt; for I alone survive to tell the tale, and as God is my witness I will tell it truthfully now, here in my ninetieth year, all praises be to Him and to the Mother who bore Him. \* \* \* \* The matter of the Fountain, first. Commonly, I know, it is called the Fountain of Youth. You will read that in many places, such as in the book about the New World which that

Italian wrote who lived at Seville, Peter Martyr of Anghiera, where he says, "The governor of the Island of Boriquena, Juan Ponce de Leon, sent forth two caravels to seek the Islands of Boyuca in which the Indians affirmed there to be a fountain or spring whose water is of such marvelous virtue, that when it is drunk it makes old men young again." This is true, so far as it goes. But when Peter Martyr talks of "making old men young again," his words must be interpreted in a poetic way. Perhaps long life is truly what that Fountain really provides, along with its other and more special virtue -- who knows? For I have tasted of that Fountain's waters myself, and here I am nearly 90 years of age and still full of vigor, I who was born in the year of our Lord 1473, and how many others are still alive today who came into the world then, when Castile and Aragon still were separate kingdoms? But I tell you that what Don Juan Ponce was seeking was not strictly speaking a Fountain of Youth at all, but rather a Fountain that offered a benefit of a very much more intimate kind. For I was there, I saw and heard everything. And they have cowardly tongues, those who say it was a Fountain of Youth, for it would seem that out of shame they choose not to speak honestly of the actual nature of the powers that the Fountain which we sought was supposed to confer. It was when we were in the island of Hispaniola that we first heard of this wonderful Fountain, Don Juan Ponce and I. This was, I think, in the year 1504. Don Juan Ponce, a true nobleman and a man of high and elegant thoughts, was governor then in the province of Higüey of that island, which was ruled at that time by Don Nicolas de Ovando, successor to the great Admiral Cristobal Colon. There was in Higüey then a certain Indian cacique or chieftain of remarkable strength and force, who was reputed to keep seven wives and to satisfy each and every one of them each night of the week. Don Juan Ponce was curious about the great virility of this cacique, and one day he sent a certain Aurelio Herrera to visit him in his village. "He does indeed have many wives," said Herrera, "though whether there were five or seven or fifty-nine I could not say, for there were women surrounding all the time I was there, coming and going in such multitudes that I was unable to make a clear count, and swarms of children also, and from the looks of it the women were his wives and the children were his children." "And what sort of manner of man is this cacique?" asked Don Juan Ponce. "Why," said Herrera, "he is a very ordinary man, narrow of shoulders and shallow of chest, whom you would never think capable of such marvels of manhood, and he is past middle age besides. I remarked on this to him, and he said that when he was young he was easily exhausted and found the manly exercises a heavy burden. But then he journeyed to Boyuca, which is an island to the north of Cuba that is also called Bimini, and there he drank of a spring that cures the debility of sex. Since then, he asserts, he has been able to give pleasure to any number of women in a night without the slightest fatigue." I was there. I saw and heard everything. El enflaquecimiento del sexo was the phrase that Aurelio Herrera used, "the debility of sex." The eyes of Don Juan Ponce de Leon opened wide at this tale, and he turned to me and said, "We must go in search of this miraculous fountain some day, Francisco, for there will be great profit in the selling of its waters." Do you see? Not a word had been spoken about long life, but "only about the curing of el enflaquecimiento del sexo. Nor was Don Juan Ponce in need of any such cure for himself, I assure you, for in the year 1504 he was just thirty years old, a lusty and aggressive man of fiery and restless spirit, and red-haired as well, and you know what is said about the virility of red-haired men. As for me, I will not boast, but I will say only that since the age of thirteen I have rarely gone a single night without a woman's company, and have been married four times, on the fourth occasion to a woman fifty years younger than myself. And if you find yourself in the province of Valladolid where I live and come to pay a call on me I can show you young Diego Antonio de Ortega whom you would think was my great-grandson, and little Juana Maria de Ortega who could be my great-granddaughter, for the boy is seven and the girl is five, but in truth they are my own children, conceived when I was past eighty years of age; and I

have had many other sons and daughters too, some of whom are old people now and some are dead. So it was not to heal our own debilities that Don Juan Ponce and I longed to find this wonderful Fountain, for of such shameful debilities we had none at all, he and I. No, we yearned for the Fountain purely for the sake of the riches we might derive from it: for each year saw hundreds or perhaps thousands of men come from Spain to the New World to seek their fortunes, and some of these were older men who no doubt suffered from a certain enflaquecimiento. In Spain I understand they use the powdered horn of the unicorn to cure this malady, or the crushed shells of a certain insect, though I have never had need of such things myself. But those commodities are not to be found in the New World, and it was Don Juan Ponce's hope that great profit might be made by taking possession of Bimini and selling the waters of the Fountain to those who had need of such a remedy. This is the truth, whatever others may claim.

\* \* \* \* But the pursuit of gold comes before everything, even the pursuit of miraculous Fountains of Manly Strength. We did not go at once in search of the Fountain because word came to Don Juan Ponce in Hispaniola that the neighboring island of Borinquen was rich in gold, and thereupon he applied to Governor Ovando for permission to go there and conquer it. Don Juan Ponce already somewhat knew that island, having seen its western coast briefly in 1493 when he was a gentleman volunteer in the fleet of Cristobal Colon, and its beauty had so moved him that he had resolved someday to return and make himself master of the place. With one hundred men, he sailed over to this Borinquen in a small caravel, landing there on Midsummer Day, 1506, at the same bay he had visited earlier aboard the ship of the great Admiral. Seeing us arrive with such force, the cacique of the region was wise enough to yield to the inevitable and we took possession with very little fighting.

So rich did the island prove to be that we put the marvelous Fountain of which we had previously heard completely out of our minds. Don Juan Ponce was made governor of Borinquen by royal appointment and for several years the natives remained peaceful and we were able to obtain a great quantity of gold indeed. This is the same island that Cristobal Colon called San Juan Bautista and which people today call Puerto Rico.

All would have been well for us there but for the stupidity of a certain captain of our forces, Cristobal de Sotomayor, who treated the natives so badly that they rose in rebellion against us. This was in the year of our Lord 1511. So we found ourselves at war; and Don Juan Ponce fought with all the great valor for which he was renowned, doing tremendous destruction against our pagan enemies. We had among us at that time a certain dog, called Bercerillo, of red pelt and black eyes, who could tell simply by smell alone whether an Indian was friendly to us or hostile, and could understand the native speech as well; and the Indians were more afraid of ten Spaniards with this dog, than of one hundred without him. Don Juan Ponce rewarded Bercerillo's bravery and cleverness by giving the dog a full share of all the gold and slaves we captured, as though he were a crossbowman; but in the end the Indians killed him. I understand that a valiant pup of this Bercerillo, Leoncillo by name, went with Nunez de Balboa when he crossed the Isthmus of Panama and discovered the great ocean beyond.

During this time of our difficulties with the savages of Puerto Rico, Don Diego Colon, the son of the great Admiral, was able to take advantage of the trouble and make himself governor of the island in the place of Don Juan Ponce. Don Juan Ponce thereupon returned to Spain and presented himself before King Ferdinand, and told him the tale of the fabulous Fountain that restores manly power. King Ferdinand, who was greatly impressed by Don Juan Ponce's lordly bearing and noble appearance, at once granted him a royal permit to seek and conquer the isle of Bimini where this Fountain was said to be. Whether this signifies that His Most Catholic Majesty was troubled by debilities of a sexual sort, I would not dare to say. But the king was at that time a man of sixty years and it would not be unimaginable that some difficulty of that kind had begun to perplex him.

Swiftly Don Juan Ponce returned to Puerto Rico with the good news of his royal appointment, and on the third day of March of the year

of our Lord 1513 we set forth from the Port of San German in three caravels to search for Bimini and its extraordinary Fountain. I should say at this point that it was a matter of course that Don Juan Ponce should have asked me to take part in the quest for this Fountain. I am a man of Tervas de San Campos in the province of Valladolid, where Don Juan Ponce de Leon also was born less than one year after I was, and he and I played together as children and were friends all through our youth. As I have said, he first went to the New World in 1493, when he was nineteen years of age, as a gentleman aboard the ship of Admiral Cristobal Colon, and after settling in Hispaniola he wrote to me and told me of the great wealth of the New World and urged me to join him there. Which I did forthwith; and we were rarely separated from then until the day of his death. Our flagship was the Santiago, with Diego Bermudez as its master -- the brother to the man who discovered the isle of Bermuda -- and the famous Anton de Alaminos as its pilot. We had two Indian pilots too, who knew the islands of that sea. Our second ship was the Santa Maria de Consolacion, with Juan Bono de Quexo as its captain, and the third was the San Cristobal. All of these vessels were purchased by Don Juan Ponce himself out of the riches he had laid by in the time when he was governor of Puerto Rico. I have to tell you that there was not one priest in our company, not that we were ungodly men but only that it was not our commander's purpose on this voyage to bring the word of Jesus to the natives of Bimini. We did have some few women among us, including my own wife Beatriz, who had come out from Spain to be with me, and grateful I was to have her by my side; and my wife's young sister Juana was aboard the ship also, that I could better look after her among these rough Spaniards of the New World. Northward we went. After ten days we halted at the isle of San Salvador to scrape weeds from the bottom of one of our ships. Then we journeyed west-northwest, passing the isle of Ciguateo on Easter Sunday, and, continuing onward into waters that ran ever shallower, we caught sight on the second day of April of a large delightful island of great and surpassing beauty, all blooming and burgeoning with a great host of wildflowers whose delectable odors came wafting to us on the warm gentle breeze. We named this isle La Florida, because Easter is the season when things flower and so we call that time of year in our language Pascua Florida. And we said to one another at once, seeing so beautiful a place, that this island of Florida must surely be the home of the wondrous Fountain that restores men to their fleshly powers and grants all their carnal desires to the fullest. \* \* \* \* Of the loveliness of Florida I could speak for a day and a night and a night and a day, and not exhaust its marvels. The shallowing green waters give way to white crests of foam that fall upon beaches paved hard with tiny shells; and when you look beyond the beach you see dunes and marshes, and beyond those a land altogether level, not so much as a hillock upon it, where glistening sluggish lagoons bordered brilliantly with rushes and sedges show the way to the mysterious forests of the interior. Those forests! Palms and pines, and gnarled gray trees whose names are known only to God! Trees covered with snowy beards! Trees whose leaves are like swords! Flowers everywhere, dizzying us with their perfume! We were stunned by the fragrance of jasmine and honeyflower. We heard the enchanting songs of a myriad of birds. We stared in wonder at the bright blooms. We doffed our helmets and dropped to our knees to give thanks to God for having led us to this most beautiful of shores. Don Juan Ponce was the first of us to make his way to land, carrying with him the banner of Castile and Leon. He thrust the royal standard into the soft sandy soil and in the name of God and Spain took possession of the place. This was at the mouth of a river which he named in honor of his patron, the blessed San Juan. Then, since there were no Indians thereabouts who might lead us to the Fountain, we returned to our vessels and continued along the coast of that place. Though the sea looked gentle we found the currents unexpectedly strong, carrying us northward so swiftly that we feared we would never see Puerto Rico again. Therefore did Don Juan Ponce give orders for us to turn south; but although we had a fair following wind the current was so strong against us

that we could make no headway, and at last we were compelled to anchor in a cove. Here we spent some days, with the ships straining against their cables; and during that time the little San Cristobal was swept out to sea and we lost sight of her altogether, though the day was bright and the weather fair. But within two days by God's grace she returned to us.

At this time we saw our first Indians, but they were far from friendly. Indeed they set upon us at once and two of our men were wounded by their little darts and arrows, which were tipped with sharp points made of bone. When night came we were able to withdraw and sail on to another place that we called the Rio de la Cruz, where we collected wood and water; and here we were attacked again, by sixty Indians, but they were driven off. And so we continued for many days, until in latitude 28 degrees 15 minutes we did round a cape, which we called Cabo de los Corrientes on account of the powerful currents, which were stronger than the wind.

Here it was that we had the strangest part of our voyage, indeed the strangest thing I have ever seen in all my ninety years. Which is to say that we encountered at this time in this remote and hitherto unknown land the defenders of the Christian Faith, the sworn foes of the Saracens, the last sons of the Crusades, whose great dream it was, even now, to wrest the Holy Land of our Savior's birth from those infidel followers of Muhammad who seized it long ago and rule it today.

We suspected nothing of any of what awaited us when we dropped our anchors near an Indian town on the far side of Cabo de los Corrientes. Cautiously, for we had received such a hostile reception farther up the coast, we made our landfall a little way below the village and set about the task of filling our water casks and cutting firewood. While this work was being carried out we became aware that the Indians had left their village and had set out down the shore to encounter us, for we heard them singing and chanting even before we could see them; and we halted in our labors and made ourselves ready to deal with another attack.

After a short while the Indians appeared, still singing as they approached. Wonder of wonders, they were clothed, though all the previous natives that we had seen were naked, or nearly so, as these savages usually are. Even more marvelous was the nature of their clothing, which was of a kind not very different from that which Christians wear, jerkins and doublets and tunics, and such things. And -- marvel of marvel -- every man of them wore upon his chest a white garment that bore the holy cross of Jesus painted brightly in red! We could not believe our eyes. But if we had any doubt that these were Christian men, it was eradicated altogether when we saw that in the midst of the procession came certain men wearing the dark robes of priests, who carried great wooden crosses held high aloft.

Were these indeed Indians? Surely not! Surely they must be Spaniards like ourselves! We might almost have been in Toledo, or Madrid, or Seville, and not on the shore of some strange land of the Indies! But indeed we saw without doubt now that the marchers were men of the sort that is native to the New World, with the ruddy skins and black hair and sharp features of their kind, Christian though they might be in dress, and carrying the cross itself in their midst.

When they were close enough so that we could hear distinctly the words of their song, it sounded to some of us that they might be Latin words, though Latin of a somewhat barbarous kind. Could that be possible? We doubted the evidence of our ears. But then Pedro de Plasencia, who had studied for the priesthood before entering the military, crossed himself most vigorously and said to us in wonder, "Do you hear that? They are singing the Gloria in excelsis Deo!" And in truth we could tell that hymn was what they sang, now that Pedro de Plasencia had picked out the words of it for us. Does that sound strange to you, that Indians of an unknown isle should be singing in Latin? Yes, it is strange indeed. But doubt me at your peril. I was there; I saw and heard everything myself

"Surely," said Diego Bermudez, "there must have been Spaniards here before us, who have instructed these people in the way of God."

"That cannot be," said our pilot, Anton de Alaminos. "For I was with Cristobal Colon on his second voyage and have been on every voyage since of any note that has been made in these waters, and I can tell you that no white man has set foot on

this shore before us." "Then how came these Indians by their crosses and their holy hymns?" asked Diego Bermudez. "Is it a pure miracle of the saints, do you think?" "Perhaps it is," said Don Juan Ponce de Leon, with some heat, for it looked as if there might be a quarrel between the master and the pilot. "Who can say? Be thankful that these folk are our Christian friends and not our enemy, and leave off your useless speculations." And in the courageous way that was his nature, Don Juan Ponce went forward and raised his arms to the Indians, and made the sign of the cross in the air, and called out to them, saying, "I am Don Juan Ponce de Leon of Valladolid in the land of Spain, and I greet you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." All of which he said clearly and loudly in his fine and beautiful Castilian, which he spoke with the greatest purity. But the Indians, who by now had halted in a straight line before us, showed no understanding in their eyes. Don Juan Ponce spoke again, once more in Spanish, saying that he greeted them also in the name of His Most Catholic Majesty King Ferdinand of Aragon and Castile. This too produced no sign that it had been understood. One of the Indians then spoke. He was a man of great presence and bearing, who wore chains of gold about his chest and carried a sword of strange design at his side, the first sword I had ever seen a native of these islands to have. From these indications it was apparent that he was the cacique. He spoke long and eloquently in a language that I suppose was his own, for none of us had ever heard it before, not even the two Indian pilots we had brought with us. Then he said a few words that had the sound and the ring of French or perhaps Catalan, though we had a few men of Barcelona among us who leaned close toward him and put their hands to their ears and even they could make no sense out of what they heard. But then finally this grand cacique spoke words which we all could understand plainly, garbled and thick-tongued though his speaking of them was: for what he said was, and there could be no doubt of it however barbarous his accent, "In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti," and he made the sign of the cross over his chest as any good Christian man would do. To which Don Juan replied, "Amen. Dominus vobiscum." Whereupon the cacique, exclaiming, "Et cum spiritu tuo," went forthrightly to the side of Don Juan Ponce, and they embraced with great love, likewise as any Christian men might do, here on this remote beach in this strange and lovely land of Florida. \* \* \* \* They brought us then to their village and offered a great feast for us, with roasted fish and the meat of tortoises and sweet fruits of many mysterious kinds, and made us presents of the skins of animals. For our part we gave them such trinkets as we had carried with us, beads and bracelets and little copper daggers and the like, but of all the things we gave them they were most eager to receive the simple figurines of Jesus on the cross that we offered them, and passed them around amongst themselves in wonder, showing such love for them as if they were made of the finest gold and studded with emeralds and rubies. And we said privately to each other that we must be dreaming, to have met with Indians in this land who were of such great devotion to the faith.

We tried to speak with them again in Spanish, but it was useless, and so too was speaking in any of the native tongues of Hispaniola or Puerto Rico that we knew. In their turn they addressed us in their own language, which might just as well have been the language of the people of the Moon for all we comprehended it, and also in that tantalizing other tongue which seemed almost to be French or Catalan. We could not make anything of that, try though we did. But Pedro de Plasencia, who was the only one of us who could speak Latin out loud like a priest, sat down with the cacique after the meal and addressed him in that language. I mean not simply saying things like the Pater Noster and the Ave Maria, which any child can say, but speaking to him as if Latin was a real language with words and sentences of common meaning, the way it was long ago. To which the cacique answered, though he seemed to be framing his words with much difficulty; and Pedro answered him again, just as hesitatingly; and so they went on, talking to each other in a slow and halting way, far into the night, nodding and smiling most jubilantly whenever one of

them reached some understanding of the other's words, while we looked on in astonishment, unable to fathom a word of what they were saying. At last Pedro rose, looking pale and exhausted like a man who has carried a bull on his back for half a league, and came over to us where we were sitting in a circle. "Well?" Don Juan Ponce demanded at once. Pedro de

Plasencia shook his head wearily. "It was all nonsense, what the cacique said. I understood nothing. Nothing at all! It was mere incomprehensible babble and no more than that." And he picked up a leather sack of wine that lay near his feet and drank from it as though he had a thirst that no amount of drinking ever could quench. "You appeared to comprehend, at times," said Don Juan Ponce. "Or so it seemed to me as I watched you." "Nothing. Not a word. Let me sleep on it, and perhaps it will come clear to me in the morning."

I thought Don Juan Ponce would pursue him on the matter. But Don Juan Ponce, though he was an impatient and high-tempered man, was also a man of great sagacity, and he knew better than to press Pedro further at a time when he seemed so troubled and fatigued. So he dismissed the company and we settled down in the huts that the Indians had given us for lodging, all except those of us who were posted as sentries during the night to guard against treachery.

I rose before dawn. But I saw that Don Juan Ponce and Pedro de Plasencia were already awake and had drawn apart from the rest of us and were talking most earnestly. After a time they returned, and Don Juan Ponce beckoned to me. "Pedro has told me something of his conversation with the cacique," he said.

"And what is it that you have learned?"

"That these Indians are indeed Christians." "Yes, that seems to be the plain truth, strange though it seems," I said. "For they do carry the cross about, and sing the Gloria, and honor the Father and the Son."

"There is more." I waited. He continued, "Unless Pedro much mistook what the cacique told him, the greatest hope in which these people live is that of wresting the Holy Land from the Saracen, and restoring it to good Christian pilgrims."

At that I burst out into such hearty laughter that Don Juan Ponce, for all his love of me, looked at me with eyes flashing with reproof. Yet I could not withhold my mirth, which poured from me like a river.

I said at last, when I had mastered myself, "But tell me, Don Juan, what would these savages know of the Holy Land, or of Saracens, or any such thing? The Holy Land is thousands of leagues away, and has never been spoken of so much as once in this New World by any man, I think; nor does anyone speak of the Crusade any longer in this age, neither here nor at home."

"It is very strange, I agree," replied Don Juan Ponce. "Nevertheless, so Pedro swears, the cacique spoke to him of Terra Sancta, Terra Sancta, and of infidels, and the liberation of the city of Jerusalem."

"And how does it come to pass," I asked, "that they can know of such things, in this remote isle, where no white man has ever visited before?"

"Ah," said Don Juan Ponce, "that is the great mystery, is it not?" \*

\* \* \* In time we came to understand the solution to this mystery, though the tale was muddled and confused, and emerged only after much travail, and long discussions between Pedro de Plasencia and the cacique of the Indians. I will tell you the essence of it, which was this: Some three hundred years ago, or perhaps it was four hundred, while much of our beloved Spain still lay under the Moorish hand, a shipload of Frankish warriors set sail from the port of Genoa, or perhaps it was Marseilles, or some other city along the coast of Provence. This was in the time when men still went crusading, to make war for Jesus' sake in the Holy Land against the followers of Muhammad who occupied that place.

But the voyage of these Crusaders miscarried; for when they entered the great Mar Mediterraneo, thinking to go east they were forced west by terrible storms and contrary winds, and swept helpless past our Spanish shores, past Almeria and Malaga and Tarifa, and through the narrow waist of the Estrecho de Gibraltar and out into the vastness of the Ocean Sea. Here, having no sound knowledge as we in our time do of the size and shape of the African continent, they thought to turn south and then east below Egypt and make their voyage yet to the Holy Land. Of course this would be



impossible, except by rounding the Buena Fortuna cape and traveling up past Arabia, a journey almost beyond our means to this day. But being unaware of that, these bold but hapless men made the attempt, coasting southerly and southerly and southerly, and the land of course not only not ending but indeed carrying them farther and farther outward into the Ocean Sea, until at last, no doubt weary and half dead of famine, they realized that they had traveled so far to the west that there was no hope of returning eastward again, nor of turning north and making their way back into the Mediterraneo. So they yielded to the westerly winds that prevail near the Canary Isles, and allowed themselves to be blown clear across the sea to the Indies. And so after long arduous voyaging they made landfall in this isle we call Florida. Thus these men of three hundred years ago were the first discoverers of the New World, although I doubt very greatly that they comprehended what it was that they had achieved.

You must understand that we received few of these details from our Indian hosts: only the tale that men bound to Terra Sancta departing from a land in the east were blown off course some hundreds of years previous and were brought after arduous sailing to the isle of Florida and to this very village where our three caravals had made their landfall. All the rest did we conclude for ourselves, that they were Crusaders and so forth, after much discussing of the matter and recourse to the scholarship that the finest men among us possessed.

And what befell these men of the Crusade, when they came to this Florida? Why, they offered themselves to the mercies of the villagers, who greeted them right honorably and took them to dwell amongst them, and married them to their daughters! And for their part the seafarers offered the word of Jesus to the people of the village and thereby gave them hope of Heaven; and taught these kindly savages the Latin tongue so well that it remained with them after a fashion hundreds of years afterward, and also some vestiges of the common speech that the seafaring men had had in their own native land.

But most of all did the strangers from the sea imbue in the villagers the holy desire to rid the birthplace of Jesus of the dread hand of the Mussulman; and ever, in years after, did the Christian Indians of this Florida village long to put to sea, and cross the great ocean, and wield their bows and spears valiantly amidst the paynim enemy in the defense of the True Faith. Truly, how strange are the workings of God Almighty, how far beyond our comprehension, that He should make Crusaders out of the naked Indians in this far-off place!

You may ask what became of those European men who landed there, and whether we saw anyone who plainly might mark his descent from them. And I will tell you that those ancient Crusaders, who intermarried with the native women since they had brought none of their own, were wholly swallowed up by such intermarrying and were engulfed by the fullness of time. For they were only forty or fifty men among hundreds, and the passing centuries so diluted the strain of their race that not the least trace of it remained, and we saw no pale skin or fair hair or blue eyes or other marks of European men here. But the ideas that they had fetched to this place did survive, that is, the practicing of the Catholic faith and the speaking of a debased and corrupt sort of Latin and the wearing of a kind of European clothes, and such. And I tell you it was passing strange to see these red savages in their surplices and cassocks, and in their white tunics bearing the great emblem of our creed, and other such ancient marks of our civilization, and to hear them chanting the Kyrie eleison and the Confiteor and the Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus Dominus Deus Sabaoth in that curious garbled way of theirs, like words spoken in a dream.

Nay, I have spoken untruthfully, for the men of that lost voyage did leave other remnants of themselves among the villagers beside our holy faith, which I have neglected to mention here, but which I will tell you of now.

For after we had been in that village several days, the cacique led us through the close humid forest along a tangled trail to a clearing nearby just to the north of the village, and here we saw certain tangible remains of the voyagers: a graveyard with grave markers of white limestone, and the rotting ribs and strakes and some of the keel of a seafaring vessel of an ancient design, and the foundation walls of a little wooden church. All of

which things were as sad a sight as could be imagined, for the gravestones were so weathered and worn that although we could see the faint marks of names we could not read the names themselves, and 'the vessel was but a mere sorry remnant, a few miserable decaying timbers, and the church was only a pitiful fragment of a thing.

We stood amidst these sorry ruins and our hearts were struck into pieces by pity and grief for these brave men, so far from home and lonely, who in this strange place had nevertheless contrived to plant the sacred tree of Christianity. And the noble Don Juan Ponce de Leon went down on his knees before the church and bowed his head and said, "Let us pray, my friends, for the souls of these men, as we hope that someday people will pray for ours."

\* \* \* \* We spent some days amongst these people in feasting and prayer, and replenishing our stock of firewood and water. And then Don Juan Ponce gave new thought to the primary purpose of our voyage, which was, to find the miraculous Fountain that renews a man's energies. He called Pedro de Plasencia to his side and said, "Ask of the cacique, whether he knows such a Fountain."

"It will not be easy, describing such things in my poor Latin," answered Pedro. "I had my Latin from the Church, Don Juan, and what I learned there is of little use here, and it was all so very long ago."

"You must try, my friend. For only you of all our company has the power to speak with him and be understood."

Whereupon Pedro went to the cacique; but I could see even at a distance that he was having great difficulties. For he would speak a few halting words, and then he would act out his meaning with gestures, like a clown upon a stage, and then he would speak again. There would be silence; and then the cacique would reply, and I would see Pedro leaning forward most intently, trying to catch the meaning of the curious Latin that the cacique spoke. They did draw pictures for each other also in the sand, and point to the sky and sweep their arms to and fro, and do many another thing to convey to each other the sense of their words, and so it went, hour after hour.

At length Pedro de Plasencia returned to where we stood, and said, "There does appear to be a source of precious water that they cherish on this island, which they call the Blue Spring."

"And is this Blue Spring the Fountain for which we search?" Don Juan Ponce asked, all eagerness.

"Ah, of that I am not certain." "Did you tell him that the water of it would allow a man to take his pleasure with women all day and all night, and never tire of it?"

"So I attempted to say."

"With many women, one after another?" "These are Christian folk, Don Juan!"

"Yes, so they are. But they are Indians also. They would understand such a thing, just as any man of Estramadura or Galicia or Andalusia would understand such a thing, Christian though he be."

Pedro de Plasencia nodded. "I told him what I could, about the nature of the Fountain for which we search. And he listened, very close, and he said, Yes, yes, you are speaking of the Blue Spring."

"So he understood you, then?"

"He understood something of what I said, Don Juan, so I do firmly believe. But whether he understood it all, that is only for God to know."

I saw the color rise in Don Juan Ponce's face, and I knew that that restless choleric nature of his was coming to the fore, which had always been his great driving force and also his most perilous failing.

He said to Pedro de Plasencia, "And will he take us to this Blue Spring of his, do you think?"

"I think he will," said Pedro. "But first he wishes to enact a treaty with us, as the price of transporting us thither."

"A treaty."

"A treaty, yes. He wants our aid and assistance."

"Ah," said Don Juan Ponce. "And how can we be of help to these people, do you think?"

"They want us to show them how to build seafaring ships," said Pedro. "So that they can sail across the Ocean Sea, and go to the rescue of the Holy Land, and free it from the paynim hordes."

\* \* \* \* There was much more of back and forth, and forth and back, in these negotiations, until Pedro de Plasencia grew weary indeed, and there was not enough wine in our sacks to give him the rest he needed, so that we had to send a boat out to fetch more from one of our ships at anchor in the harbor. For it was a great burden upon him to conduct these conversations, he remembering only little

patches of Church Latin from his boyhood, and the cacique speaking a language that could be called Latin only by great courtesy. I sat with them as they talked, on several occasions, and not for all my soul could I understand a thing that they said to each other. From time to time Pedro would lose his patience and speak out in Spanish, or the cacique would begin to speak in his savage tongue or else in that other language, somewhat like Provencal, which must have been what the seafaring Crusaders spoke amongst themselves. But none of that added to the understanding between the two men, which I think was a very poor understanding indeed.

It became apparent after a time that Pedro had misheard the cacique's terms of treaty: what he wished us to do was not to teach them how to build ships but to give them one of ours in which to undertake their Crusade.

"It cannot be," replied Don Juan Ponce, when he had heard. "But tell him this, that I will undertake to purchase ships for him with my own funds, in Spain. Which I will surely do, after we have received the proceeds from the sale of the water from the Fountain."

"He wishes to know how many ships you will provide," said Pedro de Plasencia, after another conference.

"Two," said Don Juan Ponce. "No: three. Three fine caravels."

Which Pedro duly told the cacique; but his way of telling him was to point to our three ships in the harbor, which led the cacique into thinking that Don Juan Ponce meant to give him those three actual ships then and now, and that required more hours of conferring to repair. But at length all was agreed on both sides, and our journey toward the Blue Spring was begun.

The cacique himself accompanied us, and the three priests of the tribe, carrying the heavy wooden crosses that were their staffs of office, and perhaps two dozen of the young men and girls of the village. In our party there were ten men, Don Juan Ponce and Pedro and I, and seven ordinary seamen carrying barrels in which we meant to store the waters of the Fountain. My wife Beatriz and her sister Juana accompanied us also, for I never would let them be far from me.

Some of the ordinary seamen among us were rough men of Estramadura, who spoke jestingly and with great licentiousness of how often they would embrace the girls of the native village after they had drunk of the Fountain. I had to silence them, reminding them that my wife and her sister could overhear their words. Yet I wondered privately what effects the waters would have on my own manhood: not that it had ever been lacking in any aspect, but I, could not help asking myself if I would find it enhanced beyond its usual virtue, for such curiosity is but a natural thing to any man, as you must know.

We journeyed for two days, through hot close terrain where insects of great size buzzed among the flowers and birds of a thousand colors astounded our eyes. And at last we came to a place of bare white stone, flat like all other places in this isle of Florida, where clear cool blue water gushed up out of the ground with wondrous force.

The cacique gestured grandly, with a great sweep of his arms. "It is the Blue Spring," said Pedro de Plasencia.

Our men would have rushed forward at once to lap up its waters like greedy dogs at a pond; but the cacique cried out, and Don Juan Ponce also in that moment ordered them to halt. There would be no unseemly haste here, he said. And it was just as well he did, for we very soon came to see that this spring was a holy place to the people of the village, and it would have been profaned by such an assault on it, to our possible detriment and peril.

The cacique came forward, with his priests beside him, and gestured to Don Juan Ponce to kneel and remove his helmet. Don Juan Ponce obeyed; and the cacique took his helmet from him, and passed it to one of the priests, who filled it with water from the spring and poured it down over Don Juan Ponce's face and neck, so that Don Juan Ponce laughed out loud. The which laughter seemed to offend the Indians, for they showed looks of disapproval, and Don Juan Ponce at once grew silent.

The Indians spoke words which might almost have been Latin words, and there was much elevating of their crosses as the water was poured down over Don Juan Ponce, after which he was given the order to rise.

And then one by one we stepped forth, and the Indians did the same to each of us.

"It is very like a rite of holy baptism, is it not?" said Aurelio Herrera to me.

"Yes, very much like a

baptism," I said to him. And I began to wonder: How well have we been understood here? Is it a new access of manly strength that these Indians are conferring upon us, or rather the embrace of the Church? For surely there is nothing about this rite that speaks of anything else than a religious enterprise. But I kept silent, since it was not my place to speak. When the villagers were done dousing us with water, and speaking words over us and elevating their crosses, which made me more sure than ever that we were being taken into the congregation of their faith, we were allowed to drink of the spring -- they did the same -- and to fill our barrels. Don Juan Ponce turned to me after we had drunk, and winked at me and said, "Well, old friend, this will serve us well in later years, will it not? For though we have no need of such invigoration now, you and I, nevertheless time will have its work with us as it does with all men." "If it does," I said, "why, then, we are fortified against it now indeed." But in truth I felt no change within. The water was pure and cool and good, but it had seemed merely to be water to me, with no great magical qualities about it; and when I turned and looked upon my wife Beatriz, she seemed pleasing to me as she always had, but no more than that. Well, so be it, I thought; this may be the true Fountain or maybe it is not, and only time will tell; and we began our return to the village, carrying the casks of water with us; and the day of our return, Pedro de Plasencia drew up a grand treaty on a piece of bark from a tree, in which we pledged our sacred honor and our souls to do all in our power to supply this village with good Spanish ships so that the villagers would be able to fulfill their pledge to liberate the Holy Land. "Which we will surely do for them," said Don Juan Ponce with great conviction. "For I mean to come back to this place as soon as I am able, with many ships of our own as well as the vessels I have promised them from Spain; and we will fill our holds with cask upon cask of this virtuous water from the Fountain, and replenish our fortunes anew by selling that water to those who need its miraculous power. Moreover we ourselves will benefit from its use in our declining days. And also we will bring this cacique some priests, who will correct him in his manner of practicing our faith, and guide him in his journey to Jerusalem. All of which I will swear by a great oath upon the Cross itself, in the presence of the cacique, so that he may have no doubt whatsoever of our kindly Christian purposes." \* \* \* \* And so we departed, filled with great joy and no little wonder at all that we had seen and heard. Well, and none of the brave intentions of Don Juan Ponce were fulfilled, as you surely must know, inasmuch as the valiant Don Juan Ponce de Leon never saw Spain again, nor did he live to enjoy the rejuvenations of his body that he hoped the water of the Fountain would bring him in his later years. For when we left the village of the Indian Crusaders, we continued on our way along the coast of the isle of Florida a little further in a southerly direction, seeking to catch favorable winds and currents that would carry us swiftly back to Puerto Rico; and on the 23rd of May we halted in a pleasing bay to gather wood and water -- for we would not touch the water of our casks from the Fountain! -- and to careen the San Cristobal, the hull of which was fouled with barnacles. And as we did our work there, a party of Indians came forth out of the woods. "Hail, brothers in Christ!" Don Juan Ponce called to them with great cheer, for the cacique had told him that his people had done wonderful things in bringing their neighbors into the embrace of Jesus, and he thought now that surely all the Indians of this isle had been converted to the True Faith by those Crusading men of long ago. But he was wrong in that; for these Indians were no Christians at all, but only pagan savages like most of their kind, and they replied instantly to Don Juan Ponce's halloos with a volley of darts and arrows that struck five of us dead then and there before we were able to drive them off. And among those who took his mortal wound that day was the valiant and noble Don Juan Ponce de Leon of Valladolid, in the thirty-ninth year of his life. I knelt beside him on the beach in his last moments, and said the last words with him. And he looked up at me and smiled -- for death had never been frightening to him -- and he said to me, almost with his last

breath, "There is only one thing that I regret, Francisco. And that is that I will never know, now, what powers the water of that Fountain would have conferred upon me, when I was old and greatly stricken with the frailty of my years." With that he perished. What more can I say? We made our doleful way back to Puerto Rico, and told our tale of Crusaders and Indians and cool blue waters. But we were met with laughter, and there were no purchasers for the contents of our casks, and our fortunes were greatly depleted. All praise be to God, I survived that dark time and went on afterward to join the magnificent Hernando Cortes in his conquest of the land of Mexico, which today is called New Spain, and in the fullness of time I returned to my native province of Valladolid with much gold in my possession, and here I live in health and vigor to this day. Often do I think of the isle of Florida and those Christian Indians we found there. It is fifty years since that time. In those fifty years the cacique and his people have rendered most of Florida into Christians by now, as we now know, and I tell you what is not generally known, that this expansion of their nation was brought about the better to support their Crusade against the Mussulman once the ships that Don Juan Ponce promised them had arrived. So there is a great warlike Christian kingdom in Florida today, filling all that land and spreading over into adjacent isles, against which we men of Spain so far have struggled in vain as we attempt to extend our sway to those regions. I think it was poor Don Juan Ponce de Leon, in his innocent quest for a miraculous Fountain, who without intending it caused them to become so fierce, by making them a promise which he could not fulfill, and leaving them thinking that they had been betrayed by false Christians. Better that they had remained forever in the isolation in which they lived when we found them, singing the Gloria and the Credo and the Sanctus, and waiting with Christian patience for the promised ships that are to take them to the reconquest of the Holy Land. But those ships did not come; and they see us now as traitors and enemies. I often think also of the valiant Don Juan Ponce, and his quest for the wondrous Fountain. Was the Blue Spring indeed the Fountain of legend? I am not sure of that. It may be that those Indians misunderstood what Pedro de Plasencia was requesting of them, and that they were simply offering us baptism -- us, good Christians all our lives! -- when what we sought was something quite different from that. But if the Fountain was truly the one we sought, I feel great sorrow and pity for Don Juan Ponce. For though he drank of its waters, he died too soon to know of its effects. Whereas here I am, soon to be ninety years old, and the father of a boy of seven and a girl of five. Was it the Fountain's virtue that has given me so long and robust a life, or have I simply enjoyed the favor of God? How can I say? Whichever it is, I am grateful; and if ever there is peace between us and the people of the isle of Florida, and you should find yourself in the vicinity of that place, you could do worse, I think, than to drink of that Blue Spring, which will do you no harm and may perhaps bring you great benefit. If by chance you go to that place, seek out the Indians of the village nearby, and tell them that old Francisco de Ortega remembers them, and cherishes the memory, and more than once has said a Mass in their praise despite all the troubles they have caused his countrymen, for he knows that they are the last defenders of the Holy Land against the paynim infidels. This is my story, and the story of Don Juan Ponce de Leon and the miraculous Fountain, which the ignorant call the Fountain of Youth, and of the Christian Indians of Florida who yearn to free the Holy Land. You may wonder about the veracity of these things, but I beg you, have no doubt on that score. All that I have told you is true. For I was there. I saw and heard everything. ----- At [www.fictionwise.com](http://www.fictionwise.com) you can: \* Rate this story \* Find more stories by this author \* Read the author's notes for this story \* Get story recommendations

===== Many Mansions by Robert

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IT'S BEEN A rough day. Everything gone wrong. A tremendous tie-up on the freeway going to work, two accounts canceled before lunch, now some inconceivable botch by the weather programmers. It's snowing outside. Actually snowing. He'll have to go out and clear the driveway in the morning. He can't remember when it last snowed. And of course a fight with Alice again. She never lets him alone. She's at her most deadly when she sees him come home exhausted from the office. Ted why don't you this, Ted get me that. Now, waiting for dinner, working on his third drink in forty minutes, he feels one of his headaches coming on. Those miserable killer headaches that can destroy a whole evening. What a life! He toys with murderous fantasies. Take her out by the reservoir for a friendly little stroll, give her a quick hard shove with his shoulder. She can't swim. Down, down, down. Glub. Goodbye, Alice. Free at last.

In the kitchen she furiously taps the keys of the console, programming dinner just the way he likes it. Cold vichyssoise, baked potato with sour cream and chives, sirloin steak blood-rare inside and charcoal-charred outside. Don't think it isn't work to get the meal just right, even with the autochef. All for him. The bastard. Tell me, why do I sweat so hard to please him? Has he made me happy? What's he ever done for me except waste the best years of my life? And he thinks I don't know about his other women. Those lunchtime quickies. Oh, I wouldn't mind at all if he dropped dead tomorrow. I'd be a great widow -- so dignified at the funeral, so strong, hardly crying at all. And everybody thinks we're such a close couple. Married eleven years and they're still in love. I heard someone say that only last week. If they only knew the truth about us. If they only knew.

Martin peers out the window of his third-floor apartment in Sunset Village. Snow. I'll be damned. He can't remember the last time he saw snow. Thirty, forty years back, maybe, when Ted was a baby. He absolutely can't remember. White stuff on the ground -- when? The mind gets wobbly when you're past eighty. He still can't believe he's an old man. It rocks him to realize that his grandson Ted, Martha's boy, is almost forty. I bounced that kid on my knee and he threw up all over my suit. Four years old then. Nixon was President. Nobody talks much about Tricky Dick these days. Ancient history. McKinley, Coolidge, Nixon. Time flies. Martin thinks of Ted's wife, Alice. What a nice tight little ass she has. What a cute pair of jugs. I'd like to get my hands on them. I really would. You know something, Martin? You're not such an old ruin yet. Not if you can get it up for your grandson's wife.

His dreams of drowning her fade as quickly as they came. He is not a violent man by nature. He knows he could never do it. He can't even bring himself to step on a spider; how then could he kill his wife? If she'd die some other way, of course, without the need of his taking direct action, that would solve everything. She's driving to the hairdresser on one of those manual-access roads she likes to use, and her car swerves on an icy spot, and she goes into a tree at eighty kilometers an hour. Good. She's shopping on Union Boulevard, and the bank is blown up by an activist; she's nailed by flying debris. Good. The dentist gives her a new anesthetic and it turns out she's fatally allergic to it. Puffs up like a blowfish and dies in five minutes. Good. The police come, long faces, snuffly noses. Terribly sorry, Mr. Porter. There's been an awful accident. Don't tell me it's my wife, he cries. They nod lugubriously. He bears up bravely under the loss, though. "You can come in for dinner now," she says. He's sitting

slouched on the sofa with another drink in his hand. He drinks more than any man she knows, not that she knows all that many. Maybe he'll get cirrhosis and die. Do people still die of cirrhosis, she wonders, or do they give them liver transplants now? The funny thing is that he still turns her on, after eleven years. His eyes, his face, his hands. She despises him but he still turns her on.

The snow reminds him of his young manhood, of his days long ago in the East. He was quite the ladies' man then. And it wasn't so easy to get some action back in those days, either. The girls were always worried about what people would say if anyone found out. What people would say! As if doing it with a boy you liked was something shameful. Or they'd worry about getting knocked up. They made you wear a rubber. How awful that was: like wearing a sock. The pill was just starting to come in, the original pill, the old one-a-day kind. Imagine a world without the pill! ("Did they have dinosaurs when you were a boy, grandpa?") Still, Martin had made out all right, Big muscular frame, strong earnest features, warm inquisitive eyes. You'd never know it to look at me now. I wonder if Alice realizes what kind of stud I used to be. If I had the money I'd rent one of those time machines they've got now and send her back to visit myself around 1950 or so. A little gift to my younger self. He'd really rip into her. It gives Martin a quick riffle of excitement to think of his younger self ripping into Alice. But of course he can't afford any such thing.

As he forks down his steak he imagines being single again. Would I get married again? Not on your life. Not until I'm good and ready, anyway, maybe when I'm fifty-five or sixty. Me for bachelorhood for the time being, just screwing around like a kid. To hell with responsibilities. I'll wait two, three weeks after the funeral, a decent interval, and then I'll go off for some fun. Hawaii, Tahiti, Fiji, someplace out there. With Nolie. Or Maria. Or Ellie. Yes, with Ellie. He thinks of Ellie's pink thighs, her soft heavy breasts, her long radiant auburn hair. Two weeks in Fiji with Ellie. Two weeks in Ellie with Fiji. Yes. Yes. Yes. "Is the steak rare enough for you, Ted?" Alice asks. "It's fine," he says. She goes upstairs to check the children's bedroom. They're both asleep, finally. Or else faking it so well that it makes no difference. She stands by their beds a moment, thinking, I love you, Bobby, I love you, Tink. Tink and Bobby, Bobby and Tink. I love you even though you drive me crazy sometimes. She tiptoes out. Now for a quiet evening of television. And then to bed. The same old routine. Christ. I don't know why I go on like this. There are times when I'm ready to explode. I stay with him for the children's sake, I guess. Is that enough of a reason?

He envisions himself running hand in hand along the beach with Ellie. Both of them naked, their skins bronzed and gleaming in the tropical sunlight. Palm trees everywhere. Grains of pink sand under foot. Soft transparent wavelets lapping the shore. A quiet cove. "No one can see us here," Ellie murmurs. He sinks down on her firm sleek body and enters her.

A blazing band of pain tightens like a strip of hot metal across Martha's chest. He staggers away from the window, dropping into a low crouch as he stumbles toward a chair. The heart. Oh, the heart! That's what you get for drooling over Alice. Dirty old man. "Help," he calls feebly. "Come on, you filthy machine, help me!" The medic, activated by the key phrase, rolls silently toward him. Its sensors are already at work scanning him, searching for the cause of the discomfort. A telescoping steel-jacketed arm slides out of the medic's chest and, hovering above Martin, extrudes an ultrasonic injection snout. "Yes," Martin murmurs, "that's right, damn you, hurry up and give me the drug!" Calm. I must try to remain calm. The snout makes a gentle whirring noise as it forces the relaxant into Martin's vein. He slumps in relief. The pain slowly ebbs. Oh, that's much better. Saved again. Oh. Oh. Oh. Dirty old man. Ought to be ashamed of yourself.

Ted knows he won't get to Fiji with Ellie or anybody else. Any realistic assessment of the situation brings him inevitably to the same conclusion. Alice isn't going to die in an accident, any more than he's likely to murder her. She'll live forever. Unwanted wives always do. He could ask for a divorce, of course. He'd probably lose everything he owned, but he'd win his freedom. Or he could

simply do away with himself. That was always a temptation for him. The easy way out, no lawyers, no hassles. So it's that time of the evening again. It's the same every night. Pretending to watch television, he secretly indulges in suicidal fantasies.

Bare-bodied dancers in gaudy luminous paint gyrate lasciviously on the screen, nearly large as life. Alice scowls. The things they show on TV nowadays! It used to be that you got this stuff only on the X-rated channels, but now it's everywhere. And look at him, just lapping it up! Actually she knows she wouldn't be so stuffy about the sex shows except that Ted's fascination with them is a measure of his lack of interest in her. Let them show screwing and all the rest on TV, if that's what people want. I just wish Ted had as much enthusiasm for me as he does for the television stuff. So far as sexual permissiveness in general goes, she's no prude. She used to wear nothing but hunks at the beach, until Tink was born and she started to feel a little less proud of her figure. But she still dresses as revealingly as anyone in their crowd. And gets stared at by everyone but her own husband. He watches the TV cuties. His other women must use him up. Maybe I ought to step out a bit myself, Alice thinks. She's had her little affairs along the way. Not many, nothing very serious, but she's had some. Three lovers in eleven years, that's not a great many, but it's a sign that she's no puritan. She wonders if she ought to get involved with somebody now. It might move her life off dead center while she still has the chance, before boredom destroys her entirely. "I'm going up to wash my hair," she announces. "Will you be staying down here till bedtime?"

There are so many ways he could do it. Slit his wrists. Drive his car off the bridge. Swallow Alice's whole box of sleeping tabs. Of course those are all old-fashioned ways of killing yourself. Something more modern would be appropriate. Go into one of the black taverns and start making loud racial insults? No, nothing modern about that. It's very 1975. But something genuinely contemporary does occur to him. Those time machines they've got now: suppose he rented one and went back, say, sixty years, to a time when one of his parents hadn't yet been born. And killed his grandfather. Find old Martin as a young man and slip a knife into him. If I do that, Ted figures, I should instantly and painlessly cease to exist. I would never have existed, because my mother wouldn't ever have existed. Poof. Out like a light. Then he realizes he's fantasizing a murder again. Stupid: if he could ever murder anyone, he'd murder Alice and be done with it. So the whole fantasy is foolish. Back to the starting point is where he is.

She is sitting under the hair-dryer when he comes upstairs. He has a peculiarly smug expression on his face, and as soon as she turns the dryer off she asks him what he's thinking about. "I may have just invented a perfect murder method," he tells her. "Oh?" she says. He says, "You rent a time machine. Then you go back a couple of generations and murder one of the ancestors of your intended victim. That way you're murdering the victim too, because he won't ever have been born if you kill off one of his immediate progenitors. Then you return to your own time. Nobody can trace you because you don't have any fingerprints on file in an era before your own birth. What do you think of it?" Alice shrugs. "It's an old one," she says. "It's been done on television a dozen times. Anyway, I don't like it. Why should an innocent person have to die just because he's the grandparent of somebody you want to kill?"

They're probably in bed together right now, Martin thinks gloomily. Stark naked side by side. The lights are out. The house is quiet. Maybe they're smoking a little grass. Do they still call it grass, he wonders, or is there some new nickname now? Anyway the two of them turn on. Yes. And then he reaches for her. His hands slide over her cool, smooth skin. He cups her breasts. Plays with the hard little nipples. Sucks on them. The other hand wandering down to her parted thighs. And then she. And then he. And then they. And then they. Oh, Alice, he murmurs. Oh, Ted, Ted, she cries. And then they. Go to it. Up and down, in and out. Oh. Oh. Oh. She claws his back. She pumps her hips. Ted! Ted! Ted! The big moment is arriving now. For her, for him. Jackpot! Afterward they lie close for a few minutes, basking in the afterglow. And then they roll apart. Goodnight, Ted. Goodnight, Alice. Oh, Jesus. They do it every night, I



bet. They're so young and full of juice. And I'm all dried up. Christ, I hate being old. When I think of the man I once was. When I think of the women I once had. Jesus. Jesus. God, let me have the strength to do it just once more before I die. And leave me alone for two hours with Alice. She has trouble falling asleep. A strange scene keeps playing itself out obsessively in her mind. She sees herself stepping out of an upright coffin-size box of dark gray metal, festooned with dials and levers. The time machine. It delivers her into a dark, dirty alleyway, and when she walks forward to the street she sees scores of little antique automobiles buzzing around. Only they aren't antiques, they're the current models. This is the year 1947. New York City. Will she be conspicuous in her futuristic clothes? She has her breasts covered, at any rate. That's essential back here. She hurries to the proper address, resisting the temptation to browse in shop windows along the way. How quaint and ancient everything looks. And how dirty the streets are. She comes to a tall building of red brick. This is the place. No scanners study her as she enters. They don't have annunciators yet or any other automatic home-protection equipment. She goes upstairs in an elevator so creaky and unstable that she fears for her life. Fifth floor. Apartment 5-J. She rings the doorbell. He answers. He's terribly young, only twenty-four, but she can pick out sips of the Martin of the future in his face, the strong cheekbones, the searching blue eyes. "Are you Martin Jamieson?" she asks. "That's right," he says. She smiles. "May I come in?" "Of course," he says. He bows her into the apartment. As he momentarily turns his back on her to open the coat closet she takes the heavy steel pipe from her purse and lifts it high and brings it down on the back of his head. Thwock. She takes the heavy steel pipe from her purse and lifts it high and brings it down on the back of his head. Thwock. She takes the heavy steel pipe from her purse and lifts it high and brings it down on the back of his head. Thwock. Ted and Alice visit him at Sunset Village two or three times a month. He can't complain about that; it's as much as he can expect. He's an old, old man and no doubt a boring one, but they come dutifully, sometimes with the kids, sometimes without. He's never gotten used to the idea that he's a great-grandfather. Alice always gives him a kiss when she arrives and another when she leaves. He plays a private little game with her, copping a feel at each kiss. His hand quickly stroking her butt. Or sometimes when he's really rambunctious it travels lightly over her breast. Does she notice? Probably. She never lets on, though. Pretends it's an accident touch. Most likely she thinks it's charming that a man of his age would still have at least a vestige of sexual desire left. Unless she thinks it's disgusting, that is. The time-machine gimmick, Ted tells himself, can be used in ways that don't quite amount to murder. For instance. "What's that box?" Alice asks. He smiles cunningly. "It's called a panchronicon," he says. "It gives you a kind of televised reconstruction of ancient times. The salesman loaned me a demonstration sample." She says, "How does it work?" "Just step inside," he tells her. "It's all ready for you." She starts to enter the machine, but then, suddenly suspicious, she hesitates on the threshold. He pushes her in and slams the door shut behind her. Wham! The controls are set. Off goes Alice on a one-way journey to the Pleistocene. The machine is primed to return as soon as it drops her off. That isn't murder, is it? She's still alive, wherever she may be, unless the saber-tooth tigers have caught up with her. So long, Alice. In the morning she drives Bobby and Tink to school. Then she stops at the bank and post office. From ten to eleven she has her regular session at the identity-reinforcement parlor. Ordinarily she would go right home after that, but this morning she strolls across the shopping center plaza to the office that the time machine people have just opened. TEMPONAUTICS, LTD., the sign over the door says. The place is empty except for two machines, no doubt demonstration models, and a bland-faced, smiling salesman. "Hello," Alice says nervously. "I just wanted to pick up some information about the rental costs of one of your machines." Martin likes to imagine Alice coming to visit him by herself some rainy Saturday afternoon. "Ted isn't able to make it today," she explains.

"Something came up at the office. But I knew you were expecting us, and I didn't want you to be disappointed. Poor Martin, you must lead such a lonely life." She comes close to him. She is trembling. So is he. Her face is flushed and her eyes are bright with the unmistakable glossiness of desire. He feels a sense of sexual excitement too, for the first time in ten or twenty years, that tension in the loins, that throbbing of the pulse. Electricity. Chemistry. His eyes lock on hers. Her nostrils flare, her mouth goes taut. "Martin," she whispers huskily. "Do you feel what I feel?" "You know I do," he tells her. She says, "If only I could have known you when you were in your prime!" He chuckles. "I'm not altogether senile yet," he cries exultantly. Then she is in his arms and his lips are seeking her fragrant breasts. "Yes, it came as a terrible shock to me," Ted tells Ellie. "Having her disappear like that. She simply vanished from the face of the earth, as far as anyone can determine. They've tried every possible way of tracing her and there hasn't been a clue." Ellie's flawless forehead furrows in a fitful frown. "Was she unhappy?" she asks. "Do you think she may have done away with herself?" Ted shakes his head. "I don't know. You live with a person for eleven years and you think you know her pretty well, and then one day something absolutely incomprehensible occurs and you realize how impossible it is ever to know another human being at all. Don't you agree?" Ellie nods gravely. "Yes, oh, yes, certainly!" she says. He smiles down at her and takes her hands in his. Softly he says, "Let's not talk about Alice any more, shall we? She's gone and that's all I'll ever know." He hears a pulsing symphonic crescendo of shimmering angelic choirs as he embraces her and murmurs, "I love you, Ellie. I love you." She takes the heavy steel pipe from her purse and lifts it high and brings it down on the back of his head. Thwock. Young Martin drops instantly, twitches once, lies still. Dark blood begins to seep through the dense blond curls of his hair. How strange to see Martin with golden hair, she thinks, as she kneels beside his body. She puts her hand to the bloody place, probes timidly, feels the deep indentation. Is he dead? She isn't sure how to tell. He isn't moving. He doesn't seem to be breathing. She wonders if she ought to hit him again, just to make certain. Then she remembers something she's seen on television, and takes her mirror from her purse. Holds it in front of his face. No cloud forms. That's pretty conclusive: you're dead, Martin. R.I.P. Martin Jamieson, 1923-1947. Which means that Martha Jamieson Porter (1948- ) will never now be conceived, and that automatically obliterates the existence of her son Theodore Porter (1968- ). Not bad going, Alice, getting rid of unloved husband and miserable shrewish mother-in-law all in one shot. Sorry, Martin. Bye-bye, Ted. (R.I.P. Theodore Porter, 1968-1947. Eh?) She rises, goes into the bathroom with the steel pipe and carefully rinses it off. Then she puts it back into her purse. Now to go back to the machine and return to 2006, she thinks. To start my new life. But as she leaves the apartment, a tall, lean man steps out of the hallway shadows and clamps his hand powerfully around her wrist. "Time Patrol," he says crisply, flashing an identification badge. "You're under arrest for temponautic murder, Mrs. Porter." Today has been a better day than yesterday, low on crises and depressions, but he still feels a headache coming on as he lets himself into the house. He is braced for whatever bitchiness Alice may have in store for him this evening. But, oddly, she seems relaxed and amiable. "Can I get you a drink, Ted?" she asks. "How did your day go?" He smiles and says, "Well, I think we may have salvaged the Hammond account after all. Otherwise nothing special happened. And you? What did you do today, love?" She shrugs. "Oh, the usual stuff," she says. "The bank, the post office, my identity-reinforcement session." If you had the money, Martin asks himself, how far back would you send her? 1947, that would be the year, I guess. My last year as a single man. No sense complicating things. Off you go, Alice baby, to 1947. Let's make it March. By June I was engaged and by September Martha was on the way, though I didn't find that out until later. Yes: March, 1947. So Young Martin answers the doorbell and sees an attractive girl in the hall, a woman, really, older than he is, maybe thirty or

thirty-two. Slender, dark-haired, nicely constructed. Odd clothing: a clinging gray tunic, very short, made of some strange fabric that flows over her body like a stream. How it achieves that liquid effect around the pleats is beyond him. "Are you Martin Jamieson?" she asks. And quickly answers herself. "Yes, of course, you must be. I recognize you. How handsome you were!" He is baffled. He knows nothing, naturally, about this gift from his aged future self. "Who are you?" he asks. "May I come in first?" she says. He is embarrassed by his lack of courtesy and waves her inside. Her eyes glitter with mischief. "You aren't going to believe this," she tells him, "but I'm your grandson's wife." "Would you like to try out one of our demonstration models?" the salesman asks pleasantly. "There's absolutely no cost or obligation." Ted looks at Alice. Alice looks at Ted. Her frown mirrors his inner uncertainty. She also must be wishing that they had never come to the Temponautics showroom. The salesman, pattering smoothly onward, says, "In these demonstrations we usually send our potential customers fifteen or twenty minutes into the past. I'm sure you'll find it fascinating. While remaining in the machine, you'll be able to look through a viewer and observe your own selves actually entering this very showroom a short while ago. Well? Will you give it a try? You go first, Mrs. Porter. I assure you it's going to be the most unique experience you've ever had." Alice, uneasy, tries to back off, but the salesman prods her in a way that is at once gentle and unyielding, and she steps reluctantly into the time machine. He closes the door. A great business of adjusting fine controls ensues. Then the salesman throws a master switch. A green glow envelops the machine and it disappears, although something transparent and vague -- a retinal after-image? the ghost of the machine?--remains dimly visible. The salesman says, "She's now gone a short distance into her own past. I've programmed the machine to take her back eighteen minutes and keep her there for a total elapsed interval of six minutes, so she can see the entire opening moments of your visit here. But when I return her to Now Level, there's no need to match the amount of elapsed time in the past, so that from our point of view she'll have been absent only some thirty seconds. Isn't that remarkable, Mr. Porter? It's one of the many extraordinary paradoxes we encounter in the strange new realm of time travel." He throws another switch. The time machine once more assumes solid form. "Voila!" cries the salesman. "Here is Mrs. Porter, returned safe and sound from her voyage into the past." He flings open the door of the time machine. The passenger compartment is empty. The salesman's face crumbles. "Mrs. Porter?" he shrieks in consternation. "Mrs. Porter? I don't understand! How could there have been a malfunction? This is impossible! Mrs. Porter? Mrs. Porter?" She hurries down the dirty street toward the tall brick building. This is the place. Upstairs. Fifth floor, apartment 5-J. As she starts to ring the doorbell, a tall, lean man steps out of the shadows and clamps his hand powerfully around her wrist. "Time Patrol," he says crisply, flashing an identification badge. "You're under arrest for contemplated temponautic murder, Mrs. Porter." "But I haven't any grandson," he sputters. "I'm not even mar -- " She laughs. "Don't worry about it!" she tells him. "You're going to have a daughter named Martha and she'll have a son named Ted and I'm going to marry Ted and we'll have two children named Bobby and Tink. And you're going to live to be an old, old man. And that's all you need to know. Now let's have a little fun." She touches a catch at the side of her tunic and -- the garment falls away in a single fluid cascade. Beneath it she is naked. Her nipples stare up at him resembling blind pink eyes. She beckons to him. "Come on!" she says hoarsely. "Get undressed, Martin! You're wasting time!" Alice giggles nervously. "Well, as a matter of fact," she says to the salesman, "I think I'm willing to let my husband be the guinea pig. How about it, Ted?" She turns toward him. So does the salesman. "Certainly, Mr. Porter. I know you're eager to give our machine a test run, yes?" No, Ted thinks, but he feels the pressure of events propelling him willy-nilly. He gets into the machine. As the door closes on him he fears that claustrophobic panic will overwhelm him; he is reassured by the sight of a handle on the

door's inner face. He pushes on it and the door opens, and he steps out of the machine just in time to see his earlier self coming into the Temponautics showroom with Alice. The salesman is going forward to greet them. Ted is now eighteen minutes into his own past. Alice and the other Ted stare at him, aghast. The salesman whirls and exclaims, "Wait a second, you aren't supposed to get out of -- " How stupid they all were! How bewildered! Ted laughs in their faces. Then he rushes past them, nearly knocking his other self down, and erupts into the shopping-center plaza. He sprints in a wild frenzy of exhilaration toward the parking area. Free, he thinks. I'm free at last. And I didn't have to kill anybody.

Suppose I rent a machine, Alice thinks, and go back to 1947 and kill Martin? Suppose I really do it? What if there's some way of tracing the crime to me? After all, a crime committed by a person from 2006 who goes back to 1947 will have consequences in our present day. It might change all sorts of things. So they'd want to catch the criminal and punish him, or better yet prevent the crime from being committed in the first place. And the time-machine company is bound to know what year I asked them to send me to. So maybe it isn't such an easy way of committing a perfect crime. I don't know. God, I can't understand any of this. But perhaps I can get away with it. Anyway, I'm going to give it a try. I'll show Ted he can't go on treating me like dirt.

They lie peacefully side by side, sweaty, drowsy, exhausted in the good exhaustion that comes after a first-rate screw. Martin tenderly strokes her belly and thighs. How smooth her skin is, how pale, how transparent! The little blue veins so clearly visible. "Hey," he says suddenly. "I just thought of something. I wasn't wearing a rubber or anything. What if I made you pregnant? And if you're really who you say you are. Then you'll go back to the year 2006 and you'll have a kid and he'll be his own grandfather, won't he?" She laughs. "Don't worry much about it," she says.

A wave of timidity comes over her as she enters the Temponautics office. This is crazy, she tells herself. I'm getting out of here. But before she can turn around, the salesman she spoke to the day before materializes from a side room and gives her a big hello. Mr. Friesling. He's practically rubbing his hands together in anticipation of landing a contract. "So nice to see you again, Mrs. Porter." She nods and glances worriedly at the demonstration models. "How much would it cost," she asks, "to spend a few hours in the spring of 1947?"

Sunday is the big family day. Four generations sitting down to dinner together: Martin, Martha, Ted and Alice, Bobby and Tink. Ted rather enjoys these reunions, but he knows Alice loathes them, mainly because of Martha. Alice hates her mother-in-law. Martha has never cared much for Alice, either. He watches them glaring at each other across the table. Meanwhile old Martin stares lecherously at the gulf between Alice's breasts. You have to hand it to the old man, Ted thinks. He's never lost the old urge. Even though there's not a hell of a lot he can do about gratifying it, not at his age. Martha says sweetly. "You'd look ever so much better, Alice dear, if you'd let your hair grow out to its natural color." A sugary smile from Martha. A sour scowl from Alice. She glowers at the older woman. "This is its natural color," she snaps.

Mr. Friesling hands her the standard contract form. Eight pages of densely packed type. "Don't be frightened by it, Mrs. Porter. It looks formidable but actually it's just a lot of empty legal rhetoric. You can show it to your lawyer, if you like. I can tell you, though, that most of our customers find no need for that." She leafs through it. So far as she can tell, the contract is mainly a disclaimer of responsibility. Temponautics, Ltd., agrees to bear the brunt of any malfunction caused by its own demonstrable negligence, but wants no truck with acts of God or with accidents brought about by clients who won't obey the safety regulations. On the fourth page Alice finds a clause warning the prospective renter that the company cannot be held liable for any consequences of actions by the renter which wantonly or willfully interfere with the already determined course of history. She translates that for herself: If you kill your husband's grandfather don't blame us if you get in trouble. She skims the remaining pages. "it looks harmless enough," she says. "Where do I

sign?" As Martin comes out of the bathroom he finds Martha blocking his way. "Excuse me," he says mildly, but she remains in his path. She is a big fleshy woman. At fifty-eight she affects the fashions of the very young, with grotesque results; he hates that aspect of her. He can see why Alice dislikes her so much. "Just a moment," Martha says. "I want to talk to you, Father." About what?" he asks. "About those looks you give Alice. Don't you think that's a little too much? How tasteless can you get?" "Tasteless? Are you anybody to talk about taste, with your face painted green like a fifteen-year old?" She looks angry: he's scored a direct hit. She replies, "I just think that at the age of eighty-two you ought to have a greater regard for decency than to go staring down your own grandson's wife's front." Martin sighs. "Let me have the staring, Martha. It's all I've got left." He is at the office, deep in complicated negotiations, when his autosecretary bleeps him and announces that a call has come in from a Mr. Friesling, of the Union Boulevard Plaza office of Temponautics, Ltd. Ted is puzzled by that: what do the time-machine people want with him? Trying to line him up as a customer? "Tell him I'm not interested in time trips," Ted says. But the autosecretary bleeps again a few moments later. Mr. Friesling, it declares, is calling in reference to Mr. Porter's credit standing. More baffled than before, Ted orders the call switched over to him. Mr. Friesling appears on the desk screen. He is small-featured and bright-eyed, rather like a chipmunk. "I apologize for troubling you, Mr. Porter," he begins. "This is strictly a routine credit check, but it's altogether necessary. As you surely know, your wife has requested rental of our equipment for a fifty-nine-year time jaunt, and inasmuch as the service fee, for such a trip exceeds the level at which we extend automatic credit, our policy requires us to ask you if you'll confirm the payment schedule that she has requested us to -- " Ted coughs violently. "Hold on," he says. "My wife's going on a time jaunt? What the hell, this is the first time I've heard of that!" She is surprised by the extensiveness of the preparations. No wonder they charge so much. Getting her ready for the jaunt takes hours. They inoculate her to protect her against certain extinct diseases. They provide her with clothing in the style of the mid-twentieth century, ill-fitting and uncomfortable. They give her contemporary currency, but warn her that she would do well not to spend any except in an emergency, since she will be billed for it at its present-day numismatic value, which is high. They make her study a pamphlet describing the customs and historical background of the era and quiz her in detail. She learns that she is not under any circumstances to expose her breasts or genitals in public while she is in 1947. She must not attempt to obtain any mind-stimulating drugs other than alcohol. She should not say anything that might be construed as praise of the Soviet Union or of Marxist philosophy. She must bear in mind that she is entering the past solely as an observer, and should engage in minimal social interaction with the citizens of the era she is visiting. And so forth. At last they decide it's safe to let her go. "Please come this way, Mrs. Porter," Friesling says. After staring at the telephone a long while, Martin punches out Alice's number. Before the second ring he loses his nerve and disconnects. Immediately he calls her again. His heart pounds so furiously that the medic, registering alarm on its delicate sensing apparatus, starts toward him. He waves the robot away and clings to the phone. Two rings. Three. Ah. "Hello?" Alice says. Her voice is warm and rich and feminine. He has his screen switched off. "Hello? Who's there?" Martin breathes heavily into the mouthpiece. Ah. Ah. Ah. Ah. "Hello? Hello? Hello? Listen, you pervert, if you phone me once more -- " Ah. Ah. Ah. A smile of bliss appears on Martin's withered features. Alice hangs up. Trembling, Martin sags in his chair. Oh, that was good! He signals fiercely to the medic. "Let's have the injection now, you metal monster!" He laughs. Dirty old man. Ted realizes that it isn't necessary to kill a person's grandfather in order to get rid of that person. Just interfere with some crucial event in that person's past, is all. Go back and break up the marriage of Alice's grandparents, for example. (How? Seduce the grandmother when she's

18? "I'm terribly sorry to inform you that your intended bride is no virgin, and here's the documentary evidence." They were very grim about virginity back then, weren't they?) Nobody would have to die. But Alice wouldn't ever be born.

Martin still can't believe any of this, even after she's slept with him. It's some crazy practical joke, most likely. Although he wishes all practical jokes were as sexy as this one. "Are you really from the year 2006?" he asks her. She laughs prettily. "How can I prove it to you?" Then she leaps from the bed. He tracks her with his eyes as she crosses the room, breasts jiggling gaily. What a sweet little body. How thoughtful of my older self to ship her back here to me. If that's what really happened. She fumbles in her purse and extracts a handful of coins. "Look here," she says. "Money from the future. Here's a dime from 1993. And this is a two-dollar piece from 2001. And here's an old one, a 1979 Kennedy half-dollar." He studies the unfamiliar coins. They have a greasy look, not silvery at all. Counterfeits? They won't necessarily be striking coins out of silver forever. And the engraving job is very professional. A two-dollar piece, eh? Well, you never can tell. And this. The half-dollar. A handsome young man in profile. "Kennedy?" he says. "Who's Kennedy?"

So this is it at last. Two technicians in gray smocks watch her, sober-faced, as she clambers into the machine. It's very much like a coffin, just as she imagined it would be. She can't sit down in it; it's too narrow. Gives her the creeps, shut up in here. Of course, they've told her the trip won't take any apparent subjective time, only a couple of seconds. Woosh! and she'll be there. All right. They close the door. She hears the lock clicking shut. Mr. Friesling's voice comes to her over a loudspeaker. "We wish you a happy voyage, Mrs. Porter. Keep calm and you won't get into any difficulties." Suddenly the red light over the door is glowing. That means the jaunt has begun: she's traveling backward in time. No sense of acceleration, no sense of motion. One, two, three. The light goes off. That's it. I'm in 1947, she tells herself. Before she opens the door, she closes her eyes and runs through her history lessons. World War II has just ended. Europe is in ruins. There are forty-eight states. Nobody has been to the moon yet or even thinks much about going there. Harry Truman is President. Stalin runs Russia, and Churchill -- is Churchill still Prime Minister of England? She isn't sure. Well, no matter. I didn't come here to talk about prime ministers. She touches the latch and the door of the time machine swings outward.

He steps from the machine into the year 2006. Nothing has changed in the showroom. Friesling, the two poker-faced technicians, the sleek desks, the thick carpeting, all the same as before. He moves bouncily. His mind is still back there with Alice's grandmother. The taste of her lips, the soft urgent cries of her fulfillment. Who ever said all women were frigid in the old days? They ought to go back and find out. Friesling smiles at him. "I hope you had a very enjoyable journey, Mr. -- ah -- " Ted nods. "Enjoyable and useful," he says. He goes out. Never to see Alice again -- how beautiful! The car isn't where he remembers leaving it in the parking area. You have to expect certain small peripheral changes, I guess. He hails a cab, gives the driver his address. His key does not fit the front door. Troubled, he thumbs the annunciator. A woman's voice, not Alice's, asks him what he wants. "Is this the Ted Porter residence?" he asks. "No, it isn't," the woman says, suspicions and irritated. The name on the doorplate, he notices now, is McKenzie. So the changes are not all so small. Where do I live now? If I don't live here, then where? "Wait!" he yells to the taxi, just pulling away. It takes him to a downtown cafe, where he phones Ellie. Her face, peering out of the tiny screen, wears an odd frowning expression. "Listen, something very strange has happened," he begins, "and I need to see you as soon as -- " "I don't think I know you," she says. "I'm Ted," he tells her. "Ted who?" she asks.

How peculiar this is, Alice thinks. Like walking into a museum diorama and having it come to life. The noisy little automobiles. The ugly clothing. The squat, dilapidated twentieth-century buildings. The chaos. The oily, smoky smell of the polluted air. Wisps of dirty snow in the streets. Cans of garbage just sitting around as if nobody's ever heard of the plague. Well, I won't stay here long. In her

purse she carries her kitchen carver, a tiny nickel-jacketed laser-powered implement. Steel pipes are all right for dream fantasies, but this is the real thing, and she wants the killing to be quick and efficient. Criss, cross, with the laser beam, and Martin goes. At the street corner she pauses to check the address. There's no central info number to ring for all sorts of useful data, not in these primitive times; she must use a printed telephone directory, a thick tattered book with small smeary type. Here he is: Martin Jamieson, 504 West Forty-fifth. That's not far. In ten minutes she's there. A dark brick structure, five or six stories high, with spidery metal fire escapes running down its face. Even for its day it appears unusually run-down. She goes inside. A list of tenants is posted just within the front door. Jamieson, 3-A. There's no elevator and of course no liftshaft. Up the stairs. A musty hallway lit by a single dim incandescent bulb. This is Apartment 3-A. Jamieson. She rings the bell.

Ten minutes later Friesling calls back, sounding abashed and looking dismayed: "I'm sorry to have to tell you that there's been some sort of error, Mr. Porter. The technicians were apparently unaware that a credit check was in process, and they sent Mrs. Porter off on her trip while we were still talking." Ted is shaken. He clutches the edge of the desk. Controlling himself with an effort, he says, "How far back was it that she wanted to go?" Friesling says, "It was fifty-nine years. To 1947." Ted nods grimly. A horrible idea has occurred to him. 1947 was the year that his mother's parents met and got married. What is Alice up to? The doorbell rings. Martin, freshly showered, is sprawled out naked on his bed, leafing through the new issue of Esquire and thinking vaguely of going out for dinner. He isn't expecting any company. Slipping into his bathrobe, he goes toward the door. "Who's there?" he calls. A youthful, pleasant female voice replies, "I'm looking for Martin Jamieson." Well, okay. He opens the door. She's perhaps twenty-seven, twenty-eight years old, very sexy, on the slender side but well built. Dark hair, worn in a strangely boyish short cut. He's never seen her before. "Hi," he says tentatively. She grins warmly at him. "You don't know me," she tells him, "but I'm a friend of an old friend of yours. Mary Chambers? Mary and I grew up together in -- ah -- Ohio. I'm visiting New York for the first time, and Mary once told me that if I ever come to New York I should be sure to look up Martin Jamieson, and so -- may I come in?" "You bet," he says. He doesn't remember any Mary Chambers from Ohio. But what the hell, sometimes you forget a few. What the hell. He's much more attractive than she expected him to be. She has always known Martin only as an old man, made unattractive as much by his coarse lechery as by what age has done to him. Hollow-chested, stoop-shouldered, pleated jowly face, sparse strands of white hair, beady eyes of faded blue -- a wreck of a man. But this Martin in the doorway is sturdy, handsome, untouched by time, brimming with life and vigor and virility. She thinks of the carver in her purse and feels a genuine pang of regret at having to cut this robust boy off in his prime. But there isn't such a great hurry, is there? First we can enjoy each other, Martin. And then the laser. "When is she due back?" Ted demands. Friesling explains that all concepts of time are relative and flexible; so far as elapsed time at Now Level goes, she's already returned. "What?" Ted yells. "Where is she?" Friesling does not know. She stepped out of the machine, bade the Temponautics staff a pleasant goodbye, and left the showroom. Ted puts his hand to his throat. What if she's already killed Martin? Will I just wink out of existence? Or is there some sort of lag, so that I'll fade gradually into unreality over the next few days? "Listen," he says raggedly, "I'm leaving my office right now and I'll be down at your place in less than an hour. I want you to have your machinery set up so that you can transport me to the exact point in space and time where you just sent my wife." "But that won't be possible," Friesling protests. "It takes hours to prepare a client properly for --" Ted cuts him off. "Get everything set up, and to hell with preparing me properly," he snaps. "Unless you feel like getting slammed with the biggest negligence suit since this time-machine thing got started, you better have everything ready when I get there." He opens the door. The girl in the

hallway is young and good-looking, with close-cropped dark hair and full lips. Thank you, Mary Chambers, whoever you may be. "Pardon the bathrobe," he says, "but I wasn't expecting company." She steps into his apartment. Suddenly he notices how strained and tense her face is. Country girl from Ohio, suddenly having second thoughts about visiting a strange man in a strange city? He tries to put her at her ease. "Can I get you a drink?" he asks. "Not much of a selection, I'm afraid, but I have scotch, gin, some blackberry cordial -- "

She reaches into her purse and takes something out. He frowns. Not a gun, exactly, but it does seem like a weapon of some sort, a little glittering new device that fits neatly in her hand. "Hey," he says, "what's -- " "I'm so terribly sorry, Martin," she whispers, and a bolt of terrible fire slams into his chest.

She sips the drink. It relaxes her. The glass isn't very clean, but she isn't worried about picking up a disease, not after all the injections Friesling gave her. Martin looks as if he can stand some relaxing too. "Aren't you drinking?" she asks. "I suppose I will," he says. He pours himself some gin. She comes up behind him and slips her hand into the front of his bathrobe. His body is cool, smooth, hard. "Oh, Martin," she murmurs. "Oh! Martin!"

Ted takes a room in one of the commercial hotels downtown. The first thing he does is try to put a call through to Alice's mother in Chillicothe. He still isn't really convinced that his little time-jant flirtation has retroactively eliminated Alice from existence. But the call convinces him, all right. The middle-aged woman who answers is definitely not Alice's mother. Right phone number, right address -- he badgers her for the information -- but wrong woman. "You don't have a daughter named Alice Porter?" he asks three or four times. "You don't know anyone in the neighborhood who does? It's important." All right. Cancel the old lady, ergo cancel Alice. But now he has a different problem. How much of the universe has he altered by removing Alice and her mother? Does he live in some other city, now, and hold some other job? What has happened to Bobby and Tink? Frantically he begins phoning people. Friends, fellow workers, the man at the bank. The same response from all of them: blank stares, shakings of the head. We don't know you, fellow. He looks at himself in the mirror. Okay, he asks himself. Who am I?

Martin moves swiftly and purposefully, the way they taught him to do in the army when it's necessary to disarm a dangerous opponent. He lunges forward and catches the girl's arm, pushing it upward before she can fire the shiny whatzis she's aiming at him. She turns out to be stronger than he anticipated, and they struggle fiercely for the weapon. Suddenly it furs. Something like a lightning bolt explodes between them and knocks him to the floor, stunned. When he picks himself up he sees her lying near the door with a charred hole in her throat.

The telephone's jangling clatter brings Martin up out of a dream in which he is ravishing Alice's luscious young body. Dry-throated, gummy-eyed, he reaches a palsied hand toward the receiver. "Yes?" he says. Ted's face blossoms on the screen. "Grandfather!" he blurts. "Are you all right?" "Of course I'm all right," Martin says testily. "Can't you tell? What's the matter with you, boy?" Ted shakes his head. "I don't know," he mutters. "Maybe it was only a bad dream. I imagined that Alice rented one of those time machines and went back to 1947. And tried to kill you so that I wouldn't ever have existed." Martin snorts. "What idiotic nonsense! How can she have killed me in 1947 when I'm here alive in 2006?"

Naked, Alice sinks into Martin's arms. His strong hands sweep eagerly over her breasts and shoulders and his mouth descends to hers. She shivers with desire. "Yes," she murmurs tenderly, pressing herself against him. "Oh, yes, yes, yes!" They'll do it and it'll be fantastic. And afterward she'll kill him with the kitchen carver while he's lying there savoring the event. But a troublesome thought occurs. If Martin dies in 1947, Ted doesn't get to be born in 1968. Okay. But what about Tink and Bobby? They won't get born either, not if I don't marry Ted. I'll be married to someone else when I get back to 2006, and I suppose I'll have different children. Bobby? Tink? What am I doing to you? Sudden fear congeals her, and she pulls back from the vigorous young man nuzzling her throat. "Wait," she says. "Listen, I'm sorry. It's all a big



mistake. I'm sorry, but I've got to get out of here right away!" So this is the year 1947. Well, well, well. Everything looks so cluttered and grimy and ancient. He hurries through the chilly streets toward his grandfather's place. If his luck is good and if Friesling's technicians have calculated things accurately, he'll be able to head Alice off. That might even be her now, that slender woman walking briskly half a block ahead of him. He steps up his pace. Yes, it's Alice, on her way to Martin's. Well done, Friesling! Ted approaches her warily, suspecting that she's armed. If she's capable of coming back to 1947 to kill Martin, she'd kill him just as readily. Especially back here where neither one of them has any legal existence. When he's close to her he says in a low, hard, intense voice, "Don't turn around, Alice. Just keep walking as if everything's perfectly normal." She stiffens. "Ted?" she cries, astonished. "Is that you, Ted?" "Damned right it is." He laughs harshly. "Come on. Walk to the corner and turn to your left around the block. You're going back to your machine and you're going to get the hell out of the twentieth century without harming anybody. I know what you were trying to do, Alice. But I caught you in time, didn't?" Martin is just getting down to real business when the door of his apartment bursts open and a man rushes in. He's middle-aged, stocky, with weird clothes -- the ultimate in zoot suits, a maze of vividly contrasting colors and conflicting patterns, shoulders padded to resemble shelves -- and a wild look in his eyes. Alice leaps up from the bed. "Ted!" she screams. "My God, what are you doing here?" "You murderous bitch," the intruder yells. Martin, naked and feeling vulnerable, his nervous system stunned by the interruption, looks on in amazement as the stranger grabs her and begins throttling her. "Bitch! Bitch! Bitch!" he roars, shaking her in a mad frenzy. The girl's face is turning black. Her eyes are bugging. After a long moment Martin breaks finally from his freeze. He stumbles forward, seizes the man's fingers, peels them away from the girl's throat. Too late. She falls limply and lies motionless. "Alice!" the intruder moans. "Alice, Alice, what have I done?" He drops to his knees beside her body, sobbing. Martin blinks. "You killed her," he says, not believing that any of this can really be happening. "You actually killed her?" Alice's face appears on the telephone screen. Christ, how beautiful she is, Martin thinks, and his decrepit body quivers with lust. "There you are," he says. "I've been trying to reach you for hours. I had such a strange dream -- That something awful had happened to Ted -- and then your phone didn't answer, and I began to think maybe the dream was a premonition of some kind, an omen, you know -- " Alice looks puzzled. "I'm afraid you have the wrong number, sir," she says sweetly, and hangs up. She draws the laser and the naked man cowers back against the wall in bewilderment. "What the hell is this?" he asks, trembling. "Put that thing down, lady. You've got the wrong guy." "No," she says. "You're the one I'm after. I hate to do this to you, Martin, but I've got no choice. You have to die." "Why?" he demands. "Why?" "You wouldn't understand it even if I told you," she says. She moves her finger toward the discharge stud. Abruptly there is a frightening sound of cracking wood and collapsing plaster behind her, as though an earthquake has struck. She whirls and is appalled to see her husband breaking down the door of Martin's apartment. "I'm just in time!" Ted exclaims. "Don't move, Alice!" He reaches for her. In panic she fires without thinking. The dazzling beam catches Ted in the pit of the stomach and he goes down, gurgling in agony, clutching at his belly as he dies. The door falls with a crash and this character in peculiar clothing materializes in a cloud of debris, looking crazier than Napoleon. It's incredible, Martin thinks. First an unknown broad rings his bell and invites herself in and takes her clothes off, and then, just as he's about to screw her, this happens. It's pure Marx Brothers, only dirty. But Martin's not going to take any crap. He pulls himself away from the panting, gasping girl on the bed, crosses the room in three quick strides, and seizes the newcomer. "Who the hell are you?" Martin demands, slamming him hard against the wall. The girl is dancing around behind him. "Don't hurt him!" she wails. "Oh, please, don't hurt him!" Ted certainly hadn't expected to

find them in bed together. He understood why she might have wanted to go back in time to murder Martin, but simply to have an affair with him, no, it didn't make sense. Of course, it was altogether likely that she had come here to kill and had paused for a little dalliance first. You never could tell about women, even your own wife. Alley cats, all of them. Well, a lucky thing for him that she had given him these few extra minutes to get here. "Okay," he says. "Get your clothes on, Alice. You're coming with me." "Just a second, mister," Martin growls. "You've got your goddamned nerve, busting in like this." Ted tries to explain, but the words won't come. It's all too complicated. He gestures mutely at Alice, at himself, at Martin. The next moment Martin jumps him and they go tumbling together to the floor. "Who are you?" Martin

yells, banging the intruder repeatedly against the wall. "You some kind of detective? You trying to work a badger game on me?" Slain. Slam. Slam. He feels the girl's small fists pounding on his own back. "Stop it!" she screams. "Let him alone, will you? He's my husband!" "Husband!" Martin cries.

Astounded, he lets go of the stranger and swings around to face the girl. A moment later he realizes his mistake. Out of the corner of his eye he sees that the intruder has raised his fists high above his head like clubs. Martin tries to get out of the way, but no time, no time, and the fists descend with awful force against his skull. Alice doesn't know what to do. They're rolling around on the floor, fighting like wildcats, now Martin on top, now Ted. Martin is younger and bigger and stronger, but Ted seems possessed by the strength of the insane; he's gone berserk. Both men are bloody-faced, and furniture is crashing over everywhere. Her first impulse is to get between them and stop this crazy fight somehow. But then she remembers that she has come here as a killer, not as a peacemaker. She gets the laser from her purse and aims it at Martin, but then the combatants do a flipflop and it is Ted who is in the line of fire. She hesitates. It doesn't matter which one she shoots, she realizes after a moment. They both have to die, one way or another. She takes aim. Maybe she can get them both with one bolt. But as her finger starts to tighten on the discharge stud, Martin suddenly gets Ted in a bearhug and, half lifting him, throws him five feet across the room. The back of Ted's neck hits the wall and there is a loud crack. Ted slumps and is still. Martin gets shakily to his feet. "I think I killed him," he says. "Christ, who the hell was he?" "He was your grandson," Alice says and begins to shriek

hysterically. Ted stares in horror at the crumpled body at his feet. His hands still tingle from the impact. The left side of Martin's head looks as though a pile-driver has crushed it. "Good God in heaven," Ted says thickly, "what have I done? I came here to protect him and I've killed him! I've killed my own grandfather!" Alice, wide-eyed, futilely trying to cover her nakedness by folding one arm across her breasts and spreading her other hand over her loins, says, "If he's dead, why am you still here? Shouldn't you have disappeared?" Ted shrugs. "Maybe I'm safe as long as I remain here in the past. But the moment I try to go back to 2006, I'd vanish as though I've never been. I don't know. I don't understand any of this. What do you think?"

Alice steps uncertainly from the machine into the Temponautics showroom. There's Friesling. There are the technicians. Friesling says, smiling, "I hope you had a very enjoyable journey, Mrs. -- ah -- uh -- " He falters. "I'm sorry," he says, reddening, "but your name seems to have escaped me." Alice says, "It's, ah, Alice -- uh -- do you know, the second name escapes me too?"

The whole clan has gathered to celebrate Martin's 83rd birthday. He cuts the cake, and then one by one they go to him to kiss him. When it's Alice's turn, he deftly spins her around so that he screens her from the others and gives her rump a good hearty pinch. "Oh, if I were only fifty years younger!" he sighs.

It's a warm springlike day. Everything has been lovely at the office -- three new accounts all at once -- and the trip home on the freeway was a breeze. Alice is waiting for him, dressed in her finest and most sexy outfit, all ready to go out. It's a special day. Their eleventh

anniversary. How beautiful she looks! He kisses her, she kisses him, he takes the tickets from his pocket with a grand flourish. "Surprise," he says. "Two

weeks in Hawaii, starting next Tuesday! Happy anniversary!" "Oh, Ted!" she cries. "How marvelous! I love you, Ted darling!" He pulls her close to him again. "I love you, Alice dear." ----- At  
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fumbling for words, shifting my weight from foot to foot, chewing on my lips, going red in the face. All my pimples light up like beacons when I blush. Come on, Blaufeld, pull yourself together. Change your image of yourself. Try this on for size: you're twenty-three years old, tall, strong, suave, a man of the world, veteran of so many beds you've lost count. Bushy beard that girls love to run their hands through. Big drooping handlebar mustachios. And you aren't asking her for any favors. You aren't whining and wheedling and saying please, Cindy, let's do it, because you know you don't need to say please. It's no boon you seek: you give as good as you get, right, so it's a mutually beneficial transaction, right? Right? Wrong. You're as suave as a pig. You want to exploit her for the sake of your own grubby needs. You know you'll be inept. But let's pretend, at least. Straighten the shoulders, suck in the gut, inflate the chest. Harry Blaufeld, the devilish seducer. Get your hands on her sweater for starters. No one's around; it's a dark night. Go for the boobs, get her hot. Isn't that what Jimmy the Greek told you to do? So you try it. Grinning stupidly, practically apologizing with your eyes. Reaching out. The grabby fingers connecting with the fuzzy purple fabric. Her face, flushed and big-eyed. Her mouth, thin-lipped and wide. Her voice, harsh and wire-edged. She says, "Don't be disgusting, Harry. Don't be silly." Silly. Backing away from me like I've turned into a monster with eight eyes and green fangs. Don't be disgusting. She tries to slip into the house fast, before I can paw her again. I stand there watching her fumble for her key, and this terrible rage starts to rise in me. Why disgusting? Why silly? All I wanted was to show her my love, right? That I really care for her, that I relate to her. A display of affection through physical contact. Right? So I reached out. A little caress. Prelude to tender intimacy. "Don't be disgusting," she said. "Don't be silly." The trivial little immature bitch. And now I feel the anger mounting. Down between my legs there's this hideous pain, this throbbing sensation of anguish, this purely sexual tension, and it's pouring out into my belly, spreading upward along my gut like a stream of flame. A dam has broken somewhere inside me. I feel fire blazing under the top of my skull. And there it is! The power! The strength! I don't question it. I don't ask myself what it is or where it came from. I just push her, hard, from ten feet away, a quick furious shove. It's like an invisible hand against her breasts -- I can see the front of her sweater flatten out -- and she topples backward, clutching at the air, and goes over on her ass. I've knocked her sprawling without touching her. "Harry," she mumbles. "Harry?" My anger's gone. Now I feel terror. What have I done? How? How? Down on her ass, boom. From ten feet away! I run all the way home, never looking back. \* \*

\* \* Footsteps in the hallway, clickety-clack. My sister is home from her date with Jimmy the Greek. That isn't his name. Aristides Pappas is who he really is. Ari, she calls him. Jimmy the Greek, I call him, but not to his face. He's nine feet tall with black greasy hair and a tremendous beak of a nose that comes straight out of his forehead. He's twenty-seven years old and he's laid a thousand girls. Sara is going to marry him next year. Meanwhile they see each other three nights a week and they screw a lot. She's never said a word to me about that, about the screwing, but I know. Sure they screw. Why not? They're going to get married, aren't they? And they're adults. She's nineteen years old, so it's legal for her to screw. I won't be nineteen for four years and four months. It's legal for me to screw now, I think. If only. If only I had somebody. If only. Clickety-clickety-clack. There she goes, into her room. Blunk. That's her door closing. She doesn't give a damn if she wakes the whole family up. Why should she care? She's all turned on now. Soaring on her memories of what she was just doing with Jimmy the Greek. That warm feeling. The afterglow, the book calls it. I wonder how they do it when they do it. They go to his apartment. Do they take off all their clothes first? Do they talk before they begin? A drink or two? Smoke a joint? Sara claims she doesn't smoke it. I bet she's putting me on. They get naked. Christ, he's so tall, he must have a dong a foot long. Doesn't it scare her? They lie down on the bed together. Or on a couch. The floor, maybe? A

thick fluffy carpet? He touches her body. Doing the foreplay stuff. I've read about it. He strokes the breasts, making the nipples go erect. I've seen her nipples. They aren't any bigger than mine. How tall do they get when they're erect? An inch? Three inches? Standing up like a couple of pink pencils? And his hand must go down below, too. There's this thing you're supposed to touch, this tiny bump of flesh hidden inside there. I've studied the diagrams and I still don't know where it is. Jimmy the Greek knows where it is, you can bet your ass. So he touches her there. Then what? She must get hot, right? How can he tell when it's time to go inside her? The time arrives. They're finally doing it. You know, I can't visualize it. He's on top of her and they're moving up and down, sure, but I still can't imagine how the bodies fit together, how they really move, how they do it.

She's getting undressed now, right across the hallway. Off with the shirt, the slacks, the bra, the panties, whatever the hell she wears. I can hear her moving around. I wonder if her door is really closed tight. It's a long time since I've had a good look at her. Who knows, maybe her nipples are still standing up. Even if her door's open only a few inches, I can see into her room from mine, if I hunch down here in the dark and peek.

But her door's closed. What if I reach out and give it a little nudge? From here. I pull the power up into my head, yes ... reach ... push ... ah ... yes! Yes! It moves! One inch, two, three. That's good enough. I can see a slice of her room. The light's on. Hey, there she goes! Too fast, out of sight. I think she was naked. Now she's coming back. Naked, yes. Her back is to me. You've got a cute ass, Sis, you know that? Turn around, turn around, turn around ... ah. Her nipples look the same as always. Not standing up at all. I guess they must go back down after it's all over. Thy two breasts are like two young roes that are twins, which feed among the lilies. (I don't really read the Bible a lot, just the dirty parts.) Cindy's got bigger ones than you, Sis, I bet she has. Unless she pads them. I couldn't tell tonight. I was too excited to notice whether I was squeezing flesh or rubber.

Sara's putting her housecoat on. One last flash of thigh and belly, then no more. Damn. Into the bathroom now. The sound of water running. She's getting washed. Now the tap is off. And now ... tinkle, tinkle, tinkle. I can picture her sitting there, grinning to herself, taking a happy piss, thinking cozy thoughts about what she and Jimmy the Greek did tonight. Oh, Christ, I hurt! I'm jealous of my own sister! That she can do it three times a week while I ... am nowhere ... with nobody ... no one ... nothing ...

Let's give Sis a little surprise. Hmm. Can I manipulate something that's out of my direct line of sight? Let's try it. The toilet seat is in the right-hand corner of the bathroom, under the window. And the flush knob is -- let me think -- on the side closer to the wall, up high -- yes. Okay, reach out, man. Grab it before she does. Push ... down ... push. Yeah! Listen to that, man! You flushed it for her without leaving your own room!

She's going to have a hard time figuring that one out.

\* \* \* \* Sunday: a rainy day, a day of worrying. I can't get the strange events of last night out of my mind. This power of mine -- where did it come from, what can I use it for? And I can't stop fretting over the awareness that I'll have to face Cindy again first thing tomorrow morning, in our Biology class. What will she say to me? Does she realize I actually wasn't anywhere near her when I knocked her down? If she knows I have a power, is she frightened of me? Will she report me to the Society for the Prevention of Supernatural Phenomena, or whoever looks after such things? I'm tempted to pretend I'm sick, and stay home from school tomorrow. But what's the sense of that? I can't avoid her forever.

The more tense I get, the more intensely I feel the power surging within me. It's very strong today. (The rain may have something to do with that. Every nerve is twitching. The air is damp and maybe that makes me more conductive.) When nobody is looking, I experiment. In the bathroom, standing far from the sink, I unscrew the top of the toothpaste tube. I turn the water taps on and off. I open and close the window. How fine my control is! Doing these things is a strain: I tremble, I sweat, I feel the muscles of my jaws knotting up, my back teeth ache. But I

can't resist the kick of exercising my skills. I get riskily mischievous. At breakfast, my mother puts four slices of bread in the toaster; sitting with my back to it, I delicately work the toaster's plug out of the socket, so that when she goes over to investigate five minutes later, she's bewildered to find the bread still raw. "How did the plug slip out?" she asks, but of course no one tells her. Afterward, as we all sit around reading the Sunday papers, I turn the television set on by remote control, and the sudden blaring of a cartoon show makes everyone jump. And a few hours later I unscrew a light bulb in the hallway, gently, gently, easing it from its fixture, holding it suspended close to the ceiling for a moment, then letting it crash to the floor. "What was that?" my mother says in alarm. My father inspects the hall. "Bulb fell out of the fixture and smashed itself to bits." My mother shakes her head. "How could a bulb fall out? It isn't possible." And my father says, "It must have been loose." He doesn't sound convinced. It must be occurring to him that a bulb loose enough to fall to the floor couldn't have been lit. And this bulb had been lit.

How soon before my sister connects these incidents with the episode of the toilet that flushed by itself? \* \*

\* \* Monday is here. I enter the classroom through the rear door and skulk to my seat. Cindy hasn't arrived yet. But now here she comes. God, how beautiful she is! The gleaming, shimmering red hair, down to her shoulders. The pale flawless skin. The bright, mysterious eyes. The purple sweater, same one as Saturday night. My hands have touched that sweater. I've touched that sweater with my power, too. I bend low over my notebook. I can't bear to look at her. I'm a coward. But I force myself to look up. She's standing in the aisle, up by the front of the room, staring at me. Her expression is strange -- edgy, uneasy, the lips clamped tight. As if she's thinking of coming back here to talk to me but is hesitating. The moment she sees me watching her, she glances away and takes her seat. All through the hour I sit hunched forward, studying her shoulders, the back of her neck, the tips of her ears. Five desks separate her from me. I let out a heavy romantic sigh. Temptation is tickling me. It would be so easy to reach across that distance and touch her. Gently stroking her soft cheek with an invisible fingertip. Lightly fondling the side of her throat. Using my special power to say a tender hello to her. See, Cindy? See what I can do to show my love? Having imagined it, I find myself unable to resist doing it. I summon the force from the churning reservoir in my depths; I pump it upward and simultaneously make the automatic calculations of intensity of push. Then I realize what I'm doing. Are you crazy, man? She'll scream. She'll jump out of her chair like she was stung. She'll toll on the floor and have hysterics. Hold back, hold back, you lunatic! At the last moment I manage to deflect the impulse. Gasping, grunting, I twist the force away from Cindy and hurl it blindly in some other direction. My random thrust sweeps across the room like a whiplash and intersects the big framed chart of the plant and animal kingdoms that hangs on the classrooms's left-hand wall. It rips loose as though kicked by a tornado and soars twenty feet on a diagonal arc that sends it crashing into the blackboard. The frame shatters. Broken glass sprays everywhere. The class is thrown into panic. Everybody yelling, running around, picking up pieces of glass, exclaiming in awe, asking questions. I sit like a statue. Then I start to shiver. And Cindy, very slowly, turns and looks at me. A chilly look of horror freezes her face. She knows, then. She thinks I'm some sort of freak. She thinks I'm some sort of monster. \* \* \* \* \_Poltergeist.\_

That's what I am. That's me. I've been to the library. I've done some homework in the occultism section. So: Harry Blaufeld, boy poltergeist. From the German, \_poltern\_, "to make a noise," and \_geist\_, "spirit." Thus, \_poltergeist\_ = "noisy spirit." Poltergeists make plates go smash against the wall, pictures fall suddenly to the floor, doors bang when no one is near them, rocks fly through the air. I'm not sure whether it's proper to say that I am a poltergeist, or that I'm merely the host for one. It depends on which theory you prefer. True-blue occultists like to think that poltergeists are wandering demons or spirits that occasionally take up

residence in human beings, through whom they focus their energies and play their naughty tricks. On the other hand, those who hold a more scientific attitude toward paranormal extrasensory phenomena say that it's absurdly medieval to believe in wandering demons; to them, a poltergeist is simply someone who's capable of harnessing a paranormal ability within himself that allows him to move things without touching them. Myself, I incline toward the latter view. It's much more flattering to think that I have an extraordinary psychic gift than that I've been possessed by a marauding demon. Also less scary.

Poltergeists are nothing new. A Chinese book about a thousand years old called Gossip from the Jade Hall tells of one that disturbed the peace of a monastery by flinging crockery around. The monks hired an exorcist to get things under control, but the noisy spirit gave him the works: "His cap was pulled off and thrown against the wall, his robe was loosed, and even his trousers pulled off, which caused him to retire precipitately." Right on, poltergeist! "Others tried where he had failed, but they were rewarded for their pains by a rain of insolent missives from the air, upon which were written words of malice and bitter odium." The archives bulge with such tales from many lands and many eras. Consider the Clarke case, Oakland, California, 1874. On hand: Mr. Clarke, a successful businessman of austere and reserved ways, and his wife and adolescent daughter and eight-year-old son, plus two of Mr. Clarke's sisters and two male house guests. On the night of April 23, as everyone prepares for bed, the front doorbell rings. No one there. Rings again a few minutes later. No one there. Sound of furniture being moved in the parlor. One of the house guests, a banker named Bayley, inspects, in the dark, and is hit by a chair. No one there. A box of silverware comes floating down the stairs and lands with a bang. (Poltergeist = "noisy spirit.") A heavy box of coal flies about next. A chair hits Bayley on the elbow and lands against a bed. In the dining room a massive oak chair rises two feet in the air, spins, lets itself down, chases the unfortunate Bayley around the room in front of three witnesses. And so on. Much spooked, everybody goes to bed, but all night they hear crashes and rumbling sounds; in the morning they find all the downstairs furniture in a scramble. Also the front door, which was locked and bolted, has been ripped off its hinges. More such events the next night. Likewise on the next, culminating in a female shriek out of nowhere, so terrible that it drives the Clarkes and guests to take refuge in another house. No explanation for any of this ever offered.

A man named Charles Fort, who died in 1932, spent much of his life studying poltergeist phenomena and similar mysteries. Fort wrote four fat books which so far I've only skimmed. They're full of newspaper accounts of strange things like the sudden appearance of several young crocodiles on English farms in the middle of the nineteenth century, and rainstorms in which the earth was pelted with snakes, frogs, blood, or stones. He collected clippings describing instances of coal-heaps and houses and even human beings suddenly and spontaneously bursting into flame. Luminous objects sailing through the sky. Invisible hands that mutilate animals and people. "Phantom bullets" shattering the windows of houses. Inexplicable disappearances of human beings, and equally, inexplicable reappearances far away. Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. I gather that Fort believed that most of these phenomena were the work of beings from interplanetary space who meddle in events on our world for their own amusement. But he couldn't explain away everything like that. Poltergeists in particular didn't fit into his bogeymen-from-space fantasy, and so, he wrote, "Therefore I regard poltergeists as evil or false or discordant or absurd . . . ." Still, he said, "I don't care to deny poltergeists, because I suspect that later, when we're more enlightened, or when we widen the range of our credulities, or take on more of that increase of ignorance that is called knowledge, poltergeists may become assimilable. Then they'll be as reasonable as trees."

I like Fort. He was eccentric and probably very gullible, but he wasn't foolish or crazy. I don't think he's right about beings from interplanetary space, but I admire his attitude toward the inexplicable. Most of the poltergeist cases on record are frauds. They've been exposed by

experts. There was the 1944 episode in Wild Plum, North Dakota, in which lumps of burning coal began to jump out of a bucket in the one-room schoolhouse of Mrs. Pauline Rebel. Papers caught fire on the pupils' desks and charred spots appeared on the curtains. The class dictionary moved around of its own accord. There was talk in town of demonic forces. A few days later, after an assistant state attorney general had begun interrogating people, four of Mrs. Rebel's pupils confessed that they had been tossing the coal around to terrorize their teacher. They'd done most of the dirty work while her back was turned or when she had had her glasses off. A prank. A hoax. Some people would tell you that all poltergeist stories are equally phony. I'm here to testify that they aren't.

One pattern is consistent in all genuine poltergeist incidents: an adolescent is invariably involved, or a child on the edge of adolescence. This is the "naughty child" theory of poltergeists, first put forth by Frank Podmore in 1890 in the Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research. (See, I've done my homework very thoroughly.) The child is usually unhappy, customarily over sexual matters, and suffers either from a sense of not being wanted or from frustration, or both. There are no statistics on the matter, but the lore indicates that teenagers involved in poltergeist activity are customarily virgins.

The 1874 Clarke case, then, becomes the work of the adolescent daughter, who -- I would guess -- had a yen for Mr. Bayley. The multitude of cases cited by Fort, most of them dating from the nineteenth century, show a bunch of poltergeist kids flinging stuff around in a sexually repressed era. That seething energy had to go somewhere. I discovered my own poltering power while in an acute state of palpitating lust for Cindy Klein, who wasn't having any part of me. Especially that part. But instead of exploding from the sheer force of my bottled-up yearnings I suddenly found a way of channeling all that drive outward. And pushed ...

Fort again: "Wherein children are atavistic, they may be in rapport with forces that most human beings have outgrown." Atavism: a strange recurrence to the primitive past. Perhaps in Neanderthal times we were all poltergeists, but most of us lost it over the millennia. But see Fort, also: "There are of course other explanations of the 'occult power' of children. One is that children, instead of being atavistic, may occasionally be far in advance of adults, foreshadowing coming human powers, because their minds are not stifled by conventions. After that, they go to school and lose their superiority. Few boy-prodigies have survived an education."

I feel reassured, knowing I'm just a statistic in a long-established pattern of paranormal behavior. Nobody likes to think he's a freak, even when he is a freak. Here I am, virginal, awkward, owlsh, quirky, precocious, edgy, uncertain, timid, clever, solemn, socially inept, stumbling through all the standard problems of the immediately post-pubescent years. I have pimples and wet dreams and the sort of fine fuzz that isn't worth shaving, only I shave it anyway. Cindy Klein thinks I'm silly and disgusting. And I've got this hot core of fury and frustration in my gut, which is my great curse and my great supremacy. I'm a poltergeist, man. Go on, give me a hard time, make fun of me, call me silly and disgusting. The next time I may not just knock you on your ass. I might heave you all the way to Pluto.

\* \* \* \* An unavoidable humiliating encounter with Cindy today. At lunchtime I go into Schindler's for my usual bacon-lettuce-tomato; I take a seat in one of the back booths and open a book and someone says, "Harry," and there she is at the booth just opposite, with three of her friends. What do I do? Get up and run out? Poltergeist her into the next county? Already I feel the power twitching in me. Mrs. Schindler brings me my sandwich. I'm stuck. I can't bear to be here. I hand her the money and mutter, "Just remembered, got to make a phone call." Sandwich in hand, I start to leave, giving Cindy a foolish hot-cheeked grin as I go by. She's looking at me fiercely. Those deep green eyes of hers terrify me.

"Wait," she says, "Can I ask you something?" She slides out of her booth and blocks the aisle of the luncheonette. She's nearly as tall as I am, and I'm tall. My knees are shaking. God in heaven, Cindy, don't trap me like this, I'm not responsible for what I might do.

She says in a low voice,



"Yesterday in Bio, when that chart hit the blackboard. You did that, didn't you?" "I don't understand." "You made it jump across the room."

"That's impossible," I mumble. "What do you think I am, a magician?"

"I don't know. And Saturday night, that dumb scene outside my house -- "

"I'd rather not talk about it." "I would. How did you do that to me, Harry? Where did you learn the trick?" "Trick? Look, Cindy, I've absolutely got to go." "You pushed me over. You just looked at me and I felt a push." "You tripped," I say. "You just fell down." She laughs. Right now she seems about nineteen years old and I feel about nine years old. "Don't put me on," she says, her voice a deep sophisticated drawl. Her girlfriends are peering at us, trying to overhear. "Listen, this interests me. I'm involved. I want to know how you do that stuff." "There isn't any stuff," I tell her, and suddenly I know I have to escape. I give her the tiniest push, not touching her, of course, just a wee mental nudge, and she feels it and gives ground, and I rush miserably past her, cramming my sandwich into my mouth. I flee the store. At the door I look back and see her smiling, waving to me, telling me to come back. \* \* \* \* I have a rich fantasy life. Sometimes I'm a movie star, twenty-two years old with a palace in the Hollywood hills, and I give parties that Peter Fonda and Dustin Hoffman and Julie Christie and Faye Dunaway come to, and we all turn on and get naked and swim in my pool and afterward I make it with five or six starlets all at once. Sometimes I'm a famous novelist, author of the book that really gets it together and speaks for My Generation, and I stand around in Brentano's in a glittering science-fiction costume signing thousands of autographs, and afterward I go to my penthouse high over First Avenue and make it with a dazzling young lady editor. Sometimes I'm a great scientist, four years out of Harvard Medical School and already acclaimed for my pioneering research in genetic reprogramming of unborn children, and when the phone rings to notify me of my Nobel Prize I'm just about to reach my third climax of the evening with a celebrated Metropolitan Opera soprano who wants me to design a son for her who'll eclipse Caruso. And sometimes -- But why go on? That's all fantasy. Fantasy is dumb because it encourages you to live a self-deluding life, instead of coming to grips with reality. Consider reality, Harry. Consider the genuine article that is Harry Blaufeld. The genuine article is something pimply and ungainly and naive, something that shrieks with every molecule of his skinny body that he's not quite fifteen and has never made it with a girl and doesn't know how to go about it and is terribly afraid that he never will. Mix equal parts of desire and self-pity. And a dash of incompetence and a dollop of insecurity. Season lightly with extrasensory powers. You're a long way from the Hollywood hills, boy. \* \* \* \* Is there some way I can harness my gift for the good of mankind? What if all these ghastly power plants, belching black smoke into the atmosphere, could be shut down forever, and humanity's electrical needs were met by a trained corps of youthful poltergeists, volunteers living a monastic life and using their sizzling sexual tensions as the fuel that keeps the turbines spinning? Or perhaps NASA wants a poltergeist-driven spaceship. There I am, lean and bronzed and jaunty, a handsome figure in my white astronaut suit, taking my seat in the command capsule of the Mars One. T minus thirty seconds and counting. An anxious world awaits the big moment. Five. Four. Three. Two. One. Lift-off. And I grin my world-famous grin and coolly summon my power and open the mental throttle and push, and the mighty vessel rises, hovering serenely a moment above the launching pad, rises and climbs, slicing like a giant glittering needle through the ice-blue Florida sky, soaring up and away on man's first voyage to the red planet .... Another experiment is called for. I'll try to send a beer can to the moon. If I can do that, I should be able to send a spaceship. A simple Newtonian process, a matter of attaining escape velocity; and I don't think thrust is likely to be a determining quantitative function. A push is a push is a push, and so far I haven't noticed limitations of mass, so if I can get it up with a beer can, I ought to succeed in throwing anything of any mass into space. I think. Anyway, I raid

the family garbage and go outside clutching a crumpled Schlitz container. A mild misty night; the moon isn't visible. No matter. I place the can on the ground and contemplate it. Five. Four. Three. Two. One. Lift-off. I grin my world-famous grin. I coolly summon my power and open the mental throttle. Push. Yes, the beer can rises. Hovering serenely a moment above the pavement. Rises and climbs, end over end, slicing like a crumpled beer can through the muggy air. Up. Up. Into the darkness. Long after it disappears, I continue to push. Am I still in contact? Does it still climb? I have no way of telling. I lack the proper tracking stations. Perhaps it does travel on and on through the lonely void, on a perfect lunar trajectory. Or maybe it has already tumbled down, a block away, skulling some hapless cop. I shot a beer can into the air, it fell to earth I know not where. Shrugging, I go back into the house. So much for my career as a spaceman. Blaufeld, you've pulled off another dumb fantasy. Blaufeld, how can you stand being such a silly putz?

\* \* \* \* Clickety-clack. Four in the morning, Sara's just coming in from her date. Here I am lying awake like, a worried parent. Notice that the parents themselves don't worry: they're fast asleep, I bet, giving no damns about the hours their daughter keeps. Whereas I brood. She got laid again tonight, no doubt of it. Possibly twice. Grimly I try to reconstruct the event in my imagination. The positions, the sounds of flesh against flesh, the panting and moaning. How often has she done it now? A hundred times? Three hundred? She's been doing it at least since she was sixteen. I'm sure of that. For girls it's so much easier; they don't need to chase and coax, all they have to do is say yes. Sara says yes a lot. Before Jimmy the Greek there was Greasy Kid Stuff, and before him there was the Spade Wonder, and before him ...

Out there tonight in this city there are three million people at the very minimum who just got laid. I detest adults and their easy screwing. They devalue it by doing it so much. They just have to roll over and grab some meat, and away they go, in and out, ooh ooh ooh ahhh. Christ, how boring it must get! If they could only look at it from the point of view of a frustrated adolescent again. The hungry virgin, on the outside peering in. Excluded from the world of screwing. Feeling that delicious sweet tension of wanting and not knowing how to get. The fiery knot of longing, sitting like a ravenous tapeworm in my belly, devouring my soul. I magnify sex. I exalt it. I multiply its wonders. It'll never live up to my anticipations. But I love the tension of anticipating and speculating and not getting. In fact, I think sometimes I'd like to spend my whole life on the edge of the blade, looking forward always to being deflowered but never quite taking the steps that would bring it about. A dynamic stasis, sustaining and enhancing my special power. Harry Blaufeld, virgin and poltergeist. Why not? Anybody at all can screw. Idiots, morons, bores, uglies. Everybody does it. There's magic in renunciation. If I keep myself aloof, pure, unique .... Push .... I do my little

poltergeisty numbers. I stack and restack my textbooks without leaving my bed. I move my shirt from the floor to the back of the chair. I turn the chair around to face the wall. Push ... push ... push .... Water running in the john. Sara's washing up. What's it like, Sara? How does it feel when he puts it in you? We don't talk much, you and I. You think I'm a child; you patronize me, you give me cute winks, your voice goes up half an octave. Do you wink at Jimmy the Greek like that? Like hell. And you talk husky contralto to him. Sit down and talk to me some time, Sis. I'm teetering on the brink of manhood. Guide me out of my virginity. Tell me what girls like guys to say to them. Sure. You won't tell me shit, Sara. You want me to stay your baby brother forever, because that enhances your own sense of being grown up. And you screw and screw and screw, you and Jimmy the Greek, and you don't even understand the mystical significance of the act of intercourse. To you it's just good sweaty fun, like going bowling. Right? Right? Oh, you miserable bitch! Screw you, Sara!

A shriek from the bathroom. Christ, what have I done now? I better go see. Sara, naked, kneels on the cold tiles. Her head is in the bathtub and she's clinging with both hands to the bathtub's rim, and she's shaking violently. "You okay?" I ask. "What happened?"

"Like a kick in the back," she says hoarsely. "I was at the sink, washing my face, and I turned around and something hit me like a kick in the back and knocked me halfway across the room." "You okay, though? You aren't hurt?" "Help me up." She's upset but not injured. She's so upset that she forgets that she's naked, and without putting on her robe she cuddles up against me, trembling. She seems small and fragile and scared. I stroke her bare back where I imagine she felt the blow. Also I sneak a look at her nipples, just to see if they're still standing up after her date with Jimmy the Greek. They aren't. I soothe her with my fingers. I feel very manly and protective, even if it's only my cruddy dumb sister I'm protecting. "What could have happened?" she asks. "You weren't pulling any tricks, were you?" "I was in bed," I say, totally sincere. "A lot of funny things been going on around this house lately," she says. \* \* \*

\* Cindy, catching me in the hallway between Geometry and Spanish: "How come you never call me any more?" "Been busy." "Busy how?" "Busy." "I guess you must be," she says. "Looks to me like you haven't slept in a week. What's her name?" "Her? No her. I've just been busy." I try to escape. Must I push her again? "A research project." "You could take some time out for relaxing. You should keep in touch with old friends." "Friends? What kind of friend are you? You said I was silly. You said I was disgusting. Remember, Cindy?" "The emotions of the moment. I was off balance. I mean, psychologically. Look, let's talk about all this some time, Harry. Some time soon." "Maybe." "If you're not doing anything Saturday night --" I look at her in astonishment. She's actually asking me for a date! Why is she pursuing me? What does she want from me? Is she itching for another chance to humiliate me? Silly and disgusting, disgusting and silly. I look at my watch and quirk up my lips. Time to move along. "I'm not sure," I tell her. "I may have some work to do." "Work?" "Research," I say. "I'll let you know."

\* \* \* \* A night of happy experiments. I unscrew a light bulb, float it from one side of my room to the other, return it to the fixture, and efficiently screw it back in. Precision control. I go up to the roof and launch another beer can to the moon, only this time I loft it a thousand feet, bring it back, kick it up even higher, bring it back, send it off a third time with a tremendous accumulated kinetic energy, and I have no doubt it'll cleave through space. I pick up trash in the street from a hundred yards away and throw it in the trash basket. Lastly -- most scary of all -- I polt myself. I levitate a little, lifting myself five feet into the air. That's as high as I dare go. (What if I lose the power and fall?) If I had the courage, I could fly. I can do anything. Give me the right fulcrum and I'll move the world. 0, potentia! What a fantastic trip this is! \* \* \* \* After two awful days of inner debate I phone Cindy and make a date for Saturday. I'm not sure whether it's a good idea. Her sudden new aggressiveness turns me off, slightly, but nevertheless it's a novelty to have a girl chasing me, and who am I to snub her? I wonder what she's up to, though. Coming on so interested in me after dumping me mercilessly on our last date. I'm still angry with her about that, but I can't hold a grudge, not with her. Maybe she wants to make amends. We did have a pretty decent relationship in the nonphysical sense, until that one stupid evening. Jesus, what if she really does want to make amends, all the way? She scares me. I guess I'm a little bit of a coward. Or a lot of a coward. I don't understand any of this, man. I think I'm getting into something very heavy. \* \* \* \* I juggle three tennis balls and keep them all in the air at once, with my hands in my pockets. I see a woman trying to park her car in a space that's too small, and as I pass by I give her a sneaky little assist by pushing against the car behind her space; it moves backward a foot and a half, and she has room to park. Friday afternoon, in my gym class, I get into a basketball game and on five separate occasions when Mike Kisiak goes driving in for one of his sure-thing lay-ups I kick the ball away from the hoop. He can't figure out why he's off form and it really kills him. There seem to be no limits to what I can do. I'm awed at it myself. I

gain skill from day to day. I might just be an authentic superman. \*

\* \* \* Cindy and Harry, Harry and Cindy, warm and cozy, sitting on her living-room couch. Christ, I think I'm being seduced! How can this be happening? To me? Christ. Christ. Christ. Cindy and Harry. Harry and Cindy. Where are we heading tonight? In the movie house Cindy snuggles close. Midway through the bring flick I take the hint. A big bold move: slipping my arm around her shoulders. She wriggles so that my hand slides down through her armpit and comes to rest grasping her right breast. My cheeks blaze. I do as if to pull back, as if I've touched a hot stove, but she clamps her arm over my forearm. Trapped. I explore her yielding flesh. No padding there, just authentic Cindy. She's so eager and easy that it terrifies me. Afterward we go for sodas. In the shop she turns on the body language something frightening -- gleaming eyes, suggestive smiles, little steamy twistings of her shoulders. I feel like telling her not to be so obvious about it. It's like living one of my own wet dreams. Back to her place, now. It starts to rain. We stand outside, in the very spot where I stood when I polted her the last time. I can write the script effortlessly. "Why don't you come inside for a while, Harry?" "I'd love to." "Here, dry your feet on the doormat. Would you like some hot chocolate?" "Whatever you're having, Cindy." "No, whatever you'd like to have." "Hot chocolate would be fine, then." Her parents aren't home. Her older brother is fornicating in Scarsdale. The rain hammers at the windows. The house is big, expensive-looking, thick carpets, fancy draperies. Cindy in the kitchen, pattering at the stove. Harry in the living room, fidgeting at the bookshelves. Then Cindy and Harry, Harry and Cindy, warm and cozy, together on the couch. Hot chocolate: two sips apiece. Her lips near mine. Silently begging me. Come on, dope, bend forward. Be a mensh. We kiss. We've kissed before, but this time it's with tongues. Christ. Christ. I don't believe this. Suave old Casanova Blaufeld swinging into action like a well-oiled seducing machine. Her perfume in my nostrils, my tongue in her mouth, my hand on her sweater, and then, unexpectedly, my hand is under her sweater, and then, astonishingly, my other hand is on her knee, and up under her skirt, and her thigh is satiny and cool, and I sit there having this weird two-dimensional feeling that I'm not an autonomous human being but just somebody on the screen in a movie rated X, aware that thousands of people out there in the audience are watching me with held breath, and I don't dare let them down. I continue, not letting myself pause to examine what's happening, not thinking at all, turning off my mind completely, just going forward step by step. I know that if I ever halt and back off to ask myself if this is real, it'll all blow up in my face. She's helping me. She knows much more about this than I do. Murmuring softly. Encouraging me. My fingers scrabbling at our undergarments. "Don't rush it," she whispers. "We've got all the time in the world." My body pressing urgently against hers. Somehow now I'm not puzzled by the mechanics of the thing. So this is how it happens. What a miracle of evolution that we're designed to fit together this way! "Be gentle," she says, the way girls always say in the novels, and I want to be gentle, but how can I be gentle when I'm riding a runaway chariot? I push, not with my mind but with my body, and suddenly I feel this wondrous velvety softness enfolding me, and I begin to move fast, unable to hold back, and she moves too and we clasp each other and I'm swept helter-skelter along into a whirlpool. Down and down and down. "Harry!" she gasps and I explode uncontrollably and I know it's over. Hardly begun, and it's over. Is that it? That's it. That's all there is to it, the moving, the clasping, the gasping, the explosion. It felt good, but not that good, not as good as in my feverish virginal hallucinations I hoped it would be, and a backwash of letdown rips through me at the realization that it isn't transcendental after all, it isn't a mystic thing, it's just a body thing that starts and continues and ends. Abruptly I want to pull away and be alone to think. But I know I mustn't, I have to be tender and grateful now, I hold her in my arms, I whisper soft things to her, I tell her how good it was, she tells me how good it was. We're both lying, but so what? It was good. In retrospect it's starting to seem fantastic, overwhelming, all the things I

wanted it to be. The idea of what we've done blows my mind. If only it hadn't been over so fast. No matter. Next time will be better. We've crossed a frontier; we're in unfamiliar territory now. Much later she says, "I'd like to know how you make things move without touching them." I shrug. "Why do you want to know?" "It fascinates me. You fascinate me. I thought for a long time you were just another fellow, you know, kind of clumsy, kind of immature. But then this gift of yours. It's ESP, isn't it, Harry? I've read a lot about it. I know. The moment you knocked me down, I knew what it must have been. Wasn't it?" Why be coy with her? "Yes," I say, proud in my new manhood. "As a matter of fact, it's a classic poltergeist manifestation. When I gave you that shove, it was the first I knew I had the power. But I've been developing it. You wouldn't believe some of the things I've been able to do lately." My voice is deep; my manner is assured. I have graduated into my own fantasy self tonight. "Show me," she says. "Poltergeist something, Harry!" "Anything. You name it." "That chair." "Of course." I survey the chair. I reach for the power. It does not come. The chair stays where it is. What about the saucer, then? No. The spoon? No. "Cindy, I don't understand it, but -- it doesn't seem to be working right now ..." "You must be tired." "Yes. That's it. Tired. A good night's sleep and I'll have it again. I'll phone you in the morning and give you a real demonstration." Hastily buttoning my shirt. Looking for my shoes. Her parents will walk in any minute. Her brother. "Listen, a wonderful evening, unforgettable, tremendous --" "Stay a little longer." "I really can't." Out into the rain. \* \* \* \* Home. Stunned. I push ... and the shoe sits there. I look up at the light fixture. Nothing. The bulb will not turn. The power is gone. What will become of me now? Commander Blaufeld, space hero! No. No. Nothing. I will drop back into the ordinary rut of mankind. I will be ... a husband. I will be ... an employee. And push no more. And push no more. Can I even lift my shirt and flip it to the floor? No. No. Gone. Every shred, gone. I pull the covers over my head. I put my hands to my deflowered maleness. That alone responds. There alone am I still potent. Like all the rest. Just one of the common herd, now. Let's face it: I'll push no more. I'm ordinary again. Fighting off tears, I coil tight against myself in the darkness, and, sweating, moaning a little, working hard, I descend numbly into the quicksand, into the first moments of the long colorless years ahead. ----- At [www.fictionwise.com](http://www.fictionwise.com) you can: \* Rate this story \* Find more stories by this author \* Get story recommendations

===== Sailing to Byzantium by Robert Silverberg ===== Copyright (c)1985 by Agberg, Ltd. First published in Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, February 1985 Fictionwise Contemporary Science Fiction ----- NOTICE: This work is copyrighted. It is licensed only for use by the purchaser. If you did not purchase this ebook directly from Fictionwise.com then you are in violation of copyright law and are subject to severe fines. Please visit [www.fictionwise.com](http://www.fictionwise.com) to purchase a legal copy. Fictionwise.com offers a reward for information leading to the conviction of copyright violators of Fictionwise ebooks. ----- At dawn he arose and stepped out on to the patio for his first look at Alexandria, the one city he had not yet seen. That year the five cities were Chang-an, Asgard, New Chicago, Timbuctoo, Alexandria: the usual mix of eras, cultures, realities. He and Gioia, making the long flight from Asgard in the distant north the night before, had arrived late, well after sundown, and had gone straight to bed. Now, by the gentle apricot-hued morning light, the fierce spires and battlements of Asgard seemed merely something he had dreamed. The

rumour was that Asgard's moment was finished, anyway. In a little while, he had heard, they were going to tear it down and replace it, elsewhere, with Mohenjo-daro. Though there were never more than five cities, they changed constantly. He could remember a time when they had had Rome of the Caesars instead of Chang-an, and Rio de Janeiro rather than Alexandria. These people saw no point in keeping anything very long. It was not easy for him to adjust to the sultry intensity of Alexandria after the frozen splendours of Asgard. The wind, coming off the water, was brisk and torrid both at once. Soft turquoise wavelets lapped at the jetties. Strong presences assailed his senses: the hot heavy sky, the stinging scent of the red lowland sand borne on the breeze, the sullen swampy aroma of the nearby sea. Everything trembled and glimmered in the early light. Their hotel was beautifully situated, high on the northern slope of the huge artificial mound known as the Paneium that was sacred to the goat-footed god. From here they had a total view of the city: the wide noble boulevards, the soaring obelisks and monuments, the palace of Hadrian just below the hill, the stately and awesome Library, the temple of Poseidon, the teeming marketplace, the royal lodge that Mark Antony had built after his defeat at Actium. And of course the Lighthouse, the wondrous many-windowed Lighthouse, the seventh wonder of the world, that immense pile of marble and limestone and reddish-purple Aswan granite rising in majesty at the end of its mile-long causeway. Black smoke from the beacon-fire at its summit curled lazily into the sky. The city was awakening. Some temporaries in short white kilts appeared and began to trim the dense dark hedges that bordered the great public buildings. A few citizens wearing loose robes of vaguely Grecian style were strolling in the streets. There were ghosts and chimeras and phantasies everywhere about. Two slim elegant centaurs, a male and a female, grazed on the hillside. A burly thick-thighed swordsman appeared on the porch of the temple of Poseidon holding a Gorgon's severed head and waved it in a wide arc, grinning broadly. In the street below the hotel gate three small pink sphinxes, no bigger than house cats, stretched and yawned and began to prowl the kerbside. A larger one, lion-sized, watched warily from an alleyway: their mother, surely. Even at this distance he could hear her loud purring. Shading his eyes, he peered far out past the Lighthouse and across the water. He hoped to see the dim shores of Crete or Cyprus to the north, or perhaps the great dark curve of Anatolia. Carry me towards that great Byzantium, he thought. Where all is ancient, singing at the oars. But he beheld only the endless empty sea, sun-bright and blinding though the morning was just beginning. Nothing was ever where he expected it to be. The continents did not seem to be in their proper places any longer. Gioia, taking him aloft long ago in her little flutterflutter, had shown him that. The tip of South America was canted far out into the Pacific; Africa was weirdly foreshortened; a broad tongue of ocean separated Europe and Asia. Australia did not appear to exist at all. Perhaps they had dug it up and used it for other things. There was no trace of the world he once had known. This was the fiftieth century. 'The fiftieth century after what?' he had asked several times, but no-one seemed to know, or else they did not care to say.

'Is Alexandria very beautiful?' Gioia called from within. 'Come out and see.' Naked and sleepy-looking, she padded out on to the white-tiled patio and nestled up beside him. She fitted neatly under his arm. 'Oh, yes, yes!' she said softly. 'So very beautiful, isn't it? Look, there, the palaces, the Library, the Lighthouse! Where will we go first? The Lighthouse, I think. Yes? And then the market place -- I want to see the Egyptian magicians -- and the stadium, the races -- will they be having races today, do you think? Oh, Charles, I want to see everything!'

'Everything? All on the first day?' 'All on the first day, yes,' she said. 'Everything.' 'But we have plenty of time, Gioia.' 'Do we?' He smiled and drew her tight against his side. 'Time enough,' he said gently. He loved her for her impatience, for her bright bubbling eagerness. Gioia was not much like the rest in that regard, though she seemed identical in all other ways. She was short, supple, slender,

dark-eyed, olive-skinned, narrow-hipped, with wide shoulders and flat muscles. They were all like that, each one indistinguishable from the rest, like a horde of millions of brothers and sisters -- a world of small lithe childlike Mediterraneans, built for juggling, for bull-dancing, for sweet white wine at midday and rough red wine at night. They had the same slim bodies, the same broad mouths, the same great glossy eyes. He had never seen anyone who appeared to be younger than twelve or older than twenty. Gioia was somehow a little different, although he did not quite know how; but he knew that it was for that imperceptible but significant difference that he loved her. And probably that was why she loved him also.

He let his gaze drift from west to east, from the Gate of the Moon down broad Canopus Street and out to the harbour, and off to the tomb of Cleopatra at the tip of long slender Cape Lochias. Everything was here and all of it perfect, the obelisks, the statues and marble colonnades, the courtyards and shrines and groves, great Alexander himself in his coffin of crystal and gold: a splendid gleaming pagan city. But there were oddities -- an unmistakable mosque near the public gardens, and what seemed to be a Christian church not far from the Library. And those ships in the harbour, with all those red sails and bristling masts -- surely they were medieval, and late medieval at that. He had seen such anachronisms in other places before. Doubtless these people found them amusing. Life was a game for them. They played at it unceasingly. Rome, Alexandria, Timbuctoo -- why not? Create an Asgard of translucent bridges and shimmering ice-girt palaces, then grow weary of it and take it away? Replace it with Mohenjo-daro? Why not? It seemed to him a great pity to destroy those lofty Nordic feasting-halls for the sake of building a squat brutal sun-baked city of brown brick; but these people did not look at things the way he did. Their cities were only temporary. Someone in Asgard had said that Timbuctoo would be the next to go, with Byzantium rising in its place. Well, why not? Why not? They could have anything they liked. This was the fiftieth century, after all. The only rule was that there could be no more than five cities at once. 'Limits,' Gioia had informed him solemnly when they first began to travel together, 'are very important.' But she did not know why, or did not care to say. He

stared out once more towards the sea. He imagined a newborn city congealing suddenly out of mists, far across the water: shining towers, great domed palaces, golden mosaics. That would be no great effort for them. They could just summon it forth whole out of time, the Emperor on his throne and the Emperor's drunken soldiery roistering in the streets, the brazen clangour of the cathedral gong rolling through the Grand Bazaar, dolphins leaping beyond the shoreside pavilions. Why not? They had Timbuctoo. They had Alexandria. Do you crave Constantinople? Then behold Constantinople! Or Avalon, or Lyonesse, or Atlantis. They could have anything they liked. It is pure Schopenhauer here: the world as will and imagination. Yes! These slender dark-eyed people journeying tirelessly from miracle to miracle. Why not Byzantium next? Yes! Why not? That is no country for old men, he thought. The young in one another's arms, the birds in the trees -- yes! Yes!

Anything they liked. They even had him. Suddenly he felt frightened. Questions he had not asked for a long time burst through into his consciousness. Who am I? Why am I here? Who is this woman beside me? 'You're so quiet all of a sudden, Charles,' said Gioia, who could not abide silence for very long.

'Will you talk to me? I want you to talk to me. Tell me what you're looking for out there.' He shrugged. 'Nothing.' 'Nothing?'

'Nothing in particular.' 'I could see you seeing something.'

'Byzantium,' he said. 'I was imagining that I could look straight across the water to Byzantium. I was trying to get a glimpse of the walls of Constantinople.'

'Oh, but you wouldn't be able to see as far as that from here. Not really.' 'I know.'

'And anyway Byzantium doesn't exist.'

'Not yet. But it will. Its time comes later on.'

'Does it?' she said. 'Do you know that for a fact?'

'On good authority. I heard it in Asgard,' he told her. 'But even if I hadn't, Byzantium would be inevitable, don't you think? Its time would have to come. How could we not do

Byzantium, Gioia? We certainly will do Byzantium, sooner or later. I know we will. It's only a matter of time. And we have all the time in the world.'

A shadow crossed her face. 'Do we? Do we?' \* \* \* \* He knew very little about himself, but he knew that he was not one of them. That he knew. He knew that his name was Charles Phillips and that before he had come to live among these people he had lived in the year 1984, when there had been such things as computers and television sets and baseball and jet planes, and the world was full of cities, not merely five but thousands of them, New York and London and Johannesburg and Paris and Liverpool and Bangkok and San Francisco and Buenos Aires and a multitude of others, all at the same time. There had been four and a half billion people in the world then; now he doubted that there were as many as four and a half million. Nearly everything had changed beyond comprehension. The moon still seemed the same, and the sun; but at night he searched in vain for familiar constellations. He had no idea how they had brought him from then to now, or why. It did no good to ask. No-one had any answers for him; no-one so much as appeared to understand what it was that he was trying to learn. After a time he had stopped asking; after a time he had almost entirely ceased wanting to know.

He and Gioia were climbing the Lighthouse. She scampered ahead, in a hurry as always, and he came along behind her in his more stolid fashion. Scores of other tourists, mostly in groups of two or three, were making their way up the wide flagstone ramps, laughing, calling to one another. Some of them, seeing him, stopped a moment, stared, pointed. He was used to that. He was so much taller than any of them; he was plainly not one of them. When they pointed at him he smiled. Sometimes he nodded a little acknowledgement.

He could not find much of interest in the lowest level, a massive square structure two hundred feet high built of huge marble blocks: within its cool musty arcades were hundreds of small dark rooms, the offices of the Lighthouse's keepers and mechanics, the barracks of the garrison, the stables for the three hundred donkeys that carried the fuel to the lantern far above. None of that appeared inviting to him. He forged onwards without halting until he emerged on the balcony that led to the next level. Here the Lighthouse grew narrower and became octagonal: its face, granite now and handsomely fluted, rose in a stunning sweep above him.

Gioia was waiting for him there. 'This is for you,' she said, holding out a nugget of meat on a wooden skewer. 'Roast lamb. Absolutely delicious. I had one while I was waiting for you.' She gave him a cup of some cool green sherbet also, and darted off to buy a pomegranate. Dozens of temporaries were roaming the balcony, selling refreshments of all kinds.

He nibbled at the meat. It was charred outside, nicely pink and moist within. While he ate, one of the temporaries came up to him and peered blandly into his face. It was a stocky swarthy mate wearing nothing but a strip of red and yellow cloth about its waist. 'I sell meat,' it said. 'Very fine roast lamb, only five drachmas.'

Phillips indicated the piece he was eating. 'I already have some,' he said. 'It is excellent meat, very tender. It has been soaked for three days in the juices of -- ' 'Please,' Phillips said. 'I don't want to buy any meat. Do you mind moving along?'

The temporaries had confused and baffled him at first, and there was still much about them that was unclear to him. They were not machines -- they looked like creatures of flesh and blood -- but they did not seem to be human beings, either, and no-one treated them as if they were. He supposed they were artificial constructs, products of a technology so consummate that it was invisible. Some appeared to be more intelligent than others, but all of them behaved as if they had no more autonomy than characters in a play, which was essentially what they were. There were untold numbers of them in each of the five cities, playing all manner of roles: shepherds and swineherds, street-sweepers, merchants, boatmen, vendors of grilled meats and cool drinks, hagglers in the marketplace, schoolchildren, charioteers, policemen, grooms, gladiators, monks, artisans, whores and cutpurses, sailors -- whatever was needed to sustain the illusion of a thriving, populous urban centre. The dark-eyed people, Gioia's people, never performed work. There were not enough of them to



keep a city's functions going, and in any case they were strictly tourists, wandering with the wind, moving from city to city as the whim took them, Chang-an to New Chicago, New Chicago to Timbuctoo, Timbuctoo to Asgard, Asgard to Alexandria, onwards, ever onwards. The temporary would not leave him alone. Phillips walked away and it followed him, cornering him against the balcony wall. When Gioia returned a few minutes later, lips prettily stained with pomegranate juice, the temporary was still hovering about him, trying with lunatic persistence to sell him a skewer of lamb. It stood much too close to him, almost nose to nose, great sad cowlike eyes peering intently into his as it extolled with mournful mooring urgency the quality of its wares. It seemed to him that he had had trouble like this with temporaries on one or two earlier occasions. Gioia touched the creature's elbow lightly and said, in a short sharp tone Phillips had never heard her use before, 'He isn't interested. Get away from him.' It went at once. To Phillips she said, 'You have to be firm with them.' 'I was trying. It wouldn't listen to me.'

'You ordered it to go away, and it refused?' 'I asked it to go away. Politely. Too politely, maybe.' 'Even so,' she said. 'It should have obeyed a human, regardless.' 'Maybe it didn't think I was human,' Phillips suggested. 'Because of the way I look. My height, the colour of my eyes. It might have thought I was some kind of temporary myself.' 'No,' Gioia said, frowning. 'A temporary won't solicit another temporary. But it won't ever disobey a citizen, either. There's a very clear boundary. There isn't ever any confusion. I can't understand why it went on bothering you.' He was surprised at how troubled she seemed: far more so, he thought, than the incident warranted. A stupid device, perhaps miscalibrated in some way, overenthusiastically pushing its wares -- what of it? What of it? Gioia, after a moment, appeared to come to the same conclusion. Shrugging, she said, 'It's defective, I suppose. Probably such things are more common than we suspect, don't you think?' There was something forced about her tone that bothered him. She smiled and handed him her pomegranate. 'Here. Have a bite, Charles. It's wonderfully sweet. They used to be extinct, you know. Shall we go on upwards?'

\* \* \* \* The octagonal midsection of the Lighthouse must have been several hundred feet in height, a grim claustrophobic tube almost entirely filled by the two broad spiralling ramps that wound around the huge building's central well. The ascent was slow: a donkey team was a little way ahead of them on the ramp, plodding along laden with bundles of kindling for the lantern. But at last, just as Phillips was growing winded and dizzy, he and Gioia came out on to the second balcony, the one marking the transition between the octagonal section and the Lighthouse's uppermost storey, which was cylindrical and very slender. She leaned far out over the balustrade.

'Oh, Charles, look at the view! Look at it!' It was amazing. From one side they could see the entire city, and swampy Lake Mareotis and the dusty Egyptian plain beyond it, and from the other they peered far out into the grey and choppy Mediterranean. He gestured towards the innumerable reefs and shallows that infested the waters leading to the harbour entrance. 'No wonder they needed a lighthouse here,' he said. 'Without some kind of gigantic landmark they'd never have found their way in from the open sea.'

A blast of sound, a ferocious snort, erupted just above him. He looked up, startled. Immense statues of trumpet-wielding Tritons jutted from the corners of the Lighthouse at this level; that great blurting sound had come from the nearest of them. A signal, he thought. A warning to the ships negotiating that troubled passage. The sound was produced by some kind of steam-powered mechanism, he realized, operated by teams of sweating temporaries clustered about bonfires at the base of each Triton.

Once again he found himself swept by admiration for the clever way these people carried out their reproductions of antiquity. Or were they reproductions, he wondered? He still did not understand how they brought their cities into being. For all he knew, this place was the authentic Alexandria itself, pulled forward out of its proper time just as he himself had been. Perhaps this was the true and original Lighthouse, and not a copy. He had no idea which was the case, nor

which would be the greater miracle.' 'How do we get to the top?' Gioia asked. 'Over there, I think. That doorway.' The spiralling donkey-ramps ended here. The loads of lantern fuel went higher via a dumb-waiter in the central shaft. Visitors continued by way of a cramped staircase, so narrow at its upper end that it was impossible to turn around while climbing. Gioia, tireless, sprinted ahead. He clung to the rail and laboured up and up, keeping count of the tiny window-slits to ease the boredom of the ascent. The count was nearing a hundred when finally he stumbled into the vestibule of the beacon chamber. A dozen or so visitors were crowded into it. Gioia was at the far side, by the wall that was open to the sea. It seemed to him he could feel the building swaying in the winds, up here. How high were they? Five hundred feet, six hundred, seven? The beacon chamber was tall and narrow, divided by a catwalk into upper and lower sections. Down below, relays of temporaries carried wood from the dumb-waiter and tossed it on the blazing fire. He felt its intense heat from where he stood, at the rim of the platform on which the giant mirror of polished metal was hung. Tongues of flame leaped upwards and danced before the mirror, which hurled its dazzling beam far out to sea. Smoke rose through a vent. At the very top was a colossal statue of Poseidon, austere, ferocious, looming above the lantern.

Gioia sidled along the catwalk until she was at his side. 'The guide was talking before you came,' she said, pointing. 'Do you see that place over there, under the mirror? Someone standing there and looking into the mirror gets a view of ships at sea that can't be seen from here by the naked eye. The mirror magnifies things.' 'Do you believe that?' She nodded towards the guide. 'It said so. And it also told us that if you look in a certain way, you can see right across the water into the city of Constantinople.'

She is like a child, he thought. They all are. He said, 'You told me yourself this very morning that it isn't possible to see that far. Besides, Constantinople doesn't exist right now.' 'It will,' she replied. 'You said that to me, this very morning. And when it does, it'll be reflected in the Lighthouse mirror. That's the truth. I'm absolutely certain of it.' She swung about abruptly towards the entrance of the beacon chamber. 'Oh, look, Charles! Here come Nissandra and Aramayne! And there's Hawk! There's Stengard!' Gioia laughed and waved and called out names. 'Oh, everyone's here! Everyone!' They came jostling into the room, so many newcomers that some of those who had been there were forced to scramble down the steps on the far side. Gioia moved among them, hugging, kissing. Phillips could scarcely tell one from another -- it was hard for him even to tell which were the men and which the women, dressed as they all were in the same sort of loose robes -- but he recognized some of the names. These were her special friends, her set, with whom she had journeyed from city to city on an endless round of gaiety in the old days before he had come into her life. He had met a few of them before, in Asgard, in Rio, in Rome. The beacon-chamber guide, a squat wide-shouldered old temporary wearing a laurel wreath on its bald head, reappeared and began its potted speech, but no-one listened to it; they were all too busy greeting one another, embracing, giggling. Some of them edged their way over to Phillips and reached up, standing on tiptoes, to touch their fingertips to his cheek in that odd hello of theirs. 'Charles,' they said gravely, making two syllables out of the name, as these people often did. 'So good to see you again. Such a pleasure. You and Gioia -- such a handsome couple. So well suited to each other.'

Was that so? He supposed it was. The chamber hummed with chatter. The guide could not be heard at all. Stengard and Nissandra had visited New Chicago for the water-dancing -- Aramayne bore tales of a feast in Chang-an that had gone on for days -- Hawk and Hekna had been to Timbuctoo to see the arrival of the salt caravan, and were going back there soon -- a final party soon to celebrate the end of Asgard that absolutely should not be missed -- the plans for the new city, Mohenjo-daro -- we have reservations for the opening, we wouldn't pass it up for anything -- and, yes, they were definitely going to do Constantinople after that, the planners were already deep into their Byzantium research -- so

good to see you, you look so beautiful all the time -- have you been to the Library yet? The zoo? To the temple of Serapis? -- To Phillips they said, 'What do you think of our Alexandria, Charles? Of course you must have known it well in your day. Does it look the way you remember it?' They were always asking things like that. They did not seem to comprehend that the Alexandria of the Lighthouse and the Library was long lost and legendary by the time his twentieth century had been. To them, he suspected, all the places they had brought back into existence were more or less contemporary. Rome of the Caesars, Alexandria of the Ptolemies, Venice of the Doges, Chang-an of the T'angs, Asgard of the Aesir, none any less real than the next nor any less unreal, each one simply a facet of the distant past, the fantastic immemorial past, a plum plucked from that dark backward abysm of time. They had no contexts for separating one era from another. To them all the past was one borderless timeless realm. Why then should he not have seen the Lighthouse before, he who had leaped into this era from the New York of 1984? He had never been able to explain it to them. Julius Caesar and Hannibal, Helen of Troy and Charlemagne, Rome of the gladiators and New York of the Yankees and Mets, Gilgamesh and Tristan and Othello and Robin Hood and George Washington and Queen Victoria -- to them, all equally real and unreal, none of them any more than bright figures moving about on a painted canvas. The past, the past, the elusive and fluid past -- to them it was a single place of infinite accessibility and infinite connectivity. Of course they would think he had seen the Lighthouse before. He knew better than to try again to explain things. 'No,' he said simply. 'This is my first time in Alexandria.'

\* \* \* \* They stayed there all winter long, and possibly some of the spring. Alexandria was not a place where one was sharply aware of the change of seasons, nor did the passage of time itself make itself very evident when one was living one's entire life as a tourist. During the day there was always something new to see. The zoological garden, for instance: a wondrous park, miraculously green and lush in this hot dry climate, where astounding animals roamed in enclosures so generous that they did not seem like enclosures at all. Here were camels, rhinoceroses, gazelles, ostriches, lions, wild asses; and here too, casually adjacent to those familiar African beasts, were hippogriffs, unicorns, basilisks and fire-snorting dragons with rainbow scales. Had the original zoo of Alexandria had dragons and unicorns? Phillips doubted it. But this one did; evidently it was no harder for the backstage craftsmen to manufacture mythic beasts than it was for them to turn out camels and gazelles. To Gioia and her friends all of them were equally mythical, anyway. They were just as awed by the rhinoceros as by the hippogriff. One was no more strange -- nor any less -- than the other. So far as Phillips had been able to discover, none of the mammals or birds of his era had survived into this one except for a few cats and dogs, though many had been reconstructed. And then the Library! All those lost treasures, reclaimed from the jaws of time! Stupendous columned marble walls, airy high-vaulted reading-rooms, dark coiling stacks stretching away to infinity. The ivory handles of seven hundred thousand papyrus scrolls bristling on the shelves. Scholars and librarians gliding quietly about, smiling faint scholarly smiles but plainly preoccupied with serious matters of the mind. They were all temporaries, Phillips realized. Mere props, part of the illusion. But were the scrolls illusions too? 'Here we have the complete dramas of Sophocles,' said the guide with a blithe wave of its hand, indicating shelf upon shelf of texts. Only seven of his hundred and twenty-three plays had survived the successive burnings of the Library in ancient times by Romans, Christians, Arabs: were the lost ones here, the Triptolemus, the Nausicaa, the Jason and all the rest? And would he find here too, miraculously restored to being, the other vanished treasures of ancient literature -- the memoirs of Odysseus, Cato's history of Rome, Thucydides' life of Pericles, the missing volumes of Livy? But when he asked if he might explore the stacks, the guide smiled apologetically and said that all the librarians were busy just now. Another time, perhaps? Perhaps, said

the guide. It made no difference, Phillips decided. Even if these people somehow had brought back those lost masterpieces of antiquity, how would he read them? He knew no Greek. The life of the city buzzed and throbbed about him. It was a dazzlingly beautiful place: the vast bay thick with sails, the great avenues running rigidly east-west, north-south, the sunlight rebounding almost audibly from the bright walls of the palaces of kings and gods. They have done this very well, Phillips thought: very well indeed. In the marketplace hard-eyed traders squabbled in half a dozen mysterious languages over the price of ebony, Arabian incense, jade, panther-skins. Gioia bought a dram of pale musky Egyptian perfume in a delicate tapering glass flask. Magicians and jugglers and scribes called out stridently to passersby, begging for a few moments of attention and a handful of coins for their labour. Strapping slaves, black and tawny and some that might have been Chinese, were put up for auction, made to flex their muscles, to bare their teeth, to bare their breasts and thighs to prospective buyers. In the gymnasium naked athletes hurled javelins and discuses, and wrestled with terrifying zeal. Gioia's friend Stengard came rushing up with a gift for her, a golden necklace that would not have embarrassed Cleopatra. An hour later she had lost it, or perhaps had given it away while Phillips was looking elsewhere. She bought another, even finer, the next day. Anyone could have all the money he wanted, simply by asking: it was as easy to come by as air, for these people. Being here was much like going to the movies, Phillips told himself. A different show every day: not much plot, but the special effects were magnificent and the detail-work could hardly have been surpassed. A megamovie, a vast entertainment that went on all the time and was being played out by the whole population of Earth. And it was all so effortless, so spontaneous: just as when he had gone to a movie he had never troubled to think about the myriad technicians behind the scenes, the cameramen and the costume designers and the set-builders and the electricians and the model-makers and the boom operators, so too here he chose not to question the means by which Alexandria had been set before him. It felt real. It was real. When he drank the strong red wine it gave him a pleasant buzz. If he leaped from the beacon chamber of the Lighthouse he suspected he would die, though perhaps he would not stay dead for long: doubtless they had some way of restoring him as often as was necessary. Death did not seem to be a factor in these people's lives. By day they saw sights. By night he and Gioia went to parties, in their hotel, in seaside villas, in the palaces of the high nobility. The usual people were there all the time: Hawk and Hekna, Aramayne, Stengard and Shelimir, Nissandra, Asoka, Afonso, Protay. At the parties there were five or ten temporaries for every citizen, some as mere servants, others as entertainers or even surrogate guests, mingling freely and a little daringly. But everyone knew, all the time, who was a citizen and who just a temporary. Phillips began to think his own status lay somewhere between. Certainly they treated him with a courtesy that no-one ever would give a temporary, and yet there was a condescension to their manner that told him not simply that he was not one of them but that he was someone or something of an altogether different order of existence. That he was Gioia's lover gave him some standing in their eyes, but not a great deal: obviously he was always going to be an outsider, a primitive, ancient and quaint. For that matter he noticed that Gioia herself, though unquestionably a member of the set, seemed to be regarded as something of an outsider, like a tradesman's great-granddaughter in a gathering of Plantagenets. She did not always find out about the best parties in time to attend; her friends did not always reciprocate her effusive greetings with the same degree of warmth; sometimes he noticed her straining to hear some bit of gossip that was not quite being shared with her. Was it because she had taken him for her lover? Or was it the other way around: that she had chosen to be his lover precisely because she was not a full member of their caste? Being a primitive gave him, at least, something to talk about at their parties. 'Tell us about war,' they said. 'Tell us about elections. About money. About disease.' They wanted to

know everything, though they did not seem to pay close attention: their eyes were quick to glaze. Still, they asked. He described traffic jams to them, and politics, and deodorants, and vitamin pills. He told them about cigarettes, newspapers, subways, telephone directories, credit cards and basketball. 'Which was your city?' they asked. New York, he told them. 'And when was it? The seventh century, did you say?' The twentieth, he told them. They exchanged glances and nodded. 'We will have to do it,' they said. 'The World Trade Center, the Empire State Building, the Citicorp Center, the Cathedral of St John the Divine: how fascinating! Yankee Stadium. The Verrazzano Bridge. We will do it all. But first must come Mohenjo-daro. And then, I think, Constantinople. Did your city have many people?' Seven million, he said. Just in the five boroughs alone. They nodded, smiling amiably, unfazed by the number. Seven million, seventy million -- it was all the same to them, he sensed. They would just bring forth the temporaries in whatever quantity was required. He wondered how well they would carry the job off. He was no real judge of Atexandrias and Asgard, after all. Here they could have unicorns and hippogriffs in the zoo, and live sphinxes prowling in the gutters, and it did not trouble him. Their fanciful Alexandria was as good as history's, or better. But how sad, how disillusioning it would be, if the New York that they conjured up had Greenwich Village uptown and Times Square in the Bronx, and the New Yorkers, gentle and polite, spoke with the honeyed accents of Savannah or New Orleans. Well, that was nothing he needed to brood about just now. Very likely they were only being courteous when they spoke of doing his New York. They had all the vastness of the past to choose from: Nineveh, Memphis of the Pharaohs, the London of Victoria or Shakespeare or Richard III, Florence of the Medici, the Paris of Abelard and Heo'se or the Paris of Louis XIV, Montezuma's Tenochtitlan and Atahualpa's Cuzco; Damascus, St Petersburg, Babylon, Troy. And then there were all the cities like New Chicago, out of time that was time yet unborn to him but ancient history to them. In such richness, such an infinity of choices, even mighty New York might have to wait a long while for its turn. Would he still be among them by the time they got around to it? By then, perhaps, they might have become bored with him and returned him to his own proper era. Or possibly he would simply have grown old and died. Even here, he supposed, he would eventually die, though no-one else ever seemed to. He did not know. He realized that in fact he did not know anything.

\* \* \* \* The north wind blew all day long. Vast flocks of ibises appeared over the city, fleeing the heat of the interior, and screeched across the sky with their black necks and scrawny legs extended. The sacred birds, descending by the thousand, scuttered about in every crossroad, pouncing on spiders and beetles, on mice, on the debris of the meat shops and the bakeries. They were beautiful but annoyingly ubiquitous, and they splashed their dung over the marble buildings; each morning squadrons of temporaries carefully washed it off. Gioia said little to him now. She seemed cool, withdrawn, depressed; and there was something almost intangible about her, as though she were gradually becoming transparent. He felt it would be an intrusion upon her privacy to ask her what was wrong. Perhaps it was only restlessness. She became religious, and presented costly offerings at the temples of Serapis, Isis, Poseidon, Pan. She went to the necropolis west of the city to lay wreaths on the tombs in the catacombs. In a single day she climbed the Lighthouse three times without any sign of fatigue. One afternoon he returned from a visit to the Library and found her naked on the patio; she had anointed herself all over with some aromatic green salve. Abruptly she said, 'I think it's time to leave Alexandria, don't you?' \* \* \* \* She wanted to go to Mohenjo-daro, but Mohenjo-daro was not yet ready for visitors. Instead they flew eastwards to Chang-an, which they had not seen in years. It was Phillips's suggestion: he hoped that the cosmopolitan gaudiness of the old T'ang capital would lift her mood. They were to be guests of the Emperor this time: an unusual privilege, which ordinarily had to be applied for far in advance, but Phillips had told some of Gioia's highly-placed friends that she was unhappy, and they had quickly arranged everything. Three

endlessly bowing functionaries in flowing yellow robes and purple sashes met them at the Gate of Brilliant Virtue in the city's south wall and conducted them to their pavilion, close by the imperial palace and the Forbidden Garden. It was a light, airy place, thin walls of plastered brick braced by graceful columns of some dark, aromatic wood. Fountains played on the roof of green and yellow tiles, creating an unending cool rainfall of recirculating water. The balustrades were of carved marble, the door-fittings were of gold.

There was a suite of private rooms for him, and another for her, though they would share the handsome damask-draped bedroom at the heart of the pavilion. As soon as they arrived Gioia announced that she must go to her rooms to bathe and dress. 'There will be a formal reception for us at the palace tonight,' she said. 'They say the imperial receptions are splendid beyond anything you could imagine. I want to be at my best.' The Emperor and all his ministers, she told him, would receive them in the Hall of the Supreme Ultimate; there would be a banquet for a thousand people; Persian dancers would perform, and the celebrated jugglers of Chung-nan. Afterwards everyone would be conducted into the fantastic landscape of the Forbidden Garden to view the dragon-races and the fireworks.

He went to his own rooms. Two delicate little maidservants undressed him and bathed him with fragrant sponges. The pavilion came equipped with eleven temporaries who were to be their servants: soft-voiced unobtrusive catlike Chinese, done with perfect verisimilitude, straight black hair, glowing skin, epicanthic folds. Phillips often wondered what happened to a city's temporaries when the city's time was over. Were the towering Norse heroes of Asgard being recycled at this moment into wiry dark-skinned Dravidians for Mohenjo-daro? When Timbuctoo's day was done, would its brightly-robed black warriors be converted into supple Byzantines to stock the arcades of Constantinople? Or did they simply discard the old temporaries like so many excess props, stash them in warehouses somewhere, and turn out the appropriate quantities of the new model? He did not know; and once when he had asked Gioia about it she had grown uncomfortable and vague. She did not like him to probe for information, and he suspected it was because she had very little to give. These people did not seem to question the workings of their own world; his curiosities were very twentieth-century of him, he was frequently told, in that gently patronizing way of theirs. As his two little maids patted him with their sponges he thought of asking them where they had served before Chang-an. Rio? Rome? Haroun al-Raschid's Baghdad? But these fragile girls, he knew, would only giggle and retreat if he tried to question them. Interrogating temporaries was not only improper but pointless: it was like interrogating one's luggage.

When he was bathed and robed in rich red silks he wandered the pavilion for a little while, admiring the tinkling pendants of green jade dangling on the portico, the lustrous auburn pillars, the rainbow hues of the intricately interwoven girders and brackets that supported the roof. Then, wearying of his solitude, he approached the bamboo curtain at the entrance to Gioia's suite. A porter and one of the maids stood just within. They indicated that he should not enter; but he scowled at them and they melted from him like snowflakes. A trail of incense led him through the pavilion to Gioia's innermost dressing-room. There he halted, just outside the door.

Gioia sat naked with her back to him at an ornate dressing table of some rare flame-coloured wood inlaid with bands of orange and green porcelain. She was studying herself intently in a mirror of polished bronze held by one of her maids: picking through her scalp with her fingernails, as a woman might do who was searching out her grey hairs.

But that seemed strange. Grey hair, on Gioia? On a citizen? A temporary might display some appearance of ageing, perhaps, but surely not a citizen. Citizens remained forever young. Gioia looked like a girl. Her face was smooth and unlined, her flesh was firm, her hair was dark: that was true of all of them, every citizen he had ever seen. And yet there was no mistaking what Gioia was doing. She found a hair, frowned, drew it taut, nodded, plucked it. Another. Another. She pressed the tip of her finger to her cheek as if testing it for resilience. She tugged at the skin below her eyes, pulling it downwards. Such familiar

little gestures of vanity; but so odd here, he thought, in this world of the perpetually young. Gioia, worried about growing old? Had he simply failed to notice the signs of age on her? Or was it that she worked hard behind his back at concealing them? Perhaps that was it. Was he wrong about the citizens, then? Did they age even as the people of less blessed eras had always done, but simply have better ways of hiding it? How old was she, anyway? Thirty? Sixty? Three hundred?

Gioia appeared satisfied now. She waved the mirror away; she rose; she beckoned for her banquet robes. Phillips, still standing unnoticed by the door, studied her with admiration: the small round buttocks, almost but not quite boyish, the elegant line of her spine, the surprising breadth of her shoulders. No, he thought, she is not ageing at all. Her body is still like a girl's. She looks as young as on the day they first had met, however long ago that was -- he could not say; it was hard to keep track of time here; but he was sure some years had passed since they had come together. Those grey hairs, those wrinkles and sags for which she had searched just now with such desperate intensity, must all be imaginary, mere artefacts of vanity. Even in this remote future epoch, then, vanity was not extinct. He wondered why she was so concerned with the fear of ageing. An affectation? Did all these timeless people take some perverse pleasure in fretting over the possibility that they might be growing old? Or was it some private fear of Gioia's, another symptom of the mysterious depression that had come over her in Alexandria?

Not wanting her to think that he had been spying on her, when all he had really intended was to pay her a visit, he slipped silently away to dress for the evening. She came to him an hour later, gorgeously robed, swaddled from chin to ankles in a brocade of brilliant colours shot through with threads of gold, face painted, hair drawn up tightly and fastened with ivory combs: very much the lady of the court. His servants had made him splendid also, a lustrous black surplice embroidered with golden dragons over a sweeping floor-length gown of shining white silk, a necklace and pendant of red coral, a five-cornered grey felt hat that rose in tower upon tower like a ziggurat. Gioia, grinning, touched her fingertips to his cheek. 'You look marvellous!' she told him. 'Like a grand mandarin!' 'And you like an empress,' he said. 'Of some distant land: Persia, India. Here to pay a ceremonial visit on the Son of Heaven.' An access of love suffused his spirit, and, catching her lightly by the wrist, he drew her towards him, as close as he could manage it considering how elaborate their costumes were. But as he bent forward and downwards, meaning to brush his lips lightly and affectionately against the tip of her nose, he perceived an unexpected strangeness, an anomaly: the coating of white paint that was her make-up seemed oddly to magnify rather than mask the contours of her skin, highlighting and revealing details he had never observed before. He saw a pattern of fine lines radiating from the corners of her eyes, and the unmistakable beginning of a quirk-mark in her cheek just to the left of her mouth, and perhaps the faint indentation of frown-lines in her flawless forehead. A shiver travelled along the nape of his neck. So it was not affectation, then, that had had her studying her mirror so fiercely. Age was in truth beginning to stake its claim on her, despite all that he had come to believe about these people's agelessness. But a moment later he was not so sure. Gioia turned and slid gently half a step back from him -- she must have found his stare disturbing -- and the lines he had thought he had seen were gone. He searched for them and saw only girlish smoothness once again. A trick of the light? A figment of an overwrought imagination? He was baffled.

'Come,' she said. 'We mustn't keep the Emperor waiting.' Five moustachioed warriors in armour of white quilting and seven musicians playing cymbals and pipes escorted them to the Hall of the Supreme Ultimate. There they found the full court arrayed: princes and ministers, high officials, yellow-robed monks, a swarm of imperial concubines. In a place of honour to the right of the royal thrones, which rose like gilded scaffolds high above all else, was a little group of stern-faced men in foreign costumes, the ambassadors of Rome and Byzantium, of Arabia and Syria, of Korea, Japan,

Tibet, Turkestan. Incense smouldered in enamelled braziers. A poet sang a delicate twanging melody, accompanying himself on a small harp. Then the Emperor and Empress entered: two tiny aged people, like waxen images, moving with infinite slowness, taking steps no greater than a child's. There was the sound of trumpets as they ascended their thrones. When the little Emperor was seated -- he looked like a doll up there, ancient, faded, shrunken, yet still somehow a figure of extraordinary power -- he stretched forth both his hands, and enormous gongs began to sound. It was a scene of astonishing splendour, grand and overpowering.

These are all temporaries, Phillips realized suddenly. He saw only a handful of citizens -- eight, ten, possibly as many as a dozen -- scattered here and there about the vast room. He knew them by their eyes, dark, liquid, knowing. They were watching not only the imperial spectacle but also Gioia and him; and Gioia, smiling secretly, nodding almost imperceptibly to them, was acknowledging their presence and their interest. But those few were the only ones in here who were autonomous living beings. All the rest -- the entire splendid court, the great mandarins and paladins, the officials, the giggling concubines, the haughty and resplendent ambassadors, the aged Emperor and Empress themselves, were simply part of the scenery. Had the world ever seen entertainment on so grand a scale before? All this pomp, all this pageantry, conjured up each night for the amusement of a dozen or so viewers?

At the banquet the little group of citizens sat together at a table apart, a round onyx slab draped with translucent green silk. There turned out to be seventeen of them in all, including Gioia; Gioia appeared to know all of them, though none, so far as he could tell, was a member of her set that he had met before. She did not attempt introductions. Nor was conversation at all possible during the meal: there was a constant astounding roaring din in the room. Three orchestras played at once and there were troupes of strolling musicians also, and a steady stream of monks and their attendants marched back and forth between the tables loudly chanting sutras and waving censers to the deafening accompaniment of drums and gongs. The Emperor did not descend from his throne to join the banquet; he seemed to be asleep, though now and then he waved his hand in time to the music. Gigantic half-naked brown slaves with broad cheekbones and mouths like gaping pockets brought forth the food, peacock tongues and breast of phoenix heaped on mounds of glowing saffron-coloured rice, served on frail alabaster plates. For chopsticks they were given slender rods of dark jade. The wine, served in glistening crystal beakers, was thick and sweet, with an aftertaste of raisins, and no beaker was allowed to remain empty for more than a moment. Phillips felt himself growing dizzy: when the Persian dancers emerged he could not tell whether there were five of them or fifty, and as they performed their intricate whirling routines it seemed to him that their slender muslin-veiled forms were blurring and merging one into another. He felt frightened by their proficiency, and wanted to look away, but he could not. The Chung-nan jugglers that followed them were equally skilful, equally alarming, filling the air with scythes, flaming torches, live animals, rare porcelain vases, pink jade hatchets, silver bells, gilded cups, wagon-wheels, bronze vessels, and never missing a catch. The citizens applauded politely but did not seem impressed. After the jugglers, the dancers returned, performing this time on stilts; the waiters brought platters of steaming meat of a pale lavender colour, unfamiliar in taste and texture: filet of camel, perhaps, or haunch of hippopotamus, or possibly some choice chop from a young dragon. There was more wine. Feebly Phillips tried to wave it away, but the servitors were implacable. This was a drier sort, greenish-gold, austere, sharp on the tongue. With it came a silver dish, chilled to a polar coldness, that held shaved ice flavoured with some potent smoky-flavoured brandy. The jugglers were doing a second turn, he noticed. He thought he was going to be ill. He looked helplessly towards Gioia, who seemed sober but fiercely animated, almost manic, her eyes blazing like rubies. She touched his cheek fondly. A cool draught blew through the hall: they had opened one entire wall, revealing the garden, the night, the stars. Just outside was a colossal wheel of oiled



paper stretched on wooden struts. They must have erected it in the past hour: it stood a hundred and fifty feet high or even more, and on it hung lanterns by the thousands, glimmering like giant fireflies. The guests began to leave the hall. Phillips let himself be swept along into the garden, where under a yellow moon strange crook-armed trees with dense black needles loomed ominously. Gioia slipped her arm through his. They went down to a lake of bubbling crimson fluid and watched scarlet flamingo-like birds ten feet tall fastidiously spearing angry-eyed turquoise eels. They stood in awe before a fat-bellied Buddha of gleaming blue tilework, seventy feet high. A horse with a golden mane came prancing by, striking showers of brilliant red sparks wherever its hooves touched the ground. In a grove of lemon trees that seemed to have the power to wave their slender limbs about, Phillips came upon the Emperor, standing by himself and rocking gently back and forth. The old man seized Phillips by the hand and pressed something into his palm, closing his fingers tight about it; when he opened his fist a few moments later he found his palm full of grey irregular pearls. Gioia took them from him and cast them into the air, and they burst like exploding firecrackers, giving off splashes of coloured light. A little later, Phillips realized that he was no longer wearing his surplice or his white silken undergown. Gioia was naked too, and she drew him gently down into a carpet of moist blue moss, where they made love until dawn, fiercely at first, then slowly, languidly, dreamily. At sunrise he looked at her tenderly and saw that something was wrong.

'Gioia?' he said doubtfully. She smiled. 'Ah, no. Gioia is with Fenimon tonight. I am Belilala. 'With -- Fenimon?' 'They are old friends. She had not seen him in years.'

'Ah. I see. And you are -- ?' 'Belilala,' she said again, touching her fingertips to his cheek. \* \* \* \* It was not unusual, Belilala said. It happened all the time; the only unusual thing was that it had not happened to him before now. Couples formed, travelled together for a while, drifted apart, eventually reunited. It did not mean that Gioia had left him for ever. It meant only that just now she chose to be with Fenimon. Gioia would return. In the meanwhile he would not be alone. 'You and I met in New Chicago,' Belilala told him. 'And then we saw each other again in Timbuctoo. Have you forgotten? Oh, yes, I see that you have forgotten!' She laughed prettily; she did not seem at all offended. She looked enough like Gioia to be her sister. But, then, all the citizens looked more or less alike to him. And apart from their physical resemblance, so he quickly came to realize, Belilala and Gioia were not really very similar. There was a calmness, a deep reservoir of serenity, in Belilala, that Gioia, eager and volatile and ever impatient, did not seem to have. Strolling the swarming streets of Chang-an with Belilala, he did not perceive in her any of Gioia's restless feverish need always to know what lay beyond, and beyond, and beyond even that. When they toured the Hsing-ch'ing Palace, Belilala did not after five minutes begin -- as Gioia surely would have done -- to seek directions to the Fountain of Hsuan-tsung or the Wild Goose Pagoda. Curiosity did not consume Belilala as it did Gioia. Plainly she believed that there would always be enough time for her to see everything she cared to see. There were some days when Belilala chose not to go out at all, but was content merely to remain at their pavilion playing a solitary game with flat porcelain counters, or viewing the flowers of the garden. He found, oddly, that he enjoyed the respite from Gioia's intense world-swallowing appetites; and yet he longed for her to return. Belilala -- beautiful, gentle, tranquil, patient -- was too perfect for him. She seemed unreal in her gleaming impeccability, much like one of those Sung celadon vases that appear too flawless to have been thrown and glazed by human hands. There was something a little soulless about her: an immaculate finish outside, emptiness within. Belilala might almost have been a temporary, he thought, though he knew she was not. He could explore the pavilions and palaces of Chang-an with her, he could make graceful conversation with her while they dined, he could certainly enjoy coupling with her; but he could not love her or even contemplate the possibility. It was hard to imagine Belilala worriedly studying herself in a

mirror for wrinkles and grey hairs. Belilala would never be any older than she was at this moment; nor could Belilala ever have been any younger. Perfection does not move along an axis of time. But the perfection of Belilala's glossy surface made her inner being impenetrable to him. Gioia was more vulnerable, more obviously flawed -- her restlessness, her moodiness, her vanity, her fears -- and therefore she was more accessible to his own highly imperfect twentieth-century sensibility.

Occasionally he saw Gioia as he roamed the city, or thought he did. He had a glimpse of her among the miracle-vendors in the Persian Bazaar, and outside the Zoroastrian temple, and again by the goldfish pond in the Serpentine Park. But he was never quite sure that the woman he saw was really Gioia, and he never could get close enough to her to be certain: she had a way of vanishing as he approached, like some mysterious Lorelei luring him onwards and onwards in a hopeless chase. After a while he came to realize that he was not going to find her until she was ready to be found.

He lost track of time. Weeks, months, years? He had no idea. In this city of exotic luxury, mystery and magic, all was in constant flux and transition and the days had a fitful, unstable quality. Buildings and even whole streets were torn down one afternoon and re-erected, within days, far away. Grand new pagodas sprouted like toadstools in the night. Citizens came in from Asgard, Alexandria, Timbuctoo, New Chicago, stayed for a time, disappeared, returned. There was a constant round of court receptions, banquets, theatrical events, each one much like the one before. The festivals in honour of past emperors and empresses might have given some form to the year, but they seemed to occur in a random way, the ceremony marking the death of T'ai Tsung coming around twice the same year, so it seemed to him, once in a season of snow and again in high summer, and the one honouring the ascension of the Empress Wu being held twice in a single season. Perhaps he had misunderstood something. But he knew it was no use asking anyone. \* \*

\* \* One day Belilala said unexpectedly, 'Shall we go to Mohenjo-daro?' 'I didn't know it was ready for visitors,' he replied. 'Oh, yes. For quite some time now.'

He hesitated. This had caught him unprepared. Cautiously he said, 'Gioia and I were going to go there together, you know.'

Belilala smiled amiably, as though the topic under discussion were nothing more than the choice of that evening's restaurant. 'Were you?' she asked.

'It was all arranged while we were still in Alexandria. To go with you instead -- I don't know what to tell you, Belilala.' Phillips sensed that he was growing terribly flustered. 'You know that I'd like to go. With you. But on the other hand I can't help feeling that I shouldn't go there until I'm back with Gioia again. If I ever am.' How foolish this sounds, he thought. How clumsy, how adolescent. He found that he was having trouble looking straight at her. Uneasily he said, with a kind of desperation in his voice, 'I did promise her -- there was a commitment, you understand -- a firm agreement that we would go to Mohenjo-daro together --'

'Oh, but Gioia's already there!' said Belilala in the most casual way. He gaped as though she had punched him. 'What?'

'She was one of the first to go, after it opened. Months and months ago. You didn't know?' she asked, sounding surprised, but not very. 'You really didn't know?'

That astonished him. He felt bewildered, betrayed, furious. His cheeks grew hot, his mouth gaped. He shook his head again and again, trying to clear it of confusion. It was a moment before he could speak. 'Already there?' he said at last. 'Without waiting for me? After we had talked about going there together -- after we had agreed --'

Belilala laughed. 'But how could she resist seeing the newest city? You know how impatient Gioia is!' 'Yes. Yes.'

He was stunned. He could barely think. 'Just like all short-timers,' Belilala said. 'She rushes here, she rushes there. She must have it all, now, now, right away, at once, instantly. You ought never to expect her to wait for you for anything for very long: the fit seizes her, and off she goes. Surely you must know that about her by now.'

'A short-timer?' He had not heard that term before. 'Yes. You knew that.

You must have known that.' Belilala flashed her sweetest smile. She showed no

sign of comprehending his distress. With a brisk wave of her hand she said, 'Well, then, shall we go, you and I? To Mohenjo-daro?' 'Of course,' Phillips said bleakly. 'When would you like to leave?' 'Tonight,' he said. He paused a moment. 'What's a short-timer, Belilala?' Colour came to her cheeks. 'Isn't it obvious?' she asked. \* \* \*

\* Had there ever been a more hideous place on the face of the earth than the city of Mohenjo-daro? Phillips found it difficult to imagine one. Nor could he understand why, out of all the cities that had ever been, these people had chosen to restore this one to existence. More than ever they seemed alien to him, unfathomable, incomprehensible. From the terrace atop the many-towered citadel he peered down into grim claustrophobic Mohenjo-daro and shivered. The stark, bleak city looked like nothing so much as some prehistoric prison colony. In the manner of an uneasy tortoise it huddled, squat and compact, against the grey monotonous Indus River plain: miles of dark burnt-brick walls enclosing miles of terrifyingly orderly streets, laid out in an awesome, monstrous gridiron pattern of maniacal rigidity. The houses themselves were dismal and forbidding too, clusters of brick cells gathered about small airless courtyards. There were no windows, only small doors that opened not on to the main boulevards but on to the tiny mysterious lanes that ran between the buildings. Who had designed this horrifying metropolis? What harsh sour souls they must have had, these frightening and frightened folk, creating for themselves in the lush fertile plains of India such a Supreme Soviet of a city! 'How lovely it is,' Belilala murmured. 'How fascinating!' He stared at her in amazement. 'Fascinating? Yes,' he said. 'I suppose so. The same way that the smile of a cobra is fascinating.' 'What's a cobra?' 'Poisonous predatory serpent,' Phillips told her. 'Probably extinct. Or formerly extinct, more likely. It wouldn't surprise me if you people had re-created a few and turned them loose in Mohenjo to make things livelier.' 'You sound angry, Charles.' 'Do I? That's not how I feel.' 'How do you feel, then?' 'I don't know,' he said after a long moment's pause. He shrugged. 'Lost, I suppose. Very far from home.' 'Poor Charles.' 'Standing here in this ghastly barracks of a city, listening to you tell me how beautiful it is, I've never felt more alone in my life.' 'You miss Gioia very much, don't you?' He gave her another startled look. 'Gioia has nothing to do with it. She's probably been having ecstasies over the loveliness of Mohenjo just like you. Just like all of you. I suppose I'm the only one who can't find the beauty, the charm. I'm the only one who looks out there and sees only horror, and then wonders why nobody else sees it, why in fact people would set up a place like this for entertainment, for pleasure -- ' Her eyes were gleaming. 'Oh, you are angry! You really are!' 'Does that fascinate you too?' he snapped. 'A demonstration of genuine primitive emotion? A typical quaint twentieth-century outburst?' He paced the rampart in short quick anguished steps. 'Ah. Ah. I think I understand it now, Belilala. Of course: I'm part of your circus, the star of the sideshow. I'm the first experiment in setting up the next stage of it, in fact.' Her eyes were wide. The sudden harshness and violence in his voice seemed to be alarming and exciting her at the same time. That angered him even more. Fiercely he went on, 'Bringing whole cities back out of time was fun for a while, but it lacks a certain authenticity, eh? For some reason you couldn't bring the inhabitants too; you couldn't just grab a few million prehistorics out of Egypt or Greece or India and dump them down in this era, I suppose because you might have too much trouble controlling them, or because you'd have the problem of disposing of them once you were bored with them. So you had to settle for creating temporaries to populate your ancient cities. But now you've got me. I'm something more real than a temporary, and that's a terrific novelty for you, and novelty is the thing you people crave more than anything else: maybe the only thing you crave. And here I am, complicated, unpredictable, edgy, capable of anger, fear, sadness, love and all those other formerly extinct things. Why settle for picturesque architecture when you can observe

picturesque emotion, too? What fun I must be for all of you! And if you decide that I was really interesting, maybe you'll ship me back where I came from and check out a few other ancient types -- a Roman gladiator, maybe, or a Renaissance pope, or even a Neanderthal or two -- 'Charles,' she said tenderly. 'Oh, Charles, Charles, Charles, how lonely you must be, how lost, how troubled! Will you ever forgive me? Will you ever forgive us all?' Once more he was astounded by her. She sounded entirely sincere, altogether sympathetic. Was she? Was she, really? He was not sure he had ever had a sign of genuine caring from any of them before, not even Gioia. Nor could he bring himself to trust Belilala now. He was afraid of her, afraid of all of them, of their brittleness, their slyness, their elegance. He wished he could go to her and have her take him in her arms; but he felt too much the shaggy prehistoric just now to be able to risk asking that comfort of her. He turned away and began to walk around the rim of the citadel's massive wall.

'Charles?' 'Let me alone for a little while,' he said. He walked on. His forehead throbbed and there was a pounding in his chest. All stress systems going full blast, he thought: secret glands dumping gallons of inflammatory substances into his bloodstream. The heat, the inner confusion, the repellent look of this place -- Try to understand, he thought. Relax. Look about you. Try to enjoy your holiday in Mohenjo-daro. He leaned warily outwards over the edge of the wall. He had never seen a wall like this; it must be forty feet thick at the base, he guessed, perhaps even more, and every brick perfectly shaped, meticulously set. Beyond the great rampart, marshes ran almost to the edge of the city, although close by the wall the swamps had been dammed and drained for agriculture. He saw lithe brown farmers down there, busy with their wheat and barley and peas. Cattle and buffaloes grazed a little farther out. The air was heavy, dank, humid. All was still. From somewhere close at hand came the sound of a droning, whining stringed instrument and a steady insistent chanting. Gradually a sort of peace pervaded him. His anger subsided. He felt himself beginning to grow calm again. He looked back at the city, the rigid interlocking streets, the maze of inner lanes, the millions of courses of precise brickwork. It is a miracle, he told himself, that this city is here in this place and at this time. And it is a miracle that I am here to see it. Caught for a moment by the magic within the bleakness, he thought he began to understand Belilala's awe and delight, and he wished now that he had not spoken to her so sharply. The city was alive. Whether it was the actual Mohenjo-daro of thousands upon thousands of years ago, ripped from the past by some wondrous hook, or simply a cunning reproduction, did not matter at all. Real or not, this was the true Mohenjo-daro. It had been dead and now, for the moment, it was alive again. These people, these citizens, might be trivial, but reconstructing Mohenjo-daro was no trivial achievement. And that the city that had been reconstructed was oppressive and sinister-looking was unimportant. No-one was compelled to live in Mohenjo-daro any more. Its time had come and gone, long ago; those little dark-skinned peasants and craftsmen and merchants down there were mere temporaries, mere inanimate things, conjured up like zombies to enhance the illusion. They did not need his pity. Nor did he need to pity himself. He knew that he should be grateful for the chance to behold these things. Some day, when this dream had ended and his hosts had returned him to the world of subways and computers and income tax and television networks, he would think of Mohenjo-daro as he had once beheld it, lofty walls of tightly woven dark brick under a heavy sky, and he would remember only its beauty.

Glancing back, he searched for Belilala and could not for a moment find her. Then he caught sight of her carefully descending a narrow staircase that angled down the inner face of the citadel wall. 'Belilala!' he called. She paused and looked his way, shading her eyes from the sun with her hand. 'Are you all right?' 'Where are you going?' 'To the baths,' she said. 'Do you want to come?' He nodded. 'Yes. Wait for me, will you? I'll be right there.' He began to run towards her along the top of the wall. \* \* \* \* The baths were

attached to the citadel: a great open tank the size of a large swimming pool, lined with bricks set on edge in gypsum mortar and waterproofed with asphalt, and eight smaller tanks just north of it in a kind of covered arcade. He supposed that in ancient times the whole complex had had some ritual purpose, the large tank used by common folk and the small chambers set aside for the private ablutions of priests or nobles. Now the baths were maintained, it seemed, entirely for the pleasure of visiting citizens. As Phillips came up the passageway that led to the main bath he saw fifteen or twenty of them lolling in the water or padding languidly about, while temporaries of the dark-skinned Mohenjo-daro type served them drinks and pungent little morsels of spiced meat as though this were some sort of luxury resort. Which was, he realized, exactly what it was. The temporaries wore white cotton loincloths; the citizens were naked. In his former life he had encountered that sort of casual public nudity a few times on visits to California and the south of France, and it had made him mildly uneasy. But he was growing accustomed to it here.

The changing-rooms were tiny brick cubicles connected by rows of closely placed steps to the courtyard that surrounded the central tank. They entered one and Belilala swiftly slipped out of the loose cotton robe that she had worn since their arrival that morning. With arms folded she stood leaning against the wall, waiting for him. After a moment he dropped his own robe and followed her outside. He felt a little giddy, sauntering around naked in the open like this.

On the way to the main bathing area they passed the private baths. None of them seemed to be occupied. They were elegantly constructed chambers, with finely jointed brick floors and carefully designed runnels to drain excess water into the passageway that led to the primary drain. Phillips was struck with admiration for the cleverness of the prehistoric engineers. He peered into this chamber and that to see how the conduits and ventilating ducts were arranged, and when he came to the last room in the sequence he was surprised and embarrassed to discover that it was in use. A brawny grinning man, big-muscled, deep-chested, with exuberantly flowing shoulder-length red hair and a flamboyant, sharply tapering beard was thrashing about merrily with two women in the small tank. Phillips had a quick glimpse of a lively tangle of arms, legs, breasts, buttocks.

'Sorry,' he muttered. His cheeks reddened. Quickly he ducked out, blurting apologies as he went. 'Didn't realize the room was occupied -- no wish to intrude --'

Belilala had proceeded on down the passageway. Phillips hurried after her. From behind him came peals of cheerful raucous booming laughter and high-pitched giggling and the sound of splashing water. Probably they had not even noticed him.

He paused a moment, puzzled, playing back in his mind that one startling glimpse. Something was not right. Those women, he was fairly sure, were citizens: little slender elfin dark-haired girlish creatures, the standard model. But the man? That great curling sweep of red hair? Not a citizen. Citizens did not affect shoulder-length hair. And red? Nor had he ever seen a citizen so burly, so powerfully muscular. Or one with a beard. But he could hardly be a temporary, either. Phillips could conceive no reason why there would be so Anglo-Saxon-looking a temporary at Mohenjo-daro; and it was unthinkable for a temporary to be frolicking like that with citizens, anyway.

'Charles?' He looked up ahead. Belilala stood at the end of the passageway, outlined in a nimbus of brilliant sunlight.

'Charles?' she said again. 'Did you lose your way?' 'I'm right here behind you,' he said. 'I'm coming.'

'Who did you meet in there?' 'A man with a beard.' 'With a what?' 'A beard,' he said. 'Red hair growing on his face. I wonder who he is.'

'Nobody I know,' said Belilala. 'The only one I know with hair on his face is you. And yours is black, and you shave it off every day.' She laughed. 'Come along, now! I see some friends by the pool!'

He caught up with her and they went hand in hand out into the courtyard. Immediately a waiter glided up to them, an obsequious little temporary with a tray of drinks. Phillips waved it away and headed for the pool. He felt terribly exposed: he imagined that the citizens disporting themselves here were staring intently at him, studying his hairy

primitive body as though he were some mythical creature, a Minotaur, a werewolf, summoned up for their amusement. Belilala drifted off to talk to someone and he slipped into the water, grateful for the concealment it offered. It was deep, warm, comforting. With swift powerful strokes he breast-stroked from one end to the other. A citizen perched elegantly on the pool's rim smiled at him. 'Ah, so you've come at last, Charles!' Char-less. Two syllables. Someone from Gioia's set: Stengard, Hawk, Aramayne? He could not remember which one. They were all so much alike. Phillips returned the man's smile in a half-hearted, tentative way. He searched for something to say and finally asked, 'Have you been here long?' 'Weeks. Perhaps months. What a splendid achievement this city is, eh, Charles? Such utter unity of mood -- such a total statement of a uniquely single-minded aesthetic -- ' 'Yes. Single-minded is the word,' Phillips said drily. 'Gioia's word, actually. Gioia's phrase. I was merely quoting.' \_Gioia\_. He felt as if he had been stabbed. 'You've spoken to Gioia lately?' he said. 'Actually, no. It was Hekna who saw her. You do remember Hekna, eh?' He nodded towards two naked women standing on the brick platform that bordered the pool, chatting, delicately nibbling morsels of meat. They could have been twins. 'There is Hekna, with your Belilala.' Hekna, yes. So this must be Hawk, Phillips thought, unless there has been some recent shift of couples. 'How sweet she is, your Belilala,' Hawk said. 'Gioia chose very wisely when she picked her for you.' Another stab: a much deeper one. 'Is that how it was?' he said. 'Gioia \_picked\_ Belilala for me?' 'Why, of course!' Hawk seemed surprised. It went without saying, evidently. 'What did you think? That Gioia would merely go off and leave you to fend for yourself?' 'Hardly. Not Gioia.' 'She's very tender, very gentle, isn't she?' 'You mean Belilala? Yes, very,' said Phillips carefully. 'A dear woman, a wonderful woman. But of course I hope to get together with Gioia again soon.' He paused. 'They say she's been in Mohenjo-daro almost since it opened.' 'She was here, yes.' '\_Was?\_' 'Oh, you know Gioia,' Hawk said lightly. 'She's moved along by now, naturally.' Phillips leaned forward. 'Naturally,' he said. Tension thickened his voice. 'Where has she gone this time?' 'Timbuctoo, I think. Or New Chicago. I forget which one it was. She was telling us that she hoped to be in Timbuctoo for the closing-down party. But then Fenimon had some pressing reason for going to New Chicago. I can't remember what they decided to do.' Hawk gestured sadly. 'Either way, a pity that she left Mohenjo before the new visitor came. She had such a rewarding time with you, after all: I'm sure she'd have found much to learn from him also.' The unfamiliar term twanged an alarm deep in Phillips's consciousness. '\_Visitor?\_' he said, angling his head sharply towards Hawk. 'What visitor do you mean?' 'You haven't met him yet? Oh, of course, you've only just arrived.' Phillips moistened his lips. 'I think I may have seen him. Long red hair? Beard like this?' 'That's the one! Willoughby, he's called. He's -- what? -- a Viking, a pirate, something like that. Tremendous vigour and force. Remarkable person. We should have many more visitors, I think. They're far superior to temporaries, everyone agrees. Talking with a temporary is a little like talking to one's self, wouldn't you say? They give you no significant illumination. But a visitor -- someone like this Willoughby -- or like you, Charles -- a visitor can be truly enlightening, a visitor can transform one's view of reality -- ' 'Excuse me,' Phillips said. A throbbing began behind his forehead. 'Perhaps we can continue this conversation later, yes?' He put the flats of his hands against the hot brick of the platform and hoisted himself swiftly from the pool. 'At dinner, maybe -- or afterwards -- yes? All right?' He set off at a quick half-trot back towards the passageway that led to the private baths. \* \* \* \* As he entered the roofed part of the structure his throat grew dry, his breath suddenly came short. He padded quickly up the hall and peered into the little bath-chamber. The bearded man was still there, sitting up in the tank, breast-high above the water, with one arm around each of the women. His eyes gleamed with fiery intensity in the dimness. He was grinning in

marvellous self-satisfaction; he seemed to brim with intensity, confidence, gusto. Let him be what I think he is, Phillips prayed. I have been alone among these people long enough. 'May I come in?' he asked. 'Aye, fellow!' cried the man in the tub thunderously. 'By my troth, come ye in, and bring your lass as well! God's teeth, I wot there's room aplenty for more folk in this tub than we!' At that great uproarious outcry Phillips felt a powerful surge of joy. What a joyous rowdy voice! How rich, how lusty, how totally uncitizen-like! And those oddly archaic words! '\_God's teeth? By my troth?\_' What sort of talk was that? What else but the good pure sonorous Elizabethan diction! Certainly it had something of the roll and fervour of Shakespeare about it. And spoken with -- an Irish brogue, was it? No, not quite: it was English, but English spoken in no manner Phillips had ever heard. Citizens did not speak that way. But a visitor might. So it was true. Relief flooded Phillips's soul. Not alone, then! Another relict of a former age -- another wanderer -- a companion in chaos, a brother in adversity -- a fellow voyager, tossed even farther than he had been by the tempests of time -- The bearded man grinned heartily and beckoned to Phillips with a toss of his head. 'Well, join us, join us, man! 'Tis good to see an English face again, amidst all these Moors and rogue Portugals! But what have ye done with thy lass? One can never have enough wenches, d'ye not agree?' The force and vigour of him were extraordinary: almost too much so. He roared, he bellowed, he boomed. He was so very much what he ought to be that he seemed more a character out of some old pirate movie than anything else, so blustering, so real, that he seemed unreal. A stage-Elizabethan, larger than life, a boisterous young Falstaff without the belly. Hoarsely Phillips said, 'Who are you?' 'Why, Ned Willoughby's son Francis am I, of Plymouth. Late of the service of Her Most Protestant Majesty, but most foully abducted by the powers of darkness and cast away among these blackamoor Hindus, or whatever they be. And thyself?' 'Charles Phillips.' After a moment's uncertainty he added, 'I'm from New York.' '\_New\_York? What place is that? In faith, man, I know it not!' 'A city in America.' 'A city in America, forsooth! What a fine fancy that is! In America, you say, and not on the Moon, or perchance underneath the sea?' To the women Willoughby said, 'D'ye hear him? He comes from a city in America! With the face of an Englishman, though not the manner of one, and not quite the proper sort of speech. A city in America! A city. God's blood, what will I hear next?' Phillips trembled. Awe was beginning to take hold of him. This man had walked the streets of Shakespeare's London, perhaps. He had clinked canisters with Marlowe or Essex or Walter Raleigh; he had watched the ships of the Armada wallowing in the Channel. It strained Phillips's spirit to think of it. This strange dream in which he found himself was compounding its strangeness now. He felt like a weary swimmer assailed by heavy surf, winded, dazed. The hot close atmosphere of the baths was driving him towards vertigo. There could be no doubt of it any longer. He was not the only primitive -- the only visitor -- who was wandering loose in this fiftieth century. They were conducting other experiments as well. He gripped the sides of the door to steady himself and said, 'When you speak of Her Most Protestant Majesty, it's Elizabeth the First you mean, is that not so?' 'Elizabeth, aye! As to the First, that is true enough, but why trouble to name her thus? There is but one. First and Last, I do trow, and God save her, there is no other!' Phillips studied the other man warily. He knew that he must proceed with care. A misstep at this point and he would forfeit any chance that Willoughby would take him seriously. How much metaphysical bewilderment, after all, could this man absorb? What did he know, what had anyone of his time known, of past and present and future and the notion that one might somehow move from one to the other as readily as one would go from Surrey to Kent? That was a twentieth-century idea, late-nineteenth at best, a fantastical speculation that very likely no one had even considered before Wells had sent his time traveller off to stare at the reddened sun of the Earth's last twilight. Willoughby's world was a world of Protestants and Catholics, of kings and

queens, of tiny sailing vessels, of swords at the hip and ox-carts on the road: that world seemed to Phillips far more alien and distant than was this world of citizens and temporaries. The risk that Willoughby would not begin to understand him was great. But this man and he were natural allies against a world they had never made. Phillips chose to take the risk.

'Elizabeth the First is the queen you serve,' he said. 'There will be another of her name in England, in due time. Has already been, in fact.'

Willoughby shook his head like a puzzled lion. 'Another Elizabeth, d'ye say?'

'A second one, and not much like the first. Long after your Virgin Queen, this one. She will reign in what you think of as the days to come. That I know without doubt.'

The Englishman peered at him and frowned. 'You see the future? Are you a soothsayer, then? A necromancer, mayhap? Or one of the very demons that brought me to this place?'

'Not at all,' Phillips said gently. 'Only a lost soul, like yourself.' He stepped into the little room and crouched by the side of the tank. The two citizen-women were staring at him in bland fascination. He ignored them. To Willoughby he said, 'Do you have any idea where you are?'

\* \* \* \* The Englishman had guessed, rightly enough, that he was in India: 'I do believe these little brown Moorish folk are of the Hindy sort,' he said. But that was as far as his comprehension of what had befallen him could go.

It had not occurred to him that he was no longer living in the sixteenth century. And of course he did not begin to suspect that this strange and sombre brick city in which he found himself was a wanderer out of an era even more remote than his own. Was there any way, Phillips wondered, of explaining that to him?

He had been here only three days. He thought it was devils that had carried him off. 'While I slept did they come for me,' he said. 'Mephistophilis Sathanas his henchmen seized me -- God alone can say why -- and swept me in a moment out to this torrid realm from England, where I had reposed among friends and family. For I was between one voyage and the next, you must understand, awaiting Drake and his ship -- you know Drake, the glorious Francis? God's blood, there's a mariner for ye! We were to go to the Main again, he and I, but instead here I be in this other place --'

Willoughby leaned close and said, 'I ask you, soothsayer, how can it be, that a man go to sleep in Plymouth and wake up in India? It is passing strange, is it not?'

'That it is,' Phillips said. 'But he that is in the dance must needs dance on, though he do but hop, eh? So do I believe.'

He gestured towards the two citizen-women. 'And therefore to console myself in this pagan land I have found me some sport among these little Portugal women --'

'Portugal?' said Phillips. 'Why, what else can they be, but Portugals? Is it not the Portugals who control all these coasts of India? See, the people are of two sorts here, the blackamoors and the others, the fair-skinned ones, the lords and masters who lie here in these baths. If they be not Hindus, and I think they are not, then Portugals is what they must be.'

He laughed and pulled the women against himself and rubbed his hands over their breasts as though they were fruits on a vine. 'is that not what you are, you little naked shameless Papist wenches? A pair of Portugals, eh?'

They giggled, but did not answer. 'No,' Phillips said. 'This is India, but not the India you think you know. And these women are not Portuguese.'

'Not Portuguese?' Willoughby said, baffled. 'No more so than you. I'm quite certain of that.'

Willoughby stroked his beard. 'I do admit I found them very odd, for Portugals. I have heard not a syllable of their Portugee speech on their lips. And it is strange also that they run naked as Adam and Eve in these baths, and allow me free plunder of their women, which is not the way of Portugals at home, God wot. But I thought me, this is India, they choose to live in another fashion here --'

'No,' Phillips said. 'I tell you, these are not Portuguese, nor any other people of Europe who are known to you.'

'Prithee, who are they, then?'

Do it delicately, now, Phillips warned himself. Delicately. He said, 'It is not far wrong to think of them as spirits of some kind -- demons, even. Or sorcerers who have magicked us out of our proper places in the world.' He paused, groping for some means to share



with Willoughby, in a way that Willoughby might grasp, this mystery that had enfolded them. He drew a deep breath. 'They've taken us not only across the sea,' he said, 'but across the years as well. We have both been hauled, you and I, far into the days that are to come.' Willoughby gave him a look of blank bewilderment. 'Days that are to come? Times yet unborn, d'ye mean? Why, I comprehend none of that!' 'Try to understand. We're both castaways in the same boat, man! But there's no way we can help each other if I can't make you see -- ' Shaking his head, Willoughby muttered, 'In faith, good friend, I find your words the merest folly. Today is today, and tomorrow is tomorrow, and how can a man step from one to t'other until tomorrow be turned into today?' 'I have no idea,' said Phillips. Struggle was apparent on Willoughby's face; but plainly he could perceive no more than the haziest outline of what Phillips was driving at, if that much. 'But this I know,' he went on. 'That your world and all that was in it is dead and gone. And so is mine, though I was born four hundred years after you, in the time of the second Elizabeth.' Willoughby snorted scornfully. 'Four hundred -- ' 'You must believe me!' 'Nay! Nay!' 'It's the truth. Your time is only history to me. And mine and yours are history to \_them\_ -- ancient history. They call us visitors, but what we are is captives.' Phillips felt himself quivering in the intensity of his effort. He was aware how insane this must sound to Willoughby. It was beginning to sound insane to him. 'They've stolen us out of our proper times -- seizing us like gypsies in the night -- ' 'Fie, man! You rave with lunacy!' Phillips shook his head. He reached out and seized Willoughby tightly by the wrist. 'I beg you, listen to me!' The citizen-women were watching closely, whispering to one another behind their hands, laughing. 'Ask them!' Phillips cried. 'Make them tell you what century this is! The sixteenth, do you think? Ask them!' 'What century could it be, but the sixteenth of Our Lord!' 'They will tell you it is the fiftieth.' Willoughby looked at him pityingly. 'Man, man, what a sorry thing thou art! The fiftieth, indeed!' He laughed. 'Fellow, listen to me, now. There is but one Elizabeth, safe upon her throne in Westminster. This is India. The year is Anno 1591. Come, let us you and I steal a ship from these Portugals, and make our way back to England, and peradventure you may get from there to your America -- ' 'There is no England.' 'Ah, can you say that and not be mad?' 'The cities and nations we knew are gone. These people live like magicians, Francis.' There was no use holding anything back now, Phillips thought leadenly. He knew that he had lost. 'They conjure up places of long ago, and build them here and there to suit their fancy, and when they are bored with them they destroy them, and start anew. There is no England. Europe is empty, featureless, void. Do you know what cities there are? There are only five in all the world. There is Alexandria of Egypt. There is Timbuctoo in Africa. There is New Chicago in America. There is a great city in China -- in Cathay, I suppose you would say. And there is this place, which they call Mohenjo-daro, and which is far more ancient than Greece, than Rome, than Babylon.' Quietly Willoughby said, 'Nay. This is mere absurdity. You say we are in some far tomorrow, and then you tell me we are dwelling in some city of long ago.' 'A conjuration, only,' Phillips said in desperation. 'A likeness of that city. Which these folk have fashioned somehow for their own amusement. Just as we are here, you and I: to amuse them. Only to amuse them.' 'You are completely mad.' 'Come with me, then. Talk with the citizens by the great pool. Ask them what year this is; ask them about England; ask them how you come to be here.' Once again Phillips grasped Willoughby's wrist. 'We should be allies. If we work together, perhaps we can discover some way to get ourselves out of this place, and -- ' 'Let me be, fellow.' 'Please -- ' 'Let me be!' roared Willoughby, and pulled his arm free. His eyes were stark with rage. Rising in the tank, he looked about furiously as though searching for a weapon. The citizen-women shrank back away from him, though at the same time they seemed captivated by the big man's fierce outburst. 'Go to, get you to Bedlam! Let me be, madman! Let me be!' \* \* \* \* Dismally Phillips

roamed the dusty unpaved streets of Mohenjo-daro alone for hours. His failure with Willoughby had left him bleak-spirited and sombre: he had hoped to stand back to back with the Elizabethan against the citizens, but he saw now that that was not to be. He had bungled things; or, more likely, it had been impossible ever to bring Willoughby to see the truth of their predicament.

In the stifling heat he went at random through the confusing congested lanes of flat-roofed windowless houses and blank featureless walls until he emerged into a broad marketplace. The life of the city swirled madly around him: the pseudo-life, rather, the intricate interactions of the thousands of temporaries who were nothing more than wind-up dolls set in motion to provide the illusion that pre-Vedic India was still a going concern. Here vendors sold beautiful little carved stone seals portraying tigers and monkeys and strange humped cattle, and women bargained vociferously with craftsmen for ornaments of ivory, gold, copper and bronze. Weary-looking women squatted behind immense mounds of newly-made pottery, pinkish-red with black designs. No-one paid any attention to him. He was the outsider here, neither citizen nor temporary. They belonged.

He went on, passing the huge granaries where workmen ceaselessly unloaded carts of wheat and others pounded grain on great circular brick platforms. He drifted into a public restaurant thronging with joyless silent people standing elbow to elbow at small brick counters, and was given a flat round piece of bread, a sort of tortilla or chapatti, in which was stuffed some spiced mincemeat that stung his lips like fire. Then he moved onwards down a wide shallow timbered staircase into the lower part of the city, where the peasantry lived in cell-like rooms packed together as though in hives.

It was an oppressive city, but not a squalid one. The intensity of the concern with sanitation amazed him: wells and fountains and public privies everywhere, and brick drains running from each building, leading to covered cesspools. There was none of the open sewage and pestilent gutters that he knew still could be found in the India of his own time. He wondered whether ancient Mohenjo-daro had in truth been so fastidious. Perhaps the citizens had redesigned the city to suit their own ideals of cleanliness. No: most likely what he saw was authentic, he decided, a function of the same obsessive discipline that had given the city its rigidity of form. If Mohenjo-daro had been a verminous filthy hole, the citizens probably would have re-created it in just that way, and loved it for its fascinating reeking filth.

Not that he had ever noticed an excessive concern with authenticity on the part of the citizens; and Mohenjo-daro, like all the other restored cities he had visited, was full of the usual casual anachronisms. Phillips saw images of Shiva and Krishna here and there on the walls of buildings he took to be temples, and the benign face of the mother-goddess Kali loomed in the plazas. Surely those deities had arisen in India long after the collapse of the Mohenjo-daro civilization. Or did they take a certain naughty pleasure in mixing the eras -- a mosque and a church in Greek Alexandria, Hindu gods in prehistoric Mohenjo-daro? Perhaps their records of the past had become contaminated with errors over the thousands of years. He would not have been surprised to see banners bearing portraits of Gandhi and Nehru being carried in procession through the streets. And there were phantasms and chimeras at large here again too, as if the citizens were untroubled by the boundary between history and myth: little fat elephant-headed Ganeshas blithely plunging their trunks into water-fountains, a six-armed three-headed woman sunning herself on a brick terrace. Why not? Surely that was the motto of these people: Why not, why not, why not? They could do as they pleased, and they did. Yet Gioia had said to him, long ago, 'Limits are very important.' In what, Phillips wondered, did they limit themselves, other than the number of their cities? Was there a quota, perhaps, on the number of 'visitors' they allowed themselves to kidnap from the past? Until today he had thought he was the only one; now he knew there was at least one other; possibly there were more elsewhere, a step or two ahead or behind him, making the circuit with the citizens who travelled endlessly from New Chicago to Chang-an to Alexandria. We should join forces, he thought, and

compel them to send us back to our rightful eras. \_Compel?\_ How? File a class-action suit, maybe? Demonstrate in the streets? Sadly he thought of his failure to make common cause with Willoughby. We are natural allies, he thought. Together perhaps we might have won some compassion from these people. But to Willoughby it must be literally unthinkable that Good Queen Bess and her subjects were sealed away on the far side of a barrier hundreds of centuries thick. He would prefer to believe that England was just a few months' voyage away around the Cape of Good Hope, and that all he need do was commandeer a ship and set sail for home. Poor Willoughby: probably he would never see his home again.

The thought came to Phillips suddenly: \_Neither will you\_. And then, after it: \_If you could go home, would you really want to?\_ One of the first things he had realized here was that he knew almost nothing substantial about his former existence. His mind was well stocked with details on life in twentieth-century New York, to be sure; but of himself he could say not much more than that he was Charles Phillips and had come from 1984. Profession? Age? Parents' names? Did he have a wife? Children? A cat, a dog, hobbies? No data: none. Possibly the citizens had stripped such things from him when they brought him here, to spare him from the pain of separation. They might be capable of that kindness. Knowing so little of what he had lost, could he truly say that he yearned for it? Willoughby seemed to remember much more of his former life, and longed somehow for it all the more intensely. He was spared that. Why not stay here, and go on and on from city to city, sightseeing all of time past as the citizens conjured it back into being? Why not? Why not? The chances were that he had no choice about it, anyway.

He made his way back up towards the citadel and to the baths once more. He felt a little like a ghost, haunting a city of ghosts.

Belilala seemed unaware that he had been gone for most of the day. She sat by herself on the terrace of the baths, placidly sipping some thick milky beverage that had been sprinkled with a dark spice. He shook his head when she offered him some.

'Do you remember I mentioned that I saw a man with red hair and a beard this morning?' Phillips said. 'He's a visitor. Hawk told me that.'

'Is he?' Belilala asked. 'From a time about four hundred years before mine. I talked with him. He thinks he was brought here by demons.' Phillips gave her a searching look. 'I'm a visitor too, isn't that so?'

'Of course, love.' 'And how was I brought here? By demons also?'

Belilala smiled indifferently. 'You'd have to ask someone else. Hawk, perhaps. I haven't looked into these things very deeply.'

'I see. Are there many visitors here, do you know?' A languid shrug.

'Not many, no, not really. I've only heard of three or four besides you. There may be others by now, I suppose.' She rested her hand lightly on his. 'Are you having a good time in Mohenjo, Charles?'

He let her question pass as though he had not heard it. 'I asked Hawk about Gioia,' he said.

'Oh?'

'He told me that she's no longer here, that she's gone on to Timbuctoo or New Chicago, he wasn't sure which.'

'That's quite likely. As everybody knows, Gioia rarely stays in the same place very long.'

Phillips nodded. 'You said the other day that Gioia is a short-timer. That means she's going to grow old and die, doesn't it?'

'I thought you understood that, Charles.'

'Whereas you will not age? Nor Hawk, nor Stengard, nor any of the rest of your set?'

'We will live as long as we wish,' she said. 'But we will not age, no.'

'What makes a person a short-timer?'

'They're born that way, I think. Some missing gene, some extra gene -- I don't actually know. It's extremely uncommon. Nothing can be done to help them. It's very slow, the ageing. But it can't be halted.'

Phillips nodded. 'That must be very disagreeable,' he said. 'To find yourself one of the few people growing old in a world where everyone stays young. No wonder Gioia is so impatient. No wonder she runs around from place to place. No wonder she attached herself so quickly to the barbaric hairy visitor from the twentieth century, who comes from a time when everybody was a

short-timer. She and I have something in common, wouldn't you say?'

'In a manner of speaking, yes.'

'We understand ageing. We understand death.'

Tell me: is Gioia likely to die very soon, Belilala?' 'Soon? soon?' She gave him a wide-eyed childlike stare. 'What is soon? How can I say? What you think of as soon and what I think of as soon are not the same things, Charles.' Then her manner changed: she seemed to be hearing what he was saying for the first time. Softly she said, 'No, no, Charles. I don't think she will die very soon.' 'When she left me in Chang-an, was it because she had become bored with me?' Belilala shook her head. 'She was simply restless. It had nothing to do with you. She was never bored with you.' 'Then I'm going to go looking for her. Wherever she may be, Timbuctoo, New Chicago, I'll find her. Gioia and I belong together.' 'Perhaps you do,' said Belilala. 'Yes. Yes, I think you really do.' She sounded altogether unperturbed, unrejected, unbereft. 'By all means, Charles. Go to her. Follow her. Find her. Wherever she may be.'

\* \* \* \* They had already begun dismantling Timbuctoo when Phillips got there. While he was still high overhead, his ffitterflitter hovering above the dusty tawny plain where the River Niger met the sands of the Sahara, a surge of keen excitement rose in him as he looked down at the square grey flat-roofed mud-brick buildings of the great desert capital. But when he landed he found gleaming metal-skinned robots swarming everywhere, a horde of them scuttling about like giant shining insects, pulling the place apart. He had not known about the robots before. So that was how all these miracles were carried out, Phillips realized: an army of obliging machines. He imagined them bustling up out of the earth whenever their services were needed, emerging from some sterile subterranean storehouse to put together Venice or Thebes or Knossos or Houston or whatever place was required, down to the finest detail, and then at some later time returning to undo everything that they had fashioned. He watched them now, diligently pulling down the adobe walls, demolishing the heavy metal-studded gates, bulldozing the amazing labyrinth of alleyways and thoroughfares, sweeping away the market. On his last visit to Timbuctoo that market had been crowded with a horde of veiled Tuaregs and swaggering Moors, black Sudanese, shrewd-faced Syrian traders, all of them busily dickering for camels, horses, donkeys, slabs of salt, huge green melons, silver bracelets, splendid vellum Korans. They were all gone now, that picturesque crowd of swarthy temporaries. Nor were there any citizens to be seen. The dust of destruction choked the air. One of the robots came up to Phillips and said in a dry crackling insect-voice, 'You ought not to be here. This city is closed.'

He stared at the flashing, buzzing band of scanners and sensors across the creature's glittering tapered snout. 'I'm trying to find someone, a citizen who may have been here recently. Her name is --'

'This city is closed,' the robot repeated inexorably. They would not let him stay as much as an hour. There is no food here, the robot said, no water, no shelter. This is not a place any longer. You may not stay. You may not stay. You may not stay. This is not a place any longer.

Perhaps he could find her in New Chicago, then. He took to the air again, soaring northwards and westwards over the vast emptiness. The land below him curved away into the hazy horizon, bare, sterile. What had they done with the vestiges of the world that had gone before? Had they turned their gleaming metal beetles loose to clean everything away? Were there no ruins of genuine antiquity anywhere? No scrap of Rome, no shard of Jerusalem, no stump of Fifth Avenue? It was all so barren down there: an empty stage, waiting for its next set to be built. He flew on a great arc across the jutting hump of Africa and on into what he supposed was southern Europe: the little vehicle did all the work, leaving him to doze or stare as he wished. Now and again he saw another flitterflitter pass by, far away, a dark distant winged teardrop outlined against the hard clarity of the sky. He wished there was some way of making radio contact with them, but he had no idea how to go about it. Not that he had anything he wanted to say; he wanted only to hear a human voice. He was utterly isolated. He might just as well have been the last living man on Earth. He closed his eyes and thought of Gioia.

\* \* \* \* 'Like this?' Phillips asked. In an ivory-panelled oval room sixty storeys above the softly

glowing streets of New Chicago he touched a small cool plastic canister to his upper lip and pressed the stud at its base. He heard a foaming sound; and then blue vapour rose to his nostrils.

'Yes,' Cantilena said. 'That's right.' He detected a faint aroma of cinnamon, cloves and something that might almost have been broiled lobster. Then a spasm of dizziness hit him and visions rushed through his head: Gothic cathedrals, the Pyramids, Central Park under fresh snow, the harsh brick warrens of Mohenjo-daro, and fifty thousand other places all at once, a wild roller-coaster ride through space and time. It seemed to go on for centuries. But finally his head cleared and he looked about, blinking, realizing that the whole thing had taken only a moment. Cantilena still stood at his elbow. The other citizens in the room -- fifteen, twenty of them -- had scarcely moved. The strange little man with the celadon skin over by the far wall continued to stare at him.

'Well?' Cantilena asked. 'What did you think?' 'Incredible.' 'And very authentic. It's an actual New Chicagoan drug. The exact formula. Would you like another?' 'Not just yet,' Phillips said uneasily. He swayed and had to struggle for his balance. Sniffing that stuff might not have been such a wise idea, he thought.

He had been in New Chicago a week, or perhaps it was two, and he was still suffering from the peculiar disorientation that that city always aroused in him. This was the fourth time that he had come here, and it had been the same every time. New Chicago was the only one of the reconstructed cities of this world that in its original incarnation had existed after his own era. To him it was an outpost of the incomprehensible future; to the citizens it was a quaint simulacrum of the archaeological past. That paradox left him aswirl with impossible confusions and tensions.

What had happened to old Chicago was of course impossible for him to discover. Vanished without a trace, that was clear: no Water Tower, no Marina City, no Hancock Centre, no Tribune building, not a fragment, not an atom. But it was hopeless to ask any of the million-plus inhabitants of New Chicago about their city's predecessor. They were only temporaries; they knew no more than they had to know, and all that they had to know was how to go through the motions of whatever it was that they did by way of creating the illusion that this was a real city. They had no need of knowing ancient history.

Nor was he likely to find out anything from a citizen, of course. Citizens did not seem to bother much about scholarly matters. Phillips had no reason to think that the world was anything other than an amusement park to them. Somewhere, certainly, there had to be those who specialized in the serious study of the lost civilizations of the past -- for how, otherwise, would these uncanny reconstructed cities be brought into being? 'The planners,' he had once heard Nissandra or Aramayne say, 'are already deep into their Byzantium research.' But who were the planners? He had no idea. For all he knew, they were the robots. Perhaps the robots were the real masters of this whole era, who created the cities not primarily for the sake of amusing the citizens but in their own diligent attempt to comprehend the life of the world that had passed away. A wild speculation, yes; but not without some plausibility, he thought.

He felt oppressed by the party gaiety all about him. 'I need some air,' he said to Cantilena, and headed towards the window. It was the merest crescent, but a breeze came through. He looked out at the strange city below.

New Chicago had nothing in common with the old one but its name. They had built it, at least, along the western shore of a large inland lake that might even be Lake Michigan, although when he had flown over it had seemed broader and less elongated than the lake he remembered. The city itself was a lacy fantasy of slender pastel-hued buildings rising at odd angles and linked by a webwork of gently undulating aerial bridges. The streets were long parentheses that touched the lake at their northern and southern ends and arched gracefully westwards in the middle. Between each of the great boulevards ran a track for public transportation -- sleek aquamarine bubble-vehicles gliding on soundless wheels -- and flanking each of the tracks were lush strips of park. It was beautiful, astonishingly so, but insubstantial. The whole thing seemed to have been contrived from sunbeams and silk.

A soft voice beside him

said, 'Are you becoming ill?' Phillips glanced around. The celadon man stood beside him: a compact, precise person, vaguely Oriental in appearance. His skin was of a curious grey-green hue like no skin Phillips had ever seen, and it was extraordinarily smooth in texture, as though he were made of fine porcelain. He shook his head. 'Just a little queasy,' he said. 'This city always scrambles me.' 'I suppose it can be disconcerting,' the little man replied. His tone was furry and veiled, the inflection strange. There was something feline about him. He seemed sinewy, unyielding, almost menacing. 'Visitor, are you?' Phillips studied him a moment. 'Yes,' he said. 'So am I, of course.' 'Are you?' 'Indeed.' The little man smiled. 'What's your locus? Twentieth century? Twenty-first at the latest, I'd say.' 'I'm from 1984. AD 1984.' Another smile, a self-satisfied one. 'Not a bad guess, then.' A brisk tilt of the head. 'Y'ang-Yeovil.' 'Pardon me?' Phillips said. 'Y'ang-Yeovil. It is my name. Formerly Colonel Y'ang-Yeovil of the Third Septentriad.' 'Is that on some other planet?' asked Phillips, feeling a bit dazed. 'Oh, no, not at all,' Y'ang-Yeovil said pleasantly. 'This very world, I assure you. I am quite of human origin. Citizen of the Republic of Upper Han, native of the city of Port Ssu. And you -- forgive me -- your name -- ?' 'I'm sorry. Phillips. Charles Phillips. From New York City, once upon a time.' 'Ah, New York!' Y'ang-Yeovil's face lit with a glimmer of recognition that quickly faded. 'New York -- New York -- it was very famous, that I know --'

This is very strange, Phillips thought. He felt greater compassion for poor bewildered Francis Willoughby now. This man comes from a time so far beyond my own that he barely knows of New York -- he must be a contemporary of the real New Chicago, in fact; I wonder whether he finds this version authentic -- and yet to the citizens this Y'ang-Yeovil too is just a primitive, a curio out of antiquity -- 'New York was the largest city of the United States of America,' Phillips said. 'Of course. Yes. Very famous.' 'But virtually forgotten by the time the Republic of Upper Han came into existence, I gather.' Y'ang-Yeovil said, looking uncomfortable, 'There were disturbances between your time and mine. But by no means should you take from my words the impression that your city was --'

Sudden laughter resounded across the room. Five or six newcomers had arrived at the party. Phillips stared, gasped, gaped. Surely that was Stengard -- and Armayne beside him -- and that other woman, half-hidden behind them -- 'If you'll pardon me a moment --' Phillips said, turning abruptly away from Y'ang-Yeovil. 'Please excuse me. Someone just coming in -- a person I've been trying to find ever since --'

He hurried towards her. \* \* \*

\* 'Gioia?' he called. 'Gioia, it's me! Wait! Wait!' Stengard was in the way. Aramayne, turning to take a handful of the little vapour-sniffers from Cantilena, blocked him also. Phillips pushed through them as though they were not there. Gioia, halfway out the door, halted and looked towards him like a frightened deer. 'Don't go,' he said. He took her hand in his. He was startled by her appearance. How long had their strange parting on that night of mysteries in Chang-an? A year? A year and a half? So he believed. Or had he lost all track of time? Were his perceptions of the passing of the months in this world that unreliable? She seemed at least ten or fifteen years older. Maybe she really was; maybe the years had been passing for him here as in a dream, and he had never known it. She looked strained, faded, worn. Out of a thinner and strangely altered face her eyes blazed at him almost defiantly, as though saying, 'See? See how ugly I have become?' He said, 'I've been hunting for you for -- I don't know how long it's been, Gioia. In Mohenjo, in Timbuctoo, now here. I want to be with you again.' 'It isn't possible.' 'Belilala explained everything to me in Mohenjo. I know that you're a short-timer -- I know what that means, Gioia. But what of it? So you're beginning to age a little. So what? So you'll only have three or four hundred years, instead of forever. Don't you think I know what it means to be a short-timer? I'm just a simple ancient man of the twentieth century, remember? Sixty, seventy, eighty years is all we would get. You and I suffer

from the same malady, Gioia. That's what drew you to me in the first place. I'm certain of that. That's why we belong with each other now. However much time we have, we can spend the rest of it together, don't you see?' 'You're the one who doesn't see, Charles,' she said softly. 'Maybe. Maybe I still don't understand a damned thing about this place. Except that you and I -- that I love you -- that I think you love me -- ' 'I love you, yes. But you don't understand. It's precisely because I love you that you and I -- you and I can't -- ' With a despairing sigh she slid her hand free of his grasp. He reached for her again, but she shook him off and backed up quickly into the corridor. 'Gioia?' 'Please,' she said. 'No. I would never have come here if I knew you were here. Don't come after me. Please. Please.' She turned and fled. He stood looking after her for a long moment. Cantilena and Aramayne appeared, and smiled at him as if nothing at all had happened. Cantilena offered him a vial of some sparkling amber fluid. He refused with a brusque gesture. Where do I go now, he wondered? What do I do? He wandered back into the party. Y'ang-Yeovil glided to his side. 'You are in great distress,' the little man murmured. Phillips glared. 'Let me be.' 'Perhaps I could be of some help.' 'There's no help possible,' said Phillips. He swung about and plucked one of the vials from a tray and gulped its contents. It made him feel as if there were two of him, standing on either side of Y'ang-Yeovil. He gulped another. Now there were four of him. 'I'm in love with a citizen,' he blurted. It seemed to him that he was speaking in chorus. 'Love. Ah. And does she love you?' 'So I thought. So I think. But she's a short-timer. Do you know what that means? She's not immortal like the others. She ages. She's beginning to look old. And so she's been running away from me. She doesn't want me to see her changing. She thinks it'll disgust me, I suppose. I tried to remind her just now that I'm not immortal either, that she and I could grow old together, but she -- ' 'Oh, no,' Y'ang-Yeovil said quietly. 'Why do you think you will age? Have you grown any older in all the time you have been here?' Phillips was nonplussed. 'Of course I have. I -- I -- ' 'Have you?' Y'ang-Yeovil smiled. 'Here. Look at yourself.' He did something intricate with his fingers and a shimmering zone of mirror-like light appeared between them. Phillips stared at his reflection. A youthful face stared back at him. It was true, then. He had simply not thought about it. How many years had he spent in this world? The time had simply slipped by: a great deal of time, though he could not calculate how much. They did not seem to keep close count of it here, nor had he. But it must have been many years, he thought. All that endless travel up and down the globe -- so many cities had come and gone -- Rio, Rome, Asgard, those were the first three that came to mind -- and there were others; he could hardly remember every one. Years. His face had not changed at all. Time had worked its harshness on Gioia, yes, but not on him. 'I don't understand,' he said. 'Why am I not ageing?' 'Because you are not real,' said Y'ang-Yeovil. 'Are you unaware of that?' Phillips blinked. 'Not -- real?' 'Did you think you were lifted bodily out of your own time?' the little man asked. 'Ah, no, no, there is no way for them to do such a thing. We are not actual time travellers: not you, not I, not any of the visitors. I thought you were aware of that. But perhaps your era is too early for a proper understanding of these things. We are very cleverly done, my friend. We are ingenious constructs, marvellously stuffed with the thoughts and attitudes and events of our own times. We are their finest achievement, you know: far more complex even than one of these cities: We are a step beyond the temporaries -- more than a step, a great deal more. They do only what they are instructed to do, and their range is very narrow. They are nothing but machines, really. Whereas we are autonomous. We move about by our own will; we think, we talk, we even, so it seems, fall in love. But we will not age. How could we age? We are not real. We are mere artificial webworks of mental responses. We are mere illusions, done so well that we deceive even ourselves. You did not know that? Indeed, you did not know?' \* \* \* \* He was airborne, touching destination buttons at random. Somehow he found himself

heading back towards Timbuctoo. \_This city is closed. This is not a place any longer.\_ It did not matter to him. Why should anything matter? Fury and a choking sense of despair rose within him. I am software, Phillips thought. I am nothing but software. \_Not real. Very cleverly done. An ingenious construct. A mere illusion.\_ No trace of Timbuctoo was visible from the air. He landed anyway. The grey sandy earth was smooth, unturned, as though there had never been anything there. A few robots were still about, handling whatever final chores were required in the shutting-down of a city. Two of them scuttled up to him. Huge bland gleaming silver-skinned insects, not friendly. 'There is no city here,' they said. 'This is not a permissible place.' 'Permissible by whom?' 'There is no reason for you to be here.' 'There's no reason for me to be anywhere,' Phillips said. The robots stirred, made uneasy humming sounds and ominous clicks, waved their antennae about. They seem troubled, he thought. They seem to dislike my attitude. Perhaps I run some risk of being taken off to the home for unruly software for debugging. 'I'm leaving now,' he told them. 'Thank you. Thank you very much.' He backed away from them and climbed into his flitterflitter. He touched more destination buttons. \_We move about by our own will. We think, we talk, we even fall in love.\_ He landed in Chang-an. This time there was no reception committee waiting for him at the Gate of Brilliant Virtue. The city seemed larger and more resplendent: new pagodas, new palaces. It felt like winter: a chilly cutting wind was blowing. The sky was cloudless and dazzlingly bright. At the steps of the Silver Terrace he encountered Francis Willoughby, a great hulking figure in magnificent brocaded robes, with two dainty little temporaries, pretty as jade statuettes, engulfed in his arms. 'Miracles and wonders! The silly lunatic fellow is here too!' Willoughby roared. 'Look, look, we are come to far Cathay, you and I!' We are nowhere, Phillips thought. \_We are mere illusions, done so well that we deceive even ourselves.\_ To Willoughby he said, 'You look like an emperor in those robes, Francis.' 'Aye, like Prester John!' Willoughby cried. 'Like Tamburlaine himself! Aye, am I not majestic?' He slapped Phillips gaily on the shoulder, a rough playful poke that spun him halfway about, coughing and wheezing. 'We flew in the air, as the eagles do, as the demons do, as the angels do! Soared like angels! Like angels!' He came close, looming over Phillips. 'I would have gone to England, but the wench Belilala said there was an enchantment on me that would keep me from England just now; and so we voyaged to Cathay. Tell me this, fellow, will you go witness for me when we see England again? Swear that all that has befallen us did in truth befall? For I fear they will say I am as mad as Marco Polo, when I tell them of flying to Cathay.' 'One madman backing another?' Phillips asked. 'What can I tell you? You still think you'll reach England, do you?' Rage rose to the surface in him, bubbling hot. 'Ah, Francis, Francis, do you know your Shakespeare? Did you go to the plays? We aren't real. \_We aren't real.\_ We are such stuff as dreams are made on, the two of us. That's all we are. O brave new world! What England? Where? There's no England. There's no Francis Willoughby. There's no Charles Phillips. What we are is -- ' 'Let him be, Charles,' a cool voice cut in. He turned. Belilala, in the robes of an empress, coming down the steps of the Silver Terrace. 'I know the truth,' he said bitterly. 'Y'ang-Yeovil told me. The visitor from the twenty-fifth century. I saw him in New Chicago.' 'Did you see Gioia there too?' Belilala asked. 'Briefly. She looks much older.' 'Yes. I know. She was here recently.' 'And has gone on, I suppose?' 'To Mohenjo again, yes. Go after her, Charles. Leave poor Francis alone. I told her to wait for you. I told her that she needs you, and you need her.' 'Very kind of you. But what good is it, Belilala? I don't even exist. And she's going to die.' 'You exist. How can you doubt that you exist? You feel, don't you? You suffer. You love. You love Gioia: is that not so? And you are loved by Gioia. Would Gioia love what is not real?' 'You think she loves me?' 'I know she does. Go to her, Charles. Go. I told her to wait for you in Mohenjo.'



Phillips nodded numbly. What was there to lose? 'Go to her,' said Belilala again. 'Now.' 'Yes,' Phillips said. 'I'll go now.' He turned to Willoughby. 'If ever we meet in London, friend, I'll testify for you. Fear nothing. All will be well, Francis.' He left them and set his course for Mohenjo-daro, half expecting to find the robots already tearing it down. Mohenjo-daro was still there, no lovelier than before. He went to the baths, thinking he might find Gioia there. She was not; but he came upon Nissandra, Stengard, Fenimon. 'She has gone to Alexandria,' Fenimon told him. 'She wants to see it one last time, before they close it.' 'They're almost ready to open Constantinople,' Stengard explained. 'The capital of Byzantium, you know, the great city by the Golden Horn. They'll take Alexandria away, you understand, when Byzantium opens. They say it's going to be marvellous. We'll see you there for the opening, naturally?' 'Naturally,' Phillips said.

He flew to Alexandria. He felt lost and weary. All this is hopeless folly, he told himself. I am nothing but a puppet jerking about on its strings. But somewhere above the shining breast of the Arabian Sea the deeper implications of something that Belilala had said to him started to sink in, and he felt his bitterness, his rage, his despair, all suddenly beginning to leave him. You exist. How can you doubt that you exist? Would Gioia love what is not real? Of course. Of course. Y'ang-Yeovil had been wrong: visitors were something more than mere illusions. Indeed Y'ang-Yeovil had voiced the truth of their condition without understanding what he was really saying: We think, we talk, we fall in love. Yes. That was the heart of the situation. The visitors might be artificial, but they were not unreal. Belilala had been trying to tell him that just the other night. You suffer. You love. You love Gioia. Would Gioia love what is not real? Surely he was real, or at any rate real enough. What he was was something strange, something that would probably have been all but incomprehensible to the twentieth-century people whom he had been designed to simulate. But that did not mean that he was unreal. Did one have to be of woman born to be real? No. No. No. His kind of reality was a sufficient reality. He had no need to be ashamed of it. And, understanding that, he understood that Gioia did not need to grow old and die. There was a way by which she could be saved, if only she would embrace it. If only she would.

When he landed in Alexandria he went immediately to the hotel on the slopes of the Paneium where they had stayed on their first visit, so very long ago; and there she was, sitting quietly on a patio with a view of the harbour and the Lighthouse. There was something calm and resigned about the way she sat. She had given up. She did not even have the strength to flee from him any longer. 'Gioia,' he said gently. \* \* \* \* She looked

older than she had in New Chicago. Her face was drawn and sallow and her eyes seemed sunken; and she was not even bothering these days to deal with the white strands that stood out in stark contrast against the darkness of her hair. He sat down beside her and put his hand over hers, and looked out towards the obelisks, the palaces, the temples, the Lighthouse. At length he said, 'I know what I really am, now.' 'Do you, Charles?' She sounded very far away.

'In my era we called it software. All I am is a set of commands, responses, cross-references, operating some sort of artificial body. It's infinitely better software than we could have imagined. But we were only just beginning to learn how, after all. They pumped me full of twentieth-century reflexes. The right moods, the right appetites, the right irrationalities, the right sort of combativeness. Somebody knows a lot about what it was like to be a twentieth-century man. They did a good job with Willoughby, too, all that Elizabethan rhetoric and swagger. And I suppose they got Y'ang-Yeovil right. He seems to think so: who better to judge? The twenty-fifth century, the Republic of Upper Han, people with grey-green skin, half Chinese and half Martian for all I know. Somebody knows. Somebody here is very good at programming, Gioia.'

She was not looking at him. 'I feel frightened, Charles,' she said in that same distant way. 'Of me? Of the things I'm saying?' 'No, not of you. Don't you see what has happened to me?' 'I see you. There are changes.' 'I lived a long

time wondering when the changes would begin. I thought maybe they wouldn't, not really. Who wants to believe they'll get old? But it started when we were in Alexandria that first time. In Chang-an it got much worse. And now -- now -- ' He said abruptly, 'Stengard tells me they'll be opening Constantinople very soon.' 'So?' 'Don't you want to be there when it opens?' 'I'm becoming old and ugly, Charles.' 'We'll go to Constantinople together. We'll leave tomorrow, eh? What do you say? We'll charter a boat. It's a quick little hop, right across the Mediterranean. Sailing to Byzantium! There was a poem, you know, in my time. Not forgotten, I guess, because they've programmed it into me. All these thousands of years, and someone still remembers old Yeats. \_The young in one another's arms, birds in the trees\_. Come with me to Byzantium, Gioia.' She shrugged. 'Looking like this? Getting more hideous every hour? While \_they\_ stay young for ever? While \_you\_ -- She faltered; her voice cracked; she fell silent. 'Finish the sentence, Gioia.' 'Please. Let me alone.' 'You were going to say, "While \_you\_ stay young for ever too, Charles," isn't that it? You knew all along that I was never going to change. I didn't know that, but you did.' 'Yes. I knew. I pretended that it wasn't true -- that as I aged, you'd age too. It was very foolish of me. In Chang-an, when I first began to see the real signs of it -- that was when I realized I couldn't stay with you any longer. Because I'd look at you, always young, always remaining the same age, and I'd look at myself, and -- ' She gestured, palms upward. 'So I gave you to Belilala and ran away.' 'All so unnecessary, Gioia.' 'I didn't think it was.' 'But you don't have to grow old. Not if you don't want to!' 'Don't be cruel, Charles,' she said tonelessly. 'There's no way of escaping what I have.' 'But there is,' he said. 'You know nothing about these things.' 'Not very much, no,' he said. 'But I see how it can be done. Maybe it's a primitive simple-minded twentieth-century sort of solution, but I think it ought to work. I've been playing with the idea ever since I left Mohenjo. Tell me this, Gioia: why can't you go to them, to the programmers, to the artificers, the planners, whoever they are, the ones who create the cities and the temporaries and the visitors. And have yourself made into something like me!' She looked up, startled. 'What are you saying?' 'They can cobble up a twentieth-century man out of nothing more than fragmentary records and make him plausible, can't they? Or an Elizabethan, or anyone else of any era at all, and he's authentic, he's convincing. So why couldn't they do an even better job with you? Produce a Gioia so real that even Gioia can't tell the difference? But a Gioia that will never age -- a Gioia-construct, a Gioia-program, a visitor-Gioia! Why not? Tell me why not, Gioia.' She was trembling. 'I've never heard of doing any such thing!' 'But don't you think it's possible?' 'How would I know?' 'Of course it's possible. If they can create visitors, they can take a citizen and duplicate her in such a way that -- ' 'It's never been done. I'm sure of it. I can't imagine any citizen agreeing to any such thing. To give up the body -- to let yourself be turned into -- into -- ' She shook her head, but it seemed to be a gesture of astonishment as much as of negation. He said. 'Sure. To give up the body. Your natural body, your ageing, shrinking, deteriorating short-timer body. What's so awful about that?' She was very pale. 'This is craziness, Charles. I don't want to talk about it any more.' 'It doesn't sound crazy to me.' 'You can't possibly understand.' 'Can't I? I can certainly understand being afraid to die. I don't have a lot of trouble understanding what it's like to be one of the few ageing people in a world where nobody grows old. What I can't understand is why you aren't even willing to consider the possibility that -- ' 'No,' she said. 'I tell you, it's crazy. They'd laugh at me.' 'Who?' 'All of my friends. Hawk, Stengard, Aramayne -- ' Once again she would not look at him. 'They can be very cruel, without even realizing it. They despise anything that seems ungraceful to them, anything sweaty and desperate and cowardly. Citizens don't do sweaty things, Charles. And that's how this will

seem. Assuming it can be done at all. They'll be terribly patronizing. Oh, they'll be sweet to me, yes, dear Gioia, how wonderful for you, Gioia, but when I turn my back they'll laugh. They'll say the most wicked things about me. I couldn't bear that.' 'They can afford to laugh,' Phillips said. 'It's easy to be brave and coot about dying when you know you're going to live for ever. How very fine for them: but why should you be the only one to grow old and die? And they won't laugh, anyway. They're not as cruel as you think. Shallow, maybe, but not cruel. They'll be glad that you've found a way to save yourself. At the very least, they won't have to feel guilty about you any longer, and that's bound to please them. You can -- ' 'Stop it,' she said. She rose, walked to the railing of the patio, stared out towards the sea. He came up behind her. Red sails in the harbour, sunlight glittering along the sides of the Lighthouse, the palaces of the Ptolemies stark white against the sky. Lightly he rested his hand on her shoulder. She twitched as if to pull away from him, but remained where she was. 'Then I have another idea,' he said quietly. 'if you won't go to the planners, I will. Reprogram me, I'll say. Fix things so that I start to age at the same rate you do. It'll be more authentic, anyway, if I'm supposed to be playing the part of a twentieth-century man. Over the years I'll very gradually get some lines in my face, my hair will turn grey, I'll walk a little more slowly -- we'll grow old together, Gioia. To hell with your lovely immortal friends. We'll have each other. We won't need them.' She swung around. Her eyes were wide with horror. 'Are you serious, Charles?' 'Of course.' 'No,' she murmured. 'No. Everything you've said to me today is monstrous nonsense. Don't you realize that?' He reached for her hand and enclosed her fingertips in his. 'All I'm trying to do is find some way for you and me to -- ' 'Don't say any more,' she said. 'Please.' Quickly, as though drawing back from a suddenly flaring flame, she tugged her fingers free of his and put her hand behind her. Though his face was just inches from hers he felt an immense chasm opening between them. They stared at one another for a moment; then she moved deftly to his left, darted around him, and ran from the patio. Stunned, he watched her go, down the long marble corridor and out of sight. It was folly to give pursuit, he thought. She was lost to him: that was clear, that was beyond any question. She was terrified of him. Why cause her even more anguish? But somehow he found himself running through the halls of the hotel, along the winding garden path, into the cool green groves of the Paneium. He thought he saw her on the portico of Hadrian's palace, but when he got there the echoing stone halls were empty. To a temporary that was sweeping the steps he said, 'Did you see a woman come this way?' A blank sullen stare was his only answer. Phillips cursed and turned away. 'Gioia?' he called. 'Wait! Come back!' Was that her, going into the Library? He rushed past the startled mumbling librarians and sped through the stacks, peering beyond the mounds of double-handled scrolls into the shadowy corridor. 'Gioia? Gioia!' It was a desecration, bellowing like that in this quiet place. He scarcely cared. Emerging by a side door, he loped down to the harbour. The Lighthouse! Terror enfolded him. She might already be a hundred steps up that ramp, heading for the parapet from which she meant to fling herself into the sea. Scattering citizens and temporaries as if they were straws, he ran within. Up he went, never pausing for breath, though his synthetic lungs were screaming for respite, his ingeniously designed heart was desperately pounding. On the first balcony he imagined he caught a glimpse of her, but he circled it without finding her. Onwards, upwards. He went to the top, to the beacon chamber itself: no Gioia. Had she jumped? Had she gone down one ramp while he was ascending the other? He clung to the rim and looked out, down, searching the base of the Lighthouse, the rocks offshore, the causeway. No Gioia. I will find her somewhere, he thought. I will keep going until I find her. He went running down the ramp, calling her name. He reached ground level and sprinted back towards the centre of town. Where next? The temple of Poseidon? The tomb of Cleopatra? He paused in the middle of Canopus Street, groggy and dazed. 'Charles?' she said. 'Where are you?'

'Right here. Beside you.' She seemed to materialize from the air. Her face was unflushed, her robe bore no trace of perspiration. Had he been chasing a phantom through the city? She came to him and took his hand, and said, softly, tenderly, 'Were you really serious, about having them make you age?' 'If there's no other way, yes.' 'The other way is so frightening, Charles.' 'Is it?' 'You can't understand how much.' 'More frightening than growing old? Than dying?' 'I don't know,' she said. 'I suppose not. The only thing I'm sure of is that I don't want you to get old, Charles.' 'But I won't have to. Will I?' He stared at her. 'No,' she said. 'You won't have to. Neither of us will.' Phillips smiled. 'We should get away from here,' he said after a while. 'Let's go across to Byzantium, yes, Gioia? We'll show up in Constantinople for the opening. Your friends will be there. We'll tell them what you've decided to do. They'll know how to arrange it. Someone will.'

'It sounds so strange,' said Gioia. 'To turn myself into -- into a visitor? A visitor in my own world?' 'That's what you've always been, though.'

'I suppose. In a way. But at least I've been real up to now.'

'Whereas I'm not?' 'Are you, Charles?' 'Yes. Just as real as you. I was angry at first, when I found out the truth about myself. But I came to accept it. Somewhere between Mohenjo and here, I came to see that it was all right to be what I am: that I perceive things, I form ideas, I draw conclusions. I am very well designed, Gioia. I can't tell the difference between being what I am and being completely alive, and to me that's being real enough. I think, I feel, I experience joy and pain. I'm as real as I need to be. And you will be too. You'll never stop being Gioia, you know. It's only your body that you'll cast away, the body that played such a terrible joke on you anyway.' He brushed her cheek with his hand. 'It was all said for us before, long ago: >>>\_Once out of nature I shall never take\_<<< >>>\_My bodily form from any natural thing,\_<<< >>>\_But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make\_<<< >>>\_Of hammered gold and gold enamelling\_<<< >>>\_To keep a drowsy Emperor awake --\_<<< 'Is that the same poem?' she asked. 'The same poem, yes. The ancient poem that isn't quite forgotten yet.' 'Finish it, Charles.' >>>\_ -- 'Or set upon a golden bough to sing\_<<< >>>\_To lords and ladies of Byzantium\_<<< >>>\_Of what is past, or passing, or to come.'\_<<< 'How beautiful. What does it mean?' 'That it isn't necessary to be mortal. That we can allow ourselves to be gathered into the artifice of eternity, that we can be transformed, that we can move on beyond the flesh. Yeats didn't mean it in quite the way I do -- he wouldn't have begun to comprehend what we're talking about, not a word of it -- and yet, and yet -- the underlying truth is the same. Live, Gioia! With me!' He turned to her and saw colour coming into her pallid cheeks. 'It does make sense, what I'm suggesting, doesn't it? You'll attempt it, won't you? Whoever makes the visitors can be induced to remake you. Right? What do you think: can they, Gioia?' She nodded in a barely perceptible way. 'I think so,' she said faintly. 'It's very strange. But I think it ought to be possible. Why not, Charles? Why not?' 'Yes,' he said. 'Why not?' \* \* \* \* In the morning they hired a vessel in the harbour, a low sleek pirogue with a blood-red sad, skippered by a rascally-looking temporary whose smile was irresistible. Phillips shaded his eyes and peered northwards across the sea. He thought he could almost make out the shape of the great city sprawling on its seven hills, Constantine's New Rome beside the Golden Horn, the mighty dome of Hagia Sophia, the sombre walls of the citadel, the palaces and churches, the Hippodrome, Christ in glory rising above all else in brilliant mosaic streaming with light. 'Byzantium,' Phillips said. 'Take us there the shortest and quickest way.' 'It is my pleasure,' said the boatman with unexpected grace. Gioia smiled. He had not seen her looking so vibrantly alive since the night of the imperial feast in Chang-an. He reached for her hand -- her slender fingers were quivering lightly -- and helped her into the boat. ----- At [www.fictionwise.com](http://www.fictionwise.com) you can: \* Rate this

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THIS MUCH is reality: Schwartz sits comfortably cocooned -- passive, suspended -- in a first-class passenger rack aboard a Japan Air Lines rocket, nine kilometers above the Coral Sea. And this much is fantasy: the same Schwartz has passage on a shining starship gliding silkily through the interstellar depths, en route at nine times the velocity of light from Betelgeuse IX to Rigel XXI, or maybe from Andromeda to the Lesser Magellanic. There are no starships. Probably there never will be any. Here we are, a dozen decades after the flight of Apollo 11, and no human being goes anywhere except back and forth across the face of the little O, the Earth, for the planets are barren and the stars are beyond reach. That little O is too small for Schwartz. Too often it glazes for him; it turns to a nugget of dead porcelain; and lately he has formed the habit, when the world glazes, of taking refuge aboard that interstellar ship. So what JAL Flight 411 holds is merely his physical self, his shell, occupying a costly private cubicle on a slender 200-passenger vessel which, leaving Buenos Aires shortly after breakfast, has sliced westward along the Tropic of Capricorn for a couple of hours and will soon be landing at Papua's Torms Skyport. But his consciousness, his anima, the essential Schwartzness of him, soars between the galaxies. What a starship it is! How marvelous its myriad passengers! Down its crowded corridors swarms a vast gaudy heterogeny of galactic creatures, natives of the worlds of Capella, Arcturus, Altair, Canopus, Polaris, Antares, beings both intelligent and articulate, methane-breathing or nitrogen-breathing or argon-breathing, spiny-skinned or skinless, many-armed or many-headed or altogether incorporeal, each a product of a distinct and distinctly unique and alien cultural heritage. Among these varied folk moves Schwartz, that superstar of anthropologists, that true heir to Kroeber and Morgan and Malinowski and Mead, delightedly devouring their delicious diversity. Whereas aboard this prosaic rocket, this planet-locked stratosphere needle, one cannot tell the Canadians from the Portuguese, the Portuguese from the Romanians, the Romanians from the Irish, unless they open their mouths, and sometimes not always then. In his reveries he confers with creatures from the Fomalhaut system about digital circumcision; he tapes the melodies of the Archernarnian eye-flute; he learns of the sneeze-magic of Acrux, the sleep-ecstasies of Aldebaran, the asteroid-sculptors of Thuban. Then a smiling JAL stewardess parts the curtain of his cubicle and peers in at him, jolting him from one reality to another. She is blue-eyed, frizzy-haired, straight-nosed, thin-lipped, bronze-skinned, a genetic mishmash, your standard twenty-first-century-model mongrel human, perhaps Melanesian-Swedish-Turkish-Bolivian, perhaps Polish-Berber-Tatar-Welsh. Cheap intercontinental transit has done its deadly work: all Earth is a crucible, all the gene pools have melted into one indistinguishable fluid. Schwartz wonders about the recessivity of those blue eyes and arrives at no satisfactory solution. She is beautiful, at any rate. Her name is Dawn -- o sweet neutral nonculture-bound cognomen! -- and they have played at a flirtation, he and she, Dawn and Schwartz, at occasional moments of this short

flight. Twinkling, she says softly, "We're getting ready for our landing, Dr. Schwartz. Are your restrictors in polarity?" "I never unfastened them." "Good." The blue eyes, warm, interested, meet his. "I have a layover in Papua tonight," she says. "That's nice." "Let's have a drink while we're waiting for them to unload the baggage," she suggests with cheerful bluntness. "All right?" "I suppose," he says casually. "Why not?" Her availability bores him: somehow he enjoys the obsolete pleasures of the chase. Once such easiness in a woman like this would have excited him, but no longer. Schwartz is forty years old, tall, square-shouldered, sturdy, a showcase for the peasant genes of his rugged Irish mother. His close-cropped black hair is flecked with gray; many women find that interesting. One rarely sees gray hair now. He dresses simply but well, in sandals and Socratic tunic. Predictably, his physical attractiveness, both within his domestic sixness and without, has increased with his professional success. He is confident, sure of his powers, and he radiates an infectious assurance. This month alone eighty million people have heard his lectures. She picks up the faint weariness in his voice. "You don't sound eager. Not interested?" "Hardly that." "What's wrong, then? Feeling sub, Professor?" Schwartz shrugs. "Dreadfully sub. Body like dry bone. Mind like dead ashes." He smiles, full force depriving his words of all their weight. She registers mock anguish. "That sounds bad," she says. "That sounds awful!" "I'm only quoting Chuang Tzu. Pay no attention to me. Actually, I feel fine, just a little stale." "Too many skyports?" He nods. "Too much of a sameness wherever I go." He thinks of a star-bright, top-deck bubble dome where three boneless Spicans do a twining dance of propitiation to while away the slow hours of nine-light travel. "I'll be all right," he tells her. "It's a date." Her hybrid face flows with relief and anticipation. "See you in Papua," she tells him, and winks, and moves jauntily down the aisle. Papua. By cocktail time Schwartz will be in Port Moresby. Tonight he lectures at the University of Papua; yesterday it was Montevideo; the day after tomorrow it will be Bangkok. He is making the grand academic circuit. This is his year: he is very big, suddenly, in anthropological circles, since the publication of *The Mask Beneath the Skin*. From continent to continent he flashes, sharing his wisdom, Monday in Montreal, Tuesday Veracruz, Wednesday Montevideo, Thursday -- Thursday? He crossed the international date line this morning, and he does not remember whether he has entered Thursday or Tuesday, though yesterday was surely Wednesday. Schwartz is certain only that this is July and the year is 2083, and there are moments when he is not even sure of that. The JAL rocket enters the final phase of its landward plunge. Papua waits, sleek, vitrescent. The world has a glassy sheen again. He lets his spirit drift happily back to the gleaming starship making its swift way across the whirling constellations. He found himself in the starship's busy lower-deck lounge, having a drink with his traveling companion, Pitkin, the Yale economist. Why Pitkin, that coarse, florid little man? With all of real and imaginary humanity to choose from, why had his unconscious elected to make him share this fantasy with such a boor? "Look," Pitkin said, winking and leering. "There's your girlfriend." The entry-iris had opened and the Antarean not-male had come in. "Quit it," Schwartz snapped. "You know there's no such thing going on." "Haven't you been chasing her for days?" "She's not a 'her,'" Schwartz said. Pitkin guffawed. "Such precision! Such scholarship! She's not a her, he says!" He gave Schwartz a broad nudge. "To you she's a she, friend, and don't try to kid me." Schwartz had to admit there was some justice to Pitkin's vulgar innuendos. He did find the Antarean -- a slim yellow-eyed ebony-skinned upright humanoid, sinuous and glossy, with tapering elongated limbs and a seal's fluid grace -- powerfully attractive. Nor could he help thinking of the Antarean as feminine. That attitude was hopelessly culture-bound and species-bound, he knew; in fact the alien had cautioned him that terrestrial sexual distinctions were irrelevant in the Antares system, that if Schwartz insisted on thinking of "her" in genders, "she" could be

considered only the negative of male, with no implication of biological femaleness. He said patiently, "I've told you. The Antarean's neither male nor female as we understand those concepts. If we happen to perceive the Antarean as feminine, that's the result of our own cultural conditioning. If you want to believe that my interest in this being is sexual, go ahead, but I assure you that it's purely professional." "Sure. You're only studying her." "In a sense I am. And she's studying me. On her native world she has the status-frame of 'watcher-of-life,' which seems to translate into the Antarean equivalent of an anthropologist." "How lovely for you both. She's your first alien and you're her first Jew." "Stop calling her her," Schwartz hissed. "But you've been doing it!" Schwartz closed his eyes. "My grandmother told me never to get mixed up with economists. Their thinking is muddy and their breath is bad, she said. She also warned me against Yale men. Perverts of the intellect, she called them. So here I am cooped up on an interstellar ship with five hundred alien creatures and one fellow human, and he has to be an economist from Yale." "Next trip travel with your grandmother instead." "Go away," Schwartz said. "Stop lousing up my fantasies. Go peddle your dismal science somewhere else. You see those Delta Aurigans over there? Climb into their bottle and tell them all about the Gross Global Product." Schwartz smiled at the Antarean, who had purchased a drink, something that glittered an iridescent blue, and was approaching them. "Go on," Schwartz murmured. "Don't worry," Pitkin said. "I wouldn't want to crowd you." He vanished into the motley crowd. The Antarean said, "The Capellans are dancing, Schwartz." "I'd like to see that. Too damned noisy in here anyway." Schwartz stared into the alien's vertical-slitted citreous eyes, Cat's eyes, he thought. Panther's eyes. The Antarean's gaze was focused, as usual, on Schwartz's mouth: other worlds, other customs. He felt a strange, unsettling tremor of desire. Desire for what, though? It was a sensation of pure need, nonspecific, certainly nonsexual. "I think I'll take a look. Will you come with me?" The Papua rocket has landed. Schwartz, leaning across the narrow table in the skyport's lounge, says to the stewardess in a low, intense tone, "My life was in crisis. All my values were becoming meaningless. I was discovering that my chosen profession was empty, foolish, as useless as -- playing chess." "How awful," Dawn whispers gently. "You can see why. You go all over the world, you see a thousand skyports a year. Everything the same everywhere. The same clothes, the same slang, the same magazines, the same styles of architecture and decor." "Yes." "International homogeneity. Worldwide uniformity. Can you understand what it's like to be an anthropologist in a world where there are no primitives left, Dawn? Here we sit on the island of Papua -- you know, headhunters, animism, body-paint, the drums at sunset, the bone through the nose -- and look at the Papuans in their business robes all around us. Listen to them exchanging stock-market tips, talking baseball, recommending restaurants in Paris and barbers in Johannesburg. It's no different anywhere else. In a single century we've transformed the planet into one huge sophisticated plastic western industrial state. The TV relay satellites, the two-hour intercontinental rockets, the breakdown of religious exclusivism and genetic taboo have mongrelized every culture, don't you see? You visit the Zuni and they have plastic African masks on the wall. You visit the Bushmen and they have Japanese-made Hopi-motif ashtrays. It's all just so much interior decoration, and underneath the carefully selected primitive motifs there's the same universal pseudo-American sensibility, whether you're in the Kalahari or the Amazon rain forest. Do you comprehend what's happened, Dawn?" "It's such a terrible loss," she says sadly. She is trying very hard to be sympathetic, but he senses she is waiting for him to finish his sermon and invite her to share his hotel room. He will invite her, but there is no stopping him once he has launched into his one great theme. "Cultural diversity is gone from the world," he says. "Religion is dead; true poetry is dead; inventiveness is dead; individuality is dead. Poetry. Listen to this."





Suppose I were out there right now. I could live in space five, ten, maybe fifteen minutes. I am there and I say, 'Come to me, Schwartz, come to me!' What do you do?" "I don't think I'm all that much self-destructive."

"To die for love, though! To make a transition for the sake of beauty."

"No. Sorry." The Antarean pointed toward the undulating Capellans.

"If they asked you, you would go." "They are asking me," he said.

"And you refuse the invitation?" "So far. So far." The Antarean laughed an Antarean laugh, a thick silvery snort. "Our voyage will last many weeks more. One of these days, I think, you will go to them."

"You were unconscious at least five minutes," Dawn says. "You gave everyone a scare. Are you sure you ought to go through with tonight's lecture?"

Nodding, Schwartz says, "I'll be all right. I'm a little tired, is all. Too many time zones this week." They stand on the terrace of his hotel room. Night is coming on, already, here in late afternoon: it is midwinter in the Southern Hemisphere, though the fragrance of tropic blossoms perfumes the air. The first few stars have appeared. He has never really known which star is which. That bright one, he thinks, could be Rigel, and that one Sirius, and perhaps this is Deneb over there. And this? Can this be red Antares, in the heart of the Scorpion, or is it only Mars? Because of his collapse at the skyport he has been able to beg off the customary faculty reception and the formal dinner; pleading the need for rest, he has arranged to have a simple snack at his hotel room, a deux. In two hours they will come for him and take him to the University to speak. Dawn watches him closely. Perhaps she is

worried about his health, perhaps she is only waiting for him to make his move toward her. There's time for all that later, he figures. He would rather talk now. Warming up for the audience he seizes his earlier thread: "For a

long time I didn't understand what had taken place. I grew up insular, cut off from reality, a New York boy, bright mind and a library card. I read all the anthropological classics, Patterns of Culture and Coming of Age in Samoa and Life of a South African Tribe and the rest, and I dreamed of field trips, collecting myths and grammars and folkways and artifacts and all that, until when I was twenty-five I finally got out into the field and started to discover I had gone into a dead science. We have only one worldwide culture now, with local variants but no basic divergences -- there's nothing primitive left on Earth, and there are no other planets. Not inhabited ones. I can't go to Mars or Venus or Saturn and study the natives. What natives? And we can't reach the stas. All I have to work with is Earth. I was thirty years old when the whole thing clicked together for me and I knew I had wasted my life."

She says, "But surely there was something for you to study on Earth."

"One culture, rootless and homogeneous. That's work for a sociologist, not for me. I'm a romantic, I'm an exotic, I want strangeness, difference. Look, we can never have any real perspective on our own time and lives. The sociologists try to attain it, but all they get is a mound of raw indigestible data. Insight comes later -- two, five, ten generations later. But one way we've always been able to learn about ourselves is by studying alien cultures, studying them completely, and defining ourselves by measuring what they are that we aren't. The cultures have to be isolated, though. The anthropologist himself corrupts that isolation in the Heisenberg sense when he comes around with his camera and scanners and starts asking questions, but we can compensate more or less, for the inevitable damage a lone observer causes. We can't compensate when our whole culture collides with another and absorbs and obliterates it. Which we technological-mechanical people now have done everywhere. One day I woke up and saw there were no alien cultures left. Hah! Crushing revelation! Schwartz's occupation is gone!" "What did you

do?" "For years I was in an absolute funk. I taught, I studied, I went through the motions, knowing it was all meaningless. All I was doing was looking at records of vanished cultures left by earlier observers and trying to cudgel new meanings. Secondary sources, stale findings: I was an evaluator of dry bones, not a gatherer of evidence. Paleontology. Dinosaurs are interesting, but what do they tell you about the contemporary world and the

meaning of its patterns? Dry bones, Dawn, dry bones. Despair. And then a clue. I had this Nigerian student, this Iibo -- well, basically an Iibo, but she's got some Israeli in her and I think Chinese -- and we grew very close, she was as close to me as anybody in my own sixness, and I told her my troubles. I'm going to give it up, I said, because it isn't what I expected it to be. She laughed at me and said, What right do you have to be upset because the world doesn't live up to your expectations? Reshape your life, Tom; you can't reshape the world. I said, But how? And she said, Look inward, find the primitive in yourself, see what made you what you are, what made today's culture what it is, see how these alien streams have flowed together. Nothing's been lost here, only merged. Which made me think. Which gave me a new way of looking at things. Which sent me on an inward quest. It took me three years to grasp the patterns, to come to an understanding of what our planet has become, and only after I accepted the planet -- " It seems to him that he has been talking forever. Talking. Talking. But he can no longer hear his own voice. There is only a distant buzz. "After I accepted -- " A distant buzz. "What was I saying?" he asks. "After you accepted the planet -- " "After I accepted the planet," he says, "that I could begin -- " Buzz. Buzz. "That I could begin to accept myself." He was drawn toward the Spicans too, not so much for themselves -- they were oblique, elliptical characters, self-contained and self-satisfied, hard to approach -- as for the apparently psychedelic drug they took in some sacramental way before the beginning of each of their interminable ritual dances. Each time he had watched them take the drug, they had seemingly made a point of extending it toward him, as if inviting him, as if tempting him, before popping it into their mouths. He felt baited; he felt pulled. There were three Spicans on board, slender creatures two and a half meters long, with flexible cylindrical bodies and small stubby limbs. Their skins were reptilian, dry and smooth, deep green with yellow bands, but their eyes were weirdly human, large liquid-brown eyes, sad Levantine eyes, the eyes of unfortunate medieval travelers transformed by enchantment into serpents. Schwartz had spoken with them several times. They understood English well enough -- all galactic races did; Schwartz imagined it would become the interstellar lingua franca as it had on Earth -- but the construction of their vocal organs was such that they had no way of speaking it, and they relied instead on small translating machines hung around their necks that converted their soft whispered hisses into amber words pulsing across a screen. Cautiously, the third or fourth time he spoke with them, he expressed polite interest in their drug. They told him it enabled them to make contact with the central forces of the universe. He replied that there were such drugs on Earth, too, and that he used them frequently, that they gave him great insight into the workings of the cosmos. They showed some curiosity, perhaps even intense curiosity: reading their eyes was difficult and the tone of their voices gave no clues. He took his elegant leather-bound drug case from his pouch and showed them what he had: leartinin, psilocerebrin, siddharthin, and acid-57. He described the effects of each and suggested an exchange, any of his for an equivalent dose of the shriveled orange fungoid they nibbled. They conferred. Yes, they said, we will do this. But not now. Not until the proper moment. Schwartz knew better than to ask them when that would be. He thanked them and put his drugs away. Pitkin, who had watched the interchange from the far side of the lounge, came striding fiercely toward him as the Spicans glided off. "What are you up to now?" he demanded. "How about minding your own business?" Schwartz said amiably. "You're trading pills with these snakes, aren't you?" "Let's call it field research." "Research? Research? What are you going to do, trip on that orange stuff of theirs?" "I might," Schwartz said. "How do you know what its effects on the human metabolism might be? You could end up blind or paralyzed or crazy or -- " " -- or illuminated," Schwartz said. "Those are the risks one takes in the field. The early anthropologists who unhesitatingly sampled peyote and yage and ololiuqui accepted those risks, and -- " "But those

were drugs that humans were using. You have no way of telling how -- oh, what's the use, Schwartz? Research, he calls it. Research." Pitkin sneered. "Junkie!" Schwartz matched him sneer for sneer. "Economist!"

The house is a decent one tonight, close to three thousand, every seat in the University's great horseshoe-shaped auditorium taken, and a video relay besides, beaming his lecture to all Papua and half of Indonesia. Schwartz stands on the dais like a demigod under a brilliant no-glare spotlight. Despite his earlier weariness he is in good form now, gestures broad and forceful, eyes commanding, voice deep and resonant, words flowing freely. "Only one planet," he says, "one small and crowded planet, on which all cultures converge to a drab and depressing sameness. How sad that is! How tiny we make ourselves, when we make ourselves to resemble one another!" He flings his arms upward. "Look to the stars, the unattainable stars! Imagine, if you can, the millions of worlds that orbit those blazing suns beyond the night's darkness! Speculate with me on other peoples, other ways, other gods. Beings of every imaginable form, alien in appearance but not grotesque, not hideous, for all life is beautiful -- beings that breathe gases strange to us, beings of immense size, beings of many limbs or of none, beings to whom death is a divine culmination of existence, beings who never die, beings who bring forth their young a thousand at a time, beings who do not reproduce -- all the infinite possibilities of the infinite universe! "Perhaps on each of those worlds it is as it has become here. One intelligent species, one culture, the eternal convergence. But the many worlds together offer a vast spectrum of variety. And now, share this vision with me! I see a ship voyaging from star to star, a spaceliner of the future, and aboard that ship is a sampling of many species, many cultures, a random scoop out of the galaxy's fantastic diversity. That ship is like a little cosmos, a small world, enclosed, sealed. How exciting to be aboard it, to encounter in that little compass such richness of cultural variation! Now our own world was once like that starship, a little cosmos, bearing with it all the thousands of Earthborn cultures. Hopi and Eskimo and Aztec and Kwakiutl and Arapesh and Orolo and all the rest. In the course of our voyage we have come to resemble one another too much, and it has impoverished the lives of all of us, because -- " He falters suddenly. He feels faint, and grasps the sides of the lectern. "Because -- " The spotlight, he thinks. In my eyes. Not supposed to glare like that, but it's blinding. Got to have them move it. "In the course -- the course of our voyage -- " What's happening? Breaking into a sweat, now. Pain in my chest. My heart? Wait, slow up, catch your breath. That light in my eyes -- "Tell me," Schwartz said earnestly, "what it's like to know you'll have ten successive bodies and live more than a thousand years." "First tell me," said the Antarean, "what it's like to know you'll live ninety years or less and perish forever." Somehow he continues. The pain in his chest grows more intense, he cannot focus his eyes; he believes he will lose consciousness at any moment and may even have lost it already at least once, and yet he continues. Clinging to the lectern, he outlines the program he developed in *The Mask Beneath the Skin*. A rebirth of tribalism without a revival of ugly nationalism. The quest for a renewed sense of kinship with the past. A sharp reduction in nonessential travel, especially tourism. Heavy taxation of exported artifacts, including films and video shows. An attempt to create independent cultural units on Earth once again while maintaining present levels of economic and political interdependence. Relinquishment of materialistic technological-industrial values. New searches for fundamental meanings. An ethnic revival, before it is too late, among those cultures of mankind that have only recently shed their traditional folkways. (He repeats and embellishes this point particularly, for the benefit of the Papuans before him, the great-grandchildren of cannibals.) The discomfort and confusion come and go as he unreels his themes. He builds and builds, crying out passionately for an end to the homogenization of Earth, and gradually the physical symptoms leave him, all but a faint vertigo. But a different malaise seizes him as he nears his peroration. His voice becomes, to

him, a far-off quacking, meaningless and foolish. He has said all this a thousand times, always to great ovations, but who listens? Who listens? Everything seems hollow tonight, mechanical, absurd. An ethnic revival? Shall these people before him revert to their loincloths and their pig roasts? His starship is a fantasy; his dream of a diverse Earth is mere silliness. What is, will be. And yet he pushes on toward his conclusion. He takes his audience back to that starship, he creates a horde of fanciful beings for them. He completes the metaphor by sketching the structures of half a dozen vanished "primitive" cultures of Earth, he chants the chants of the Navaho, the Gabon Pygmies, the Ashanti, the Mundugumor. It is over. Cascades of applause engulf him. He holds his place until members of the sponsoring committee come to him and help him down: they have perceived his distress. "It's nothing," he gasps. "The lights -- too bright -- " Dawn is at his side. She hands him a drink, something cool. Two of the sponsors begin to speak of a reception for him in the Green Room. "Fine," Schwartz says. "Glad to." Dawn murmurs a protest. He shakes her off. "My obligation," he tells her. "Meet community leaders. Faculty people. I'm feeling better now. Honestly." Swaying, trembling, he lets them lead him away.

"A Jew," the Antarean said. "You call yourself a Jew, but what is this exactly? A clan, a sept, a moiety, a tribe, a nation, what? Can you explain?"

"Of course." "Judaism -- Jewishness -- it's one of Earth's major religions." "You are therefore a priest?" "Not at all. I don't even practice Judaism. But my ancestors did, and therefore I consider myself Jewish, even though -- "

"It is an hereditary religion, then," the Antarean said, "that does not require its members to observe its rites?"

"In a sense," said Schwartz desperately. "More an hereditary cultural subgroup, actually, evolving out of a common religious outlook no longer relevant." "Ah. And the cultural traits of Jewishness that define it and separate you from the majority of humankind are -- ?" "Well -- "

Schwartz hesitated. "There's a complicated dietary code, a rite of circumcision for newborn males, a rite of passage for male adolescents, a language of scripture, a vernacular language that Jews all around the world more or less understand, and plenty more, including a certain intangible sense of clannishness and certain attitudes, such as a peculiar self-deprecating style of humor -- "

"You observe the dietary code? You understand the language of scripture?" "Not exactly," Schwartz admitted. "In fact I don't do anything that's specifically Jewish except think of myself as a Jew and adopt many of the characteristically Jewish personality modes, which however are not uniquely Jewish any longer -- they can be traced among Italians, for example, and to some extent among Greeks. I'm speaking of Italians and Greeks of the late twentieth century, of course. Nowadays -- "

"It was all becoming a terrible muddle. "Nowadays -- "

"It would seem," said the Antarean, "that you are a Jew only because your maternal and paternal gene-givers were Jews, and they -- "

"No, not quite. Not my mother, just my father, and he was Jewish only on his father's side, but even my grandfather never observed the customs, and -- "

"I think this has grown too confusing," said the Antarean. "I withdraw the entire inquiry. Let us speak instead of my own traditions. The Time of Openings, for example, may be understood as -- "

In the Green Room some eighty or a hundred distinguished Papuans press toward him, offering congratulations. "Absolutely right," they say. "A global catastrophe." "Our last chance to save our culture." Their skins are chocolate-tinted but their faces betray the genetic mishmash that is their ancestry: perhaps they call themselves Arapesh, Mundugumor, Tchambuli, Mafulu, in the way that he calls himself a Jew, but they have been liberally larded with chromosomes contributed by Chinese, Japanese, Europeans, Africans, everything. They dress in International Contemporary. They speak slangy, lively English. Schwartz feels seasick. "You look dazed," Dawn whispers. He smiles bravely. Body like dry bone. Mind like dead ashes. He is introduced to a tribal chieftain, tall, gray-haired, who looks and speaks like a professor, a lawyer, a banker. What, will these people

return to the hills for the ceremony of the yam harvest? Will newborn girl-children be abandoned, cords uncut, skins unwashed, if their fathers do not need more girls? Will boys entering manhood submit to the expensive services of the initiator who scarifies them with the teeth of crocodiles? The crocodiles are gone. The shamans have become stockbrokers. Suddenly he cannot breathe. "Get me out of here," Schwartz mutters hoarsely, choking.

Dawn, with stewardess efficiency, chops a path for him through the mob. The sponsors, concerned, rush to his aid. He is floated swiftly back to the hotel in a glistening little bubble-car. Dawn helps him to bed. Reviving, he reaches for her. "You don't have to," she says. "You've had a rough day."

He persists. He embraces her and takes her, quickly, fiercely, and they move together for a few minutes and it ends and he sinks back, exhausted, stupefied. She gets a cool cloth and pats his forehead and urges him to rest. "Bring me my drugs," he says. He wants siddharthin, but she misunderstands, probably deliberately, and offers him something blue and bulky, a sleeping pill, and, too weary to object, he takes it. Even so, it seems to be hours before sleep comes.

He dreams he is at the skyport, boarding the rocket for Bangkok, and instantly he is debarking at Bangkok -- just like Port Moresby, only more humid -- and he delivers his speech to a horde of enthusiastic Thais, while rockets Bicker about him, carrying him to skyport after skyport, and the Thais blur and become Japanese, who are transformed into Mongols, who become Uighurs, who become Iranians, who become Sudanese, who become Zambians, who become Chileans, and all look alike, all look alike, all look alike.

The Spicans hovered above him, weaving, bobbing, swaying like cobras about to strike. But their eyes, warm and liquid, were sympathetic: loving, even. He felt the flow of their compassion. If they had had the sort of musculature that enabled them to smile, they would be smiling tenderly, he knew.

One of the aliens leaned close. The little translating device dangled toward Schwartz like a holy medallion. He narrowed his eyes, concentrating as intently as he could on the amber words flashing quickly across the screen. ". . . has come. We shall . . ."

"Again, please," Schwartz said. "I missed some of what you were saying."

"The moment...has come. We shall...make the exchange of sacraments now."

"Sacraments?"

"Drugs."

"Drugs, yes. Yes. Of course." Schwartz

groped in his pouch. He felt the cool, smooth leather skin of his drug case.

Leather? Snakeskin, maybe. Anyway. He drew it forth. "Here", he said.

"Siddharthin, learitonin, psilocerebrin, acid-57. Take your pick." The Spicans selected three small blue siddhardiins. "Very good," Schwartz said. "The most transcendental of all. And now -- "

The longest of the aliens proffered a ball of dried orange fungus the size of Schwartz's thumbnail. "It is an equivalent dose. We give it to you."

"Equivalent to all three of my tablets, or to one?" "Equivalent. It will give you peace."

Schwartz smiled. There was a time for asking questions and a time for unhesitating action. He took the fungus and reached for a glass of water.

"Wait!" Pitkin cried, appearing suddenly. "What are you -- " "Too late," Schwartz said serenely, and swallowed the Spican drug in one joyous gulp.

The nightmares go on and on. He circles the Earth like the Flying Dutchman, like the Wandering Jew, skyport to skyport to skyport, an unending voyage from nowhere to nowhere. Obliging committees meet him and convey him to his hotel. Sometimes the committee members are contemporary types, indistinguishable from one another, with standard faces, standard clothing, the all-purpose new-model hybrid unihuman, and sometimes they are consciously ethnic, elaborately decked out in feathers and paint and tribal emblems, but their faces, too, are standard behind the gaudy regalia, their slang is the slang of Uganda and Tierra del Fuego and Nepal, and it seems to Schwartz that these masqueraders are, if anything, less authentic, less honest, than the other sort, who at least are true representatives of their era. So it is hopeless either way. He lashes at his pillow, he groans, he awakens. Instantly Dawn's arms enfold him. He sobs incoherent phrases into her clavicle and she murmurs soothing sounds against his forehead. He is having

some sort of breakdown, he realizes: a new crisis of values, a shattering of the philosophical synthesis that has allowed him to get through the last few years. He is bound to the wheel; he spins, he spins, he spins, traversing the continents, getting nowhere. There is no place to go. No. There is one, just one, a place where he will find peace, where the universe will be as he needs it to be. Go there, Schwartz. Go and stay as long as you can. "Is there anything I can do?" Dawn asks. He shivers and shakes his head. "Take this," she says, and gives him some sort of pill. Another tranquilizer. All right. All right. The world has turned to porcelain. His skin feels like a plastic coating. Away, away, to the ship. To the ship! "So long," Schwartz says.

Outside the ship the Capellans twist and spin in their ritual dance as, weightless and without mass, they are swept toward the rim of the galaxy at nine times the velocity of light. They move with a grace that is astonishing for creatures of such tremendous bulk. A dazzling light that emanates from the center of the universe strikes their glossy skin and, rebounding, resonates all up and down the spectrum, splintering into brilliant streamers of ultra-red, infraviolet, exoyellow. All the cosmos glows and shimmers. A single perfect note of music comes out of the remote distance and, growing closer, swells in an infinite crescendo. Schwartz trembles at the beauty of all he perceives.

Beside him stands the seal-slick Antarean. She -- definitely she, no doubt of it, she -- plucks at his arm and whispers, "Will you go to them?" "Yes. Yes, of course." "So will I.

Wherever you go." "Now," Schwartz says. He reaches for the lever that opens the hatch. He pulls down. The side of the starship swings open.

The Antarean looks deep into his eyes and says blissfully, "I never told you my name. My name is Dawn." Together they float through the hatch into space.

The blackness receives them gently. There is no chill, no pressure at the lungs, no discomfort at all. He is surrounded by luminous surges, by throbbing mantles of pure color, as though he has entered the heart of an aurora. He and Dawn swim toward the Capellans, and the huge beings welcome them with deep, glad, booming cries. Dawn joins the dance at once, moving her sinuous limbs with extravagant ease; Schwartz will do the same in a moment, but first he turns to face the starship, hanging in space close by him like a vast coppery needle, and in a voice that could shake universes he calls, "Come, friends! Come, all of you! Come dance with us!" And they come, pouring through the hatch, the Spicans first, then all the rest, the infinite multitude of beings, the travelers from Fomalhaut and Achemar and Acrux and Aldebaran, from Thuban and Arcturus and Altair, from Polaris and Canopus and Sirius and Rigel, hundreds of star-creatures spilling happily out of the vessel, bursting forth, all of them, even Pitkin, poor little Pitkin, everyone joining hands and tentacles and tendrils and whatever, forming a great ring of light across space, everyone locked in a cosmic harmony, everyone dancing. Dancing. Dancing.

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Sundance

by Robert Silverberg

Today you liquidated about 50,000 Eaters in Sector A, and now you are spending an uneasy night. You

and Herndon flew east at dawn, with the green-gold sunrise at your backs, and sprayed the neural pellets over a thousand hectares along the Forked River. You flew on into the prairie beyond the river, where the Eaters have already been wiped out, and had lunch sprawled on that thick, soft carpet of grass where the first settlement is expected to rise. Herndon picked some juiceflowers, and you enjoyed half an hour of mild hallucinations. Then, as you headed toward the copter to begin an afternoon of further pellet spraying, he said suddenly, "Tom, how would you feel about this if it turned out that the Eaters weren't just animal pests? That they were *people*, say, with a language and rites and a history and all?"

You thought of how it had been for your own people.

"They aren't," you said.

"Suppose they were. Suppose the Eaters—"

"They aren't. Drop it."

Herndon has this streak of cruelty in him that leads him to ask such questions. He goes for the vulnerabilities; it amuses him. All night now his casual remark has echoed in your mind. Suppose the Eaters ... suppose the Eaters ... suppose ... suppose ...

You sleep for a while, and dream, and in your dreams you swim through rivers of blood.

Foolishness. A feverish fantasy. You know how important it is to exterminate the Eaters fast, before the settlers get here. They're just animals, and not even harmless animals at that; ecology-wreckers is what they are, devourers of oxygen-liberating plants, and they have to go. A few have been saved for zoological study. The rest must be destroyed. Ritual extirpation of undesirable beings, the old, old story. But let's not complicate our job with moral qualms, you tell yourself. Let's not dream of rivers of blood.

The Eaters don't even *have* blood, none that could flow in rivers, anyway. What they have is, well, a kind of lymph that permeates every tissue and transmits nourishment along the interfaces. Waste products go out the same way, osmotically. In terms of process, it's structurally analogous to your own kind of circulatory system, except there's no network of blood vessels hooked to a master pump. The life-stuff just oozes through their bodies as though they were amoebas or sponges or some other low-phylum form. Yet they're definitely high-phylum in nervous system, digestive setup, limb-and-organ template, etc. Odd, you think. The thing about aliens is that they're alien, you tell yourself, not for the first time.

The beauty of their biology for you and your companions is that it lets you exterminate them so neatly.

You fly over the grazing grounds and drop the neural pellets. The Eaters find and ingest them. Within an hour the poison has reached all sectors of the body. Life ceases; a rapid breakdown of cellular matter follows, the Eater literally falling apart molecule by molecule the instant that nutrition is cut off; the lymph-like stuff works like acid; a universal lysis occurs; flesh and even the bones, which are cartilaginous, dissolve. In two hours, a puddle on the ground. In four, nothing at all left. Considering how many millions of Eaters you've scheduled for extermination here, it's sweet of the bodies to be self-disposing. Otherwise what a charnel house this world would become!

Suppose the Eaters ...

*Damn* Herndon. You almost feel like getting a memory-editing in the morning. Scrape his stupid speculations out of your head. If you dared. If you dared.

.....

In the morning he does not dare. Memory-editing frightens him; he will try to shake free of his newfound guilt without it. The Eaters, he explains to himself, are mindless herbivores, the unfortunate victims of human expansionism, but not really deserving of passionate defense. Their extermination is not tragic; it's just too bad. If Earthmen are to have this world, the Eaters must relinquish it. There's a difference, he tells himself, between the elimination of the Plains Indians from the American prairie in the nineteenth century and the destruction of the bison on that same prairie. One feels a little wistful about the slaughter of the thundering herds; one regrets the butchering of millions of the noble brown woolly beasts, yes. But one feels outrage, not mere wistful regret, at what was done to the Sioux. There's a difference. Reserve your passions for the proper cause.

He walks from his bubble at the edge of the camp toward the center of things. The flagstone path is moist and glistening. The morning fog has not yet lifted, and every tree is bowed, the long, notched leaves heavy with droplets of water. He pauses, crouching, to observe a spider-analog spinning its asymmetrical web. As he watches, a small amphibian, delicately shaded turquoise, glides as inconspicuously as possible over the mossy ground. Not inconspicuously enough; he gently lifts the little creature and puts it on the back of his hand. The gills flutter in anguish, and the amphibian's sides quiver. Slowly, cunningly, its color changes until it matches the coppery tone of the hand. The camouflage is excellent. He lowers his hand and the amphibian scurries into a puddle. He walks on.

He is forty years old, shorter than most of the other members of the expedition, with wide shoulders, a heavy chest, dark glossy hair, a blunt, spreading nose. He is a biologist. This is his third career, for he has failed as an anthropologist and as a developer of real estate. His name is Tom Two Ribbons. He has been married twice but has had no children. His great-grandfather died of alcoholism; his grandfather was addicted to hallucinogens; his father had compulsively visited cheap memory-editing parlors. Tom Two Ribbons is conscious that he is failing a family tradition, but he has not yet found his own mode of self-destruction.

In the main building he discovers Herndon, Julia, Ellen, Schwartz, Chang, Michaelson, and Nichols. They are eating breakfast; the others are already at work. Ellen rises and comes to him and kisses him. Her short soft yellow hair tickles his cheeks. "I love you," she whispers. She has spent the night in Michaelson's bubble. "I love you," he tells her, and draws a quick vertical line of affection between her small pale breasts. He winks at Michaelson, who nods, touches the tops of two fingers to his lips, and blows them a kiss. We are all good friends here, Tom Two Ribbons thinks.

"Who drops pellets today?" he asks.

"Mike and Chang," says Julia. "Sector C."

Schwartz says, "Eleven more days and we ought to have the whole peninsula clear. Then we can move inland."

"If our pellet supply holds up," Chang points out.

Herndon says, "Did you sleep well, Tom?"



"No," says Tom. He sits down and taps out his breakfast requisition. In the west, the fog is beginning to burn off the mountains. Something throbs in the back of his neck. He has been on this world nine weeks now, and in that time it has undergone its only change of season, shading from dry weather to foggy. The mists will remain for many months. Before the plains parch again, the Eaters will be gone and the settlers will begin to arrive. His food slides down the chute and he seizes it. Ellen sits beside him. She is a little more than half his age; this is her first voyage; she is their keeper of records, but she is also skilled at editing. "You look troubled," Ellen tells him. "Can I help you?"

"No. Thank you."

"I hate it when you get gloomy."

"It's a racial trait," says Tom Two Ribbons.

"I doubt that very much."

"The truth is that maybe my personality reconstruct is wearing thin. The trauma level was so close to the surface. I'm just a walking veneer, you know."

Ellen laughs prettily. She wears only a sprayon half-wrap. Her skin looks damp; she and Michaelson have had a swim at dawn. Tom Two Ribbons is thinking of asking her to marry him, when this job is over. He has not been married since the collapse of the real estate business. The therapist suggested divorce as part of the reconstruct. He sometimes wonders where Terry has gone and whom she lives with now. Ellen says, "You seem pretty stable to me, Tom."

"Thank you," he says. She is young. She does not know.

"If it's just a passing gloom I can edit it out in one quick snip."

"Thank you," he says. "No."

"I forgot. You don't like editing."

"My father—"

"Yes?"

"In fifty years he pared himself down to a thread," Tom Two Ribbons says. "He had his ancestors edited away, his whole heritage, his religion, his wife, his sons, finally his name. Then he sat and smiled all day. Thank you, no editing."

"Where are you working today?" Ellen asks.

"In the compound, running tests."

"Want company? I'm off all morning."

"Thank you, no," he says, too quickly. She looks hurt. He tries to remedy his unintended cruelty by touching her arm lightly and saying, "Maybe this afternoon, all right? I need to commune a while. Yes?"

"Yes," she says, and smiles, and shapes a kiss with her lips.

After breakfast he goes to the compound. It covers a thousand hectares east of the base; they have bordered it with neutral-field projectors at intervals of eighty meters, and this is a sufficient fence to keep the captive population of two hundred Eaters from straying. When all the others have been exterminated, this study group will remain. At the southwest corner of the compound stands a lab bubble from which the experiments are run: metabolic, psychological, physiological, ecological. A stream crosses the compound diagonally. There is a low ridge of grassy hills at its eastern edge. Five distinct copses of tightly clustered knifeblade trees are separated by patches of dense savanna. Sheltered beneath the grass are the oxygen-plants, almost completely hidden except for the photosynthetic spikes that jut to heights of three or four meters at regular intervals, and for the lemon-colored respiratory bodies, chest high, that make the grassland sweet and dizzying with exhaled gases. Through the fields move the Eaters in a straggling herd, nibbling delicately at the respiratory bodies.

Tom Two Ribbons spies the herd beside the stream and goes toward it. He stumbles over an oxygen-plant hidden in the grass but deftly recovers his balance and, seizing the puckered orifice of the respiratory body, inhales deeply. His despair lifts. He approaches the Eaters. They are spherical, bulky, slow-moving creatures, covered by masses of coarse orange fur. Saucer-like eyes protrude above narrow rubbery lips. Their legs are thin and scaly, like a chicken's, and their arms are short and held close to their bodies. They regard him with bland lack of curiosity. "Good morning, brothers!" is the way he greets them this time, and he wonders why.

. . . . .

I noticed something strange today. Perhaps I simply sniffed too much oxygen in the fields; maybe I was succumbing to a suggestion Herndon planted; or possibly it's the family masochism cropping out. But while I was observing the Eaters in the compound, it seemed to me, for the first time, that they were behaving intelligently, that they were functioning in a ritualized way.

I followed them around for three hours. During that time they uncovered half a dozen outcroppings of oxygen-plants. In each case they went through a stylized pattern of action before starting to munch. They:

Formed a straggly circle around the plants.

Looked toward the sun.

Looked toward their neighbors on left and right around the circle.

Made fuzzy neighing sounds only after having done the foregoing.

Looked toward the sun again.

Moved in and ate.

If this wasn't a prayer of thanksgiving, a saying of grace, then what was it? And if they're advanced enough spiritually to say grace, are we not therefore committing genocide here? Do chimpanzees say grace? Christ, we wouldn't even wipe out chimps the way we're cleaning out the Eaters! Of course, chimps don't interfere with human crops, and some kind of coexistence would be possible, whereas

Eaters and human agriculturalists simply can't function on the same planet. Nevertheless, there's a moral issue here. The liquidation effort is predicated on the assumption that the intelligence level of the Eaters is about on par with that of oysters, or, at best, sheep. Our consciences stay clear because our poison is quick and painless and because the Eaters thoughtfully dissolve upon dying, sparing us the mess of incinerating millions of corpses. But if they pray—

I won't say anything to the others just yet. I want more evidence, hard, objective. Films, tapes, record cubes. Then we'll see. What if I can show that we're exterminating intelligent beings? My family knows a little about genocide, after all, having been on the receiving end just a few centuries back. I doubt that I could halt what's going on here. But at the very least I could withdraw from the operation. Head back to Earth and stir up public outcries.

I hope I'm imagining this.

.....

I'm not imagining a thing. They gather in circles; they look to the sun; they neigh and pray. They're only balls of jelly on chicken-legs, but they give thanks for their food. Those big round eyes now seem to stare accusingly at me. Our tame herd here knows what's going on: that we have descended from the stars to eradicate their kind, and that they alone will be spared. They have no way of fighting back or even of communicating their displeasure, but they know. And hate us. Jesus, we have killed two million of them since we got here, and in a metaphorical sense I'm stained with blood, and what will I do, what can I do?

I must move very carefully, or I'll end up drugged and edited.

I can't let myself seem like a crank, a quack, an agitator. I can't stand up and denounce! I have to find allies. Herndon, first. He surely is onto the truth; he's the one who nudged me to it, that day we dropped pellets. And I thought he was merely being vicious in his usual way!

I'll talk to him tonight.

.....

He says, "I've been thinking about that suggestion you made. About the Eaters. Perhaps we haven't made sufficiently close psychological studies. I mean, if they really *are* intelligent—"

Herndon blinks. He is a tall man with glossy dark hair, a heavy beard, sharp cheekbones. "Who says they are, Tom?"

"You did. On the far side of the Forked River, you said—"

"It was just a speculative hypothesis. To make conversation."

"No, I think it was more than that. You really believed it."

Herndon looks troubled. "Tom, I don't know what you're trying to start, but don't start it. If I for a moment believed we were killing intelligent creatures, I'd run for an editor so fast I'd start an implosion wave."

"Why did you ask me that thing, then?" Tom Two Ribbons says.

"Idle chatter."

"Amusing yourself by kindling guilts in somebody else? You're a bastard, Herndon. I mean it."

"Well, look, Tom, if I had any idea that you'd get so worked up about a hypothetical suggestion—" Herndon shakes his head. "The Eaters aren't intelligent beings. Obviously. Otherwise we wouldn't be under orders to liquidate them."

"Obviously," says Tom Two Ribbons.

. . . . .

Ellen said, "No, I don't know what Tom's up to. But I'm pretty sure he needs a rest. It's only a year and a half since his personality reconstruct, and he had a pretty bad breakdown back then."

Michaelson consulted a chart. "He's refused three times in a row to make his pellet-dropping run. Claiming he can't take time away from his research. Hell, we can fill in for him, but it's the idea that he's ducking chores that bothers me."

"What kind of research is he doing?" Nichols wanted to know.

"Not biological," said Julia. "He's with the Eaters in the compound all the time, but I don't see him making any tests on them. He just watches them."

"And talks to them," Chang observed.

"And talks, yes," Julia said.

"About what?" Nichols asked.

"Who knows?"

Everyone looked at Ellen. "You're closest to him," Michaelson said. "Can't you bring him out of it?"

"I've got to know what he's in, first," Ellen said. "He isn't saying a thing."

. . . . .

You know that you must be very careful, for they outnumber you, and their concern for your welfare can be deadly. Already they realize you are disturbed, and Ellen has begun to probe for the source of the disturbance. Last night you lay in her arms and she questioned you, obliquely, skillfully, and you knew what she is trying to find out. When the moons appeared she suggested that you and she stroll in the compound, among the sleeping Eaters. You declined, but she sees that you have become involved with the creatures.

You have done probing of your own—subtly, you hope. And you are aware that you can do nothing to save the Eaters. An irrevocable commitment has been made. It is 1876 all over again; these are the bison, these are the Sioux, and they must be destroyed, for the railroad is on its way. If you speak out here, your friends will calm you and pacify you and edit you, for they do not see what you see. If you return to Earth to agitate, you will be mocked and recommended for another reconstruct. You can do nothing. You can do nothing.

You cannot save, but perhaps you can record.

Go out into the prairie. Live with the Eaters; make yourself their friend; learn their ways. Set it down, a full account of their culture, so that at least that much will not be lost. You know the techniques of field anthropology. As was done for your people in the old days, do now for the Eaters.

. . . . .

He finds Michaelson. "Can you spare me for a few weeks?" he asks.

"Spare you, Tom? What do you mean?"

"I've got some field studies to do. I'd like to leave the base and work with Eaters in the wild."

"What's wrong with the ones in the compound?"

"It's the last chance with wild ones, Mike. I've got to go."

"Alone, or with Ellen?"

"Alone."

Michaelson nods slowly. "All right, Tom. Whatever you want. Go. I won't hold you here."

. . . . .

I dance in the prairie under the green-gold sun. About me the Eaters gather. I am stripped; sweat makes my skin glisten; my heart pounds. I talk to them with my feet, and they understand.

They understand.

They have a language of soft sounds. They have a god. They know love and awe and rapture. They have rites. They have names. They have a history. Of all this I am convinced.

I dance on thick grass.

How can I reach them? With my feet, with my hands, with my grunts, with my sweat. They gather by the hundreds, by the thousands, and I dance. I must not stop. They cluster about me and make their sounds. I am a conduit for strange forces. My great-grandfather should see me now! Sitting on his porch in Wyoming, the firewater in his hand, his brain rotting—see me now, old one! See the dance of Tom Two Ribbons! I talk to these strange ones with my feet under a sun that is the wrong color. I dance. I dance.

"Listen to me," I say. "I am your friend, I alone, the only one you can trust. Trust me, talk to me, teach me. Let me preserve your ways, for soon the destruction will come."

I dance, and the sun climbs, and the Eaters murmur.

There is the chief. I dance toward him, back, toward, I bow, I point to the sun, I imagine the being that lives in that ball of flame, I imitate the sounds of these people, I kneel, I rise, I dance. Tom Two Ribbons dances for you.

I summon skills my ancestors forgot. I feel the power flowing in me. As they danced in the days of the bison, I dance now, beyond the Forked River.

I dance, and now the Eaters dance too. Slowly, uncertainly, they move toward me, they shift their weight, lift leg and leg, sway about. "Yes, like that!" I cry. "Dance!"

We dance together as the sun reaches noon height.

Now their eyes are no longer accusing. I see warmth and kinship. I am their brother, their redskinned tribesman, he who dances with them. No longer do they seem clumsy to me. There is a strange ponderous grace in their movements. They dance. They dance. They caper about me. Closer, closer, closer!

We move in holy frenzy.

They sing, now, a blurred hymn of joy. They throw forth their arms, unclench their little claws. In unison they shift weight, left foot forward, right, left, right. Dance, brothers, dance, dance, dance! They press against me. Their flesh quivers; their smell is a sweet one. They gently thrust me across the field, to a part of the meadow where the grass is deep and untrampled. Still dancing, we seek for the oxygen-plants, and find clumps of them beneath the grass, and they make their prayer and seize them with their awkward arms, separating the respiratory bodies from the photosynthetic spikes. The plants, in anguish, release floods of oxygen. My mind reels. I laugh and sing. The Eaters are nibbling the lemon-colored perforated globes, nibbling the stalks as well. They thrust their plants at me. It is a religious ceremony, I see. Take from us, eat with us, join with us, this is the body, this is the blood, take, eat, join. I bend forward and put a lemon-colored globe to my lips. I do not bite; I nibble, as they do, my teeth slicing away the skin of the globe. Juice spurts into my mouth while oxygen drenches my nostrils. The Eaters sing hosannas. I should

be in full paint for this, paint of my forefathers, feathers too, meeting their religion in the regalia of what should have been mine. Take, eat, join. The juice of the oxygen-plant flows in my veins. I embrace my brothers. I sing, and as my voice leaves my lips it becomes an arch that glistens like new steel, and I pitch my song lower, and the arch turns to tarnished silver. The Eaters crowd close. The scent of their bodies is fiery red to me. Their soft cries are puffs of steam. The sun is very warm; its rays are tiny jagged pings of puckered sound, close to the top of my range of hearing, plink! plink! plink! The thick grass hums to me, deep and rich, and the wind hurls points of flame along the prairie. I devour another oxygen-plant, and then a third. My brothers laugh and shout. They tell me of their gods, the god of warmth, the god of food, the god of pleasure, the god of death, the god of holiness, the god of wrongness, and the others. They recite for me the names of their kings, and I hear their voices as splashes of green mold on the clean sheet of the sky. They instruct me in their holy rites. I must remember this, I tell myself, for when it is gone it will never come again. I continue to dance. They continue to dance. The color of the hills becomes rough and coarse, like abrasive gas. Take, eat, join. Dance. They are so gentle!

I hear the drone of the copter, suddenly.

It hovers far overhead. I am unable to see who flies in it. "No!" I scream. "Not here! Not these people! Listen to me! This is Tom Two Ribbons! Can't you hear me? I'm doing a field study here! You have no right—!"

My voice makes spirals of blue moss edged with red sparks. They drift upward and are scattered by the breeze.

I yell, I shout, I bellow. I dance and shake my fists. From the wings of the copter the jointed arms of the pellet-distributors unfold. The gleaming spigots extend and whirl. The neural pellets rain down into the meadow, each tracing a blazing track that lingers in the sky. The sound of the copter becomes a furry carpet stretching to the horizon, and my shrill voice is lost in it.

The Eaters drift away from me, seeking the pellets, scratching at the roots of the grass to find them. Still dancing, I leap into their midst, striking the pellets from their hands, hurling them into the stream, crushing them to powder. The Eaters growl black needles at me. They turn away and search for more pellets. The copter turns and flies off, leaving a trail of dense oily sound. My brothers are gobbling the pellets eagerly.

There is no way to prevent it.

Joy consumes them and they topple and lie still. Occasionally a limb twitches; then even this stops. They begin to dissolve. Thousands of them melt on the prairie, sinking into shapelessness, losing spherical forms, flattening, ebbing into the ground. The bonds of the molecules will no longer hold. It is the twilight of protoplasm. They perish. They vanish. For hours I walk the prairie. Now I inhale oxygen; now I eat a lemon-colored globe. Sunset begins with the ringing of leaden chimes. Black clouds make brazen trumpet calls in the east and the deepening wind is a swirl of coaly bristles. Silence comes. Night falls. I dance. I am alone.

The copter comes again, and they find you, and you do not resist as they gather you in. You are beyond bitterness. Quietly you explain what you have done and what you have learned, and why it is wrong to exterminate these people. You describe the plant you have eaten and the way it affects your senses, and as you talk of the blessed synesthesia, the texture of the wind and the sound of the clouds and the timbre of the sunlight, they nod and smile and tell you not to worry, that everything will be all right soon, and they touch something cold to your forearm, so cold that it is a whir and a buzz and the deintoxicant sinks into your vein and soon the ecstasy drains away, leaving only the exhaustion and the grief.

.....

He says, "We never learn a thing, do we? We export all our horrors to the stars. Wipe out the Armenians, wipe out the Jews, wipe out the Tasmanians, wipe out the Indians, wipe out everyone who's in the way, and then come here and do the same damned murderous thing. You weren't with me out there. You didn't dance with them. You didn't see what a rich, complex culture the Eaters have. Let me tell you about their tribal structure. It's dense: seven levels of matrimonial relationships, to begin with, and an exogamy factor that requires—"

Softly Ellen says, "Tom, darling, nobody's going to harm the Eaters."

"And the religion," he goes on. "Nine gods, each one an aspect of *the* god. Holiness and wrongness both worshiped. They have hymns, prayers, a theology. And we, the emissaries of the god of wrongness—"

"We're not exterminating them," Michaelson says. "Won't you understand that, Tom? This is all a fantasy of yours. You've been under the influence of drugs, but now we're clearing you out. You'll be clean in a little while. You'll have perspective again."

"A fantasy?" he says bitterly. "A drug dream? I stood out in the prairie and saw you drop pellets. And I watched them die and melt away. I didn't dream that."

"How can we convince you?" Chang asks earnestly. "What will make you believe? Shall we fly over the Eater country with you and show you how many millions there are?"

"But how many millions have been destroyed?" he demands.

They insist that he is wrong. Ellen tells him again that no one has ever desired to harm the Eaters. "This is a scientific expedition, Tom. We're here to *study* them. It's a violation of all we stand for to injure intelligent lifeforms."

"You admit that they're intelligent?"

"Of course. That's never been in doubt."

"Then why drop the pellets?" he asks. "Why slaughter them?"

"None of that has happened, Tom," Ellen says. She takes his hand between her cool palms. "Believe us. Believe us."

He says bitterly, "If you want me to believe you, why don't you do the job properly? Get out the editing machine and go to work on me. You can't simply *talk* me into rejecting the evidence of my own eyes."

"You were under drugs all the time," Michaelson says.

"I've never taken drugs! Except for what I ate in the meadow, when I danced—and that came after I had watched the massacre going on for weeks and weeks. Are you saying that it's a retroactive delusion?"



"No, Tom," Schwartz says. "You've had this delusion all along. It's part of your therapy, your reconstruct. You came here programmed with it."

"Impossible," he says.

Ellen kisses his fevered forehead. "It was done to reconcile you to mankind, you see. You had this terrible resentment of the displacement of your people in the nineteenth century. You were unable to forgive the industrial society for scattering the Sioux, and you were terribly full of hate. Your therapist thought that if you could be made to participate in an imaginary modern extermination, if you could come to see it as a necessary operation, you'd be purged of your resentment and able to take your place in society as—"

He thrusts her away. "Don't talk idiocy! If you knew the first thing about reconstruct therapy, you'd realize that no reputable therapist could be so shallow. There are no one-to-one correlations in reconstructs. No, don't touch me. Keep away. Keep away."

He will not let them persuade him that this is merely a drug-born dream. It is no fantasy, he tells himself, and it is no therapy. He rises. He goes out. They do not follow him. He takes a copter and seeks his brothers.

. . . . .

Again I dance. The sun is much hotter today. The Eaters are more numerous. Today I wear paint, today I wear feathers. My body shines with my sweat. They dance with me, and they have a frenzy in them that I have never seen before. We pound the trampled meadow with our feet. We clutch for the sun with our hands. We sing, we shout, we cry. We will dance until we fall.

This is no fantasy. These people are real, and they are intelligent, and they are doomed. This I know.

We dance. Despite the doom, we dance.

My great-grandfather comes and dances with us. He too is real. His nose is like a hawk's, not blunt like mine, and he wears the big headdress, and his muscles are like cords under his brown skin. He sings, he shouts, he cries.

Others of my family join us.

We eat the oxygen-plants together. We embrace the Eaters. We know, all of us, what it is to be hunted.

The clouds make music and the wind takes on texture and the sun's warmth has color.

We dance. We dance. Our limbs know no weariness.

The sun grows and fills the whole sky, and I see no Eaters now, only my own people, my father's fathers across the centuries, thousands of gleaming skins, thousands of hawk's noses, and we eat the plants, and we find sharp sticks and thrust them into our flesh, and the sweet blood flows and dries in the blaze of the

sun, and we dance, and we dance, and some of us fall from weariness, and we dance, and the prairie is a sea of bobbing headdresses, an ocean of feathers, and we dance, and my heart makes thunder, and my knees become water, and the sun's fire engulfs me, and I dance, and I fall, and I dance, and I fall, and I fall, and I fall.

. . . . .

Again they find you and bring you back. They give you the cool snout on your arm to take the oxygen-plant drug from your veins, and then they give you something else so you will rest. You rest and you are very calm. Ellen kisses you and you stroke her soft skin, and then the others come in and they talk to you, saying soothing things, but you do not listen, for you are searching for realities. It is not an easy search. It is like falling through many trapdoors, looking for the one room whose floor is not hinged. Everything that has happened on this planet is your therapy, you tell yourself, designed to reconcile an embittered aborigine to the white man's conquest; nothing is really being exterminated here. You reject that and fall through and realize that this must be the therapy of your friends; they carry the weight of accumulated centuries of guilts and have come here to shed that load, and you are here to ease them of their burden, to draw their sins into yourself and give them forgiveness. Again you fall through, and see that the Eaters are mere animals who threaten the ecology and must be removed; the culture you imagined for them is your hallucination, kindled out of old churnings. You try to withdraw your objections to this necessary extermination, but you fall through again and discover that there is no extermination except in your mind, which is troubled and disordered by your obsession with the crime against your ancestors, and you sit up, for you wish to apologize to these friends of yours, these innocent scientists whom you have called murders. And you fall through.

The End

ROBERT SILVERBERG

THE LAST SURVIVING VETERAN OF THE WAR OF SAN FRANCISCO

\*

All you have to do to become a hero is live long enough

The city on the other side of the bay was putting on its best show that morning: shimmering and glorious in the clear December sunlight. Lovely old San Francisco, capital of the Empire, now and always. Carlotta, readying her great-great-multi-great-uncle for his first trip over there in forty-three years, looked up to take in the view from the picture window of the Berkeley War Veterans Center, where he was the only remaining resident: green hills rising far into the distance, the twentieth-century white towers of the downtown closer

in, the sparkling, lacy roadbed of the New Bay Bridge, running parallel to the majestic stumps of the old one.

"Isn't it beautiful?" she said, turning him in his swivelseat so he could have a look at it, too.

"What?"

"The city. San Francisco. You see it there, don't you?" She touched the visual node that jutted like a tiny titanium mushroom from his left temple, giving it a quarter turn. Maybe the sharpness was off a little. Sometimes the old man fiddled with his nodes while he slept. "We're going across in a little while."

"All the way to the city, are we?"

"You know. For the ceremony. The anniversary of the end of the war. They're going to give you a medal. Don't tell me you've forgotten already."

The timeless face, leathery but supple, stretched and twisted like taffy, rearranging its sallow sagging folds into a smile. "The war's over? I'm a civilian again?"

"You bet you are, Uncle."

The wrinkled eyelids made three or four quick traversals of the hazel-colored fiberglass bundles that were his optical inputs.

"When did all that happen?"

"The war's been over for a hundred years, Uncle James. A hundred years today."

"No shit!" Muscle stalks moved slowly around in the crepey convolutions of his cheeks. "Imagine that. A hundred years. That's one goddamn long time." Then he said, after a moment, "Who won?"

"We did, Uncle."

"We did? You sure?"

"We're still a free country, aren't we? Nobody tells the Empire of San Francisco what to do, do they? We're the most powerful country in Northern California, isn't that so?"

He digested that. "Yeah. Yeah, of course we won. I knew that. Really I did." He sounded a little doubtful. He generally did. Well, he had a right. He was one hundred forty-three years old, give or take a few months, and most of him was machinery now, practically everything except the soggy old grey brain behind his optical inputs. His wrists were silicon elastomer, his femurs were polyurethane and cobalt-chromium, his eardrums were Teflon and platinum, his metacarpal joints were silicone with titanium grommets. His elbows had plastic bushings; his abdominal walls were Dacron. And so on, on and on. Why anyone wanted to keep

seniors alive that long was more than Carlotta could figure out. Or why the seniors wanted to be kept. But she was only nineteen. She allowed for the possibility that she might take a different view of things when she got to be as old as he was.

"We're just about ready to go, now. Let's do the checkout, all right?" Obediently he held out his arm. She opened his instrument panel and began keying in the life-support readouts that ran like a row of bright metal tacks from his wrist to his elbow. "Respiratory--circulatory-- metabolic--catabolic--there, that's a good reading--audio appercept--optical appercept--biochip automaintain-- aminos-- hemoglobin--enzyme release--glucose level..."

There were two dozen of them, some of them pretty trivial. But Carlotta diligently ran down the whole list, tapping in a query and getting a green from each little readout plate. It took close to ten minutes. The newer-model senior-rehab equipment had just a single readout, which gave you a go or a no go, and if you got the no go you could immediately request data on specific organic or pseudo-organic malfunctions. But Uncle James was one of the early models, and there was no money in the rehab budget for updating citizens left over from the previous century.

"You think I'll live?" he asked her, suddenly feisty.

"For another five hundred years, minimum."

Quickly, deftly, she finished the job of making him ready to go out. She disconnected the long intravenous line from the wall and put him on portable. She disabled his chair control override so that she alone could guide the movements of his vehicle via the remote implant in her palm. She locked the restraining bars in place across his chest to keep him from attempting some sudden berserk excursion on foot out there. More than ever now, the old man was the prisoner of his own life-support system.

Just as she finished the job Carlotta felt a strange inner twisting and jolting as though an earthquake had struck: the unexpected, sickening sensation of seeing herself in his place, old and withered and shrunken and mostly artificial, feeble and helpless in the grip of a life-support. Her long slender legs had turned into pretzels, her golden hair was thin colorless straw, her smooth oval face was a mass of dry valleys and crevasses. Her eyebrows were gone, her chin jutted like some old witch's. The only recognizable aspect of her was her clear blue eyes, and those, still bright, still quick and sharp, glared out of her ruined face carrying such a charge of hatred and fury that they burned through the air in front of her like twin lasers, leaving trails of white smoke.

Not me, she thought. Not ever, not like that.

She pressed down hard on her palm implant and sent the old man's chair

rolling toward the door, which opened at his approach. And out they went into the hallway.

Carlotta had been working as a nurse at the center for a year and a half, ever since she'd left high school. It wasn't the kind of work she had hoped for. She had imagined doing something with singing in it, or music, or maybe acting, at least. When she had first come to the center there had still been seven veterans living there and a staff of twelve, but one by one the old guys had undergone random system malfunctions, probabilistic events that became statistically unavoidable the deeper you got into your second century, and now only Uncle James was left, the last survivor of the army of the War of San Francisco. The staff was down to four: Dr. McClintock, the director; three nurses. But everybody understood that when Uncle James finally went they'd all lose their jobs.

That morning, when Carlotta showed up, there was a note from Sanchez, the night nurse, waiting for her in the staff room. GOD HELP YOU IF ANYTHING HAPPENS TO YOUR UNCLE IN THE CITY TODAY.

"Hot weather today," Uncle James said, as they emerged from the building. "Very nice for December, yes."

"Hot. Not just nice. Hot. It must be a hundred degrees."

"A hundred's impossible, Uncle. It doesn't get that hot even in Death Valley. A hundred and the whole world would melt."

"Bullshit. It was a hundred degrees the day the war started. Everyone remembers that. The fourteenth of October, hot as blazes, a hundred degrees smack on the nose at three in the afternoon. When those Nazi Stukas started coming over the horizon like bats out of hell."

"Nazis?" she said. "What Nazis?"

"The invading force. Hitler's Wehrmacht."

"That was a different war, Uncle. A long time before even you were born."

"Don't be so smart. Were you there? Like eagles, they were, those planes. Merciless. They strafed us for hours in that filthy heat. Blam! Blam! Chk-chk-chk-chk-chk! Blam!" He glowered up at her. "And it's a hundred degrees right now, too. If you don't think so, you're wrong. I know what a hundred degrees feels like."

The temperature that morning was about eighteen, maybe twenty. Very nice for December, yes. But then Carlotta realized that the degrees he was talking about were the old kind, the Fahrenheit kind. One hundred on the old scale might be forty or forty-five real degrees, she figured. But he might be having some appercept trouble, or maybe even a boil-over

in the metabolism line. She leaned over and checked the master chair readout. Everything looked okay. He must just be excited about getting to go to the city.

The car that the Armistice Centennial people had sent was waiting out front. It had a hinged gate and a wheelchair ramp so she could roll him right into it. The driver looked like an android, though he probably wasn't. Uncle James sat quietly, murmuring to himself, as the car pulled away from the curb and headed down the hill toward the freeway.

"We in the city yet?" he asked, after a time. "We're just reaching the bridge, Uncle."

"The bridge is broken. That was the first thing they bombed in the war."

"There's a new bridge now," Carlotta said. The new bridge was older than she was, but she didn't see much purpose in telling him that. She swung him around to face the window and pointed it out to him, a delicate, flexible ribbon of airy suspension cable swaying in the breeze. It was like a bridge of glass. The shattered pylons of the old bridge that rose from the bay alongside it seemed as ponderous as dinosaur thighs.

"Some bridge," he muttered. "Looks like a piece of rope."

"It'll get us there," she told him.

According to the center records, he had been taken to San Francisco for his hundredth birthday. He hadn't been much of anywhere since. Just sitting in his chair, doing nothing, living on and on. If you called that living. Old James had outlasted his son by more than a century—he had been killed at the age of something like twenty-two in the War of San Francisco, during the raid by the Free State of Mendocino. He had outlived his grandson, too, victim of an unexplained sniper attack while visiting Monterey. Hell of a thing, to outlive your own grandson. James's closest relative was his great-granddaughter, who lived in Los Angeles and hadn't come north in decades. And then Carlotta.

She felt sorry for the old man. And yet he had managed to have one big thing in his life: the war. That was something. His one moment of glory,

Her life had had nothing in it at all, so far, except the uneventful getting from age zero to age nineteen, and that was how it looked to remain. The world was pretty empty, locally, these days. You couldn't expect much when you lived in a country thirty miles across, that you could drive from one end of to the other in an hour, if you could drive. At least Uncle James had had a war.

They were on the bridge now, meshed with its transport cable, whizzing westward at a hundred kilometers per hour. Carlotta pointed out landmarks on the way, in case he had forgotten them. "There's Alcatraz

Island, do you see? And that's Mount Tamalpais, away across on the Marin County side. And back over there, behind us, you can see the whole East Bay, Oakland, Berkeley, El Cerrito . . . "

The old man seemed interested. He responded with a jumble of military history, hazy memories intermixed with scrambled details out of the wrong wars, "The Mendocino people came in right through there, where the San Rafael bridge used to be, maybe two hundred of them. We fixed their wagons. And then the Japs, General Togo and Admiral Mitsubishi, but we drove them back, we nuked their asses right out of here, Then a week afterward there was a raid by San Jose, came up through Oakland, we stopped them by the Alameda Tunnel-no, it was the bridge-the bridge, right, we held them, they were cursing at us in gook and when we went in to clear them out we found that Charlie had planted Bouncing Betties everywhere, you know, antipersonnel mines . . . "

She didn't know what he was talking about, but that was all right. Most of the time she didn't know what he was talking about, nor, she suspected, did he. It didn't matter. He rambled on and on.

The bridge crossing took ten minutes-- there was hardly any traffic--and then they were gliding down the ramp into the city.

Carlotta felt a little wave of excitement stirring within her. Approaching the city could do that to you. It was so lovely, shining in the bright sunlight with the waters of the bay glittering all around. A place of such infinite promise and mystery.

Let me have an adventure while I'm over there, she prayed. Let me meet someone. Let something really unusual happen, okay?

She hadn't been in the city herself in six or eight months. You tended not to, without some special reason. If only she could park the old man for a couple of hours and go off to have some fun, see the clubs, maybe check out the new styles, meet someone lively. But that wasn't going to happen. She had to stick close by Uncle James. At least she was here, a perfect day, blue sky, warm breezes blowing. The city was where everything that was of any interest in Northern California went on, It was the capital of the Empire of San Francisco, and the Empire was the center of the action, Everything else was small-time, even if the small-time places wanted to give themselves fancy names: the Republic of Monterey, the Free State of Mendocino, the Royal Domain of San Jose. Once upon a time, of course, it had all been a lot different.

"San Francisco," Carlotta said. "Here we are, Uncle!"

They came off the bridge at the downtown off-ramp. There were bright banners everywhere, the imperial colors, green and gold. Crowds were in the streets, waving little flags. Carlotta heard the sound of a brass band somewhere far away, The driver was taking them up the Embarcadero now, around toward the plaza at Market Street, where the Emperor was



going to preside over the ceremony in person. Because theirs was just about the only car in the vicinity, the spectators had figured out that someone important must be riding in it, and they were cheering and waving.

"Wave, Uncle! They're cheering you. Here, let me help you." She touched her finger to his motor control and his right arm came stiffly up, fingers clenched. A little fine tuning and she had the fingers open, the palm turned outward, the arm moving back and forth in a nice sprightly wave.

"Smile at them," she told him. "Be nice. You're a hero."

"A hero, yes. Purple Heart. Distinguished Service Cross. Croix de Guerre. You ought to see my medals sometime. I've got a box full of them." He was leaning forward, peering out the car window, smiling as hard as he could. His arm jerked convulsively; he was trying to move it himself. Good for him. She let him override her control. He waved with surprising energy, a jerky wave, almost robotic, but at least he was doing it under his own power.

They had a big platform made out of polished redwood up at the plaza, with a crowd of VIPs already there. As the car approached, everyone made room for it, and when it halted just in front of the platform Carlotta hopped out and guided Uncle James's chair down the car's wheelchair ramp and into the open.

"Ned Townes," a fat sandy-haired man with a thick brown mustache told her, pushing his face into hers. "Imperial adjutant. Splendid of you to come. What a grand old soldier he is!" He gave Uncle James a sidelong glance. "Can he hear anything I say?" He leaned down next to Uncle James's ear and in a booming voice he bellowed, "Welcome to San Francisco, General Crawford! On behalf of His Imperial Majesty Norton the Fourteenth, welcome to--"

Uncle James shot him a withering scowl.

"You don't have to shout like that, boy," Uncle James said. "I can fucking well hear better than you can."

Townes reddened, but he managed a laugh. "Of course. Of course."

Carlotta said, "Is the Emperor here yet?"

"In a little while. We're running a bit late, you understand. If you and the general will take seats over there until we're ready to call him up to receive his medal-- well, of course, he's seated already, but you know what I--"

"Aren't we going to sit on the platform?" Carlotta asked.

"I'm afraid it's reserved for city officials and dignitaries."



She didn't move. "Uncle James is a dignitary. We came all the way from Berkeley for this, and if you're going to shunt him into some corner for hours and hours while you-"

"Please," Townes said.

"He's a hundred forty-three years old, do you realize that?"

"Please," he said. "Bear with me." He looked ready to cry. "The Emperor himself will personally decorate him. But until then, I have to ask you . . . "

He seemed so desperate that Carlotta gave in. She and Uncle James went into a roped-off area just below and to the left of the platform.

Uncle James didn't seem to mind. He sat quietly, lost in dreams of God knows what moment of antique heroism, while Carlotta, standing behind his chair, kept one eye on his systems reports and took in the sights of downtown San Francisco with the other, the huge tapering buildings, the radiant blue sky, the unusual trees, the shining bridge stretching off to the east.

Uncle James said suddenly, "What are all these foreigners doing here?"

"Foreigners? What foreigners?"

"Look around you, girl."

She thought at first that he meant people from the neighboring republics and kingdoms: San Jose, Santa Cruz, Monterey, Mendocino. It wouldn't be surprising that they'd be here, considering that this was a celebration intended to commemorate the signing of the Armistice that had ended the war of everybody against everybody and guaranteed the independence of all the various Northern California nations. But how could Uncle James tell a Santa Cruzian or a Montereyan from a San Franciscan? They didn't look any different down there. They didn't dress any different.

Then she realized that he meant visitors from the countries beyond the seas. And indeed there were plenty of them all around the plaza, a lot of exotic people carrying cameras and such, Japanese, Indians, Latin Americans, Africans. They were wearing exotic clothing, most of them. Many had exotic faces. The old man was staring at them as though he had never seen tourists before.

"San Francisco is always full of visitors from far away, Uncle. There's nothing new about that."

"So many of them. Gawking at us like that. They dress like gooks, girl. Didn't we fight that war to keep San Francisco for the San Franciscans? A pure nation of pure people. Look at them all. Look at them!"

"It's the most beautiful city in the world," Carlotta said. "People have been coming from all over to see it for hundreds of years. You know that. There's nothing wrong with-

He was raging, though. "Yellow people! Black people! Brown people! Why not green people, too? Why not purple people? Their faces! Their eyes! And the clothes they wear! Who let them in? What are they all doing here?"

"Uncle," she said, reaching down surreptitiously to give his adrenaline damper a little downtwist. your country, its greatness, its downfall. To speak with the general, to hear from his lips the reminiscences of his days of battle, the actual descriptions of the warfare-it would be ecstasy for me. Ecstasy. Do you understand my words?"

"His Imperial Highness Norton the Fourteenth!" cried a man with an enormous voice. Carlotta looked around. A ground-effect palanquin bedecked with gaudy banners was floating solemnly up the street toward the plaza.

"You've got to go now," Carlotta said. "Look, the Emperor's arriving."

"But later, perhaps?"

"Well-

"It is for the sacred purpose of scholarship only. Half an hour to speak with this great man-

"All welcome His Imperial Highness!" the immense voice called. "Later," the Brazilian said urgently. "Please!" He slipped under the rope and was gone.

Carlotta shrugged. If the Brazilian only knew that nothing Uncle James said made sense, he wouldn't be so eager. She turned to stare at the Emperor, atop his palanquin. She had never seen him live before. The Emperor was a surprisingly small man, very frail, about fifty, with pale skin and tiny hands, which he held extended to the crowd in a kind of imperial blessing. The palanquin, drifting a little ways above the pavement, came forward to the reviewing stand and halted like an obedient elephant. Members of the imperial guard helped him out, and up the stairs of the platform to the position of honor.

Someone began a long droning speech of welcome. The mayor of San Francisco, Carlotta supposed. It went on and on, this grand occasion, this triumphant day of the commemoration of the hundred-year peace, on and on and on, yawn and yawn and yawn. The foreigners' cameras and recorders whirred diligently. Uncle James seemed to be asleep. Carlotta's attention wandered. Now and then a cheer rose from the assembled citizens.

She could see the sleek Brazilian in the crowd. He was staring at the old man as though he were a mound of emeralds. Then he noticed Carlotta

watching him, and he flicked his gaze toward her, letting his eyes rest on her in a warm insinuating way, and smiled a sleek smile that gave her shivers. As if he was buying her with that smile.

What did he want, really? Just to talk?

Uncle James was awake again. Instead of looking at the Emperor, who had begun to speak in response to the mayor's oration, he was peering at the rows of foreign tourists, gaping at them as though they came not merely from other continents but from other planets. In a way, Carlotta thought, they did. Who could get to Japan or Brazil or Nigeria from here? They come to us; we don't go to them. It used to be different, she knew. Hundreds of years ago, before everything fell apart, when America had been all one country of incomprehensible size that stretched from ocean to ocean, its citizens had gone everywhere in the world. But now there were thousands of little principalities where America had been, and no one went anywhere much.

"A century ago," the Emperor was saying, "the fate of this entire area was at stake. Every man's hand was raised against his neighbor. Cities that long had lived in peace had gone to war against their fellow cities. But then, on this day exactly one hundred years ago, the climactic battle of the War of San Francisco was fought. This city and its valiant allies in the East Bay and Marin stood firm against the invaders from the outlying lands. And on that day of triumph, when the peace and security of the Empire of San Francisco was made certain forever-

"Start moving the old man up to the top of the platform," Ned Townes whispered. "He's going to get his medal now. "

Uncle James was asleep again. Carlotta gave him a little adrenaline jolt.

"It's time, Uncle," she whispered.

They had a ramp around back. She touched her palm control and the wheelchair began to glide up it. The big moment at last.

The Emperor smiled, shook Uncle James's hand the way he would shake a turkey's claw, said a few words, this gallant survivor, this embodiment of history, this remnant of our glorious past, and put a sash around his neck. At the end of the sash there was a mud-colored medal the size of a cookie, which seemed to have a portrait of the Emperor on it. That was it. Carlotta found herself wheeling Uncle James down the ramp a moment later. Evidently the old man wasn't expected to say anything in reply. They couldn't even stay on the platform.

For this they had traveled all the way from Berkeley? "Will you find us our driver?" she said to Ned Townes. "We might as well go back home now."

Townes looked shocked. "Oh, no! You can't do that. There are further

ceremonies, and then a banquet at the palace this afternoon for all the celebrities."

"Uncle James doesn't eat banquet food. And he's getting very tired."

"Even so. It would be terrible if you left now." Townes tugged at his jowls. "Look, stay another hour, at least. You can't just grab the medal and disappear. That's the Emperor up there, young lady."

"I don't give a damn if he's-

But Townes was gone. The Emperor was awarding another medal, this time to a wide-shouldered woman who already was wearing an assortment of decorations that had a glittery Southern California look about them.

"Permit me," a deep confident voice said. The Brazilian again. Leaning over the rope, tapping her on the shoulder. Carlotta had forgotten all about him.

"Is it possible to discuss, now, an opportunity for me to record the great general's reminiscences, perhaps?"

"Look, we don't have time for that. I just want to get my uncle out of here and back across the bay."

He looked distressed. "But before you leave-half an hour fifteen minutes . . ."

She glanced down at the emerald ring. A gleam came into her eyes. "There's a fee, you know. For his time. We can't just let him talk to people for free."

"Yes. Yes, of course. Why should there not be a fee? It is no problem. We will discuss it." He offered her an engraved card, holding it close in front of her face as if he wasn't sure she knew how to read and holding it close might help. "This is my name. I am at the Imperial Hotel. You know that hotel? You will come to me when this is over? With the general? You agree?"

"Sorry, sir," a marshal said. "This area is for official guests only."

"Of course, Understood." The Brazilian began to back away, nodding, bowing, smiling brilliantly. To Carlotta he said, "I will see you later? Yes? I am very grateful. Obrigado! Obrigado!" He disappeared into the crowd of foreign visitors. Behind her, on the reviewing stand, the Emperor was giving a medal to a man in a uniform of the San Jose Air Force.

It was almost noon now. People were coming out of the nearby office buildings. Some of them were carrying sandwiches. Carlotta began to feel fiercely hungry. Townes had talked about a banquet that afternoon, but the afternoon seemed a long way away. Uncle James got fed by intravenous

line, but she needed real food, and soon, Emperor or no Emperor, she had to get out of here, and Townes could go whistle. Maybe the thing to do was find the Brazilian, strike a deal with him, let him take her to his hotel and buy her lunch. And then he could interview Uncle James all he wanted, so long as the old man's strength held out.

All right, she thought. Let's get moving.

But where had the Brazilian gone?

She didn't see him anywhere. Leaving Uncle James to look after himself for a moment, she slipped under the rope and went over to the place where the foreign visitors were clustered, No, no sign of him. People began to jabber at her and take her picture. She brushed her hand through the air as though they were a cloud of gnats. Producing the Brazilian's card, she said, to no one in particular, "Have you seen Humberto-Humberto Jose de Magal Magal " It was a struggle to pronounce his name.

He must have gone, though. Perhaps he was on his way to his hotel, to wait for them.

She rushed back to Uncle James. Some people had crept into the roped-off area and were pushing microphones into his face again. Angrily Carlotta hit her palm control, backing up his wheelchair and pulling it toward her right through the flimsy rope. At a brisk pace she headed across the street to the parking area where she hoped their driver was waiting. Ned Townes, red-faced, materialized from somewhere and furiously wigwagged at her, but she smiled and waved and nodded and kept on going. He shouted something to her but didn't pursue.

The driver, miraculously, was still there. "Imperial Hotel," she said.

"Where?"

"Imperial Hotel. Downtown, somewhere."

"I'm supposed to take you back to the East Bay."

"First we have to go to the Imperial. There's a reception there for my great-uncle."

The driver, sullen, androidal, looked right through her and said, "I don't know about no reception. I don't know no Hotel Imperial. You're supposed to go to the East Bay."

"First we stop at the Imperial," she said, "They're expecting us. I'll show you how to get there," she told him grandly.

To her amazement he yielded, swinging the car around in a petulant U-turn and shooting off toward Market Street. Carlotta studied the signs on the buildings, hoping to find a marquee that proclaimed one of them

to be the Imperial, but there were no hotels here at all, only office buildings. They turned right, turned left again, started up a steep hill.

"This is Chinatown," the driver said. "That where your hotel is?"

"Turn left," she said.

That took them down toward Market Street again, and across it. At a stoplight she rolled down the window and called out, "Does anyone know where the Imperial Hotel is?" Blank faces stared at her. She might just as well have been speaking Greek or Arabic. The driver, on his own, turned onto Mission Street, took a left a few blocks later, turned left again soon after. Carlotta looked around desperately. This was a district of battered old warehouses. She caught sight of a sign directing traffic to the Bay Bridge and for a moment decided that it was best to forget about the Brazilian and head for home, when unexpectedly a billboard loomed up before them, a glaring six-color solido advertising, of all things, the Imperial Hotel. They were right around the corner from it, apparently.

The Imperial was all glass and concrete, with what looked like giant mirrors at its summit, high overhead. It must have been two or three hundred years old. They hadn't built buildings like that in San Francisco for a long time. Carlotta got Uncle James out of the car, told the driver to wait across the street, and signaled to a doorman to help them go inside.

"I'm here to see this man," she announced, producing Magalhaes's card. "We have an appointment. Tell him that General James Crawford is waiting for him in the lobby,"

The doorman seemed unimpressed. "Wait here," he said. Carlotta waited a long time. Uncle James muttered restlessly.

Some hotel official appeared, studied the Brazilian's card, studied her, murmured something under his breath, went back inside. What did they think she was, a prostitute? Showing up for a job with an old man in a life-support chair to keep her company? Another long time went by. A different hotel person came out.

"May I have your name," he said, not amiably.

"My name doesn't matter. This is General James Crawford, the famous war hero. Can you see the imperial medal around his neck? We've just been at the Armistice celebration, and now we're here to see the delegate from Brazil, Mr. Humberto Maria-"

"Yes, but I need to know your name." "My name doesn't matter. Just tell him that General James Crawford-"

"But your name-"

"Carlotta," she said. "Oh, go to hell, all of you," She pressed the palm control and started to turn Uncle James around. There was no sense enduring all this grief. Just then, though, an enormous black limousine glided up to the curb and Humberto Maria de Magalhaes himself emerged.

He sized up the situation at once.

"So you have come after all! How good! How very good!"

The hotel man said, "Senhor Magalhaes, this woman claims-"

"Yes. Yes. Is all right. I am expecting. Please, let us go inside. Please. Please. Such a great honor, General Crawford!" He extended his arms in a gesture so splendid that it would have been worthy of the Emperor himself. "Come," he said. He led them into the building.

The lobby of the Imperial was a great glittering cavern, all glass and lights. Carlotta felt dizzy. The Brazilian was in complete command, shepherding them to some secluded alcove, where waiters in brocaded livery came hustling to bring champagne, little snacks on porcelain trays, a glistening bowl brimming with fruit. Magalhaes pulled a recorder from his pocket, a holido scanner, and two or three other devices, and set them on the table before them.

"Now, if you please, General Crawford-"

"The fee," Carlotta said.

"Ah. Yes. Yes, of course." Magalhaes pulled crumpled old dirty bills from his wallet, imperial money, green and gold. "Will this be enough, do you think?"

She stared. It was more than she made in six months. But some demon took hold of her and she said, recklessly, "Another five hundred should do it."

"Of course," the Brazilian said. "No problem!" He put another bill on the edge of the table and aimed his lens at the old man. "I am so eager to record his memories, I can hardly tell you. Now, if you would ask the general to discuss the day of the famous battle, first-"

Carlotta bent close to the old man's audio intake and said, "Uncle, this man wants you to talk about your war experiences. He's going to record a sort of memoir of you. Just say whatever you can remember, all right? He'll be taking your picture, and this machine will record your words."

"The war," Uncle James said. And immediately lapsed into silence.



The Brazilian watched, big-eyed, holding his breath as if he feared it would interfere with the flow of the old man's words.

But there were no words. Carlotta, who had tactfully left the Brazilian's money on the table, thinking it would look a little better not to pocket it until after the interview, began to wish now that she had taken it right away.

The silence became very long indeed.

She reached down and gave the old man a little spurt of heptocholinase through the IV line. That seemed to do it.

"-the invasion," Uncle James said, as if he'd been speaking silently for some time and only now was bothering to come up to the audible level. And then words poured out of him as she had never heard them come before, bubbling nonstop spew. It was like the breaking of a dam. "We were dug into the trenches, you understand, and the Boche infantry came sneaking up at us from the east, under cover of mustard gas-oh, that was awful, the gas-but we called in an air strike right away, we hit them hard with napalm and antipersonnel shrapnel, and then we came ashore with our landing craft, hit them at Anzio and Normandy both. That was the beginning of it. Our entire strategy, you understand, was built around a terminal nuclear hit at Bull Run, but first we knew we had to close the Dardanelles and knock out their command center back of Cam Ranh Bay. Once we had that, we'd only need to worry about the Prussian cavalry and the possibility of a Saracen suicide charge, that wasn't a real big risk, we figured, all the Rebels were pretty well demoralized already and it didn't make sense that they'd have the balls to come back at us after all we'd thrown at them, so-"

"What is he saying, please?" the Brazilian asked softly. "He speaks so quickly. I am not quite understanding him, I think."

"He does sound a little confused," said Carlotta.

"Well, we drove the Turks completely out of the Gulf of Corinth, and were heading on toward Lepanto with sixty-four galleys, full steam ahead. Then came a message from Marlborough, get our asses over to Blenheim fast as we knew how, the French were trying to break through--or was it the Poles?-- well, hell, it was a mess, the winter was coming on, that lunatic Hitler actually thought he could take out Russia with a fall offensive and damned if he didn't get within eighty miles of Moscow before the Russkies could stop him, and then-then-" Uncle James looked up. There was a stunned expression on his face. All his indicators were flashing in the caution zone. His cheeks were flushed and he was breathing hard.

Carlotta let her hand rest lightly on the little stack of bank notes.

"He's very overexcited," she explained. "This has been a big day for



him. He hasn't been in San Francisco for forty-three years, you know."

"Wait," Uncle James said. He stretched a hand toward the Brazilian.  
"There's something that I need to say."

There was an unfamiliar note in his voice suddenly, a forcefulness, a strange clarity. The cloudiness was gone from it, the husky senile woolliness. It sounded now like the voice of someone else entirely, someone a hundred years younger than Uncle James.

The Brazilian nodded vigorously. "Yes, tell us everything, General! Everything."

Uncle James smiled. There was an eerie look on his face. "I wasn't a general, for one thing. I was a programmer. I never fought an actual battle. I certainly never killed anybody. Not anybody. It's all a lie, that I was any kind of hero. It was just an error in the computer records and I never said anything about it to anybody, and now it's so long ago that nobody remembers what was what. Nobody but me. And most of the time I don't even remember it myself."

Uh-oh, Carlotta thought.

As secretively as she could manage it, she slid the bills from the table into her purse. The Brazilian didn't appear to notice.

Uncle James said, "It was only a two-bit war, anyway. A lot of miserable skirmishes between a bunch of jerkwater towns gone wild with envy of what they each thought the other one had, and in fact nobody had anything at all. That was what ended the war, when we all figured out that there was nothing anywhere, that we were wiped out from top to bottom." He laughed. "And there I sat in the command center at the university the whole time, writing software. That was how I spent the war. A hundred goddamn years ago."

The Brazilian said, "His voice is so clear, suddenly."

"He's terribly tired," said Carlotta. "He doesn't know what he's saying. I should have just taken him right home. The interview's over. It's too much of a strain on him."

"Could we not have him continue a small while longer? But perhaps we should allow him to rest for a little," the Brazilian suggested.

"Rest," Uncle James said. "That's all I fucking want. But they don't ever let you rest. You fight the Crusades, you fight the Peloponnesian, you fight the Civil, you get so tired, you get so fucking tired. All those wars. I fought 'em all. Every one of them at once. You run the simulations and you've got the Nazis over here and Hannibal there and the Monterey crowd trying to bust in up the center, and Hastings, and Tours, and San Jose-Grant and Lee-Charlemagne-Napoleon-Eisenhower-Patton . . .

."

His voice was still weirdly lucid and strong.

But it was terrible to sit here listening to him babbling like this. Enough is enough, Carlotta decided. She reached down quickly and hit main cerebral and put him to sleep. Between one moment and the next he shut down completely.

The Brazilian gasped. "What has happened? He has not died, has he?"

"No, he's all right. Just sleeping. He was too tired for this. I'm sorry, Mr. Magal-Magal-" Carlotta rose. The money was safely stowed away. "He's badly in need of rest, just as you heard him say. I'm going to take him home. Perhaps we can do this interview some other time. I don't know when. I have your card. I'll call you, all right?"

She flexed her palm and sent the chair moving out into the main lobby of the hotel, and toward the door.

The driver, thank God, was still sitting there. Carlotta beckoned to him.

They were halfway across the bay before she brought the old man back to consciousness. He sat up rigidly in the chair, looked around, peered for a moment at the scenery, the afternoon light on the East Bay hills ahead of them, the puffy clouds that had come drifting down from somewhere.

"Pretty," he said. His voice had its old muddled quality again. "What a goddamn pretty place! Are we on the bridge? We were in the city, were we?"

"Yes," she told him. "For the anniversary of the Armistice. We had ourselves a time, too. The Emperor himself hung that medal around your neck."

"The Emperor, yes. Fine figure of a man. Norton the Ninth."

"Fourteenth, I think."

"Yes. Yes, right. Norton the Fourteenth," the old man said vaguely. "I meant Fourteenth." He fingered the medal idly and seemed to disappear for a moment into some abyss of thought where he was completely alone. She heard him murmuring to himself, a faint indistinct flow of unintelligible sound. Then suddenly he said, reverting once more to that tone of the same strength and lucidity that he had been able to muster for just a moment at the Imperial Hotel, "What happened to that slick-looking rich foreigner? He was right there. Where did he go?"

"You were telling him about General Patton at Bull Run, and you got overexcited, and you weren't making any sense, Uncle. I had to shut

you down for a little time."

"General Patton? Bull Run?"

"It was that time you nuked the Rebels," Carlotta said. "It's not important if you don't remember, Uncle. It was all so long ago. How could anyone expect you to remember?" She patted him gently on the shoulder. "Anyway, we had ourselves a time in the city today, didn't we? That's all that matters. You got yourself a medal, and we had ourselves a time."

He chuckled and nodded, and said something in a voice too soft to understand, and slipped off easily into sleep.

The car sped onward, eastward across the bridge, back toward Berkeley.

==== The Man Who Never Forgot by Robert Silverberg ===== Copyright (c)1958, 1996 by Agberg, Ltd. First published in The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Feb. 1958 Fictionwise Contemporary Science Fiction ----- NOTICE: This work is copyrighted. It is licensed only for use by the purchaser. If you did not purchase this ebook directly from Fictionwise.com then you are in violation of copyright law and are subject to severe fines. Please visit [www.fictionwise.com](http://www.fictionwise.com) to purchase a legal copy. Fictionwise.com offers a reward for information leading to the conviction of copyright violators of Fictionwise ebooks. ----- He saw the girl waiting in line outside a big Los Angeles movie house, on a mildly foggy Tuesday morning. She was slim and pale, barely five-three, with stringy flaxen hair, and she was alone. He remembered her, of course. He knew it would be a mistake, but he crossed the street anyway and walked up along the theatre line to where she stood. 'Hello,' he said. She turned, stared at him blankly, flicked the tip of her tongue out for an instant over her lips. 'I don't believe I -- ' 'Tom Niles,' he said. 'Pasadena, New Year's Day, 1955. You sat next to me. Ohio State 20, Southern Cal 7. You don't remember?' 'A football game? But I hardly ever -- I mean -- I'm sorry, mister. I -- ' Someone else in the line moved forward towards him with a tight hard scowl on his face. Niles knew when he was beaten. He smiled apologetically and said, 'I'm sorry, miss. I guess I made a mistake. I took you for someone I knew -- a Miss Bette Torrance. Excuse me.' And he strode rapidly away. He had not gone more than ten feet when he heard the little surprised gasp and the 'But I \_am\_ Bette Torrance!' -- but he kept going. \_I should know better after twenty-eight years, he thought bitterly. But I forget the most basic fact -- that even though I remember people, they don't necessarily remember me -- \_ He walked wearily to the corner, turned right, and started down a new street, one whose shops were totally unfamiliar to him and which, therefore, he had never seen before, His mind, stimulated to its normal pitch of activity by the incident outside the theatre, spewed up a host of tangential memories like the good machine it was: \_1 Jan. 1955. Rose Bowl Pasadena California Seat G126; warm day, high humidity, arrived in stadium 12:03 P.M., PST. Came alone. Girl in next seat wearing blue cotton dress, while oxfords, carrying Southern Cal pennant. Talked to her. Name Bette Torrance, senior at Southern Cal, government major. Had a date for the game but he came down with flu symptoms night before, insisted she see game anyway.

Seat on other side of her empty. Bought her a hot dog, \$.20 (no mustard) --

There was more, much more. Niles forced it back down. There was the virtually stenographic report of their conversation all that day: ('... I hope we win. I saw the last Bowl game we won, two years ago...' '... Yes, that was 1953. Southern Cal 7, Wisconsin 0 ... and two straight wins in 1944-45 over Washington and Tennessee ...' '... Gosh, you know a lot about football! What did you do, memorize the record book?') And the old memories. The jeering yell of freckled Joe Merritt that warm April day in 1937 -- \_who are you, Einstein?\_ And Buddy Call saying acidly on 8 November 1939, \_Here comes Tommy Niles, the human adding machine. Get him!\_ And then the bright stinging pain of a snowball landing just below his left clavicle, the pain that he could summon up as easily as any of the other pain-memories he carried with him. He winced and closed his eyes suddenly, as if struck by the icy pellet here on a Los Angeles street on a foggy Tuesday morning. They didn't call him the human adding machine any more. Now it was the human tape recorder; the derisive terms had to keep pace with the passing decades. Only Niles himself remained unchanging, The Boy With The Brain Like A Sponge grown up into The Man With The Brain Like A Sponge, still cursed with the same terrible gift. His data-cluttered mind ached. He saw a diminutive yellow sports car parked on the far side of the street, recognized it by its make and model and colour and licence number as the car belonging to Leslie F. Marshall, twenty-six, blond hair, blue eyes, television actor with the following credits --

Wincing, Niles applied the cutoff circuit and blotted out the upwelling data. He had met Marshall once, six months ago, at a party given by a mutual friend -- an erstwhile mutual friend; Niles found it difficult to keep friends for long. He had spoken with the actor for perhaps ten minutes and had added that much more baggage to his mind. It was time to move on, Niles decided. He had been in Los Angeles ten months. The burden of accumulated memories was getting too heavy; he was greeting too many people who had long since forgotten him \_(curse my John Q. Average build, 5 feet 9, 163 pounds, brownish hair, brownish eyes, no unduly prominent physical features, no distinguishing scars except those inside, \_ he thought). He contemplated returning to San Francisco, and decided against it. He had been there only a year ago; Pasadena, two years ago; the time had come, he realized, for another eastward jaunt. \_Back and forth across the face of America goes Thomas Richard Niles, Der fliegende Hollander, the Wandering Jew, the Ghost of Christmas Past, the Human Tape Recorder\_. He smiled at a newsboy who had sold him a copy of the Examiner on 13 May past, got the usual blank stare in return, and headed for the nearest bus terminal. For Niles the long journey had begun on 11 October 1929, in the small Ohio town of Lowry Bridge. He was third of three children, born of seemingly normal parents, Henry Niles (b. 1896), Mary Niles (b. 1899). His older brother and sister had shown no extraordinary manifestations. Tom had. It began as soon as he was old enough to form words; a neighbour woman on the front porch peered into the house where he was playing, and remarked to his mother, 'Look how \_big\_ he's getting, Mary!' He was less than a year old. He had replied, in virtually the same tone of voice, \_'Look how\_ big \_he's getting, Mary!\_' It caused a sensation, even though it was only mimicry, not even speech. He spent his first twelve years in Lowry Bridge, Ohio. In later years, he often wondered how he had been able to last there so long. He began school at the age of four, because there was no keeping him back; his classmates were five and six, vastly superior to him in physical coordination, vastly inferior in everything else. He could read. He could even write, after a fashion, though his babyish muscles tired easily from holding a pen. And he could remember. He remembered everything. He remembered his parents' quarrels and repeated the exact words of them to anyone who cared to listen, until his father whipped him and threatened to kill him if he ever did \_that\_ again. He remembered that too. He remembered the lies his brother and sister told, and took great pains to set the record straight. He learned eventually not to do that, either. He remembered things people had said, and corrected

them when they later deviated from their earlier statements. He remembered everything. He read a textbook once and it stayed with him. When the teacher asked a question based on the day's assignment, Tommy Niles' skinny arm was in the air long before the others had even really assimilated the question. After a while, his teacher made it clear to him that he could not answer every question, whether he had the answer first or not; there were twenty other pupils in the class. The other pupils in the class made that abundantly clear to him, after school. He won the verse-learning contest in Sunday school. Barry Harman had studied for weeks in hopes of winning the catcher's mitt his father had promised him if he finished first -- but when it was Tommy Niles' turn to recite, he began with In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth, continued through Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them, headed on into Now the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made, and presumably would have continued clear through Genesis, Exodus, and on to Joshua if the dazed proctor hadn't shut him up and declared him the winner. Barry Harman didn't get his glove; Tommy Niles got a black eye instead. He began to realize he was different. It took time to make the discovery that other people were always forgetting things, and that instead of admiring him for what he could do they hated him for it. It was difficult for a boy of eight, even Tommy Niles, to understand why they hated him, but eventually he did find out, and then he started learning how to hide his gift. Through his ninth and tenth years he practised being normal, and almost succeeded; the after-school beatings stopped, and he managed to get a few Bs on his report cards at last, instead of straight rows of A. He was growing up; he was learning to pretend. Neighbours heaved sighs of relief, now that that terrible Niles boy was no longer doing all those crazy things. But inwardly he was the same as ever. And he realized he'd have to leave Lowry Bridge soon. He knew everyone too well. He would catch them in lies ten times a week, even Mr Lawrence, the minister, who once turned down an invitation to pay a social call to the Nileses one night, saying, 'I really have to get down to work and write my sermon for Sunday,' when only three days before Tommy had heard him say to Miss Emery, the church secretary, that he had had a sudden burst of inspiration and had written three sermons all at one sitting, and now he'd have some free time for the rest of the month. Even Mr. Lawrence lied, then. And he was the best of them. As for the others -- Tommy waited until he was twelve; he was big for his age by then and figured he could take care of himself. He borrowed twenty dollars from the supposedly secret cashbox in the back of the kitchen cupboard (his mother had mentioned its existence five years before, in Tommy's hearing) and tiptoed out of the house at three in the morning. He caught the night freight for Chillicothe, and was on his way. \* \* \* \* There were thirty people on the bus out of Los Angeles. Niles sat alone in the back, by the seat just over the rear wheel. He knew four of the people in the bus by name -- but he was confident they had forgotten who he was by now, and so he kept to himself. It was an awkward business. If you said hello to someone who had forgotten you, they thought you were a troublemaker or a panhandler. And if you passed someone by, thinking he had forgotten you, and he hadn't -- well, then you were a snob. Niles swung between both those poles five times a day. He'd see someone, such as that girl Bette Torrance, and get a cold, unrecognizing stare; or he'd go by someone else, believing the other person did not remember him but walking rapidly just in case he did, and there would be the angry, 'Well! Who the blazes do you think you are!' floating after him as he retreated. Now he sat alone, bouncing up and down with each revolution of the wheel, with the one suitcase containing his property thumping constantly against the baggage rack over his head. That was one advantage of his talent: he could travel light. He didn't need to keep books, once he had read them, and there wasn't much point in amassing belongings of any other sort either; they became overfamiliar and dull too soon. He eyed the road signs. They were well into Nevada by now, The old, wearisome retreat was

on. He could never stay in the same city too long. He had to move on to new territory, to some new place where he had no old memories, where no one knew him, where he knew no one. In the sixteen years since he had left home, he'd covered a lot of ground. He remembered the jobs he had held.

He had been a proofreader for a Chicago publishing firm, once. He did the jobs of two men. The way proofreading usually worked, one man read the copy from the manuscript, the other checked it against the galleys. Niles had a simpler method: he would scan the manuscript once, thereby memorizing it, and then merely check the galley for discrepancies. It brought him fifty dollars a week for a while, before the time came to move along. He once held a job as a sideshow freak in a travelling carnie that made a regular Alabama-Mississippi-Georgia circuit. Niles had really been low on cash, then. He remembered how he had gotten the job: by buttonholing the carnie boss and demanding a tryout. 'Read me anything -- anything at all! I can remember it!' The boss had been sceptical, and didn't see any use for such an act anyway, but finally gave in when Niles practically fainted of malnutrition in his office. The boss read him an editorial from a Mississippi county weekly, and when he was through Niles recited it back, word perfect. He got the job, at fifteen dollars a week plus meals, and sat in a little booth under a sign that said The Human Tape Recorder. People read or said things to him, and he repeated them. It was dull work; sometimes the things they said to him were filthy, and most of the time they couldn't even remember what they had said to him a minute later. He stayed with the show four weeks, and when he left no one missed him much. The bus rolled on into the fogbound night.

There had been other jobs: good jobs, bad jobs. None of them had lasted very long. There had been some girls too, but none of them had lasted too long. They had all, even those he had tried to conceal it from, found out about his special ability, and soon after that they had left. No one could stay with a man who never forgot, who could always dredge yesterday's foibles out of the reservoir that was his mind and hurl them unanswerably into the open. And the man with the perfect memory could never live long among imperfect human beings. To forgive is to forget, he thought. The memory of old insults and quarrels fades, and a relationship starts anew. But for him there could be no forgetting, and hence little forgiving. He closed his eyes after a little while and leaned back against the hard leather cushion of his seat. The steady rhythm of the bus lulled him to sleep. In sleep, his mind could rest; he found ease from memory. He never dreamed.

\* \* \* \* In Salt Lake City he paid his fare, left the bus, suitcase in hand, and set out in the first direction he faced. He had not wanted to go any farther east on that bus. His cash reserve was only sixty-three dollars now, and he had to make it last. He found a job as a dishwasher in a downtown restaurant, held it long enough to accumulate a hundred dollars, and moved out again, this time hitchhiking to Cheyenne. He stayed there a month and took a night bus to Denver, and when he left Denver it was to go to Wichita. Wichita to Des Moines to Minneapolis, Minneapolis to Milwaukee, then down through Illinois, carefully avoiding Chicago, and on to Indianapolis. It was an old story for him, this travelling. Gloomily he celebrated his twenty-ninth birthday alone in an Indianapolis rooming house on a drizzly October day, and for the purpose of brightening the occasion, summoned up his old memories of his fourth birthday party in 1933 ... one of the few unalloyedly happy days of his life.

They were all there, all his playmates, and his parents, and his brother Hank, looking gravely important at the age of eight, and his sister Marian, and there were candles and favours and punch and cake. Mrs Heinsohn from next door stopped in and said, 'He looks like a regular little man,' and his parents beamed at him, and everyone sang and had a good time. And afterwards, when the last game had been played, the last present opened, when the boys and girls had waved good-bye and disappeared up the street, the grownups sat around and talked of the new president and the many strange things that were happening in the country, and little Tommy sat in the middle of the floor, listening and recording everything and glowing warmly, because somehow during

the whole afternoon no one had said or done anything cruel to him. He was happy that day, and he went to bed still happy. Niles ran through the party twice, like an old movie he loved well; the print never grew frayed, the registration always remained as clear and sharp as ever. He could taste the sweet tang of the punch, he could relive the warmth of that day when through some accident the others had allowed him a little happiness. Finally he let the brightness of the party fade, and once again he was in Indianapolis on a grey, bleak afternoon, alone in an eight-dollar-a-week furnished room. \_Happy birthday to me,\_ he thought bitterly. \_Happy birthday.\_ He stared at the blotchy green wall with the cheap Corot print hung slightly askew. I could have been something special, he brooded, one of the wonders of the world. Instead I'm a skulking freak who lives in dingy third-floor back rooms, and I don't dare let the world know what I can do. He scooped into his memory and came up with the Toscanini performance of Beethoven's Ninth he had heard in Carnegie Hall once while he was in New York. It was infinitely better than the later performance Toscanini had approved for recording, yet no microphones had taken it down; the blazing performance was as far beyond recapture as a flame five minutes snuffed, except in one man's mind. Niles had it all: the majestic downcrash of the tympani, the resonant, perspiring basso bringing forth the great melody of the finale, even the french-horn bobble that must have enraged the maestro so, the infuriating cough from the dress circle at the gentlest moment of the adagio, the sharp pinching of Niles' shoes as he leaned forward in his seat -- He had it all, in highest fidelity. \* \* \* \* He arrived in the small town on a moonless night three months later, a cold, crisp January evening, when the wintry wind swept in from the north, cutting through his thin clothing and making the suitcase an almost impossible burden for his numb, gloveless hand. He had not meant to come to this place, but he had run short of cash in Kentucky, and there had been no helping it. He was on his way to New York, where he could live in anonymity for months unbothered, and where he knew his rudeness would go unnoticed if he happened to snub someone on the street or if he greeted someone who had forgotten him. But New York was still hundreds of miles away, and it might have been millions on this January night. He saw a sign: BAR. He forced himself forward towards the sputtering neon; he wasn't ordinarily a drinker, but he needed the warmth of alcohol inside him now, and perhaps the barkeep would need a man to help out, or could at least rent him a room for what little he had in his pockets. There were five men in the bar when he reached it. They looked like truck drivers. Niles dropped his valise to the left of the door, rubbed his stiff hands together, exhaled a white cloud. The bartender grinned jovially at him. 'Cold enough for you out there?' Niles managed a grin. 'I wasn't sweating much. Let me have something warming. Double shot of bourbon, maybe.' That would be ninety cents. He had \$7.34. He nursed the drink when it came, sipped it slowly, let it roll down his gullet. He thought of the summer he had been stranded for a week in Washington, a solid week of 97-degree temperature and 97-per cent humidity, and the vivid memory helped to ease away some of the psychological effects of the coldness. He relaxed; he warmed. Behind him came the penetrating sound of argument. ' -- I tell you Joe Louis beat Schmeling to a pulp the second time! Kayoed him in the first round!' 'You're nuts! Louis just barely got him down in a fifteen-round decision, the second bout.' 'Seems to me -- ' 'I'll put money on it. Ten bucks says it was a decision in fifteen, mac.' Sounds of confident chuckles. 'I wouldn't want to take your money so easy, pal. Everyone knows it was a knockout in one.' 'Ten bucks, I said.' Niles turned to see what was happening. Two of the truck drivers, burly men in dark pea jackets, stood nose to nose. Automatically the thought came: \_Louis knocked Max Schmeling out in the first round at Yankee Stadium, New York, 22 June 1938.\_ Niles had never been much of a sports fan, and particularly disliked boxing -- but he had once glanced at an almanac page cataloguing Joe Louis' title fights, and the data had, of course remained.

He watched detachedly as the bigger of the two truck drivers angrily slapped a ten-dollar bill down on the bar; the other matched it. Then the first glanced up at the barkeep and said. 'Okay, bud. You're a shrewd guy. Who's right about the second Louis-Schmeling fight?' The barkeep was a blank-faced cipher of a man, middle-aged, balding, with mild, empty eyes. He chewed at his lip a moment, shrugged, fidgeted, finally said, 'Kinda hard for me to remember. That musta been twenty-five years ago.' \_Twenty,\_ Niles thought. 'Lessee now,' the bartender went on. 'Seems to me I remember -- yeah, sure. It went the full fifteen, and the judges gave it to Louis. I seem to remember a big stink being made over it; the papers said Joe should've killed him a lot faster'n that.' A triumphant grin appeared on the bigger driver's face. He deftly pocketed both bills. The other man grimaced and howled, 'Hey! You two fixed this thing up beforehand! I know damn well that Louis kayoed the German in one.' 'You heard what the man said. The money's mine.' 'No,' Niles said suddenly, in a quiet voice that seemed to carry halfway across the bar. \_Keep your mouth shut, he told himself frantically. This is none of your business. Stay out of it!\_ But it was too late. 'What you say?' asked the one who'd dropped the ten-spot. 'I say you're being rooked. Louis won the fight in one round, like you say. 22 June 1938, Yankee Stadium. The barkeep's thinking of the Arturo Godoy fight. \_That\_ went the full fifteen in 1940. February 9.' 'There -- told you! Gimme back my money!' But the other driver ignored the cry and turned to face Niles. He was a cold-faced, heavy-set man, and his fists were starting to clench. 'Smart man, eh? Boxing expert?' 'I just didn't want to see anybody get cheated,' Niles said stubbornly. He knew what was coming now. The truck driver was weaving drunkenly towards him; the barkeep was yelling, the other patrons backing away. The first punch caught Niles in the ribs; he grunted and staggered back, only to be grabbed by the throat and slapped three times. Dimly he heard a voice saying, 'Hey, let go the guy! He didn't mean anything! You want to kill him?' A volley of blows doubled him up; a knuckle swelled his right eyelid, a fist crashed stunningly into his left shoulder. He spun, wobbled uncertainly, knowing that his mind would permanently record every moment of this agony. Through half-closed eyes he saw them pulling the enraged driver off him; the man writhed in the grip of three others, aimed a last desperate kick at Niles' stomach and grazed a rib, and finally was subdued. Niles stood alone in the middle of the floor, forcing himself to stay upright, trying to shake off the sudden pain that drilled through him in a dozen places. 'You all right?' a solicitous voice asked. 'Hell, those guys play rough. You oughtn't mix up with them.' 'I'm all right,' Niles said hollowly. 'Just ... let me ... catch my breath.' 'Here. Sit down. Have a drink. It'll fix you up.' 'No,' Niles said. \_I can't stay here. I have to get moving.\_ 'I'll be all right,' he muttered unconvincingly. He picked up his suitcase, wrapped his coat tight about him, and left the bar, step by step by step. He got fifteen feet before the pain became unbearable. He crumpled suddenly and fell forward on his face in the dark, feeling the cold iron-hard frozen turf against his cheek, and struggled unsuccessfully to get up. He lay there, remembering all the various pains of his life, the beatings, the cruelty, and when the weight of memory became too much to bear he blanked out. \* \* \* \* \* The bed was warm, the sheets clean and fresh and soft. Niles woke slowly, feeling a temporary sensation of disorientation, and then his infallible memory supplied the data on his blackout in the snow and he realized he was in a hospital. He tried to open his eyes; one was swollen shut, but he managed to get the other's lids apart. He was in a small hospital room -- no shining metropolitan hospital pavilion, but a small country clinic with gingerbread moulding on the walls and homey lace curtains, through which afternoon sunlight was entering. So he had been found and brought to a hospital. That was good. He could have easily died out there in the snow; but someone had stumbled over him and brought him in. That was a novelty, that someone had bothered to help him; the treatment he had received in the bar



last night -- was it last night? -- was more typical of the world's attitude towards him. In twenty-nine years he had somehow failed to learn adequate concealment, camouflage and every day he suffered the consequences. It was so hard for him to remember, he who remembered everything else, that the other people were not like him, and hated him for what he was. Gingerly he felt his side. There didn't seem to be any broken ribs -- just bruises. A day or so of rest and they would probably discharge him and let him move on. A cheerful voice said, 'Oh, you're awake, Mr Niles. Feeling better now? I'll brew some tea for you.' He looked up and felt a sudden sharp pang. She was a nurse -- twenty-two, twenty-three, new at the job perhaps, with a flowing tumble of curling blonde hair and wide, clear blue eyes. She was smiling, and it seemed to Niles it was not merely a professional smile. 'I'm Miss Carroll, your day nurse. Everything okay?' 'Fine.' Niles said hesitantly. 'Where am I?' 'Central County General Hospital. You were brought in late last night -- apparently you'd been beaten up and left by the road out on Route 32. It's a lucky thing Mark McKenzie was walking his dog, Mr Niles.' She looked at him gravely. 'You remember last night, don't you? I mean -- the shock -- amnesia -- ' Niles chuckled. 'That's the last ailment in the world I'd be afraid of,' he said. 'I'm Thomas Richard Niles, and I remember pretty well what happened. How badly am I damaged?' 'Superficial bruises, mild shock and exposure, slight case of frostbite,' she summed up. 'You'll live. Dr Hammond'll give you a full checkup a little later, after you've eaten. Let me bring you some tea.' Niles watched the trim figure vanish into the hallway. She was certainly an attractive girl, he thought, fresh-eyed, alert ... alive. Old cliché: patient falling for his nurse. But she's not for me, I'm afraid. Abruptly the door opened and the nurse reentered, bearing a little enamelled tea tray. 'You'll never guess! I have a surprise for you, Mr Niles. A visitor. Your mother.' 'My moth -- ' She saw the little notice about you in the county paper. She's waiting outside, and she told me she hasn't seen you in seventeen years. Would you like me to send her in now?' 'I guess so,' Niles said, in a dry, feathery voice. A second time the nurse departed. My God, Niles thought! If I had known I was this close to home -- I should have stayed out of Ohio altogether. The last person he wanted to see was his mother. He began to tremble under the covers. The oldest and most terrible of his memories came bursting up from the dark compartment of his mind where he thought he had imprisoned it forever. The sudden emergence from warmth into coolness, from darkness to light, the jarring slap of a heavy hand on his buttocks, the searing pain of knowing that his security was ended, that from now on he would be alive, and therefore miserable -- The memory of the agonized birth-shriek sounded in his mind. He could never forget being born. And his mother was, he thought, the one person of all he could never forgive, since she had given him forth into the life he hated. He dreaded the moment when -- 'Hello, Tom. It's been a long time.' Seventeen years had faded her, had carved lines in her face and made the cheeks more baggy, the blue eyes less bright, the brown hair a mousy grey. She was smiling. And to his own astonishment Niles was able to smile back. 'Mother.' 'I read about it in the paper. It said a man of about thirty was found just outside town with papers bearing the name Thomas R. Niles, and he was taken to Central County General Hospital. So I came over, just to make sure -- and it was you.' A lie drifted to the surface of his mind, but it was a kind lie, and he said it: 'I was on my way back home to see you. Hitchhiking. But I ran into a little trouble en route.' 'I'm glad you decided to come back, Tom. It's been so lonely, ever since your father died, and of course Hank was married, and Marian too -- it's good to see you again. I thought I never would.' He lay back, perplexed, wondering why the upwelling flood of hatred did not come. He felt only warmth towards her. He was glad to see her. 'How has it been -- all these years, Tom? You haven't had it easy. I can see. I see it all over your face.' 'It hasn't been easy,' he said. 'You know why I ran away?' She nodded.

'Because of the way you are. That thing about your mind -- never forgetting. I knew. Your grandfather had it too, you know.' 'My grandfather -- but --'

'You got it from him. I never did tell you, I guess. He didn't get along too well with any of us. He left my mother when I was a little girl, and I never knew where he went. So I always knew you'd go away the way he did. Only you came back. Are you married?' He shook his head. 'Time you got started, then, Tom. You're near thirty.'

The door opened, and an efficient-looking doctor appeared. 'Afraid your time's up, Mrs Niles. You'll be able to see him again later. I have to check him over, now that he's awake.'

'Of course, doctor.' She smiled at him, then at Niles. 'I'll see you later, Tom.'

'Sure, mother.'

Niles lay back, frowning, as the doctor poked at him here and there. I didn't hate her. A growing wonderment rose in him, and he realized he should have come home long ago. He had changed, inside, without even knowing it.

Running away was the first stage in growing up, and a necessary one. But coming back came later, and that was the mark of maturity. He was back. And suddenly he saw he had been terribly foolish all his bitter adult life.

He had a gift, a great gift, an awesome gift. It had been too big for him until now. Self-pitying, self-tormented, he had refused to allow for the shortcomings of the forgetful people about him, and had paid the price of their hatred. But he couldn't keep running away forever. The time would have to come for him to grow big enough to contain his gift, to learn to live with it instead of moaning in dramatic, self-inflicted anguish.

And now was the time. It was long overdue.

His grandfather had had the gift; they had never told him that. So it was genetically transmissible. He could marry, have children, and they, too, would never forget.

It was his duty not to let his gift die with him. Others of his kind, less sensitive, less thin-skinned, would come after and they, too, would know how to recall a Beethoven symphony or a decade-old wisp of conversation. For the first time since that fourth birthday party he felt a hesitant flicker of happiness. The days of running were ended; he was home again. If I learn to live with others, maybe they'll be able to live with me.

He saw the things he yet needed: a wife, a home, children --

'-- a couple of days' rest, plenty of hot liquids, and you'll be as good as new, Mr Niles,' the doctor was saying. 'is there anything you'd like me to bring you now?'

'Yes,' Niles said. 'Just send in the nurse, will you? Miss Carroll, I mean.'

The doctor grinned and left. Niles waited expectantly, exulting in his new self. He switched on Act Three of Die Meistersinger as a kind of jubilant backdrop music in his mind, and let the warmth sweep up over him. When she entered the room he was smiling and wondering how to begin saying what he wanted to say.

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# The Martian Invasion Journals of Henry James

By Robert Silverberg

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Editor's Note:

Of all the treasures contained in the coffin-shaped wooden sea-chest at Harvard's Widener Library in which those of Henry James's notebooks and journals that survived his death were preserved and in the associated James archive at Harvard, only James's account of his bizarre encounter with the Martian invaders in the summer of 1900 has gone unpublished until now. The rest of the material the box contained --the diaries and datebooks, the notes for unfinished novels, the variant drafts of his late plays, and so forth--has long since been made available to James scholars, first in the form of selections under the editorship of F.O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock (*The Notebooks of Henry James*, Oxford University Press, 1947), and then a generation later in the magisterial full text edited by Leon Edel and Lyall H. Powers (*The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, Oxford University Press, 1987.)

Despite the superb latter volume's assertions, in its title and subtitle, of being "complete," "authoritative," and "definitive," one brief text was indeed omitted from it, which was, of course, the invasion journal. Edel and Powers are in no way to be faulted for this, since they could not have been aware of the existence of the Martian papers, which had (apparently accidentally) been sequestered long ago among a group of documents at Harvard associated with the life of James's sister Alice (1848-1892) and had either gone unnoticed by the biographers of Alice James or else, since the diary had obviously been composed some years after her death, had been dismissed by them as irrelevant to their research. It may also be that they found the little notebook simply illegible, for James had suffered severely from writer's cramp from the winter of 1896-97 onward; his handwriting by 1900 had become quite erratic, and many of the (largely pencilled) entries in the Martian notebook are extremely challenging even to a reader experienced in Henry James's hand, set down as they were in great haste under intensely strange circumstances.

The text is contained in a pocket diary book, four and a half inches by six, bound in a green leatherette cover. It appears that James used such books, in those years, in which to jot notes that he would later transcribe into his permanent notebook (*Houghton Journal VI, 26 October 1896 to 10 February 1909*); but this is the only one of its kind that has survived. The first entry is undated, but can be specifically identified as belonging to mid-May of 1900 by its references to James's visit to London in that month. At that time James made his home at Lamb House in the pleasant Sussex town of Rye, about seventy miles southeast of London. After an absence of nearly two years he had made a brief trip to the capital in March, 1900, at which time, he wrote, he was greeted by his friends "almost as if I had returned from African or Asian exile." After seventeen days he went home to Lamb House, but he returned to London in May, having suddenly shaven off, a few days before, the beard that he had worn since the 1860s, because it had begun to turn white and offended his vanity. (James was then 57.) From internal evidence, then, we can date the first entry in the Martian journals to the period between May 15 and May 25, 1900.

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[*Undated*] Stepped clean-shaven from the train at Charing Cross. Felt clean and light and eerily young: I could have been forty. A miraculous transformation, so simply achieved! Alas, the sad truth of it is that it will always be I, never any younger even without the beard; but this is a good way to greet the new

century nevertheless.

Called on Helena De Kay. Gratifying surprise and expressions of pleasure over my rejuvenated physiognomy. Clemens is there, that is, "Mark Twain." He has aged greatly in the three years since our last meeting. "The twentieth century is a stranger to me," he sadly declares. His health is bad: has been to Sweden for a cure. Not clear what ails him, physically, at least. He is a dark and troubled soul in any case. His best work is behind him and plainly he knows it. I pray whatever God there be that that is not to be my fate.

To the club in the evening. Tomorrow a full day, the galleries, the booksellers, the customary dismaying conference with the publishers. (The war in South Africa is depressing all trade, publishing particularly badly hit, though I should think people would read more novels at a time of such tension.) Luncheon and dinner engagements, of course, the usual hosts, no doubt the usual guests. And so on and on the next day and the next and the next. I yearn already for little restful, red-roofed, uncomplicated Rye.

*June 7, LH[Lamb House, Rye]:* Home again at long last. London tires me: that is the truth of things. I have lost the habit of it, *je crois*. How I yearned, all the while I was there, for cableless days and dinnerless nights! And of course there is work to do. *The Sacred Fount* is now finished and ready to go to the agent. A fine flight into the high fantastic, I think--fanciful, fantastic, but very close and sustained. Writing in the first person makes me uneasy--it lends itself so readily to garrulity, to a fluidity of self-revelation--but there is no questioning that such a structure was essential to this tale.

What is to be next? There is of course the great Project, the fine and major thing, which perhaps I mean to call *The Ambassadors*. Am I ready to begin it? It will call for the most supreme effort, though I think the reward will be commensurate. A masterpiece, dare I say? I might do well to set down one more sketch of it before commencing. But not immediately. There is powerful temptation to be dilatory: I find a note here from Wells, who suggests that I bicycle over to Sandgate and indulge in a bit of conversation with him. Indeed it has been a while, and I am terribly fond of him. Wells first, yes, and some serious thought about my ambassadors after that.

*June 14, Sandgate.* I am at Wells's this fine bright Thursday, very warm even for June. The bicycle ride in such heat across Romney Marsh to this grand new villa of his on the Kentish coast left me quite wilted, but Wells's robust hospitality has quickly restored me.

What a vigorous man Wells is! Not that you would know it to look at him; his health is much improved since his great sickly time two years ago, but he is nonetheless such a flimsy little wisp of a man, with those short legs, that high squeaky voice, his somewhat absurd moustaches. And yet the mind of the man burns like a sun within that frail body! The energy comes forth in that stream of books, the marvelous fantastic tales, the time-machine story and the one about Dr. Moreau's bestial monsters and the one that I think is my favorite, the pitiful narrative of the invisible man. Now he wants to write the story of a journey to the Moon, among innumerable other projects, all of which he will probably fulfill. But of course there is much more to Wells than these outlandish if amusing fables: his recent book, *Love and Mr. Lewisham*, is not at all a scientific romance but rather quite the searching analysis of matters of love and power. Even so Wells is not just a novelist (*amere* novelist, I came close to saying!); he is a seer, a prophet, he genuinely wishes to transform the world according to his great plan for it. I doubt very much that he will have the chance, but I wish him well. It is a trifle exhausting to listen to him go on and on about the new

century and the miracles that it will bring, but it is enthralling as well. And of course behind his scientific optimism lurks a dark vision, quite contradictory, of the inherent nature of mankind. He is a fascinating man, a raw, elemental force. I wish he paid more attention to matters of literary style; but, then, he wishes that I would pay *less*. I dare say each of us is both right and wrong about the other.

We spoke sadly of our poor friend and neighbor, Crane [*Stephen Crane, the American novelist*], whose untimely death last week we both lament. His short life was chaotic and his disregard for his own health was virtually criminal; but *The Red Badge of Courage*, I believe, will surely long outlive him. I wonder what other magnificent works were still in him when he died.

We talk of paying calls the next day on some of our other literary friends who live nearby, Conrad, perhaps, or young Hueffer, or even Kipling up at Burwash. What a den of novelists these few counties possess!

A fine dinner and splendid talk afterward.

Early to bed for me; Wells, I suppose, will stay awake far into the night, writing, writing, writing.

*June 14, Spade House, Sandgate.* In mid-morning after a generous late breakfast Wells is just at the point of composing a note to Conrad proposing an impromptu visit--Conrad is still despondently toiling at his interminable *Lord Jim* and no doubt would welcome an interruption, Wells says--when a young fellow whom Wells knows comes riding up, all out of breath, with news that a falling star has been seen crossing the skies in the night, rushing high overhead, inscribing a line of flame visible from Winchester eastward, and that--no doubt as a consequence of that event--something strange has dropped from the heavens and landed in Wells's old town of Woking, over Surrey way. It is a tangible thunderbolt, a meteor, some kind of shaft flung by the hand of Zeus, at any rate.

So, *instanter*, all is up with our visit to Conrad. Wells's scientific curiosity takes full hold of him. He must go to Woking this very moment to inspect this gift of the gods; and, willy-nilly, I am to accompany him. "You must come, you *must!*" he cries, voice disappearing upward into an octave extraordinary even for him. I ask him why, and he will only say that there will be revelations of an earthshaking kind, of planetary dimensions. "To what are you fantastically alluding?" I demand, but he will only smile enigmatically. And, shortly afterward, off we go.

*June 14, much later, Woking.* Utterly extraordinary! We make the lengthy journey over from Sandgate by pony-carriage, Wells and I, two literary gentleman out for an excursion on this bright and extravagantly warm morning in late spring. I am garbed as though for a bicycle journey, my usual knickerbockers and my exiguous jacket of black and white stripes and my peaked cap; I feel ill at ease in these regalia but I have brought nothing else with me suitable for this outing. We arrive at Woking by late afternoon and plunge at once into--what other word can I use?--into madness.

The object from on high, we immediately learn, landed with an evidently violent impact in the common between Woking, Horsell, and Ottershaw, burying itself deep in the ground. The heat and fury of its impact have hurled sand and gravel in every direction and set the surrounding heather ablaze, though the fires were quickly enough extinguished. But what has fallen is no meteorite. The top of an immense metallic cylinder, perhaps thirty yards across, can be seen protruding from the pit.

Early this morning Ogilvy, the astronomer, hastened to inspect the site; and, he tells us now, he was able despite the heat emanating from the cylinder's surface to get close enough to perceive that the top of the thing had begun to rotate--as though, so he declares, there were creatures within attempting to get out!

"What we have here is a visitation from the denizens of Mars, I would hazard," says Wells without hesitation, in a tone of amazing calmness and assurance.

"Exactly so!" cries Ogilvy. "Exactly so!"

These are both men of science, and I am but *alitterateur*. I stare in bewilderment from one to the other. "How can you be so certain?" I ask them, finally.

To which Wells replies, "The peculiar bursts of light we have observed on the face of that world in recent years have aroused much curiosity, as I am sure you are aware. And then, some time ago, the sight of jets of flame leaping up night after night from the red planet, as if some great gun were being repeatedly fired--in direct consequence of which, let me propose, there eventually came the streak of light in the sky late last night, which I noticed from my study window--betokening, I would argue, the arrival here of this projectile--why, what else can it all mean, James, other than that travelers from our neighbor world lie embedded here before us on Horsell Common!"

"It can be nothing else," Ogilvy cries enthusiastically. "Travelers from Mars! But are they suffering, I wonder? Has their passage through our atmosphere engendered heat too great for them to endure?"

A flush of sorrow and compassion rushes through me at that. It awes and flutters me to think that the red planet holds sentient life, and that an intrepid band of Martians has ventured to cross the great sea of space that separates their world from ours. To have come such an immense, and to me, unimaginable distance--only to perish in the attempt--! Can it be, as Ogilvy suggests, that this brave interplanetary venture will end in tragedy for the brave voyagers? I am racked briefly by the deepest concern.

How ironic, I suppose, in view of the dark and violent later events of this day, that I should expend such pity upon our visitors. But we could tell nothing, then, nor for some little while thereafter. Crowds of curiosity-seekers came and went, as they have done all day; workmen with digging tools now began to attempt to excavate the cylinder, which had cooled considerably since the morning; their attempts to complete the unscrewing of the top were wholly unsuccessful. Wells could not take his eyes from the pit. He seemed utterly possessed by a fierce joy that had been kindled in him by the possibility that the cylinder held actual Martians. It was, he told me several times, almost as though one of his own scientific fantasy-books were turning to reality before his eyes; and Wells confessed that he had indeed sketched out the outline of a novel about an invasion from Mars, intending to write it some two or three years hence, but of course now that scheme has been overtaken by actual events and he shall have to abandon it. He evidences little regret at this; he appears wholly delighted, precisely as a small boy might be, that the Martians are here. I dare say that he would have regarded the intrusion of a furious horde of dinosaurs into the Surrey countryside with equal pleasure.

But I must admit that I am somewhat excited as well. Travelers from Mars! How extraordinary! *Quel phenomene!* And what vistas open to the mind of the intrepid seeker after novelty! I have traveled somewhat myself, of course, to the Continent, at least, if not to Africa or China, but I have not ruled such farther journeys completely out, and now the prospect of an even farther one becomes possible. To make the Grand Tour of Mars! To see its great monuments and temples, and perhaps have an audience at the court of the Great Martian Cham! It is a beguiling thought, if not a completely serious one. See, see, I am becoming a fantasist worthy of Wells!



(Later. The hour of sunset.) The cylinder is open. To our immense awe we find ourselves staring at a Martian. Did I expect them to be essentially human in form? Well, then, I was foolish in my expectations. What we see is a bulky ungainly thing; two huge eyes, great as saucers; tentacles of some sort; a strange quivering mouth--yes, yes, an alien being *senza dubbio*, preternaturally *other*.

Wells, unexpectedly, is appalled. "Disgusting...dreadful," he mutters. "That oily skin! Those frightful eyes! What a hideous devil it is!" Where has his scientific objectivity gone? For my part I am altogether fascinated. I tell him that I see rare beauty in the Martian's strangeness, not the beauty of a Greek vase or of a ceiling by Tiepolo, of course, but beauty of a distinct kind all the same. In this, I think, my perceptions are the superior of Wells's. There is beauty in the squirming octopus dangling from the hand of some grinning fisherman at the shore of Capri; there is beauty in the *terrifiant* bas-reliefs of winged bulls from the palaces of Nineveh; and there is beauty of a sort, I maintain, in this Martian also.

He laughs heartily. "You are ever the esthete, eh, James!"

I suppose that I am. But I will not retreat from my appreciation of the strange being who--struggling, it seems, against the unfamiliar conditions of our world--is moving about slowly and clumsily at the edge of its cylinder.

The creature drops back out of sight. The twilight is deepening to darkness. An hour passes, and nothing occurs. Wells suggests we seek dinner, and I heartily agree.

(Later still.) Horror! Just past eight, while Wells and I were dining, a delegation bearing a white flag of peace approached the pit, so we have learned--evidently in the desire to demonstrate to the Martians that we are intelligent and friendly beings. Ogilvy was in the group, and Stent, the Astronomer Royal, and some poor journalist who had arrived to report on the event. There came suddenly a blinding flash of flame from the pit, and another and another, and the whole delegation met with a terrible instant death, forty souls in all. The fiery beam also ignited adjacent trees and brought down a portion of a nearby house; and all those who had survived the massacre fled the scene in the wildest of terror.

"So they are monsters," Wells ejaculates fiercely, "and this is war between the worlds!"

"No, no," I protest, though I too am stunned by the dire news. "They are far from home--frightened, discomforted--it is a tragic misunderstanding and nothing more."

Wells gives me a condescending glance. That one withering look places our relationship, otherwise so cordial, in its proper context. He is the hard-headed man of realities who has clawed his way up from poverty and ignorance; I am the moneyed and comfortable and overly gentle literary artist, the *connoisseur* of the life of the leisured classes. And then too, not for the first time, I have failed to seize the immediate horrific implications of a situation whilst concentrating on peripheral pretty responses. To brusque and self-confident Wells, in his heart of hearts, I surely must appear as something charming but effete.

I think that Wells greatly underestimates the strength of my fibre, but this is no moment to debate the point.

"Shall we pay a call on your unhappy friends from Mars, and see if they receive us more amiably?" he suggests.

I cannot tell whether he is sincere. It is always necessary to allow for Wells's insatiable scientific

curiosity.

"By all means, if that is what you wish," I bravely say, and wait for his response. But in fact he *is not* serious; he has no desire to share the fate of Ogilvy and Stent; and, since it is too late now to return to Sandgate this night, we take lodgings at an inn he knows here in Woking. Clearly Wells is torn, I see, between his conviction that the Martians are here to do evil and his powerful desire to learn all that a human mind can possibly learn about these beings from an unknown world.

*June 15, Woking and points east.* Perhaps the most ghastly day of my life.

Just as well we made no attempt last evening to revisit the pit. Those who did--there were some such foolhardy ones--did not return, for the heat-ray was seen to flash more than once in the darkness. Great hammering noises came from the pit all night, and occasional puffs of greenish-white smoke. Devil's work, to be sure. Just after midnight a second falling star could be seen in the northwest sky. The invasion, and there is no doubt now that that is what it is, proceeds apace.

In the morning several companies of soldiers took possession of the entire common and much of the area surrounding it. No one may approach the site and indeed the military have ordered an evacuation of part of Horsell. It is a hot, close day and we have, of course, no changes of clothing with us. Rye and dear old Lamb House seem now to be half a world away. In the night I began to yearn terribly for home, but Wells's determination to remain here and observe the unfolding events was manifest from the time of our awakening. I was unwilling to be rebuked for my timidity, nor could I very well take his pony-carriage and go off with it whilst leaving him behind, and so I resolved to see it all out at his side.

But would there be any unfolding events to observe? The morning and afternoon were dull and wearying. Wells was an endless fount of scientific speculation--he was convinced that the greater gravitational pull of Earth would keep the Martians from moving about freely on our world, and that conceivably they might drown in our thicker atmosphere, et cetera, and that was interesting to me at first and then considerably less so as he went on with it. Unasked, he lectured me interminably on the subject of Mars, its topography, its climate, its seasons, its bleak and forlorn landscape. Wells is an irrepressible lecturer: there is no halting him once he has the bit between his teeth.

In mid-afternoon we heard the sound of distant gunfire to the north: evidently attempts were being made to destroy the second cylinder before it could open. But at Woking all remained in a nervewracking stasis the whole day, until, abruptly, at six in the evening there came an explosion from the common, and gunfire, and a fierce shaking and a crashing that brought into my mind the force of the eruption of Vesuvius as it must have been on the day of the doom of Pompeii. We looked out and saw treetops breaking into flame like struck matches; buildings began to collapse as though the breath of a giant had been angrily expended upon them; and fires sprang up all about. The Martians had begun to destroy Woking.

"Come," Wells said. He had quickly concluded that it was suicidal folly to remain here any longer, and certainly I would not disagree. We hastened to the pony-carriage; he seized the reins; and off we went to the east, with black smoke rising behind us and the sounds of rifles and machine-guns providing incongruous contrapuntal rhythms as we made our way on this humid spring evening through this most pleasant of green countrysides.

We traveled without incident as far as Leatherhead; all was tranquil; it was next to impossible to believe



that behind us lay a dreadful scene of death and destruction. Wells's wife has cousins at Leatherhead, and they, listening gravely and with obvious skepticism to our wild tales of Martians with heat-rays laying waste to Woking, gave us supper and evidently expected that we would be guests for the night, it now being nearly ten; but no, Wells had taken it into his head to drive all night, going on by way of Maidstone or perhaps Tunbridge Wells down into Sussex to deliver me to Rye, and thence homeward for him to Sandgate. It was lunacy, but in the frenzy of the moment I agreed to his plan, wishing at this point quickly to put as much distance between the invaders and myself as could be managed.

And so we took our hasty leave of Leatherhead. Glancing back, we saw a fearsome scarlet glow on the western horizon, and huge clots of black smoke. And, as we drove onward, there came a horrid splash of green light overhead, which we both knew must be the third falling star, bringing with it the next contingent of Martians.

Nevertheless I believed myself to be safe. I have known little if any physical danger in my life and it has a certain unreal quality to me; I cannot ever easily accept it as impinging on my existence. Therefore it came as a great astonishment and a near unhinging of my inner stability when, some time past midnight, with thunder sounding in the distance and the air portending imminent rain, the pony abruptly whinnied and reared in terror, and a moment later we beheld a titanic metal creature, perhaps one hundred feet high, striding through the young forest before us on three great metal legs, smashing aside all that lay in its way.

"Quickly!" Wells cried, and seized me by the wrist in an iron grasp and tumbled me out of the cart, down into the grass by the side of the road, just as the poor pony swung round in its fright and bolted off, cart and all, into the woods. The beast traveled no more than a dozen yards before it became fouled amidst low-lying branches and tumbled over, breaking the cart to splinters and, I am afraid, snapping its own neck in the fall. Wells and I lay huddled beneath a shrub as the colossal three-legged metal engine passed high above us. Then came a second one, following in its track, setting up a monstrous outcry as it strode along. "Aloo! Aloo!" it called, and from its predecessor came back an acknowledging "Aloo!"

"The Martians have built war-machines for themselves," Wells murmured. "That was the hammering we heard in the pit. And now these two are going to greet the companions who have just arrived aboard the third cylinder."

How I admired his cool analytical mind just then! For the thunderstorm had reached us, and we suddenly now were being wholly drenched, and muddied as well, and it was late at night and our cart was smashed and our pony was dead, the two of us alone out here in a deserted countryside at the mercy of marauding metal monsters, and even then Wells was capable of so cool an assessment of the events exploding all around us.

I have no idea how long we remained where we were. Perhaps we even dozed a little. No more Martians did we see. A great calmness came over me as the rain went on and on and I came to understand that I could not possibly get any wetter. At length the storm moved away; Wells aroused me and announced that we were not far from Epsom, where perhaps we might find shelter if the Martians had not already devastated it; and so, drenched to the bone, we set out on foot in the darkness. Wells prattled all the while, about the parchedness of Mars and how intensely interested the Martians must be in the phenomenon of water falling from the skies. I replied somewhat curtly that it was not a phenomenon of such great interest to me, the rain now showing signs of returning. In fact I doubted I should survive this soaking. Already I was beginning to feel unwell. But I drew on unsuspected reservoirs of strength and kept pace with the indomitable Wells as we endlessly walked. To me this excursion was like a dream, and not a pleasing one. We tottered on Epsomward all through the dreadful night, arriving with the dawn.

*June 20? 21? 22? Epsom.*

My doubt as to today's date is trivial in regard to my doubt over everything else. It seems that I have been in a delirium of fever for at least a week, perhaps more, and the world has tottered all about me in that time.

Wells believes that today is Thursday, the 21st of June, 1900. Our innkeeper passionately insists it is a day earlier than that. His daughter thinks we have reached Saturday or even Sunday. If we had today's newspaper we should be able to settle the question easily enough, but there are no newspapers. Nor can we wire Greenwich to learn whether the summer solstice has yet occurred, for the Observatory no doubt has been abandoned, as has all the rest of London. Civilization, it appears, has collapsed utterly in this single week. All days are Sundays now: nothing stirs, there is no edifying life.

I, too, collapsed utterly within an hour or two of the end of our night's march to Epsom, lost in a dizzying rhapsody of fatigue and exposure. Wells has nursed me devotedly. Apparently I have had nearly all of his meager ration of food. There are five of us here, the innkeeper and his wife and daughter and us, safely barricaded, so we hope, against the Martian killing-machines and the lethal black gas that they have been disseminating. Somehow this town, this inn, this little island within England where we lie concealed, has escaped the general destruction--thus far. But now comes word that our sanctuary may soon be violated; and what shall we do, Wells and I? Proceeding eastward to our homes along the coast is impossible: the Martians have devastated everything in that direction. "We must to London," Wells insists. "The great city stands empty. Only there will we find food enough to continue, and places to hide from them."

It is a source of wonder and mystery to me that all has fallen apart so swiftly, that--in southern England, at least--the comfortable structures of the society I knew have evaporated entirely, within a week, vanishing with the speed of snowflakes after a spring storm.

What has happened?*This* has happened:

Cylinders laden with Martians have continued daily to arrive from the void. The creatures emerge; they assemble their gigantic transporting-carriages; the mechanical colossi go back and forth upon the land, spreading chaos and death with their heat-rays, their clouds of poisonous black vapor, and any number of other devices of devilry. Whole towns have been charred; whole regiments have been dropped in their tracks; whole counties have been abandoned. The government, the military, all has disintegrated. Our leaders have vanished in a hundred directions. Her Majesty and the Members of Parliament and the entire authority-wielding apparatus of the state now seem as mythical as the knights of the Round Table. We have been thrown back into a state of nature, every man for himself.

In London, so our hosts have told us, all remained ignorantly calm through Sunday last, until news came to the capital from the south of the terror and destruction there, the giant invulnerable spider-like machines, the fires, the suffocating poisonous gas. Evidently a ring of devastation had been laid down on a great arc south of the Thames from Windsor and Staines over through Reigate, at least, and on past Maidstone to Deal and Broadstairs on the Kentish coast. Surely they were closing the net on London, and on Monday morning the populace of that great city commenced to flee in all directions. A few of those who came this way, hoping to reach friends or kin in Kent or East Sussex--there were many thousands--told Wells and the innkeeper of the furious frantic exodus, the great mobs streaming northward, and those other desperate mobs flooding eastward to the Essex shore, as the methodical Martians advanced on London, exterminating all in their path. The loss of life, in that mad rush, must have

been unthinkably great.

"And we have had no Martians here?" I asked Wells.

"On occasion, yes," he replied casually, as though I had asked him about cricket-matches or rainstorms. "A few of their great machines passed through earlier in the week, bound on deadly business elsewhere, no doubt; we called no attention to ourselves, and they took no notice of us. We have been quite fortunate, James."

The landlord's daughter, though--a wild boyish girl of fourteen or fifteen--has been out boldly roving these last few days, and reports increasing numbers of Martians going to and fro to the immediate south and east of us. She says that everything is burned and ruined as far as she went in the directions of Banstead and Leatherhead, and some sort of red weed, no doubt of Martian origin, is weirdly spreading across the land. It is only a matter of time, Wells believes, before they come into Epsom again, and this time, like the randomly striking godlike beings that they seem to be, they may take it into their minds to hurl this place into ruin as well. We must be off, he says; we must to London, where we will be invisible in the vastness of the place.

"And should we not make an attempt to reach our homes, instead?" I ask.

"There is no hope of that, none," says Wells. "The Martians will have closed the entire coast, to prevent an attack through the Strait of Dover by our maritime forces. Even if we survived the journey to the coast, we should find nothing there, James, nothing but ash and rubble. To London, my friend: that is where we must go, now that you are sturdy again."

There is no arguing with Wells. It would be like arguing with a typhoon.

*June 23, let us say. En route to London.*

How strange this once-familiar landscape seems! I feel almost as though I have been transported to Mars and my old familiar life has been left behind on some other star.

We are just outside Wimbledon. Everything is scorched and blackened to our rear; everything seems scorched and blackened ahead of us. We have seen things too terrible to relate, signs of the mass death that must have been inflicted here. Yet all is quiet now. The weather continues fiercely hot and largely dry, and the red Martian weed, doubtless finding conditions similar to those at home, has spread everywhere. It reminds me of the enormous cactus plants one sees in southern Italy, but for its somber brick-red hue and the great luxuriance of its habit of growth: it is red, red, *red*, as far as the eye can see. A dreamlike transformation, somber and depressing in its morbid implications, and of course terrifying. I am certain I will never see my home again, which saddens me. It seems pure insanity to me to be going on into London, despite all the seemingly cogent reasons Wells expresses.

And yet, and yet! Behind the terror and the sadness, how wonderfully exhilarating all this is, really! Shameful of me to say so, but I confess it only to my notebook: this is the great adventure of my life, the wondrous powerful action in which I have everlonged to be involved. At last I am fully *living*! My heart weeps for the destruction I see all about me, for the fall of civilization itself, but yet--I will not deny it--I am invigorated far beyond my considerable years by the constant peril, by the demands placed upon my formerly coddled body, above all, by the sheer *strangeness* of everything within my ken. If I survive this

journey and live to make my escape to some unblighted land I shall dine out on these events forever.

We are traveling, to my supreme astonishment, *bymotor-car*. Wells found one at a house adjacent to the inn, fully stocked with petrol, and he is driving the noisy thing, very slowly but with great perseverance, with all the skill of an expert *chauffeur*. He steers around obstacles capably; he handles sharp and frightening turns in the road with supreme aplomb. It was only after we had been on the road for over an hour that he remarked to me, in an offhand way, "Do you know, James, I have never driven one of these machines before. But there's nothing at all to it, really! Nothing!" Wells is extraordinary. He has offered to give me a chance at the wheel; but no, no, I think I shall let him be the driver on this journey.

(Later.) An astonishing incident, somewhere between Wimbledon and London, unforgettably strange.

Wells sees the cupola of a Martian walking-machine rising above the treetops not far ahead of us, and brings the motor-car to a halt while we contemplate the situation. The alien engine stands completely still, minute after minute; perhaps it has no tenant, or possibly even its occupant was destroyed in some rare successful attempt at a counterattack. Wells proposes daringly but characteristically that we go up to it on foot and take a close look at it, after which, since we are so close to London and ought not to be drawing the Martians' attention to ourselves as we enter a city which presumably they occupy, we should abandon our motor-car and slip into the capital on foot, like the furtive fugitives that we are.

Naturally I think it's rash to go anywhere near the Martian machine. But Wells will not be gainsaid. And so we warily advance, until we are no more than twenty yards from it; whereupon we discover an amazing sight. The Martians ride in a kind of cabin or basket high up above the great legs of their machines. But this one had dismounted and descended somehow to the ground, where it stands fully exposed in a little open space by the side of a small stream just beyond its mechanical carrier, peering reflectively toward the water for all the world as though it were considering passing the next hour with a bit of angling.

The Martian was globular in form, a mere ambulatory head without body--or a body without head, if you will--a yard or more in diameter, limbless, with an array of many whip-like tentacles grouped in two bunches by its mouth. As we breathlessly watched, the creature leaned ponderously forward and dipped a few of these tentacles into the stream, holding them there a long while in evident satisfaction, as though it were a Frenchman and this was a river of the finest claret passing before it, which could somehow be enjoyed and appreciated in this fashion. We could not take our eyes from the spectacle. I saw Wells glance toward a jagged rock of some size lying nearby, as though he had it in mind to attempt some brutal act of heroism against the alien as it stood with its back to us; but I shook my head, more out of an unwillingness to see him take life than out of fear of the consequences of such an attack, and he let the rock be.

How long did this interlude go on? I could not say. We were rooted, fascinated, by our encounter with *the other*. Then the Martian turned--with the greatest difficulty--and trained its huge dark eyes on us. Wells and I exchanged wary glances. Should we finally flee? The Martian seemed to carry no weapons; but who knew what powers of the mind it might bring to bear on us? Yet it simply studied us, dispassionately, as one might study a badger or a mole that has wandered out of the woods. It was a magical moment, of a sort: beings of two disparate worlds face to face (so to speak) and eye to eye, and no hostile action taken on either side.

The Martian then uttered a kind of clicking noise, which we took to be a threat, or a warning. "Time for us to be going," Wells said, and we backed hastily out of the clearing. The clicking sound, we saw, had notified the Martian's transport-mechanism that it wished to be re-seated in the cupola, and a kind of

cable quickly came down, gathered it up, and raised it to its lofty perch. Now the Martian was in full possession of its armaments again, and I was convinced that my last moments had arrived. But no; no. The thing evinced no interest in murdering us. Perhaps it too had felt the magic of our little encounter; or it may be that we were deemed too insignificant to be worth slaughtering. In any event the great machine lumbered into life and went striding off toward the west, leaving Wells and me gaping slackjawed at each other like two men who had just experienced the company of some basilisk or chimera or banshee and had lived to tell the tale.

*The following day, whichever one that may be.* We are in London, having entered the metropolis from the south by way of the Vauxhaull Bridge after a journey on foot that makes my old trappings in Provence and the Campagna and the one long ago over the Alps into Italy seem like the merest trifling strolls. And yet I feel little weariness, for all my hunger and the extreme physical effort of these days past. It is the strange exhilaration, still, that drives me onward, muddied and tattered though I am, and with my banished beard, alas, re-emerging in all its dread whiteness.

Here in the greatest of cities the full extent of the catastrophe comes home with overwhelming impact. There is no one here. We could not be more alone were we on Crusoe's island. The desolation is magnified by the richness of the amenities all about us, the grand hotels, the splendid town-houses, the rich shops, the theaters. Those still remain: but whom do they serve? We see a few corpses lying about here and there, no doubt those who failed to heed the warning to flee; the murderous black powder, apparently no longer lethal, covers much of the city like a horrid dark snowfall; there is some sign of looting, but not really very much, so quickly did everyone flee. The stillness is profound. It is the stillness of Pompeii, the stillness of Agamemnon's Mycenae. But those are bleached ruins; London has the look of a vibrant city, yet, except that there is no one here.

So far as we can see, Wells and I are the only living things, but for birds, and stray cats and dogs. Not even the Martians are in evidence: they must be extending their conquests elsewhere, meaning to return in leisure when the job is done. We help ourselves to food in the fine shops of Belgravia, whose doors stand mostly open; we even dare to refresh ourselves, guiltlessly, with a bottle of three-guinea Chambertin, after much effort on Wells's part in extracting the cork; and then we plunge onward past Buckingham Palace--empty, empty!--into the strangely bleak precincts of Mayfair and Piccadilly.

Like some revenant wandering through a dream-world I revisit the London I loved. Now it is Wells who feels the outsider, and I who am at home. Here are my first lodgings at Bolton St., in Picadilly; here are the clubs where I so often dined, pre-eminent among them for me the Reform Club, my dear refuge and sanctuary in the city, where when still young I was to meet Gladstone and Tennyson and Schliemann of Troy. What would Schliemann make of London now? I invite Wells to admire my little *pied-a-terre* at the Reform, but the building is sealed and we move on. The city is ours. Perhaps we will go to Kensington, where I can show him my chaste and secluded flat at De Vere Mansions with its pretty view of the park; but no, no, we turn the other way, through the terrifying silence, the tragic solitude. Wells wishes to ascertain whether the British Museum is open. So it is up Charing Cross Road for us, and into Bloomsbury, and yes, amazingly, the museum door stands ajar. We can, if we wish, help ourselves to the Elgin Marbles and the Rosetta Stone and the Portland Vase. But to what avail? Everything is meaningless now. Wells stations himself before some battered pharaoh in the hall of Egyptian sculpture and cries out, in what I suppose he thinks is a mighty and terrible voice, "I am Ozymandias, King of Kings! Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!"

What, I wonder, shall we do? Wander London at will, until the Martians come and slay us as they have slain the others? There is a certain wonderful *frisson* to be had from being the last men in London; but in truth it is terrible, terrible, terrible. What is the worth of having survived, when civilization has perished?



Cold sausages and stale beer in a pub just off Russell Square. The red weed, we see, is encroaching everywhere in London as it is in the countryside. Wells is loquacious; talks of his impoverished youth, his early ambitions, his ferociously self-imposed education, his gradual accretion of achievement and his ultimate great triumph as popular novelist and philosopher. He has a high opinion of his intellect, but there is nothing offensive in the way he voices it, for his self-appraisal is well earned. He is a remarkable man. I could have done worse for a companion in this apocalypse. Imagine being here with poor gloomy tormented Conrad, for example!

A terrifying moment toward nightfall. We have drifted down toward Covent Garden; I turn toward Wells, who has been walking a pace or two behind me peering into shop-windows, and suggest that we appropriate lodgings for ourselves at the Savoy or the Ritz. No Wells! He has vanished like his own Invisible Man!

"Wells?" I cry. "Wells, where are you?"

Silence. *Calma come la tomba*. Has he plunged unsuspecting into some unguarded abyss of the street? Or perhaps been snatched away by some silent machine of the Martians? How am I to survive without him in this dead city? It is Wells who has the knack of breaking into food shops and such, Wells who will meet all the practical challenges of our strange life here: not I.

"*Wells!*" I call again. There is panic in my voice, I fear.

But I am alone. He is utterly gone. What shall I do? Five minutes go by; ten, fifteen. Logic dictates that I remain right on this spot until he reappears, for how else shall we find each other in this huge city? But night is coming; I am suddenly afraid; I am weary and unutterably sad; I see my death looming before me now. I will go to the Savoy. Yes. Yes. I begin to walk, and then to run, as my terror mounts, along Southampton Street.

Then I am at the Strand, at last. There is the hotel; and there is Wells, arms folded, calmly waiting outside it for me.

"I thought you would come here," he says.

"Where have you been? Is this some prank, Wells?" I hotly demand.

"I called to you to follow me. You must not have heard me. Come: I must show you something, James."

"Now? For the love of God, Wells, I'm ready to drop!" But he will hear no protests, of course. He has me by the wrist; he drags me *away* from the hotel, back toward Covent Garden, over to little Henrietta Street. And there, pushed up against the facade of a shabby old building--Number 14, Henrietta Street--is the wreckage of some Martian machine, a kind of low motor-car with metallic tentacles, that has smashed itself in a wild career through the street. A dead Martian is visible through the shattered window of the passenger carriage. We stare a while in awe. "Do you see?" he asks, as though I could not. "They are not wholly invulnerable, it seems!" To which I agree, thinking only of finding a place where I can lie down; and then he allows us to withdraw, and we go to the hotel, which stands open to us, and esconce ourselves in the most lavish suites we can find. I sleep as though I have not slept in months.

*A day later yet.* It is beyond all belief, but the war is over, and we are, miraculously, free of the Martian terror!

Wells and I discovered, in the morning, a second motionless Martian machine standing like a sentinel at

the approach to the Waterloo Bridge. Creeping fearlessly up to it, we saw that its backmost leg was frozen in flexed position, so that the thing was balanced only on two; with one good shove we might have been able to push the whole unstable mechanism over. Of the Martian in its cabin we could see no sign.

All during the day we roamed London, searching out the Martians. I felt strangely tranquil. Perhaps it was only my extreme fatigue; but certainly we were accustomed now to the desolation, to the tangles of the red weed, the packs of newly wild dogs.

Between the Strand and Grosvenor Square we came upon three more Martian machines: dead, dead, all dead. Then we heard a strange sound, emanating from the vicinity of the Marble Arch: "Ulla, ulla, ulla," it was, a mysterious sobbing howl. In the general silence that sound had tremendous power. It drew us; instead of fleeing, as sane men should have done, we approached. "Ulla, ulla!" A short distance down the Bayswater Road we saw a towering Martian fighting-machine looming above Hyde Park: the sound was coming from it. A signal of distress? A call to its distant cohorts, if any yet lived? Hands clapped to our ears--for the cry was deafening--we drew nearer still; and, suddenly, it stopped. There seemed an emphatic permanence to that stoppage. We waited. The sound did not begin anew.

"Dead," Wells said. "The last of them, I suspect. Crying a requiem for its race."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"What our guns could not do, the lowly germs of Earth have achieved--I'll wager a year's earnings on that! Do you think, James, that the Martians had any way of defending themselves against our microbes? I have been waiting for this! I knew it would happen!"

Did he? He had never said a word.

*July 7, Lamb House.* How sweet to be home!

And so it has ended, the long nightmare of the interplanetary war. Wells and I found, all over London, the wrecked and useless vehicles of the Martians, with their dead occupants trapped within. Dead, all dead, every invader. And as we walked about, other human beings came forth from hiding places, and we embraced one another in wild congratulation.

Wells's hypothesis was correct, as we all have learned by now. The Martians have perished in mid-conquest, victims of our terrestrial bacteria. No one has seen a living one anywhere in the past two weeks, the red weed, too, has already begun to die. We fugitive humans have returned to our homes; the wheels of civilization have begun to turn once more.

We are safe, yes--and yet we are not. Whether the Martians will return, fortified now against our microorganisms and ready to bend us once more to their wishes, we cannot say. But it is clear now to me that the little sense of security that we of Earth feel, most especially we inhabitants of England in the sixty-third year of the reign of Her Majesty Queen Victoria, is a pathetic illusion. Our world is no impregnable fortress. We stand open to the unpredictable sky. If Martians can come one day, Venusians may come another, or Jovians, or warlike beings from some wholly unknown star. The events of these weeks have been marvelous and terrible, and without shame I admit having derived great rewards even from my fear and my exertions; but we must all be aware now that we are at great risk of a reprise of these dark happenings. We have learned, now, that we are far from being the masters of the cosmos, as

we like to suppose. It is a bitter lesson to be given at the outset of this glorious new century.

I discussed these points with Wells when he called here yesterday. He was in complete agreement.

And, as he was taking his leave, I went on, somewhat hesitantly, to express to him the other thought that had been forming in my mind all this past week. "You said once," I began, "that you had had some scheme in mind, even before the coming of the Martians, for writing a novel of interplanetary invasion. Is that still your intent now that fantasy has become fact, Wells?"

He allowed that it was.

"But it would not now be," I said, "your usual kind of fantastic fiction, would it? It would be more in the line of *reportage*, would you not say? An account of the responses of certain persons to the true and actual extreme event?"

"Of course it would, of necessity," he said. I smiled expressively and said nothing. And then, quickly divining my meaning, he added: "But of course I would yield, *cher maitre*, if it were *your* intention to--"

"It is," I said serenely.

He was quite graceful about it, all in all. And so I will set to work tomorrow. *The Ambassadors* may perhaps be the grandest and finest of my novels, but it will have to wait another year or two, I suppose, for there is something much more urgent that must be written first.

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James's notebooks indicate that he did not actually begin work on his classic novel of interplanetary conflict, *The War of the Worlds*, until the 28th of July, 1900. The book was finished by the 17th of November, unusually quickly for James, and after serialization in *The Atlantic Monthly* (August-December, 1901) was published in England by Macmillan and Company in March, 1902 and in the United States by Harper & Brothers one month later. It has remained his most popular book ever since and has on three occasions been adapted for motion pictures. Wells never did write an account of his experiences during the Martian invasion, though those experiences did, of course, have a profound influence on his life and work thereafter.

--The Editor.

END

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published in Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, September



1987 Fictionwise Contemporary Science

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IT WAS MY first time to heaven and I was no one at all, no one at all, and this was the voyage that was supposed to make me someone. But though I was no one at all I dared to look upon the million worlds and I felt a great sorrow for them. There they were all about me, humming along on their courses through the night, each of them believing it was actually going somewhere. And each one wrong, of course, for worlds go nowhere, except around and around and around, pathetic monkeys on a string, forever tethered in place. They seem to move, yes. But really they stand still. And I -- I who stared at the worlds of heaven and was swept with compassion for them -- I knew that though I seemed to be standing still, I was in fact moving. For I was aboard a ship of heaven, a ship of the Service, that was spanning the light-years at a speed so incomprehensibly great that it might as well have been no speed at all. I was very young. My ship, then as now, was the Sword of Orion, on a journey out of Kansas Four bound for Cul-de-Sac and Strappado and Mangan's Bitch and several other worlds, via the usual spinarounds. It was my first voyage and I was in command. I thought for a long time that I would lose my soul on that voyage; but now I know that what was happening aboard that ship was not the losing of a soul but the gaining of one. And perhaps of more than one.

2. Roacher thought I was sweet. I could have killed him for that; but of course he was dead already. You have to give up your life when you go to heaven. What you get in return is for me to know and you, if you care, to find out; but the inescapable thing is that you leave behind anything that ever linked you to life on shore, and you become something else. We say that you give up the body and you get your soul. Certainly you can keep your body too, if you want it. Most do. But it isn't any good to you any more, not in the ways that you think a body is good to you. I mean to tell you how it was for me on my first voyage aboard the Sword of Orion, so many years ago. I was the youngest officer on board, so naturally I was captain. They put you in command right at the start, before you're anyone. That's the only test that means a damn: they throw you in the sea and if you can swim you don't drown, and if you can't you do. The drowned ones go back in the tank and they serve their own useful purposes, as push-cells or downloaders or mind-wipers or Johnny-scrub-and-scour or whatever. The ones that don't drown go on to other commands. No one is wasted. The Age of Waste has been over a long time. On the third virtual day out from Kansas Four, Roacher told me that I was the sweetest captain he had ever served under. And he had served under plenty of them, for Roacher had gone up to heaven at least two hundred years before, maybe more.

"I can see it in your eyes, the sweetness. I can see it in the angle you hold your head." He didn't mean it as a compliment. "We can put you off ship at Ultima Thule," Roacher said. "Nobody will hold it against you. We'll put you in a bottle and send you down, and the Thuleys will catch you and decant you and you'll be able to find your way back to Kansas Four in twenty or fifty years. It might be the best thing." Roacher is small and parched, with brown skin and eyes that shine with the purple luminescence of space. Some of the worlds he has seen were forgotten a thousand years ago. "Go bottle yourself, Roacher," I told him. "Ah, captain, captain! Don't take it the wrong way. Here, captain, give us a touch of the sweetness." He reached out a claw, trying to stroke me along the side of my face. "Give us a touch, captain, give us just a little touch!" "I'll fry your soul and have it for breakfast, Roacher. There's sweetness for you. Go scuttle off, will you? Go jack yourself to the mast and drink hydrogen,

Roacher. Go. Go." "So sweet," he said. But he went. I had the power to hurt him. He knew I could do it, because I was captain. He also knew I wouldn't; but there was always the possibility he was wrong. The captain exists in that margin between certainty and possibility. A crewman tests the width of that margin at his own risk. Roacher knew that. He had been a captain once himself, after all. There were seventeen of us to heaven that voyage, staffing a ten-kilo Megaspore-class ship with full annexes and extensions and all virtualities. We carried a bulging cargo of the things regarded in those days as vital in the distant colonies: pre-read vapor chips, artificial intelligences, climate nodes, matrix jacks, mediq machines, bone banks, soil converters, transit spheres, communication bubbles, skin-and-organ synthesizers, wildlife domestication plaques, gene replacement kits, a sealed consignment of obliteration sand and other proscribed weapons, and so on. We also had fifty billion dollars in the form of liquid currency pods, central-bank-to-central-bank transmission. In addition there was a passenger load of seven thousand colonists. Eight hundred of these were on the hoof and the others were stored in matrix form for body transplant on the worlds of destination. A standard load, in other words. The crew worked on commission, also as per standard, one percent of bill-of-lading value divided in customary lays. Mine was the 50th lay -- that is, two percent of the net profits of the voyage -- and that included a bonus for serving as captain; otherwise I would have had the 100th lay or something even longer. Roacher had the 10th lay and his jackmate Bulgar the 14th, although they weren't even officers. Which demonstrates the value of seniority in the Service. But seniority is the same thing as survival, after all, and why should survival not be rewarded? On my most recent voyage I drew the 19th lay. I will have better than that on my next.

3. You have never seen a starship. We keep only to heaven; when we are to worldward, shoreships come out to us for the downloading. The closest we ever go to planetskin is a million shiplengths. Any closer and we'd be shaken apart by that terrible strength which emanates from worlds. We don't miss landcrawling, though. It's a plague to us. If I had to step to shore now, after having spent most of my lifetime in heaven, I would die of the drop-death within an hour. That is a monstrous way to die; but why would I ever go ashore? The likelihood of that still existed for me at the time I first sailed the Sword of Orion, you understand, but I have long since given it up. That is what I mean when I say that you give up your life when you go to heaven. But of course what also goes from you is any feeling that to be ashore has anything to do with being alive. If you could ride a starship, or even see one as we see them, you would understand. I don't blame you for being what you are.

Let me show you the Sword of Orion. Though you will never see it as we see it. What would you see, if you left the ship as we sometimes do to do the starwalk in the Great Open?

The first thing you would see was the light of the ship. A starship gives off a tremendous insistent glow of light that splits heaven like the blast of a trumpet. That great light both precedes and follows. Ahead of the ship rides a luminescent cone of brightness bellowing in the void. In its wake the ship leaves a photonic track so intense that it could be gathered up and weighed. It is the stardrive that issues this light: a ship eats space, and light is its offthrow.

Within the light you would see a needle ten kilometers long. That is the ship. One end tapers to a sharp point and the other has the Eye, and it is several days' journey by foot from end to end through all the compartments that lie between. It is a world self-contained. The needle is a flattened one. You could walk about easily on the outer surface of the ship, the skin of the top deck, what we call Skin Deck. Or just as easily on Belly Deck, the one on the bottom side. We call one the top deck and the other the bottom, but when you are outside the ship these distinctions have no meaning. Between Skin and Belly lie Crew Deck, Passenger Deck, Cargo Deck, Drive Deck. Ordinarily no one goes from one deck to another. We stay where we belong. The engines are in the Eye. So are the captain's quarters. That needle

is the ship, but it is not the whole ship. What you will not be able to see are the annexes and extensions and virtualities. These accompany the ship, enfolding it in a webwork of intricate outstructures. But they are of a subordinate level of reality and therefore they defy vision. A ship tunnels into the void, spreading far and wide to find room for all that it must carry. In these outlying zones are kept our supplies and provisions, our stores of fuel, and all cargo traveling at second-class rates. If the ship transports prisoners, they will ride in an annex. If the ship expects to encounter severe probability turbulence during the course of the voyage, it will arm itself with stabilizers, and those will be carried in the virtualities, ready to be brought into being if needed. These are the mysteries of our profession. Take them on faith, or ignore them, as you will: they are not meant for you to know.

A ship takes forty years to build. There are two hundred seventy-one of them in service now. New ones are constantly under construction. They are the only link binding the Mother Worlds and the eight hundred ninety-eight Colonies and the colonies of the Colonies. Four ships have been lost since the beginning of the Service. No one knows why. The loss of a starship is the worst disaster I can imagine. The last such event occurred sixty virtual years ago.

A starship never returns to the world from which it was launched. The galaxy is too large for that. It makes its voyage and it continues onward through heaven in an endless open circuit. That is the service of the Service. There would be no point in returning, since thousands of worldward years sweep by behind us as we make our voyages. We live outside of time. We must, for there is no other way. That is our burden and our privilege. That is the service of the Service.

4. On the fifth virtual day of the voyage I suddenly felt a tic, a nibble, a subtle indication that something had gone wrong. It was a very trifling thing, barely perceptible, like the scatter of eroded pebbles that tells you that the palaces and towers of a great ruined city lie buried beneath the mound on which you climb. Unless you are looking for such signals you will not see them. But I was primed for discovery that day. I was eager for it. A strange kind of joy came over me when I picked up that fleeting signal of wrongness.

I keyed the intelligence on duty and said, "What was that tremor on Passenger Deck?"

The intelligence arrived instantly in my mind, a sharp gray-green presence with a halo of tingling music.

"I am aware of no tremor, sir."

"There was a distinct tremor. There was a data-spurt just now."

"Indeed, sir? A data-spurt, sir?"

The intelligence sounded aghast, but in a condescending way. It was humoring me.

"What action shall I take, sir?"

I was being invited to retreat.

The intelligence on duty was a 49 Henry Henry. The Henry series affects a sort of slippery innocence that I find disingenuous. Still, they are very capable intelligences. I wondered if I had misread the signal. Perhaps I was too eager for an event, any event, that would confirm my relationship with the ship.

There is never a sense of motion or activity aboard a starship: we float in silence on a tide of darkness, cloaked in our own dazzling light. Nothing moves, nothing seems to live in all the universe. Since we had left Kansas Four I had felt that great silence judging me. Was I really captain of this vessel? Good: then let me feel the weight of duty upon my shoulders.

We were past Ultima Thule by this time, and there could be no turning back. Borne on our cloak of light, we would roar through heaven for week after virtual week until we came to worldward at the first of our destinations, which was Cul-de-Sac in the Vainglory Archipelago, out by the Spook Clusters. Here in free space I must begin to master the ship, or it would master me.

"Sir?" the intelligence said.

"Run a data uptake," I ordered. "All Passenger Deck input for the past half hour. There was movement. There was a spurt."

I knew I might be wrong.

Still, to err on the side of caution may be naive, but it isn't a sin. And I knew that at this stage in the voyage nothing I could say or do would make me seem other than naive to the crew of the Sword of Orion. What did I have to lose by ordering a recheck, then? I was hungry for surprises. Any

irregularity that 49 Henry Henry turned up would be to my advantage; the absence of one would make nothing worse for me. "Begging your pardon, sir," 49 Henry Henry reported after a moment, "but there was no tremor, sir."

"Maybe I overstated it, then. Calling it a tremor. Maybe it was just an anomaly. What do you say, 49 Henry Henry?" I wondered if I was humiliating myself, negotiating like this with an intelligence. "There was something. I'm sure of that. An unmistakable irregular burst in the data-flow. An anomaly, yes. What do you say, 49 Henry Henry?" "Yes, sir."

"Yes what?" "The record does show an irregularity, sir. Your observation was quite acute, sir." "Go on." "No cause for alarm, sir. A minor metabolic movement, nothing more. Like turning over in your sleep." You bastard, what do you know about sleep? "Extremely unusual, sir, that you should be able to observe anything so small. I commend you, sir. The passengers are all well, sir." "Very good," I said. "Enter this exchange in the log, 49 Henry Henry." "Already entered, sir," the intelligence said. "Permission to decouple, sir?" "Yes, you can decouple," I told it.

The shimmer of music that signalled its presence grew tinny and was gone. I could imagine it smirking as it went about its ghostly flitting rounds deep in the neural conduits of the ship. Scornful software, glowing with contempt for its putative master. The poor captain, it was thinking. The poor hopeless silly boy of a captain. A passenger sneezes and he's ready to seal all bulkheads. Well, let it smirk, I thought. I have acted appropriately and the record will show it. I knew that all this was part of my testing. You may think that to be captain of such a ship as the Sword of Orion in your first voyage to heaven is an awesome responsibility and an inconceivable burden. So it is, but not for the reason you think. In truth the captain's duties are the least significant of anyone's aboard the ship. The others have well-defined tasks that are essential to the smooth running of the voyage, although the ship could, if the need arose, generate virtual replacements for any and every crew member and function adequately on its own. The captain's task, though, is fundamentally abstract. His role is to witness the voyage, to embody it in his own consciousness, to give it coherence, continuity, by reducing it to a pattern of decisions and responses. In that sense the captain is simply so much software: he is the coding through which the voyage is expressed as a series of linear functions. If he fails to perform that duty adequately, others will quietly see to it that the voyage proceeds as it should. What is destroyed, in the course of a voyage that is inadequately captained, is the captain himself, not the voyage. My pre-flight training made that absolutely clear. The voyage can survive the most feeble of captains. As I have said, four starships have been lost since the Service began, and no one knows why. But there is no reason to think that any of those catastrophes were caused by failings of the captain. How could they have been? The captain is only the vehicle through which others act. It is not the captain who makes the voyage, but the voyage which makes the captain.

5.

Restless, troubled, I wandered the eye of the ship. Despite 49 Henry Henry's suave mockery I was still convinced there was trouble on board, or about to be. Just as I reached Outerscreen Level I felt something strange touch me a second time. It was different this time, and deeply disturbing. The Eye, as it makes the complete descent from Skin Deck to Belly Deck, is lined with screens that provide displays, actual or virtual, of all aspects of the ship both internal and external. I came up to the great black bevel-edged screen that provided our simulated view of the external realspace environment and was staring at the dwindling wheel of the Ultima Thule relay point when the new anomaly occurred. The other had been the merest of subliminal signals, a nip, a tickle. This was more like an attempted intrusion. Invisible fingers seemed to brush lightly over my brain, probing, seeking entrance. The fingers withdrew; a moment later there was a sudden stabbing pain in my left temple. I stiffened. "Who's there?"

"Help me," a silent voice said. I had heard wild tales of passenger

matrixes breaking free of their storage circuits and drifting through the ship like ghosts, looking for an unguarded body that they might infiltrate. The sources were unreliable, old scoundrels like Roacher or Bulgar. I dismissed such stories as fables, the way I dismissed what I had heard of the vast tentacular krakens that were said to swim the seas of space, or the beckoning mermaids with shining breasts who danced along the force-lines at spinaround points. But I had felt this. The probing fingers, the sudden sharp pain. And the sense of someone frightened, frightened but strong, stronger than I, hovering close at hand.

"Where are you?" There was no reply. Whatever it was, if it had been anything at all, had slipped back into hiding after that one furtive thrust. But was it really gone? "You're still here somewhere," I said. "I know that you are." Silence. Stillness. "You asked for help. Why did you disappear so fast?" No response. I felt anger rising. "Whoever you are. Whatever. Speak up." Nothing. Silence. Had I imagined it? The probing, the voiceless voice? No. No. I was certain that there was something invisible and unreal hovering about me. And I found it infuriating, not to be able to regain contact with it. To be toyed with this way, to be mocked like this.

This is my ship, I thought. I want no ghosts aboard my ship. "You can be detected," I said. "You can be contained. You can be eradicated."

As I stood there blustering in my frustration, it seemed to me that I felt that touch against my mind again, a lighter one this time, wistful, regretful. Perhaps I invented it. Perhaps I have supplied it retroactively. But it lasted only a part of an instant, if it happened at all, and then I was unquestionably alone again. The solitude was real and total and unmistakable. I stood gripping the rail of the screen, leaning forward into the brilliant blackness and swaying dizzily as if I were being pulled forward through the wall of the ship into space.

"Captain?" The voice of 49 Henry Henry, tumbling out of the air behind me. "Did you feel something that time?" I asked. The intelligence ignored my question. "Captain, there's trouble on Passenger Deck. Hands-on alarm: will you come?" "Set up a transit track for me," I said. "I'm on my way." Lights began to glow in mid-air, yellow, blue, green. The interior of the ship is a vast opaque maze and moving about within it is difficult without an intelligence to guide you. 49 Henry Henry constructed an efficient route for me down the curve of the Eye and into the main body of the ship, and thence around the rim of the leeward wall to the elevator down to Passenger Deck. I rode an air-cushion tracker keyed to the lights. The journey took no more than fifteen minutes. Unaided I might have needed a week. Passenger Deck is an echoing nest of coffins, hundreds of them, sometimes even thousands, arranged in rows three abreast. Here our live cargo sleeps until we arrive and decant the stored sleepers into wakefulness. Machinery sighs and murmurs all around them, coddling them in their suspension. Beyond, far off in the dim distance, is the place for passengers of a different sort -- a spiderwebbing of sensory cables that holds our thousands of disembodied matrixes. Those are the colonists who have left their bodies behind when going into space. It is a dark and forbidding place, dimly lit by swirling velvet comets that circle overhead emitting sparks of red and green.

The trouble was in the suspension area. Five crewmen were there already, the oldest hands on board: Katkat, Dismas, Rio de Rio, Gavotte, Roacher. Seeing them all together, I knew this must be some major event. We move on distant orbits within the immensity of the ship: to see as many as three members of the crew in the same virtual month is extraordinary. Now here were five. I felt an oppressive sense of community among them. Each of these five had sailed the seas of heaven more years than I had been alive. For at least a dozen voyages now they had been together as a team. I was the stranger in their midst, unknown, untried, lightly regarded, insignificant. Already Roacher had indicted me for my sweetness, by which he meant, I knew, a basic incapacity to act decisively. I thought he was wrong. But perhaps he knew me better than I knew myself. They stepped back, opening a path between

them. Gavotte, a great hulking thick-shouldered man with a surprisingly delicate and precise way of conducting himself, gestured with open hands: Here, captain, see? See? What I saw were coils of greenish smoke coming up from a passenger housing, and the glass door of the housing half open, cracked from top to bottom, frosted by temperature differentials. I could hear a sullen dripping sound. Blue fluid fell in thick steady goutts from a shattered support line. Within the housing itself was the pale naked figure of a man, eyes wide open, mouth agape as if in a silent scream. His left arm was raised, his fist was clenched. He looked like an anguished statue. They had body-salvage equipment standing by. The hapless passenger would be disassembled and all usable parts stored as soon as I gave the word. "Is he irretrievable?" I asked. "Take a look," Katkat said, pointing to the housing readout. All the curves pointed down. "We have nineteen percent degradation already, and rising. Do we disassemble?" "Go ahead," I said. "Approved." The lasers glinted and flailed. Body parts came into view, shining, moist. The coiling metallic arms of the body-salvage equipment rose and fell, lifting organs that were not yet beyond repair and putting them into storage. As the machine labored the men worked around it, shutting down the broken housing, tying off the disrupted feeders and refrigerator cables. I asked Dismas what had happened. He was the mind-wiper for this sector, responsible for maintenance on the suspended passengers. His face was open and easy, but the deceptive cheeriness about his mouth and cheeks was mysteriously negated by his bleak, shadowy eyes. He told me that he had been working much farther down the deck, performing routine service on the Strappado-bound people, when he felt a sudden small disturbance, a quick tickle of wrongness. "So did I," I said. "How long ago was that?" "Half an hour, maybe. I didn't make a special note of it. I thought it was something in my gut, captain. You felt it too, you say?" I nodded. "Just a tickle. It's in the record." I heard the distant music of 49 Henry Henry. Perhaps the intelligence was trying to apologize for doubting me. "What happened next?" I asked. "Went back to work. Five, ten minutes, maybe. Felt another jolt, a stronger one." He touched his forehead, right at the temple, showing me where. "Detectors went off, broken glass. Came running, found this Cul-de-Sac passenger here undergoing convulsions. Rising from his bindings, thrashing around. Pulled himself loose from everything, went smack against the housing window. Broke it. It's a very fast death." "Matrix intrusion," Roacher said. The skin of my scalp tightened. I turned to him. "Tell me about that." He shrugged. "Once in a long while someone in the storage circuits gets to feeling footloose, and finds a way out and goes roaming the ship. Looking for a body to jack into, that's what they're doing. Jack into me, jack into Katkat, even jack into you, captain. Anybody handy, just so they can feel flesh around them again. Jacked into this one here and something went wrong." The probing fingers, yes. The silent voice. Help me. "I never heard of anyone jacking into a passenger in suspension," Dismas said. "No reason why not," said Roacher. "What's the good? Still stuck in a housing, you are. Frozen down, that's no better than staying matrix." "Five to two it was matrix intrusion," Roacher said, glaring. "Done," Dismas said. Gavotte laughed and came in on the bet. So too did sinuous little Katkat, taking the other side. Rio de Rio, who had not spoken a word to anyone in his last six voyages, snorted and gestured obscenely at both factions. I felt like an idle spectator. To regain some illusion of command I said, "If there's a matrix loose, it'll show up on ship inventory. Dismas, check with the intelligence on duty and report to me. Katkat, Gavotte, finish cleaning up this mess and seal everything off. Then I want your reports in the log and a copy to me. I'll be in my quarters. There'll be further instructions later. The missing matrix, if that's what we have on our hands, will be identified, located, and recaptured." Roacher grinned at me. I thought he was going to lead a round of cheers. I turned and mounted my tracker, and rode it following

the lights, yellow, blue, green, back up through the maze of decks and out to the Eye. As I entered my cabin something touched my mind and a silent voice said, "Please help me." 6.

Carefully I shut the door behind me, locked it, loaded the privacy screens. The captain's cabin aboard a Megaspore starship of the Service is a world in itself, serene, private, immense. In mine, spiral galaxies whirled and sparkled on the walls. I had a stream, a lake, a silver waterfall beyond it. The air was soft and glistening. At a touch of my hand I could have light, music, scent, color, from any one of a thousand hidden orifices. Or I could turn the walls translucent and let the luminous splendor of starspace come flooding through. Only when I was fully settled in, protected and insulated and comfortable, did I say, "All right. What are you?" "You

promise you won't report me to the captain?" "I don't promise anything." "You will help me, though?" The voice seemed at once

frightened and insistent, urgent and vulnerable. "How can I say? You give me nothing to work with." "I'll tell you everything. But first

you have to promise not to call the captain." I debated with myself for a moment and opted for directness. "I am the captain," I said.

"No!" "Can you see this room? What do you think it is? Crew quarters? The scullery?" I felt turbulent waves of fear coming from my invisible

companion. And then nothing. Was it gone? Then I had made a mistake in being so forthright. This phantom had to be confined, sealed away, perhaps destroyed, before it could do more damage. I should have been more devious. And also I knew that I would regret it in another way if it had slipped away: I was taking a certain pleasure in being able to speak with someone -- something -- that was neither a member of my crew nor an omnipotent, contemptuous artificial intelligence. "Are you still here?" I asked

after a while. Silence. Gone, I thought. Sweeping through the Sword of Orion like a gale of wind. Probably down at the far end of the ship by this time. Then, as if there had been no break in the conversation:

"I just can't believe it. Of all the places I could have gone, I had to walk right into the captain's cabin." "So it seems." "And you're

actually the captain?" "Yes. Actually." Another pause. "You seem so young," it said. "For a captain." "Be careful," I told

it. "I didn't mean anything by that, captain." With a touch of bravado, even defiance, mingling with uncertainty and anxiety. "Captain sir."

Looking toward the ceiling, where shining resonator nodes shimmered all up and down the spectrum as slave-light leaped from junction to junction along the illuminator strands, I searched for a glimpse of it, some minute electromagnetic clue. But there was nothing. I imagined a web

of impalpable force, a dancing will-o'-the-wisp, flitting erratically about the room, now perching on my shoulder, now clinging to some fixture, now extending itself to fill every open space: an airy thing, a sprite, playful and capricious. Curiously, not only was I unafraid but I found myself strongly drawn to it. There was something strangely appealing about this quick vibrating spirit, so bright with contradictions. And yet it had caused the death of one of my passengers. "Well?" I said. "You're safe here. But when are you going to tell me what you are?" "Isn't that obvious? I'm a matrix." "Go on." "A free matrix, a matrix on the loose. A matrix who's in big trouble. I think I've hurt someone. Maybe killed

him." "One of the passengers?" I said. "So you know?" "There's a dead passenger, yes. We're not sure what happened." "It

wasn't my fault. It was an accident." "That may be," I said. "Tell me about it. Tell me everything." "Can I trust you?" "More than

anyone else on this ship." "But you're the captain." "That's why," I said.

7. Her name was Leeleaine, but she wanted me to call her Vox. That means "voice," she said, in one of the ancient languages of Earth. She was seventeen years old, from Jaana Head, which is an island off the coast of West Palabar on Kansas Four. Her father was a glass-farmer, her mother operated a gravity hole, and she had

five brothers and three sisters, all of them much older than she was.

"Do you know what that's like, captain? Being the youngest of nine? And both your parents working all the time, and your cross-parents just as busy? Can you imagine? And growing up on Kansas Four, where it's a thousand kilometers between cities, and you aren't even in a city, you're on an island?" "I know something of what that's like," I said. "Are you from Kansas Four too?"

"No," I said. "Not from Kansas Four. But a place much like it, I think." She spoke of a troubled, unruly childhood, full of loneliness and anger. Kansas Four, I have heard, is a beautiful world, if you are inclined to find beauty in worlds: a wild and splendid place, where the sky is scarlet and the bare basalt mountains rise in the east like a magnificent black wall. But to hear Vox speak of it, it was squalid, grim, bleak. For her it was a loveless place where she led a loveless life. And yet she told me of pale violet seas aglow with brilliant yellow fish, and trees that erupted with a shower of dazzling crimson fronds when they were in bloom, and warm rains that sang in the air like harps. I was not then so long in heaven that I had forgotten the beauty of seas or trees or rains, which by now are nothing but hollow words to me. Yet Vox had found her life on Kansas Four so hateful that she had been willing to abandon not only her native world but her body itself. That was a point of kinship between us: I too had given up my world and my former life, if not my actual flesh. But I had chosen heaven, and the Service. Vox had volunteered to exchange one landcrawling servitude for another.

"The day came," she said, "when I knew I couldn't stand it any more. I was so miserable, so empty: I thought about having to live this way for another two hundred years or even more, and I wanted to pick up the hills and throw them at each other. Or get into my mother's plummet and take it straight to the bottom of the sea. I made a list of ways I could kill myself. But I knew I couldn't do it, not this way or that way or any way. I wanted to live. But I didn't want to live like that." On that same day, she said, the soul-call from Cul-de-Sac reached Kansas Four. A thousand vacant bodies were available there and they wanted soul-matrixes to fill them. Without a moment's hesitation Vox put her name on the list. There is a constant migration of souls between the worlds. On each of my voyages I have carried thousands of them, setting forth hopefully toward new bodies on strange planets.

Every world has a stock of bodies awaiting replacement souls. Most were the victims of sudden violence. Life is risky on shore, and death lurks everywhere. Salvaging and repairing a body is no troublesome matter, but once a soul has fled it can never be recovered. So the empty bodies of those who drown and those who are stung by lethal insects and those who are thrown from vehicles and those who are struck by falling branches as they work are collected and examined. If they are beyond repair they are disassembled and their usable parts set aside to be installed in others. But if their bodies can be made whole again, they are, and they are placed in holding chambers until new souls become available for them. And then there are those who vacate their bodies voluntarily, perhaps because they are weary of them, or weary of their worlds, and wish to move along. They are the ones who sign up to fill the waiting bodies on far worlds, while others come behind them to fill the bodies they have abandoned. The least costly way to travel between the worlds is to surrender your body and go in matrix form, thus exchanging a discouraging life for an unfamiliar one. That was what Vox had done. In pain and despair she had agreed to allow the essence of herself, everything she had ever seen or felt or thought or dreamed, to be converted into a lattice of electrical impulses that the Sword of Orion would carry on its voyage from Kansas Four to Cul-de-Sac. A new body lay reserved for her there. Her own discarded body would remain in suspension on Kansas Four. Some day it might become the home of some wandering soul from another world; or, if there were no bids for it, it might eventually be disassembled by the body-salvagers, and its parts put to some worthy use. Vox would never know; Vox would never care.

"I can understand trading an unhappy life for a chance at a happy one," I said. "But why break loose on ship? What purpose



could that serve? Why not wait until you got to Cul-de-Sac?" "Because it was torture," she said. "Torture? What was?" "Living as a matrix." She laughed bitterly. "Living? It's worse than death could ever be!" "Tell me." "You've never done matrix, have you?" "No," I said. "I chose another way to escape." "Then you don't know. You can't know. You've got a ship full of maxtrixes in storage circuits but you don't understand a thing about them. Imagine that the back of your neck itches, captain. But you have no arms to scratch with. Your thigh starts to itch. Your chest. You lie there itching everywhere. And you can't scratch. Do you understand me?" "How can a matrix feel an itch? A matrix is simply a pattern of electrical --" "Oh, you're impossible! You're stupid! I'm not talking about actual literal itching. I'm giving you a suppose, a for-instance. Because you'd never be able to understand the real situation. Look: you're in the storage circuit. All you are is electricity. That's all a mind really is, anyway: electricity. But you used to have a body. The body had sensation. The body had feelings. You remember them. You're a prisoner. A prisoner remembers all sorts of things that used to be taken for granted. You'd give anything to feel the wind in your hair again, or the taste of cool milk, or the scent of flowers. Or even the pain of a cut finger. The saltiness of your blood when you lick the cut. Anything. I hated my body, don't you see? I couldn't wait to be rid of it. But once it was gone I missed the feelings it had. I missed the sense of flesh pulling at me, holding me to the ground, flesh full of nerves, flesh that could feel pleasure. Or pain." "I understand," I said, and I think that I truly did. "But the voyage to Cul-de-Sac is short. A few virtual weeks and you'd be there, and out of storage and into your new body, and --" "Weeks? Think of that itch on the back of your neck, Captain. The itch that you can't scratch. How long do you think you could stand it, lying there feeling that itch? Five minutes? An hour? Weeks?" It seemed to me that an itch left unscratched would die of its own, perhaps in minutes. But that was only how it seemed to me. I was not Vox; I had not been a matrix in a storage circuit. I said, "So you let yourself out? How?" "It wasn't that hard to figure. I had nothing else to do but think about it. You align yourself with the polarity of the circuit. That's a matrix too, an electrical pattern holding you in crosswise bands. You change the alignment. It's like being tied up, and slipping the ropes around until you can slide free. And then you can go anywhere you like. You key into any bioprocessor aboard the ship and you draw your energy from that instead of from the storage circuit, and it sustains you. I can move anywhere around this ship at the speed of light. Anywhere. In just the time you blinked your eye, I've been everywhere. I've been to the far tip and out on the mast, and I've been down through the lower decks, and I've been in the crew quarters and the cargo places and I've even been a little way off into something that's right outside the ship but isn't quite real, if you know what I mean. Something that just seems to be a cradle of probability waves surrounding us. It's like being a ghost. But it doesn't solve anything. Do you see? The torture still goes on. You want to feel, but you can't. You want to be connected again, your senses, your inputs. That's why I tried to get into the passenger, do you see? But he wouldn't let me." I began to understand at last. Not everyone who goes to the worlds of heaven as a colonist travels in matrix form. Ordinarily anyone who can afford to take his body with him will do so; but relatively few can afford it. Those who do travel in suspension, the deepest of sleeps. We carry no waking passengers in the Service, not at any price. They would be trouble for us, poking here, poking there, asking questions, demanding to be served and pampered. They would shatter the peace of the voyage. And so they go down into their coffins, their housings, and there they sleep the voyage away, all life-processes halted, a death-in-life that will not be reversed until we bring them to their destinations. And poor Vox, freed of her prisoning circuit and hungry for sensory data, had tried to slip herself into a passenger's body. I listened, appalled and

somber, as she told of her terrible odyssey through the ship. Breaking free of the circuit: that had been the first strangeness I felt, that tic, that nibble at the threshold of my consciousness. Her first wild moment of freedom had been exhilarating and joyous. But then had come the realization that nothing really had changed. She was at large, but still she was incorporeal, caught in that monstrous frustration of bodilessness, yearning for a touch. Perhaps such torment was common among matrixes; perhaps that was why, now and then, they broke free as Vox had done, to roam ships like sad troubled spirits. So Roacher had said. Once in a long while someone in the storage circuits gets to feeling footloose, and finds a way out and goes roaming the ship. Looking for a body to jack into, that's what they're doing. Jack into me, jack into Katkat, even jack into you, captain. Anybody handy, just so they can feel flesh around them again. Yes. That was the second jolt, the stronger one, that Dismas and I had felt, when Vox, selecting a passenger at random, suddenly, impulsively, had slipped herself inside his brain. She had realized her mistake at once. The passenger, lost in whatever dreams may come to the suspended, reacted to her intrusion with wild terror. Convulsions swept him; he rose, clawing at the equipment that sustained his life, trying desperately to evict the succubus that had penetrated him. In this frantic struggle he smashed the case of his housing and died. Vox, fleeing, frightened, careened about the ship in search of refuge, encountered me standing by the screen in the Eye, and made an abortive attempt to enter my mind. But just then the death of the passenger registered on 49 Henry Henry's sensors and when the intelligence made contact with me to tell me of the emergency Vox fled again, and hovered dolefully until I returned to my cabin. She had not meant to kill the passenger, she said. She was sorry that he had died. She felt some embarrassment, now, and fear. But no guilt. She rejected guilt for it almost defiantly. He had died? Well, so he had died. That was too bad. But how could she have known any such thing was going to happen? She was only looking for a body to take refuge in. Hearing that from her, I had a sense of her as someone utterly unlike me, someone volatile, unstable, perhaps violent. And yet I felt a strange kinship with her, even an identity. As though we were two parts of the same spirit; as though she and I were one and the same. I barely understood why. "And what now?" I asked. "You say you want help. How?" "Take me in." "What?" "Hide me. In you. If they find me, they'll eradicate me. You said so yourself, that it could be done, that I could be detected, contained, eradicated. But it won't happen if you protect me." "I'm the captain," I said, astounded. "Yes." "How can I --" "They'll all be looking for me. The intelligences, the crewmen. It scares them, knowing there's a matrix loose. They'll want to destroy me. But if they can't find me, they'll start to forget about me after a while. They'll think I've escaped into space, or something. And if I'm jacked into you, nobody's going to be able to find me." "I have a responsibility to --" "Please," she said. "I could go to one of the others, maybe. But I feel closest to you. Please. Please." "Closest to me?" "You aren't happy. You don't belong. Not here, not anywhere. You don't fit in, any more than I did on Kansas Four. I could feel it the moment I first touched your mind. You're a new captain, right? And the others on board are making it hard for you. Why should you care about them? Save me. We have more in common than you do with them. Please? You can't just let them eradicate me. I'm young. I didn't mean to hurt anyone. All I want is to get to Cul-de-Sac and be put in the body that's waiting for me there. A new start, my first start, really. Will you?" "Why do you bother asking permission? You can simply enter me through my jack whenever you want, can't you?" "The last one died," she said. "He was in suspension. You didn't kill him by entering him. It was the surprise, the fright. He killed himself by thrashing around and wrecking his housing." "Even so," said Vox. "I wouldn't try that again, an unwilling host. You have to say you'll let me, or I won't come in." I was silent. "Help me?" she said.

"Come," I told her. 8. It was just like any other jacking: an electrochemical mind-to-mind bond, a linkage by way of the implant socket at the base of my spine. The sort of thing that any two people who wanted to make communion might do. There was just one difference, which was that we didn't use a jack. We skipped the whole intricate business of checking bandwidths and voltages and selecting the right transformer-adaptor. She could do it all, simply by matching evoked potentials. I felt a momentary sharp sensation and then she was with me.

"Breathe," she said. "Breathe real deep. Fill your lungs. Rub your hands together. Touch your cheeks. Scratch behind your left ear. Please. Please. It's been so long for me since I've felt anything." Her voice sounded the same as before, both real and unreal. There was no substance to it, no density of timbre, no sense that it was produced by the vibrations of vocal cords atop a column of air. Yet it was clear, firm, substantial in some essential way, a true voice in all respects except that there was no speaker to utter it. I suppose that while she was outside me she had needed to extend some strand of herself into my neural system in order to generate it. Now that was unnecessary. But I still perceived the voice as originating outside me, even though she had taken up residence within. She overflowed with needs.

"Take a drink of water," she urged. "Eat something. Can you make your knuckles crack? Do it, oh, do it! Put your hand between your legs and squeeze. There's so much I want to feel. Do you have music here? Give me some music, will you? Something loud, something really hard." I did the things she wanted. Gradually she grew more calm. I was strangely calm myself. I had no special awareness then of her presence within me, no unfamiliar pressure in my skull, no slitherings along my spine. There was no mingling of her thought-stream and mine. She seemed not to have any way of controlling the movements or responses of my body. In these respects our contact was less intimate than any ordinary human jacking communion would have been. But that, I would soon discover, was by her choice. We would not remain so carefully compartmentalized for long.

"Is it better for you now?" I asked. "I thought I was going to go crazy. If I didn't start feeling something again soon." "You can feel things now?" "Through you, yes. Whatever you touch, I touch." "You know I can't hide you for long. They'll take my command away if I'm caught harboring a fugitive. Or worse." "You don't have to speak out loud to me any more," she said. "I don't understand." "Just send it. We have the same nervous system now." "You can read my thoughts?" I said, still aloud.

"Not really. I'm not hooked into the higher cerebral centers. But I pick up motor, sensory stuff. And I get subvocalizations. You know what those are? I can hear your thoughts if you want me to. It's like being in communion. You've been in communion, haven't you?" "Once in a while." "Then you know. Just open the channel to me. You can't go around the ship talking out loud to somebody invisible, you know. Send me something. It isn't hard." "Like this?" I said, visualizing a packet of verbal information sliding through the channels of my mind. "You see? You can do it!" "Even so," I told her. "You still can't stay like this with me for long. You have to realize that." She laughed.

It was unmistakable, a silent but definite laugh. "You sound so serious. I bet you're still surprised you took me in in the first place." "I certainly am. Did you think I would?" "Sure I did. From the first moment. You're basically a very kind person." "Am I, Vox?" "Of course. You just have to let yourself do it." Again the silent laughter. "I don't even know your name. Here I am right inside your head and I don't know your name." "Adam." "That's a nice name. Is that an Earth name?" "An old Earth name, yes. Very old." "And are you from Earth?" she asked. "No. Except in the sense that we're all from Earth."

"Where, then?" "I'd just as soon not talk about it," I said. She thought about that. "You hated the place where you grew up that much?" "Please, Vox -- " "Of course you hated it. Just

like I hated Kansas Four. We're two of a kind, you and me. We're one and the same. You got all the caution and I got all the impulsiveness. But otherwise we're the same person. That's why we share so well. I'm glad I'm sharing with you, Adam. You won't make me leave, will you? We belong with each other. You'll let me stay until we reach Culde-Sac. I know you will." "Maybe. Maybe not." I wasn't at all sure, either way. "Oh, you will. You will, Adam. I know you better than you know yourself."

9. So it began. I was in some new realm outside my established sense of myself, so far beyond my notions of appropriate behavior that I could not even feel astonishment at what I had done. I had taken her in, that was all. A stranger in my skull. She had turned to me in appeal and I had taken her in. It was as if her recklessness was contagious. And though I didn't mean to shelter her any longer than was absolutely necessary, I could already see that I wasn't going to make any move to eject her until her safety was assured. But how was I going to hide her? Invisible she might be, but not undetectable. And everyone on the ship would be searching for her. There were sixteen crewmen on board who dreaded a loose matrix as they would a vampire. They would seek her as long as she remained at large. And not only the crew. The intelligences would be monitoring for her too, not out of any kind of fear but simply out of efficiency: they had nothing to fear from Vox but they would want the cargo manifests to come out in balance when we reached our destination. The crew didn't trust me in the first place. I was too young, too new, too green, too sweet. I was just the sort who might be guilty of giving shelter to a secret fugitive. And it was altogether likely that her presence within me would be obvious to others in some way not apparent to me. As for the intelligences, they had access to all sorts of data as part of their routine maintenance operations. Perhaps they could measure tiny physiological changes, differences in my reaction times or circulatory efficiency or whatever, that would be a tipoff to the truth. How would I know? I would have to be on constant guard against discovery of the secret sharer of my consciousness. The first test came less than an hour after Vox had entered me. The communicator light went on and I heard the far-off music of the intelligence on duty. This one was 612 Jason, working the late shift. Its aura was golden, its music deep and throbbing. Jasons tend to be more brusque and less condescending than the Henry series, and in general I prefer them. But it was terrifying now to see that light, to hear that music, to know that the ship's intelligence wanted to speak with me. I shrank back at a tense awkward angle, the way one does when trying to avoid a face-to-face confrontation with someone. But of course the intelligence had no face to confront. The intelligence was only a voice speaking to me out of a speaker grid, and a stew of magnetic impulses somewhere on the control levels of the ship. All the same, I perceived 612 Jason now as a great glowing eye, staring through me to the hidden Vox. "What is it?" I asked. "Report summary, captain. The dead passenger and the missing matrix." Deep within me I felt a quick plunging sensation, and then the skin of my arms and shoulders began to glow as the chemicals of fear went coursing through my veins in a fierce tide. It was Vox, I knew, reacting in sudden alarm, opening the petcocks of my hormonal system. It was the thing I had dreaded. How could 612 Jason fail to notice that flood of endocrine response? "Go on," I said, as coolly as I could. But noticing was one thing, interpreting the data something else. Fluctuations in a human being's endocrine output might have any number of causes. To my troubled conscience everything was a glaring signal of my guilt. 612 Jason gave no indication that it suspected a thing. The intelligence said, "The dead passenger was Hans Eger Olafssen, 54 years of age, a native of -- " "Never mind his details. You can let me have a printout on that part." "The missing matrix," 612 Jason went on imperturbably. "Leeleaine Eliani, 17 years of age, a native of Kansas Four, bound for Cul-de-Sac, Vainglory Archipelago, under Transmission Contract No. D-14871532, dated the 27th day of the third month of -- " "Printout on

that too," I cut in. "What I want to know is where she is now." "That information is not available." "That isn't a responsive answer, 6l2 Jason."

"No better answer can be provided at this time, captain. Tracer circuits have been activated and remain in constant search mode."

"And?" "We have no data on the present location of the missing matrix." Within me Vox reacted instantly to the intelligence's calm flat statement. The hormonal response changed from one of fear to one of relief. My blazing skin began at once to cool. Would 6l2 Jason notice that too, and from that small clue be able to assemble the subtext of my body's responses into a sequence that exposed my criminal violation of regulations?

"Don't relax too soon," I told her silently. "This may be some sort of trap." To 6l2 Jason I said, "What data do you have, then?" "Two things are known: the time at which the Eliani matrix achieved negation of its storage circuitry and the time of its presumed attempt at making neural entry into the suspended passenger Olafssen. Beyond that no data has been recovered."

"Its presumed attempt?" I said. "There is no proof, captain." "Olafssen's convulsions? The smashing of the storage housing?"

"We know that Olafssen responded to an electrical stimulus, captain. The source of the stimulus is impossible to trace, although the presumption is that it came from the missing matrix Eliani. These are matters for the subsequent inquiry. It is not within my responsibilities to assign definite causal relationships." Spoken like a true Jason-series intelligence, I thought. I said, "You don't have any effective way of tracing the movements of the Eliani matrix, is that what you're telling me?"

"We're dealing with extremely minute impedances, sir. In the ordinary functioning of the ship it is very difficult to distinguish a matrix manifestation from normal surges and pulses in the general electrical system."

"You mean, it might take something as big as the matrix trying to climb back into its own storage circuit to register on the monitoring system?"

"Very possibly, sir." "Is there any reason to think the Eliani matrix is still on the ship at all?" "There is no reason to think that it is not, captain."

"In other words, you don't know anything about anything concerning the Eliani matrix." "I have provided you with all known data at this point. Trace efforts are continuing, sir."

"You still think this is a trap?" Vox asked me. "It's sounding better and better by the minute. But shut up and don't distract me, will you?"

To the intelligence I said, "All right, keep me posted on the situation. I'm preparing for sleep, 6l2 Jason. I want the end-of-day status report, and then I want you to clear off and leave me alone." "Very good, sir. Fifth virtual day of voyage. Position of ship sixteen units beyond last port of call, Kansas Four. Scheduled rendezvous with relay forces at Ultima Thule spinaround point was successfully achieved at the hour of --"

The intelligence droned on and on: the usual report of the routine events of the day, broken only by the novelty of an entry for the loss of a passenger and one for the escape of a matrix, then returning to the standard data, fuel levels and velocity soundings and all the rest. On the first four nights of the voyage I had solemnly tried to absorb all this torrent of ritualized downloading of the log as though my captaincy depended on committing it all to memory, but this night I barely listened, and nearly missed my cue when it was time to give it my approval before clocking out for the night. Vox had to prod me and let me know that the intelligence was waiting for something. I gave 6l2 Jason the confirm-and-clock-out and heard the welcome sound of its diminishing music as it decoupled the contact.

"What do you think?" Vox asked. "It doesn't know, does it?" "Not yet," I said.

"You really are a pessimist, aren't you?" "I think we may be able to bring this off," I told her. "But the moment we become overconfident, it'll be the end. Everyone on this ship wants to know where you are. The slightest slip and we're both gone."

"Okay. Don't lecture me." "I'll try not to. Let's get some sleep now." "I don't need to sleep." "Well, I do." "Can we talk for a while

first?" "Tomorrow," I said. But of course sleep was impossible. I was all too aware of the stranger within me, perhaps prowling the most hidden places of my psyche at this moment. Or waiting to invade my dreams once I drifted off. For the first time I thought I could feel her presence even when she was silent: a hot node of identity pressing against the wall of my brain. Perhaps I imagined it. I lay stiff and tense, as wide awake as I have ever been in my life. After a time I had to call 612 Jason and ask it to put me under the wire; and even then my sleep was uneasy when it came.

10. Until that point in the voyage I had taken nearly all of my meals in my quarters. It seemed a way of exerting my authority, such as it was, aboard ship. By my absence from the dining hall I created a presence, that of the austere and aloof captain; and I avoided the embarrassment of having to sit in the seat of command over men who were much my senior in all things. It was no great sacrifice for me. My quarters were more than comfortable, the food was the same as that which was available in the dining hall, the servo-steward that brought it was silent and efficient. The question of isolation did not arise. There has always been something solitary about me, as there is about most who are of the Service. But

when I awoke the next morning after what had seemed like an endless night, I went down to the dining hall for breakfast. It was nothing like a deliberate change of policy, a decision that had been rigorously arrived at through careful reasoning. It wasn't a decision at all. Nor did Vox suggest it, though I'm sure she inspired it. It was purely automatic. I arose, showered, and dressed. I confess that I had forgotten all about the events of the night before. Vox was quiet within me. Not until I was under the shower, feeling the warm comforting ultrasonic vibration, did I remember her: there came a disturbing sensation of being in two places at once, and, immediately afterward, an astonishingly odd feeling of shame at my own nakedness. Both those feelings passed quickly. But they did indeed bring to mind that extraordinary thing which I had managed to suppress for some minutes, that I was no longer alone in my body. She said nothing. Neither did I.

After last night's astounding alliance I seemed to want to pull back into wordlessness, unthinkingness, a kind of automaton consciousness. The need for breakfast occurred to me and I called up a tracker to take me down to the dining hall. When I stepped outside the room I was surprised to encounter my servo-steward, already on its way up with my tray. Perhaps it was just as surprised to see me going out, though of course its blank metal face betrayed no feelings. "I'll be having breakfast in the dining hall today," I told it. "Very good, sir." My tracker arrived. I climbed into its seat and it set out at once on its cushion of air toward the dining hall.

The dining hall of the Sword of Orion is a magnificent room at the Eye end of Crew Deck, with one glass wall providing a view of all the lights of heaven. By some whim of the designers we sit with that wall below us, so that the stars and their tethered worlds drift beneath our feet. The other walls are of some silvery metal chased with thin swirls of gold, everything shining by the reflected light of the passing star-clusters. At the center is a table of black stone, with places allotted for each of the seventeen members of the crew. It is a splendid if somewhat ridiculous place, a resonant reminder of the wealth and power of the Service. Three of my shipmates were at their places when I entered. Pedregal was there, the supercargo, a compact, sullen man whose broad dome of a head seemed to rise directly from his shoulders. And there was Fresco, too, slender and elusive, the navigator, a lithe dark-skinned person of ambiguous sex who alternated from voyage to voyage, so I had been told, converting from male to female and back again according to some private rhythm. The third person was Raebuck, whose sphere of responsibility was communications, an older man whose flat, chilly gaze conveyed either boredom or menace, I could never be sure which. "Why, it's the captain," said Pedregal calmly. "Favoring us with one of his rare visits." All three stared at me with that curious testing intensity which I was coming to see was an inescapable part of my life aboard ship: a

constant hazing meted out to any newcomer to the Service, an interminable probing for the place that was most vulnerable. Mine was a parsec wide and I was certain they would discover it at once. But I was determined to match them stare for stare, ploy for ploy, test for test. "Good morning, gentlemen," I said. Then, giving Fresco a level glance, I added, "Good morning, Fresco." I took my seat at the table's head and rang for service. I was beginning to realize why I had come out of my cabin that morning. In part it was a reflection of Vox' presence within me, an expression of that new component of rashness and impulsiveness that had entered me with her. But mainly it was, I saw now, some stratagem of my own, hatched on some inaccessible subterranean level of my double mind. In order to conceal Vox most effectively, I would have to take the offensive: rather than skulking in my quarters and perhaps awakening perilous suspicions in the minds of my shipmates, I must come forth, defiantly, challengingly, almost flaunting the thing that I had done, and go among them, pretending that nothing unusual was afoot and forcing them to believe it. Such aggressiveness was not natural to my temperament. But perhaps I could draw on some reserves provided by Vox. If not, we both were lost. Raebuck said, to no one in particular, "I suppose yesterday's disturbing events must inspire a need for companionship in the captain." I faced him squarely. "I have all the companionship I require, Raebuck. But I agree that what happened yesterday was disturbing." "A nasty business," Pedregal said, ponderously shaking his neckless head. "And a strange one, a matrix trying to get into a passenger. That's new to me, a thing like that. And to lose the passenger besides -- that's bad. That's very bad." "It does happen, losing a passenger," said Raebuck. "A long time since it happened on a ship of mine," Pedregal rejoined. "We lost a whole batch of them on the Emperor of Callisto," Fresco said. "You know the story? It was thirty years ago. We were making the run from Van Buren to the San Pedro Cluster. We picked up a supernova pulse and the intelligence on duty went into flicker. Somehow dumped a load of aluminum salts in the feed-lines and killed off fifteen, sixteen passengers. I saw the bodies before they went into the converter. Beyond salvage, they were." "Yes," said Raebuck. "I heard of that one. And then there was the Queen Astarte, a couple of years after that. Tchelitchev was her captain, little green-eyed Russian woman from one of the Troika worlds. They were taking a routine inventory and two digits got transposed, and a faulty delivery signal slipped through. I think it was six dead, premature decanting, killed by air poisoning. Tchelitchev took it very badly. Very badly. Somehow the captain always does." "And then that time on the Hecuba," said Pedregal. "No ship of mine, thank God. That was the captain who ran amok, thought the ship was too quiet, wanted to see some passengers moving around and started awakening them -- " Raebuck showed a quiver of surprise. "You know about that? I thought that was supposed to be hushed up." "Things get around," Pedregal said, with something like a smirk. "The captain's name was Catania-Szu, I believe, a man from Mediterraneo, very high-strung, the way all of them are there. I was working the Valparaiso then, out of Mendax Nine bound for Scylla and Charybdis and neighboring points, and when we stopped to download some cargo in the Seneca system I got the whole story from a ship's clerk named -- " "You were on the Valparaiso?" Fresco asked. "Wasn't that the ship that had a free matrix, too, ten or eleven years back? A real soul-eater, so the report went -- " "After my time," said Pedregal, blandly waving his hand. "But I did hear of it. You get to hear about everything, when you're downloading cargo. Soul-eater, you say, reminds me of the time -- " And he launched into some tale of horror at a spinaround station in a far quadrant of the galaxy. But he was no more than halfway through it when Raebuck cut in with a gorier reminiscence of his own, and then Fresco, seething with impatience, broke in on him to tell of a ship infested by three free matrixes at once. I had no doubt that all this was being staged for my enlightenment, by way of showing me how seriously such events were taken in the Service, and

how the captains under whom they occurred went down in the folklore of the starships with ineradicable black marks. But their attempts to unsettle me, if that is what they were, left me undismayed. Vox, silent within me, infused me with a strange confidence that allowed me to ignore the darker implications of these anecdotes.

I simply listened, playing my role: the neophyte fascinated by the accumulated depth of spacegoing experience that their stories implied.

Then I said, finally, "When matrixes get loose, how long do they generally manage to stay at large?" "An hour or two, generally," said Raebuck. "As they drift around the ship, of course, they leave an electrical trail. We track it and close off access routes behind them and eventually we pin them down in close quarters. Then it's not hard to put them back in their bottles."

"And if they've jacked into some member of the crew?" "That makes it even easier to find them."

Boldly I said, "Was there ever a case where a free matrix jacked into a member of the crew and managed to keep itself hidden?" "Never," said a new voice.

It belonged to Roacher, who had just entered the dining hall. He stood at the far end of the long table, staring at me. His strange luminescent eyes, harsh and probing, came to rest on mine. "No matter how clever the matrix may be, sooner or later the host will find some way to call for help." "And if the host doesn't choose to call for help?" I asked.

Roacher studied me with great care. Had I been too bold? Had I given away too much? "But that would be a violation of regulations!" he said, in a tone of mock astonishment. "That would be a criminal act!"

11. She asked me to take her starwalking, to show her the full view of the Great Open. It was the third day of her concealment within me. Life aboard the Sword of Orion had returned to routine, or, to be more accurate, it had settled into a new routine in which the presence on board of an undetected and apparently undetectable free matrix was a constant element.

As Vox had suggested, there were some who quickly came to believe that the missing matrix must have slipped off into space, since the watchful ship-intelligences could find no trace of it. But there were others who kept looking over their shoulders, figuratively or literally, as if expecting the fugitive to attempt to thrust herself without warning into the spinal jacks that gave access to their nervous systems. They behaved exactly as if the ship were haunted. To placate those uneasy ones, I ordered round-the-clock circuit sweeps that would report every vagrant pulse and random surge. Each such anomalous electrical event was duly investigated, and, of course, none of these investigations led to anything significant. Now that Vox resided in my brain instead of the ship's wiring, she was beyond any such mode of discovery.

Whether anyone suspected the truth was something I had no way of knowing. Perhaps Roacher did; but he made no move to denounce me, nor did he so much as raise the issue of the missing matrix with me at all after that time in the dining hall. He might know nothing whatever; he might know everything, and not care; he might simply be keeping his own counsel for the moment. I had no way of telling.

I was growing accustomed to my double life, and to my daily duplicity. Vox had quickly come to seem as much a part of me as my arm, or my leg. When she was silent -- and often I heard nothing from her for hours at a time -- I was no more aware of her than I would be, in any special way, of my arm or my leg; but nevertheless I knew somehow that she was there. The boundaries between her mind and mine were eroding steadily. She was learning how to infiltrate me. At times it seemed to me that what we were were joint tenants of the same dwelling, rather than I the permanent occupant and she a guest. I came to perceive my own mind as something not notably different from hers, a mere web of electrical force which for the moment was housed in the soft moist globe that was the brain of the captain of the Sword of Orion. Either of us, so it seemed, might come and go within that soft moist globe as we pleased, flitting casually in or out after the wraithlike fashion of matrixes.

At other times it was not at all like that: I gave no thought to her presence and went about my tasks as if nothing had changed for me. Then it would come as a surprise when Vox



announced herself to me with some sudden comment, some quick question. I had to learn to guard myself against letting my reaction show, if it happened when I was with other members of the crew. Though no one around us could hear anything when she spoke to me, or I to her, I knew it would be the end for our masquerade if anyone caught me in some unguarded moment of conversation with an unseen companion.

How far she had penetrated my mind began to become apparent to me when she asked to go on a starwalk. "You know about that?" I said, startled, for starwalking is the private pleasure of the spacegoing and I had not known of it myself before I was taken into the Service.

Vox seemed amazed by my amazement. She indicated casually that the details of starwalking were common knowledge everywhere. But something rang false in her tone. Were the landcrawling folk really so familiar with our special pastime? Or had she picked what she knew of it out of the hitherto private reaches of my consciousness? I chose not to ask. But I was uneasy about taking her with me into the Great Open, much as I was beginning to yearn for it myself. She was not one of us. She was planetary; she had not passed through the training of the Service. I told her that.

"Take me anyway," she said. "It's the only chance I'll ever have."

"But the training -- "

"I don't need it. Not if you've had it."

"What if that's not enough?"

"It will be," she said. "It know it will, Adam. There's nothing to be afraid of. You've had the training, haven't you? And I am you."

12. Together we rode the transit track out of the Eye and down to Drive Deck, where the soul of the ship lies lost in throbbing dreams of the far galaxies as it pulls us ever onward across the unending night.

We passed through zones of utter darkness and zones of cascading light, through places where wheeling helixes of silvery radiance burst like auroras from the air, through passages so crazed in their geometry that they reawakened the terrors of the womb in anyone who traversed them. A starship is the mother of mysteries. Vox crouched, frozen with awe, within that portion of our brain that was hers. I felt the surges of her awe, one after another, as we went downward.

"Are you really sure you want to do this?" I asked.

"Yes!" she cried fiercely. "Keep going!"

"There's the possibility that you'll be detected," I told her.

"There's the possibility that I won't be," she said.

We continued to descend. Now we were in the realm of the three cyborg push-cells, Gabriel, Banquo, and Fleece. Those were three members of the crew whom we would never see at the table in the dining hall, for they dwelled here in the walls of Drive Deck, permanently jacked in, perpetually pumping their energies into the ship's great maw. I have already told you of our saying in the Service, that when you enter you give up the body and you get your soul. For most of us that is only a figure of speech: what we give up, when we say farewell forever to planetskin and take up our new lives in starships, is not the body itself but the body's trivial needs, the sweaty things so dear to shore people. But some of us are more literal in their renunciations. The flesh is a meaningless hindrance to them; they shed it entirely, knowing that they can experience starship life just as fully without it. They allow themselves to be transformed into extensions of the stardrive. From them comes the raw energy out of which is made the power that carries us hurtling through heaven. Their work is unending; their reward is a sort of immortality. It is not a choice I could make, nor, I think, you: but for them it is bliss. There can be no doubt about that.

"Another starwalk so soon, captain?" Banquo asked. For I had been here on the second day of the voyage, losing no time in availing myself of the great privilege of the Service.

"Is there any harm in it?"

"No, no harm," said Banquo. "Just isn't usual, is all."

"That's all right," I said.

"That's not important to me." Banquo is a gleaming metallic ovoid, twice the size of a human head, jacked into a slot in the wall. Within the ovoid is the matrix of what had once been Banquo, long ago on a world called Sunrise where night is unknown. Sunrise's golden dawns and shining days had not been good enough for Banquo, apparently. What Banquo had wanted was to be

a gleaming metallic ovoid, hanging on the wall of Drive Deck aboard the Sword of Orion. Any of the three cyborgs could set up a starwalk. But Banquo was the one who had done it for me that other time and it seemed best to return to him. He was the most congenial of the three. He struck me as amiable and easy. Gabriel, on my first visit, had seemed austere, remote, incomprehensible. He is an early model who had lived the equivalent of three human lifetimes as a cyborg aboard starships and there was not much about him that was human any more. Fleece, much younger, quick-minded and quirky, I mistrusted: in her weird edgy way she might just somehow be able to detect the hidden other who would be going along with me for the ride. You must realize that when we starwalk we do not literally leave the ship, though that is how it seems to us. If we left the ship even for a moment we would be swept away and lost forever in the abyss of heaven. Going outside a starship of heaven is not like stepping outside an ordinary planet-launched shoreship that moves through normal space. But even if it were possible, there would be no point in leaving the ship. There is nothing to see out there. A starship moves through utter empty darkness. But though there may be nothing to see, that does not mean that there is nothing out there. The entire universe is out there. If we could see it while we are traveling across the special space that is heaven we would find it flattened and curved, so that we had the illusion of viewing everything at once, all the far-flung galaxies back to the beginning of time. This is the Great Open, the totality of the continuum. Our external screens show it to us in simulated form, because we need occasional assurance that it is there. A starship rides along the mighty lines of force which cross that immense void like the lines of the compass rose on an ancient mariner's map. When we starwalk, we ride those same lines, and we are held by them, sealed fast to the ship that is carrying us onward through heaven. We seem to step forth into space; we seem to look down on the ship, on the stars, on all the worlds of heaven. For the moment we become little starships flying along beside the great one that is our mother. It is magic; it is illusion; but it is magic that so closely approaches what we perceive as reality that there is no way to measure the difference, which means that in effect there is no difference. "Ready?" I asked Vox. "Absolutely." Still I hesitated. "Are you sure?" "Go on," she said impatiently. "Do it!" I put the jack to my spine myself. Banquo did the matching of impedances. If he were going to discover the passenger I carried, this would be the moment. But he showed no sign that anything was amiss. He queried me; I gave him the signal to proceed; there was a moment of sharp warmth at the back of my neck as my neural matrix, and Vox's traveling with it, rushed out through Banquo and hurtled downward toward its merger with the soul of the ship. We were seized and drawn in and engulfed by the vast force that is the ship. As the coils of the engine caught us we were spun around and around, hurled from vector to vector, mercilessly stretched, distended by an unimaginable flux. And then there was a brightness all about us, a brightness that cried out in heaven with a mighty clamor. We were outside the ship. We were starwalking. "Oh," she said. A little soft cry, a muted gasp of wonder. The blazing mantle of the ship lay upon the darkness of heaven like a white shadow. That great cone of cold fiery light reached far out in front of us, arching awesomely toward heaven's vault, and behind us it extended beyond the limits of our sight. The slender tapering outline of the ship was clearly visible within it, the needle and its Eye, all ten kilometers of it easily apparent to us in a single glance. And there were the stars. And there were the worlds of heaven. The effect of the stardrive is to collapse the dimensions, each one in upon the other. Thus inordinate spaces are diminished and the galaxy may be spanned by human voyagers. There is no logic, no linearity of sequence, to heaven as it appears to our eyes. Wherever we look we see the universe bent back upon itself, revealing its entirety in an infinite series of infinite segments of itself. Any sector of stars contains all stars. Any demarcation of time encompasses all of time

past and time to come. What we behold is altogether beyond our understanding, which is exactly as it should be; for what we are given, when we look through the Eye of the ship at the naked heavens, is a god's-eye view of the universe. And we are not gods. "What are we seeing?" Vox murmured within me.

I tried to tell her. I showed her how to define her relative position so there would be an up and a down for her, a backward, a forward, a flow of time and event from beginning to end. I pointed out the arbitrary coordinate axes by which we locate ourselves in this fundamentally incomprehensible arena. I found known stars for her, and known worlds, and showed them to her.

She understood nothing. She was entirely lost. I told her that there was no shame in that. I told her that I had been just as bewildered,

when I was undergoing my training in the simulator. That everyone was; and that no one, not even if he spent a thousand years aboard the starships that plied the routes of heaven, could ever come to anything more than a set of crude equivalents and approximations of understanding what starwalking shows us. Attaining actual understanding itself is beyond the best of us. I could feel her struggling to encompass the impact of all that rose and wheeled and soared before us. Her mind was agile, though still only half-formed, and I sensed her working out her own system of explanations and assumptions, her analogies, her equivalencies. I gave her no more help. It was best for her to do these things by herself; and in any case I had no more help to give.

I had my own astonishment and bewilderment to deal with, on this my second starwalk in heaven. Once more I looked down upon the myriad worlds

turning in their orbits. I could see them easily, the little bright globes rotating in the huge night of the Great Open: red worlds, blue worlds, green ones, some turning their full faces to me, some showing mere slivers of a crescent. How they cleaved to their appointed tracks! How they clung to their parent stars!

I remembered that other time, only a few virtual days before, when I had felt such compassion for them, such sorrow. Knowing that they were condemned forever to follow the same path about the same star, a hopeless bondage, a meaningless retracing of a perpetual route. In their own eyes they might be footloose wanderers, but to me they had seemed the most pitiful of slaves. And so I had grieved for the worlds of heaven; but now, to my surprise, I felt no pity, only a kind of love. There was no reason to be sad for them. They were what they were, and there was a supreme rightness in those fixed orbits and their obedient movements along them. They were content with being what they were. If they were loosed even a moment from that bondage, such chaos would arise in the universe as could never be contained. Those circling worlds are the foundations upon which all else is built; they know that and they take pride in it; they are loyal to their tasks and we must honor them for their devotion to their duty. And with honor comes love.

This must be Vox speaking within me, I told myself. I had never thought such thoughts. Love the planets in their orbits? What kind of notion was that? Perhaps no stranger than my earlier notion of pitying them because they weren't starships; but that thought had arisen from the spontaneous depths of my own spirit and it had seemed to make a kind of sense to me. Now it had given way to a wholly other view. I loved the worlds that moved before me and yet did not move, in the great night of heaven.

I loved the strange fugitive girl within me who beheld those worlds and loved them for their immobility.

I felt her seize me now, taking me impatiently onward, outward, into the depths of heaven. She understood now; she knew how it was done. And she was far more daring than ever I would have allowed me to be. Together we walked the stars. Not only walked but plunged and swooped and soared, traveling among them like gods. Their hot breath singed us. Their throbbing brightness thundered at us. Their serene movements boomed a mighty music at us. On and on we went, hand in hand, Vox leading, I letting her draw me, deeper and deeper into the shining abyss that was the universe. Until at last we halted, floating in mid-cosmos, the ship nowhere to be seen, only the two of us surrounded by a shield of suns.

In that moment a sweeping ecstasy filled my soul. I felt all eternity within my grasp. No,

that puts it the wrong way around and makes it seem that I was seized by delusions of imperial grandeur, which was not at all the case. What I felt was myself within the grasp of all eternity, enfolded in the loving embrace of a complete and perfect cosmos in which nothing was out of place, or ever could be.

It is this that we go starwalking to attain. This sense of belonging, this sense of being contained in the divine perfection of the universe. When it comes, there is no telling what effect it will have; but inner change is what it usually brings. I had come away from my first starwalk unaware of any transformation; but within three days I had impulsively opened myself to a wandering phantom, violating not only regulations but the nature of my own character as I understood it. I have always, as I think I have said, been an intensely private man. Even though I had given Vox refuge, I had been relieved and grateful that her mind and mine had remained separate entities within our shared brain. Now I did what I could to break down whatever boundary remained between us. I hadn't let her know anything, so far, of my life before going to heaven. I had met her occasional questions with coy evasions, with half-truths, with blunt refusals. It was the way I had always been with everyone, a habit of secrecy, an unwillingness to reveal myself. I had been even more secretive, perhaps, with Vox than with all the others, because of the very closeness of her mind to mine. As though I feared that by giving her any interior knowledge of me I was opening the way for her to take me over entirely, to absorb me into her own vigorous, undisciplined soul.

But now I offered my past to her in a joyous rush. We began to make our way slowly backward from that apocalyptic place at the center of everything; and as we hovered on the breast of the Great Open, drifting between the darkness and the brilliance of the light that the ship created, I told her everything about myself that I had been holding back.

I suppose they were mere trivial things, though to me they were all so highly charged with meaning. I told her the name of my home planet. I let her see it, the sea the color of lead, the sky the color of smoke. I showed her the sparse and scrubby gray headlands behind our house, where I would go running for hours by myself, a tall slender boy pounding tirelessly across the crackling sands as though demons were pursuing him. I showed her everything: the somber child, the troubled youth, the wary, overcautious young man. The playmates who remained forever strangers, the friends whose voices were drowned in hollow babbling echoes, the lovers whose love seemed without substance or meaning. I told her of my feeling that I was the only one alive in the world, that everyone about me was some sort of artificial being full of gears and wires. Or that the world was only a flat colorless dream in which I somehow had become trapped, but from which I would eventually awaken into the true world of light and color and richness of texture. Or that I might not be human at all, but had been abandoned in the human galaxy by creatures of another form entirely, who would return for me some day far in the future.

I was lighthearted as I told her these things, and she received them lightly. She knew them for what they were -- not symptoms of madness, but only the bleak fantasies of a lonely child, seeking to make sense out of an incomprehensible universe in which he felt himself to be a stranger and afraid.

"But you escaped," she said. "You found a place where you belonged!" "Yes," I said. "I escaped." And I told her of the day when I had seen a sudden light in the sky. My first thought then had been that my true parents had come back for me; my second, that it was some comet passing by. That light was a starship of heaven that had come to worldward in our system. And as I looked upward through the darkness on that day long ago, straining to catch a glimpse of the shoships that were going up to it bearing cargo and passengers to be taken from our world to some unknowable place at the other end of the galaxy, I realized that that starship was my true home. I realized that the Service was my destiny.

And so it came to pass, I said, that I left my world behind, and my name, and my life, such as it had been, to enter the company of those who sail between the stars. I let her know that this was my first voyage, explaining that it is the peculiar

custom of the Service to test all new officers by placing them in command at once. She asked me if I had found happiness here; and I said, quickly, Yes, I had, and then I said a moment later, Not yet, not yet, but I see at least the possibility of it.

She was quiet for a time. We watched the worlds turning and the stars like blazing spikes of color racing toward their far-off destinations, and the fiery white light of the ship itself streaming in the firmament as if it were the blood of some alien god. The thought came to me of all that I was risking by hiding her like this within me. I brushed it aside. This was neither the place nor the moment for doubt or fear or misgiving.

Then she said, "I'm glad you told me all that, Adam."

"Yes. I am too." "I could feel it from the start, what sort of person you were. But I needed to hear it in your own words, your own thoughts. It's just like I've been saying. You and I, we're two of a kind. Square pegs in a world of round holes. You ran away to the Service and I ran away to a new life in somebody else's body."

I realized that Vox wasn't speaking of my body, but of the new one that waited for her on Cul-de-Sac. And I realized too that there was one thing about herself that she had never shared with me, which was the nature of the flaw in her old body that had caused her to discard it. If I knew her more fully, I thought, I could love her more deeply: imperfections and all, which is the way of love. But she had shied away from telling me that, and I had never pressed her on it. Now, out here under the cool gleam of heaven, surely we had moved into a place of total trust, of complete union of soul.

I said, "Let me see you, Vox."

"See me? How could you -- " "Give me an image of yourself. You're too abstract for me this way. Vox. A voice. Only a voice. You talk to me, you live within me, and I still don't have the slightest idea what you look like."

"That's how I want it to be." "Won't you show me how you look?"

"I won't look like anything. I'm a matrix. I'm nothing but electricity." "I understand that. I mean how you looked before. Your old self, the one you left behind on Kansas Four."

She made no reply.

I thought she was hesitating, deciding; but some time went by, and still I heard nothing from her. What came from her was silence, only silence, a silence that had crashed down between us like a steel curtain.

"Vox?"

Nothing. Where was she hiding? What had I done? "What's the matter? Is it the thing I asked you?"

No answer.

"It's all

right, Vox. Forget about it. It isn't important at all. You don't have to show me anything you don't want to show me."

Nothing. Silence.

"Vox? Vox?" The worlds and stars wheeled in chaos before me. The light of the ship roared up and down the spectrum from end to end. In growing panic I sought for her and found no trace of her presence within me. Nothing. Nothing.

"Are you all right?" came another voice. Banquo, from inside the ship. "I'm getting some pretty wild signals. You'd better come in. You've been out there long enough as it is."

Vox was gone. I had crossed some uncrossable boundary and I had frightened her away.

Numbly

I gave Banquo the signal, and he brought me back inside.

13.

Alone, I made my way upward level by level through the darkness and mystery of the ship, toward the Eye. The crash of silence went on and on, like the falling of some colossal wave on an endless shore. I missed Vox terribly. I had never known such complete solitude as I felt now. I had not realized how accustomed I had become to her being there, nor what impact her leaving would have on me. In just those few days of giving her sanctuary, it had somehow come to seem to me that to house two souls within one brain was the normal condition of mankind, and that to be alone in one's skull as I was now was a shameful thing.

As I neared the place where Crew Deck narrows into the curve of the Eye a slender figure stepped without warning from the shadows.

"Captain."

My mind was full of the

loss of Vox and he caught me unawares. I jumped back, badly startled.

"For the love of God, man!"

"It's just me. Bulgar. Don't be so

scared, captain. It's only Bulgar."

"Let me be," I said, and brusquely

beckoned him away.

"No. Wait, captain. Please, wait."

He

clutched at my arm, holding me as I tried to go. I halted and turned toward him, trembling with anger and surprise. Bulgar, Roacher's jackmate, was a gentle, soft-voiced little man, wide-mouthed, olive-skinned, with huge sad eyes. He and Roacher had sailed the skies of Heaven together since before I was born. They complemented each other. Where Roacher was small and hard, like fruit that has been left to dry in the sun for a hundred years, his jackmate Bulgar was small and tender, with a plump, succulent look about him. Together they seemed complete, an unassailable whole: I could readily imagine them lying together in their bunk, each jacked to the other, one person in two bodies, linked more intimately even than Vox and I had been. With an effort I recovered my poise. Tightly I said, "What is it, Bulgar?"

"Can we talk a minute, captain?" "We are talking. What do you want with me?" "That loose matrix, sir." My reaction must have been stronger than he was expecting. His eyes went wide and he took a step or two back from me. Moistening his lips, he said, "We were wondering, captain -- wondering how the search is going -- whether you had any idea where the matrix might be -- " I said stiffly, "Who's we, Bulgar?" "The men. Roacher. Me. Some of the others. Mainly Roacher, sir." "Ah. So Roacher wants to know where the matrix is." The little man moved closer. I saw him staring deep into me as though searching for Vox behind the mask of my carefully expressionless face. Did he know? Did they all? I wanted to cry out, She's not there any more, she's gone, she left me, she ran off into space. But apparently what was troubling Roacher and his shipmates was something other than the possibility that Vox had taken refuge with me.

Bulgar's tone was soft, insinuating, concerned. "Roacher's very worried, captain. He's been on ships with loose matrixes before. He knows how much trouble they can be. He's really worried, captain. I have to tell you that. I've never seen him so worried." "What does he think the matrix will do to him?" "He's afraid of being taken over," Bulgar said. "Taken over?" "The matrix coming into his head through his jack. Mixing itself up with his brain. It's been known to happen, captain." "And why should it happen to Roacher, out of all the men on this ship? Why not you? Why not Pedregal? Or Rio de Rio? Or one of the passengers again?" I took a deep breath. "Why not me, for that matter?" "He just wants to know, sir, what's the situation with the matrix now. Whether you've discovered anything about where it is. Whether you've been able to trap it."

There was something strange in Bulgar's eyes. I began to think I was being tested again. This assertion of Roacher's alleged terror of being infiltrated and possessed by the wandering matrix might simply be a roundabout way of finding out whether that had already happened to me. "Tell him it's gone," I said. "Gone, sir?" "Gone. Vanished. It isn't anywhere on the ship any more. Tell him that, Bulgar. He can forget about her slithering down his precious jackhole." "Her?" "Female matrix, yes. But that doesn't matter now. She's gone. You can tell him that. Escaped. Flew off into heaven. The emergency's over." I glowered at him. I yearned to be rid of him, to go off by myself to nurse my new grief. "Shouldn't you be getting back to your post, Bulgar?" Did he believe me? Or did he think that I had slapped together some transparent lie to cover my complicity in the continued absence of the matrix? I had no way of knowing. Bulgar gave me a little obsequious bow and started to back away.

"Sir," he said. "Thank you, sir. I'll tell him, sir." He retreated into the shadows. I continued uplevel. I passed Katkat on my way, and, a little while afterward, Raebuck. They looked at me without speaking. There was something reproachful but almost loving about Katkat's expression, but Raebuck's icy, baleful stare brought me close to flinching. In their different ways they were saying, Guilty, guilty, guilty. But of what? Before, I had imagined that everyone whom I encountered aboard ship was able to tell at a single glance that I was harboring the fugitive, and was simply waiting for me to reveal myself with some foolish slip. Now everything was reversed. They looked at me and I told myself that they were thinking, He's

all alone by himself in there, he doesn't have anyone else at all, and I shrank away, shamed by my solitude. I knew that this was the edge of madness. I was overwrought, overtired; perhaps it had been a mistake to go starwalking a second time so soon after my first. I needed to rest. I needed to hide.

I began to wish that there were someone aboard the Sword of Orion with whom I could discuss these things. But who, though? Roacher? 612 Jason? I was altogether isolated here. The only one I could speak to on this ship was Vox. And she was gone.

In the safety of my cabin I jacked myself into the mediq rack and gave myself a ten-minute purge. That helped. The phantom fears and intricate uncertainties that had taken possession of me began to ebb.

I keyed up the log and ran through the list of my captainly duties, such as they were, for the rest of the day. We were approaching a spinaround point, one of those nodes of force positioned equidistantly across heaven which a starship in transit must seize and use in order to propel itself onward through the next sector of the universe. Spinaround acquisition is performed automatically but at least in theory the responsibility for carrying it out successfully falls to the captain: I would give the commands, I would oversee the process from initiation through completion. But there was still time for that.

I accessed 49 Henry Henry, who was the intelligence on duty, and asked for an update on the matrix situation.

"No change, sir," the intelligence reported at once. "What does that mean?"

"Trace efforts continue as requested, sir. But we have not detected the location of the missing matrix."

"No clues? Not even a hint?"

"No data at all, sir. There's essentially no way to isolate the minute electromagnetic pulse of a free matrix from the background noise of the ship's entire electrical system."

I believed it. 612 Jason Jason had told me that in nearly the same words.

I said, "I have reason to think that the matrix is no longer on the ship, 49 Henry Henry."

"Do you, sir?" said 49 Henry Henry in its usual aloof, halfmocking way. "I do, yes.

After a careful study of the situation, it's my opinion that the matrix exited the ship earlier this day and will not be heard from again."

"Shall I record that as an official position, sir?" "Record it," I said.

"Done, sir." "And therefore, 49 Henry Henry, you can cancel search mode immediately and close the file. We'll enter a debit for one matrix and the Service bookkeepers can work it out later."

"Very good, sir." "Decouple," I ordered the intelligence. 49 Henry Henry went away.

I sat quietly amid the splendors of my cabin, thinking back over my starwalk and reliving that sense of harmony, of love, of oneness with the worlds of heaven, that had come over me while Vox and I drifted on the bosom of the Great Open. And feeling once again the keen slicing sense of loss that I had felt since Vox' departure from me. In a little while I would have to rise and go to the command center and put myself through the motions of overseeing spinaround acquisition; but for the moment I remained where I was, motionless, silent, peering deep into the heart of my solitude.

"I'm not gone," said an unexpected quiet voice. It came like a punch beneath the heart. It was a moment before I could speak.

"Vox?" I said at last. "Where are you, Vox?" "Right here."

"Where?" I asked. "Inside. I never went away."

"You never --" "You upset me. I just had to hide for a while."

"You knew I was trying to find you?" "Yes." Color came to my cheeks. Anger roared like a stream in spate through my veins. I felt myself blazing.

"You knew how I felt, when you -- when it seemed that you weren't there any more."

"Yes," she said, even more quietly, after a time. I forced myself to grow calm. I told myself that she owed me nothing, except perhaps gratitude for sheltering her, and that whatever pain she had caused me by going silent was none of her affair. I reminded myself also that she was a child, unruly and turbulent and undisciplined.

After a bit I said, "I missed you. I missed you more than I want to say."

"I'm sorry," she said, sounding repentant, but not very. "I had to go away for a time. You upset me, Adam."

"By asking you to show me how you used to look?" "Yes." "I

don't understand why that upset you so much." "You don't have to," Vox said. "I don't mind now. You can see me, if you like. Do you still want to? Here. This is me. This is what I used to be. If it disgusts you don't blame me. Okay? Okay, Adam? Here. Have a look. Here I am."

14. There was a wrenching within me, a twisting, a painful yanking sensation, as of some heavy barrier forcibly being pulled aside. And then the glorious radiant scarlet sky of Kansas Four blossomed on the screen of my mind.

She didn't simply show it to me. She took me there. I felt the soft moist wind on my face, I breathed the sweet, faintly pungent air, I heard the sly rustling of glossy leathery fronds that dangled from bright yellow trees. Beneath my bare feet the black soil was warm and spongy.

I was Leeleaine, who liked to call herself Vox. I was seventeen years old and swept by forces and compulsions as powerful as hurricanes.

I was her from within and also I saw her from outside.

My hair was long and thick and dark, tumbling down past my shoulders in an avalanche of untended curls and loops and snags. My hips were broad, my breasts were full and heavy: I could feel the pull of them, the pain of them. It was almost as if they were stiff with milk, though they were not. My face was tense, alert, sullen, aglow with angry intelligence. It was not an unappealing face. Vox was not an unappealing girl. From her earlier reluctance to show herself to me I had expected her to be ugly, or perhaps deformed in some way, dragging herself about in a coarse, heavy, burdensome husk of flesh that was a constant reproach to her. She had spoken of her life on Kansas Four as being so dreary, so sad, so miserable, that she saw no hope in staying there. And had given up her body to be turned into mere electricity, on the promise that she could have a new body -- any body -- when she reached Cul-de-Sac. I hated my body, she had told me. I couldn't wait to be rid of it. She had refused even to give me a glimpse of it, retreating instead for hours into a desperate silence so total that I thought she had fled.

All that was a mystery to me now. The Leeleaine that I saw, that I was, was a fine sturdy-looking girl. Not beautiful, no, too strong and strapping for that, I suppose, but far from ugly: her eyes were warm and intelligent, her lips full, her nose finely modeled. And it was a healthy body, too, robust, vital. Of course she had no deformities; and why had I thought she had, when it would have been a simple matter of retrogenetic surgery to amend any bothersome defect? No, there was nothing wrong with the body that Vox had abandoned and for which she professed such loathing, for which she felt such shame.

Then I realized that I was seeing her from outside. I was seeing her as if by relay, filtering and interpreting the information she was offering me by passing it through the mind of an objective observer: myself. Who understood nothing, really, of what it was like to be anyone but himself.

Somehow -- it was one of those automatic, unconscious adjustments -- I altered the focus of my perceptions. All old frames of reference fell away and I let myself lose any sense of the separateness of our identities.

I was her. Fully, unconditionally, inextricably.

And I understood. Figures flitted about her, shadowy, baffling, maddening. Brothers, sisters, parents, friends: they were all strangers to her. Everyone on Kansas Four was a stranger to her. And always would be.

She hated her body not because it was weak or unsightly but because it was her prison. She was enclosed within it as though within narrow stone walls. It hung about her, a cage of flesh, holding her down, pinning her to this lovely world called Kansas Four where she knew only pain and isolation and estrangement. Her body -- her perfectly acceptable, healthy body -- had become hateful to her because it was the emblem and symbol of her soul's imprisonment. Wild and incurably restless by temperament, she had failed to find a way to live within the smothering predictability of Kansas Four, a planet where she would never be anything but an internal outlaw. The only way she could leave Kansas Four was to surrender the body that tied her to it; and so she had turned against it with fury and loathing, rejecting it, abandoning it, despising it, detesting it. No one could ever



understand that who beheld her from the outside. But I understood.

I understood much more than that, in that one flashing moment of communion that she and I had. I came to see what she meant when she said that I was her twin, her double, her other self. Of course we were wholly different, I the sober, staid, plodding, diligent man, and she the reckless, volatile, impulsive, tempestuous girl. But beneath all that we were the same: misfits, outsiders, troubled wanderers through worlds we had never made. We had found vastly differing ways to cope with our pain. Yet we were one and the same, two halves of a single entity. We will remain together always now, I told myself. And in that moment our communion broke. She broke it -- it must have been she, fearful of letting this new intimacy grow too deep -- and I found myself apart from her once again, still playing host to her in my brain but separated from her by the boundaries of my own individuality, my own selfhood. I felt her nearby, within me, a warm but discrete presence. Still within me, yes. But separate again. 15.

There was shipwork to do. For days, now, Vox's invasion of me had been a startling distraction. But I dared not let myself forget that we were in the midst of a traversal of heaven. The lives of us all, and of our passengers, depended on the proper execution of our duties: even mine. And worlds awaited the bounty that we bore. My task of the moment was to oversee spinaround acquisition. I told Vox to leave me temporarily while I went through the routines of acquisition. I would be jacked to other crewmen for a time; they might very well be able to detect her within me; there was no telling what might happen. But she refused. "No," she said. "I won't leave you. I don't want to go out there. But I'll hide, deep down, the way I did when I was upset with you." "Vox --" I began. "No. Please. I don't want to talk about it." There was no time to argue the point. I could feel the depth and intensity of her stubborn determination. "Hide, then," I said. "If that's what you want to do." I made my way down out of the Eye to Engine Deck. The rest of the acquisition team was already assembled in the Great Navigation Hall: Fresco, Raebuck, Roacher. Raebuck's role was to see to it that communications channels were kept open, Fresco's to set up the navigation coordinates, and Roacher, as power engineer, would monitor fluctuations in drain and input-output cycling. My function was to give the cues at each stage of acquisition. In truth I was pretty much redundant, since Raebuck and Fresco and Roacher had been doing this sort of thing a dozen times a voyage for scores of voyages and they had little need of my guidance. The deeper truth was that they were redundant too, for 49 Henry Henry would oversee us all, and the intelligence was quite capable of setting up the entire process without any human help. Nevertheless there were formalities to observe, and not inane ones. Intelligences are far superior to humans in mental capacity, interfacing capability, and reaction time, but even so they are nothing but servants, and artificial servants at that, lacking in any real awareness of human fragility or human ethical complexity. They must only be used as tools, not decision-makers. A society which delegates responsibilities of life and death to its servants will eventually find the servants' hands at its throat. As for me, novice that I was, my role was valid as well: the focal point of the enterprise, the prime initiator, the conductor and observer of the process. Perhaps anyone could perform those functions, but the fact remained that someone had to, and by tradition that someone was the captain. Call it a ritual, call it a highly stylized dance, if you will. But there is no getting away from the human need for ritual and stylization. Such aspects of a process may not seem essential, but they are valuable and significant, and ultimately they can be seen to be essential as well. "Shall we begin?" Fresco asked. We jacked up, Roacher directly into the ship, Raebuck into Roacher, Fresco to me, me into the ship.

"Simulation," I said. Raebuck keyed in the first code and the vast echoing space that was the Great Navigation Hall came alive with pulsing light: a representation of heaven all about us, the lines of force, the spinaround nodes, the stars, the planets. We moved unhinderedly in free fall,

drifting as casually as angels. We could easily have believed we were starwalking. The simulacrum of the ship was a bright arrow of fierce light just below us and to the left. Ahead, throbbing like a nest of twining angry serpents, was the globe that represented the *Lasciate Ogni Speranza* spinaround point, tightly-wound dull gray cables shot through with strands of fierce scarlet. "Enter approach mode," I said. "Activate receptors. Begin threshold equalization. Begin momentum comparison. Prepare for acceleration uptick. Check angular velocity. Begin spin consolidation. Enter displacement select. Extend mast. Prepare for acquisition receptivity." At each command the proper man touched a control key or pressed a directive panel or simply sent an impulse shooting through the jack hookup by which he was connected, directly or indirectly, to the mind of the ship. Out of courtesy to me, they waited until the commands were given, but the speed with which they obeyed told me that their minds were already in motion even as I spoke. "It's really exciting, isn't it?" Vox said suddenly. "For God's sake, Vox! What are you trying to do?" For all I knew, the others had heard her outburst as clearly as though it had come across a loudspeaker. "I mean," she went on, "I never imagined it was anything like this. I can feel the whole --" I shot her a sharp, anguished order to keep quiet. Her surfacing like this, after my warning to her, was a lunatic act. In the silence that followed I felt a kind of inner reverberation, a sulky twanging of displeasure coming from her. But I had no time to worry about Vox's moods now. Arcing patterns of displacement power went ricocheting through the Great Navigation Hall as our mast came forth -- not the underpinning for a set of sails, as it would be on a vessel that plied planetary seas, but rather a giant antenna to link us to the spinaround point ahead -- and the ship and the spinaround point reached toward one another like grappling many-armed wrestlers. Hot streaks of crimson and emerald and gold and amethyst speared the air, vaulting and rebounding. The spinaround point, activated now and trembling between energy states, was enfolding us in its million tentacles, capturing us, making ready to whirl on its axis and hurl us swiftly onward toward the next way-station in our journey across heaven. "Acquisition," Raebuck announced. "Proceed to capture acceptance," I said. "Acceptance," said Raebuck. "Directional mode," I said. "Dimensional grid eleven." "Dimensional grid eleven," Fresco repeated. The whole hall seemed on fire now. "Wonderful," Vox murmured. "So beautiful --" "Vox!" "Request spin authorization," said Fresco. "Spin authorization granted," I said. "Grid eleven." "Grid eleven," Fresco said again. "Spin achieved." A tremor went rippling through me -- and through Fresco, through Raebuck, through Roacher. It was the ship, in the persona of 49 Henry Henry, completing the acquisition process. We had been captured by *Lasciate Ogni Speranza*, we had undergone velocity absorption and redirection, we had had new spin imparted to us, and we had been sent soaring off through heaven toward our upcoming port of call. I heard Vox sobbing within me, not a sob of despair but one of ecstasy, of fulfillment. We all unjacked. Raebuck, that dour man, managed a little smile as he turned to me. "Nicely done, captain," he said. "Yes," said Fresco. "Very nice. You're a quick learner." I saw Roacher studying me with those little shining eyes of his. Go on, you bastard, I thought. You give me a compliment too now, if you know how. But all he did was stare. I shrugged and turned away. What Roacher thought or said made little difference to me, I told myself. As we left the Great Navigation Hall in our separate directions Fresco fell in alongside me. Without a word we trudged together toward the transit trackers that were waiting for us. Just as I was about to board mine he -- or was it she? -- said softly, "Captain?" "What is it, Fresco?" Fresco leaned close. Soft sly eyes, tricky little smile; and yet I felt some warmth coming from the navigator. "It's a very dangerous game, captain." "I don't know what you mean." "Yes, you do," Fresco said. "No use pretending. We were jacked together in there. I felt things. I know."

There was nothing I could say, so I said nothing. After a moment Fresco said, "I like you. I won't harm you. But Roacher knows too. I don't know if he knew before, but he certainly knows now. If I were you, I'd find that very troublesome, captain. Just a word to the wise. All right?"

16. Only a fool would have remained on such a course as I had been following. Vox saw the risks as well as I. There was no hiding anything from anyone any longer; if Roacher knew, then Bulgar knew, and soon it would be all over the ship. No question, either, but that 49 Henry Henry knew. In the intimacies of our navigation-hall contact, Vox must have been as apparent to them as a red scarf around my forehead. There was no point in taking her to task for revealing her presence within me like that during acquisition. What was done was done. At first it had seemed impossible to understand why she had done such a thing; but then it became all too easy to comprehend. It was the same sort of unpredictable, unexamined, impulsive behavior that had led her to go barging into a suspended passenger's mind and cause his death. She was simply not one who paused to think before acting. That kind of behavior has always been bewildering to me. She was my opposite as well as my double. And yet had I not done a Vox-like thing myself, taking her into me, when she appealed to me for sanctuary, without stopping at all to consider the consequences?

"Where can I go?" she asked, desperate. "If I move around the ship freely again they'll track me and close me off. And then they'll eradicate me. They'll --" "Easy," I said. "Don't panic. I'll hide you where they won't find you." "Inside some passenger?"

"We can't try that again. There's no way to prepare the passenger for what's happening to him, and he'll panic. No. I'll put you in one of the annexes. Or maybe one of the virtualities." "The what?" "The additional

cargo area. The subspace extensions that surround the ship." She gasped. "Those aren't even real! I was in them, when I was traveling around the ship. Those are just clusters of probability waves!" "You'll be safe there," I said. "I'm afraid. It's bad enough that I'm not real

any more. But to be stored in a place that isn't real either -- "

"You're as real as I am. And the outstructures are just as real as the rest of the ship. It's a different quality of reality, that's all. Nothing bad will happen to you out there. You've told me yourself that you've already been in them, right? And got out again without any problems. They won't be able to detect you there, Vox. But I tell you this, that if you stay in me, or anywhere else in the main part of the ship, they'll track you down and find you and eradicate you. And probably eradicate me right along with you."

"Do you mean that?" she said, sounding chastened. "Come on. There isn't much time."

On the pretext of a routine inventory check -- well within my table of responsibilities -- I obtained access to one of the virtualities. It was the storehouse where the probability stabilizers were kept. No one was likely to search for her there. The chances of our encountering a zone of probability turbulence between here and Cul-de-Sac were minimal; and in the ordinary course of a voyage nobody cared to enter any of the virtualities.

I had lied to Vox, or at least committed a half-truth, by leading her to believe that all our outstructures are of an equal level of reality. Certainly the annexes are tangible, solid; they differ from the ship proper only in the spin of their dimensional polarity. They are invisible except when activated, and they involve us in no additional expenditure of fuel, but there is no uncertainty about their existence, which is why we entrust valuable cargo to them, and on some occasions even passengers.

The extensions are a level further removed from basic reality. They are skewed not only in dimensional polarity but in temporal contiguity: that is, we carry them with us under time displacement, generally ten to twenty virtual years in the past or future. The risks of this are extremely minor and the payoff in reduction of generating cost is great. Still, we are measurably more cautious about what sort of cargo we keep in them.

As for the virtualities-- Their name itself implies their uncertainty. They are purely probabilistic entities, existing most of the

time in the stochastic void that surrounds the ship. In simpler words, whether they are actually there or not at any given time is a matter worth wagering on. We know how to access them at the time of greatest probability, and our techniques are quite reliable, which is why we can use them for overflow loadings when our cargo uptake is unusually heavy. But in general we prefer not to entrust anything very important to them, since a virtuality's range of access times can fluctuate in an extreme way, from a matter of microseconds to a matter of megayears, and that can make quick recall a chancy affair.

Knowing all this, I put Vox in a virtuality anyway. I had to hide her. And I had to hide her in a place where no one would look. The risk that I'd be unable to call her up again because of virtuality fluctuation was a small one. The risk was much greater that she would be detected, and she and I both punished, if I let her remain in any area of the ship that had a higher order of probability. "I want you to stay here until the coast is clear," I told her sternly. "No impulsive journeys around the ship, no excursions into adjoining outstructures, no little trips of any kind, regardless of how restless you get. Is that clear? I'll call you up from here as soon as I think it's safe."

"I'll miss you, Adam." "The same here. But this is how it has to be." "I know." "If you're discovered, I'll deny I know anything about you. I mean that, Vox."

"I understand." "You won't be stuck in here long. I promise you that." "Will you visit me?" "That wouldn't be wise," I said.

"But maybe you will anyway." "Maybe. I don't know." I opened the access channel. The virtuality gaped before us. "Go on," I said. "In with you. In. Now. Go, Vox. Go." I could feel her leaving me. It was almost like an amputation. The silence, the emptiness, that descended on me suddenly was ten times as deep as what I had felt when she had merely been hiding within me. She was gone, now. For the first time in days, I was truly alone. I closed off the virtuality. When I returned to the Eye, Roacher was waiting for me near the command bridge.

"You have a moment, captain?" "What is it, Roacher." "The missing matrix. We have proof it's still on board ship." "Proof?" "You know what I mean. You felt it just like I did while we were doing acquisition. It said something. It spoke. It was right in there in the navigation hall with us, captain." I met his luminescent gaze levelly and said in an even voice, "I was giving my complete attention to what we were doing, Roacher.

Spinaround acquisition isn't second nature to me the way it is to you. I had no time to notice any matrixes floating around in there." "You didn't?" "No. Does that disappoint you?" "That might mean that you're the one carrying the matrix," he said.

"How so?" "If it's in you, down on a subneural level, you might not even be aware of it. But we would be. Raebuck, Fresco, me. We all detected something, captain. If it wasn't in us it would have to be in you. We can't have a matrix riding around inside our captain, you know. No telling how that could distort his judgment. What dangers that might lead us into." "I'm not carrying any matrixes, Roacher."

"Can we be sure of that?" "Would you like to have a look?" "A jackup, you mean? You and me?" The notion disgusted me. But I had to make the offer.

"A -- jackup, yes," I said. "Communion. You and me, Roacher. Right now. Come on, we'll measure the bandwidths and do the matching. Let's get this over with." He contemplated me a long while, as if calculating the likelihood that I was bluffing. In the end he must have decided that I was too naive to be able to play the game out to so hazardous a turn. He knew that I wouldn't bluff, that I was confident he would find me untenanted or I never would have made the offer. "No," he said finally. "We don't need to bother with that."

"Are you sure?" "If you say you're clean -- " "But I might be carrying her and not even know it," I said. "You told me that yourself."

"Forget it. You'd know, if you had her in you." "You'll never be certain of that unless you look. Let's jack up, Roacher." He scowled. "Forget it," he said again, and turned away. "You must be clean, if you're

this eager for jacking. But I'll tell you this, captain. We're going to find her, wherever she's hiding. And when we do -- " He left the threat unfinished. I stood staring at his retreating form until he was lost to view.

17. For a few days everything seemed back to normal. We sped onward toward Cul-de-Sac. I went through the round of my regular tasks, however meaningless they seemed to me. Most of them did. I had not yet achieved any sense that the Sword of Orion was under my command in anything but the most hypothetical way. Still, I did what I had to do.

No one spoke of the missing matrix within my hearing. On those rare occasions when I encountered some other member of the crew while I moved about the ship, I could tell by the hooded look of his eyes that I was still under suspicion. But they had no proof. The matrix was no longer in any way evident on board. The ship's intelligences were unable to find the slightest trace of its presence. I was alone, and oh! it was a painful business for me.

I suppose that once you have tasted that kind of round-the-clock communion, that sort of perpetual jacking, you are never the same again. I don't know: there is no real information available on cases of possession by free matrix, only shipboard folklore, scarcely to be taken seriously. All I can judge by is my own misery now that Vox was actually gone. She was only a half-grown girl, a wild coltish thing, unstable, unformed; and yet, and yet, she had lived within me and we had come toward one another to construct the deepest sort of sharing, what was almost a kind of marriage. You could call it that.

After five or six days I knew I had to see her again. Whatever the risks. I accessed the virtuality and sent a signal into it that I was coming in. There was no reply; and for one terrible moment I feared the worst, that in the mysterious workings of the virtuality she had somehow been engulfed and destroyed. But that was not the case. I stepped through the glowing pink-edged field of light that was the gateway to the virtuality, and instantly I felt her near me, clinging tight, trembling with joy.

She held back, though, from entering me. She wanted me to tell her it was safe. I beckoned her in; and then came that sharp warm moment I remembered so well, as she slipped down into my neural network and we became one.

"I can only stay a little while," I said. "It's still very chancy for me to be with you." "Oh, Adam, Adam, it's been so awful for me in here -- " "I know. I can imagine." "Are they still looking for me?"

"I think they're starting to put you out of their minds," I said. And we both laughed at the play on words that that phrase implied.

I didn't dare remain more than a few minutes. I had only wanted to touch souls with her briefly, to reassure myself that she was all right and to ease the pain of separation. But it was irregular for a captain to enter a virtuality at all. To stay in one for any length of time exposed me to real risk of detection.

But my next visit was longer, and the one after that longer still. We were like furtive lovers meeting in a dark forest for hasty delicious trysts. Hidden there in that not-quite-real outstructure of the ship we would join our two selves and whisper together with urgent intensity until I felt it was time for me to leave. She would always try to keep me longer; but her resistance to my departure was never great, nor did she ever suggest accompanying me back into the stable sector of the ship. She had come to understand that the only place we could meet was in the virtuality.

We were nearing the vicinity of Cul-de-Sac now. Soon we would go to worldward and the shoships would travel out to meet us, so that we could download the cargo that was meant for them. It was time to begin considering the problem of what would happen to Vox when we reached our destination.

That was something I was unwilling to face. However I tried, I could not force myself to confront the difficulties that I knew lay just ahead. But she could.

"We must be getting close to Cul-de-Sac now," she said. "We'll be there soon, yes." "I've been thinking about that. How I'm going to deal with that." "What do you mean?" "I'm a lost soul," she said. "Literally. There's no way I can come to life again."

"I don't under -- " "Adam, don't you

see?" she cried fiercely. "I can't just float down to Cul-de-Sac and grab myself a body and put myself on the roster of colonists. And you can't possibly smuggle me down there while nobody's looking. The first time anyone ran an inventory check, or did passport control, I'd be dead. No, the only way I can get there is to be neatly packed up again in my original storage circuit. And even if I could figure out how to get back into that, I'd be simply handing myself over for punishment or even eradication. I'm listed as missing on the manifest, right? And I'm wanted for causing the death of that passenger. Now I turn up again, in my storage circuit. You think they'll just download me nicely to Cul-de-Sac and give me the body that's waiting for me there? Not very likely. Not likely that I'll ever get out of that circuit alive, is it, once I go back in? Assuming I could go back in in the first place. I don't know how a storage circuit is operated, do you? And there's nobody you can ask." "What are you trying to say, Vox?" "I'm not trying to say anything. I'm saying it. I have to leave the ship on my own and disappear."

"No. You can't do that!" "Sure I can. It'll be just like starwalking. I can go anywhere I please. Right through the skin of the ship, out into heaven. And keep on going." "To Cul-de-Sac?"

"You're being stupid," she said. "Not to Cul-de-Sac, no. Not to anywhere. That's all over for me, the idea of getting a new body. I have no legal existence any more. I've messed myself up. All right: I admit it. I'll take what's coming to me. It won't be so bad, Adam. I'll go starwalking. Outward and outward and outward, forever and ever." "You mustn't," I said.

"Stay here with me." "Where? In this empty storage unit out here?"

"No," I told her. "Within me. The way we are right now. The way we were before." "How long do you think we could carry that off?" she asked.

I didn't answer. "Every time you have to jack into the machinery I'll have to hide myself down deep," she said. "And I can't guarantee that I'll go deep enough, or that I'll stay down there long enough. Sooner or later they'll notice me. They'll find me. They'll eradicate me and they'll throw you out of the Service, or maybe they'll eradicate you too. No, Adam. It couldn't possibly work. And I'm not going to destroy you with me. I've done enough harm to you already." "Vox -- " "No. This is how it has to be." 18. And this is how it

was. We were deep in the Spook Cluster now, and the Vainglory Archipelago burned bright on my realspace screen. Somewhere down there was the planet called Cul-de-Sac. Before we came to worldward of it, Vox would have to slip away into the great night of heaven. Making a worldward approach is perhaps the most difficult maneuver a starship must achieve; and the captain must go to the edge of his abilities along with everyone else. Novice at my trade though I was, I would be called on to perform complex and challenging processes. If I failed at them, other crewmen might cut in and intervene, or, if necessary, the ship's intelligences might override; but if that came to pass my career would be destroyed, and there was the small but finite possibility, I suppose, that the ship itself could be gravely damaged or even lost.

I was determined, all the same, to give Vox the best send-off I could.

On the morning of our approach I stood for a time on Outerscreen Level, staring down at the world that called itself Culde-Sac. It glowed like a red eye in the night. I knew that it was the world Vox had chosen for herself, but all the same it seemed repellent to me, almost evil. I felt that way about all the worlds of the shore people now. The Service had changed me; and I knew that the change was irreversible. Never again would I go down to one of those worlds. The starship was my world now. I went to the virtuality where Vox was waiting. "Come," I said, and she entered me.

Together we crossed the ship to the Great Navigation Hall. The approach team had already gathered: Raebuck, Fresco, Roacher, again, along with Pedregal, who would supervise the downloading of cargo. The intelligence on duty was 612 Jason. I greeted them with quick nods and we jacked ourselves together in approach series. Almost at once I felt Roacher probing within me, searching for the fugitive intelligence that he still thought I

might be harboring. Vox shrank back, deep out of sight. I didn't care. Let him probe, I thought. This will all be over soon. "Request approach instructions," Fresco said. "Simulation," I ordered. The fiery red eye of Cul-de-Sac sprang into vivid representation before us in the hall. On the other side of us was the simulacrum of the ship, surrounded by sheets of white flame that rippled like the blaze of the aurora. I gave the command and we entered approach mode. We could not, of course, come closer to planetskin than a million shiplengths, or Cul-de-Sac's inexorable forces would rip us apart. But we had to line the ship up with its extended mast aimed at the planet's equator, and hold ourselves firm in that position while the shoships of Cul-de-Sac came swarming up from their red world to receive their cargo from us. 612 Jason fed me the coordinates and I gave them to Fresco, while Raebuck kept the channels clear and Roacher saw to it that we had enough power for what we had to do. But as I passed the data along to Fresco, it was with every sign reversed. My purpose was to aim the mast not downward to Cul-de-Sac but outward toward the stars of heaven. At first none of them noticed. Everything seemed to be going serenely. Because my reversals were exact, only the closest examination of the ship's position would indicate our 180-degree displacement. Floating in the free fall of the Great Navigation Hall, I felt almost as though I could detect the movements of the ship. An illusion, I knew. But a powerful one. The vast ten-kilometer-long needle that was the Sword of Orion seemed to hang suspended, motionless, and then to begin slowly, slowly to turn, tipping itself on its axis, reaching for the stars with its mighty mast. Easily, easily, slowly, silently -- What joy that was, feeling the ship in my hand! The ship was mine. I had mastered it. "Captain," Fresco said softly. "Easy on, Fresco. Keep feeding power." "Captain, the signs don't look right -- " "Easy on. Easy." "Give me a coordinates check, captain." "Another minute," I told him. "But -- " "Easy on, Fresco." Now I felt restlessness too from Pedregal, and a slow chilly stirring of interrogation from Raebuck; and then Roacher probed me again, perhaps seeking Vox, perhaps simply trying to discover what was going on. They knew something was wrong, but they weren't sure what it was. We were nearly at full extension, now. Within me there was an electrical trembling: Vox rising through the levels of my mind, nearing the surface, preparing for departure. "Captain, we're turned the wrong way!" Fresco cried. "I know," I said. "Easy on. We'll swing around in a moment." "He's gone crazy!" Pedregal blurted. I felt Vox slipping free of my mind. But somehow I found myself still aware of her movements, I suppose because I was jacked into 612 Jason and 612 Jason was monitoring everything. Easily, serenely, Vox melted into the skin of the ship. "Captain!" Fresco yelled, and began to struggle with me for control. I held the navigator at arm's length and watched in a strange and wonderful calmness as Vox passed through the ship's circuitry all in an instant and emerged at the tip of the mast, facing the stars. And cast herself adrift. Because I had turned the ship around, she could not be captured and acquired by Cul-de-Sac's powerful navigational grid, but would be free to move outward into heaven. For her it would be a kind of floating out to sea, now. After a time she would be so far out that she could no longer key into the shipboard bioprocessors that sustained the patterns of her consciousness, and, though the web of electrical impulses that was the Vox matrix would travel outward and onward forever, the set of identity responses that was Vox herself would lose focus soon, would begin to waver and blur. In a little while, or perhaps not so little, but inevitably, her sense of herself as an independent entity would be lost. Which is to say, she would die. I followed her as long as I could. I saw a spark traveling across the great night. And then nothing. "All right," I said to Fresco. "Now let's turn the ship the right way around and give them their cargo."

Orion has carried me nearly everywhere in the galaxy since then. On some voyages I have been captain; on others, a downloader, a supercargo, a mind-wiper, even sometimes a push-cell. It makes no difference how we serve, in the Service. I often think of her. There was a time when thinking of her meant coming to terms with feelings of grief and pain and irrecoverable loss, but no longer, not for many years. She must be long dead now, however durable and resilient the spark of her might have been. And yet she still lives. Of that much I am certain. There is a place within me where I can reach her warmth, her strength, her quirky vitality, her impulsive suddenness. I can feel those aspects of her, those gifts of her brief time of sanctuary within me, as a living presence still, and I think I always will, as I make my way from world to tethered world, as I journey onward everlastingly spanning the dark light-years in this great ship of heaven. ----- At [www.fictionwise.com](http://www.fictionwise.com) you can: \* Rate this story \* Find more stories by this author \* Read the author's notes for this story \* Get story recommendations

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It was eleven weeks and two days and three hours -- plus or minus a little -- until the earthquake that was going to devastate the planet, and suddenly Morrissey found himself doubting that the earthquake was going to happen at all. The strange notion stopped him in his tracks. He was out strolling the shore of the Ring Ocean, half a dozen kilometers from his cabin, when the idea came to him. He turned to his companion, an old fux called Dinoov who was just entering his postsexual phase, and said in a peculiar tone, "What if the ground doesn't shake, you know?" "But it will," the aborigine said calmly. "What if the predictions are wrong?" The fux was a small elegant blue-furred creature, sleek and compact, with the cool all-accepting demeanor that comes from having passed safely through all the storms and metamorphoses of a fux's reproductive odyssey. It raised its hind legs, the only pair that remained to it now, and said, "You should cover your head when you walk in the sunlight at flare time, friend Morrissey. The brightness damages the soul." "You think I'm crazy, Dinoov?" "I think you are under great stress." Morrissey nodded vaguely. He looked away and stared westward across the shining blood-hued ocean, narrowing his eyes as though trying to see the frosty crystalline shores of Farside beyond the curve of the horizon. Perhaps half a kilometer out to sea he detected glistening patches of bright green on the surface of the water -- the spawning bloom of the balloons. High above those dazzling streaks a dozen or so brilliant iridescent gasbag-creatures hovered, going through the early sarabandes of their mating dance. The quake would not matter at all to the balloons. When the surface of Medea heaved and buckled and crumpled, they would be drifting far overhead, dreaming their transcendental dreams and paying no attention. But maybe there will be no quake, Morrissey told himself. He played with the thought. He had waited all his life for the vast apocalyptic event that was supposed to put an end to the thousand-year-long human occupation of Medea, and now, very close to earthquake time, he found a savage perverse pleasure in denying the truth of what he knew to be coming. No earthquake! No earthquake!



Life will go on and on and on! The thought gave him a chilling prickling feeling. There was an odd sensation in the soles of his feet, as if he were standing with both his feet off the ground. Morrissey imagined himself sending out a joyful message to all those who had fled the doomed world: Come back, all is well, it didn't happen! Come live on Medea again! And he saw the fleet of great gleaming ships swinging around, heading back, moving like mighty dolphins across the void, shimmering like needles in the purple sky, dropping down by the hundred to unload the vanished settlers at Chong and Enrique and Pellucidar and Port Medea and Madagozar. Swarms of people rushing forth, tears, hugs, raucous laughter, old friends reunited, the cities coming alive again! Morrissey trembled. He closed his eyes and wrapped his arms tight around himself. The fantasy had almost hallucinatory power. It made him giddy, and his skin, bleached and leathery from a lifetime under the ultraviolet flares of the twin suns, grew hot and moist. Come home, come home, come home! The earthquake's been canceled! He savored that. And then he let go of it and allowed the bright glow of it to fade from his mind. He said to the fux, "There's eleven weeks left. And then everything on Medea is going to be destroyed. Why are you so calm, Dinoov?" "Why not?" "Don't you care?" "Do you?" "I love this place," Morrissey said. "I can't bear to see it all smashed apart." "Then why didn't you go home to Earth with the others?" "Home? Home? This is my home. I have Medean genes in my body. My people have lived here for a thousand years. My great-grandparents were born on Medea and so were their great-grandparents." "The others could say the same thing. Yet when earthquake time drew near, they went home. Why have you stayed?" Morrissey, towering over the slender little being, was silent a moment. Then he laughed harshly and said, "I didn't evacuate for the same reason that you don't give a damn that a killer quake is coming. We're both done for anyway, right? I don't know anything about Earth. It's not my world. I'm too old to start over there. And you? You're on your last legs, aren't you? Both your wombs are gone, your male itch is gone, you're in that nice quiet burned-out place, eh, Dinoov?" Morrissey chuckled. "We deserve each other. Waiting for the end together, two old hulks." The fux studied Morrissey with glinting, unfathomable, mischievous eyes. Then he pointed downwind, toward a headland maybe three hundred meters away, a sandy rise thickly furred with bladdermoss and scrubby yellow-leaved anglepod bushes. Right at the tip of the cape, outlined sharply against the glowing sky, were a couple of fuxes. One was female, six-legged, yet to bear her first litter. Behind her, gripping her haunches and readying himself to mount, was a bipedal male, and even at this distance Morrissey could see his frantic, almost desperate movements. "What are they doing?" Dinoov asked. Morrissey shrugged. "Mating." "Yes. And when will she drop her young?" "In fifteen weeks." "Are they burned out?" the fux asked. "Are they done for? Why do they make young if destruction is coming?" "Because they can't help --" Dinoov silenced Morrissey with an upraised hand. "I meant the question not to be answered. Not yet, not until you understand things better. Yes? Please?" "I don't --" " -- understand. Exactly." The fux smiled a fuxy smile. "This walk has tired you. Come now: I'll go with you to your cabin." \* \* \* \* They scrambled briskly up the path from the long crescent of pale blue sand that was the beach to the top of the bluff, and then walked more slowly down the road, past the abandoned holiday cabins toward Morrissey's place. Once this had been Argoview Dunes, a bustling shoreside community, but that was long ago. Morrissey in these latter days would have preferred to live in some wilder terrain where the hand of man had not weighed so heavily on the natural landscape, but he dared not risk it. Medea, even after ten centuries of colonization, still was a world of sudden perils. The unconquered places had gone unconquered for good reason; and, living on alone since the evacuation, he needed to keep close to some settlement with its stores of food and materiel. He could not afford the luxury of the picturesque. In any case the wilderness was rapidly reclaiming its own now that most of the

intruders had departed. In the early days this steamy low-latitude tropical coast had been infested with all manner of monstrous beasts. Some had been driven off by methodical campaigns of extermination and others, repelled by the effluvia of the human settlements, had simply disappeared. But they were starting to return. A few weeks ago Morrissey had seen a Scuttlefish come ashore, a gigantic black-scaled tubular thing, hauling itself onto land by desperate heaves of its awesome curved flippers and actually digging its fangs into the sand, biting the shore to pull itself onward. They were supposed to be extinct. By a fantastic effort the thing had dug itself into the beach, burying all twenty meters of its body in the azure sand, and a couple of hours later hundreds of young ones that had tunneled out of the mighty carcass began to emerge, slender beasts no longer than Morrissey's arm that went writhing with demonic energy down the dunes and into the rough surf. So this was becoming a sea of monsters again. Morrissey had no objections. Swimming was no longer one of his recreations. He had lived by himself beside the Ring Ocean for ten years in a little low-roofed cabin of the old Arcan wingstructure design, that so beautifully resisted the diabolical Medean winds. In the days of his marriage, when he had been a geophysicist mapping the fault lines, he and Nadia and Paul and Danielle had had a house on the outskirts of Chong on Northcape within view of the High Cascades, and had come here only in winter; but Nadia had gone to sing cosmic harmonies with the serene and noble and incomprehensible balloons, and Danielle had been caught in the Hotlands at doubleflare time and had not returned, and Paul, tough old indestructible Paul, had panicked over the thought that the earthquake was only a decade away, and between Darkday and Dimday of Christmas week had packed up and boarded an Earthbound ship. All that had happened within the space of four months, and afterward Morrissey found he had lost his fondness for the chilly air of Northcape. So he had come down to Argoview Dunes to wait out the final years in the comfort of the humid tropics, and now he was the only one left in the shore-side community. He had brought persona-cubes of Paul and Nadia and Danielle with him, but playing them turned out to be too painful, and it was a long time since he had talked with anyone but Dinoov. For all he knew, he was the only one left on Medea. Except, of course, the fuxes and the balloons. And the scuttlefish and the rock demons and the wingfingers and the not-turtles and all of those.

Morrissey and Dinoov stood silently for a time outside the cabin, watching the sunset begin. Through a darkening sky mottled with the green and yellow folds and streaks of Medea's perpetual aurora, the twin suns Phrixus and Helle -- mere orange red daubs of feeble light -- drifted toward the horizon. In a few hours they would be gone, off to cast their bleak glow over the dry-ice wastelands of Farside. There could never be real darkness on the inhabited side of Medea, though, for the oppressive great sullen bulk of Argo, the huge red-hot gas-giant planet whose moon Medea was, lay just a million kilometers away. Medea, locked in Argo's grip, kept the same face turned toward her enormous primary all the time. From Argo came the warmth that made life possible on Medea, and also a perpetual dull reddish illumination. The stars were beginning to come out as the twin suns set.

"See there," Dinoov said. "Argo has nearly eaten the white fires." The fux had chosen deliberately archaic terms, folk-astronomy; but Morrissey understood what he meant. Phrixus and Helle were not the only suns in Medea's sky. The two orange-red dwarf stars, moving as a binary unit, were themselves subject to a pair of magnificent blue-white stars, Castor A and B. Though the blue-white stars were a thousand times as far from Medea as the orange-red ones were, they were plainly visible by day and by night, casting a brilliant icy glare. But now they were moving into eclipse behind great Argo, and soon -- eleven weeks, two days, one hour, plus or minus a little -- they would disappear entirely. And how, then,

could there not be an earthquake? Morrissey was angry with himself for the pathetic soft-headedness of his fantasy of an hour ago. No earthquake? A last-minute miracle? The calculations in error? Sure. Sure. If wishes were horses, beggars might ride. The earthquake was inevitable. A day would come

when the configuration of the heavens was exactly thus, Phrixus and Helle positioned here, and Castor A and B there, and there and there, and Argo as ever exerting its inexorable pull above the Hotlands, and when the celestial vectors were properly aligned, the gravitational stresses would send a terrible shudder through the crust of Medea. This happened every

7,160 years. And the time was at hand. Centuries ago, when the persistence of certain apocalyptic themes in fux folklore had finally led the astronomers of the Medea colony to run a few belated calculations of these matters, no one had really cared. Hearing that the world will come to an end in five or six hundred years is much like hearing that you yourself are going to die in another fifty or sixty: it makes no practical difference in the conduct of everyday life. Later, of course, as the seismic tickdown moved along, people began to think about it more seriously, and beyond doubt it had been a depressive factor in the Medean economy for the past century or so. Nevertheless, Morrissey's generation was the first that had confronted the dimensions of the impending calamity in any realistic way. And in one manner or another the thousand-year-old colony had melted away in little more than a decade.

"How quiet everything is," Morrissey said. He glanced at the fux. "Do you think I'm the only one left, Dinoov?" "How would I know?"

"Don't play those games with me. Your people have ways of circulating information that we were only just beginning to suspect. You know." The fux said gravely, "The world is large. There were many human cities. Probably some others of your kind are still living here, but I have no certain knowledge. You may well be the last one." "I suppose. Someone had to be."

"Does it give you satisfaction, knowing you are last?" "Because it means I have more endurance, or because I think it's good that the colony has broken up?" "Either," said the fux. "I don't feel a thing," Morrissey said. "Either way. I'm the last, if I'm the last, because I didn't want to leave. That's all. This is my home and here I stay. I don't feel proud or brave or noble for having stayed. I wish there wasn't going to be an earthquake, but I can't do anything about that, and by now I don't think I even care."

"Really?" Dinoov asked. "That's not how it seemed a little while ago." Morrissey smiled. "Nothing lasts. We pretend we build for the ages, but time moves and everything fades and art becomes artifacts and sand becomes sandstone, and what of it? Once there was a world here and we turned it into a colony. And now the colonists are gone and soon the colony will be gone and this will be a world again as our rubble blows away. And what of it?" "You sound very old," said the fux. "I am very old. Older even than you."

"Only in years. Our lives move faster than yours, but in my few years I have been through all the stages of my life, and the end would soon be coming for me even if the ground were not going to shake. But you still have time left" Morrissey shrugged. The fux said, "I know that there are starships standing fueled and ready at Port Medea. Ready to go, at the push of a button." "Are you sure? Ships ready to go?" "Many of them. They were not needed. The Ahya have seen them and told us." "The balloons? What were they doing at Port Medea?"

"Who understands the Ahya? They wander where they please. But they have seen the ships, friend Morrissey. You could still save yourself." "Sure," Morrissey said. "I take a flitter thousands of kilometers across Medea, and I singlehandedly give a starship the checkdown for a voyage of fifty light-years, and then I put myself into coldsleep and I go home all alone and wake up on an alien planet where my remote ancestors happened to have been born. What for?" "You will die, I think, when the ground shakes."

"I will die, I think, even if it doesn't." "Sooner or later. But this way, later." "If I had wanted to leave Medea," Morrissey said, "I would have gone with the others. It's too late now." "No," said the fux. "There are ships at Port Medea. Go to Port Medea, my friend." Morrissey was silent. In the dimming light he knelt and tugged at tough little hummocks of stickweed that were beginning to invade his garden. Once he had exotic shrubs from all over Medea, everything beautiful

that was capable of surviving the humidity and rainfall of the Wetlands, but now as the drew near, the native plants of the coast were closing in, smothering his lovely whiptrees and dangletwines and flamestripes and the rest, and he no longer was able to hold them back. For minutes he clawed at the sticky stoloniferous killers, baleful orange against the tawny sand, that suddenly were sprouting by his doorway.

Then he said, "I think I will take a trip, Dinoov." The fux looked startled. "You'll go to Port Medea?"

"There, yes, and other places. It's years since I've left the Dunes. I'm going to make a farewell tour of the whole planet." He was amazed himself at what he was saying. "I'm the last one here, right? And this is almost the last chance, right? And it ought to be done, right? Saying good-bye to Medea. Somebody has to make the rounds, somebody has to turn off the lights. Right? Right. Right. Right. And I'm the one."

"Will you take the starship home?" "That's not part of my plan. I'll be back here, Dinoov. You can count on that. You'll see me again, just before the end. I promise you that."

"I wish you would go home," said the fux, "and save yourself."

"I will go home," Morrissey answered. "To save myself. In eleven weeks. Plus or minus a little."

\* \* \* \* Morrissey spent the next day, Darkday, quietly -- planing his trip, packing, reading, wandering along the beach front in the red twilight glimmer. There was no sign all day of Dinoov or indeed of any of the local fuxes, although in mid-afternoon a hundred or more balloons drifted by in tight formation, heading out to sea. In the darkness their shimmering colors were muted, but still they were a noble sight, huge taut globes trailing long coiling ropy organs. As they passed overhead Morrissey saluted them and said quietly, "A safe flight to you, cousins." But of course the balloons took no notice of him.

Toward evening he drew from his locker a dinner that he had been saving for some special occasion, Madagozar oysters and filet of vandaleur and newly ripened peeperpods. There were two bottles of golden red Palinurus wine left and he opened one of them. He drank and ate until he started to nod off at the table; then he lurched to his cradle, programmed himself for ten hours' sleep, about twice what he normally needed at his age, and closed his eyes.

When he woke it was well along into Dimday morning with the double sun not yet visible but already throwing pink light across the crest of the eastern hills.

Morrissey, skipping breakfast altogether, went into town and ransacked the commissary. He filled a freezercase with provisions enough to last him for three months, since he had no idea what to expect by way of supplies elsewhere on Medea. At the landing strip where commuters from Enrique and Pelluciday once had parked their flitters after flying in for the weekend, he checked out his own, an '83 model with sharply raked lines and a sophisticated moire-pattern skin, now somewhat pitted and rusted by neglect. The powerpak still indicated a full charge -- ninety-year half-life; he wasn't surprised -- but just to be on the safe side he borrowed an auxiliary pak from an adjoining flitter and keyed it in as a reserve. He hadn't flown in years, but that didn't worry him much: the flitter responded to voice-actuated commands, and Morrissey doubted that he'd have to do any manual overriding.

Everything was ready by mid-afternoon. He slipped into the pilot's seat and told the flitter, "Give me a systems checkout for extended flight."

Lights went on and off on the control panels. It was an impressive display of technological choreography, although Morrissey had forgotten what the displays signified. He called for verbal confirmation, and the flitter told him in a no-nonsense contralto that it was ready for takeoff.

"Your course," Morrissey said, "is due west for fifty kilometers at an altitude of five hundred meters, then north-northeast as far as Jane's Town, east to Hawkman Farms, and southwest back to Argoview Dunes. Then without landing, head due north by the shortest route to Port Kato. Got it?"

Morrissey waited for takeoff. Nothing happened.

"Well?" he said. "Awaiting tower clearance," said the flitter.

"Consider all clearance programs revoked."

Still nothing happened. Morrissey wondered how to key in a program override. But the flitter evidently could find no reason to call

Morrissey's bluff, and after a moment takeoff lights glowed all over the cabin, a low humming came from aft. Smoothly the little vehicle retracted its wind-jacks, gliding into flight position, and spun upward into the moist, heavy, turbulent air. \* \* \* \* He had chosen to begin his journey with

a ceremonial circumnavigation of the immediate area -- ostensibly to be sure that his flitter still could fly after all these years, but he suspected also that he wanted to show himself aloft to the fuxes of the district, to let them know that at least one human vehicle still traversed the skies. The flitter seemed all right. Within minutes he was at the beach, flying directly over his own cabin -- it was the only one whose garden had not been overtaken by jungle scrub -- and then out over the dark, tide-driven ocean. Up north then to the big port of Jane's Town, where tourist cruisers lay rusting in the crescent harbor, and inland a little way to a derelict farming settlement where the tops of mighty gattabangus trees, heavily laden with succulent scarlet fruit, were barely visible above swarming strangler vines. And then back, over sandy scrubby hills, to the Dunes. Everything below was desolate and dismal. He saw a good many fuxes, long columns of them in some places, mainly six-leg females and some four-leg ones, with mates leading the way. Oddly, they all seemed to be marching inland toward the dry Hotlands, as though some sort of migration were under way. Perhaps so. To a fux the interior was holier than the coast, and the holiest place of all was the great jagged central peak that the colonists called Mount Olympus, directly under Argo, where the air was hot enough to make water boil and only the most specialized of living creatures could survive. Fuxes would die in that blazing terrible highland desert almost as quickly as humans, but maybe, Morrissey thought, they wanted to get as close as possible to the holy mountain as the time of the earthquake approached. The coming round of the earthquake cycle was the central event of fux cosmology, after all -- a millennial time, a time of wonders. He

counted fifty separate bands of migrating fuxes. He wondered whether his friend Dinoov was among them. Suddenly he realized how strong was his need to find Dinoov waiting at Argoview Dunes when he returned from his journey around Medea. The circuit of the district took less than an hour. When the Dunes came in view again, the flitter performed a dainty pirouette over the town and shot off northward along the coast. \* \* \* \* The route

Morrissey had in mind would take him up the west coast as far as Arca, across the Hotlands to Northcape and down the other coast to tropical Madagozar before crossing back to the Dunes. Thus he would neatly touch base wherever mankind had left an imprint on Medea. Medea was divided into two huge

hemispheres separated by the watery girdle of the Ring Ocean. But Farside was a glaciated wasteland that never left Argo's warmth, and no permanent settlements had ever been founded there, only research camps, and in the last four hundred years very few of those. The original purpose of the Medea colony had been scientific study, the painstaking exploration of a wholly alien environment, but of course, as time goes along original purposes have a way of being forgotten. Even on the warm continent human occupation had been limited to twin arcs along the coasts from the tropics through the high temperate latitudes, and timid incursions a few hundred kilometers inland. The high desert was uninhabitable, and few humans found the bordering Hotlands hospitable, although the balloons and even some tribes of fuxes seemed to like the climate there. The only other places where humans had planted themselves was the Ring Ocean, where some floating raft-cities had been constructed in the kelp-choked equatorial water. But during the ten centuries of Medea the widely scattered human enclaves had sent out amoeboid extensions until they were nearly continuous for thousands of kilometers. Now, Morrissey saw,

that iron band of urban sprawl was cut again and again by intrusions of dense underbrush. Great patches of orange and yellow foliage already had begun to smother highways, airports, commercial plazas, residential suburbs. What the jungle had begun, he thought, the earthquake would finish. \*

\* \* \* On the third day Morrissey saw Hansonia Island ahead of him, a dark orange slash against the breast of the sea, and soon the flitter was making

its approach to the airstrip at Port Kato on the big island's eastern shore. Morrissey tried to make radio contact but got only static and silence. He decided to land anyway. Hansonia had never had much of a human population. It had been set aside from the beginning as an ecological-study laboratory, because its population of strange life-forms had developed in isolation from the mainland for thousands of years, and somehow it had kept its special status even in Medea's boom years. A few groundcars were parked at the airstrip. Morrissey found one that still held a charge, and ten minutes later he was in Port Kato. The place stank of red mildew. The buildings, wicker huts with thatched roofs, were falling apart. Angular trees of a species Morrissey did not know sprouted everywhere, in the streets, on rooftops, in the crowns of other trees. A cool hard-edged wind was blowing out of Farside. Two fuxes, four-leg females herding some young six-leggers, wandered out of a tumbledown warehouse, and stared at him in what surely was astonishment. Their pelts were so blue they seemed black -- the island species, different from mainlanders. "You come back?" one asked. Local accent, too. "Just for a visit. Are there any humans here?" "You," said the other fux. He thought they laughed at him. "Ground shake soon. You know?" "I know," he said. They nuzzled their young and wandered away. For three hours Morrissey explored the town, holding himself aloof from emotion, not letting the rot and decay and corruption get to him. It looked as if the place had been abandoned at least fifty years. More likely only five or six, though. Late in the day he entered a small house where the town met the forest and found a functioning personacube setup. The cubes were clever things. You could record yourself in an hour or so -- facial gestures, motion habits, voice, speech patterns. Scanners identified certain broad patterns of mental response and coded those into the cube, too. What the cube playback provided was a plausible imitation of a human being, the best possible memento of a loved one or friend or mentor, an electronic phantom programmed to absorb data and modify its own program, so that it could engage in conversation, ask questions, pretend to be the person who had been cubed. A soul in a box, a cunning device. Morrissey jacked the cube into its receptor slot. The screen displayed a thin-lipped man with a high forehead and a lean, agile body. "My name is Leopold Brannum," he said at once. "My specialty is xenogenetics. What year is this?" "It's '97, autumn," Morrissey said. "Ten weeks and a bit before the earthquake." "And who are you?" "Nobody particular. I just happen to be visiting Port Kato and I felt like talking to someone." "So talk," Brannum said. "What's going on in Port Kato?" "Nothing. It's pretty damned quiet here. The place is empty." "The whole town's been evacuated?" "The whole planet, for all I know. Just me and the fuxes and the balloons still around. When did you leave, Brannum?" "Summer of '92," said the man in the cube. "I don't see why everyone ran away so early. There wasn't any chance the earthquake would come before the predicted time." "I didn't run away," Brannum said coldly. "I left Port Kato to continue my research by other means." "I don't understand." "I went to join the balloons," Brannum said. Morrissey caught his breath. The words touched his soul with wintry bleakness. "My wife did that," he said after a moment. "Perhaps you know her now. Nadia Dutoit -- she was from Chong, originally -- " The face on the screen smiled sourly. "You don't seem to realize," Brannum said, "that I'm only a recording." "Of course. Of course." "I don't know where your wife is now. I don't even know where I am now. I can only tell you that wherever we are, it's in a place of great peace, of utter harmony." "Yes. Of course." Morrissey remembered the terrible day when Nadia told him that she could no longer resist the spiritual communion of the aerial creatures, that she was going off to seek entry into the collective mind of the Ahya. All through the history of Medea some colonists had done that. No one had ever seen any of them again. Their souls, people said, were absorbed, and their bodies lay buried somewhere beneath the dry ice of Farside. Toward the end the frequency of such defections had

doubled and doubled and doubled again, thousands of colonists every month giving themselves up to whatever mystic engulfment the balloons offered. To Morrissey it was only a form of suicide; to Nadia, to Brannum, to all those other hordes, it had been the path to eternal bliss. Who was to say? Better to undertake the uncertain journey into the great mind of the Ahya, perhaps, than to set out in panicky flight for the alien and unforgiving world that was Earth. "I hope you've found what you were looking for," Morrissey said. "I hope she has." He unjacked the cube and went quickly away. \* \*

\* \* He flew northward over the fog-streaked sea. Below him were the floating cities of the tropical waters, that marvelous tapestry of rafts and barges. That must be Port Backside down there, he decided -- a sprawling intricate tangle of foliage under which lay the crumbling splendors of one of Medea's greatest cities. Kelp choked the waterways. There was no sign of human life down there and he did not land. Pellucidar, on the mainland, was empty also. Morrissey spent four days there, visiting the undersea gardens, treating himself to a concert in the famous Hall of Columns, watching the suns set from the top of Crystal Pyramid. That last evening dense drifts of balloons, hundreds of them, flew oceanward above him. He imagined he heard them calling to him in soft sighing whispers, saying, I am Nadia. Come to me. There's still time. Give yourself up to us, dear love. I am Nadia. Was it only imagination? The Ahya were seductive. They had called to Nadia, and ultimately Nadia had gone to them. Brannum had gone. Thousands had gone. Now he felt the pull himself, and it was real. For an instant it was tempting. Instead of perishing in the quake, life eternal -- of a sort. Who knew what the balloons really offered? A merging, a loss of self, a transcendental bliss -- or was it only delusion, folly, had the seekers found nothing but a quick death in the icy wastes? Come to me. Come to me. Either way, he thought, it meant peace.

I am Nadia. Come to me. He stared a long while at the bobbing shimmering globes overhead, and the whispers grew to a roar in his mind. Then he shook his head. Union with the cosmic entity was not for him. He had sought no escape from Medea up till now, and now he would have none. He was himself and nothing but himself, and when he went out of the world he would still be only himself. And then, only then, the balloons could have his soul. If they had any use for it. \* \* \* \* It was nine weeks and a day

before the earthquake when Morrissey reached sweltering Enrique, right on the equator. Enrique was celebrated for its Hotel Luxe, of legendary opulence. He took possession of its grandest suite, and no one was there to tell him no. The air conditioning still worked, the bar was well stocked, the hotel grounds still were manicured daily by fux gardeners who did not seem to know that their employers had gone away. Obliging servomechanisms provided Morrissey with meals of supreme elegance that would each have cost him a month's earnings in the old days. As he wandered through the silent grounds, he thought how wonderful it would have been to come here with Nadia and Danielle and Paul. But it was meaningless now, to be alone in all this luxury. Was he alone, though? On his first night, and again the next, he heard laughter in the darkness, borne on the thick dense sweet-scented air. Fuxes did not laugh. The balloons did not laugh.

On the morning of the third day, as he stood on his nineteenth-floor veranda, he saw movements in the shrubbery at the rim of the lawn. Five, seven, a dozen male fuxes, grim two-legged engines of lust, prowling through the bushes. And then a human form! Pale flesh, bare legs, long unkempt hair! She streaked through the underbrush, giggling, pursued by fuxes. "Hello!" Morrissey called.

"Hey! I'm up here!" He hurried downstairs and spent all day searching the hotel grounds. Occasionally he caught glimpses of frenzied naked figures, leaping and cavorting far away. He cried out to them, but they gave no sign of hearing him.

In the hotel office Morrissey found the manager's cube and turned it on. She was a dark-haired young woman, a little wild-eyed. "Hey, is it earthquake time yet?" she asked. "Not quite yet." "I want to be around for that. I want to see this stinking hotel topple into a million pieces." "Where have you gone?" Morrissey asked. She snickered.

"Where else? Into the bush. Off to hunt fuxes. And to be hunted." Her face was flushed. "The old recombinant genes are still pretty hot, you know? Me for the fuxes and the fuxes for me. Get yourself a little action, why don't you? Whoever you are."

Morrissey supposed he ought to be shocked. But he couldn't summon much indignation. He had heard rumors of things like this already. In the final years before the cataclysm, he knew, several sorts of migration had been going on. Some colonists opted for the exodus to Earth and some for the surrender to the Ahya soul-collective, and others chose the simple reversion to the life of the beast. Why not? Every Medean, by now, was a mongrel. The underlying Earth stock was tinged with alien genes. The colonists looked human enough, but they were in fact mixed with balloon or fux or both. Without the early recombinant manipulations the colony could never have survived, for human life and native Medean organisms were incompatible, and only by genetic splicing had a race been brought forth that could overcome that natural biological enmity. So now, with doom-time coming near, how many colonists had simply kicked off their clothes and slipped away into the jungles to run with their cousins the fuxes? And was that any worse, he wondered, than climbing in panic aboard a ship bound for Earth or giving up your individuality to merge with the balloons? What did it matter which route to escape was chosen? But Morrissey wanted no escape. Least of all into the jungles, off to the fuxes.

\* \* \* \* He flew on northward. In Catamount he heard the cube of the city's mayor tell him, "They've all cleared out, and I'm going next Dimday. There's nothing left here." In Yellowleaf a cubed biologist spoke of genetic drift, the reversion of the alien genes. In Sandy's Mishigos, Morrissey could find no cubes at all, but eighteen or twenty skeletons lay chaotically on the broad central plaza. Mass immolation? Mass murder, in the final hours of the city's disintegration? He gathered the bones and buried them in the moist, spongy ochre soil. It took him all day. Then he went on, up the coast as far as Arca, through city after city. Wherever he stopped, it was the same story -- no humans left, only balloons and fuxes, most of the balloons heading out to sea and most of the fuxes migrating inland. He jacked in cubes wherever he found them, but the cube-people had little new to tell him. They were clearing out, they said: one way or another they were giving up on Medea. Why stick around to the end? Why wait for the big shudder? Going home, going to the balloons, going to the bush -- clearing out, clearing out clearing out.

So many cities, Morrissey thought. Such an immense outpouring of effort. We smothered this world. We came in, we built our little isolated research stations, we stared in wonder at the coruscating sky and the double suns and the bizarre creatures. And we transformed ourselves into Medeans and transformed Medea into a kind of crazy imitation of Earth. And for a thousand years we spread out along the coasts wherever our kind of life could dig itself in. Eventually we lost sight of our purpose in coming here, which in the beginning was to learn. But we stayed anyway. We just stayed. We muddled along. And then we found out that it was all for nothing, that with one mighty heave of its shoulders this world was going to cast us off, and we got scared and packed up and went away. Sad, he thought. Sad and foolish.

He stayed at Arca a few days and turned inland, across the hot, bleak desert that sloped upward toward Mount Olympus. It was seven weeks and a day until the quake. For the first thousand kilometers or so he still could see encampments of migrating fuxes below him, slowly making their way into the Hotlands. Why, he wondered, had they permitted their world to be taken from them? They could have fought back. In the beginning they could have wiped us out in a month of guerrilla warfare. Instead they let us come in, let us make them into pets and slaves and flunkies while we paved the most fertile zones of their planet, and whatever they thought about us they kept to themselves. We never even knew their own name for Medea, Morrissey thought. That was how little of themselves they shared with us. But they tolerated us here. Why? Why?

The land below him was furnace-hot, a badland streaked with red and yellow and orange, and now there were no fuxes in sight. The first jagged foothills of the Olympus scarp knobbed the desert. He saw the



mountain itself rising like a black fang toward the heavy low-hanging sky-filling mass of Argo. Morrissey dared not approach that mountain. It was holy and it was deadly. Its terrible thermal updrafts could send his flitter spinning to ground like a swatted fly; and he was not quite ready to die.

He swung northward again and journeyed up the barren and forlorn heart of the continent toward the polar region. The Ring Ocean came into view, coiling like a world-swallowing serpent beyond the polar shores, and he kicked the flitter higher, almost to its maximum safety level, to give himself a peek at Farside, where white rivers of CO<sub>2</sub> flowed through the atmosphere and lakes of cold gas filled the valleys. It seemed like six thousand years ago that he had led a party of geologists into that forbidding land. How earnest they had all been then! Measuring fault lines, seeking to discover the effects the quake would have over there. As if such things mattered when the colony was doomed by its own hand anyway. Why had he bothered? The quest for pure knowledge, yes. How futile that quest seemed to him now. Of course, he had been much younger then. An aeon ago. Almost in another life. Morrissey had planned to fly into Farside on this trip, to bid formal farewell to the scientist he had been, but he changed his mind. There was no need. Some farewells had already been made.

He curved down out of the polar regions as far south as Northcape on the eastern coast, circled the wondrous red-glinting sweep of the Cascades, and landed the airstrip at Chong. It was six weeks and two days to the earthquake. In these high latitudes the twin suns were faint and feeble even though the day was a Sunday. The monster Argo itself far to the south, appeared shrunken. He had forgotten the look of the northern sky in his ten years in the tropics. And yet, and yet, had he not lived thirty years in Chong? It seemed like only a moment, as all time collapsed into this instant of now.

Morrissey found Chong painful. Too many old associations, too many cues to memory. Yet he kept himself there until he had seen it all, the restaurant where he and Danielle had invited Nadia and Paul to join their marriage, the house on Vladimir Street where they had lived, the Geophysics Lab, the skiing lodge just beyond the Cascades. All the footprints of his life.

The city and its environs were utterly deserted. For day after day Morrissey wandered, reliving the time when he was young and Medea still lived. How exciting it had all been then! The quake was coming someday -- everybody knew the day, down to the hour -- and nobody cared except cranks and neurotics, for the others were too busy living. And then suddenly everyone cared, and everything changed.

Morrissey played no cubes in Chong. The city itself, gleaming, a vast palisade of silver thermal roofs, was one great cube for him, crying out the tale of his years.

When he could take it no longer, he started his southward curve around the east coast. There were four weeks and a day to go.

His first stop was Meditation Island, the jumping-off point for those who went to visit Virgil Oddums's fantastic and ever-evolving ice sculptures out on Farside. Four newlyweds had come here, a billion years ago, and had gone, laughing and embracing, off in icecrawlers to see the one miracle of art Medea had produced. Morrissey found the cabin where they all had stayed. It had faded and its roof was askew. He had thought of spending the night on Meditation Island, but he left after an hour.

Now the land grew rich and lush again as he passed into the upper tropics. Again he saw balloons by the score letting themselves be wafted toward the ocean, and again there were bands of fuxes slowly journeying inland, driven by he knew not what sense of ritual obligation as the quake came near.

Three weeks two days five hours. Plus or minus.

He flew low over the fuxes. Some were mating. That astounded him -- that persistence in the face of calamity. Was it merely the irresistible biological drive that kept the fuxes coupling? What chance did the newly engendered young have to survive? Would their mothers not be better off with empty wombs when the quake came? They knew what was going to happen, and yet they mated. And yet they mated. It made no sense to Morrissey.

And then he thought he understood. The sight of those coupling fuxes gave him an insight into the Medean natives that explained it all, for the first time.

Their patience, their calmness, their tolerance of all that had befallen them since their world had become Medea. Of course they would mate as the catastrophe drew near! They had been waiting for the earthquake all along, and for them it was no catastrophe. It was a holy moment, a purification -- so he realized. He wished he could discuss this with Dinoov. It was a temptation to return at once to Argoview Dunes and seek out the old fux and test on him the theory that just had sprung to life in him. But not yet. Port Medea, first.

The east coast had been settled before the other, and the density of development here was intense. The first two colonies -- Touchdown City and Medeatown -- had long ago coalesced into the urban smear that radiated outward from the third town, Port Medea. When he was still far to the north, Morrissey could see the gigantic peninsula on which Port Medea and its suburbs sprawled: the tropic heat rose in visible waves from it, buffeting his little flitter as he made his way toward that awesome, hideous concrete expanse.

Dinoov had been right. There were starships waiting at Port Medea -- four of them, a waste of money beyond imagination. Why had they not been used in the exodus? Had they been set aside for emigrants who had decided instead to run with the rutting fuxes or give their souls to the balloons? He would never know. He entered one of the ships and said, "Operations directory." "At your service," a bodiless voice replied. "Give me a report on ship status. Are you prepared for a voyage to Earth?" "Fueled and ready."

"Everything operational." Morrissey weighed his moves. So easy, he thought, to lie down and go to sleep and let the ship take him to Earth. So easy, so automatic, so useless. After a moment he said, "How long do you need to reach departure level?" "One hundred sixty minutes from moment of command."

"Good. The command is given. Get yourself ticking and take off. Your destination is Earth and the message I give you is this: Medea says good-bye. I thought you might have some use for this ship. Sincerely, Daniel F. Morrissey. Dated Earthquake Minus two weeks one day seven hours." "Acknowledged. Departure-level procedures initiated."

"Have a nice flight," Morrissey told the ship. He entered the second ship and gave it the same command. He did the same in the third. He paused before entering the last one, wondering if there were other colonists who even now were desperately racing toward Port Medea to get aboard one of these ships before the end came. To hell with them, Morrissey thought. They should have made up their minds sooner. He told the fourth ship to go home to Earth. On his way back from the port to the city, he saw the four bright spears of light rise skyward, a few minutes apart. Each hovered a moment, outlined against Argo's colossal bulk, and shot swiftly into the aurora-dappled heavens. In sixty-one years they would descend onto a baffled Earth with their cargo of no one. Another great mystery of space to delight the tale tellers, he thought. The Voyage of the Empty Ships.

With a curious sense of accomplishment he left Port Medea and headed down the coast to the sleek resort of Madagozar, where the elite of Medea had amused themselves in tropic luxury. Morrissey had always thought the place absurd. But it was still intact, still purring with automatic precision. He treated himself to a lavish holiday there. He raided the wine cellars of the best hotels. He breakfasted on tubs of chilled spikelegs caviar. He dozed in the warm sun. He bathed in the juice of gilliwog flowers. And he thought about absolutely nothing at all.

The day before the earthquake he flew back to Argoview Dunes. "So you chose not to go home after all," Dinoov said. Morrissey shook his head. "Earth was never my home. Medea was my home. I went home to Medea. And then I came back to this place because it was my last home. It pleases me that you're still here, Dinoov." "Where would I have gone?" the fux asked. "The rest of your people are migrating inland. I think it's to be nearer the holy mountain when the end comes. Is that right?" "That is right." "Why have you stayed, then?" "This is my home, too. I have so little time left that it matters not very much to me where I am when the ground shakes. But tell me, friend Morrissey: was your journey worth the taking?" "It was." "What did you see?"

What did you learn?" "I saw Medea, all of it," Morrissey said. "I never realized how much of your world we took. By the end we covered all the land that was worth covering, didn't we? And you people never said a word. You stood by and let it happen." The fux was silent. Morrissey said, "I understand now. You were waiting for the earthquake all along, weren't you? You knew it was coming long before we bothered to figure it out. How many times has it happened since fuxes first evolved on Medea? Every 7160 years the fuxes move to high ground and the balloons drift to Farside and the ground shakes and everything falls apart. And then the survivors reappear with new life already in the wombs and build again. How many times has it happened in fux history? So you knew when we came here, when we built our towns everywhere and turned them into cities, when we rounded you up and made you work for us, when we mixed our genes with yours and changed the microbes in the air so we'd be more comfortable here, that what we were doing wouldn't last forever, right? That was your secret knowledge, your hidden consolation, that this, too, would pass. Eh, Dinoov? And now it has passed. We're gone and the happy young fuxes are mating. I'm the only one of my kind left except for a few naked crazies in the bush." There was a glint in the fux's eyes. Amusement? Contempt? Compassion? Who could read a fux's eyes? "All along," Morrissey said, "you were all just waiting for the earthquake. Right? The earthquake that would make everything whole again. Well, now it's almost upon us. And I'm going to stand here alongside you and wait for the earthquake, too. It's my contribution to inter-species harmony. I'll be the human sacrifice. I'll be the one who atones for all that we did here. How does that sound, Dinoov? Is that all right with you?" "I wish," the fux said slowly, "that you had boarded one of those ships and gone back to Earth. Your death will give me no pleasure." Morrissey nodded. "I'll be back in a few minutes," he said, and went into his cabin. The cubes of Nadia and Paul and Danielle sat beside the screen. Not for years had he played them, but he jacked them into the slots now, and on the screen appeared the three people he had most loved in all the universe. They smiled at him, and Danielle offered a soft greeting, and Paul winked, and Nadia blew a kiss. Morrissey said, "It's almost over now. Today's earthquake day. I just wanted to say good-bye, that's all. I just wanted to tell you that I love you and I'll be with you soon." "Dan -- " Nadia said. "No. You don't have to say anything. I know you aren't really there, anyway. I just wanted to see you all again. I'm very happy right now." He took the cubes from their slots. The screen went dark. Gathering up the cubes, he carried them outside and carefully buried them in the soft moist soil of his garden. The fux watched him incuriously. "Dinoov?" Morrissey called. "One last question." "Yes, my friend?" "All the years we lived on Medea, we were never able to learn the name by which you people called your own world. We kept trying to find out, but all we were told was that it was taboo, and even when we coaxed a fux into telling us the name, the next fux would tell us an entirely different name, so we never knew. I ask you a special favor now, here at the end. Tell me what you call your world. Please. I need to know." The old fux said, "We call it Sanoon." "Sanoon? Truly?" "Truly," said the fux. "What does it mean?" "Why, it means the World," said Dinoov. "What else?" "Sanoon," Morrissey said. "It's a beautiful name." The earthquake was thirty minutes away -- plus or minus a little. Sometime in the past hour the white suns had disappeared behind Argo. Morrissey had not noticed that. But now, he heard a low rumbling roar, and then he felt a strange trembling in the ground, as though something mighty were stirring beneath his feet and would burst shortly into wakefulness. Not far offshore terrible waves rose and crashed. Calmly Morrissey said, "This is it, I think." Overhead a dozen gleaming balloons soared and bobbed in a dance that looked much like a dance of triumph. There was thunder in the air and a writhing in the heart of the world. In another moment the full force of the quake would be upon them and the crust of the planet would quiver and the first awful tremors would rip the land apart and the sea

would rise up and cover the coast. Morrissey began to weep, and not out of fear. He managed a smile. "The cycle's complete, Dinoov. Out of Medea's ruins Sanoon will rise. The place is yours again at last." ----- At [www.fictionwise.com](http://www.fictionwise.com) you can: \* Rate this story \* Find more stories by this author \* Get story recommendations

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