

Eyes I Dare Not Meet in Dreams

by Dan Simmons

Introduction

The summer of 1969 was very hot. It was especially hot where I spend it—living in the "ghetto" section of Germantown, Pennsylvania. Germantown, a pleasant little village in pre-Revolutionary War days, was an inner-city enclave of Philadelphia by 1969. The streets were hot. Tempers—racial and otherwise—were even hotter.

I rented the attic of a neighborhood Settlement House/ birth control clinic/community medical center for \$35 a month. It was a small attic. On evenings when the tiny second-floor wasn't busy serving as a waiting room, I could put it to use as a living room and use the tiny kitchen off of it. Most evenings it was busy. From my attic dormer windows, I watched several gang battles and one full-fledged riot that summer.

But it is the evenings seen from the front stoop I most remember: a brick canyon rich with human noise, the long sweep of Bringham Street's rowhouses illuminated in the sodium-yellow glow of "crime lights" while children jumped Double Dutch and played the dozens in the street, the endless parade of people strolling and laughing and chatting and making room on the step for visitors. To this day, confronted with the privacy-fenced sterility of suburban back-yard patios, I wonder what lunacy made us turn away from the front porch and the front step, the communal ownership of the street, to flee to these claus-trophobic plots of isolation.

During the day in that long-ago summer of 1969, I worked as a teacher's aide in the Upsal Day School for the Blind. The children often were not merely blind—some were also deaf and severely mentally retarded. Many of them had been this way since birth.

The wonderful thing about working in such an envi-ronment is that one learns quickly that human beings—even human beings with such terrible and relentless disadvantages—maintain not only the essence of human-ity and the full panoply of human desires and strengths, but also somehow retain the capacity to struggle, to achieve ... to *triumph*.

On the day after human beings first set foot on the moon in that hot summer of 1969, I celebrated the event with my class. They were very excited. Thomas, one of the young adolescents who had been blind and retarded since birth but who could hear, had taught himself to play the piano. Another hearing student—a young lady who had been brain-damaged as a result of extreme abuse as an infant—suggested that we end the celebration of the lu-nar landing by having Thomas play our national anthem.

He did.

He played "We Shall Overcome."

* * *

Bremen left the hospital and his dying wife and drove east to the sea. The roads were thick with Philadelphians fleeing the city for the weekend, and Bremen had to concentrate on traffic, leaving only the most tenuous of touches in his wife's mind. Gail was sleeping. Her dreams were fitful and drug-induced. She was seeking her mother through endlessly interlinked rooms filled with Victorian furniture.

As Bremen crossed the pine barrens, the images of the dreams slid between the evening shadows of reality. Gail awoke just as Bremen was leaving the parkway. For a few seconds after she awoke the pain was not with her. She opened her eyes, and the evening sunlight falling across the blue blanket made her think—for only a moment—that it was morning on the farm. Her thoughts reached out for her husband just as the pain and dizziness struck behind her left eye. Bremen grimaced and dropped the coin he was handing to the toll-booth attendant.

"What's the matter, buddy?"

Bremen shook his head, fumbled out a dollar, and thrust it blindly at the man. Throwing his change in the Triumph's cluttered console, he concentrated on pushing the car's speed to its limit. Gail's pain faded, but her confusion washed over him in a wave of nausea.

She quickly gained control despite the shifting curtains of fear that fluttered at the tightly held mindshield. She subvocalized, concentrating on narrowing the spectrum to a simulacrum of her voice.

"Hi, Jerry."

"Hi, yourself, kiddo." He sent the thought as he turned onto the exit for Long Beach Island. He shared the visual—the starting green of grass and pine trees overlaid with the gold of August light, the sports car's shadow leaping along the curve of asphalt. Suddenly the unmistakable salt freshness of the Atlantic came to him, and he shared that with her also.

The entrance to the seaside community was disappointing: dilapidated seafood restaurants, overpriced cinder-block motels, endless marinas. But it was reassuring in its familiarity to both of them, and Bremen concentrated on seeing all of it. Gail began to relax and appreciate the ride. Her presence was so real that Bremen caught himself turning to speak aloud to her. The pang of regret and embarrassment was sent before he could stifle it.

The island was cluttered with families unpacking station wagons and carrying late dinners to the beach. Bremen drove north to Barnegat Light. He glanced to his right and caught a glimpse of some fishermen standing along the surf, their shadows intersecting the white lines of breakers.

Monet, thought Gail, and Bremen nodded, although he had actually been thinking of Euclid.

Always the mathematician, thought Gail, and then her voice faded as the pain rose. Half-formed sentences shredded like clouds in a gale.

Bremen left the Triumph parked near the lighthouse and walked through the low dunes to the beach. He threw down the tattered blanket that they had carried so many times to just this spot. There was a group of children running along the surf. A girl of about nine, all long white legs in a suit two years too small, pranced on the wet sand in an intricate, unconscious choreography with the sea.

The light was fading between the Venetian blinds. A nurse smelling of cigarettes and stale talcum powder came in to change the IV bottle and take a pulse. The intercom in the hall continued to make loud, imperative announcements, but it was difficult to understand them through the growing haze of pain. The new doctor arrived about ten o'clock, but Gail's attention was riveted on the nurse who carried the blessed needle. The cotton swab on her arm was a delightful preliminary to the promised surcease of pain behind her eye. The doctor was saying something.

"...your husband? I thought he would be staying the night."

"Right here, doctor," said Gail. She patted the blanket and the sand.

Bremen pulled on his nylon windbreaker against the chill of the night. The stars were occluded by a high cloud layer that allowed only a few to show through. Far out to sea, an improbably long oil tanker, its lights blazing, moved along the horizon. The windows of the beach homes behind Bremen cast yellow rectangles on the dunes.

The smell of steak being grilled came to him on the breeze. Bremen tried to remember whether he had eaten that day or not. He considered going back to the convenience store near the lighthouse to get a sandwich but remembered an old Payday candy bar in his jacket pocket and contented himself with chewing on the rock-hard wedge of peanuts.

Footsteps continued to echo in the hall. It sounded as if entire armies were on the march. The rush of footsteps, clatter of trays, and vague chatter of voices reminded Gail of lying in bed as a child and listening to her parents' parties downstairs.

Remember the party where we met? thought Bremen.

Chuck Gilpen had insisted that Bremen go along. Bremen had never had much use for parties. He was lousy at small talk, and the psychic tension and neurobabble always left him with a headache from maintaining his mindshield tightly for hours. Besides, it was his first week teaching graduate tensor calculus and he knew that he should be home boning up on basic principles. But he had gone. Gilpen's nagging and the fear of being labeled a social misfit in his new academic community had brought Bremen to the Drexel Hill townhouse. The music was palpable half a block

away, and had he driven there by him-self, he would have gone home then. He was just inside the door—someone had pressed a drink in his hand—when suddenly he sensed another mindshield quite near him. He had put out a gentle probe, and immediately the force of Gail's thoughts swept across him like a searchlight.

Both were stunned. Their first reaction had been to raise their mindshields and roll up like frightened armadillos. Each soon found that useless against the unconscious probes of the other. Neither had ever encountered another telepath of more than primitive, untapped ability. Each had assumed that he or she was a freak—unique and unassailable. Now they stood naked before each other in an empty place. Suddenly, almost without volition, they flooded each other's mind with a torrent of images, self-images, half-memories, secrets, sensations, preferences, perceptions, hidden fears, echoes, and feelings. Nothing was held back. Every petty cruelty committed, sexual shame experienced, and prejudice harbored poured out along with thoughts of past birthday parties, ex-lovers, parents, and an endless stream of trivia. Rarely had two people known each other as well after fifty years of marriage. A few minutes later they met for the first time.

The beacon from Barnegat Light passed over Bremen's head every twenty-four seconds. There were more lights burning out at sea now than along the dark line of beach. The wind came up after midnight, and Bremen wrapped the blanket around himself tightly. Gail had refused the needle when the nurse had last made her rounds, but her mindtouch was still clouded. Bremen forced the contact through sheer strength of will. Gail had always been afraid of the dark. Many had been the times during their six years of marriage that he reached out in the night with his mind or arm to reassure her. Now she was the frightened little girl again, left alone upstairs in the big old house on Burlingame Avenue. There were things in the darkness beneath her bed.

Bremen reached through her confusion and pain and shared the sound of the sea with her. He told her stories about the antics of Gernisavien, their calico cat. He lay in the hollow of the sand to match his body with hers. Slowly she began to relax, to surrender her thoughts to his. She even managed to doze a few times, and her dreams were the movement of stars between clouds and the sharp smell of the Atlantic. Bremen described the week's work at the farm—the subtle beauty of his Fourier equations across the chalkboard in his study and the sunlit satisfaction of planting a peach tree by the front drive. He shared memories of their ski trip to Aspen and the sudden shock of a searchlight reaching in to the beach from an unseen ship out at sea. He shared what little poetry he had memorized, but the words kept sliding into images and feelings.

The night drew on, and Bremen shared the cold clarity of it with his wife, adding to each image the warm overlay of his love. He shared trivia and hopes for the future. From seventy-five miles away he reached out and touched her hand with his. When he drifted off to sleep for only a few minutes, he sent her his dreams.

Gail died just before the false light of dawn touched the sky.

The head of the mathematics department at Haverford urged Bremen to take a leave or a full sabbatical if he needed it. Bremen thanked him and resigned.

Dorothy Parks in the psychology department spent a long evening explaining the mechanics of grief to Bremen. "You have to understand, Jeremy," she said, "that moving is a common mistake made by people who have just suffered a serious loss. You may think that a new environment will help you forget, but it just postpones the inevitable confrontation with grief."

Bremen listened attentively and eventually nodded his agreement. The next day he put the farm up for sale, sold the Triumph to his mechanic on Conestoga Road, and took the bus to the airport. Once there, he went to the United Airlines counter and bought a ticket for the next departing flight.

For a year Bremen worked in central Florida, loading produce at a shipping center near Tampa. The next year Bremen did not work at all. He fished his way north from the Everglades to the Chattooga River in northern Georgia. In March he was arrested as a vagrant in Charleston, South Carolina. In May he spent two weeks in Washington, during which he left his room only to go to liquor stores and the Congressional Library. He was robbed and badly beaten outside of the Baltimore bus station at 2 a.m. on a June night. Leaving the hospital the next day, he returned to the bus station and headed north to visit his sister in New York. His sister and her husband insisted that he stay several weeks, but he left early on the third morning, propping a note up against the salt shaker on the kitchen table. In Philadelphia he sat in Penn Station and read the help-wanted ads. His progress was as predictable as the elegant, ellipsoid mathematics of a yo-yo's path.

Robby was sixteen, weighed one hundred seventy-five pounds, and had been blind, deaf, and retarded since birth. His mother's drug addiction during pregnancy and a placental malfunction had shut off Robby's senses as surely as a sinking ship condemns compartment after compartment to the sea by the shutting of watertight doors.

Robby's eyes were the sunken, darkened caverns of the irrevocably blind. The pupils, barely visible under drooping, mismatched lids, tracked separately in random movements. The boy's lips were loose and blubbery, his teeth gapped and carious. At sixteen, he already had the dark down of a mustache on his upper lip. His black hair stood out in violent tufts, and his eyebrows met above the bridge of his broad nose.

The child's obese body was balanced precariously on grub-white, emaciated legs. Robby had learned how to walk at age eleven but still would stagger only a few paces before toppling over. He moved in a series of pigeon-toed lurches, pudgy arms pulled as tight as broken wings, wrists cocked at an improbable angle, fingers

separate and extended. Like so many of the retarded blind, his favorite motion was a perpetual rocking with his hand fanning above his sunken eyes as if to cast shadows into the pit of darkness.

He did not speak. His only sounds were occasional, meaningless giggles and a rare squeal of protest, which sounded like nothing so much as an operatic falsetto.

Robby had been coming to the Chelton Day School for the Blind for six years. His life before that was unknown. He had been discovered by a social worker visiting Robby's mother in connection with a court-ordered methadone-treatment program. The door to the apartment had been left open, and the social worker heard noises. The boy had been sealed into the bathroom by the nailing of a piece of plywood over the bottom half of the door. There were wet papers on the tile floor, but Robby was naked and smeared with his own excrement. A tap had been left on, and water filled the room to the depth of an inch or two. The boy was rolling fitfully in the mess and making mewling noises.

Robby was hospitalized for four months, spent five weeks in the county home, and was then returned to the custody of his mother. In accordance with further court orders, he was dutifully bussed to Chelton Day School for five hours of treatment a day, six days a week. He made the daily trip in darkness and silence.

Robby's future was as flat and featureless as a line extending nowhere, holding no hope of intersection.

"Shit, Jer, you're going to have to watch after the kid tomorrow."

"Why me?"

"Because he won't go into the goddamn pool, that's why. You saw him today. Smitty just lowered his legs into the water, and the kid started swinging and screaming. Sounded like a bunch of cats had started up. Dr. Whilden says he stays back tomorrow. She says that the van is too hot for him to stay in. Just keep him company in the room till Jan McLellan's regular aide gets back from vacation."

"Great," said Bremen. He pulled his sweat-plastered shirt away from his skin. He had been hired to drive the school van, and now he was helping to feed, dress, and babysit the poor bastards. "Great. That's just great, Bill. What am I supposed to do with him for an hour and a half while you guys are at the pool?"

"Watch him. Try to get him to work on the zipper book. You ever see that page in there with the bra stuff—the eyes and hooks? Let him work on that. I use a practice on that with my eyes shut."

"Great," said Bremen. He closed his eyes against the glare of the sun.

Bremen sat on the front stoop and poured the last of the scotch into his glass. It was

long past midnight, but the narrow street teemed with children playing. Two black teenagers were playing the dozens while their friends urged them on. A group of little girls jumped double dutch under the streetlamp. Insects milled in the light and seemed to dance to the girls' singing. Adults sat on the steps of identical rowhouses and watched one another dully. No one moved much. It was very hot.

It's time to move on.

Bremen knew that he had stayed too long. Seven weeks working at the day school had been too much. He was getting curious. And he was beginning to ask questions about the kids.

Boston, perhaps. Farther north. Maine.

Asking questions and getting answers. Jan McLellan had told him about Robby. She had told him about the bruises on Robby's body, about the broken arm two years before. She told him about the teddy bear that a candy-striper had given the blind boy. It had been the first positive stimulus to evoke an emotion from Robby. He had kept the bear in his arms for weeks. Refused to go to X-ray without it. Then, a few days after his return home, Robby got into the van one morning, screaming and whining in his weird way. No teddy bear. Dr. Whilden called his mother only to be told that the God-damned toy was lost. "God-damned toy" were the mother's words, according to Jan McLellan. No other teddy bear would do. Robby carried on for three weeks.

So what? What can I do?

Bremen knew what he could do. He had known for weeks. He shook his head and took another drink, adding to the already-thickened mindshield that separated him from the senseless, pain-giving world.

Hell, it'd be better for Robby if I didn't try it.

A breeze came up. Bremen could hear the screams from a lot down the street where two allied gangs played a fierce game of pick-up ball. Curtains billowed out open windows. Somewhere a siren sounded, faded. The breeze lifted papers from the gutter and ruffled the dresses of the girls jumping rope.

Bremen tried to imagine a lifetime with no sight, no sound.

Fuck it! He picked up the empty bottle and went up-stairs.

The van pulled up the circular drive of the day school, and Bremen helped unload the children with a slow care born of practice, affection, and a throbbing headache.

Scotty emerged, smiling, hands extended to the unseen adult he trusted to be waiting. Tommy Pierson lurched out with knees together and hands pulled up to his chest. Bremen had to catch him or the frail boy would have fallen face first into the

pavement. Teresa jumped down with her usual gleeful cries, imparting inexact but slobberingly en-thusiastic kisses on everyone who touched her.

Robby remained seated after the others had exited. It took both Bremen and Smitty to get the boy out of the van. Robby did not resist; he was simply a mass of pliable but unresponsive fat. The boy's head tilted back in a disturbing way. His tongue lolled first from one corner of the slack mouth and then from the other. The short, pigeon-toed steps had to be coaxed out of him one at a time. Only the familiarity of the short walk to the classroom kept Robby moving at all.

The morning seemed to last forever. It rained before lunch, and for a while it looked as if the swimming would be canceled. Then the sun came out and illuminated the flowerbeds on the front lawn. Bremen watched sunlight dance on the moistened petals of Turk's prize roses and listened to the roar of the lawnmower. He realized that it was going to happen.

After lunch he helped them prepare for departure. The boys needed help getting into their suits, and it saddened Bremen to see pubic hair and a man's penis on the body of someone with a seven-year-old's mind. Tommy would always start masturbating idly until Bremen touched his arm and helped him with the elastic of the suit.

Then they were gone, and the hall, which had been filled with squealing children and laughing adults, was silent. Bremen watched the blue-and-white van disappear slowly down the drive. Then he turned back to the classroom.

Robby showed no awareness that Bremen had entered the room. The boy looked absurd dressed in a striped, green top and orange shorts that were too tight to button. Bremen thought of a broken, bronze Buddha he had seen once near Osaka. What if this child harbored some deep wisdom born of his long seclusion from the world?

Robby stirred, farted loudly, and resumed his slumped position.

Bremen sighed and pulled up a chair. It was too small. His knees stuck into the air, and he felt ridiculous. He grinned to himself. He would leave that night. Take a bus north. Hitchhike. It would be cooler in the country.

This would not take long. He need not even establish full contact. A one-way mindtouch. It was possible. A few minutes. He could look out the window for Robby, look at a picture book, perhaps put a record on and share the music. What would the boy make of these new impressions? A gift before leaving. Anonymous. Share nothing else. Better not to send any images of Robby, either. All right.

Bremen lowered his mindshield. Immediately he flinched and raised it again. It had been a long time since he had allowed himself to be so vulnerable. The thick, woolly blanket of the mindshield, thickened even further by alcohol, had become natural to him. The sudden surge of background babble—he thought of it as white noise—was

abrasive. It was like coming into a glaringly bright room after spending months in a cave. He directed his attention to Robby and lowered his barriers again. He tuned out the neurobabble and looked deeply into Robby's mind.

Nothing.

For a confused second Bremen thought that he had lost the focus of his power. Then he concentrated and was able to pick out the dull, sexual broodings of Turk out in the garden and the preoccupied fragments of Dr. Whilden's thoughts as she settled herself into her Mercedes and checked her stockings for runs. The receptionist was read-ing a novel—*The Plague Dogs*. Bremen read a few lines with her. It frustrated him that her eyes scanned so slowly. His mouth filled with the syrupy taste of her cherry coughdrop.

Bremen stared intensely at Robby. The boy was breathing asthmatically. His tongue was visible and heav-ily coated. Stray bits of food remained on his lips and cheeks. Bremen narrowed his probe, strengthened it, fo-cused it like a beam of coherent light.

Nothing.

No. Wait. There was—what?—an *absence* of some-thing. There was a hole in the field of mindbabble where Robby's thoughts should have been. Bremen realized that he was confronting the strongest mindshield he had ever encountered. Even Gail had not been able to concentrate a barrier of that incredible tightness. For a second Bremen was deeply impressed, even shaken, and then he realized the cause of it. Robby's mind was damaged. Entire seg-ments were probably inactive. With so few senses to rely on and such limited awareness, it was little wonder that the boy's consciousness—what there was of it—had turned inward. What at first seemed to Bremen to be a powerful mindshield was nothing more than a tight ball of intro-spection going beyond autism. Robby was truly alone.

Bremen was still shaken enough to pause a minute and take a few deep breaths. When he resumed, it was with even more care, feeling along the negative boundaries of the mindshield like a man groping along a rough wall in the dark. Somewhere there had to be an opening.

There was. Not an opening so much as a soft spot—a resilience set amidst the stone. Bremen half-perceived the flutter of underlying thoughts, much as a pedestrian senses the movement of trains in a subway under the pavement. He concentrated on building the strength of the probe until he felt his shirt beginning to soak with sweat. His vision and hearing were beginning to dim in the singleminded ex-ertion of his effort. No matter. Once initial contact was made, he would relax and slowly open the channels of sight and sound.

He felt the shield give a bit, still elastic but sinking slightly under his unrelenting pressure. He concentrated until the veins stood out in his temples. Unknown to him-self, he was grimacing, neck muscles knotting with the strain. The shield bent.

Bremen's probe was a solid ram battering a tight, gelatinous doorway. It bent further. He concentrated with enough force to move objects, to pulverize bricks, to halt birds in their flight.

The shield continued to bend. Bremen leaned forward as into a strong wind. There was only the concentrated force of his will. Suddenly there was a ripping, a rush of warmth, a falling forward. Bremen lost his balance, flailed his arms, opened his mouth to yell.

His mouth was gone.

He was falling. Tumbling. He had a distant, confused glimpse of his own body writhing in the grip of an epileptic seizure. Then he was falling again. Falling into silence. Falling into nothing.

Nothing.

Bremen was inside. Beyond. Was diving through layers of slow thermals. Colorless pinwheels tumbled in three dimensions. Spheres of black collapsed outward. Blinded him. There were waterfalls of touch, rivulets of scent, a thin line of balance blowing in a silent wind.

Supported by a thousand hands—touching, exploring, fingers in the mouth, palms along the chest, sliding along the belly, cupping the penis, moving on.

He was buried. He was underwater. Rising in the blackness. But he could not breathe. His arms began to move. Palms flailed against the viscous current. Up. He was buried in sand. He flailed and kicked. He moved upwards, pulled on by a vacuum that gripped his head in a vise. The substance shifted. Compacted, pressed in by a thousand unseen hands, he was propelled through the constricting aperture. His head broke the surface. He opened his mouth to scream, and the air rushed into his chest like water filling a drowning man. The scream went on and on.

ME!

Bremen awoke on a broad plain. There was no sky. Pale, peach-colored light diffused everything. The ground was hard and scaled into separate orange segments which receded to infinity. There was no horizon. The land was cracked and serrated like a floodplain during a drought. Above him were levels of peachlit crystal. Bremen felt that it was like being in the basement of a clear plastic skyscraper. An empty one. He lay on his back and looked up through endless stories of crystallized emptiness.

He sat up. His skin felt as if it had been toweled with sandpaper. He was naked. He rubbed his hand across his stomach, touched his pubic hair, found the scar on his knee from the motorcycle accident when he was seven-teen. A wave of dizziness rolled through him when he stood upright.

He walked. His bare feet found the smooth plates warm. He had no direction and no destination. Once he had walked a mile on the Bonneville Salt Flats just before

sunset. It was like that. Bremen walked. *Step on a crack, break your mother's back.*

When he finally stopped, it was in a place no different from any other. His head hurt. He lay back and imagined himself as a bottom-dwelling sea creature looking up through layers of shifting currents. The peach-colored light bathed him in warmth. His body was radiant. He shut his eyes against the light and slept.

He sat up suddenly, with nostrils flaring, ears actually twitching with the strain of trying to pinpoint a half-heard sound. Darkness was total.

Something was moving in the night.

Bremen crouched in the blackness and tried to filter out the sound of his own ragged breathing. His glandular system reverted to programming a million years old. His fists clenched, his eyes rolled uselessly in their sockets, and his heart raced.

Something was moving in the night.

He felt it nearby. He felt the power of it. It was huge, and it had no trouble finding its way in the darkness. The thing was near him, above him. Bremen felt the force of its blind gaze. He kneeled on the cold ground and hugged himself into a ball.

Something touched him.

Bremen fought down the impulse to scream. He was caught in a giant's hand—something rough and huge and not a hand at all. It lifted him. Bremen felt the power of it through the pressure, the pain in his ribs. The thing could crush him easily. Again he felt the sense of being viewed, inspected, weighed on some unseen balance. He had the naked, helpless, but somehow reassuring feeling one has while lying on the X-ray table, knowing that invis-ible beams are passing through you, searching for any malignancy, probing.

Something set him down.

Bremen heard no sound but sensed great footsteps re-ceding. A weight lifted from him. He sobbed. Eventually he uncurled and stood up. He called into the blackness, but the sound of his voice was tiny and lost and he was not even sure whether he had heard it at all.

The sun rose. Bremen's eyes fluttered open, stared into the distant brilliance, and then closed again before the fact registered fully in his mind. *The sun rose.*

He was sitting on grass. A prairie of soft, knee-high grass went off to the horizon in all directions. Bremen pulled a strand, stripped it, and sucked on the sweet mar-row. It reminded him of childhood afternoons. He began walking.

The breeze was warm. It stirred the grass and set up a soft sighing, which helped to

ease the headache that still throbbed behind his eyes. The walking pleased him. He contented himself with the feel of grass bending under his bare feet and the play of sunlight and wind on his body.

By early afternoon he realized that he was walking to-ward a smudge on the horizon. By late afternoon the smudge had resolved itself into a line of trees. Shortly before sunset he entered the edge of the forest. The trees were the stately elms and oaks of his Pennsylvania boy-hood. Bremen's long shadow moved ahead of him as he moved deeper into the forest.

For the first time he felt fatigue and thirst begin to work on him. His tongue was heavy, swollen with dryness. He moved leadenly through the lengthening shadows, oc-casionally checking the visible patches of sky for any sign of clouds. It was while he was looking up that he almost stumbled into the pond. Inside a protective ring of weeds and reeds lay the circle of water. A heavily laden cherry tree sent roots down the bank. Bremen took the last few steps forward, expecting the water to disappear as he threw himself into it.

It was waist-deep and cold as ice.

It was just after sunrise that she came. He spotted the movement immediately upon awakening. Not believing, he stood still, just another shadow in the shade of the trees. She moved hesitantly with the tentative step of the meek or the barefoot. The tasseled sawgrass brushed at her thighs. Bremen watched with a clarity amplified by the rich, horizontal sweeps of morning light. Her body seemed to glow. Her breasts, the left ever so slightly fuller than the right, bobbed gently with each high step. Her black hair was cut short.

She paused in the light. Moved forward again. Bremen's eyes dropped to her strong thighs, and he watched as her legs parted and closed with the heart-stopping inti-macy of the unobserved. She was much closer now, and Bremen could make out the delicate shadows along her fine ribcage, the pale, pink circles of areolae, and the spreading bruise along the inside of one arm.

Bremen stepped out into the light. She stopped, arms rising across her upper body in a second's instinctive movement, then moved toward him quickly. She opened her arms to him. He was filled with the clean scent of her hair. Skin slid across skin. Their hands moved across mus-cle, skin, the familiar terrain of vertebrae. Both were sob-bing, speaking incoherently. Bremen dropped to one knee and buried his face between her breasts. She bent slightly and cradled his head with her fingers. Not for a second did they relax the pressure binding them together.

"Why did you leave me?" he muttered against her skin. "Why did you go away?"

Gail said nothing. Her tears fell into his hair and her hands tightened against his back. Wordlessly she kneeled with him in the high grass.

Together they passed out of the forest just as the morning mists were burning away. In the early light the grass-covered hills gave the impression of being part of a tanned, velvety human torso, which they could reach out and touch.

They spoke softly, occasionally intertwining fingers. Each had discovered that to attempt telepathic contact meant inviting the blinding headaches that had plagued both of them at first. So they talked. And they touched. And twice before the day was over, they made love in the high, soft grass with only the golden eye of the sun looking down on them.

Late in the afternoon they crossed a rise and looked past a small orchard at a vertical glare of white.

"It's the farm!" cried Gail, with wonder in her voice. "How can that be?"

Bremen felt no surprise. His equilibrium remained as they approached the tall old building. The saggy barn they had used as a garage was also there. The driveway still needed new gravel, but now it went nowhere, for there was no highway at the end of it. A hundred yards of rusted wire fence that used to border the road now terminated in the high grass.

Gail stepped up on the front porch and peered in the window. Bremen felt like a trespasser or a weekend house browser who had found a home that might or might not still be lived in. Habit brought them around to the back door. Gail gingerly opened the outer screen door and jumped a bit as the hinge squeaked.

"Sorry," Bremen said. "I know I promised to oil that."

It was cool inside and dark. The rooms were as they had left them. Bremen poked his head into his study long enough to see his papers still lying on the oak desk and a long-forgotten transform still chalked on the blackboard. Upstairs, afternoon sunlight was falling from the skylight he had wrestled to install that distant September. Gail went from room to room, making small noises of appreciation, more often just touching things gently. The bedroom was as orderly as ever, with the blue blanket pulled tight and tucked under the mattress and her grandmother's patch-work quilt folded across the foot of the bed.

They fell asleep on the cool sheets. Occasionally a wisp of breeze would billow the curtains. Gail mumbled in her sleep, reaching out to touch him frequently. When Bremen awoke, it was almost dark, that late, lingering twilight of early summer.

There was a sound downstairs.

He lay without moving for a long while. The air was thick and still, the silence tangible. Then came another sound.

Bremen left the bed without waking Gail. She was curled on her side with one hand lifted to her cheek, the pillow moist against her lips. Bremen walked barefoot down the wooden stairs. He slipped into his study and carefully opened the

lower-right-hand drawer. It was there under the empty folders he had laid atop it. He removed the rags from the drawer.

The .38 Smith and Wesson smelled of oil and looked as new as it had the day his brother-in-law had given it to him. Bremen checked the chambers. The bullets lay fat and heavy, like eggs in a nest. The roughened grip was firm in his hand, the metal cool. Bremen smiled ruefully at the absurdity of what he was doing, but kept the weapon in his hand when the kitchen screen door slammed again.

He made no sound as he stepped from the hallway to the kitchen door. It was very dim, but his eyes had adapted. From where he stood he could make out the pale white phantom of the refrigerator. Its recycling pump chunked on while he stood there. Holding the revolver down at his side, Bremen stepped onto the cool tile of the kitchen floor.

The movement startled him, and the gun rose an inch or so before he relaxed. Gernisavien, the tough-minded lit-tle calico, crossed the floor to brush against his legs, paced back to the refrigerator, looked up at him meaningfully, then crossed back to brush against trim. Bremen kneeled to rub her neck absently. The pistol looked idiotic in his clenched hand. He loosened his grip.

The moon was rising by the time they had a late dinner. The steaks had come from the freezer in the basement, the ice-cold beers from the refrigerator, and there had been several bags of charcoal left in the garage. They sat out back near the old pump while the steaks sizzled on the grill. Gernisavien had been well fed earlier but crouched expectantly at the foot of one of the big, old wooden lawn chairs.

Both of them had slipped into clothes—Bremen into his favorite pair of cotton slacks and his light blue workshirt and Gail into the loose, white cotton dress she often wore on trips. The sounds were the same they had heard from this backyard so many times before: crickets, night birds from the orchard, the variations of frog sounds from the distant stream, an occasional flutter of sparrows in the outbuildings.

Bremen served the steaks on paper plates. Their knives made crisscross patterns on the white. They had just the steaks and a simple salad from the garden, fresh radishes and onions on the side.

Even with the three-quarter moon rising, the stars were incredibly clear. Bremen remembered the night they had lain out in the hammock and waited for *Skylab* to float across the sky like a windblown ember. He realized that the stars were even clearer tonight because there were no reflected lights from Philadelphia or the tollway to dim their glory.

Gail sat back before the meal was finished. *Where are we, Jerry?* The mindtouch was gentle. It did not bring on the blinding headaches.

Bremen took a sip of Budweiser. "What's wrong with just being home, kiddo?"

There's nothing wrong with being home. But where are we?

Bremen concentrated on turning a radish in his fingers. It had tasted salty, sharp, and cool.

What is this place? Gail looked toward the dark line of trees at the edge of the orchard. Fireflies winked against the blackness.

Gail, what is the last thing you can remember?

"I remember dying." The words hit Bremen squarely in the solar plexus. For a moment he could not speak or frame his thoughts.

Gail went on. "We've never believed in an afterlife, Jerry." *Hypocritical fundamentalist parents. Mother's drunken sessions of weeping over the Bible.* "I mean ... I don't ... How can we be..."

"No," said Bremen, putting his dish on the arm of the chair and leaning forward. "There may be an explanation."

Where to begin? The lost years, Florida, the hot streets of the city, the day school for retarded blind children. Gail's eyes widened as she looked directly at this period of his life. She sensed his mindshield, but did not press to see the things he withheld. *Robby. A moment's contact. Perhaps playing a record. Falling.*

He paused to take a long swallow of beer. Insects cho-rused. The house glowed pale in the moonlight.

Where are we, Jerry?

"What do you remember about awakening here, Gail?"

They had already shared images, but trying to put them into words sharpened the memories. "Darkness," she said. "Then a soft light. Rocking.

Being rocked. Holding and being held. Walking. Finding you."

Bremen nodded. He lifted the last piece of steak and savored the burnt charcoal taste of it. *It's obvious we're with Robby.* He shared images for which there were no adequate words. Waterfalls of touch. Entire landscapes of scent. A movement of power in the dark.

With Robby, Gail's thought echoed. ?????????? *In his mind.* "How?"

The cat had jumped into his lap. He stroked it idly and set it down. Gernisavien immediately raised her tail and turned her back on him. "You've read a lot of stories about telepaths. Have you ever read a completely satisfying explanation of how telepathy works? Why some people have it and others don't? Why some people's

thoughts are loud as bullhorns and others' almost imperceptible?"

Gail paused to think. The cat allowed herself to be rubbed behind the ears. "Well, there was a really good book—no, that only came close to describing what it *felt* like. No. They usually describe it as some sort of radio or TV broadcast. *You* know that, Jerry. We've talked about it enough."

"Yeah," Bremen said. Despite himself, he was already trying to describe it to Gail. His mindtouch interfered with the words. Images cascaded like printouts from an over-worked terminal. Endless Schrodinger curves, their plots speaking in a language purer than speech. The collapse of probability curves in binomial progression.

"Talk," Gail said. He marveled that after all the years of sharing his thoughts she still did not always see through his eyes.

"Do you remember my last grant project?" he asked.

"The wavefront stuff," she said.

"Yeah. Do you remember what it was about?"

"Holograms. You showed me Goldman's work at the university," she said. She seemed a soft, white blur in the dim light. "I didn't understand most of it, and I got sick shortly after that."

"It was based on holographic research," Bremen interrupted quickly, "but Goldman's research group was working up an analog of human consciousness ... of thought."

"What does that have to do with ... with *this*?" Gail asked. Her hand made a graceful movement that encompassed the yard, the night, and the bright bowl of stars above them.

"It might help," Bremen said. "The old theories of mental activity didn't explain things like stroke effects, generalized learning, and memory function, not to mention the act of thinking itself."

"And Goldman's theory does?"

"It's not really a theory yet, Gail. It was a new approach, using both recent work with holograms and a line of analysis developed in the Thirties by a Russian mathematician. That's where I was called in. It was pretty simple, really. Goldman's group was doing all sorts of complicated EEG studies and scans. I'd take their data, do a Fourier analysis of them, and then plug it all into various modifications of Schrodinger's wave equation to see whether it worked as a standing wave."

"Jerry, I don't see how this helps."

"Goddamn it, Gail, it *did* work. Human thought *can* be described as a standing

wavefront. Sort of a superhologram. Or, maybe more precisely, a hologram containing a few million smaller holograms."

Gail was leaning forward. Even in the darkness Bremen could make out the frown lines of attention that appeared whenever he spoke to her of his work. Her voice came very softly. "Where does that leave the mind, Jerry ... the brain?"

It was his turn to frown slightly. "I guess the best answer is that the Greeks and the religious nuts were right to separate the two," he said. "The brain could be viewed as kind of a ... well, electrochemical generator and interferometer all in one. But the mind ... ah, the *mind* is something a lot more beautiful than that lump of gray matter." He was thinking in terms of equations, sine waves dancing to Schrodinger's elegant tune.

"So there *is* a soul that can survive death?" Gail asked. Her voice had taken on the slightly defensive, slightly querulous tone that always entered in when she discussed religious ideas.

"Hell, no," said Bremen. He was a little irritated at having to think in words once again. "If Goldmann was right and the personality is a complex wavefront, sort of a series of low-energy holograms interpreting reality, then the personality certainly couldn't survive brain death. The template would be destroyed as well as the holographic generator."

"So where does that leave us?" Gail's voice was almost inaudible.

Bremen leaned forward and took her hand. It was cold.

"Don't you see why I got interested in this whole line of research? I thought it might offer a way of describing our ... uh ... ability."

Gail moved over and sat next to him in the broad, wooden chair. His arm went around her, and he could feel the cool skin of her upper arm. Suddenly a meteorite lanced from the zenith to the south, leaving the briefest of retinal echoes.

"And?" Gail's voice was very soft.

"It's simple enough," said Bremen. "When you visualize human thought as a series of standing wavefronts creating interference patterns that can be stored and propagated in holographic analogs, it begins to make sense."

"Uh-huh."

"It *does*. It means that for some reason our minds are resonant not only to wave patterns that we initiate but to transforms that others generate."

"Yes," said Gail, excited now, gripping his hand tightly. "Remember when we shared impressions of the talent just after we met? We both decided that it would be impossible to explain mindtouch to anyone who hadn't experienced it. It would be

like describing colors to a blind person..." She halted and looked around her.

"Okay," said Bremen. "Robby. When I contacted him, I tapped into a closed system. The poor kid had almost no data to use in constructing a model of the real world. What little information he did have was mostly painful. So for sixteen years he had happily gone about building his own universe. My mistake was in underestimating, hell, never even *thinking* about, the power he might have in that world. He grabbed me, Gail. And with me, you."

The wind came up a bit and moved the leaves of the orchard. The soft rustling had a sad, end-of-summer sound to it.

"All right," she said after a while, "that explains how *you* got here. How about me? Am I a figment of your imagination, Jerry?"

Bremen felt her shiver. Her skin was like ice. He took her hand and roughly rubbed some warmth back into it. "Come on, Gail, *think*. You weren't just a memory to me. For over six years we were essentially one person with two bodies. That's why when ... that's why I went a little crazy, tried to shut my mind down completely for a couple of years. You *were* in my mind. But my ego sense, or whatever the hell keeps us sane and separate from the bab-ble of all those minds, kept telling me that it was only the *memory* of you. You were a figment of my imagination ... the way we all are. Jesus, we were both dead until a blind, deaf, retarded kid, a goddamn vegetable, ripped us out of one world and offered us another one in its place."

They sat for a minute. It was Gail who broke the si-lence. "But how can it seem so real?"

Bremen stirred and accidentally knocked his paper plate off the arm of the chair. Gernisavien jumped to one side and stared reproachfully at them. Gail nudged the cat's fur with the toe of her sandal. Bremen squeezed his beer can until it dented in, popped back out.

"You remember Chuck Gilpen, the guy who dragged me to that party in Drexel Hill? The last I heard he was working with the Fundamental Physics Group out at the Lawrence Berkely Labs."

"So?"

"So for the past few years they've been hunting down all those smaller and smaller particles to get a hook on what's real. And when they get a glimpse of reality on its most basic and pervasive level, you know what they get?" Bremen took one last swig from the beer can. "They get a series of equations that show standing wavefronts, not too different from the squiggles and jiggles Goldmann used to send me."

Gail took a deep breath, let it out. Her question was al-most lost as the wind rose again and stirred the tree branches. "Where is Robby? When do we see *his* world?"

"I don't know," Bremen replied. He was frowning without knowing it. "He seems to

be allowing us to define what should be real. Don't ask me why. Maybe he's enjoy-ing a peek at a new universe. Maybe he can't do anything about it."

They sat still for a few more minutes. Gernisavien brushed up against them, irritated that they insisted on sit-ting out in the cold and dark. Bremen kept his mindshield raised sufficiently to keep from sharing the information that his sister had written a year ago to say that the little calico had been run over and killed in New York. Or that a family of Vietnamese had bought the farmhouse and had already added new rooms. Or that he had carried the .38 police special around for two years, waiting to use it on himself.

"What do we do now, Jerry?"

We go to bed. Bremen took her hand and led her into their home.

Bremen dreamed of fingernails across velvet, cold tile along one cheek, and wool blankets against sunburned skin. He watched with growing curiosity as two people made love on a golden hillside. He floated through a white room where white figures moved in a silence broken only by the heartbeat of a machine. He was swimming and could feel the tug of inexorable planetary forces in the pull of the riptide. He was just able to resist the deadly current by using all of his energy, but he could feel himself tiring, could feel the tide pulling him out to deeper water. Just as the waves closed over him he vented a final shout of de-spair and loss.

He cried out his own name.

He awoke with the shout still echoing in his mind. The details of the dream fractured and fled before he could grasp them. He sat up quickly in bed. Gail was gone.

He had taken two steps toward the stairway before he heard her voice calling to him from the side yard. He re-turned to the window.

She was dressed in a blue sundress and was waving her arms at him. By the time he was downstairs she had thrown half a dozen items into the picnic basket and was boiling water to make iced tea.

"Come on, sleepyhead. I have a surprise for you!"

"I'm not sure we need any more surprises," Bremen mumbled.

"*This* one we do," she said, and she was upstairs, hum-ming and thrashing around in the closet.

She led them, Gernisavien following reluctantly, to a trail that led off in the same general direction as the high-way that had once been in front of the house. It led up through pasture to the east and over the rise. They carried the picnic basket between them, Bremen repeatedly asking for clues, Gail repeatedly denying him any.

They crossed the rise and looked down to where the path ended. Bremen dropped the basket into the grass. In the valley where the Pennsylvania Turnpike once had been was an ocean.

"Holy shit!" Bremen exclaimed softly.

It was not the Atlantic. At least not the New Jersey Atlantic that Bremen knew. The seacoast looked more like the area near Mendocino where he had taken Gail on their honeymoon. Far to the north and south stretched broad beaches and high cliffs. Tall breakers broke against black rock and white sand. Far out to sea, the gulls wheeled and pivoted.

"Holy shit!" Bremen repeated.

They picnicked on the beach. Gernisavien stayed behind to hunt insects in the dune grass. The air smelled of salt and sea and summer breezes. It seemed they had a thousand miles of shoreline to themselves.

Gail stood and kicked off her dress. She was wearing a one-piece suit underneath. Bremen threw his head back and laughed. "Is that why you came back? To get a suit? Afraid the lifeguards would throw you out?"

She kicked sand at him and ran to the water. Three strides in and she was swimming. Bremen could see from the way her shoulders hunched that the water was freezing.

"Come on in!" she called, laughing. "The water's fine!"

He began walking toward her.

The blast came from the sky, the earth, the sea. It knocked Bremen down and thrust Gail's head underwater. She flailed and splashed to make the shallows, crawled gasping from the receding surf.

NO!!!

Wind roared around them and threw sand a hundred feet in the air. The sky twisted, wrinkled like a tangled sheet on the line, changed from blue to lemon-yellow to gray. The sea rolled out in a giant slack tide and left dry, dead land where it receded. The earth pitched and shifted around them. Lightning flashed along the horizon.

When the buckling stopped, Bremen ran to where Gail lay on the sand, lifted her with a few stern words.

The dunes were gone, the cliffs were gone, the sea had disappeared. Where it had been now stretched a dull expanse of salt flat. The sky continued to shift colors down through darker and darker grays. The sun seemed to be rising again in the eastern desert. No. The light was moving. Something was crossing the wasteland. Something was coming to them.

Gail started to break away, but Bremen held her tight. The light moved across the

dead land. The radiance grew, shifted, sent out streamers that made both of them shield their eyes. The air smelled of ozone and the hair on their arms stood out.

Bremen found himself clutching tightly to Gail and leaning toward the apparition as toward a strong wind. Their shadows leaped out behind them. The light struck at their bodies like the shock wave of a bomb blast. Through their fingers, they watched while the radiant figure approached. A double form became visible through the blaze of corona. It was a human figure astride a huge beast. If a god had truly come to Earth, this then was the form he would have chosen. The beast he rode was featureless, but besides light it gave off a sense of ... warmth? Softness?

Robby was before them, high on the back of his teddy bear.

TOO STRONG CANNOT KEEP

He was not used to language but was making the effort. The thoughts struck them like electrical surges to the brain. Gail dropped to her knees, but Bremen lifted her to her feet.

Bremen tried to reach out with his mind. It was no use. Once at Haverford he had gone with a promising student to the coliseum, where they were setting up for a rock concert. He had been standing in front of a scaffolded bank of speakers when the amplifiers were tested. It was a bit like that.

They were standing on a flat, reticulated plain. There were no horizons. White banks of curling fog were approaching from all directions. The only light came from the Apollo-like figure before them. Bremen turned his head to watch the fog advance. What it touched, it erased.

"Jerry, what..." Gail's voice was close to hysteria.

Robby's thoughts struck them again with physical force. He had given up any attempt at language, and the images cascaded over them. The visual images were vaguely distorted, miscolored, and tinged with an aura of wonder and newness. Bremen and his wife reeled from their impact.

A WHITE ROOM ... WHITE
THE HEARTBEAT OF A MACHINE
SUNLIGHT ON SHEETS
THE STING OF A NEEDLE
VOICES ... WHITE SHAPES MOVING
A GREAT WIND BLOWING
A CURRENT PULLING, PULLING,
PULLING

With the images came the emotional overlay, almost unbearable in its knife-sharp intensity: discovery, loneliness, wonder, fatigue, love, sadness, sadness, sadness.

Both Bremen and Gail were on their knees. Both were sobbing without being aware

of it. In the sudden stillness after the onslaught, Gail's thoughts came loudly. *Why is he doing this? Why won't he leave us alone?*

Bremen took her by the shoulders. Her face was so pale that her freckles stood out in bold relief.

Don't you understand, Gail? It's not him doing it.

Not??? Who ...?????

Gail's thoughts rolled in confusion. Splintered images and fragmented questions leaped between them as she struggled to control herself.

It's me. Gail. Me. Bremen had meant to speak aloud, but there was no sound now, only the crystalline edges of their thoughts. *He's been fighting to keep us together all along. I'm the one. I don't belong. He's been hanging on for me, trying to help me to stay, but he can't resist the pull any longer.*

Gail looked around in terror. The fog boiled and reached for them in tendrils. It was closing around the god figure on his mount. Even as they watched, his radiance dimmed.

Touch him, thought Bremen.

Gail closed her eyes. Bremen could feel the wings of her thought brushing by him. He heard her gasp.

My God, Jerry. He's just a baby. A frightened child!

If I stay any longer, I'll destroy us all. With that thought Bremen conveyed a range of emotions too complex for words. Gail saw what was in his mind and began to protest, but before she could pattern her thoughts, he had pulled her close and hugged her fiercely. His mindtouch amplified the embrace, added to it all the shades of feeling that neither language nor touch could communicate in full. Then he pushed her away from him, turned, and ran toward the wall of fog. Robby was visible as only a faint glow in the white mist, clutching the neck of his teddy bear. Bremen touched him as he passed. Five paces into the cold mist and he could see nothing, not even his own body. Three more paces and the ground disappeared. Then he was falling.

The room was white, the bed was white, the windows were white. Tubes ran from the suspended bottles into his arm. His body was a vast ache. A green plastic bracelet on his wrist said BREMEN, JEREMY H. The doctors wore white. A cardiac monitor echoed his heartbeat.

"You gave us all quite a scare," said the woman in white.

"It's a miracle," said the man to her left. There was a faint note of belligerence in his

voice. "The EEG scans were flat for five days, but you came out of it. A miracle."

"We've never seen a case of simultaneous seizures like this," said the woman. "Do you have a history of epi-lepsy?"

"The school had no family information," said the man. "Is there anyone we could contact for you?"

Bremen groaned and closed his eyes. There was distant conversation, the cool touch of a needle, and the noises of leavetaking. Bremen said something, cleared his throat as they turned, tried again.

"What room?"

They stared, glanced at each other.

"Robby," said Bremen in a hoarse whisper. "What room is Robby in?"

"Seven twenty-six," said the woman. "The intensive care ward."

Bremen nodded and closed his eyes.

He made his short voyage in the early hours of the morning when the halls were dark and silent except for the occasional swish of a nurse's skirt or the low, fitful groans of the patients. He moved slowly down the hallway, some-times clutching the wall for support. Twice he stepped into darkened rooms as the soft, rubber tread of quickly mov-ing nurses came his way. On the stairway he had to stop repeatedly, hanging over the hard, metal railing to catch his breath, his heart pounding.

Finally he entered the room. Robby was there in the far bed. A tiny light burned on the monitor panel above his head. The fat, faintly odorous body was curled up in a tight fetal position. Wrists and ankles were cocked at stiff angles. Fingers splayed out against the tousled sheets, Robby's head was turned to the side, and his eyes were open, staring blindly. His lips fluttered slightly as he breathed, and a small circle of drool had moistened the sheets.

He was dying.

Bremen sat on the edge of the bed. The thickness of the night was palpable around him. A distant chime sounded once and someone moaned. Bremen reached his hand out and laid a palm gently on Robby's cheek. He could feel the soft down there. The boy continued his la-bored, asthmatic snoring. Bremen touched the top of the misshapen head tenderly, almost reverently. The straight, black hair stuck up through his fingers. Bremen stood and left the room.

The suspension on the borrowed Fiat rattled over the rough bricks as Bremen swerved to avoid the streetcars. It was quite early, and the eastbound lane on the

Benjamin Franklin Bridge was almost empty. The double strip of highway across New Jersey was quiet. Bremen cautiously lowered his mindshield a bit and flinched as the surge of mindbabble pushed against his bruised mind. He quickly raised his shield. Not yet. The pain throbbed behind his eyes as he concentrated on driving. There had not been the slightest hint of a familiar voice.

Bremen glanced toward the glove compartment, thought of the rag-covered bundle there. Once, long ago, he had fantasized about the gun. He had half-convinced himself that it was some sort of magic wand—an instrument of release. Now he knew better. He recognized it for what it was—a killing instrument. It would never free him. It would not allow his consciousness to fly. It would only slam a projectile through his skull and end once and for all the mathematically perfect dance within.

Bremen thought of the weakening, quiet figure he had left in the hospital that morning. He drove on.

He parked near the lighthouse, packed the revolver in a brown bag, and locked the car. The sand was very hot when it lopped over the tops of his sandals. The beach was almost deserted as Bremen sat in the meager shade of a dune and looked out to sea. The morning glare made him squint.

He took off his shirt, set it carefully on the sand behind him, and removed the bundle from the bag. The metal felt cool, and it was lighter than he remembered. It smelled faintly of oil.

You'll have to help me. If there's another way, you'll have to help me find it.

Bremen dropped his mindshield. The pain of a million aimless thoughts stabbed at his brain like an icepick. His mindshield rose automatically to blunt the noise, but Bremen pushed down the barrier. For the first time in his life Bremen opened himself fully to the pain, to the world that inflicted it, to the million voices calling in their isolation and loneliness. He accepted it. He willed it. The great chorus struck at him like a giant wand. Bremen sought a single voice.

Bremen's hearing dimmed to nothing. The hot sand failed to register; the sunlight on his body became a distant, forgotten thing. He concentrated with enough force to move objects, to pulverize bricks, to halt birds in their flight. The gun fell unheeded to the sand.

From down the beach came a young girl in a dark suit two seasons too small. Her attention was on the sea as it teased the land with its sliding strokes and then withdrew. She danced on the dark strips of wet sand. Her sunburned legs carried her to the very edge of the world's ocean and then back again in a silent ballet. Suddenly she was distracted by the screaming of gulls. Startled, she halted her dance, and the waves broke over her ankles with a sound of triumph.

The gulls dived, rose again, wheeled away to the north. Bremen walked to the top of the dune. Salt spray blew in from the waves. Sunlight glared on water.

The girl resumed her waltz with the sea while behind her, squinting slightly in the clean, sharp light of morning, the three of them watched through Bremen's eyes.

-=*@*=-