

THE PERFECT HOST
by Theodore Sturgeon

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I

As Told By
RONNIE DANIELS

I WAS FOURTEEN then. I was sitting in the car waiting for dad to come out of the hospital. Dad was in there seeing mother. It was the day after dad told me I had a little sister.

It was July, warm, and I suppose about four in the afternoon. It was almost time for dad to come out. I half opened the car door and looked for him.

Someone called, "Mister! Mister!"

There was a red squirrel arcing across the thick green lawn, and a man with balloons far down the block. I looked at him. Nobody would call me mister. Nobody ever had, yet. I was too young.

"Mister!"

It was a woman's voice, but rough; rough and nasty. It was strong, and horrible for the pleading in it. No strong thing should beg. The sun was warm and the red of the brick buildings was warm, too. The squirrel was not afraid.

The grass was as green and smooth as a jelly bean.

Mother was all right, dad said, and dad felt fine. We would go to the movies, dad and I, close together with a closeness that never happened when things were regular, meals at home, mother up making breakfast every morning, and all that. This week it would be raids on the icebox and staying up late sometimes, because dad forgot about bedtime and anyway wanted to talk.

"Mister!"

Her voice was like a dirty mark on a new collar. I looked up.

She was hanging out of a window on the second floor of a near ell of the hospital. Her hair was dank and stringy, her eyes had mud in them, and her teeth were beautiful.

She was naked, at least to the waist. She was saying "Mister!" and she was saying it to me.

I was afraid, then. I got in the car and slammed the door.

"Mister! Mister! Mister!"

They were syllables that meant nothing. A "mis," a "ter"-- sounds that rasped across the very wound they opened. I put my hands over my ears, but by then the sounds were inside my head, and my hands just seemed to keep them there. I think I sobbed. I jumped out of the car and screamed, "What? What?"

"I got to get out of here," she moaned.

I thought, why tell me? I thought, what can I do? I had heard of crazy people, but I had never seen one. Grownup people were sensible, mostly. It was only kids who did crazy things, without caring how much sense they made. I was only fourteen.

"Mister," she said. "Go to--to....Let me think, now. ...Where I live. Where I live."

"Where do you live?" I asked.

"In Homeland," she said.

She sank down with her forehead on the sill, slowly, as if some big slow weight were on her shoulderblades. I could see only the top of her head, the two dank feathers of her hair, and the point of an elbow. Homeland was a new residential suburb.

"Where in Homeland?" It seemed to be important. To me, I mean, as much as to her.

"Twenty," she mumbled. "I have to remember it . . ." and her voice trailed off. Suddenly she stood bolt upright, looking back into the room as if something had happened there. Then she leaned far out.

"Twenty sixty-five," she snarled. "You hear? Twenty sixty-five. That's the one."

"Ron! Ronnie!"

It was dad, coming down the path, looking at me, looking at the woman.

"That's the one," said the woman again.

There was a flurry of white behind her. She put one foot on the sill and sprang out at me. I closed my eyes. I heard her hit the pavement.

When I opened my eyes they were still looking up at the window. There was a starched white

nurse up there with her fingers in her mouth, all of them, and eyes as round and blank as a trout's. I looked down.

I felt dad's hand on my upper arm. "Ronnie!"

I looked down. There was blood, just a little, on the cuff of my trousers. There was nothing else.

"Dad...."

Dad looked all around, on the ground.

He looked up at the window and at the nurse. The nurse looked at dad and at me, and then put her hands on the sill and leaned out and looked all around on the ground. I could see, in the sunlight, where her fingers were wet from being in her mouth.

Dad looked at me and again at the nurse, and I heard him draw a deep quivering breath as if he'd forgotten to breathe for a while and had only just realized it. The nurse straightened up, put her hands over her eyes and twisted back into the room.

Dad and I looked at each other. He said, "Ronnie--what was--what ..." and then licked his lips.

I was not as tall as my father, though he was not a tall man. He had thin, fine obedient hair, straight and starting high. He had blue eyes and a big nose and his mouth was quiet. He was broad and gentle and close to the ground, close to the earth.

I said, "How's mother?"

Dad gestured at the ground where something should be, and looked at me. Then he said, "We'd better go, Ron."

I got into the car. He walked around it and got in and started it, and then sat holding the wheel, looking back at where we had been standing. There was still nothing there. The red squirrel, with one cheek puffed out, came bounding and freezing across the path.

I asked again how mother was.

"She's fine. Just fine. Be out soon. And the baby. Just fine." He looked back carefully for traffic, shifted and let in the clutch. "Good as new," he said.

I looked back again. The squirrel hopped and arched and stopped, sitting on something. It sat on something so that it was perhaps ten inches off the ground, but the thing it sat on couldn't be seen. The squirrel put up its paws and popped a chestnut into them from its cheek, and put its tail along its back with the big tip curled over like a fern frond, and began to nibble. Then I couldn't see any more.

After a time dad said, "What happened there just as I came up?"

I said, "What happened? Nothing. There was a squirrel."

"I mean, uh, up at the window."

"Oh, I saw a nurse up there."

"Yes, the nurse." He thought for a minute. "Anything else?"

"No. What are you going to call the baby?"

He looked at me strangely. I had to ask him again about the baby's name.

"I don't know yet," he said distantly. "Any ideas?"

"No, dad."

We rode along for quite a while without saying anything. A little frown came and went between dad's eyes, the way it did when he was figuring something out, whether it was a definition at charades, or an income tax report, or a problem of my school algebra.

"Dad. You know Homeland pretty well, don't you?"

"I should. Our outfit agented most of those sites. Why?"

"Is there a Homeland Street, or a Homeland Avenue out there?"

"Not a one. The north and south ones are streets, and are named after trees. The east and west ones are avenues, and are named after flowers. All alphabetical. Why?"

"I just wondered. Is there a number as high as twenty sixty-five?"

"Not yet, though I hope there will be some day ... unless it's a telephone number. Why, Ron? Where did you get that number?"

"I dunno. Just thought of it. Just wondered. Where are we going to eat?"

We went to the Bluebird.

I suppose I knew then what had gotten into me when the woman jumped; but I didn't think of it, any more than a redhead goes around thinking to himself "I have red hair" or a taxi-driver says to himself "I drive a cab."

I knew, that's all. I just knew. I knew the purpose, too, but didn't think of it, any more than a man thinks and thinks of the place where he works, when he's on his way to work in the morning.

II

As Told By
BENTON DANIELS

RONNIE'S not an unusual boy. Oh, maybe a little quieter than most, but it takes all kinds. He's good in school, but not brilliant; averages in the low eighties, good in music and English and history, weak in math, worse in science than he could be if he cared a little bit more about it.

That day when we left the hospital grounds, though, there was something unusual going on. Yes, sir. I couldn't make head nor tail of it, and I must say I still can't.

Sometimes I think it's Ronnie, and sometimes I think it was something temporarily wrong with me. I'm trying to get it all straight in my mind, right from the start.

I had just seen Clee and the baby. Clee looked a little tired, but her color was wonderful. The baby looked like a baby--that is, like a little pink old man, but I told Clee she was beautiful and takes after her mother, which she will be and do, of course, when she gets some meat on her bones.

I came along the side path from the main entrance, toward where the car was parked. Ronnie was waiting for me there. I saw him as I turned toward the road, just by the north building.

Ronnie was standing by the car, with one foot on the running board, and he seemed to be talking with somebody in the second-floor window. I called out to him, but he didn't hear. Or he paid no attention. I looked up, and saw someone in the window. It was a woman, with a crazy face. I remember an impression of very regular white teeth, and scraggly hair. I don't think she had any clothes on.

I was shocked, and then I was very angry. I thought, here's some poor sick person gone out of her mind, and she'll maybe mark Ronnie for life, standing up there like that and maybe saying all sorts of things.

I ran to the boy, and just as I reached him, the woman jumped. I think someone came into the room behind her.

Now, look. I distinctly heard that woman's body hit. It was a terrible sound. And I remember feeling a wave of nausea just then, but for some reason I was sure then, and I'm sure now, that it had nothing to do with the thing I saw. That kind of shock-nausea only hits a person after the shock, not before or during. I don't even know why I think of this at all. It's just something I feel sure about, that's all.

I heard her body hit. I don't know whether I followed her body down with my eyes or not. There wasn't much time for that; she didn't fall more than twenty-five, maybe twenty-eight feet.

I heard the noise, and when I looked down--there wasn't anything there!

I don't know what I thought then. I don't know if a man does actually think at a time like that. I know I looked all around, looking for a hole in the ground or maybe a sheet of camouflage or something which might be covering the body. It was too hard to accept that disappearance. They say that a dog doesn't bother with his reflection in a mirror because he can't smell it, and he believes his nose rather than his eyes. Humans aren't like that, I guess. When your brain tells you one thing and your eyes another, you just don't know what to believe.

I looked back up at the window, perhaps thinking I'd been mistaken, that the woman would still be up there.

She was gone, all right. There was a nurse up there instead, looking down, terrified.

I returned to Ronnie and started to ask him what had happened. I stopped when I saw his face. It wasn't shocked, or surprised, or anything. Just relaxed. He asked me how his mother was.

I said she was fine. I looked at his face and marveled that it showed nothing of this horrible thing that had happened. It wasn't blank, mind you. It was just as if nothing had occurred at all, or as if the thing had been wiped clean out of his memory.

I thought at the moment that that was a blessing, and, with one more glance at the window--the nurse had gone-- I went to the car and got in. Ronnie sat next to me. I started the car, then looked back at the path. There was nothing there.

I suppose the reaction hit me then--that, or the thought that I had had a hallucination. If I had, I was naturally worried. If I had not, what had happened to Ronnie?

I drove off, finally. Ronnie made some casual small talk; I questioned him about the thing,

carefully, but he seemed honestly to know nothing about it. I decided to let well enough alone, at least for the time being. . . .

We had a quick dinner at the Bluebird, and then went home. I suppose I was poor company for the boy, because I kept finding myself mulling over the thing. We went to the Criterion, and I don't believe I heard or saw a bit of it. Then we picked up an evening paper and went home. He went to bed while I sat up with the headlines.

I found it down at the bottom of the third page. This is the item:

WOMAN DIES IN HOSPITAL LEAP

Mrs. Helmuth Stoye, of Homeland, was found yesterday afternoon under her window at Memorial Hospital, Carstairs. Dr. R. B. Knapp, head physician at the hospital, made a statement to the press in which he absolved the hospital and staff from any charges of negligence. A nurse, whose name is withheld, had just entered Mrs. Stoye's room when the woman leaped to her death.

"There was no way to stop her," said Dr. Knapp. "It happened too fast."

Dr. Knapp said that Mrs. Stoye had shown no signs of depression or suicidal intent on admission to the hospital four days ago. Her specific illness was not divulged.

Mrs. Stoye, the former Grace Korshak of Ferntree, is survived by her husband, a well-known printer here.

I went straight to the telephone and dialed the hospital. I heard the ringing signal once, twice, and then, before the hospital could answer, I hung up again. What could I ask them, or tell them? "I saw Mrs. Stoye jump." They'd be interested in that, all right. Then what? "She disappeared when she hit the ground." I can imagine what they'd say to that. "But my son saw it too!" And the question from hospital officials, a psychiatrist or two...Ronnie being questioned, after he had mercifully forgotten about the whole thing ... no. No; better let well enough alone.

The newspaper said Mrs. Stoye was found under her window. Whoever found her must have been able to see her.

I wonder what the nurse saw?

I went into the kitchen and heated some coffee, poured it, sweetened it, stirred it, and then left it untasted on the table while I put on my hat and got my car keys.

I had to see that nurse. First I tore out the newspaper article--I didn't want Ronnie, ever to see it.

III

As Told By
LUCILLE HOLDER

I HAVE seen a lot of ugly things as a trainee and as a nurse, but they don't bother me very much. It's not that the familiarity hardens one; it is rather that one learns the knack of channeling one's emotions around the ugly thing.

When I was a child in England I learned how to use this knack. I lived in Coventry, and though Herr Hitler's treatment of the city seems to have faded from the news and from fiction, the story is still vividly written on the memories of us who were there, and is read and reread more often than we care to say.

You can't know what this means until you know the grim happiness that the chap you've dug out of the ruins is a dead 'un, for the ones who still live horrify you so.

So--one gets accustomed to the worst. Further, one is prepared when a worse "worst" presents itself.

And I suppose that it was this very preparation which found me jolly well unprepared for what happened when Mrs. Stoye jumped out of her window.

There were two things happening from the instant I opened her door. One thing was what I did, and the other thing is what I felt.

These are the things I did:

I stepped into the room, carrying a washing tray on my arm. Everything seemed in order, except, of course, that Mrs. Stoye was out of bed. That didn't surprise me; she was ambulant. She

was over by the window; I suppose I glanced around the room before I looked directly at her.

When I saw her pajama top lying on the bedclothes I looked at her, though.

She straightened up suddenly as she heard me, barked something about "That's the one!" and jumped--dived, rather --right out. It wasn't too much of a drop, really--less than thirty feet, I'd say, but she went down head first, and I knew instantly that she hadn't a chance.

I can't remember setting down the washing tray; I saw it later on the bed. I must have spun around and set it there and rushed to the window.

I looked down, quite prepared for the worst, as I've said.

But what I saw was so terribly much worse than it should have been. I mean, an ill person is a bad thing to see, and an accident case can be worse, and burn cases, I think, are worst of all. The thing is, these all get worse in one direction. One simply cannot be prepared for something which is bad in a totally unexpected, impossible way.

There was nothing down there at all. Nothing. I saw Mrs. Stoye jump out, ran to the window, it couldn't have been more than three seconds later; and there was nothing there.

But I'm saying now how I felt. I mean to say first what I did, because the two are so different, from this point on.

I looked down; there was no underbrush, no flowerbed, nothing which could have concealed her had she rolled. There were some people--a stocky man and a young boy, perhaps fourteen or fifteen--standing nearby. The man seemed to be searching the ground as I was; I don't remember what the boy was doing. Just standing there. The man looked up at me; he looked badly frightened. He spoke to the boy, who answered quietly, and then they moved off together to the road.

I looked down once more, still could not see Mrs. Stoye, and turned and ran to the signal-button.

I rang it and then rushed out into the hall. I must have looked very distraught.

I ran right into Dr. Knapp, all but knocking him over, and gasped out that Mrs. Stoye had jumped.

Dr. Knapp was terribly decent. He led me back into the room and told me to sit down. Then he went to the window, looked down and grunted. Miss Flaggon came in just then. I was crying.

Dr. Knapp told her to get a stretcher and a couple of orderlies and take them outside, under this window. She asked no questions, but fled; when Dr. Knapp gives orders in that voice, people jump to it. Dr. Knapp ran out, calling to me to stay where I was until he came back. In spite of the excitement, he actually managed to make his voice gentle.

I went to the window after a moment and looked down. Two medical students were running across the lawn from the south building, and the orderlies with their stretcher, still rolled, were pelting down the path. Dr. Knapp, bag in hand, was close behind them.

Dr. Carstairs and Dr. Greenberg were under the window and already shunting away the few curious visitors who had appeared as if from out of the ground, the way people do after an accident anywhere. But most important of all, I saw Mrs. Stoye's body. It was lying crumpled up, directly below me, and there was no doubt of it that her neck was broken and her skull badly fractured. I went and sat down again.

Afterward Dr. Knapp questioned me closely and, I must say, very kindly. I told him nothing about the strange disappearance of the body. I expect he thought I was crying because I felt responsible for the death. He assured me that my record was in my favor, and it was perfectly understandable that I was helpless to stop Mrs. Stoye.

I apparently went quite to pieces then, and Dr. Knapp suggested that I take my two weeks' leave--it was due in another twenty days in any case--immediately, and rest up and forget this thing.

I said, "Perhaps I will."

I went out to the Quarters to bathe and change. And now I had better say how I felt during all this....

I was terrified when Mrs. Stoye jumped. When I reached the window right afterward, I was exactly as excited as one might expect.

But the instant I looked down, something happened. It wasn't anything I can describe, except to say that there was a change of attitude. That doesn't seem to mean much, does it? Well, I can only say this; that from that moment I was no longer frightened nor shocked nor horrified nor anything else. I remember putting my hands up to my mouth, and I must have given a perfect picture of a terrified nurse.

I was actually quite calm. I was quite cool as I ran to the bell and then out onto the hall. I collapsed, I cried, I sobbed, I produced a flood of tears and streaks for my face. But during every minute of it I was completely calm.

Now, I knew that was strange, but I felt no surprise at it. I knew that it could be called

dishonest. I don't know how to analyze it. I am a nurse, and a profound sense of duty has been drilled into me for years. I felt that it was my duty to cry, to say nothing about the disappearance of the body, to get the two weeks' leave immediately, and to do the other things which I have done and must do.

While I bathed I thought. I was still calm, and I suppose I behaved calmly; it didn't matter, for there was no one to see.

Two people had seen Mrs. Stoye jump besides myself. I realized that I must see them. I didn't think about the disappearing body. I didn't feel I had to, somehow, any more than one thinks consciously of the water in the pipes and heaters as one draws a bath. The thing was there, and needed no investigation.

But it was necessary to see that man and the boy. What I must do when I saw them required no thought either. That seemed all arranged, unquestionable, so evident that it needed no thought or definition.

I put away the white stockings and shoes with a feeling of relief, and slipped into underthings with a bit of lace on them, and sheer hose. I put on my wine rayon with the gored skirt, and the matching shoes. I combed my hair out and put it up in a roll around the back, cool and out of the way. Money, keys, cigarette case, knife, lighter, compact. All ready.

I went round by the administration offices, thinking hard. A man visits the hospital with his boy--it was probably his boy--and leaves the boy outside while he goes in. He would be seeing a wife, in all probability. He'd leave the boy outside only if the woman's condition were serious or if she were immediately post-operative or post-partem.

So many patients go in and out that I naturally don't remember too many of them; on the other hand, I can almost always tell a new patient or visitor ... marvelous the way the mind, unbidden, clocks and catalogs, to some degree, all that passes before it....

The chances were that these people, the man and the boy, were visiting a new patient. Maternity would be as good a guess as any, to start with.

It was well after nine o'clock, the evening of Mrs. Stoye's death, and the administration offices were deserted except for Miss Kaye, the night registrar. It was not unusual for nurses to check up occasionally on patients. I nodded to Miss Kaye and went back to the files. The maternity admission file gave me five names for the previous two days. I got the five cards out of the patients alphabetical and glanced over them. Two of these new mothers had other children; a Mrs. Korff, with three sons and a daughter at home, and a Mrs. Daniels who had one son. Here: "Previous children: One. Age this date: 14 yrs. 3 months." And further down: "Father age: 41."

It looked like a bull's eye. I remember feeling inordinately pleased with myself, as if I had assisted particularly well in an operation, or had done a bang-up job of critical first-aid.

I copied down the address of the Daniels family, and, carefully replacing all the cards, made my vacation checkout and left the building.

It seemed late to go calling, but I knew that I must. There had been a telephone number on the card, but I had ignored it. What I must do could not be done over the phone.

I found the place fairly easily, although it was a long way out in the suburbs on the other side of the town. It was a small, comfortable-looking place, set well back from the road, and with wide lawns and its own garage. I stepped up on the porch and quite shamelessly looked inside.

The outer door opened directly into the living room, without a foyer. There was a plate-glass panel in the door with a sheer curtain on the inside. I could see quite clearly. The room was not too large--fireplace, wainscoting, stairway in the left corner, big easy chairs, a studio couch--that sort of thing. There was a torn newspaper tossed on the arm of one fireside chair. Two end table lamps were lit. There was no one in the room.

I rang the bell, waited, rang again, peering in. Soon I saw a movement on the stairs. It was the boy, thin-looking and tousled, thumping down the carpeted steps, tying the cord of a dark-red dressing gown as he came. On the landing he stopped.

I could just hear him call "Dad!" He leaned over the banister, looking up and back. He called again, shrugged a shrug which turned into a stretch, and, yawning, came to the door. I hid the knife in my sleeve.

"Oh!" he said, startled, as he opened the door. Unaccountably, I felt a wave of nausea. Getting a grip on myself, I stepped inside before I spoke. He stood looking at me, flushing, a bit conscious, I think, of his bare feet, for he stood on one of them, trying to curl the toes of the other one out of sight.

"Daniels...." I murmured.

"Yes," he said. "I'm Ronald Daniels." He glanced quickly into the room. "Dad doesn't seem to

be ... I don't ... I was asleep."

"I'm so sorry."

"Gosh, that's all right," he said. He was a sweet little chap, not a man yet, not a child--less and less of a child as he woke up, which he was doing slowly. He smiled.

"Come in. Let me have your coat. Dad ought to be here now. Maybe he went for cigarettes or something."

It was as if a switch had been thrown and a little sign had lit up within him-- "Remember your manners."

Abruptly I felt the strangest compulsion--a yearning, a warming toward this lad. It was completely a sexual thing, mind you--completely. But it was as if a part of me belonged to a part of him . . . no; more the other way round. I don't know. It can't be described. And with the feeling, I suddenly knew that it was all right, it was all quite all right.

I did not have to see Mr. Daniels after all. That business would be well taken care of when the time came, and not by me. Better--much better--for him to do it.

He extended his hand for my coat. "Thank you so much," I said, smiling, liking him--more than liking him, in this indefinable way--"but I really must go. I--if your father--" How could I say it? How could I let him know that it was different now; that everything might be spoiled if his father knew I had come here? "I mean, when your father comes back...."

Startlingly, he laughed. "Please don't worry," he said. "I won't tell him you were here."

I looked at his face, his round, bland face, so odd with his short slender frame. That thing like a sense of duty told me not to ask, but I violated it. "You don't know who I am, do you?"

He shook his head. "Not really. But it doesn't matter. I won't tell dad."

"Good." I smiled, and left.

IV

As Told By
JENNIE BEAUFORT

YOU NEVER know what you're going to run up against when you're an information operator, I mean really, people seem to have the craziest idea of what we're there for. Like the man called up the other day and wanted to know how you spell conscientious--"Just conscientious," he says, "I know how to spell objector" and I gave him the singsong, you know, the voice with a smile, "I'm soreee! We haven't that infor-may-shun!" and keyed him out, thinking to myself, what a schmo. (I told Mr. Parker, he's my super, and he grinned and said it was a sign of the times; Mr. Parker's always making jokes.) And like the other man wants to know if he gets a busy signal and hangs on to the line, will the signal stop and the bell ring when the party he is calling hangs up.

I want to say to him, what do you think I am, Alexander Graham Bell or something, maybe Don Ameche, instead of which I tell him "One moment, sir, and I will get that information for you?" (not that I'm asking a question, you raise your voice that way because it leaves the customers breathless) and I nudge Sue and she tells me, Sue knows everything.

Not that everything like that comes over the wire, anything is liable to happen right there in the office or in the halls to say nothing of the stage-door Johnnies with hair oil and cellophane boxes who ask all the girls if they are Operator 23, she has such a nice voice.

Like the kid that was in here yesterday, not that he was on the prowl, he was too young, though five years from now he'll be just dreamy, with his cute round face and his long legs. Mr. Parker brought him in to me and told me the kid was getting up a talk on telephones for his civics class in high school, and tells the kid to just ask Miss Beaufort anything he wants to know and walks off rubbing his hands, which I can understand because he has made me feel good and made the kid feel good and has me doing all the work while he gets all the credit.

Not that I felt good just at that particular moment, my stomach did a small flip-flop but that has nothing to do with it; it must have been the marshmallow cake I had for my lunch, I should remember to keep away from the marshmallow when I have gravy-and-mashed, at least on weekdays.

Anyway this kid was cute, with his pleases and his thank you's and his little almost-bows-from-the-waist like a regular Lord Calvert. He asked me all sorts of questions and all smart too, but

he never asked them right out, I mean, he would say, "Please tell me how you can find a number so fast?" and then listen to every word I said and squiggle something down in his notebook. I showed him the alphabeticals and the central indexes and the assonance file (and you can bet I called it by its full name to that nice youngster) where we find out that a number for Meyer, say, is listed as Maior. And he wanted to know why it was that we never give a street address to someone who has the phone number, but only the other way around, and how we found out the phone number from just the street address.

So I showed him the street index and the checking index, which has the numbers all in order by exchanges with the street addresses, which is what we use to trace calls when we have to. And lots more. And finally he said he wanted to pretend he was me for a minute, to see if he understood everything. He even blushed when he said it. I told him to go ahead and got up and let him sit down. He sat there all serious and bright-eyed, and said, "Now, suppose I am you, and someone wants to know the number of--uh--Fred Zimmerman, who lives out at Bell Hill, but they have no street number."

And I showed him how to flip out the alphabetical, and how to ask the customer which one he wants if there should be more than one Fred Zimmerman. He listened so carefully and politely, and made a note in his book. Then he asked me what happens if the police or somebody has a phone number and wants the address, we'll say, out in Homeland, like Homeland 2050. I showed him the numerical index, and he whipped it out and opened it like an old hand. My, he caught on quickly. He made another note in his book ... well, it went on like that, and all in twenty minutes.

I bet he could take over from me any time and not give Mr. Parker a minute's worry, which is more than I can say for some of the girls who have been working here for years, like that Patty Mawson with her blonde hair and her awful New Look.

Well, that boy picked my brains dry in short order, and he got up and for a moment I thought he was going to kiss my hand like a Frenchman or a European, but he didn't. He just thanked me as if I had given him the crown jewels or my hand in marriage, and went out to do the same for Mr. Parker, and all I can say is, I wish one-tenth of the customers showed as much good house breaking.

V

As Told By
HELMUTH STOYE

GRACE ... Grace . . . Grace!

Oh, my little darling, my gentle, my soft little bird with the husky voice. Miss Funny-Brows. Little Miss Teeth. You used to laugh such a special laugh when I made up new names for you, Coral-cache, Cadenza, Viola-voice . . . and you'll never laugh again, because I killed you.

I killed you, I killed you.

Yesterday I stopped all the clocks.

I couldn't stand it. It was wrong; it was a violation. You were dead. I drew the blinds and sat in the dark, not really believing that it had happened--how could it happen? You're Grace, you're the humming in the kitchen, the quick footfalls in the foyer as I come up the porch steps.

I think for a while I believed that your coming back was the most real, the most obvious thing; in a moment, any moment, you would come in and kiss the nape of my neck; you would be smelling of vanilla and cut flowers, and you'd laugh at me and together we'd fling up the blinds and let in the light.

And then Tinkle struck--Tinkle, the eight-foot grandfather's clock with the basso profundo chime. That was when I knew what was real. It was real that you were dead, it was real. . . .

I got angry at that violation, that sacrilege, that clock. What right had the clock to strike, the hands to move? How could it go on? It was wrong. I got up and stopped it. I think I spoke to it, not harshly, angry as I was; I said, "You don't know, do you, Tinkle? No one's told you yet," and I caught it by its swinging neck and held it until its ticking brain was quiet.

I told all the clocks, one by one, that you were dead--the glowing Seth Thomas ship's clock, with its heavy threads and its paired syllables, and Drowsy the alarm, and the cuckoo with the cleft palate who couldn't say anything but "hook-who!"

A truck roared by outside, and I remember the new surge of fury because of it, and then the thought that the driver hadn't been told yet ... and then the mad thought that the news would spread from these silent clocks, from these drawn blinds, spread like a cloud-shadow over the world, and when it touched birds, they would glide to the ground and crouch motionless, with no movement in their jeweled eyes; when it touched machines, they would slow and stop; when it touched flowers they would close themselves into little soft fists and bend to knuckle the earth; when it touched people they would finish that stride, end that sentence, slowing, softening, and would sink down and be still.

There would be no noise or confusion as the world slipped into its stasis, and nothing would grow but silence. And the sun would hang on the horizon with its face thickly veiled, and there would be eternal dusk.

That was yesterday, and I was angry. I am not angry today. It was better, yesterday, the sitting in turmoil and uselessness, the useless raging up and down rooms so hollow, yet still so full of you they would not echo. It got dark, you see, and in good time the blinds were brighter than the walls around them again. I looked out, squinting through grainy eyelids, and saw a man walking by, walking easily, his hands in his pockets, and he was whistling.

After that I could not be angry any more, not at the man, not at the morning. I knew only the great cruel pressure of a fact, a fact worse than the fact of emptiness or of death-- the fact that nothing ever stops, that things must go on.

It was better to be angry, and to lose myself in uselessness. Now I am not angry and I have no choice but to think usefully. I have lived a useful life and have built it all on useful thinking, and if I had not thought so much and so carefully Grace would be here with me now, with her voice like a large soft breeze in some springtime place, and perhaps tickling the side of my neck with feather-touches of her moving lips ... it was my useful, questing, thirsty thought which killed her, killed her.

The accident was all of two years ago--almost two years anyway. We had driven all the way back from Springfield without stopping, and we were very tired. Grace and Mr. Share and I were squeezed into the front seat.

Mr. Share was a man Grace had invented long before, even before we were married. He was a big invisible fat man who always sat by the right-hand window, and always looked out to the side so that he never watched us.

But since he was so fat, Grace had to press up close to me as we drove.

There was a stake-bodied truck bowling along ahead of us, and in the back of it was a spry old man, or perhaps a weatherbeaten young man--you couldn't tell--in blue dungarees and a red shirt. He had a yellow woolen muffler tied around his waist, and the simple strip of material made all the difference between "clothes" and "costume."

Behind him, lashed to the bed of the truck just back of the cab, was a large bundle of burlap. It would have made an adequate seat for him, cushioned and out of the wind. But the man seemed to take the wind as a heady beverage and the leaping floor as a challenge.

He stood with his arms away from his sides and his knees slightly flexed, and rode the truck as if it were a live thing. He yielded himself to each lurch and bump, brought himself back with each recession, guarding his equilibrium with an easy virtuosity.

Grace was, I think, dozing; my shout of delighted laughter at the performance on the bounding stage before us brought her upright. She laughed with me for the laugh alone, for she had not looked through the windshield yet, and she kissed my cheek.

He saw her do it, the man on the truck, and he laughed with us.

"He's our kind of people," Grace said.

"A pixie," I agreed, and we laughed again.

The man took off an imaginary plumed hat, swung it low toward us, but very obviously toward Grace. She nodded back to him, with a slight sidewise turn of her face as it went down that symbolized a curtsy.

Then he held out his elbow, and the pose, the slightly raised shoulder over which he looked fondly at the air over his bent arm, showed that he had given his arm to a lady. The lady was Grace, who, of course, would be charmed to join him in the dance . . . she clapped her hands and crowed with delight, as she watched her imaginary self with the courtly, colorful figure ahead.

The man stepped with dainty dignity to the middle of the truck and bowed again, and you could all but hear the muted minuet as it began. It was a truly wonderful thing to watch, this pantomime; the man knew the ancient stately steps to perfection, and they were unflawed by the careening surface on which they were performed. There was no mockery in the miming, but simply the fullness of good, the sheer, unspoiled sharing of a happy magic.

He bowed, he took her hand, smiled back into her eyes as she pirouetted behind him. He stood

back to the line waiting his turn, nodding slightly to the music; he dipped ever so little, twice, as his turn came, and stepped gracefully out to meet her, smiling again.

I don't know what made me look up. We were nearing the Speedway Viaduct, and the truck ahead was just about to pass under it. High up over our heads was the great span, and as my eyes followed its curve, to see the late afternoon sun on the square guard posts which bounded the elevated road, three of the posts exploded outward, and the blunt nose of a heavy truck plowed through and over the edge, to slip and catch and slip again, finally to teeter to a precarious stop.

Apparently its trailer was loaded with light steel girders; one of them slipped over the tractor's crumpled shoulder and speared down toward us.

Our companion of the minuet, on the truck ahead, had finished his dance, and, turned to us, was bowing low, smiling, looking up through his eyebrows at us. The girder's end took him on the back of the head. It did not take the head off; it obliterated it. The body struck flat and lay still, as still as wet paper stuck to glass. The girder bit a large piece out of the tailgate and somersaulted to the right, while I braked and swerved dangerously away from it. Fortunately there were no cars coming toward us.

There was, of course, a long, mixed-up, horrified sequence of the two truck drivers, the one ahead and the one who came down later from the viaduct and was sick. Ambulances and bystanders and a lot of talk . . . none of it matters, really.

No one ever found out who the dead man was. He had no luggage and no identification; he had over ninety dollars in his pocket. He might have been anybody--someone from show business, or a writer perhaps, on a haywire vacation of his own wild devising. I suppose that doesn't matter either. What does matter is that he died while Grace was in a very close communion with what he was doing, and her mind was wide open for his fantasy. Mine is, generally, I suppose; but at that particular moment, when I had seen the smash above and the descending girder, I was wide awake, on guard. I think that had a lot to do with what has happened since. I think it has everything to do with Grace's--with Grace's--

There is no word for it. I can say this, though. Grace and I were never alone together again until the day she died. Died, died, Grace is dead.

Grace!

I can go on with my accursed useful thinking now, I suppose.

Grace was, of course, badly shaken, and I did what I could for her over the next few weeks. I tried my best to understand how it was affecting her. (That's what I mean by useful thinking--trying to understand. Trying and trying--prying and prying. Arranging, probing, finding out. Getting a glimpse, a scent of danger, rooting it out--bringing it out into the open where it can get at you.) Rest and new clothes and alcohol rubdowns; the theater, music and music, always music, for she could lose herself in it, riding its flux, feeling and folding herself in it, following it, sometimes, with her hushed, true voice, sometimes lying open to it, letting it play its colors and touches over her.

There is always an end to patience, however. After two months, knowing her as I did, I knew that there was more here than simple shock. If I had known her less well--if I had cared less, even, it couldn't have mattered.

It began with small things. There were abstractions which were unusual in so vibrant a person. In a quiet room, her face would listen to music; sometimes I had to speak twice and then repeat what I had said.

Once I came home and found supper not started, the bed not made. Those things were not important--I am not a fusspot nor an autocrat; but I was shaken when, after calling her repeatedly I found her in the guest room, sitting on the bed without lights. I had no idea she was in there; I just walked in and snapped on the light in the beginnings of panic because she seemed not to be in the house; she had not answered me.

And at first it was as if she had not noticed the sudden yellow blaze from the paired lamps; she was gazing at the wall, and on her face was an expression of perfect peace. She was wide awake--at least her eyes were. I called her: "Grace!"

"Hello, darling," she said quietly. Her head turned casually toward me and she smiled--oh, those perfect teeth of hers!--and her smile was only partly for me; the rest of it was inside, with the nameless things with which she had been communing.

I sat beside her, amazed, and took her hands. I suppose I spluttered a bit, "Grace, are you all right? Why didn't you answer? The bed's not--have you been out? What's happened? Here--let me see if you have a fever."

Her eyes were awake, yes; but riot awake to me, to here and now. They were awake and open to some elsewhere matters. . . . She acquiesced as I felt her forehead and cheeks for fever, and

while I was doing it I could see the attention of those warm, pleased, living eyes shifting from the things they had been seeing, to me. It was as if they were watching a scene fade out while another was brought in on a screen, so that for a second all focusing points on the first picture were lost, and there was a search for a focusing point on the second.

And then, apparently, the picture of Helmuth Stoye sitting next to her, holding one of her hands, running his right palm across her forehead and down her cheek, came into sharp, true value, and she said, "Darling! You're home! What happened? Holiday or strike? You're not sick?"

I said, "Sweetheart, it's after seven."

"No!" She rose, smoothed her hair in front of the mirror. Hers was a large face and her appeal had none of the doll qualities, the candy-and-peaches qualities of the four-color ads. Her brow and cheekbones were wide and strong, and the hinges of her jaw were well-marked, hollowed underneath. Her nostrils were flared and sensuously tilted and her shoulders too wide to be suitable for fashion plates or pinups. But clothes hung from those shoulders with the graceful majesty of royal capes, and her breasts were large, high, separated and firm.

Yet for all her width and flatness and strength, for all her powerfully-set features, she was woman all through; and with clothes or without, she looked it.

She said, "I had no idea . . . after seven! Oh, darling, I'm sorry. You poor thing, and no dinner yet. Come help me," and she dashed out of the room, leaving me flapping my lips, calling, "But Grace! Wait! Tell me first what's the mat--"

And when I got to the kitchen she was whipping up a dinner, efficiently, deftly, and all my questions could wait, could be interrupted with "Helmuth, honey, open these, will you?" "I don't know, b'loved; we'll dig it out after supper. Will you see if there're any French fries in the freezer?"

And afterward she remembered that "The Pearl" was playing at the Ascot Theater, and we'd missed it when it first came to town, and this was the best night . . . we went, and the picture was fine, and we talked of nothing else that night.

I could have forgotten about that episode, I suppose. I could have forgotten about any one of them--the time she turned her gaze so strangely inward when she was whipping cream, and turned it to butter because she simply forgot to stop whipping it when it was ready; the times she had the strong, uncharacteristic urges to do and feel things which had never interested her before--to lose herself in distances from high buildings and tall hills, to swim underwater for long, frightening minutes; to hear new and ever new kinds of music--saccharine fox-trots and atonal string quartets, arrangements for percussion alone and Oriental modes.

And foods--rattlesnake ribs, moo goo gai pan, curried salmon with green rice, Paella, with its chicken and clams, headcheese, canolas, sweet-and-pungent pork; all these Grace made herself, and well.

But in food as in music, in new sensualities as in new activities, there was no basic change in Grace. These were additions only; for all the exoticism of the dishes, for example, we still had and enjoyed the things she had always made--the gingered leg of lamb, the acorn squash filled with creamed onions, the crepes suzettes.

She could still be lost in the architecture of Bach's "Passacaglia and Fugue" and in the raw heartbeat of the Haggard-Bauduc "Big Noise from Winnetka." Because she had this new passion for underwater swimming, she did not let it take from her enjoyment of high-board diving. Her occasional lapses from efficiency, as in the whipped cream episode, were rare and temporary. Her sometime dreaminess, when she would forget appointments and arrangements and time itself, happened so seldom, that in all justice, they could have been forgotten, or put down, with all my vaunted understanding, to some obscure desire for privacy, for alone-ness.

So--she had everything she had always had, and now more. She was everything she always had been, and now more. She did everything she had always done, and now more. Then what, what on earth and in heaven, was I bothered, worried, and--and afraid of?

I know now. It was jealousy. It was--one of the jealousies.

There wasn't Another Man. That kind of poison springs from insecurity--from the knowledge that there's enough wrong with you that the chances are high that another man--any other man--could do a better job than you in some department of your woman's needs. Besides, that kind of thing can never be done by the Other Man alone; your woman must cooperate, willfully and consciously, or it can't happen. And Grace was incapable of that.

No; it was because of the sharing we had had. My marriage was a magic one because of what we shared; because of our ability to see a red gold leaf, exchange a glance and say never a word, for we knew so well each other's pleasure, its causes and expressions and associations. The pleasures were not the magic; the sharing was.

A poor analogy: you have a roommate who is a very dear friend, and together you have

completely redecorated your room. The colors, the lighting, the concealed shelves and drapes, all are a glad communion of your separated tastes. You are both proud and fond of your beautiful room . . . and one day you come home and find a new television set. Your roommate has acquired it and brought it in to surprise you. You are surprised, and you are happy, too.

But slowly an ugly thing creeps into your mind. The set is a big thing, an important, dominating thing in the room and in the things for which you use the room. And it is his--not mine or ours, but his. There is his unspoken, unde-manded authority in the choice of programs in the evenings; and where are the chess games, the folk singing with your guitar, the long hours of phonograph music?

They are there, of course, ready for you every moment; no one has taken them away. But now the room is different. It can continue to be a happy room; only a petty mind would resent the new shared riches; but the fact that the source of the riches is not shared, was not planned by you both. This changes the room and everything in it, the colors, the people, the shape and warmth.

So with my marriage. A thing had come to Grace which made us both richer but I did not share that source; and damn, damn my selfishness, I could not bear it; if I could not share it I wanted her deprived of it. I was gentle; beginning with, "How do you feel, sweetheart? But you aren't all right; what were you thinking of? It couldn't be 'nothing' . . . you were giving more attention to it than you are to me right now!"

I was firm; beginning with, "Now look, darling; there's something here that we have to face. Please help. Now, exactly why are you so interested in hearing that Hindemith sketch? You never used to be interested in music like that.

It has no melody, no key, no rhythm; it's unpredictable and ugly. I'm quoting you, darling; that's what you used to say about it. And now you want to soak yourself in it. Why? Why? What has changed you? Yes--people must grow and change; I know that. But--growing so fast, so quickly, in so many different directions! Tell me, now. Tell me exactly why you feel moved to hear this thing at this time."

And--I was angry, beginning with, "Grace! Why didn't you answer me? Oh, you heard me, did you? What did I say? Yes; that's right; you did . . . then why didn't you answer? Well? Not important? You'll have to realize that it's important to me to be answered when I speak to you!"

She tried. I could see her trying. I wouldn't stop. I began to watch her every minute. I stopped waiting for openings, and made them myself. I trapped her. I put on music in which I knew she would be lost, and spoke softly, and when she did not answer, I would kick over my chair with a shout and demand that she speak up. She tried.... Sometimes she was indignant, and demanded the peace that should be her right. Once I struck her.

That did it. Oh, the poor, brutalized beloved!

Now I can see it; now!

She never could answer me, until the one time. What could she have said? Her "I don't know!" was the truth. Her patience went too far, her anger not far enough, and I know that her hurt was without limits.

I struck her, and she answered my questions. I was even angrier after she had than I had been before, for I felt that she had known all along, that until now she had withheld what she knew; and I cursed myself for not using force earlier and more often. I did. For not hitting Grace before!

I came home that night tired, for there was trouble at the shop; I suppose I was irascible with the composers, but that was only because I had not slept well the night before, which was because--anyway, when I got home, I slammed the door, which was not usual, and, standing there with my raincoat draped over one shoulder, looking at the beautiful spread on the coffee table in front of the fireplace, I demanded, "What's that for?"

There were canapes and dainty round and rolled and triangular sandwiches; a frosty bluish beverage twinkling with effervescence in its slender pitcher; there were stars and flowers of tiny pickles, pastes and dressings, a lovely coral potato chip, and covered dishes full of delicate mysteries.

There were also two small and vivid bowls of cut blooms, beautifully arranged.

"Why, for us. Just for us two," she said.

I said, "Good God. Is there anything the matter with sitting up to a table and eating like a human being?" Then I went to hang up the coat.

She had not moved when I came back; she was still standing facing the door, and perhaps a quarter of her welcoming smile was frozen on her face.

No, I said to myself, no you don't. Don't go soft, now. You have her on the run; let's break this thing up now, all at once, all over the place. The healing can come later. I said, "Well?"

She turned to me, her eyes full of tears. "Helmuth ..." she said weakly. I waited. "Why did

you ... it was only a surprise. A pretty surprise for you. We haven't been together for so long . . . you've been . . ."

"You haven't been yourself since that accident," I said coldly. "I think you like being different. Turn off the tears, honey. They'll do you no good."

"I'm not different!" she wailed; and then she began to cry in earnest. "I can't stand it!" she moaned, "I can't, I can't . . . Helmuth, you're losing your mind. I'm going to leave you. Leave you ... maybe for just a while, maybe for .."

"You're going to what?" I whispered, going very close to her.

She made a supreme effort and answered, flatly, looking me in the eye, "I'm going, Helmuth. I've got to."

I think if she'd seen it coming she would have stood back; perhaps I'd have missed her. I think that if she'd expected it, she would have fled after I hit her once. Instead she stood still, unutterably shocked, unmoving, so it was easy to hit her again.

She stood watching me, her face dead, her eyes, and, increasingly, the flames of the fingermarks on her bleached cheeks burning. In that instant I knew how she felt, what her mind was trying frantically to do.

She was trying to think of a way to make this a dream, to explain it as an accident, to find some excuse for me; and the growing sting in her beaten cheeks slowly proved and reproved that it was true. I know this, because the tingling sting of my hands was proving it to me.

Finally she put one hand up to her face. She said, "Why?"

I said, "Because you have kept a secret from me."

She closed her eyes, swayed. I did not touch her. Still with her eyes closed, she said:

"It wants to be left alone. It feeds on vital substance, but there is always an excess . . . there is in a healthy person, anyway. It only takes a small part of that excess, not enough to matter, not enough for anyone but a jealous maniac like you to notice. It lives happily in a happy person, it lives richly in a mind rich with the experiences of the senses, feeding only on what is spare and extra. And you have made me unfit, forever and ever, with your prodding and scarring, and because you have found it out it can never be left alone again, it can never be safe again, it can never be safe while you live, it can never be content, it can never leave me while I live, it can never, it can never, it can never."

Her voice did not trail off--it simply stopped, without a rise or fall in pitch or volume, without any normal human aural punctuation. What she said made no sense to me.

I snarled at her--I don't think it was a word--and turned my back. I heard her fall, and when I looked she was crumpled up like a castoff, empty, trodden-on white paper box.

I fought my battle between fury and tenderness that night, and met the morning with the dull conclusion that Grace was possessed, and that what had possessed her had gone mad . . . that I didn't know where I was, what to do; that I must save her if I could, but in any case relentlessly track down and destroy the--the-- No, it hadn't a name . . .

Grace was conscious, docile, and had nothing to say. She was not angry or resentful; she was nothing but--obedient. She did what she was told, and when she finished she stopped until she was told to do something else.

I called in Doc Knapp. He said that what was mostly wrong with her was outside the field of a medical doctor, but he didn't think a little regimented rest and high-powered food therapy would hurt.

I let him take her to the hospital. I think I was almost glad to see her go. No I wasn't. I couldn't be glad. How could I be glad about anything? Anyway, Knapp would have her rested and fed and quieted down and fattened up and supplied with two alcohol rubs a day, until she was fit to start some sort of psychotherapy. She always liked alcohol rubs. She killed her--she died just before the second alcohol rub, on the fourth day . . . Knapp said, when he took her away, "I can't understand it, Helmuth. It's like shock, but in Grace that doesn't seem right at all. She's too strong, too alive."

Not any more, she isn't.

My mind's wandering. Hold on tight, you . . . Hold . . .

Where am I? I am at home. I am sitting in the chair. I am getting "up. Uh! I have fallen down. Why did I fall down? Because my leg was asleep. Why was it asleep? Because I have been sitting here all day and most of the night without moving. The doorbell is ringing. Why is the doorbell ringing? Because someone wants to come in. Who is it? Someone who comes visiting at two o' eight in the morning, I know that because I started the clock again and Tinkle says what time it is. Who visits at two o' eight in the morning? Drunks and police and death. There is a small person's shadow on the frosted door, which I open. "Hello, small person, Grace is dead."

It is not a drunk it is not the police it is Death who has a child's long lashes and small

hands, one to hold up a blank piece of paper for me to stare at, one to slide the knife between my ribs, feel it scrape on my breastbone . . . a drama, Enter Knife Left Center, and I fall back away from the door, my blood leaping lingering after the withdrawn blade, Grace, Grace, treasure me in your cupped hands--

VI

As Told By
LAWRENCE DELEHANTY

I GOT THE call on the car radio just before half-past two. Headquarters had a phone tip of some funny business out on Poplar Street in Homeland. The fellow who phoned was a milk truck dispatcher on his way to work. He says he thought he saw someone at the door of this house stab the guy who came to the door, close the door and beat it.

I didn't see anyone around. There were lights on in the house--in what seemed to be the living room, and in the hallway just inside the door. I could see how anyone passing by could get a look at such a thing if it had happened.

I told Sam to stay in the prowl car and ran up the path to the house.

I knocked on the door, figuring maybe there'd be prints on the bell push. There was no answer. I tried again, and finally opened the door, turning the knob by the shaft, which was long enough for me to get hold of without touching the knob.

It had happened all right. The stiff was just inside the door. The guy was on his back, arms and legs spread out, with the happiest look on his face I ever saw. No kidding-- that guy looked as if he'd just been given a million dollars. He had blood all over his front.

I took one look and went back and called Sam. He came up asking questions and stopped asking when he saw the stiff. "Go phone," I told him, "and be careful. Don't touch nothin'."

While he was phoning I took a quick squint around. There was a few dirty dishes in the kitchen sink and on the table, and half a bottle of some liqueur on an end table in the living room, sitting right on the polished wood, where it'd sure leave a ring. I'd say this guy had been in there some time without trying to clean up any.

I inched open the drawer in the big sideboard in the dining room and all the silver was there. None of the drawers in the two bedrooms were open; it looked like a grudge killing of some kind; there wasn't no robbery I could see.

Just as I came back down the stairs the doorbell rang. Sam came out of the front room and I waved him back. "There goes our prints on the bell," I said. "I'll get it." I pussyfooted to the door and pulled it wide open, real sudden.

"Mr. Stoye?" says a kid standing there. He's about fourteen, maybe, small for his age. He's standing out there, three o'clock in the morning, mind you, smiling real polite, just like it was afternoon and he'd come around to sell raffle tickets. I felt a retch starting in my stomach just then--don't know why. The sight of the stiff hadn't bothered me none. Maybe something I ate. I swallowed it down and said, "Who are you?"

He said, "I would like to see Mr. Stoye."

"Bub," I said, "Mr. Stoye isn't seeing anybody just now. What do you want?"

He squinted around me and saw the stiff. I guess I should've stopped him but he had me off guard. And you know, he didn't gasp or jump back or any of the things you expect anyone to do. He just straightened up, and he smiled.

"Well," he says, sort of patting his jacket pocket, "I don't s'pose there's anything I can do now," and he smiles at me, real bright. "Well, good night," he says, and turns to go.

I nabbed him and spun him inside and shut the door. "What do you know about this?" I asked him.

He looked at the stiff, where I nodded, and he looked at me. The stiff didn't bother him.

"Why, nothing," he said. "I don't know anything at all. Is that really Mr. Stoye?"

"You know it is."

"I think I did know, all right," he said. "Well, can I go home now? Dad doesn't know I'm out."

"I bet he doesn't. Let's see what you got in your pockets."

He didn't seem to mind. I frisked him. Inside the jacket pocket was a jump knife--one of those Army issue paratrooper's clasp knives with a spring; touch the button and click! you've got four and a half inches of razor steel sticking out of your fist, ready for business. A lot of 'em got out in war surplus. Too many. We're always finding 'em in carcasses.

I told him he'd have to stick around. He frowned a little bit and said he was worried about his father, but I didn't let that make no difference. He gave his name without any trouble. His name was Ronnie Daniels. He was a clean-cut little fellow, just as nice and polite as I ever saw.

Well, I asked him all kinds of questions. His answers just didn't make no sense. He said he couldn't recall just what it was he wanted to see Stoye about. He said he had never met Stoye and had never been out here before. He said he got the address from knowing the phone number; went right up to the telephone company and wormed it out of one of the girls there. He said he didn't remember at all where he got the number from. I looked at the number just out of curiosity; it was Homeland 2065, which didn't mean nothing to me.

After that there wasn't anything to do until the homicide squad got there. I knew the kid's old man, this Daniels, would have to get dragged into it, but that wasn't for me to do; that would be up to the detective looey. I turned the kid over to Sam.

I remember Sam's face just then; it turned pale. I asked him what was the matter but he just swallowed hard and said he didn't know; maybe it was the pickles he had with his midnight munch. He took the kid into the front room and they got into a fine conversation about cops and murders. He sure seemed to be a nice, healthy, normal kid.

Quiet and obedient--you know. I can't really blame Sam for what happened.

The squad arrived--two carloads, sirens and all, making so much noise I thought sure Stoye would get up and tell 'em to let him rest in peace--and in they came--photogs, print men, and the usual bunch of cocky plainclothesmen. They swarmed all over.

Flick was the man in charge, stocky, tough, mad at everybody all the time, especially on the night detail. Man, how he hated killers that worked at night and dragged him away from his pinochle!

I told the whole story to him and his little book.

"His name's Tommy," I said, "and he says he lives at--"

"His name's Ronnie," says Sam, from behind me.

"Hey," I says. "I thought I told you to stay with him."

"I had to go powder my nose," says Sam. "My stomach done a flip-flop a while back that had me worried. It's okay. Brown was dusting in the room there when I went out. And besides, that's a nice little kid. He wouldn't--"

"Brown!" Flick roared.

Brown came out of the living room. "Yeah, chief."

"You done in the front room?"

"Yeah; everything I could think of. No prints except Stove's, except on the phone. I guess they'd be Sam's."

"The kid's all right?"

"Was when I left," said Brown, and went back into the living room. Flick and me and Sam went into the front room.

The kid was gone.

Sam turned pale.

"Ronnie!" he bellows. "Hey you, Ronnie!"

No answer.

"You hadda go powder your big fat nose," says Flick to Sammy. Sam looked bad. The soft seats in a radio car feel good to a harness bull, and I think Sam decided right then that he'd be doing his job on foot for quite a while.

It was easy to see what had happened. Sammy left the room, and then Brown got finished and went out, and in those few seconds he was alone the kid had stepped through the short hall into the kitchen and out the side door.

Sam looked even worse when I suddenly noticed that the ten-inch ham slicer was gone from the knife rack; that was one of the first things I looked at after I saw Stoye had been stabbed. You always look for the kitchen knives in a home stabbing.

Flick turned to Sam and opened his mouth, and in that moment, believe me, I was glad I was me and not him. I thought fast.

"Flick," I said, "I knew where that kid's going. He was all worried about what his old man would think. Here--I got his address in my book."

Flick snapped, "Okay. Get down there right away. I'll call what's-his-name--Daniels--from here and tell him to wait for the kid and hold him if he shows up before you do. Get down there, now,

and hurry. Keep your eyes peeled on the way; you might see him on the street. Look out for that knife. Kelly, get a general alarm out for that kid soon's I'm off the phone. Or send it from your car."

He turned back to me, thumbed at Sam. "Take him with you," he says, "I want him out of my sight. And if his hot damned nose gets shiny again see he don't use your summons book."

We ran out and piled into the car and took off. We didn't go straight to Daniels' address. Sam hoped we would see the kid on the way; I think he had some idea of a heroic hand-to-hand grapple with the kid in which maybe he'd get a little bit stabbed in line of duty, which might quiet Flick down some.

So we cut back and forth between Myrtle Avenue and Varick; the kid could've taken a trolley on one or a bus on the other. We found out soon enough that he'd done neither; he'd found a cab; and I'd like to know who it was drove that hack.

He must've been a jet pilot.

It was real dark on Daniels' street. The nearest streetlight was a couple hundred feet away, and there was a big maple tree in Daniels' yard that cast thick black shadow all over the front of the house. I missed the number in the dark and pulled over to the curb; I knew it must be somewhere around here.

Me and Sam got out and Sam went up on the nearest porch to see the house number; Daniels was two doors away. That's how it was we happened to be far to the left of the house when the killer rang Daniels' bell.

We both saw it, Sam and me, that small dark shadow up against Daniels' front door. The door had a glass panel and there was some sort of a night light on inside, so all we saw was the dark blob waiting there, ringing on the bell. I guess Daniels was awake, after Flick's phone call.

I grabbed Sam's arm, and he shook me free. He had his gun out. I said, "What are you gonna do?" He was all hopped up, I guess.

He wanted to make an arrest or something. He wanted to be The Man here. He didn't want to go back on a beat. He said, "You know how Stoye was killed. Just like that."

That made sense, but I said, "Sam! You're not going to shoot a kid!"

"Just wing him, if it looks--"

Just then the door opened. There wasn't much light. I saw Daniels, a stocky, balding man with a very mild face, peering out. I saw an arm come up from that small shadowy blob. Then Sam fired twice. There was a shrill scream, and the clatter of a knife on the porch. I heard Ronnie yell, "Dad! Dad!"

Then Sam and I were pounding over to the house. Daniels was frozen there, staring down onto the porch and the porch steps.

At the foot of the steps the kid was huddled. He was unconscious. The ham slicer gleamed wickedly on the steps near his hand.

I called out, "Mr. Daniels! We're the police. Better get back inside."

And together Sam and I lifted up the kid. He didn't weigh much. Going inside, Sam tripped over his big flat feet and I swore at him.

We put the kid down on the couch. I didn't see any blood. Daniels was dithering around like an old lady. I pushed him into a chair and told him to stay there and try to take it easy.

Sam went to phone Flick. I started going over the kid.

There was no blood.

There were no holes in him, either; not a nick, not a graze. I stood back and scratched my head.

Daniels said, "What's wrong with him? What happened?"

Inside, I heard Sam at the phone. "Yeah, we got 'im. It was the kid all right. Tried to stab his old man. I winged him. Huh? I don't know. We're looking him over now. Yeah."

"Take it easy," I said again to Daniels. He looked rough. "Stay fight there."

I went to the door, which was standing open. Over by the porch rail I saw something shining green and steel blue. I started over to it, tripped on something yielding, and went flat on my face. Sam came running out. "What's the--uh!" and he came sailing out and landed on top of me. He's a big boy.

I said, "My goodness, Sam, that was careless of you," or words to that effect, and some other things amounting to maybe Flick had the right idea about him.

"Damn it, Delehanty," he says, "I tripped on something. What are you doing sprawled out here, anyway?"

"I was looking for--" and I picked it up, the green and steel blue thing. It was a Finnish sheath knife, long and pointed, double razor edges, scrollwork up near the hilt. Blood, still a bit tacky, in the scrollwork.

"Where'd that come from?" grunted Sam, and took it "Hey! Flick just told me the medic says Stoye was stabbed with a two-edged knife. You don't suppose--"

"I don't suppose nothin'," I said, getting up. "On your feet, Sam. Flick finds us like this, he'll think we're playing mumblety-peg . . . tell you what, Sam; I took a jump knife off the kid out there, and it only had a single edge."

I went down the steps and picked it up. Sam pointed out that the kid had never had a chance to use the ham slicer.

I shrugged that off. Flick was paid the most for thinking--let him do most of the thinking. I went to the side of the door, and looked at the bell push to get an idea as to how it might take prints, and then went inside. Sam came straight in and tripped again.

"Pick up ya feet!"

Sam had fallen to his knees this time. He growled something and, swinging around, went to feeling around the porch floor with his hands. "Now it's patty-cake," I said. "For Pete's sake, Sam--"

Inside Daniels was on the floor by the couch, rubbing the kid's hands, saying, real scared like, "Ronnie! Ronnie!"

"Delehanty!"

Half across the room, I turned. Sam was still on his knees just outside the door, and his face was something to see. "Delehanty, just come here, will you?"

There was something in his voice that left no room for a wisecrack. I went right to him. He motioned me down beside him, took my wrist and pushed my hand downward.

It touched something, but--there was nothing there.

We looked at each other, and I wish I could write down what that look said.

I touched it again, felt it. It was like cloth, then like flesh, yielding, then bony.

"It's the Invisible Man!" breathed Sam, bug-eyed.

"Stop talking nonsense," I said thickly. "And besides, it's a woman. Look here."

"I'll take your word for it," said Sam, backing away. "Anyhow, I'm a married man."

Cars came, screaming as usual. "Here's Flick."

Flick and his mob came streaming up the steps.

"What's going on here? Where's the killer?"

Sam stood in front of the doorway, holding his hands out like he was unsnarling traffic. He was shaking. "Walk over this side," he said, "or you'll step on her."

"What are you gibbering about? Step on who?"

Sam flapped his hands and pointed at the floor. Flick and Brown and the others all looked down, then up again. I don't know what got into me. I just couldn't help it. I said, "He found a lady-bug and he don't want you to step on it."

Flick got so mad, so quick, he didn't even swear.

We went inside. The medic was working over the boy, •who was still unconscious. Flick was demanding, "Well! Well? What's the matter with him?"

"Not a thing I can find out, not without a fluoroscope and some blood tests. Shock, maybe."

"Shot?" gasped Daniels.

"Definitely not," said the M.O.

Flick said, very, very quietly, "Sam told me over the phone that he had shot the boy. What about this, Delehanty? Can you talk sense, or is Sam contagious?"

I told him what we had seen from the side of the house. I told him that we couldn't be sure who it was that rang the bell, but that we saw whoever it was raise a knife to strike, and then Sam fired, and then we ran up and found the kid lying at the bottom of the steps. We heard a knife fall.

"Did you hear him fall down the steps?"

"No," said Sam.

"Shut up, you," said Flick, not looking at him. "Well, Delehanty?"

"I don't think so," I said, thinking hard. "It all happened so fast."

"It was a girl."

"What was a girl? Who said that?"

Daniels shuffled forward. "I answered the door. A girl was there. She had a knife. A long one, pointed. I think it was double-edged."

"Here it is," said Sam brightly.

Flick raised his eyes to heaven, moved his lips silently, and took the knife.

"That's it," said Daniels. "Then there was a gunshot, and she screamed and fell."

"She did, huh? Where is she?"

"I--I don't know," said Daniels in puzzlement.

"She's still there," said Sam smugly. I thought, oh-oh. This is it.

"Thank you, Sam," said Flick icily. "Would you be good enough to point her out to me?"

Sam nodded. "There. Right there," and he pointed.

"See her, lying there in the doorway," I piped up.

Flick looked at Sam, and he looked at me. "Are you guys trying to--uk!" His eyes bulged, and his jaw went slack.

Everyone in the room froze. There, in plain sight on the porch, lay the body of a girl. She was quite a pretty girl, small and dark. She had a bullet hole on each side of her neck, a little one here and a great big one over here.

VII

Told by the Author
THEODORE STURGEON

I DON'T much care for the way this story's going.

You want to write a story, see, and you sit down in front of the mill, wait until that certain feeling comes to you, hold off a second longer just to be quite sure that you know exactly what you want to do, take a deep breath, and get up and make a pot of coffee.

This sort of thing is likely to go for days, until you are out of coffee and can't get more until you can pay for same, which you can do by writing a story and selling it; or until you get tired of messing around and sit down and write a yarn purely by means of knowing how to do it and applying the knowledge.

But this story's different. It's coming out as if it were being dictated to me, and I'm not used to that. It's a haywire sort of yarn; I have no excuses for it, and can think of no reasons for such a plot having unfolded itself to me. It isn't that I can't finish it up; far from it--all the plot factors tie themselves neatly together at the end, and this with no effort on my part at all.

This can be demonstrated; it's the last chapter that bothers me. You see, I didn't write it. Either someone's playing a practical joke on me, or-- No. I prefer to believe someone's playing a practical joke on me.

Otherwise, this thing is just too horrible.

But about that demonstration, here's what happened:

Flick never quite recovered from the shock of seeing that sudden corpse. The careful services of the doctor were not required to show that the young lady was dead, and Flick recovered himself enough to start asking questions.

It was Daniels who belatedly identified her as the nurse he had seen at the hospital the day Mrs. Stoye killed herself. The nurse's name was Lucille Holder. She had come from England as a girl; she had a flawless record abroad and in this country. The head doctor told the police on later investigation, that he had always been amazed at the tremendous amount of work Miss Holder could turn out, and had felt that inevitably some sort of a breakdown must come. She went all to pieces on Mrs. Stoye's death, and he sent her on an immediate vacation.

Her movements were not difficult to trace, after she left the administrative office, where she ascertained Mr. Daniels' address. She went first to his house, and the only conclusion the police could come to was that she had done so on purpose to kill him. But he was not there: he, it seems, had been trying to find her at the hospital at the time! So she left. The following night she went out to Stoye's, rang the bell, and killed him.

Ronnie followed her, apparently filled with the same unaccountable impulse, and was late. Miss Holder went then to Daniels' house and tried to kill him, but was shot by the policeman, just as Ronnie, late again, arrived.

Ronnie lay in a coma for eight weeks. The diagnosis was brain fever, which served as well as anything else. He remembered little, and that confused. He did, however, vouch for the nurse's visit to his home the night of Mrs. Stoye's death. He could not explain why he had kept it a

secret from his father, nor why he had had the impulse to kill Mr. Stoye (he admitted this impulse freely and without any horror), nor how he had happened to think of finding Stoye's address through the information operator at the telephone company.

He simply said that he wanted to get it without asking any traceable questions. He also admitted that when he found that Mr. Stoye had already been killed, he felt that he must secure another weapon, and go and kill his father.

He says he remembers thinking of it without any emotion whatsoever at the time, though he was appalled at the thought after he came out of the coma.

"It's all like a story I read a long time ago," he said. "I don't remember doing these things at all; I remember seeing them done."

When the policeman shot Miss Holder, Ronnie felt nothing; the lights went out, and he knew nothing until eight weeks later.

These things remained unexplained to the participants:

Mrs. Stoye's disappearing body. The witnesses were the two Daniels and Miss Holder. Miss Holder could not report it; Ronnie did not remember it; Mr. Daniels kept his own counsel.

Lucille Holder's disappearing body. Daniels said nothing about this either, and for the rest of his life tried to forget it. The members of the homicide detail and the two prowler car men tried to forget it, too. It was not entered in the records of the case. It seemed to have no bearing, and all concerned were happy to erase it as much as possible. If they spoke of it at all, it was in terms of mass hypnosis-- which was reasonably accurate, at that. . . .

Lucille Holder's motive in killing Mr. Stoye and in trying to kill Mr. Daniels. This could only be guessed at; it was simple to put it down to the result of a nervous breakdown after overwork.

Mrs. Stoye's suicide. This, too, was attributed to a mounting mental depression and was forgotten as quickly as possible.

And two other items must be mentioned. The radio patrolman Sam was called on the carpet by Detective Lieutenant Flick for inefficiency in letting the boy Ronnie go. He was not punished, oddly enough. He barely mentioned the corpse of Lucille Holder, and that there were witnesses to the fact that apparently the lieutenant had not seen it, though he had stepped right over it on the way into Daniels' house. Flick swore that he was being framed, but let Sam alone thereafter.

The other item has to do with Miss Jennie Beaufort, an operator in the Information Office of the telephone company. Miss Beaufort won a prize on a radio quiz--a car, a plane, two stoves, a fur coat, a diamond ring, a set of SwingFree Shoulder pads, and a 38-day South American cruise. She quit her job the following day, took the cruise, enjoyed it mightily, learned on her return that income tax was due on the valuation of all her prizes, sold enough to pay the tax, and was so frightened at the money it took that she went back to work at her old job.

So, you see, these tangled deaths, these mad actions, were all explained, forgotten, rationalized--made to fit familiar patterns, as were Charles Fort's strange lights and shapes in the night, as were the Flying Discs, the disappearance of Lord Bathhurst, the teleportation of Kaspar Hauser, and the disappearance of the crew of the Mary Celeste.

I leave it to the reader to explain the following chapter. I found it by and in my typewriter yesterday afternoon (I'd been writing this story all the previous night). Physically, it was the most extraordinary looking manuscript I have ever seen.

In the first place the paper bails had apparently been released most of the time, and letters ran into each other and lines crossed and recrossed each other with wild abandon. In the second place there were very few capital letters; I was reminded of Don Marquis's heroic Archy the cockroach, who used to write long effusions while Mr. Marquis was asleep, by jumping from one key to the other.

But Archy was not heavy enough to operate the shift key, and so he eschewed the upper case characters. In the third place, the spelling was indescribable. It was a mixture of phonetics and something like Speed-writing, or ABC shorthand. It begins this way:

i mm a thngg wch livz n fantsy whr tru fantsy z fond n th mynz v mn.

I couldn't possibly inflict it all on you in its original form. It took me the better part of two hours just to get the pages in order--they weren't numbered, of course.

After I plowed through it myself, I undertook a free translation. I have rewritten it twice since, finding more rhythm, more fluidity, each time, as I become familiar with the extraordinary idiom in which it was written. I think that as it now stands it closely follows the intent and mood of the original. The punctuation is entirely mine; I regard punctuation as inflection in print, and have treated this accordingly, as if it were read aloud.

I must say this: there are three other people who could conceivably have had access to this machine while I was asleep. They are Jeff and Les and Mary.

I know for a fact that Jeff, who is an artist, was busy the entire time with a nonobjective painting of unusual vividness and detail; I know how he works, and I know what the picture looked like when I quit writing for the night, and what it looked like when I woke up, and believe me, he must have been painting like mad the entire time--he and no one else.

As for Les, he works in the advertising department of a book publisher and obviously has not the literary command indicated by this manuscript.

And Mary--I am lucky enough to be able to say that Mary is very fond of me, and would be the last person in the world to present me with such a nasty jolt as is innate in this final chapter. Here it is; and please forgive me for this lengthy but necessary introduction to it, and for my intrusion; this sort of thing is strictly against the rules.

VIII

"?"

I AM A THING which lives in fantasy, where true fantasy lives in the minds of men.

What fumbling is this, what clumsiness, what pain. . . . I who never was a weight, who never turned, coerced, nor pressed a person, never ordered, never forced--I who live with laughter, die with weeping, rise and hope and cheer with man's achievements, yet with failure and despair go numb and cold and silent and unnoticeable--what have I to do with agony?

Know me, mankind, know me now and let me be.

Know the worst. I feed on you. I eat and breathe no substance but a precious ether. No, not souls (but where a soul is strong and clean I live my best). I take this guarded essence where I can, and thrive on it; and when I choose a host I am imprisoned, for I may not leave him while he lives, and when he dies I must locate another to inhabit. And I have . . . powers.

But know this too: The thing that I take is the essence of joy--and in joy is created an excess of that which I need. I drink in your reservoir, yes; but when there is drought and the level is low, and your needs are increased, and the water turns bitter with flavors of worry, and anger, and fear, then I shrink and I soften, and lose all my hunger; and then if you grieve, if your spirit is broken, if you should forget all the pleasure and glory and wonder of being a man--then I die. . . .

Such a death is not death as you know it. It is more a waiting unmoving within a soul's winter, to wake with the spring of the heart. But where people grieve over years, or let fear share their souls with me, then I must wait for the walls of my prison to crumble.

Then, after the death of my host I go drifting, seeking another. That is my Search, and in it, for me, is the ultimate cold. No human can know such a thing, for death, for a human, is kinder.

I am and I am not a parasite. I feed on your substance; yet what living thing in the world does not feed on the substance of others? And I take only excess--take only that which you radiate gaily when you feel joy.

When you feel otherwise, then I must wait, or must sleep, or must die. Where is the evil in being a parasite, when I take only a product which you never need? I demand only sustenance; that is the right of all living things. I ask in addition a thing which is simple enough--I ask to be left to myself, to encyst or to flower or sleep or be joyful, without any devilish probing.

I do not know how old I am; I do not know if there are others like me. I do not know how many hosts I have inhabited, or whether I was born or hatched, or whether, like a human, I must one day truly die. I shall, no doubt; I am alive, and nothing lives forever. I know my years are thousands, and my hosts have been in scores of hundreds. I have no interest in statistics.

Yet you must know me.... I think my origins were like a plant's--an accidental seed of sensuality perhaps. My infancy was passed in dreams, in sightless stirrings when the stimulation merited, and blacknesses between. I think that when my hosts passed on, my knotted insubstantial cyst just drifted like a petal on a roiling stream, it bumped and nuzzled and at last slipped in when chance presented hosts which qualified.

To qualify, in those uncaring phases, men had but to show an openness and nothing more. And when I gained experience and consciousness increased, and realization came to me, and I was grown

and had ability to choose, I gained as well the power of rejection.

And after that I was no longer bound to sickly children, open to me through their thirst for colors, senses, odors, vivid to them through unsaid convictions that the end was near. I became increasingly meticulous in choosing; I became an expert in detecting signs of whimsy-richness in its earliest potential. I have powers. . . .

You have powers too, you human ones. You can change the color of a life by vicious striking at a stranger-child. You can give away a thing you treasure, making memories which later might compose a symphony. You can do a thousand thousand things you never do; you never try; there is no reason to depart from paths you have established. When, however, circumstances force you into it, you do the "superhuman."

Once my host was Annabelle, a woman on a farm. (She loved the birds!) In a blizzard she was lost; she was old and had a crippled knee, and could not find the road, and could not last the night. She stumbled on a post which stood erect and lonesome on the prairie, and, without a conscious thought of bravery, or what mankind might say to her, she put a hand upon the weathered wood, and in the blowing snow and bitter cold, she walked around the post-- around and around, in spite of age and pain and growing numbness, walked around the post until the sun came up in blowing gray, then growing cold.

They found her and they saved her, when in truth she saved herself. There was about her such a cloud of pure achievement, such a joy at having cheated wind and cold! (I fed that day; I still possess the energies she radiated!) ... I have powers; all have powers, when we're forced to use them. I have powers, you have too, which you have never cataloged.

I have powers--now I use them!

I have no host. Such bitterness and agony as I have just experienced I never want again. My Search, this time, will be a thorough one and for it, now, I make my sacrifice. I am unknown; but with this script, these purposely hypnotic words, I shall be known! I sacrifice my privacy, my yearning for the pleasant weightless dark where I have dwelt. I challenge mankind's probing, for, through these bright words and burnished continuities, I shall locate a host who will defend me!

I had a man--he had me, possibly--who would have fought for me. And after him I dwelt within a woman's mind--the richest and most magical to all. The man was one of those who, on maturing, never lost the colorful ability to wonder like a child. And one day, miming, imitating a precise and dainty minuet in joyful incongruity (he danced alone upon the bouncing platform of a truck) a falling girder struck him and he died. I had no warning and no way to make a Search; I flung myself into the mind of one who was nearby in close communion with my dead host's whimsy.

Grace had a mind that was magic throughout. Never in thousands of years have I seen such a shimmering jewel; never in thousands of pages of words found in thousands of languages could such a trove be described. All that she saw was transmuted in sibilant subtleties; all that she heard was in breath-taking colors and shapes. What she touched, what she said, what she saw, what she felt, what she thought --these were all blended in joy.

She was the pinnacle; she was the source of the heady exuberant food which in flavor eclipsed my most radiant memories. She, like the blizzard of Annabelle--she was the suitable circumstance, bringing about the release of the powers I held all untried.

I stirred in her mind. I found I could reach out and touch certain sources of hunger--sights that she never had seen and sensations she never had turned to, things which should surely delight such a sensitive soul.

I found to my joy that with care I controlled them, the hungers for things I remembered in hosts less responsive. I practiced this skill as she broadened her life, and I led her to music and poems and thoughts which she never, perhaps, could have found by herself. She had every reason for happiness with all these riches, and I--oh, I gloried in bringing things to her, as many a gifted composer has brought a new music to some virtuoso.

But her husband was Stoye.

Stoye was a devil. He hated me for what I was, before he could define it. His mind was quite as rich as hers, but something curbed it. Growing with her was impossible; he sensed with rare perception that a Thing had come to her, and since that Thing was not of him, he hated it. It mattered not to him that she was better for it. Brutally he turned away from sharing what I brought into his home.

And she--I could not take her from him. How I tried! Poor treasure trove, she was at last a battleground between that questing creature and myself. He hounded me through her, and I struck, back by taking her to rare enchantments in which he could not share.

He was the first--the very first--of all the humans I have known, to recognize me and to seek me out. This recognition was intolerable; all my life I have avoided it, and lived in war and secret joyfulness. He goaded me until I evidenced myself; I never realized I could make a human

speak, but Grace spoke for me when she said that "It wants only to be let alone."

She might as well have died, right then and there, for all the sustenance I got from here thereafter. I knew that she would kill herself; between us, her and me, there was a madness caught from Stoye.

Stoye put her, numb and docile, in the hospital. I started to encyst, for Grace's well was dry to me. I found a likely subject in the nurse, who seemed as sensitive as Grace (but lacked that fine capacity for whimsy) and I poised myself to make the change. While waiting, then, I thought of Stoye--and realized that, with Grace's death, he would not rest until he found me and destroyed me, either by attacking all my hosts, or if he learned the way of it, by closing minds against me by his printed propaganda. He had to be destroyed.

Grace killed herself; her one blind foolishness, her love for Stoye, and all her stupid thoughts that she had lost it, made her do it. I might have stopped her; but why should I, when I needed a release from all her bitterness? Believe me, it was just as strong as all her joys had been . . . before she leaped she tried to warn him, tried to send some crazy message to him through a youngster standing down below.

My connection with her was not close just then; I am not sure; she still was set on death as an escape but wished her husband to be watchful and protect himself. And then she leaped.

And then it came--that awful amputation.

I could not know that Ronnie was so strong a host, potentially--that so well suited to me was he that, as I flashed upward to the nurse, to take possession, I was torn apart!

I have no substance; yet I am an entity, with limits and with boundaries. These were ruptured; while my greater . part found room within the nurse's mind, a fragment nestled into Ronnie's.

At first I felt a transcendental pain and dizziness; and then I did the things I could to be protected. I hid the crumpled body with a forced hypnotic wave (this is no subtle mystery; a thousand men can do it) to keep the wave of terror all confused with curiosity, for terror undiluted quite inhibits my possession of a host.

I settled into Lucille Holder's mind and tested the controls which Stoye had forced me to develop. Lucille was far less strong than Grace had been, and forcing her was easy. I was wounded, I was maddened, and at last I drank, with purpose and a new dark joy, the thing called hate.

Stoye had to die. The man called Daniels, Ronnie's father, saw Grace leap and was a witness. Possibly he might become too curious, with his son possessed, and be another probing devil. He must die. Ronnie had a part of me, and I did not think he could release it while he lived. So he must die.

To test my new controls, I seitt the nurse at first to do the minor task. The elder Daniels was not there; and when I found myself confronted with that other part of me, I nearly died of yearning. And I realized, in that closeness, that the boy could be controlled as well, and that he could destroy his father quite at my convenience, while Lucille could kill him later. Satisfied, I went away.

I spent that night and all next day securing my controls, and practicing. And late the night that followed, I killed Stoye, and two strange things happened.

One was when Stoye died; I felt a wave of powerful protectiveness about him as he fled his body, and I sensed again the fullest, richest magic that was Grace. I was terrified of it; I had never known before that humans could outlive their carcasses . . .

The other thing was the arrival of Ronnie, apparently moved by the part of me carried within him. Yet since he possessed but a fragment, his effort was late and his motive was weak, and I feared that he might make a botch of the killing of Daniels. I therefore sent Lucille to do it; Ronnie, again weak and tardy, followed my orders.

The gunshot, the bullet which shattered the neck of the nurse, were quite unexpected. I was flung unprepared into cold, in my nakedness, cold indescribable, cold beyond bearing. Yet I was glad; for the fraction of me that was Ronnie's came streaming toward me as I was exploded away from the nurse. The wrench it gave Ronnie must have been dreadful; when I settle into a host all my roots go down deep.

I hid Lucille's body and searched all the minds in the house for a suitable host. Ronnie was perfect, unconscious and closed. Daniels was fretful; I can't abide fear. I fought back the cold, drew inward, contracted, and formed, at long last, a new cyst. I let Lucille's body be seen, and ignoring the others--their whimsy was as flat as their oversized feet-- I withdrew.

And I have been thinking.

Some things were important that now cannot matter. I am different because of the searchings of Stoye--I blame him for all that has happened, and that is a thing which can no longer matter.

I know how to hate now, and how to make murder; the taste of these things is still bitter, but so is the taste of good stout when first taken, and stout has a taste worth acquiring. Like Grace

I still have all my earlier qualities--the sun on a mountain or watching the curve of the wing of a gull (through a host) certainly has all the zest for me that it has ever had. Now I have more, though; and that is a thing which can matter very much indeed.

I have been selfish. It never occurred to me, back in the days of the man who did minuets joyfully, that I might do something for him whom I choose as a host. Grace taught me that, purely by feeding me richly through her experiences, purely by being a subject for my schooled suggestions. There may have been many who carried me, who were susceptible to my control.

I could not know without trying, and I never tried this command until Grace took me in. And since then I hunger, I thirst for the richness and beauty and shifting and changing of colors and sounds which she brought me, and never again will rest and be fed and be happy to have just enough to sustain me.

I drift, now, encysted, but testing my powers when never before had I thought of them. I find I am mobile; also, to certain degrees, I can move things--this writing machine, for example, though it is slow and laborious. I find I can whisper to humans and fit some strange thoughts and ideas to each other.

I have looked for a host for a weary, cold while, and my energies seem to be dwindling. I still have enough, though, to search for a time, and soon now I'll have what I need.

I'll find, soon, a person, a man or a woman, or even a sensitive child. This one will be mine and I'll lead him to wonders of sense and of music and heady adventure. I think I am learning to savor the tartness of terror, the bloody salt flavor of killing with purpose. My host will exist in a series of colorful pageants and move in a world of emotional riches, all of my carefulest choosing.

And for this I sacrifice that which I guarded--my passion for quiet and secret enjoyments. I say to you, Know me! Suspect me! for by your suspicion you open yourself to my coming. And when some great mural is painted by someone who never did passable work in his life before that, suspect me. And when in a prison some cringing psychotic says, over and over, "A voice said to do it!" suspect me.

Whenever you walk in the street and feel a strange spasm of nausea, suspect me indeed; for then I am injured, and what you have seen is a part-host like Ronnie; and know that that person must die--and can kill if I will it.

I am so cold. . . .

I write this because in my search for a host who is perfect, I find that one segment of humans is almost entirely open. These are the readers and tellers of tales of the dark and of terror and madness. The one who has written these chapters would serve as a host--but I fear he would turn on me, feed on my memories, use me for piddling profit in plying his trade.

Besides, he's a bit superficial for one of my tastes. I know his intentions, however, and what he will do with this script. I know he is frightened because of the way this long tale has unfolded, I know, too, that nothing will keep him from seeing it printed.

When it is read, though, by thousands of like-minded people over the world, and he hears of the music and murder created by someone who fell to me only through reading it, then he will curse and will wish he were dead, and wish he had torn this to pieces.

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