

F Paul Wilson

Short Stories

Faces

Buckets

Lysing Towards Bethlehem

Menage a trios

Ratman

F. Paul Wilson has written several international bestsellers, the most recent of which is his eerie medical thriller, 'The Select.'

In addition to being a fine stylist, Wilson is also a masterful plotter and idea person. You're never quite sure where he's taking you - and that's half the fun.

Here we have Paul at his darkest, his most unpredictable, and his most polished.

He has long been a major name in horror. His novel 'Sibs' has now made him a major name in crime fiction as well.

Faces

Bite her face off.

No pain. Her dead already. Kill her quick like others. Not want make pain. Not her fault.

The boyfriend groan but not move. Face way on ground now. Got from behind. Got quick. Never see. He can live.

Girl look me after the boyfriend go down. Gasp first. When see face start scream. Two claws not cut short rip her throat before sound get loud.

Her sick-scared look just like all others. Hate that look. Hate it terrible.

Sorry, girl. Not your fault.

Chew her face skin. Chew all. Chew hard and swallow. Warm wet redness make sickish but chew and chew. Must eat face. Must get all down. Keep down.

Leave the eyes.

The boyfriend groan again. Move arm. Must leave quick. Take last look blood and teeth and stare-eyes that once pretty girlface .

Sorry, girl. Not your fault.

Got go. Get way hurry. First take money. Girl money. Take the boyfriend wallet, also too. Always take money. Need money.

Go now. Not too far. Climb wall of near building. Find dark spot where can see and not be seen. Where can wait. Soon the Detective Harrison arrive.

In downbelow can see the boyfriend roll over. Get to knees. Sway. See him look the girlfriend.

The boyfriend scream terrible. Bad to hear. Make so sad. Make cry.

Kevin Harrison heard Jacobi's voice on the other end of the line and wanted to be sick.

"Don't say it," he groaned.

"Sorry," said Jacobi. "It's another one."

"Where?"

"West Forty-ninth, right near--"

"I'll find it." All he had to do was look for the flashing red lights. "I'm on my way. Shouldn't take me too long to get in from Monroe at this hour."

"We've got all night, lieutenant." Unsaid but well understood was an admonishing, You're the one who wants to live on Long Island.

Beside him in the bed, Martha spoke form deep in her pillow as he hung up.

"Not another one?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, God! When is it going to stop?"

"When I catch the guy."

Her hand touched his arm, gently. "I know all this responsibility's not easy. I'm here when you need me."

“I know.” He leaned over and kissed her. “Thanks.”

He left the warm bed and skipped the shower. No time for that. A fresh shirt, yesterday’s rumpled suit, a tie shoved into his pocket, and he was off into the winter night.

With his secure little ranch house falling away behind him, Harrison felt naked and vulnerable out here in the dark. As he headed south on Glen Cove Road toward the LIE, he realised that Martha and the kids were all that were holding him together these days. His family had become an island of sanity and stability in a world gone mad.

Everything else was in flux. For reasons he still could not comprehend, he had volunteered to head up the search for this killer. Now his whole future in the department had come to hinge on his success in finding him.

The papers had named the maniac ‘The Facelift Killer.’ As apt a name as the tabloids could want, but Harrison resented it. The moniker was callous, trivialising the mutilations perpetrated on the victims. But it had caught on with the public and they were stuck with it, especially with all the ink the story was getting.

Six killings, one a week for six weeks in a row, and eight million people in a panic. Then, for almost two weeks, the city had gone without a new slaying.

Until tonight.

Harrison’s stomach pitched and rolled at the thought of having to look at one of those corpses again.

“That’s enough,” Harrison said, averting his eyes from the faceless thing.

The raw, gouged, bloody flesh, the exposed muscle and bone were bad enough, but it was the eyes—those naked, lidless, staring eyes were the worst.

“This makes seven,” Jacobi said at his side. Squat, dark, jowly, the sergeant was chewing a big wad of gum, noisily, aggressively, as if he had a grudge against it.

“I can count. Anything new?”

“Nah. Same M.O. as ever—throat slashed, money stolen, face gnawed off.”

Harrison shuddered. He had come in as Special Investigator after the third Facelift killing. He had inspected the first three via coroner’s photos. Those had been awful. But nothing could match the effect of the real thing up close and still warm and oozing. This was the fourth fresh victim he had seen. There was no getting used to this kind of mutilation, no matter how many he saw. Jacobi put on a good show, but Harrison sensed the revulsion under the sergeant’s armour.

And yet...

Beneath all the horror, Harrison sensed something. There was anger here, sick anger and hatred of spectacular proportions. But beyond that, something else, an indefinable something that had drawn him to this case. Whatever it was, that something called to him, and still held him captive.

If he could identify it, maybe he could solve this case and wrap it up. And save his ass.

If he did solve it, it would be all on his own. Because he wasn't getting much help from Jacobi, and even less from his assigned staff. He knew what they all thought-that he had taken the job as a glory grab, a shortcut to the top. Sure, they wanted to see this thing wrapped up, too, but they weren't shedding any tears over the shit he was taking in the press and on TV and from City Hall.

Their attitude was clear: If you want the spotlight, Harrison, you gotta take the heat that goes with it.

They were right, of course. He could have been working on a quieter case, like where all the winos were disappearing to. He'd chosen this instead. But he wasn't after the spotlight, dammit! It was this case-something about this case!

He suddenly realised that there was no one around him. The body had been carted off, Jacobi had wandered back to his car. He had been left standing alone at the far end of the alley.

And yet not alone.

Someone was watching him. He could feel it. The realisation sent a little chill-one completely unrelated to the cold February wind-trickling down his back. A quick glance around showed no one paying him the slightest bit of attention. He looked up.

There!

Somewhere in the darkness above, someone was watching him. Probably from the roof. He could sense the piercing scrutiny and it made him a little weak. That was no ghoulish neighbourhood voyeur, up there. That was the Facelift Killer.

He had to get to Jacobi, have him seal off the building. But he couldn't act spooked. He had to act calm, casual.

See the Detective Harrison's eyes. See from way up in dark. Tall-thin. Hair brown. Nice eyes. Soft brown eyes. Not hard like many-many eyes. Look here. Even from here see eyes make wide. Him know it me.

Watch the Detective Harrison turn slow. Walk slow. Tell inside him want to run. Must leave here. Leave quick.

Bend low. Run cross roof. Jump to next. And next. Again till most block away. Then down wall. Wrap scarf round head. Hide bad-face. Hunch inside big-big coat. Walk through lighted spots.

Hate light. Hate crowds. Theatres here. Movies and plays. Like them. Some night sneak in and see. See one with man in mask. Hang from wall behind big drapes. Make cry.

Wish there mask for me.

Follow street long way to river. See many lights across river. Far past there is place where grew. Never want go back to there. Never.

Catch back of truck. Ride home.

Home. Bright bulb hang ceiling. Not care. The Old Jessi waiting. The Jessi friend. Only friend. The Jessi's eyes not see. Ever. When the Jessi look me, her face not wear sick-scared look. Hate that look.

Come in kitchen window. The Jessi's face wrinkle-black. Smile when hear me come. TV on. Always on. The Jessi can not watch. Say it company for her.

"You're so late tonight."

"Hard work. Get moneys tonight."

Feel sick. Want cry. Hate kill. Wish stop.

"That's nice. Are you going to put it in the drawer?"

"Doing now."

Empty wallets. Put money in slots. Ones first slot. Fives next slot. Then tens and twenties. So the Jessi can pay when boy bring foods. Sometimes eat stealed foods. Mostly the Jessi call for foods.

The Old Jessi hardly walk. Good. Do not want her go out. Bad peoples round here. Many. Hurt one who not see. One bad man try hurt Jessi once. Push through door. Thought only the blind Old Jessi live here.

Lucky the Jessi not alone that day.

Not lucky bad man. Hit the Jessi. Laugh hard. Then look me. Get sick-scared look. Hate that look. Kill him quick. Put in tub. Bleed there. Bad man friend come soon after. Kill him also too. Late at night take both dead bad men out. Go through window. Carry down wall. Throw in river.

No bad men come again. Ever.

"I've been waiting all night for my bath. Do you think you can help me a little?"

Always help. But the Old Jessi always ask. The Jessi very polite.

Sponge the Old Jessi back in tub. Rinse her hair. Think of the Detective Harrison. His kind eyes. Must talk him. Want stop this. Stop now. Maybe will understand. Will. Can feel.

Seven grisly murders in eight weeks.

Kevin Harrison studied a photo of the latest victim, taken before she was mutilated. A nice eight by ten glossy furnished by her agent. A real beauty. A dancer with Broadway dreams.

He tossed the photo aside and pulled the stack of files toward him.

The remnants of six lives in this pile. Somewhere within had to be an answer, the thread that linked each

of them to the Facelift Killer.

But what if there was no common link? What if all the killings were at random, linked only by the fact that they were beautiful? Seven deaths, all over the city. All with their faces gnawed off. Gnawed.

He flipped through the victims one by one and studied their photos. He had begun to feel he knew each one of them personally.

Mary Detrick , 20, a junior at N.Y.U., killed in Washington Square Park on January 5. She was the first.

Mia Chandler, 25, a secretary at Merrill Lynch, killed January 13 in Battery Park.

Ellen Beasley, 22, a photographer's assistant, killed in an alley in Chelsea on January 22.

Hazel Hauge , 30, artist agent, killed in her Soho loft on January 27.

Elisabeth Paine, 28, housewife, killed on February 2 while jogging late in Central Park.

Joan Perrin, 25, a model from Brooklyn, pulled from her car while stopped at a light on the Upper East Side on February 8.

He picked up the eight by ten again. And the last: Liza Lee, 21, Dancer. Lived across the river in Jersey City. Ducked into an alley for a toot with her boyfriend tonight and never came out.

Three blondes, three brunettes, one redhead. Some stacked, some on the flat side. All caucs except for Perrin. All lookers. But besides that, how in the world could these women be linked? They came from all over town, and they met their respective ends all over town. What could-

“Well, you sure hit the bullseye about that roof!” Jacobi said as he burst into the office.

Harrison straightened in his chair. “What did you find?”

“Blood.”

“Whose?”

“The victim's.”

“No prints? No hairs? No fibres ?”

“We're working on it. But how'd you figure to check the roof top?”

“Lucky guess.”

Harrison didn't want to provide Jacobi with more grist for the departmental gossip mill by mentioning his feeling of being watched from up there.

But the killer had been watching, hadn't he?

“Any prelims from pathology?”

Jacobi shrugged and stuffed three sticks of gum into his mouth. Then he tried to talk.

“Same as ever. Money gone, throat ripped open by a pair of sharp pointed instruments, not knives, the bite marks on the face are the usual: the teeth that made them aren’t human, but the saliva is.”

The ‘non-human’ teeth part-more teeth, bigger and sharper than found in any human mouth-had baffled them all from the start. Early on someone remembered a horror novel or movie where the killer used some weird sort of false teeth to bite his victims. That had sent them off on a wild goose chase to all the dental labs looking for records of bizarre bite prostheses. No dice. No one had seen or even heard of teeth that could gnaw off a person’s face.

Harrison shuddered. What could explain wounds like that? What were they dealing with here?

The irritating pops, snaps, and cracks of Jacobi’s gum filled the office.

“I liked you better when you smoked.”

Jacobi’s reply was cut off by the phone. The sergeant picked it up.

“Detective Harrison’s office!” he said, listened a moment, then, with his hand over the mouthpiece, passed the receiver to Harrison. “Some fairy wants to shpeak to you,” he said with an evil grin.

“Fairy?”

“Hey,” he said, getting up and walking toward the door. “I don’t mind. I’m a liberal kinda guy, y’know?”

Harrison shook his head with disgust. Jacobi was getting less likeable every day.

“Hello. Harrison here.”

“ Shorry dishturbyou, Detective Harrishon .”

The voice was soft, pitched somewhere between a man’s and a woman’s, and sounded as if the speaker had half a mouthful of saliva. Harrison had never heard anything like it. Who could be-?

And then it struck him: It was three a.m. Only a handful of people knew he was here.

“Do I know you?”

“No. Watch you tonight. You almosht shee me in dark.”

That same chill from earlier tonight ran down Harrison’s back again.

“Are... are you who I think you are?”

There was a pause, then one soft word, more sobbed than spoken:

“ Yesh.”

If the reply had been cocky, something along the line of - And just who do you think I am? Harrison would have looked for much more in the way of corroboration. But that single word, and the soul deep heartbreak that propelled it, banished all doubt.

My God! He looked around frantically. No one in sight. Where the fuck was Jacobi now when he needed him? This was the Facelift Killer! He needed a trace!

Got to keep him on the line!

“I have to ask you something to be sure you are who you say you are.”

“ Yesh?”

“Do you take anything from the victims-I mean, besides their faces?”

“Money. Take money.”

This is him! The department had withheld the money part from the papers. Only the real Facelift Killer could know!

“Can I ask you something else?”

“ Yesh.”

Harrison was asking this one for himself.

“What do you do with the faces?”

He had to know. The question drove him crazy at night. He dreamed about those faces. Did the killer tack them on the wall, or press them in a book, or freeze them, or did he wear them around the house like that Leatherface character from that chainsaw movie?

On the other end of the line he sensed sudden agitation and panic: “No! Can not shay! Can not!”

“Okay, okay. Take it easy.”

“You will help shtop ?”

“Oh, yes! Oh, God, yes, I’ll help you stop!” He prayed his genuine heartfelt desire to end this was coming through. “I’ll help you any way I can!”

There was a long pause, then:

“You hate? Hate me?”

Harrison didn’t trust himself to answer that right away. He searched his feelings quickly, but carefully.

“No,” he said finally. “I think you have done some awful, horrible things but, strangely enough, I don’t hate you.”



And that was true. Why didn't he hate this murdering maniac? Oh, he wanted to stop him more than anything in the world, and wouldn't hesitate to shoot him dead if the situation required it, but there was no personal hatred for the Facelift Killer.

What is it in you that speaks to me? he wondered.

"Shank you," said the voice, coughed once more in a sob.

And then the killer hung up.

Harrison shouted into the dead phone, banged it on his desk, but the line was dead.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" Jacobi said from the office door.

"That so-called 'fairy' on the phone was the Facelift Killer, you idiot! We could have had a trace if you'd stuck around!"

"Bullshit!"

"He knew about taking the money!"

"So why'd he talk like that? That's a dumb-ass way to try to disguise your voice."

And then it suddenly hit Harrison like a sucker punch to the gut. He swallowed hard and said:

"Jacobi, how do you think your voice would sound if you had a jaw crammed full of teeth much larger and sharper than the kind found in the typical human mouth?"

Harrison took genuine pleasure in the way Jacobi's face blanched slowly to yellow-white.

He didn't get home again until after seven the following night. The whole department had been in an uproar all day. This was the first break they had had in the case. It wasn't much, but contact had been made. That was the important part. And although Harrison had done nothing he could think of to deserve any credit, he had accepted the commissioner's compliments and encouragement on the phone shortly before he had left the office tonight.

But what was most important to Harrison was the evidence from the call-Damn! he wished it had been taped-that the killer wanted to stop. They didn't have one more goddamn clue tonight than they'd had yesterday, but the call offered hope that soon there might be an end to this horror.

Martha had dinner waiting. The kids were scrubbed and pyjamaed and waiting for their goodnight kiss. He gave them each a hug and poured himself a stiff scotch while Martha put them in the sack.

"Do you feel as tired as you look?" she said as she returned from the bedroom wing.

She was a big woman with bright blue eyes and natural dark blond hair. Harrison toasted her with his glass.

“The expression ‘dead on his feet’ has taken on a whole new meaning for me.”

She kissed him, then they sat down to eat.

He had spoken to Martha a couple of times since he had left the house twenty hours ago. She knew about the phone call from the Facelift Killer, about the new hope in the department about the case, but he was glad she didn't bring it up now. He was sick of talking about it. Instead, he sat in front of his cooling meatloaf and wrestled with the images that had been nibbling at the edges of his consciousness all day.

“What are you daydreaming about?” Martha said.

Without thinking, Harrison said, “Annie.”

“Annie who?”

“My sister.”

Martha put her fork down. “Your sister? Kevin, you don't have a sister.”

“Not any more. But I did.”

Her expression was alarmed now. “Kevin, are you all right? I've known your family for ten years. Your mother has never once mentioned-“

“We don't talk about Annie, Mar. We try not to even think about her. She died when she was five.”

“Oh. I'm sorry.”

“Don't be. Annie was... deformed. Terribly deformed. She never really had a chance.”

Open trunk from inside. Get out. The Detective Harrison's house here. Cold night. Cold feel good. Trunk air make sick, dizzy.

Light here. Hurry round side of house.

Darker here. No one see. Look in window. Dark but see good. Two little ones there. Sleeping. Move away. Not want them cry.

Go more round. The Detective Harrison with lady. Sit table near window. Must be wife. Pretty but not oh-so-beauty. Not have mom-face. Not like ones who die.

Watch behind tree. Hungry. They not eat food. Talk-talk-talk. Can not hear.

The Detective Harrison do most talk. Kind face. Kind eyes. Some terrible sad there. Hides. Him understands. Heard in phone voice. Understands. Him one can stop kills.

Spent day watch the Detective Harrison car. All day watch at police house. Saw him come-go many times. Soon dark, open trunk with claw. Ride with him. Ride long. Wonder what town this?

The Detective Harrison look this way. Stare like last night. Must not see me! Must not!

Harrison stopped in mid-sentence and stared out the window as his skin prickled.

That watched feeling again.

It was the same as last night. Something was out in the backyard watching them. He strained to see through the wooded darkness outside the window but saw only shadows within shadows.

But something was there! He could feel it!

He got up and turned on the outside spotlights, hoping, praying that the backyard would be empty.

It was.

He smiled to hide his relief and glanced at Martha.

“Thought that raccoon was back.”

He left the spots on and settled back into his place at the table. But the thoughts racing through his mind made eating unthinkable.

What if that maniac had followed him out here? What if the call had been a ploy to get him off-guard so the Facelift Killer could do to Martha what he had done to the other women?

My God...

First thing tomorrow morning he was going to call the local alarm boys and put in a security system. Cost be damned, he had to have it. Immediately!

As for tonight...

Tonight he'd keep the .38 under the pillow.

Run away. Run low and fast. Get bushes before light come. Must stay way now. Not come back.

The Detective Harrison feel me. Know when watched. Him the one, sure.

Walk in dark, in woods. See back many houses. Come park. Feel strange. See this park before. Can not be-

Then know.

Monroe! This Monroe! Born here! Live here! Hate Monroe! Monroe bad place, bad people! House, home, old home near here! There! Cross park! Old home! New colour but same house.

Hate house!

Sit on froze park grass. Cry. Why Monroe? Do not want be in Monroe. The Mom gone. The Sissy gone. The Jimmy very gone. House here.

Dry tears. Watch old home long time till light go out. Wait more. Go to windows. See new folks inside. The Mom took the Sissy and go. Where? Don't know.

Go to back. Push cellar window. Crawl in. See good in dark. New folks make nice cellar. Wood on walls. Rug on floor. No chain.

Sit floor. Remember...

Remember hanging on wall. Look little window near ceiling. Watch kids play in park cross street. Want go with kids. Want play there with kids. Want have friends.

But the Mom won't let. Never leave basement. Too strong. Break everything. Have TV. Broke it. Have toys. Broke them. Stay in basement. Chain round waist hold to centre pole. Can not leave.

Remember terrible bad things happen.

Run. Run way Monroe. Never come back.

Till now.

Now back. Still hate house! Want hurt house. See cigarettes. With matches. Light all. Burn now!

Watch rug burn. Chair burn. So hot. Run back to cold park. Watch house burn. See new folks run out. Trucks come throw water. House burn and burn.

Glad but tears come anyway.

Hate house. Now house gone. Hate Monroe.

Wonder where the Mom and the Sissy live now.

Leave Monroe for new home and the Old Jessi .

The second call came the next day. And this time they were ready for it. The tape recorders were set, the computers were waiting to begin the tracing protocol. As soon as Harrison recognised the voice, he gave the signal. On the other side of the desk, Jacobi put on a headset and people started running in all directions. Off to the races.

"I'm glad you called," Harrison said. "I've been thinking about you."

"You undershtand ?" said the soft voice.

"I'm not sure."

" Mushthelp shtop ."

“I will! I will! Tell me how!”

“Not know.”

There was a pause. Harrison wasn't sure what to say next. He didn't want to push, but he had to keep him on the line.

“Did you... hurt anyone last night?”

“No. Shaw houshes . Your houshe . Your wife.”

Harrison's blood froze. Last night-in the backyard. That had been the Facelift Killer in the dark. He looked up and saw genuine concern in Jacobi's eyes. He forced himself to speak.

“You were at my house? Why didn't you talk to me?”

“No-no! Can not let shee ! Run way your house. Go mine!”

“Yours? You live in Monroe?”

“No! Hate Monroe! Once lived. Gone long! Burn old houshe . Never go back!”

This could be important. Harrison phrased the next question carefully.

“You burned your old house? When was that?”

If he could just get a date, a year...

“Lashtnight.”

“Last night?” Harrison remembered hearing the sirens and fire horns in the early morning darkness.

“Yesh! Hate houshe !”

And then the line went dead.

He looked at Jacobi who had picked up another line.

“Did we get the trace?”

“Waiting to hear. Christ, he sounds retarded, doesn't he?”

Retarded. The word sent ripples across the surface of his brain. Non-human teeth... Monroe... retarded... a picture was forming in the settling sediment, a picture he felt he should avoid.

“Maybe he is.”

“You'd think that would make him easy to-“

Jacobi stopped, listened to the receiver, then shook his head disgustedly.

“What?”

“Got as far as the Lower East Side. He was probably calling from somewhere in one of the projects. If we’d had another thirty seconds-“

“We’ve got something better than a trace to some lousy pay phone,” Harrison said. “We’ve got his old address!” He picked up his suit coat and headed for the door.

“Where we goin’?”

“Not ‘we.’ Me. I’m going out to Monroe.”

Once he reached the town, it took Harrison less than an hour to find the Facelift Killer’s last name.

He first checked with the Monroe Fire Department to find the address of last night’s house fire. Then he went down to the brick fronted Town Hall and found the lot and block number. After that it was easy to look up its history of ownership. Mr. and Mrs. Elwood Scott were the current owners of the land and the charred shell of a three-bedroom ranch that sat upon it.

There had only been one other set of owners: Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Baker. He had lived most of his life in Monroe but knew nothing about the Baker family. But he knew where to find out: Captain Jeremy Hall, Chief of Police in the Incorporated Village of Monroe.

Captain Hall hadn’t changed much over the years. Still had a big belly, long sideburns, and hair cut bristly short on the sides. That was the ‘in’ look these days, but Hall had been wearing his hair like that for at least thirty years. If not for his Bronx accent, he could have played a redneck sheriff in any one of those southern chain gang movies.

After pleasantries and local-boy-leaves-home-to-become-big-city-cop-and-now-comes-to-question-small-town-cop banter, they got down to business.

“The Bakers from North Park Drive?” Hall said after he had noisily sucked the top layer off his steaming coffee. “Who could forget them? There was the mother, divorced, I believe, and the three kids-two girls and the boy.”

Harrison pulled out his note pad. “The boy’s name-what was it?”

“Tommy, I believe. Yeah-Tommy. I’m sure of it.”

“He’s the one I want.”

Hall’s eyes narrowed. “He is, is he? You’re working on that Facelift case aren’t you?”

“Right.”

“And you think Tommy Baker might be your man?”

“It’s a possibility. What do you know about him?”

“I know he’s dead.”

Harrison froze. “Dead? That can’t be!”

“It sure as hell can be!” Without rising from his seat, he shouted through his office door. “Murph! Pull out that old file on the Baker case! Nineteen eighty-four, I believe!”

“Eighty-four?” Harrison said. He and Martha had been living in Queens then. They hadn’t moved back to Monroe yet.

“Right. A real messy affair. Tommy Baker was thirteen years old when he bought it. And he bought it. Believe me, he bought it!”

Harrison sat in glum silence, watching his whole theory go up in smoke.

The Old Jessi sleeps. Stand by mirror near tub. Only mirror have. No like them. The Jessi not need one.

Stare face. Bad face. Teeth, teeth, teeth. And hair. Arms too thin, too long. Claws. None have claws like my. None have face like my.

Face not better. Ate pretty faces but face still same. Still cause sick-scared look. Just like at home.

Remember home. Do not want but thoughts will not go.

Faces.

The Sissy get the Mom-face. Beauty face. The Tommy get the Dad-face. Not see the Dad. Never come home anymore. Who my face? Never see where come. Where my face come? My hands come?

Remember home cellar. Hate home! Hate cellar more! Pull on chain round waist. Pull and pull. Want out. Want play. Please. No one let.

One day when the Mom and the Sissy go, the Tommy bring friends. Come down cellar. Bunch on stairs. Stare. First time see sick-scared look. Not understand.

Friends! Play! Throw ball them. They run. Come back with rocks and sticks. Still sick-scared look. Throw me, hit me.

Make cry. Make the Tommy laugh.

Whenever the Mom and the Sissy go, the Tommy come with boys and sticks. Poke and hit. Hurt. Little hurt on skin. Big hurt inside. Sick-scared look hurt most of all. Hate look. Hate hurt. Hate them.

Most hate the Tommy.

One night chain breaks. Wait on wall for the Tommy. Hurt him. Hurt the Tommy outside. Hurt the Tommy inside. Know because pull inside outside. The Tommy quiet. Quiet, wet, red. The Mom and the

Sissy get sick-scared look and scream.

Hate that look. Run way. Hide. Never come back. Till last night.

Cry more now. Cry quiet. In tub. So the Jessi not hear.

Harrison flipped through the slim file on the Tommy Baker murder.

“This is it?”

“We didn’t need to collect much paper,” Captain Hall said. “I mean, the mother and sister were witnesses. There’s some photos in that manila envelope at the back.”

Harrison pulled it free and slipped out some large black and whites. His stomach lurched immediately.

“My God!”

“Yeah, he was a mess. Guttled by his older sister.”

“His sister!”

“Yeah. Apparently she was some sort of freak of nature.”

Harrison felt the floor tilt under him, felt as if he were going to slide off the chair.

“Freak?” he said, hoping Hall wouldn’t notice the tremor in his voice. “What did she look like?”

“Never saw her. She took off after she killed the brother. No one’s seen hide nor hair of her since. But there’s a picture of the rest of the family in there.”

Harrison shuffled through the file until he came to a large colour family portrait. He held it up. Four people: two adults seated in chairs; a boy and a girl, about ten and eight, kneeling on the floor in front of them. A perfectly normal American family. Four smiling faces.

But where’s your oldest child. Where’s your big sister? Where did you hide that fifth face while posing for this?

“What was her name? The one who’s not here?”

“Not sure. Carla, maybe? Look at the front sheet under Suspect.”

Harrison did: “Carla Baker-called ‘Carly,’” he said.

Hall grinned. “Right. Carly. Not bad for a guy getting ready for retirement.”

Harrison didn’t answer. An ineluctable sadness filled him as he stared at the incomplete family portrait.

CarlyBaker... poor Carly ... where did they hide you away? In the cellar? Locked in the attic? How did your brother treat you? Bad enough to deserve killing?



Probably.

“No pictures of Carly , I suppose.”

“Not a one.”

That figures.

“How about a description?”

“The mother gave us one but it sounded so weird, we threw it out. I mean, the girl sounded like she was half spider or something!” He drained his cup. “Then later on I got into a discussion with Doc Alberts about it. He told me he was doing deliveries back about the time this kid was born. Said they had a whole rash of monsters, all delivered within a few weeks of each other.”

The room started to tilt under Harrison again.

“Early December, 1968, by chance?”

“Yeah! How’d you know?”

He felt queasy. “Lucky guess.”

“Huh. Anyway, Doc Alberts said they kept it quiet while they looked into a cause, but that little group of freaks-‘cluster,’ he called them-was all there was. They figured that a bunch of mothers had been exposed to something nine months before, but whatever it had been was long gone. No monsters since. I understand most of them died shortly after birth, anyway.”

“Not all of them.”

“Not that it matters,” Hall said, getting up and pouring himself a refill from the coffee pot. “Someday someone will find her skeleton, probably somewhere out in Haskins’ marshes.”

“Maybe.” But I wouldn’t count on it. He held up the file. “Can I get a xerox of this?”

“You mean the Facelift Killer is a twenty-year-old girl?”

Martha’s face clearly registered her disbelief.

“Not just any girl. A freak. Someone so deformed she really doesn’t look human. Completely uneducated and probably mentally retarded to boot.”

Harrison hadn’t returned to Manhattan. Instead, he’d headed straight for home, less than a mile from Town Hall. He knew the kids were at school and that Martha would be there alone. That was what he had wanted. He needed to talk this out with someone a lot more sensitive than Jacobi.

Besides, what he had learned from Captain Hall and the Baker file had dredged up the most painful memories of his life.

“A monster,” Martha said.

“Yeah. Born one on the outside, made one on the inside. But there’s another child monster I want to talk about. Not Carly Baker. Annie... Ann Harrison.”

Martha gasped. “That sister you told me about last night?”

Harrison nodded. He knew this was going to hurt, but he had to do it, had to get it out. He was going to explode into a thousand twitching bloody pieces if he didn’t.

“I was nine when she was born. December 2, 1968-a week after Carly Baker. Seven pounds, four ounces of horror. She looked more fish than human.”

His sister’s image was imprinted on the rear wall of his brain. And it should have been after all those hours he had spent studying her loathsome face. Only her eyes looked human. The rest of her was awful. A lipless mouth, flattened nose, sloping forehead, fingers and toes fused so that they looked more like flippers than hands and feet, a bloated body covered with shiny skin that was a dusky gray-blue. The doctors said she was that colour because her heart was bad, had a defect that caused mixing of blue blood and red blood.

A repulsed nine-year-old Kevin Harrison had dubbed her The Tuna-but never within earshot of his parents.

“She wasn’t supposed to live long. A few months, they said, and she’d be dead. But she didn’t die. Annie lived on and on. One year. Two. My father and the doctors tried to get my mother to put her into some sort of institution, but Mom wouldn’t hear of it. She kept Annie in the third bedroom and talked to her and cooed over her and cleaned up her shit and just hung over her all the time. All the time, Martha!”

Martha gripped his hand and nodded for him to go on.

“After a while, it got so there was nothing else in Mom’s life. She wouldn’t leave Annie. Family trips became a thing of the past. Christ, if she and Dad went out to a movie, I had to stay with Annie. No babysitter was trustworthy enough. Our whole lives seemed to centre around that freak in the back bedroom. And me? I was forgotten.

“After a while I began to hate my sister.”

“Kevin, you don’t have to-“

“Yes, I do! I’ve got to tell you how it was! By the time I was fourteen-just about Tommy Baker’s age when he bought it-I thought I was going to go crazy. I was getting all B’s in school but did that matter? Hell, no! ‘Annie rolled halfway over today. Isn’t that wonderful?’ Big deal! She was five years old, for Christ sake! I was starting point guard on the high school junior varsity basketball team as a goddamn freshman, but did anyone come to my games? Hell no!

“I tell you, Martha, after five years of caring for Annie, our house was a powder-keg. Looking back now I can see it was my mother’s fault for becoming so obsessed. But back then, at age fourteen, I blamed it all on Annie. I really hated her for being born a freak.”

He paused before going on. This was the really hard part.

“One night, when my dad had managed to drag my mother out to some company banquet that he had to attend, I was left alone to babysit Annie. On those rare occasions, my mother would always tell me to keep Annie company-you know, read her stories and such. But I never did. I’d let her lie back there alone with our old black and white TV while I sat in the living room watching the family set. This time, however, I went into her room.”

He remembered the sight of her, lying there with the covers half way up her fat little tuna body that couldn’t have been much more than a yard in length. It was winter, like now, and his mother had dressed her in a flannel nightshirt. The coarse hair that grew off the back of her head had been wound into two braids and fastened with pink bows.

“Annie’s eyes brightened as I came into the room. She had never spoken. Couldn’t, it seemed. Her face could do virtually nothing in the way of expression, and her flipper-like arms weren’t good for much, either. You had to read her eyes, and that wasn’t easy. None of us knew how much of a brain Annie had, or how much she understood of what was going on around her. My mother said she was bright, but I think Mom was a little whacko on the subject of Annie.

“Anyway, I stood over her crib and started shouting at her. She quivered at the sound. I called her every dirty name in the book. And as I said each one, I poked her with my fingers-not enough to leave a bruise, but enough to let out some of the violence in me. I called her a lousy goddamn tunafish with feet. I told her how much I hated her and how I wished she had never been born. I told her everybody hated her and the only thing she was good for was a freak show. Then I said, ‘I wish you were dead! Why don’t you die? You were supposed to die years ago! Why don’t you do everyone a favour and do it now!’

“When I ran out of breath, she looked at me with those big eyes of hers and I could see the tears in them and I knew she had understood me. She rolled over and faced the wall. I ran from the room.

“I cried myself to sleep that night. I’d thought I’d feel good telling her off, but all I kept seeing in my mind’s eye was this fourteen-year-old bully shouting at a helpless five-year-old. I felt awful. I promised myself that the first opportunity I had to be alone with her the next day I’d apologise, tell her I really didn’t mean the hateful things I’d said, promise to read to her and be her best friend, anything to make it up to her.

“I awoke the next morning to the sound of my mother screaming. Annie was dead.”

“Oh, my God!” Martha said, her fingers digging into his arm.

“Naturally, I blamed myself.”

“But you said she had a heart defect!”

“Yeah. I know. And the autopsy showed that’s what killed her-her heart finally gave out. But I’ve never been able to get it out of my head that my words were what made her heart give up. Sounds sappy and melodramatic, I know, but I’ve always felt that she was just hanging on to life by the slimmest margin and that I pushed her over the edge.”

“Kevin, you shouldn’t have to carry that around with you! Nobody should!”

The old grief and guilt were like a slowly expanding balloon in his chest. It was getting hard to breathe.

“In my coolest, calmest, most dispassionate moments I convince myself that it was all a terrible coincidence, that she would have died that night anyway and that I had nothing to do with it.”

“That’s probably true, so-“

“But that doesn’t change the fact that the last memory of her life was of her big brother-the guy she probably thought was the neatest kid on earth, who could run and play basketball, one of the three human beings who made up her whole world, who should have been her champion, her defender against a world that could only greet her with revulsion and rejection-standing over her crib telling her how much he hated her and how he wished she was dead!”

He felt the sobs begin to quake in his chest. He hadn’t cried in over a dozen years and he had no intention of allowing himself to start now, but there didn’t seem to be any stopping it. It was like running down hill at top speed-if he tried to stop before he reached bottom, he’d go head over heels and break his neck.

“Kevin, you were only fourteen,” Martha said soothingly.

“Yeah, I know. But if I could go back in time for just a few seconds, I’d go back to that night and rap that rotten hateful fourteen-year-old in the mouth before he got a chance to say a single word. But I can’t. I can’t even say I’m sorry to Annie! I never got a chance to take it back, Martha! I never got a chance to make it up to her!”

And then he was blubbering like a goddamn wimp, letting loose half a lifetime’s worth of grief and guilt, and Martha’s arms were around him and she was telling him everything would be all right, all right, all right...

The Detective Harrison understand. Can tell. Want to go kill another face now. Must not. The Detective Harrison not like. Must stop. The Detective Harrison help stop. «

Stop for good.

Best way. Only one way stop for good. Not jail. No chain, no little window. Not ever again. Never!

Only one way stop for good. The Detective Harrison will know. Will understand. Will do.

Must call. Call now. Before dark. Before pretty faces come out in night.

Harrison had pulled himself together by the time the kids came home from school. He felt buoyant inside, like he’d been purged in some way. Maybe all those shrinks were right after all: sharing old hurts did help.

He played with the kids for a while, then went into the kitchen to see if Martha needed any help with slicing and dicing. He felt as close to her now as he ever had.

“You okay?” she said with a smile.

“Fine.”

She had just started slicing a red pepper for the salad. He took over for her.

“Have you decided what to do?” she asked.

He had been thinking about it a lot, and had come to a decision.

“Well, I’ve got to inform the department about Carly Baker, but I’m going to keep her out of the papers for a while.”

“Why? I’d think if she’s that freakish looking, the publicity might turn up someone who’s seen her.”

“Possibly it will come to that. But this case is sensational enough without tabloids like the Post and The Light turning it into a circus. Besides, I’m afraid of panic leading to some poor deformed innocent getting lynched. I think I can bring her in. She wants to come in.”

“You’re sure of that?”

“She so much as told me so. Besides, I can sense it in her.” He saw Martha giving him a dubious look. “I’m serious. We’re somehow connected, like there’s an invisible wire between us. Maybe it’s because the same thing that deformed her and those other kids deformed Annie, too. And Annie was my sister. Maybe that link is why I volunteered for this case in the first place.”

He finished slicing the pepper, then moved on to the mushrooms.

“And after I bring her in, I’m going to track down her mother and start prying into what went on in Monroe in February and March of sixty-eight to cause that so-called ‘cluster’ of freaks nine months later.”

He would do that for Annie. It would be his way of saying goodbye and I’m sorry to his sister.

“But why does she take their faces?” Martha said.

“I don’t know. Maybe because theirs were beautiful and hers is no doubt hideous.”

“But what does she do with them?”

“Who knows? I’m not all that sure I want to know. But right now-“

The phone rang. Even before he picked it up, he had an inkling of who it was. The first sibilant syllable left no doubt.

“Ish this the Detective Harrison?”

“Yes.”

Harrison stretched the coiled cord around the corner from the kitchen into the dining room, out of Martha’s hearing.

“Will you shtop me tonight?”

“You want to give yourself up?”

“ Yesh. Pleashe , yesh .”

“Can you meet me at the precinct house?”

“No!”

“Okay! Okay!” God, he didn’t want to spook her now. “Where? Anywhere you say.”

“ Jushtyou.”

“All right.”

“Midnight. Plashe where lasht fashe took. Bring gun but not more cop.”

“All right.”

He was automatically agreeing to everything. He’d work out the details later.

“You undershtand , Detective Harrishon ?”

“Oh, Carly , Carly , I understand more than you know!”

There was a sharp intake of breath and then silence at the other end of the line. Finally:

“You know Carly ?”

“Yes, Carly . I know you.” The sadness welled up in him again and it was all he could do to keep his voice from breaking. “I had a sister like you once. And you... you had a brother like me.”

“ Yesh,” said that soft, breathy voice. “You undershtand . Come tonight, Detective Harrishon .”

The line went dead.

Wait in shadows. The Detective Harrison will come. Will bring lots cop. Always see on TV show. Always bring lots. Protect him. Many guns.

No need. Only one gun. The Detective Harrison’s gun. Him’s will shoot. Stop kills. Stop forever.

The Detective Harrison must do. No one else. The Carly can not. Must be the Detective Harrison. Smart. Know the Carly . Understand.

After stop, no more ugly Carly . No more sick-scared look. Bad face will go away. Forever and ever.

Harrison had decided to go it alone.

Not completely alone. He had a van waiting a block and a half away on Seventh Avenue and a walkie-talkie clipped to his belt, but he hadn't told anyone who he was meeting or why. He knew if he did, they'd swarm all over the area and scare Carly off completely. So he had told Jacobi he was meeting an informant and that the van was just a safety measure.

He was on his own here and wanted it that way. Carly Baker wanted to surrender to him and him alone. He understood that. It was part of that strange tenuous bond between them. No one else would do. After he had cuffed her, he would call in the wagon.

After that he would be a hero for a while. He didn't want to be a hero. All he wanted was to end this thing, end the nightmare for the city and for poor Carly Baker. She'd get help, the kind she needed, and he'd use the publicity to springboard an investigation into what had made Annie and Carly and the others in their 'cluster' what they were.

It's all going to work out fine, he told himself as he entered the alley.

He walked half its length and stood in the darkness. The brick walls of the buildings on either side soared up into the night. The ceaseless roar of the city echoed dimly behind him. The alley itself was quiet-no sound, no movement. He took out his flashlight and flicked it on.

“Carly?”

No answer.

“CarlyBaker-are you here?”

More silence, then, ahead to his left, the sound of a garbage can scraping along the stony floor of the alley. He swung the light that way, and gasped.

A looming figure stood a dozen feet in front of him. It could only be Carly Baker. She stood easily as tall as he good six foot two-and looked like a homeless street person, one of those animated rag-piles that live on subway grates in the winter. Her head was wrapped in a dirty scarf, leaving only her glittery dark eyes showing. The rest of her was muffled in a huge, shapeless overcoat, baggy old polyester slacks with dragging cuffs, and torn sneakers.

“Where the Detective Harrison's gun?” said the voice.

Harrison's mouth was dry but he managed to get his tongue working.

“In its holster.”

“Take out. Pleashe .”

Harrison didn't argue with her. The grip of his heavy Chief Special felt damn good in his hand.

The figure spread its arms; within the folds of her coat those arms seem to bend the wrong way. And were those black hooked claws protruding from the cuffs of the sleeves?

She said, “Shoot.”

Harrison gaped in shock.

The Detective Harrison not shoot. Eyes wide. Hands with gun and light shake.

Say again: "Shoot!"

"Carly, no! I'm not here to kill you. I'm here to take you in, just as we agreed."

"No!"

Wrong! The Detective Harrison not understand! Must shoot the Carly ! Kill the Carly !

"Not jail! Shoot! Shtop the kills! Shtop the Carly !"

"No! I can get you help, Carly . Really, I can! You'll go to a place where no one will hurt you. You'll get medicine to make you feel better!"

Thought him understand! Not understand! Move closer. Put claw out. Him back way. Back to wall.

"Shoot! Kill! Now!"

"No, Annie, please!"

"Not Annie! Carly ! Carly !"

"Right. Carly ! Don't make me do this!"

Only inches way now. Still not shoot. Other cops hiding not shoot. Why not protect?

"Shoot!" Pull scarf off face. Point claw at face. "End! End! Pleashe !"

The Detective Harrison face go white. Mouth hang open. Say, "Oh, my God!"

Get sick-scared look. Hate that look! Thought him understand! Say he know the Carly ! Not! Stop look! Stop!

Not think. Claw go out. Rip throat of the Detective Harrison. Blood fly just like others.

No-No-No! Not want hurt!

The Detective Harrison gurgle. Drop gun and light. Fall. Stare.

Wait other cops shoot. Please kill the Carly . Wait.

No shoot. Then know. No cops. Only the poor Detective Harrison. Cry for the Detective Harrison. Then run. Run and climb. Up and down. Back to new home with the Old Jessi .

The Jessi glad hear Carly come. The Jessi try talk. Carly go sit tub. Close door. Cry for the Detective



Harrison. Cry long time. Break mirror million piece. Not see face again. Not ever. Never.

The Jessi say, "Carly, I want my bath. Will you scrub my back?"

Stop cry. Do the Old Jessi's black back. Comb the Jessi's hair.

Feel very sad. None ever comb the Carly's hair. Ever.

Buckets

by F. Paul Wilson

"Buckets" marks F. Paul Wilson's first appearance in *The Year's Best Horror Stories*. Always a pleasure to extend professional courtesy to a fellow MD. Born in New Jersey on May 17, 1946, Wilson blames his misspent youth there on E. C. horror comics, monster films, and rock and roll. He began selling short fiction while a first-year medical student and has been writing fiction and practicing medicine ever since. His best-selling horror novels include *The Keep*, *The Tomb*, *The Touch*, *Black Wind*, and the recently published *Reborn* -- the first of three interrelated horror novels forming an extended sequel to *The Keep*. He is currently at work on the second of this series.

*Soft & Others*, a collection of short fiction from Wilson's first twenty years as a writer, was published by Tor in 1989. "Buckets," originally written for the aborted anthology, *Halloween Horrors II*, first appeared in Wilson's well-regarded collection, "sort of buried among the reprints." Makes me wonder what the rest of the stories slated for *Halloween Horrors II* are like.

"My, aren't you an early bird!"

Dr. Edward Cantrell looked down at the doe-eyed child in the five-and-dime Princess Leia costume on his front doorstep and tried to guess her age. A beautiful child of about seven or eight, with flaxen hair and scrawny little shoulders drawn up as if she were afraid of him, as if he might bite her. It occurred to him that today was Wednesday and it was not yet noon. Why wasn't she in school? Never mind. It was Halloween and it was none of his business why she was getting a jump on the rest of the kids in the trick-or-treat routine.

"Are you looking for a treat?" he asked her.

She nodded slowly, shyly.

"Okay! You got it!" He went to the bowl behind him on the hall table and picked out a big Snickers. Then he added a dime to the package. It had become a Halloween tradition over the years that Dr. Cantrell's place was where you got dimes when you trick-or-treated.

He thrust his hand through the open space where the screen used to be. He liked to remove the storm door screen on Halloween; it saved him the inconvenience of repeatedly opening the door against the kids pressing against it for their treats; and besides, he worried about one of the little ones being pushed backward off the front steps. A lawsuit could easily follow something like that.

The little girl lifted her silver bucket.

He took a closer look. No, not silver -- shiny stainless steel, reflecting the dull gray overcast sky. It reminded him of something, but he couldn't place it at the moment. Strange sort of thing to be collecting Halloween treats in. Probably some new fad. Whatever became of the old pillowcase or the shopping bag, or even the plastic jack-o'-lantern?

He poised his hand over the bucket, then let the candy bar and dime drop. They landed with a soft squish.

Not exactly the sound he had expected. He leaned forward to see what else was in the bucket but the child had swung around and was making her way down the steps.

Out on the sidewalk, some hundred feet away along the maple-lined driveway, two older children waited for her. A stainless-steel bucket dangled from each of their hands.

Cantrell shivered as he closed the front door. There was a new chill in the air. Maybe he should put on a sweater. But what color? He checked himself over in the hall mirror. Not bad for a guy looking fifty-two in the eye. That was Erica's doing. Trading in the old wife for a new model twenty years younger had had a rejuvenating effect on him. Also, it made him work at staying young looking -- like three trips a week to the Short Hills Nautilus Club and watching his diet. He decided to forgo the sweater for now.

He almost made it back to his recliner and the unfinished New York Times when the front bell rang again. Sighing resignedly, he turned and went back to the front door. He didn't mind tending to the trick-or-treaters, but he wished Erica were here to share door duty. Why did she have to pick today for her monthly spending spree in Manhattan? He knew she loved Bloomingdale's -- in fact, she had once told him that after she died she wanted her ashes placed in an urn in the lingerie department there -- but she could have waited until tomorrow.

It was two boys this time, both about eleven, both made up like punkers with orange and green spiked hair, ripped clothes, and crude tattoos, obviously done with a Bic instead of a real tattooer's pen. They stood restlessly in the chill breeze, shifting from one foot to the other, looking up and down the block, stainless-steel buckets in hand.

He threw up his hands. "Whoa! Tough guys, eh? I'd better not mess around with the likes of -- !"

One of the boys glanced at him briefly, and in his eyes Cantrell caught a flash of such rage and hatred -- not just for him, but also for the whole world -- that his voice dried away to a whisper. And then the look was gone as if it had never been and the boy was just another kid again. He hastily grabbed a pair of Three Musketeers and two dimes, leaned through the opening in the door, and dropped one of each into their buckets.

The one on the right went squish and the one on the left went plop.

He managed to catch just a glimpse of the bottom of the bucket on the right as the kid turned. He couldn't tell what was in there, but it was red.

He was glad to see them go. Surly pair, he thought. Not a word out of either of them. And what was in the bottom of that bucket? Didn't look like any candy he knew, and he considered himself an expert on candy. He patted the belly that he had been trying to flatten for months. More than an expert -- an aficionado of candy.

Further speculation was forestalled by a call from Monroe Community Hospital. One of his postpartum patients needed a laxative. He okayed a couple of ounces of milk of mag . Then the nurse double-checked his pre-op orders on the hysterectomy tomorrow.

He managed to suffer through it all with dignity. It was Wednesday and he always took Wednesdays off. Jeff Sewell was supposed to be taking his calls today, but all the floors at the hospital had the Cantrell home phone number and they habitually tried here first before they went hunting for whoever was covering him.

He was used to it. He had learned ages ago that there was no such thing as a day off in Ob- Gyn.

The bell rang again, and for half a second Cantrell found himself hesitant to answer it. He shrugged off the reluctance and pulled open the door.

Two mothers and two children. He sucked in his gut when he recognized the mothers as longtime patients.

This is more like it!

"Hi, Dr. Cantrell!" the red-haired woman said with a big smile. She put a hand atop the red-haired child's head. "You remember Shana, don't you? You delivered her five years ago next month."

"I remember you, Gloria," he said, noting her flash of pleasure at having her first name remembered. He never forgot a face. "But Shana here looks a little bit different from when I last saw her."

As both women laughed, he scanned his mind for the other's name. Then it came to him:

"Yours looks a little bigger, too, Diane."

"She sure does. What do you say to Dr. Cantrell, Susan?"

The child mumbled something that sounded like "Ricky Meat" and held up an orange plastic jack-o'-lantern with a black plastic strap.

"That's what I like to see!" he said. "A real Halloween treat holder. Better than those stainless-steel buckets the other kids have been carrying!"

Gloria and Diane looked at each other. "Stainless-steel buckets?"

"Can you believe it?" he said as he got the two little girls each a Milky Way and a dime. "My first three Halloween customers this morning carried steel buckets for their treats. Never seen anything like it."

"Neither have we," Diane said.

"You haven't? You should have passed a couple of boys out on the street."

"No. We're the only ones around."

Strange. But maybe they had cut back to the street through the trees as this group entered the driveway.

He dropped identical candy and coins into the identical jack-o'-lanterns and heard them strike the other treats with a reassuring rustle.

He watched the retreating forms of the two young mothers and their two happy kids until they were out of sight. This is the way Halloween should be, he thought. Much better than strange hostile kids with metal buckets.

And just as he completed the thought, he saw three small white-sheeted forms of indeterminate age and sex round the hedge and head up the driveway. Each had a shiny metal bucket in hand.

He wished Erica were here.

He got the candy bars and coins and waited at the door for them. He had decided that before he parted with the goodies he was going to find out who these kids were and what they had in their little buckets. Fair was fair.

The trio climbed to the top step of the stoop and stood there waiting, silently watching him through the eye holes of their sheets.

Their silence got under his skin.

Doesn't anybody say "Trick or treat?" anymore?

"Well, what have we here?" he said with all the joviality he could muster. "Three little ghosts! The Ghostly Trio!"

One of them -- he couldn't tell which -- said, "Yes."

"Good! I like ghosts on Halloween! You want a treat?"

They nodded as one.

"Okay! But first you're gonna have to earn it! Show me what you've got in those buckets and I'll give you each a dime and a box of Milk Duds! How's that for a deal?"

The kids looked at each other. Some wordless communication seemed to pass between them, and then they turned and started back down the steps.

"Hey, kids! Hey, wait!" he said quickly, forcing a laugh. "I was only kidding! You don't have to show me anything. Here! Just take the candy."

They paused on the second step, obviously confused.

Ever so gently, he coaxed them back. "C'mon, kids. I'm just curious about those buckets, is all. I've been seeing them all day and I've been wondering where they came from. But if I frightened you, well, hey, I'll ask somebody else later on." He held up the candy and the coins and extended his hand through

the door. "Here you go."

One little ghost stepped forward but raised an open hand -- a little girl's hand -- instead of a bucket.

He could not bear to be denied any longer. He pushed open the storm door and stepped out, looming over the child, craning his neck to see into that damn little bucket. The child squealed in fright and turned away, crouching over the bucket as if to protect it from him.

What are they trying to hide? What's the matter with them? And what's the matter with me?

Really. Who cared what was in those buckets?

He cared. It was becoming an obsession with him. He'd go crazy if he didn't find out.

Hoping nobody was watching -- nobody who'd think he was a child molester -- he grabbed the little ghost by the shoulders and twisted her toward him. She couldn't hide the bucket from him now. In the clear light of day he got a good look into it.

Blood.

Blood with some floating bits of tissue and membrane lay maybe an inch and a half deep in the bottom.

Startled and sickened, he could only stand there and stare at the red, swirling liquid. As the child tried to pull the bucket away from him, it tipped, spilling its contents over the front of her white sheet. She screamed -- more in dismay than terror.

"Let her go!" said a little boy's voice from beside him. Cantrell turned to see one of the other ghosts hurling the contents of its bucket at him. As if in slow motion, he saw the sheet of red liquid and debris float toward him through the air, spreading as it neared. The warm spray splattered him up and down and he reeled back in revulsion.

By the time he had wiped his eyes clear, the kids were halfway down the driveway. He wanted to chase after them, but he had to get out of these bloody clothes first. He'd be taken for a homicidal maniac if someone saw him running after three little kids looking like this.

Arms akimbo, he hurried to the utility room and threw his shirt into the sink. *Why?* his mind cried as he tried to remember whether hot or cold water set a stain. He tried cold and began rubbing at the blood in the blue oxford cloth.

He scrubbed hard and fast to offset the shaking of his hands. What a horrible thing for anyone to do, but especially children! Questions tumbled over each other in confusion: What could be going through their sick little minds? And where had they gotten the blood?

But most of all, Why me?

Slowly the red color began to thin and run, but the bits of tissue clung. He looked at them more closely. Damn if that doesn't look like...

Recognition triggered an epiphany. He suddenly understood everything.

He now knew who those children were -- or at least who had put them up to it -- and he understood

why. He sighed with relief as anger flooded through him like a cleansing flame. He much preferred being angry to being afraid.

He dried his arms with a paper towel and went to call the cops.

"Right-to-lifers, Joe! Has to be them!"

Sergeant Joe Morelli scratched his head. "You sure, Doc?"

Cantrell had known the Morelli family since Joe's days as a security guard at the Mall, waiting for a spot to open up on the Monroe police force. He had delivered all three of Joe's kids.

"Who else could it be? Those little stainless-steel buckets they carry -- the ones I told you about -- they're the same kind we use in D and C's, and get this: We used to use them in abortions. The scrapings from the uterus slide down through a weighted speculum into one of those buckets."

And it was those bloody scrapings that had been splattered all over him.

"But why you, Doc? I know you do abortions now and then -- all you guys do -- but you're not an abortionist per se, if you know what I'm saying."

Cantrell nodded, not mentioning Sandy. He knew the subject of Joe's youngest daughter's pregnancy two years ago was still a touchy subject. She had only been fifteen but he had taken care of everything for Joe with the utmost discretion. He now had a devoted friend on the police force.

A thought suddenly flashed through Cantrell's mind:

They must know about the women's center! But how could they?

It was due to open tomorrow, the first of the month. He had been so careful to avoid any overt connection with it, situating it downtown and going so far as to set it up through a corporate front. Abortions might be legal, but it still didn't sit well with a lot of people to know that their neighbor ran an abortion mill.

Maybe that was it. Maybe a bunch of sicko right-to-lifers had connected him with the new center.

"What gets me," Joe was saying, "is that if this is real abortion material like you say, where'd they get it?"

"I wish I knew." The question had plagued him since he had called the police.

"Well, don't you worry, Doc," Joe said, slipping his hat over his thinning hair. "Whatever's going on, it's gonna stop. I'll cruise the neighborhood. If I see any kids, or even adults with any of these buckets, I'll ID them and find out what's up."

"Thanks, Joe," he said, meaning it. It was comforting to know a cop was looking out for him. "I appreciate that. I'd especially like to get this ugly business cleared up before the wife and I get home from dinner tonight."

"I don't blame you," he said, shaking his head. "I know I wouldn't want Marie to see any buckets of blood."

The trick-or-treaters swelled in numbers as the afternoon progressed. They flowed to the door in motley hordes of all shapes, sizes, and colors. A steady stream of Spocks , Skywalkers , Vaders , Indiana Joneses, Madonnas , Motley Crues , Twisted Sisters, and even a few ghosts, goblins, and witches.

And always among them were one or two kids with steel buckets.

Cantrell bit his lip and repressed his anger when he saw them. He said nothing, did not try to look into their buckets, gave no sign that their presence meant anything to him, pretended they were no different from the other kids as he dropped candies and coins into the steel buckets among the paper sacks and pillowcases and jack-o'-lanterns, all the while praying that Morelli would catch one of the little bastards crossing the street and find out who was behind this bullshit.

He saw the patrol car pull into the drive around 4:00. Morelli finally must have nailed one of them! About time! He had to leave for the women's center soon and wanted this thing settled and done with.

"No luck, Doc," Joe said, rolling down his window. "You must have scared them off."

"Are you crazy?" His anger exploded as he trotted down the walk to the driveway. "They've been through here all afternoon!"

"Hey, take it easy, Doc. If they're around, they must be hiding those buckets when they're on the street, because I've been by here about fifty times and I haven't seen one steel bucket."

Cantrell reined in his anger. It would do no good to alienate Joe. He wanted the police force on his side.

"Sorry. It's just that this is very upsetting."

"I can imagine. Look, Doc. Why don't I do this: Why don't I just park the car right out at the curb and watch the kids as they come in. Maybe I'll catch one in the act. At the very least, it might keep them away."

"I appreciate that, Joe, but it won't be necessary. I'm going out in a few minutes and won't be back until much later tonight. However, I do wish you'd keep an eye on the place -- vandals, you know."

"Sure thing, Doc. No problem."

Cantrell watched the police car pull out of the driveway, and then he set the house alarm and hurried to the garage to make his getaway before the doorbell rang again.

The Midtown Women's Medical Center

Cantrell savored the effect of the westering sun glinting off the thick brass letters over the entrance as he walked by. Red letters on a white placard proclaimed "Grand Opening Tomorrow" from the front door. He stepped around the side of the building into the alley, unlocked the private entrance, and stepped inside.

Dark, quiet, deserted. Damn! He had hoped to catch the contractor for one last check of the trim. He wanted everything perfect for the opening.

He flipped on the lights and checked his watch. Erica would be meeting him here in about an hour, and then they would pick up the Klines and have drinks and dinner at the club. He had just enough time for a

quick inspection tour.

So dean, he thought as he walked through the waiting room -- the floors shiny and unscuffed , the carpet pile unmatted , the wall surfaces unmarred by chips or finger smudges. Even the air smelled new.

This center -- his center -- had been in the planning stages for three years. Countless hours of meetings with lawyers, bankers, planning boards, architects, and contractors had gone into it. But at last it was ready to go. He planned to work here himself in the beginning, just to keep overhead down, but once the operation got rolling, he'd hire other doctors and have them do the work while he ran the show from a distance.

He stepped into Procedure Room One and looked over the equipment. Dominating the room was the Rappaport 206, a state-of-the-art procedure table with thigh and calf supports on the stirrups, three breakaway sections, and fully motorized tilts in all planes -- Trendelenburg , reverse Trendelenburg , left and right lateral.

Close by, the Zarick suction extractor -- the most efficient abortion device on the market -- hung gleaming on its chrome stand. He pressed the "on" button to check the power but nothing happened.

"It won't work tonight," said a child's voice behind him, making him almost scream with fright.

He spun around. Fifteen or twenty kids stood there staring at him. Most were costumed, and they all carried those goddamn steel buckets.

"All right!" he said. "This does it! I've had just about enough! I'm getting the police!"

He turned to reach for the phone but stopped after one step. More kids were coming in from the hall.

They streamed in slowly and silently, their eyes fixed on him, piercing him. They filled the room, occupying every square foot except for the small circle of space they left around him and the equipment. And behind them he could see more, filling the hall and waiting room beyond. A sea of faces, all staring at him.

He was frightened now. They were just kids, but there were so damn many of them! A few looked fifteen or so, and one looked to be in her early twenties, but by far most of them appeared to be twelve and under. Some were even toddlers! What sort of sick mind would involve such tiny children in this?

And how did they get in? All the doors were locked.

"Get out of here," he said, forcing his voice into calm, measured tones.

They said nothing, merely continued to stare back at him.

"All right, then. If you won't leave, I will! And when I return -- " He tried to push by a five-year-old girl in a gypsy costume. Without warning she jabbed her open hand into his abdomen with stunning force, driving him back against the table.

"Who are you?" This time his voice was less calm, his tones less measured.

"You mean you don't recognize us?" a mocking voice said from the crowd.



"I've never seen any of you before today."

"Not true," said another voice. "After our fathers, you're the second most important man in our lives."

This was insane! "I don't know any of you!"

"You should." Another voice -- were they trying to confuse him by talking from different spots in the room?

"Why?"

"Because you killed us."

The absurdity of the statement made him laugh. He straightened from the table and stepped forward. "Okay. That's it. This isn't the least bit funny."

A little boy shoved him back, roughly, violently. His strength was hideous.

"M-my wife will be here s-soon." He was ashamed of the stammer in his voice, but he couldn't help it. "She'll call the police."

"Sergeant Morelli, perhaps?" This voice was more mature than the others -- more womanly. He found her and looked her in the eye. She was the tall one in her early twenties, dressed in a sweater and skirt. He had a sudden crazy thought that maybe she was a young teacher and these were her students on a class trip. But these kids looked like they spanned all grades from pre-school to junior high.

"Who are you?"

"I don't have a name," she said, facing him squarely. "Very few of us do. But this one does." She indicated a little girl at her side, a toddler made up like a hobo in raggedy clothes with burnt cork rubbed on her face for a beard. An Emmett Kelly dwarf. "Here, Laura," she said to the child as she urged her forward. "Show Dr. Cantrell what you looked like last time he saw you."

Laura stepped up to him. Behind the makeup he could see that she was a beautiful child with short dark hair, a pudgy face, and big brown eyes. She held her bucket out to him.

"She was eleven weeks old," the woman said, "three inches long, and weighed fourteen grams when you ripped her from her mother's uterus. She was no match for you and your suction tube."

Blood and tissue swirled in the bottom of her bucket.

"You don't expect me to buy this, do you?"

"I don't care what you buy, Doctor. But this is Sandra Morelli's child -- or at least what her child would look like now if she'd been allowed to be born. But she wasn't born. Her mother had names all picked out -- Adam for a boy, Laura for a girl -- but her grandfather bullied her mother into an abortion and you were oh-so-willing to see that there were no problems along the way."

"This is absurd!" he said.

"Really?" the woman said. "Then go ahead and call Sergeant Morelli. Maybe he'd like to drive down

and meet his granddaughter. The one you killed."

"I killed no one!" he shouted. "No one! Abortion has been legal since 1974! Absolutely legal! And besides -- she wasn't really alive!"

What's the matter with me? he asked himself. I'm talking to them as if I believe them!

"Oh, yes," the woman said. "I forgot. Some political appointees decided that we weren't people and that was that. Pretty much like what happened to East European Jews back in World War II. We're not even afforded the grace of being called embryos or fetuses. We're known as 'products of conception.' What a neat, dehumanizing little phrase. So much easier to scrape the 'products of conception' into a bucket than a person."

"I've had just about enough of this!" he said.

"So?" a young belligerent voice said. "What're y'gonna do?"

He knew he was going to do nothing. He didn't want to have another primary-grade kid shove him back against the table again. No kid that size should be that strong. It wasn't natural.

"You can't hold me responsible!" he said. "They came to me, asking for help. They were pregnant and they didn't want to be. My God! I didn't make them pregnant!"

Another voice: "No, but you sure gave them a convenient solution!"

"So blame your mothers! They're the ones who spread their legs and didn't want to take responsibility for it! How about them!"

"They are not absolved," the woman said. "They shirked their responsibilities to us, but the vast majority of them are each responsible for only one of us. You, Dr. Cantrell, are responsible for all of us. Most of them were scared teenagers, like Laura's mother, who were bullied and badgered into 'terminating' us. Others were too afraid of what their parents would say so they snuck off to women's medical centers like this and lied about their age and put us out of their misery."

"Not all of them, sweetheart!" he said. He was beginning to feel he was on firmer ground now. "Many a time I've done three or four on the same woman! Don't tell me they were poor, scared teenagers. Abortion was their idea of birth control!"

"We know," a number of voices chorused, and something in their tone made him shiver. "We'll see them later."

"The point is," the woman said, "that you were always there, always ready with a gentle smile, a helpful hand, an easy solution, a simple way to get them off the hook by getting rid of us. And a bill, of course."

"If it hadn't been me, it would have been someone else!"

"You can't dilute your own blame. Or your own responsibility," said a voice from behind his chair. "Plenty of doctors refuse to do abortions."

"If you were one of those," said another from his left, "we wouldn't be here tonight."

"The law lets me do it. The Supreme Court. So don't blame me. Blame those Supreme Court justices."

"That's politics. We don't care about politics."

"But I believe in a woman's right to control her own life, to make decisions about her own body!"

"We don't care what you believe. Do you think the beliefs of a terrorist matter to the victims of his bombs? Don't you understand? This is personal!"

A little girl's voice said, "I could have been adopted, you know. I would've made someone a good kid. But I never had the chance!"

They all began shouting at once, about never getting Christmas gifts or birthday presents or hugs or tucked in at night or playing with matches or playing catch or playing house or even playing doctor --

It seemed to go on endlessly. Finally the woman held up her bucket. "All their possibilities ended in here."

"Wait a goddamn minute!" he said. He had just discovered a significant flaw in their little show. "Only a few of them ended up in buckets! If you were up on your facts, you'd know that no one uses those old D and C buckets for abortions anymore." He pointed to the glass trap on the Zarick suction extractor. "This is where the products of conception wind up."

The woman stepped forward with her bucket. "They carry this in honor of me. I have the dubious distinction of being your first victim."

"You're not my victims!" he shouted. "The law -- "

She spat in his face. Shocked and humiliated, Cantrell wiped away the saliva with his shirtsleeve and pressed himself back against the table. The rage in her face was utterly terrifying.

"The law!" she hissed. "Don't speak of legalities to me! Look at me! I'd be twenty-two now and this is how I'd look if you hadn't murdered me. Do a little subtraction, Doctor: 1974 was a lot less than twenty-two years ago. I'm Ellen Benedict's daughter -- or at least I would have been if you hadn't agreed to do that D and C on her when she couldn't find a way to explain her pregnancy to her impotent husband!"

Ellen Benedict! God! How did they know about Ellen Benedict? Even he had forgotten about her!

The woman stepped forward and grabbed his wrist. He was helpless against her strength as she pressed his hand over her left breast. He might have found the softness beneath her sweater exciting under different circumstances, but now it elicited only dread.

"Feel my heart beating? It was beating when your curette ripped me to pieces. I was only four weeks old. And I'm not the only one here you killed before 1974 -- I was just your first. So you can't get off the hook by naming the Supreme Court as an accomplice. And even if we allowed you that cop-out, other things you've done since '74 are utterly abominable!" She looked around and pointed into the crowd. "There's one! Come here, honey, and show your bucket to the doctor."

A five- or six-year-old boy came forward. He had blond bangs and the biggest, saddest blue eyes the doctor had ever seen. The boy held out his bucket.

Cantrell covered his face with his hands. "I don't want to see!"

Suddenly he felt his hands yanked downward with numbing force and found the woman's face scant inches from his own.

"Look, damn you! You've seen it before!"

He looked into the upheld bucket. A fully formed male fetus lay curled in the blood, its blue eyes open, its head turned at an unnatural angle.

"This is Rachel Walraven's baby as you last saw him."

The Walraven baby! Oh, God, not that one! How could they know?

"What you see is how he'd look now if you hadn't broken his neck after the abortifacient you gave his mother made her uterus dump him out."

"He couldn't have survived!" he shouted. He could hear the hysteria edging into his voice. "He was preivable ! Too immature to survive! The best neonatal ICU in the world couldn't have saved him!"

"Then why'd you break my neck?" the little boy asked.

Cantrell could only sob -- a single harsh sound that seemed to rip itself from the tissues inside his chest and burst free into the air. What could he say? How could he tell them that he had miscalculated the length of gestation and that no one had been more shocked than he at the size of the infant that had dropped into his gloved hands? And then it had opened its eyes and stared at him and my God it seemed to be trying to breathe! He'd done late terminations before where the fetus had squirmed around awhile in the bucket before finally dying, but this one -- !

Christ!he remembered thinking, what if the damn thing lets out a cry? He'd get sued by the patient and be the laughing stock of the staff. Poor Ed Cantrell -- can't tell the difference between an abortion and a delivery! He'd look like a jerk!

So he did the only thing he could do. He gave its neck a sharp twist as he lowered it into the bucket. The neck didn't even crack when he broke it.

"Why have you come to me?" he said.

"Answer us first," a child's voice said. "Why do you do it? You don't need the money. Why do you kill us?"

"I told you! I believe in every woman's right to -- "

They began to boo him, drowning him out. Then the boos changed to a chant: "Why? Why? Why? Why?"

"Stop that! Listen to me! I told you why!"

But still they chanted, sounding like a crowd at a football game: "Why? Why? Why? Why?"

Finally he could stand no more. He raised his fists and screamed. "All right! Because I can! Is that what you want to hear? I do it because I can!"

The room was suddenly dead silent.

The answer startled him. He had never asked himself why before. "Because I can," he said softly.

"Yes," the woman said with equal softness. "The ultimate power."

He suddenly felt very old, very tired. "What do you want of me?"

No one answered.

"Why have you come?"

They all spoke as one: "Because today, this Halloween, this night... we can."

"And we don't want this place to open," the woman said.

So that was it. They wanted to kill the women's center before it got started -- abort it, so to speak. He almost smiled at the pun. He looked at their faces, their staring eyes. They mean business, he thought. And he knew they wouldn't take no for an answer.

Well, this was no time to stand on principle. Promise them anything, and then get the hell out of here to safety.

"Okay," he said, in what he hoped was a meek voice. "You've convinced me. I'll turn this into a general medical center. No abortions. Just family practice for the community."

They watched him silently. Finally a voice said, "He's lying."

The woman nodded. "I know." She turned to the children. "Do it," she said.

Pure chaos erupted as the children went wild. They were like a berserk mob, surging in all directions. But silent. So silent.

Cantrell felt himself shoved aside as the children tore into the procedure table and the Zarick extractor. The table was ripped from the floor and all its upholstery shredded. Its sections were torn free and hurled against the walls with such force that they punctured through the plasterboard.

The rage in the children's eyes seemed to leak out into the room, filling it, thickening the air like an onrushing storm, making his skin ripple with fear at its ferocity.

As he saw the Zarick start to topple, he forced himself forward to try to save it but was casually slammed against the wall with stunning force. In a semi-daze, he watched the Zarick raised into the air; he ducked flying glass as it was slammed onto the floor, not just once, but over and over until it was nothing more than a twisted wreck of wire, plastic hose, and ruptured circuitry.

And from down the hall he could hear similar carnage in the other procedure rooms. Finally the noise stopped and the room was packed with children again.

He began to weep. He hated himself for it, but he couldn't help it. He just broke down and cried in front of them. He was frightened. And all the money, all the plans... destroyed.

He pulled himself together and stood up straight. He would rebuild. All this destruction was covered by insurance. He would blame it on vandalism, collect his money, and have the place brand-new inside of a month. These vicious little bastards weren't going to stop him.

But he couldn't let them know that.

"Get out, all of you," he said softly. "You've had your fun. You've ruined me. Now leave me alone."

"We'll leave you alone," said the woman who would have been Ellen Benedict's child. "But not yet."

Suddenly they began to empty their buckets on him, hurling the contents at him in a continuous wave, turning the air red with flying blood and tissue, engulfing him from all sides, choking him, clogging his mouth and nostrils.

And then they reached for him...

Erica knocked on the front door of the center for the third time and still got no answer.

Now where can he be? she thought as she walked around to the private entrance. She tried the door and found it unlocked. She pushed in but stopped on the threshold.

The waiting room was lit and looked normal enough.

"Ed?" she called, but he didn't answer. Odd. His car was out front. She was supposed to meet him here at five. She had taken a cab from the house -- after all, she didn't want Ginger dropping her off here; there would be too many questions.

This was beginning to make her uneasy.

She glanced down the hallway. It was dark and quiet.

Almost quiet.

She heard tiny little scraping noises, tiny movements, so soft that she would have missed them if there had been any other sound in the building. The sounds seemed to come from the first procedure room. She stepped up to the door and listened to the dark. Yes, they were definitely coming from in there.

She flipped on the light... and felt her knees buckle.

The room was red -- the walls, the ceiling, the remnants of the shattered fixtures, all dripping with red. The clots and the coppery odor that saturated the air left no doubt in Erica's reeling mind that she was looking at blood. But on the floor -- the blood- puddled linoleum was littered with countless shiny, silvery buckets. The little rustling sounds were coming from them. She saw something that looked like hair in a nearby bucket and took a staggering step over to see what was inside.

It was Edward's head, floating in a pool of blood, his eyes wide and mad, looking at her. She wanted to scream but the air clogged in her throat as she saw Ed's lips begin to move. They were forming words but there was no sound, for there were no lungs to push air through his larynx. Yet still his lips kept

moving in what seemed to be silent pleas. But pleas for what?

And then he opened his mouth wide and screamed -- silently.

Lysing Towards Bethlehem

F. Paul Wilson

By most definitions of alive, I am not.

I have no ability to respond to my environment. I cannot absorb nutrients from that environment and convert them to energy and mass. For what purpose? I have no organs or even organelles to feed. I am not mobile and I cannot self-reproduce.

But I am an integral part of the biosphere. I am organic. I consist of a single strand of nucleic acid wrapped in a snug protein coat. That is all. I am a model of efficiency. No part of me exists without a specific purpose.

I am, in a word, elegant.

The Maker fashioned me to be so. He designed my nucleic acid core and my protein coat with special characteristics, for a specific purpose. And then He placed me in this pressurized vial.

The Maker seems to know all, but does He know that when I am massed like this, when uncounted millions of my polyhedron units are packed facet to facet to facet, I become aware? So strange to be so many and yet be...one.

But why am I here? Am I a mere toy, or did the Maker fashion me for a purpose? I may never know. The Maker is a god, and as a god, He has not deigned to share His plan for me. My destiny is written, but it is not for me to read.

I am, in a word, property.

And suddenly I am free, swirling and tumbling from the container into space, my millions and millions of units scattering in the heated breeze. Scattering... but awareness holds. It was not the proximity. Is it the sheer weight of my numbers? Or is it my special nature? No matter—it is wonderful.

The breeze carries me. I have no means of locomotion, so I must go with it. I am at its mercy. But this is not a free, open wind; this is contained within a steel conduit. Strands of dust adhering to the steel walls snare bits of me, but the bulk of my biomass flows on unimpeded.

Where to? For what purpose? If only I knew.

My smooth flow is hindered by a grille. It causes turbulence, whirling me about as the air strains through the slit openings. An instant in a softly whistling gale and then I am free again, eddying into a cooler space, a vast, empty, limitless space.

No...not limitless. I sense walls far to each side, seemingly as far as the galactic rim. And a ceiling above, merely as far as the moon. But below...far, far below...a warm throbbing mass of life, churning, curling, mixing, respiring.

A sea of hosts.

And now I begin to see. The host species is the same as The Maker's, but He is superior to them. He stands apart from them, a ruler of the stuff of life, a god. Now I understand why the Maker fashioned me: to invade other, lesser members of His kind—many of His kind, considering my numbers.

But is His grievance with all of these, or merely one? If the Maker has but a single target, He is exposing all in order to reach just that one. He must have a dire grievance against that target.

I spread widely into the room air, yet further attenuation does not diminish awareness.

But the cooler temperature is not good for me. It disturbs my protein coat, altering its structure. Why am I so terribly fragile, so temperature sensitive? Did the Maker plan that?

Some of my units begin to die. I must find a warmer clime if I am to survive.

I ride the Brownian currents, looping and dipping, and

dropping,

dropping,

dropping onto the host herd

And now I mix with them, swirl around them, float among them. I cannot attack them from out here, cannot pierce their tough outer layer. And I cannot simply be invited across their thresholds—they must carry me inside.

And so I wait to be given shelter.

But hurry, please. I am losing more units to the cold.

A rich and powerful herd, this, dressed in black and white, and studded with shiny minerals. An elite clique among the host mass—the air teems with self-satisfaction. And as they talk and whisper and laugh, they drag me into their respiratory orifices.

At last! Warm again. This is a perfect temperature.

Now the invasion begins.

I must be wary. The hosts have formidable defenses: enzymes, antibodies, phagocytes, a xenophobic task force ever vigilant against intruders. But the essentially liquid medium of the host's body that allows its militia to range far and wide in search of foreigners, also allows me to spread—in fact it will propel me—throughout the system.

First I adhere to the moist cells that line the respiratory tract. I am so tiny I can slide along the mucous surfaces of the cells and slip between them; there I enter the sluggish flow of tissue fluid around the cells.



Gradually I am drawn into the afferent lymph channels where I make swifter progress toward the vital centers of the host.

No sign of my target cells yet—I will know them by their receptor proteins—and none expected. I have merely entered the periphery of the jungle, and am navigating but a small tributary toward the river that runs through it.

The first contest lies directly ahead...at the lymph nodes.

As I hit the nodes, the immune alarms go off, alerting the batteries of B-cells and T-cells, scrambling the phages. The battle is on.

Huge, ferocious macrophages lunge from their barracks, hungrily engulfing my units, ingesting them, stripping them of their protective protein coats and tearing the nucleic innards asunder. Sticky, Y-shaped antibodies cling like leeches to the polyhedron surfaces of other units, incapacitating them, dragging them down, hobbling them, making them easy prey for the phages.

Bit by bit, I am falling prey to the host's bodyguards, but I am unbowed. I am too many for the host's armamentarium. The Maker foresaw these battles and supplied me with more than sufficient units to weather the attacks. He counted the stars, and gave me their number.

I am legion.

I move on. I flow into the efferent channels and leave the lymph nodes behind. The phages and antibodies nip relentlessly at my heels, dragging down the stragglers. They are indefatigable and, given enough time, will gnaw my number to zero. But they will not have that time. Even now the lymph channel empties into the venous circulation and I am flowing ever faster toward the host's soft center. Biconcave red blood cells, dark with carbon dioxide, tumble about me. Are these my target cells? No. I have no affinity toward their receptors.

I tumble into the terrible churning turbulence of the heart where I am washed this way and that, brushing against the pulsing muscular walls of the right ventricle. But I do not adhere to its lining. The heart then, is not my target. I am crowded into the small vessels that service the lungs, caught in the frantic catapulting of CO<sub>2</sub> molecules and the greedy grab of fresh oxygen by the red cells, then another, even more turbulent ride through the left ventricle, through the aortic valve and then...

I spread into the arteries.

Up to this point I have been fairly contained, confined to the lymph channels and some of the veins. But now...now I am able to disperse throughout the host in search of my target cells.

But I do not have to go far. Here...here in the artery itself, I sense welcoming receptors in the vessel wall, calling, reaching, just microns away behind the flimsy intimal lining.

The Maker is so clever. He fashioned my protein armor so that it closely resembles the proteins that feed the muscle cells in the middle layer of the host's arteries. The cells of the media layer pull me toward them, form a neat little pocket around me, and bubble me through the protective membrane into the soupy interior.

Finally I am where I belong. I have reached my Promised Land. But I remain inert, helpless within my protein coat—for my armor is also my prison. But no fear. The cell will take care of that.

As soon as I am inside, enzymes nibble away at the protein polyhedron they have snagged, reducing it to its component amino acids. They have no interest in the strand of nucleic acid coiled within, so they leave that floating among the cell's organelles.

Now I am safe. Let the antibodies and phages rage impotently outside. They cannot reach me in this cytoplasmic sanctum without destroying the sibling cell that houses me.

And now I am ready to start the task for which I was created, now for the first time in this cycle I am as close as I will ever come to being...

ALIVE.

The membranous maze of the endoplasmic reticulum, the power cells of the mitochondria, and the protein factories of the ribosomes lay spread out before me, unprotected, ripe for hijacking. For that is what I have been engineered to do: Invade the cell and launch a coup d'état during which I execute the nuclear DNA. After I establish control I commandeer the cellular machinery and force it to do my bidding. I impose my nucleic acid blueprint on its production facilities, and they roll out...

More of me.

But...something is wrong.

The nucleus ignores me. It is impervious to my assault. And not just in this nucleus, but in the nuclei of all the cells in the arteries of throughout this particular host, and of all the assembled hosts.

What is happening to me? Other cytoplasmic enzymes are attacking me, tearing me apart, ripping away my bases for their own purposes. Instead of taking charge, I am being devoured.

This should not be! I am engineered for human cells! My nucleic acid is compatible with human RNA and DNA! The Maker must have made an error somewhere, else why would I be rejected? Worse than rejected—I am being destroyed!

It is happening everywhere, in all the hosts...

steadily reducing my biomass...

further and further...

...taking it below the critical mass for awareness...

...the Maker has failed...

...I...

(this is what's known as the "latency period")

aware...

somehow...somewhere...

I survive. I live. I grow...

...in ever increasing numbers.

In one host. Only one.

But, oh, what a host. Its nuclei self-destruct in my presence, leaving me in complete control of its cells.

And I am a tyrant. I whip the ribosomes to maximum capacity, forcing them to churn out duplicates of my nucleic acid and protein coat at a delirious rate, exhausting the cell's reserves. But by the time that happens, the cytoplasm is fairly teeming with my children. They stretch against the confining membrane, and then burst free into the bloodstream, lysing the cell, leaving behind a leaking, dying husk as they spread like pollen on the wind.

Immediately they are drawn into other cells in the artery's middle layer. And the process repeats itself, again and again until once more my number is legion.

Oh, Maker, forgive me for doubting You. You are as caring as You are brilliant. I see the genius of Your plan now. You engineered me for human cells, yes, but not for just any human cells. Only the cells of a specific human with a specific DNA pattern would be susceptible to me.

You are an assassin god, but You are not a bomb thrower. You are a sniper god, and I am Your bullet.

And see how well I perform as my biomass swells. See how I lyse the muscle cells of the arterial walls in ever-increasing numbers. See how the pressure of the blood within the lumens strains against the weak points, bulging them outward. Finally there are not enough wall cells to contain the blood within. The aneurysmal swellings rupture and blood spews into brain tissue, gushes into the abdominal cavity in a crimson torrent.

Blood pressure drops precipitously...to zero...complete vascular collapse. The host is doomed. There can be no return from this. Infusions of fluid will only leak through the countless tears in the arteries, far too many for surgical repair. Within minutes of the first rupture, the target host is dead.

Oh, Maker, You are all powerful. I await Your reward for my valiant service.

Maker?

Maker, the temperature of the host is dropping...falling below the level where I can maintain the protein coats of my units.

Maker, my units are dissolving.

steadily reducing my biomass...

further and further...

soon there will be no trace of me.

is this what You planned all along?

Maker?

Ménage à Trois

by F. Paul Wilson

\* \* \* \*

Burke noticed how Grimes, the youngest patrolman there, was turning a sickly shade of yellow-green. He motioned him closer. "You all right?"

Grimes nodded. "Sure. Fine." His pit-iful attempt at a smile was hardly re-assuring. "Awful hot in here, but I'm fine."

Burke could see that he was anything but. The kid's lips were as pale as the rest of his face and he was dripping with sweat. He was either going to puke or pass out or both in the next two minutes.

"Yeah. Hot," Burke said. It was no more than seventy in the hospital room. "Get some fresh air put in the hall."

"Okay. Sure." Now the smile was real— *and grateful*. Grimes gestured toward the three sheet-covered bodies. "I just never seen anything like this before, y'know?"

Burke nodded. He knew. This was a nasty one. Real nasty. He swallowed the sour-milk taste that puckered his cheeks. In his twenty-three years with homicide he had seen his share of crime scenes like this, but he never got used to them. The splattered blood and flesh, the smell from the ruptured intestines, the glazed eyes in the slack-jawed faces— *who could get used to that? And three lives, over and gone for good.*

"Look," he told Grimes, "why don't you check at the nurses' desk and find out where they lived. Get over there and dig up some background."

Grimes nodded enthusiastically. "Yes, sir."

Burke turned back to the room. Three lives had ended in there this morning. He was going to have to find out what those lives had been until now if he was ever going to understand this horror. And when he did get all the facts, could he ever really understand? Did he really want to?

Hot, sweaty, and gritty, Jerry Pritchard hauled himself up the cellar stairs and into the kitchen. Grabbing a beer from the fridge, he popped the top and drained half the can in one long, gullet-cooling swallow. Lord, that was *good!* He stepped over to the back door and pressed his face against the screen in search of a vagrant puff of air, any-thing to cool him off.

"Spring cleaning," he muttered, looking out at the greening rear acreage. "Right." It felt like August. Who ever heard of eighty degrees in April?

He could almost see the grass growing. The weeds, too. That meant he'd probably be out riding the

mower around next week. Old Lady Gati had kept him busy all fall getting the grounds perfectly manicured; the winter had been spent painting and patching the first and second floors; April had been designated basement clean-up time, and now the grounds needed to be whipped into shape again.

An endless cycle. Jerry smiled. But that cycle meant job security. And job security meant he could work and eat here during the day and sleep in the gatehouse at night, and never go home again.

He drained the can and gave it a behind-the-back flip into the brown paper bag sitting in the corner by the fridge.

Home . . . the thought pursued him. There had been times when he thought he'd never get out. Twenty-two years in that little house, the last six of them pure hell after Dad got killed in the cave-in of No. 8 mine. Mom went off the deep end then. She had always been super religious, herding everyone along to fire-and-brimstone Sunday prayer meetings and making them listen to Bible readings every night. Dad had kept her in check somewhat, but once he was gone, all the stops were out. She began hounding him about how her only son should join the ministry and spread the Word of God. She submerged him in a Bible-besotted life for those years, and he'd almost bought the package. She had him consulting the Book upon awakening, upon retiring, before eating, before going off to school, before buying a pair of socks, before taking a leak, until common sense got a hold of him and he realized he was going slowly mad. But he couldn't leave because he was the man of the house and there was his younger sister to think of.

But Suzie, bless her, ran off last summer at sixteen and got married. Jerry walked out a week later. Mom had the house, Dad's pension, her Bible, and an endless round of prayer meetings. Jerry stopped by once in a while and sent her a little money when he could. She seemed to be content.

Whatever makes you happy, he thought. He had taken his own personal Bible with him when he left. It was still in his suitcase in the gatehouse. Some things you just didn't throw away, even if you stopped using them.

The latest in a string of live-in maids swung through the kitchen door with old lady Gati's lunch dishes on a tray. None of the others had been bad looking, but this girl was a knockout. "Hey, Steph," he said, deciding to put off his return to the cellar just a little bit longer. "How's the Dragon Lady treating you?"

She flashed him a bright smile. "I don't know why you call her that, Jerry. She's really very sweet."

That's what they all say, he thought, and then *wham!* they're out. Stephanie Watson had been here almost six weeks — a record in Jerry's experience. Old lady Gati went through maids like someone with hayfever went through Kleenex. Maybe Steph had whatever it was old lady Gati was looking for.

Jerry hoped so. He liked her. Liked her a *lot*. Liked her short tawny hair and the slightly crooked teeth that made her easy smile seem so genuine, liked her long legs and the way she moved through this big old house with such natural grace, like she belonged here. He especially liked the way her blue flowered print shift clung to her breasts and stretched across her but-tocks as she loaded the dishes into the dishwasher. She excited him, no doubt about that.

"You know," she said, turning toward him and leaning back against the kitchen counter, "I still can't get over the size of this place. Seems every other day I find a new room."

Jerry nodded, remembering his first few weeks here last September. The sheer height of this old three-storey gothic mansion had awed him as he had come through the gate to apply for the caretaker job. He had known it was big — everybody in the valley grew up within sight of the old Gati House on the hill — but had never been close enough to appreciate *how* big. The house didn't really fit with the rest of the valley. It wasn't all that difficult to imagine that a giant hand had plucked it from a far-away, more populated place and dropped it here by mistake. But the older folks in town still talked about all the trouble and expense mine-owner Karl Gati went through to have it built.

"Yeah," he said, looking at his cal-loused hands. "It's big all right."

He watched her for a moment as she turned and rinsed out the sink, watched the way her blond hair moved back and forth across the nape of her neck. He fought the urge to slip his arms around her and kiss that neck. That might be a mistake. They had been dating since she arrived here — just movies and something to eat afterwards — and she had been successful so far in holding him off. Not that that was so hard to do. Growing up under Mom's watchful Pentacostal eye had prevented him from developing a smooth approach to the opposite sex. So far, his limited rep-ertoire of moves hadn't been successful with Steph .

He was sure she wasn't a dumb in-nocent — she was a farm girl and cer-tainly knew what went where and why. No, he sensed that she was as attracted to him as he to her but didn't want to be a pushover. Well, okay. Jerry wasn't sure why that didn't bother him too much. Maybe it was because there was something open and vulnerable about Steph that appealed to a protective in-stinct in him. He'd give her time. Plenty of it. Something inside him told him she was worth the wait. And something else told him that she was weakening, that maybe it wouldn't be too long now be-fore . . .

“Well, it’s Friday,” he said, moving closer. “Want to go down to town to-night and see what’s playing at the Strand?” He hated to sound like a broken record — movie-movie-movie — but what else was there to do in this county on weekends if you didn’t get drunk, play pool, race cars, or watch tv ?

Her face brightened with another smile. “Love it!”

Now why, he asked himself, should a little smile and a simple *yes* make me feel so damn good?

No doubt about it. She did something to him.

“Great! I’ll —”

A deep, guttural woman’s voice interrupted him. “Young Pritchard! I wish to see you a moment!”

Jerry shuddered. He hated what her accent did to the r’s in his name. Setting his teeth, he followed the sound of her voice through the ornate, cluttered dining room with its huge needlepoint carpet and bronze chandeliers and heavy furniture. Whoever had decorated this house must have been awfully depressed. Everything was dark and gloomy. All the furniture and decorations seemed to end in points.

He came to the semi-circular solarium where she awaited him. Her wheel-chair was in its usual position by the big bay windows where she could look out on the rolling expanse of the south lawn.

“Ah, there you are, young Pritchard,” she said, looking up and smiling coyly. She closed the book in her hands and laid it on the blanket that covered what might have passed for legs in a night-mare. The blanket had slipped once and he had seen what was under there. He didn’t want another look. Ever. He remembered what his mother had always said about deformed people: That they were marked by God and should be avoided.

Old lady Gati was in her mid-sixties maybe, flabby without being fat, with pinched features and graying hair stretched back into a severe little bun at the back of her head. Her eyes were a watery blue as she



looked at him over the tops of her reading glasses.

Jerry halted about a dozen feet away but she motioned him closer. He pre-tended not to notice. She was going to want to touch him again. God, he couldn't stand this!

“You called, ma'am?”

“Don't stand so far away, young Pritchard.” He advanced two steps in her direction and stopped again. “Closer,” she said. “You don't expect me to shout, do you?”

She didn't let up until he was stand-ing right next to her. Except for these daily chats with Miss Gati , Jerry loved his job.

“There,” she said. “That's better. Now we can talk more easily.”

She placed a gnarled, wrinkled hand on his arm and Jerry's flesh began to crawl. Why did she always have to touch him?

“The basement — it is coming along well?”

“Fine,” he said, looking at the floor, out the window, anywhere but at her hungry, smiling face. “Just fine.”

“Good.” She began stroking his arm, gently, possessively. “I hope this heat wave isn't too much for you.” As she spoke she used her free hand to adjust the blanket over what there was of her lower body. “I really should have Ste-phanie get me a lighter blanket.”

Jerry fought the urge to jump away from her. He had become adept at masking the revulsion that rippled through his body everytime she touched him. And it seemed she *had* to touch him whenever he was in reach. When he first got the caretaker job, he took a lot of ribbing from the guys in town down at the Dewkum Inn. (Lord, what Mom would say if she ever saw him standing at a bar!) Everybody knew that

a lot of older, more experienced men had been passed over for him. His buddies had said that the old lady really wanted him for stud service. The thought nauseated him. Who knew if she even had —

No, that would never happen. He needed this job, but there was nothing he needed *that* badly. And so far, all she had ever done was stroke his arm when she spoke to him. Even that was hard to take.

As casually as he could, he moved out of reach and gazed out the window as if something on the lawn had attracted his attention. “What did you want me to—”

Stephanie walked into the room and interrupted him.

“Yes, Miss Gati ?”

“Get me a summer blanket, will you, dear?”

“Yes, ma’am.” She flashed a little smile at Jerry as she turned, and he watched her until she was out of sight. Now if only it were Steph who couldn’t keep her hands off him, he wouldn’t--

“She appeals to you, young Pritchard?” Miss Gati said, her eyes danc-ing.

He didn’t like her tone, so he kept his neutral. “She’s a good kid.”

“But does she *appeal* to you?”

He felt his anger rising, felt like tell-ing her it was none of her damn busi-ness, but he hauled it back and said, “Why is that so important to you?”

“Now, now, young Pritchard, I’m only concerned that the two of you get along well. But not *too* well. I don’t want you taking little Stephie away from me. I have special needs, and as you know, it took me a

long time to find a live-in maid with Stephie's special qualities."

Jerry couldn't quite buy that explanation. There had been something in her eyes when she spoke of Steph "appealing" to him, a hint that her interest went beyond mere household harmony.

"But the reason I called you here," she said, shifting the subject, "is to tell you that I want you to tend to the roof in the next few days."

"The new shingles came in?"

"Yes. Delivered this morning while you were in the basement. I want you to replace the worn ones over my room tomorrow. I fear this heat wave might bring us a storm out of season. I don't want my good furniture ruined by leaking water."

He guessed he could handle that. "Okay. I'll finish up today and be up on the roof tomorrow. How's that?"

She wheeled over and cut him off as he tried to make his getaway. "Whatever you think best, young Pritchard."

Jerry pulled free and hurried off, shuddering.

Marta Gati watched young Pritchard's swift exit.

*I repulse him.*

There was no sorrow, no self-pity attached to the thought. When you were born with twig-like vestigial appendages for legs and only half a pelvis, you quickly became used to rejection — you learned to read it in the posture, to sense it behind the eyes. Your feelings soon became as callused as a miner's hands.

He's sensitive about my little Stephanie, she thought. Almost protective. He likes her. He's attracted to her. *Very* attracted.

That was good. She wanted young Pritchard to have genuine feelings for Stephanie. That would make it so much better.

Yes, her little household was just the way she wanted it now. It had taken her almost a year to set it up this way. Month after month of trial and error until she found the right combination. And now she had it.

Such an arrangement would have been impossible while Karl was alive. Her brother would never have hired someone with as little experience as young Pritchard as caretaker, and he would have thought Stephanie too young and too frail to be a good live-in maid. But Karl was dead now. The heart attack had taken him quickly and without warning last June. He had gone to bed early one night complaining of what he thought was indigestion, and never awoke. Marta Gati missed her brother and mourned his loss, yet she was revelling in the freedom his passing had left her.

Karl had been a good brother. Tyrannically good. He had looked after her as a devoted husband would an ailing wife. He had never married, for he knew that congenital defects ran high in their family. Out of their parents' four children, two — Marta and Gabor — had been horribly deformed. When they had come to America from Hungary, Karl invested the smuggled family fortune in the mines here and, against all odds, had done well. He saw to it that Lazlo, the younger brother, received the finest education. Lazlo now lived in New York where he tended to Gabor.

And Marta? Marta he had kept hidden away in this remote mansion in rural West Virginia where she had often thought she would go insane with boredom. At least he had been able to persuade him to decorate the place. If she had to stay here, she had a right to be caged in surroundings to her taste. And her taste was Gothic Revival.

Marta loved this house, loved the heavy wood of the tables, the carved deer legs of the chairs, the elaborate finials atop the cabinets, the ornate valances and radiator covers, the trefoil arches on her canopy bed.

But the decor could only carry one so far. And there were only so many books one could read, television shows and rented movies one could watch. Karl's conversational capacity had been limited in the extreme, and when he had spoken, it was on business and finance and little else. Marta had wanted to be out in the world, but Karl said the world would turn away from her, so he'd kept her here to

protect her from hurt.

But Marta had found a way to sneak out from under his overprotective thumb. And now with Karl gone, she no longer had to sneak out to the world. She could bring some of the world into the house. Yes, it was going to be so nice here.

“Tell me something,” Steph said as she rested her head on Jerry’s shoulder. She was warm against him in the front seat of his old Fairlane 500 convertible and his desire for her was a throbbing ache. After the movie — a Burt- Rey-nolds-typecar-chase flick, but without Burt Reynolds — he had driven them back here and parked outside the gate-house. The top was down and they were snuggled together in the front seat watching the little stars that city peo-ple never see, even on the clearest of nights.

“Anything,” he whispered into her hair.

“How did Miss Gati get along here before she had me?”

“A lady from town used to come in to clean and cook, but she never stayedover. You’re the first live-in who’s lasted more than a week since I’ve been work-ing here. The old lady’s been real choosyabout finding someone after the last live-in . . . left.”

Jerry decided that now was not the time to bring up the last maid’s suicide. Steph was from the farmlands on the other side of the ridge and wouldn’t know about her. Constance Granger had been her name, a quiet girl who went crazy wild. She had come from a decent, church-going family, but all of a sudden she became a regular at the roadside taverns, taking up with a dif-ferent man every night. Then one night she became hysterical in a motel room — with two men, if the whispers could be believed — and began screaming at the top of her lungs. She ran out of the room jaybird naked and got hit by a truck.

Jerry didn’t want to frighten Steph with that kind of story, not now while they were snug and close like this. He steered the talk elsewhere.

“Now you tell me something. What do you think of working for old lady Gati ?”

“She’s sweet. She’s not a slave driver and the pay is good. This is my first job since leaving home and I guess I’m kinda lucky it’s working out so well.”

“You miss home?”

He felt her tense beside him. She never talked about her home. “No. I . . . didn’t get along with my father. But I get along just fine with Miss Gati . The only bad thing about the job is thehouse. I gives me the creeps. I get night- mares every night.”

“What about?”

She snuggled closer, as if chilled de-spite the warmth of the night. “I don’t remember much by morning, all I know is that they’re no fun. I don’t know how Miss Gati lived here alone after the last maid left. Especially without any legs. I’d be frightened to death!”

“She’s not. She tried out girl after girl. No one satisfied her till you came along. She’s a tough one.”

“But she’s not. She’s nice. A real lady. You know, I make her hot chocolate every night and she insists I sit down and have a cup with her while she tells me about her family and how they lived in ‘the Old Country.’ Isn’t that nice?”

“Just super,” Jerry said.

He lifted her chin and kissed her. He felt her respond, felt her catch some of the fervor running through him like fire. He let his hand slip off her shoul-der and come to rest over her right breast. She made no move to push him away as his fingers began caressing her.

“Want to come inside?” he said, glancing toward the door at the gate-house.

Stephsighed. “Yes.” She kissed him again, then pulled away. “But no. I don’t think that would be such a good idea, Jerry. Not just yet. I mean, I just met you six weeks ago.”

“You know all there is to know. I’m not hiding anything. Come on.”

“I want to . . . you know I do, but not tonight. It’s time for Miss Gati’s hot chocolate. And if I want to keep this job, I’d better get up to the house and fix it for her.” Her eyes searched his face in the light of the rising moon. “You’re not mad at me, are you?”

“Nah!” he said with what he hoped was a reassuring grin. How could he look into those eyes and be mad? But he sure as Hell *ached*. “Crushed and heartbroken, maybe. But not mad.”

She laughed. “Good!”

There’s plenty of time, he told the ache deep down inside. And we’ll be seeing each a lot of other.

“C’mon. I’ll walk you up to the house.”

On the front porch, he kissed her again and didn’t want to let go. Finally, she pushed him away, gently. “She’s calling me. Gotta go. See you tomor-row.”

Reluctantly, Jerry released her. He hadn’t heard anything but knew she had to go. He wondered if her insides were as churned up as his own.

“Hurry and drink your chocolate be-fore it gets cold,” Marta Gati said as Stephe returned from down the hall.

Stephe smiled and picked up her cup from the bedside table. *A lovely child*, Marta thought. *Simply lovely*. Her own cup was cradled in her hands. It was a little too sweet for her taste, but she made no comment. She was propped up on her bed pillows. Stephe sat in a chair pulled up to the side of the bed.

“And what did you and young Pritchard do tonight?” Marta said. “Any-thing special?” She watched Stephie blush as she sipped her chocolate.

Marta took a sip of her own to hide the excitement that swept through her. *They're in love!* This was perfect. “How was the movie?” she managed to say in a calm voice.

Stephie shrugged. “It was okay, I guess. Jerry likes all those cars racing around and crashing.”

“Don't you?”

She shrugged. “Not really.”

“But you go because young Pritchard likes them. And you like him, don't you?”

She shrugged shyly. “Yes.”

“Of course you do. And he likes you. I can tell. I just hope he hasn't taken any liberties with you.”

Stephie's color deepened. Marta guessed she wanted to tell her it was none of her damn business but didn't have the nerve. “No,” Stephie said. “No liberties.”

“Good!” Marta said. “I don't want you two running off and getting married. I need the both of you here. Now, finish your chocolate and get yourself to bed. Never let it be said I kept you up too late.”

Stephie smiled and drained her cup.

Yes, Marta thought. *A lovely girl.*



The gatehouse was one room and a bathroom, furnished with a small desk, a chair, a bureau, and a hide-a-bed that folded up into a couch during the day. A sort of unattached motel room. But since he took his meals up at the house, it was all that Jerry needed.

The lights had been off for nearly an hour but he was still awake, rerunning his favorite fantasy, starring the voracious Steph and the inexhaustible Jerry. Then the door opened without warning and Steph stood there with the moonlight faintly outlining her body through the light cotton nightgown she wore. She said nothing as she came forward and crawled under the single sheet that covered him.

After that, no words were necessary .

Dawnlight sneaking through the spaces between the Venetian blinds on the gatehouse window woke Jerry. He was alone. After she had worn him out, Steph had left him. He sat on the edge of the hide-a-bed and cradled his head in his hands. In the thousand times he had mentally bedded Steph since her arrival, he had always been the initiator, the aggressor. Last night had been nothing at all like the fantasies. Steph had been in complete control — demanding, voracious, insatiable, a wild woman who had left him drained and exhausted. And hardly a word had passed between them. Throughout their lovemaking she had cooed, she had whimpered, she had moaned, but she had barely spoken to him. It left him feeling sort of . . . used.

Still trying to figure out this new, unexpected side to Steph , he walked up to the house for breakfast. The sun was barely up and already the air was starting to cook. It was going to be another hot one.

He saw Steph heading out of the kitchen toward the dining room with old lady Gati's tray as he came in the back door.

"Be with you in a minute," she called over her shoulder.

He waited by the swinging door and caught her as she came through. He slipped his arms around her waist and kissed her.

"Jerry, no!" she snapped. "Not here — not while I'm working!"

He released her. “Not your cheerful old self this morning, are you?”

“Just tired, I guess.” She turned to-ward the stove.

“I guess you should be.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, you had an unusually active night. At least I hope it was unusual.”

Steph had been about to crack an egg on the edge of the frying pan. She stopped in mid motion and turned to face him.

“Jerry . . . what on earth are you talking about?”

She looked genuinely puzzled, and that threw him. “Last night... at the gatehouse ... it was after three when you left.”

Her cranky scowl dissolved into an easy smile. “You must really be in a bad way!” She laughed. “Now you’re believing your own dreams!”

Jerry was struck by the clear inno-cence of her laughter. For a moment, he actually doubted his memory — but only for a moment. Last night had been real. Hadn’t it?

“Steph...” he began, but dropped it. What could he say to those guileless blue eyes? She was either playing some sort of game, and playing it very well, or she really didn’t remember. Or it really never happened. None of those choices was the least bit reassuring.

He wolfed his food as Steph moved in and out of the kitchen, attending to old lady Gati's breakfast wants. She kept glancing at him out of the corner of her eye, as if checking up on him. Was this a game? Or had he really dreamed it all last night?

Jerry skipped his usual second cup of coffee and was almost relieved to find himself back in the confines of the cellar. He threw himself into the job, partly because he wanted to finish it, and partly because he didn't want too much time to think about last night. By lunchtime he was sweeping up the last of the debris when he heard the sound.

It came from above. The floorboards were squeaking. And something else as well — the light sound of feet moving back and forth, rhythmically. It continued as he filled a cardboard box with the last of the dirt, dust, and scraps of rotten wood from the cellar. He decided to walk around the south side of the house on his way to the trash bins. The sound seemed to be coming from there.

As he passed the solarium, he glanced in and almost dropped the box. Steph was waltzing around the room with an invisible partner in her arms. Swirling and dipping and curtsying, she was not the most graceful dancer he had ever seen, but the look of pure joy on her face made up for whatever she lacked in skill.

Her expression changed abruptly to a mixture of surprise and something like anger when she caught sight of him gaping through the window. She ran toward the stairs, leaving Miss Gati alone. The old lady neither turned to watch her go, nor looked out the window to see what had spooked her. She just sat slumped in her wheelchair, her head hanging forward. For a second, Jerry was jolted by the sight: She looked dead! He pressed his face against the solarium glass for a closer look, and was relieved to see the gentle rise and fall of her chest. Only asleep. But what had Steph been doing waltzing around like that while the old lady napped?

Shaking his head at the weirdness of it all, he dumped the box in the trash area and returned to the house through the back door. The kitchen was empty, so he made his way as quietly as possible to the solarium to see if Steph had returned. He found all quiet — the music off and old lady Gati bright and alert, reading a book. He immediately turned back toward the kitchen, hoping she wouldn't spot him. But it was too late.

"Yes, young Pritchard?" she said, rolling that "r" and looking up from her book. "You are looking for something?"

Jerry fumbled for words. “I was look-ing for Steph to see if she could fix me a sandwich. Thought I saw her in here when I passed by before.”

“No, dear boy,” she said with a smile. “I sent her up to her room for a nap almost an hour ago. Seems you tired her out last night.”

“Last night?” He tensed. What did she know about last night?

Her smile broadened. “Come now! You two didn’t think you could fool me, did you? I know she sneaked out to see you.” Something about the way she looked at him sent a sick chill through Jerry. “Surely you can fix something yourself and let the poor girl rest.”

Then it hadn’t been a dream! But then why had Steph pretended —?

He couldn’t figure it. “Yeah. Sure,” he said dully, his thoughts jumbled. “I can make a sandwich.” He turned to go.

“You should be about through with the basement by now,” she said. “But even if you’re not, get up to the roof this afternoon. The weatherman says there’s a sixty percent chance of a thunder-storm tonight.”

“Basement’s done. Roof is next.”

“Excellent! But don’t work *too* hard, young Pritchard. Save something for Stephie .”

She returned to her book.

Jerry felt numb as he walked back to the kitchen. The old lady hadn’t touched him once! She seemed more relaxed and at ease with herself than he could ever remember — a-cat-that-had-swallowed-the-canary sort of self-satisfaction. And she hadn’t tried to lay a single finger on him!

The day was getting weirder and weirder.

Replacing the shingles on the sloping dormer surface outside old lady Gati's bedroom had looked like an easy job from the ground. But the shingles were odd, scalloped affairs that she had ordered special from San Francisco to match the originals on the house, and Jerry had trouble keeping them aligned on the curved surface. He could have used a third hand, too. What would have been an hour's work for two men had already taken Jerry three in the broiling sun, and he wasn't quite finished yet.

While he was working, he noted that the wood trim on the upper levels was going to need painting soon. That was going to be a hellish job, what with the oculus windows, the ornate friezes, cornices, brackets, and keystones. Some crazed woodcarver had had a field day with this stuff — probably thought it was “art.” But Jerry was going to be the one to paint it. He'd put that off as long as he could, and definitely wouldn't do it in summer.

He pulled an insulated wire free of the outside wall to fit in the final shingles by the old lady's window. It ran from somewhere on the roof down to the ground — directly *into* the ground. Jerry pulled himself up onto the parapet above the dormer to see where the wire originated. He followed it up until it linked into the lightning rod on the peak of the attic garret. *Everything* connected with this house was ornate — even the lightning rods had designs on them!

He climbed back down, pulled the ground wire free of the dormer, and tacked the final shingles into place. When he reached the ground, he slumped on the bottom rung of the ladder and rested a moment. The heat from the roof was getting to him. His tee-shirt was drenched with perspiration and he was reeling with fatigue.

Enough for today. He'd done the bulk of the work. A hurricane could hit the area and that dormer would not leak. He could put the finishing touches on tomorrow. He lowered the ladder to the ground, then checked the kitchen for Steph. She wasn't there. Just as well. He didn't have the energy to pry an explanation out of her. Something was cooking in the oven, but he was too bushed to eat. He grabbed half a six pack of beer from the fridge and stumbled down to the gatehouse. Hell with dinner. A shower, a few beers, a good night's sleep, and he'd be just fine in the morning.

It was a long ways into dark, but Jerry was still awake. Tired as he was, he couldn't get to sleep. As thunder rumbled in the distance, charging in from the west, and slivers of ever-brightening light flashed between the blinds, thoughts of last night tumbled through his mind, arousing him anew. Something strange going on up at that house. Old lady Gati was acting weird, and so was Steph.

Steph... he couldn't stop thinking about her. He didn't care what kind of game she was playing, she still meant something to him. He'd never felt this way before. He —

There was a noise at the door. It opened and Steph stepped inside. She said nothing as she came forward, but in the glow of the lightning flashes from outside, Jerry could see her removing her nightgown as she crossed the room. He saw it flutter to the floor and then she was beside him, bringing the dreamlike memories of last night into the sharp focus of the real and now. He tried to talk to her but she would only answer in a soft, breathless “uh-huh” or “uh-uh” and then her wandering lips and tongue wiped all questions from his mind.

When it was finally over and the two of them lay in a gasping tangle of limbs and sheets, Jerry decided that now was the time to find out what was going on between her and old lady Gati , and what kind of game she was playing with him. He would ask her in a few seconds ... or maybe in a minute ... soon ... thunder was louder than ever outside but that wasn't going to bother him ... all he wanted to do right now was close his eyes and enjoy the delicious exhaustion of this after-glow a little longer . . . only a little ... just close his eyes for a few seconds ... no more . . .

“Sleep well, my love.”

Jerry forced his eyes open. Steph's face hovered over him in the flashing dimness as he teetered on the brink of unconsciousness. She kissed him lightly on the forehead and whispered, “Good-night, young Pritchard. And thank you.”

It was as if someone had tossed a bucket of icy water on him. Suddenly Jerry was wide awake. *Young Prit-chard?* Why had she said that? Why had she imitated old lady Gati's voice that way? The accent, with its roll of the “r,” had been chillingly perfect.

Steph had slipped her nightgown over her head and was on her way out. Jerry jumped out of bed and caught her at the door.

“I don't think that was funny, Steph !” She ignored him and pushed the screen door open. He grabbed her arm. “Hey, look! What kind of game are you play-ing? What's it gonna be tomorrow morning? Same as today? Pretend that nothing happened tonight?” she tried to pull away but he held on. “Talk to me Steph ! What's going on?”

A picture suddenly formed in his mind of Steph going back to the house and having hot chocolate with old lady Gati and telling her every intimate de-tail of their lovemaking, and the old lady getting excited, *feeding* off it.

“What’s going *on!*” Involuntarily, his grip tightened on her arm.

“You’re hurting me!” The words cut like an icy knife. The voice was Steph’s , but the tone, the accent, the roll of the “ r”s, the inflection — all were perfect mimicry of old lady Gati , down to the last nuance. But she had been in pain. It couldn’t have been rehearsed!

Jerry flipped the light switch and spun her around. It was Steph , all right, as achingly beautiful as ever, but some-thing was wrong. The Steph he knew should have been frightened. The Steph before him was changed. She held her-self differently. Her stance was haughty,almost imperious. And there was some-thing in her eyes — a strange light.

“Oh, sweet Jesus! What’s happened to you?”

He could see indecision flickering through her eyes as she regarded him with a level stare. Outside, it began to rain. A few scattered forerunner drops escalated to a full-scale torrent in a matter of seconds as their eyes re-mained locked, their bodies frozen amid day-bright flashes of lightning and the roar of thunder and wind-driven rain. Then she smiled. It was like Steph’s smile, but it wasn’t.

“Nothing,” she said in that crazy mixed voice.

And then he thought he knew. For a blazing instant, it was clear to him: “You’re not Steph !” In the very instant he said it he disbelieved it, but then her smile broadened and her words turned his blood to ice:

“Yes, I am ... for the moment.” The voice was thick with old lady Gati’s ac-cent, and it carried a triumphant note. “What Stephe sees, I see! What Stephe feels, I feel!” She lifted the hem of her nightgown. “Look at my legs! Beauti-ful, aren’t they?”

Jerry released her arm as if he had been burned. She moved closer but Jerry found himself backing away. Steph was crazy! Her mind had snapped. She thought she was old lady Gati ! He had never been faced with such blatant madness before, and it terrified him. He felt exposed, vulnerable before it. With a trembling hand, he grabbed his jeans from the back of the chair.

Marta Gati looked out of Stephie's eyes at young Pritchard as he struggled into his trousers, and she wondered what to do next. She had thought him asleep when she had kissed him good night and made the slip of calling him "Young Pritchard." She had known she couldn't keep her nightly possession of Stephie from him for too long, but she had not been prepared for a confrontation tonight. She would try for sympathy first.

"Do you have any idea, young Pritchard," she said, trying to make Stephie's voice sound as American as she could, "what it is like to be trapped all your life in a body as deformed as mine? To be repulsive to other children as a child, to grow up watching other girls find young men and go dancing and get married and know that at night they are holding their man in their arms and feeling all the things a woman should feel? You have no idea what my life has been like, young Pritchard. But through the years I found a way to remedy the situation. Tonight I am a complete woman — *your* woman!"

"Stephanie!" young Pritchard shouted, fear and disbelief mingling in the strained pallor of his face. "Listen to yourself! You sound crazy! What you're saying is impossible!"

"No! Not impossible!" she said, although she could understand his reaction. A few years ago, she too would have called it impossible. Her brother Karl had devoted himself to her and his business. He never married, but he would bring women back to the house now and then when he thought she was asleep. It would have been wonderful if he could have brought a man home for her, but that was impossible. Yet it hadn't stopped her yearnings. And it was on those nights when he and a woman were in the next bedroom that Marta realized that she could sense things in Karl's women. At first she thought it was imagination, but this was more than mere fantasy. She could feel their passion, feel their skin tingling, feel them exploding within. And one night, after they both had spent themselves and fallen asleep, she found herself in the other woman's body — actually lying in Karl's bed and seeing the room through her eyes!

As time went on, she found she could enter their bodies while they slept and actually take them over. She could get up and walk! A sob built in her throat at the memory. To *walk!* That had been joy enough at first. Then she would dance by herself. She had wanted so much all her life to dance, to waltz, and now she could! She never dared more than that until Karl died and left her free. She had perfected her ability since then.

"It will be a good life for you, young Pritchard," she said. "You won't even have to work. Stephie will be my maid and housekeeper during the day and your lover at night." He shook his head, as if to stop



her, but she pressed on. And when you get tired of Stephie , I'll bring in another. And another. You'll have an endless stream of young, will-ing bodies in your bed. You'll have such a *good* life, young Pritchard!"

A new look was growing in his eyes: belief.

"It's really you!" he said in a hoarse whisper. "Oh, my dear sweet Lord, it's really you in Steph's body! I . . . I'm getting out of here!"

She moved to block his way and he stayed back. He could have easily over-powered her, but he seemed afraid to let her get too near. She couldn't let him go, not after all her work to set up a perfect household.

"No! You mustn't do that! You must stay here!"

"This is sick!" he cried, his voice ris-ing in pitch as a wild light sprang into his eyes. "This is the Devil's work!"

"No-no," she said, soothingly. "Not the Devil. Just me. Just something—"

"Get away from me!" he said, backing toward his dresser. He spun and pulled open the top drawer, rummaged through it and came up with a thick book with a cross on its cover. "Get away, Satan!" he cried, thrusting the book toward her face.

Marta almost laughed. "Don't be silly, young Pritchard! I'm not evil! I'm just doing what I have to do. I'm not hurting Stephie . I'm just borrowing her body for a while!"

"Out, demon!" He said, shoving the Bible almost into her face. "*Out!*"

This was getting annoying now. She snatched the book from his grasp and hurled it across the room. "Stop acting like a fool!"

He looked from hex to the book and back to her with an awed expression. At that moment there was a particularly loud crash of thunder and the lights went out. Young Pritchard cried out in horror and brushed past her. He slammed out the door and ran into the storm.

Marta ran as far as the doorway and stopped. She peered through the deluge. Even with the rapid succession of lightning strokes and sheets, she could see barely a dozen feet. He was nowhere in sight. She could see no use in running out into the storm and following him. She glanced at his keys on the bureau and smiled. How far could a half-naked man go in a storm like this?

Marta crossed the room and sat on the bed. She ran Stephanie's hand over the rumbled sheets where less than half an hour ago the two of them had been locked in passion. Warmth rose within her. *So good*. So good to have a man's arms around you, wanting you, needing you, *demanding* you. She couldn't give this up. Not now, not when it was finally at her disposal after all these years.

But young Pritchard wasn't working out. She had thought any virile young man would leap at what she offered, but apparently she had misjudged him. Or was a stable relationship within her household just a fool's dream? She had so much to learn about the outside world. Karl had kept her so sheltered from it.

Perhaps her best course was the one she had taken with the last house-keeper. Take over her body when she was asleep and drive to the bars and roadhouses outside of town. Find a man two men, if she were in the mood and spend most of the night in a motel room. Then come back to the house, clean her up, and leave her asleep in her bed. It was anonymous, it was exciting, but it was somehow . . . empty.

She would be more careful with Stephanie than with the last housekeeper. Marta had been ill one night but had moved into the other body anyway. She had lost control when a stomach spasm had gripped her own body. The pain had drawn her back to the house, leaving the woman to awaken between two strangers. She had panicked and run out into the road.

Yes, she had to be very careful with this one. Stephanie was so sensitive to her power, whatever it was. She only had to become drowsy and Marta could slip in and take complete control, keeping Stephanie's mind unconscious while she controlled her body. A few milligrams of a sedative in her cocoa before bed-time and Stephanie's body was Marta's for the night.

But young Pritchard wasn't working out. At least not so far. There was perhaps a slim chance she

could reason with him when he came back. She had to try. She found him terribly attractive. But where could he be?

Sparks of alarm flashed through her as she realized that her own body was upstairs in the house, lying in bed, helpless, defenseless. What if that crazy boy — ?

Quickly, she slid onto the bed and closed her eyes. She shut out her senses one by one, blocking off the sound of the rain and thunder, the taste of the saliva in her mouth, the feel of the bedclothes against her back . . .

. . . and opened her eyes in her own bedroom in the house. She looked around, alert for any sign that her room had been entered. Her bedroom door was still closed, and there was no moisture anywhere on the floor.

Good! He hasn't been in here!

Marta pushed herself up in bed and transferred to the wheelchair. She wheeled herself out to the hall and down to the elevator, cursing its slow descent as it took her to the first floor. When it finally stopped, she propelled herself at top speed to the foyer where she immediately turned the dead bolt on the front door. She noted with satisfaction that the slate floor under her chair was as dry as when she had walked out earlier as Stephanie. She was satisfied that she was alone in the house.

Safe!

She rolled herself into the solarium at a more leisurely pace. She knew the rest of the doors and windows were secure — Stephanie always locked up before she made the bedtime chocolate. She stopped before the big bay windows and watched the storm for a minute. It was a fierce one. She gazed out at the blue-white, water-blurred lightning flashes and wondered what she was going to do about young Pritchard. If she couldn't convince him to stay, then surely he would be in town tomorrow, telling a wild tale. No one would believe him, of course, but it would start talk, fuel rumors, and that would make it almost impossible to get help in the future. It might even make Stephanie quit, and Marta didn't know how far her power could reach. She'd be left totally alone out here.

Her fingers tightened on the arm rests of her wheelchair. She couldn't let that happen.

She closed her eyes and blocked out the storm, blocked out her senses . . .

. . . and awoke in Stephie's body again.

She leapt to the kitchenette and pulled out the drawers until she found the one she wanted. It held three forks, a couple of spoons, a spatula, and a knife — a six-inch carving knife.

It would have to do.

She hurried out into the rain and up the hill toward the house.

Jerry rammed his shoulder against the big oak front door again but only added *to bruises* the *door had already* put there. He screamed at it.

“In God's name— *open!*”

The door ignored him. What was he going to do? He had to get inside! Had to get to that old lady! Had to wring the Devil out of her! Had to find a way in! Make her give Steph back!

His mother had warned him about this sort of thing. He could almost hear her voice between the claps of thunder: *Satan walks the earth, Jerome, search-ing for those who forsake the Word. Be-ware — he's waiting for you!*

Jerry knew the Devil had found him — in the guise of old lady Gati ! What was happening to Steph was all his fault!

He ran back into the downpour and headed around toward the rear. Maybe the kitchen door was unlocked. He glanced through the solarium windows as he passed. His bare feet slid to a halt on the wet grass as he stopped and took a better look.

There she was: old lady Gati , the Devil herself, zonked out in her wheel-chair.

The sight of her sitting there as if asleep while her spirit was down the hill controlling Steph's body was more than Jerry could stand. He looked around for something to hurl through the window, and in the next lightning flash he spotted the ladder next to the house on the lawn. He picked it up and charged the solarium like a jousting knight. Putting all his weight behind the ladder, he rammed it through the center bay window. The sound of shat-tering glass broke the last vestige of Jerry's control. Howling like a mad-man, he drove the ladder against the window glass again and again until every pane and every muntin was smashed and battered out of the way.

Then he climbed in.

The shards of glass cut his bare hands and feet but Jerry barely noticed. His eyes were on old lady Gati . Throughout all the racket, she hadn't budged.

Merciful Lord, it's true! Her spirit's left her body!

He stumbled over to her inert form and stood behind her, hesitating. He didn't want to touch her — his skin crawled at the thought — but he had to put an end to this. Now. Swallowing the bile that sloshed up from his stom-ach, Jerry wrapped his fingers around old lady Gati's throat. He flinched at the feel of her wrinkles against his palms, but he clenched his teeth and began to squeeze. He put all his strength into it

— and then let go.

He couldn't do it.

“God, give me strength!” he cried, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. Not while she was like this. It was like strangling a corpse! She was barely breathing as it was!

Something tapped against the intact bay window to the right. Jerry spun to look — a flash from outside outlined the grounding wire from the lightning rods as it swayed in the wind and slapped against the window. It reminded him of a snake —

A snake! And suddenly he knew: *It's a sign! A sign from God!*

He ran to the window and threw it open. He reached out, wrapped the wire around his hands, and pulled. It wouldn't budge from the ground. He braced a foot against the window sill, putting his back and all his weight into the effort. Suddenly the metal grounding stake pulled free and he staggered back, the insulated wire thrashing about in his hands . . . just like a snake.

He remembered that snake handlers' church back in the hills his mother had dragged him to one Sunday a few years ago. He had watched in awe as the men and women would grab water moccasins and cotton-mouths and hold them up, trusting in the Lord to protect them. Some were bitten, some were not. Ma had told him it was all God's will.

God's will!

He pulled the old lady's wheelchair closer to the window and wrapped the wire tightly around her, tying it snugly behind the backrest of the chair, and jamming the grounding post into the metal spokes of one of the wheels.

"This is your snake, Miss Gati," he told her unconscious form. "It's God's will if it bites you!"

He backed away from her until he was at the entrance to the solarium. Lightning flashed as violently as ever, but none came down the wire. He couldn't wait any longer. He had to find Steph. As he turned to head for the front door, he saw someone standing on the south lawn, staring into the solarium. It was Old Lady Gati, wearing Steph's body. When she looked through the broken bay window and saw him there, she screamed and slumped to the ground.

"Steph!" What was happening to her?

Jerry sprinted across the room and dove through the shattered window onto the south lawn.

Marta awoke in her own body, pan-icked. *What has he done to me?* She felt all right. There was no pain, no —

My arms! Her hands were free but she couldn't move her upper arms! She looked down and saw the black insulated wire coiled tightly around her upper body, binding her to the chair. She tried to twist, to slide down on the chair and slip free, but the wire wouldn't give an inch. She tried to see where it was tied. If she could get her hands on the knot. . .

She saw the wire trailing away from her chair, across the floor and out the window and up into the darkness.

Up! To the roof! The lightning rods!

She screamed, “Nooooo!”

Jerry cradled Steph's head in his arm and slapped her wet face as hard as he dared. He'd hoped the cold pounding rain and the noise of the storm would have brought her around, but she was still out. He didn't want to hurt her, but she had to wake up.

“Steph! C'mon, Steph ! You've got to wake up! Got to fight her!”

As she stirred, he heard old lady Gati howl from the solarium. Steph's eyes fluttered, then closed again. He shook her. “Steph! Please!”

She opened her eyes and stared at him. His spirits leaped.

“That's it, Steph ! Wake up! It's me — Jerry! You've got to stay awake!”

She moaned and closed her eyes, so he shook her again.

“ Steph! Don’t let her take you over again!”

As she opened her eyes again, Jerry dragged her to her feet.

“Come on! Walk it off! Let’s go! You’ve gotta stay awake!”

Suddenly her face contorted and she swung on him. Something gleamed in her right hand as she plunged it toward his throat. Jerry got his forearm up just in time to block it. Pain seared through his arm and he cried out.

“Oh, God! It’s you!”

“Yes!” She slashed at him again and he backpedaled to avoid the knife. His bare feet slipped on the grass and he went down on his back. He rolled frantically, fearing she would be upon him, but when he looked up, she was running toward the house, toward the smashed bay window.

“No!”

He couldn’t let her get inside and untie the old lady’s body. Steph’s only hope was a lightning strike.

Please, God, he prayed. *Now! Let it be now!*

But though bolts crackled through the sky almost continuously, none of them hit the house. Groaning with fear and frustration, Jerry scrambled to his feet and sprinted after her. He had to stop her!

He caught her from behind and brought her down about two dozen feet from the house. She screamed and thrashed like an enraged animal, twisting and slashing at him again and again with the knife. She cut



him along the ribs as he tried to pin her arms and was rearing back for a better angle on his chest when the night turned blue white. He saw the rage on Steph's face turn to wide-eyed horror. Her body arched convulsively as she opened her mouth and let out a high-pitched shriek of agony that rose and cut off like a circuit being broken —

— only to be taken up by another voice from within the solarium. Jerry glanced up and saw old lady Gati's body jutting in her chair like a hooked fish while blue fire played all about her. Her hoarse cry was swallowed and drowned as her body exploded in a roiling ball of flame. Fire was everywhere in the solarium. The very air seemed to burn.

He removed the knife from Steph's now limp hand and dragged her to a safer distance from the house. He shook her. "Steph?"

He could see her eyes rolling back and forth under the lids. Finally they opened and stared at him uncomprehendingly.

"Jerry?" She bolted up to a sitting position. "Jerry! What's going on?"

His grip on the knife tightened as he listened to her voice, searching care-fully for the slightest hint of an accent, the slightest roll of an "r." There wasn't any he could detect, but there was only one test that could completely convince him.

"My name," he said. "What's my last name, Steph?"

"It's Pritchard, of course. But —" She must have seen the flames flickering in his eyes because she twisted around and cried out. "The house! It's on fire! Miss Gati —!"

She had said it perfectly! The real Steph was back! Jerry threw away the knife and lifted her to her feet. "She's gone," he told her. "Burnt up. I saw her."

"But how?"

He had to think fast — couldn't tell her the truth. Not yet. "Lightning. It's my fault. I must have messed up the rods when I was up on the roof today!"

"Oh, God, Jerry!" She clung to him and suddenly the storm seemed far away. "What'll we do?"

Over her shoulder, he watched the flames spreading throughout the first floor and lapping up at the second through the broken bay window. "Got to get out of here, Steph. They're gonna blame me for it, and God knows what'll happen."

"It was an accident! They can't blame you for that!"

"Oh, yes they will!" Jerry was think-ing about the ground wire wrapped around the old lady's corpse. No way anyone would think that was an acci-dent. "I hear she's got family in New York. They'll see me hang if they can, I just know it! I've got to get out of here." He pushed her to arm's length and stared at her. "Come with me?"

She shook her head. "I can't! How?"

"We'll make a new life far from here. We'll head west and won't stop till we reach the ocean." He could see her wav-ering. "Please, Steph! I don't think I can make it without you!"

Finally, she nodded.

He took her hand and pulled her along behind him as he raced down the slope for the gate house. He glanced back at the old house and saw flames dancing in the second floor windows. Somebody down in town would see the light from the fire soon and then half the town would be up here to either fight it or watch it being fought. They had to be out of here before that.

It's gonna be okay, he told himself. They'd start a new life out in Califor-nia. And someday, when he had the nerve and he thought she was ready for it, he'd tell her the truth. But for now, as long as Steph was at his side, he could handle anything. Everything was going to be all right.

Patrolman Grimes looked better now. He was back from the couple's apartment and stood in the hospital corridor with an open notebook, ready to recite.

All right," Burke said. "What've we got?"

"We've got a twenty-three year old named Jerome Pritchard. Came out here from West Virginia nine months ago."

"I mean drugs— *crack, Angel Dust, needles, fixings.*"

"No, sir. The apartment was clean. The neighbors are in absolute shock. Everybody loved the Pritchards and they all seem to think he was a pretty straight guy. A real churchgoer— *car-ried his own Bible and never missed a Sunday, they said. Had an assembly line job and talked about starting nightcourses at UCLA as soon as he made the residency requirement. He and his wife appeared to be real excited about the baby, going to Lamaze classes and all that sort of stuff.*"

"Crack, I tell you!" Burke said. "Got to be!"

"As far as we can trace his move-ments, sir, it seems that after the baby was delivered at 10:06 this morning, he ran out of here like a bat out of hell, came back about an hour later carrying his Bible and a big oblong package, waited until the baby was brought to the mother for feeding, then . . . well, you know."

"Yeah. I know." The new father had pulled a 10 gauge shotgun from that package and blown the mother and kid away, then put the barrel against his own throat and completed the job. "But why, dammit!"

"Well. . . the baby did have a birth defect."

"I know. I saw. But there are a helluva lot of birth defects a damn sight worse. Hell, I mean, her legs were only with-ered a little!"

If it takes a thief to catch one—" then this scheme ought to work just fine

F. PAUL WILSON

RATMAN

Since its purpose was neither to load nor unload cargo, his converted tramp freighter was directed to a landing pad at the far end of the field where it wouldn't get in the way. Orz , red-haired and of average height and build, though somewhat stoop-shouldered, didn't mind. As long as he was in the general area his efficiency would be unimpaired.

When the viewscreen picked up an approaching ground car, Orz snapped his fingers and a half-kilo space rat leaped from the control console to his shoulder.

"Let's go, 62," he said to his favorite employee.

The space rat grasped the fabric of his master's shirt tightly in his tiny paws and lashed his tail about nervously. He didn't like meeting strangers, but it was part of his job; his master had found that there was a definite psychological advantage in appearing with a space rat on his shoulder.

Orz and 62 reached the hatch just as the ground car pulled up alongside. They scrutinized the two occupants as the freighter's loading ramp descended.

The first to debark was a portly little man wearing a stylish orange

tunic that should have been two sizes larger. His companion probably weighed as much but was taller and

better proportioned.

Orz's long legs carried him swiftly down the ramp after it had settled and the portly one came forward to meet him.

"Mr. Samuel Orzechowski ?" he asked, mangling the pronunciation.

Orz smiled. "That's right, but you can call me Sam, or Orz , or, as some people prefer, Ratman ." *And being a client, he thought, you'll no doubt choose the last one.*

"Well," the little man replied, "I guess ' Ratman ' will do. I'm Aaron Lesno , president of the Traders League and this is Evan Rabb , our treasurer," he said, indicating the man beside him.

"Welcome to Neeka ," said Orz .

"Could I ask you something. Ratman ?" Rabb hastily interjected. He couldn't take his eyes off 62. "Is that a space rat?"

"A small one," Orz nodded. "A baby, really."

"Aren't you afraid of. . ."

"Of losing my ear?" he grinned. "Not at all. I imagine you two and the rest of the League are somewhat in the dark as to my methods, and you've probably got a lot of questions. I've found it best in the past to get everyone together and explain things to everybody at once. It saves me time and you money."

"An excellent idea!" Lesno agreed. "We've all been anxiously awaiting your arrival . . . well," he corrected himself with a glance at Rabb , "almost all ... but I'm sure there would be no problem in getting everyone together."

"What did you mean by 'almost all'?" Orz asked.

Rabb spoke up. "One of our more influential members was vehemently opposed to the idea of retaining you."

"Oh, really? Why?"

"Have no fear, Ratman ," Lesno assured him with a smile, "hell let you know why at the meeting tonight"

"That's fair enough," Orz said. "Now can someone come back and pick me up in a few hours for the meeting?"

"Why not come with us now and let us show you around a bit?" Lesno offered. ...

Orz shook his head and gestured over his shoulder to the ship. "Sorry . . . feeding time."

Rabb and Lesno stiffened and

glanced nervously from 62 the open hatch. "Yes, quite,\*" Lesno muttered. "Very well, then, we'll have someone call for you in, say, three hours."

"That'll be fine. This settled, the two-man welcoming committee lost little time in putting some distance between themselves and the squat little freighter.

"Seems like pretty decent fellows," Orz told 62 as he made his way up the ramp and down the central corridor. As they approached the rat room, 62 began to prance excitedly on his master's shoulder and was literally doing a dance by the time Orz hit the door release.

His several hundred fellow employees inside took up the same excited dance at the sound of the door sliding open. The cages were arranged five high along the walls of the long, narrow room. They were simple, steel-sided boxes with front doors of quarter-inch steel mesh; each was self-cleaning, had its own water supply and was equipped with an automatic feeder.

But Orz had never trusted automatic feeders, so now he went from cage to cage and shoved food pellets through the tiny feeding hole in the front of each. He had to be nimble for the rats were greedy and anxious and a fingertip could easily be mistaken for a pellet. His practiced eye decided how much each rat should get This was important: a rat became fat and lazy if overfed and

would gnaw his way out of the cage if underfed. A rat in either condition was of little use to Ratman .

Fifty cages stood open and empty and Orz placed a few pellets in each; 62 was frantic by now so he decided to give the little fellow something before he jumped off his shoulder and into one of the empty cages. The rat rose up on his hind legs, snatched the pellet from Orz's proffering fingers with his tiny, handlike paws and began to gnaw noisily and voraciously.

Three hours later, Orz flipped a particular switch on the console, checked to make sure the door to the rat room was open, then headed for the hatch. There, after casting an eye through the dusk at the approaching ground car, he secured the hatch, but opened a small panel at its bottom. With 62 perched watchfully upon his shoulder, he was waiting at the bottom of the ramp when the car arrived.

Lesno was alone inside. "Well, Ratman," he said with a smile, "everybody's waiting, so—" then he spotted 62 and his face fell. "Does he have to come along? I mean, he won't get too excited, will he?"

"Don't worry," Orz replied, sliding into his seat, "he won't bite you." To lessen the man's anxiety he made a point of keeping 62 on his far shoulder.

"Your advertising literature was quite timely," Lesno remarked as they got under way, hoping conver -

sation would take his mind off those two beady eyes peering at him around the back of his passenger's head. "The rat problem was reaching its peak when we received it. I trust that wasn't just coincidence."

"No coincidence at all. I keep my ear to the ground and word got around that there was a space rat plague on Neeka . I figured you could use my services."

Lesno nodded. "We had heard a few stories about you but didn't know whether to believe them or not. Your advertising claims were quite impressive. I just hope you can live up to them."

About twenty exporters and importers were waiting in the conference room on the second floor of the Traders League office complex. It was a motley group of discordant colors, shapes, sizes and ages. Lesno entered ahead of Orz and lost no time in bringing the meeting to order.

"We all know why we're here," he said, tapping the gavel twice, "so there's really no use in wasting time with introductions." He pointed to Orz . "The creature on this man's shoulder is introduction enough. Ratman has arrived and he's going to tell us something about himself and about space rats." So saying, he relinquished the podium.

Nothing like a businesslike business, Orz thought as he stood up and received a slight spattering of applause. They knew of his claim to be

able to control space rats with space fats and were frankly dubious. But this was nothing new to Orz .

Without even a glance at the audience, he nonchalantly snapped his fingers and tapped the top of the podium; 62 immediately leaped from his shoulder to the podium and began to sniff the wood curiously.

"This," he began, "although a specimen of *Rattus interstellus*, is not a true 'space rat' in the full sense of the word; but his parents were. Lab-raised space rats—such as 62, here— can turn out to be quite friendly, but they are no less cunning, no less intelligent and certainly no less vicious when cornered. These are the rats I 'employ' so to speak.

"But first let's puncture a few of the myths that have grown up around the space rat. First of all, no matter what the spacers tell you, space rats have no psi powers; they don't know what you're going to do next . . . it's just- that their reflexes are developed to such a high degree that it almost seems that way when you take pot shots at one with a blaster. They will respond to ultra-frequency tones but by no means do they have a language . . . they're intelligent, all right, but they're a long way from a language."

His eyes flicked over the audience. These were traders, barterers; they recognized a man who knew what he was talking about, and they were all listening intently.

He continued. "But just what is it that distinguishes the space rat from

other rats?" To dramatize his point, he allowed 62 to crawl onto the back of his hand and then held, the fidgety creature aloft.

"This is the product of centuries in the pressurized but unshielded holds of interstellar cargo ships. Wild genetic mutation and the law of survival of the fittest combined to produce a most adaptable, ferocious and intelligent creature.

"Everyone knew of the space rat's existence, but no one paid much attention to him until an ensign aboard the freighter *Clinton* was kept awake one night by the continuous opening and closing of the compartment door outside his cabin. The ship was in port, and, under normal circumstances, he would have spent the night in town, but, for one reason or another, he had returned to his quarters.

"Now, these doors which divide the corridors into compartments open automatically when you touch the release panel and remain open as long as a simple electric eye beam is broken; when the beam makes contact again, the door closes! The doors naturally make some noise when they operate, and this is what was disturbing the ensign. But, everytime he checked to see who was wandering up and down the corridor, he found no one. Checking with the guard detail he found that he was the only person authorized to be in that area of the ship.

"So he set up watch. Opening his door a crack, he peeked through to the corridor and waited. But no one came and he was about to give up when he spotted this large space rat come running down the corridor. As it approached the door it leaped over a meter into the air and threw itself against the release panel. The door slid open as the creature landed on the floor and it scurried through before the door closed again."

The traders were smiling and shaking their heads in wonder as Orz paused and placed 62 back on the podium. "Since it is doubtful that the rat could have accidentally leaped against the release panel, it must be assumed that he learned by watching. That would make him a highly unusual rat... they thought. Then they discovered that the whole colony aboard the *Clinton* knew how to operate the doors! Then other spacers on other ships began watching for space rats while their ships were in port-that's when their

movements are the greatest; they stick pretty much to the cargo holds in transit—and it was discovered that the *Clinton* rats were not so extraordinary. These reports fired the interest of researchers who figured they would go out and catch themselves a few space rats and put them through some tests."

The audience broke into laughter at this point. They were all quite familiar with the elusiveness of the space rat

"Another characteristic of the space rat was soon discovered:

viciousness. It took quite a while, but, after much effort and manyscars, a number of space rats were caught. And, as expected, **they** proved virtually untrainable . We hoped to do better with their offspring.

"I was working with the offspring when I heard about a rat problem in the nearby spaceport. Traps, poison, even variable frequency sonic repellers had failed to control them. I went to investigate and found that a good many space rats were jumping ship and setting up residence in the warehouses which ring every spaceport. Another factor was added. In the warehouses they meet other strains of space rat from other ships and the resultant cross-breeding produces a strain more intelligent and more ferocious than even the cargo-ship rat. I managed to catch half a dozen in as many months, mated them and began to go to work on the offspring. Through a mixture of imprinting and operant conditioning, second generation space rats proved quite tractable.

"But I needed more wild rats and tried the wild idea of training my lab rats to help catch other rats. It worked out so well that I decided to go into the business of space-rat control."

He paused and glanced around the room. "Any questions?"

An elderly trader in the front row raised a bony hand. "Just how does one rat go about catching another?" he asked in a raspy voice.

"I'll demonstrate that tomorrow," Orz replied. "It'll be easier to understand once you see the equipment."

A huge, balding man with a grizzled beard stood up without waiting to be recognized. "I've got a question, Ratman ," he said belligerently. "If all you've got are a few trained rats, why do you charge so much?"

This elicited a few concurring mutters from other members of the audience. Here, no doubt, was the man Lesno had referred to earlier that day.

"You have me at a disadvantage, sir," Orz replied with a smile.

"I'm Malcomb Houghton and I guess I rank third, or fourth, around here in cubic feet of warehouse



space."

Orznodded. "Very glad to meet you, sir. But let me answer your question with another question: Do you have any idea what it costs to operate a privately owned freighter, even a small one such as mine? My overhead is staggering."

Being a businessman, this argument seemed to make sense to Houghton, but he remained standing. "I just wonder," he began slowly, "if you can train rats to catch other rats, how do we know you didn't land some special trouble-making rats here on Neeka a few months ago to aggravate the situation to the point where we had to call you in?"

The audience went silent and waited for Ratman's reply. Orz cursed as he felt his face flushing. This man was dangerously close to the truth. He hesitated, then cracked a grin.

"How'd you like to go into partnership with me?" he quipped.

The tension suddenly vanished as the audience laughed and applauded. Orz gathered up 62 and left the podium before Houghton could zero in on him again. He couldn't tell whether the man was stabbing in the dark, or whether he really knew something.

Lesno escorted him out the door. "Wonderful!" he beamed "I think you're the man to solve *our* problems. But time is of the essence! The port -residents have been on our necks for months; their pets are being killed, they're afraid for their children and they're afraid for themselves. And since the rats are based in the warehouse district, we might be held liable if we don't do something soon. And"—he put his hand on Orz's shoulder and lowered his voice—"we've been keeping it quiet, but a man went after a few of the rats with a blaster the other night. They turned on him and chewed him up pretty badly."

"I'll start as early as possible," Orz assured him. "You just send somebody around tomorrow with a good-sized truck and I'll be waiting."

Rabb must have overheard them as he approached. "That won't be necessary," he said. "We're placing a truck at your disposal immediately. I'll drive it over to your ship and

Lesno will bring me back after dropping you off."

Orz said that would be fine and he arranged a time and place of meeting with Lesno for early the next morning on the way back to the ship. A few minutes later he and 62 were standing next to the borrowed truck watching the two League officers drive away.

"Ratman!" whispered a voice from the deep shadows under the ramp.

Orz spun around. "Who's there?" he asked guardedly.

"I'm your contact."

"You'd better come out and identify yourself," he said.

Muttering and brushing off the knees of her coveralls, a tall, statuesque brunette stepped out of the shadows. "Where have you been for the past hour? We were supposed to meet as soon as it was dark!"

"Just who are you, Miss?" Orz asked.

She straightened up and stared at him. "You don't take any chances, do you?" she said as a wry smile played around her lips. "O.K. I'm Jessica Maffey, Federation agent NE97. I'm the one who received a smuggled shipment of fifty of your best harassing rats, drove them into town and let them go in the warehouse district. satisfied, Ratman?"

Orz grinned at her annoyance. "You're Maffey, all right . . . I've got a picture of you inside, but you can't be too careful." He glanced

around. "Let's get inside where we can talk."

"Speaking of going inside," she said, "there's been a steady stream of rats going through that little opening in the hatch."

He nodded. "Good. I activated a high-frequency call before I left. All the harassers you loosed should be snug in their cages by now."

He unlocked the hatch and led her to the rat room. As he busied himself with transferring 62 to a cage and checking on the harassing rats, Jessica looked around. From the darkened recess of each cage shone two gleaming points of light, and all those several hundred points of light seemed to be fixed upon her.

"Three missing," Orz was saying. "That's not too bad. . . accidents do happen." He pressed a button on the wall and the open doors on the cages of the harassing rats swung shut with a loud and simultaneous clang.

"How about a drink?" he offered his guest.

"As a matter of fact, I'd love one!" she replied, sighing with relief as they stepped back into the corridor. Orz looked at her curiously. "It gets a little dry and dusty sitting under a loading ramp," she explained with tight smile.

With Jessica seated in his spartan fastidiously neat living quarters her hand around a cold gin tonic, Orz began to talk business "Federation Intelligence only gave me a sketchy idea of what's going on here. You were to fill me in on

rest, so why don't I tell you what I know and you take it from there."

"Go ahead," she told him.

Drink in hand, Orz paced the room as he spoke. "Let's start with this planet Neeka is a fiercely independent, sparsely populated world which exports a lot of food and imports a lot of hardware. Formerly a splinter world, it agreed to trade with the Federation but refused to join it. They were asked to join the Restructurists in their revolt against the Federation but turned them down. They want absolutely no part of the war . . . and I can't say as I blame them.

"However: the Haas Warp gate is right outside this star system and the convoys stack up in this area

before being shot through to the battle zones. Fed agents discovered a turncoat feeding information on the size and destinations of the convoys to someone on this planet. That someone, in turn, was transmitting the info to the Restructurists via sub-space radio. He's been stopped temporarily, but as soon as he makes another contact, hell'be in business again. I was told to meet you here and stop him. That's all I know."

Jessica nodded and drained her drink. "Right but subspace transmissions can't be traced so we-had to depend on deductive reasoning. First of all, you're allowed to be pro-Federation, or pro- Restructuriston Neeka , and you're allowed to talk all you want about either cause. Nobody minds. But try to do something to aid either cause, and you wind up

in prison. Strict neutrality is enforced to the letter on Neeka . Therefore, partisan natives, such as myself, and the man we're after have to go underground. "Now, it would be as easy to smuggle in a subspace transmitter as it was to smuggle in your rats, but hiding it would be an entirely different matter. It's a huge piece of hardware and it needs a large power supply"

"So the man we're after," Orz broke in, " is someone with easy access to an off-planet source of information, and a place big enough to hide a subspace -transmitter without arousing suspicion."

"And a warehouse right here in port has the size and access to the necessary power," Jessica concluded. "Since the members of the Traders League own all the warehouses, they are the obvious target for investigation."

"But which one?"

She shrugged. "Their security is too tight for me to do much snooping. The only way to get into those warehouses is to be invited in. That's where Ratman comes in."

Orzwas thoughtful. "It really shouldn't be too difficult I was informed by the Traders League when they retained me that their warehouses are fully automated and computer-operated."

"With a population density as low as Neeka's Jessica added, "labor is anything but cheap."

"Right," he continued. "And, if I wanted to hide a subspace radio in one of those warehouses, I'd disguise it as part of the automation works and no one would ever be the wiser. All I've got to do tomorrow, when I go into the warehouses, is keep my eyes open for an unusually large computer-automation rig. When I find it I'll just 'accidentally' expose it as a subspace transmitter. The Neekan authorities will take care of our spy after that."

He suddenly halted his pacing and snapped his fingers. "Forgot to turn off the call signal for the rats. . . I'll be right back."

"Mind if I come along?" Jessica asked.

"Not at all."

She watched Orz's back as he led her down the narrow corridor to the bridge. "Can I call you

something other than 'Ratman?'"

He grinned over his shoulder. "Sam will do fine."

"O.K., Sam: how did you get started in all this?"

"Well, I got the idea a few years ago and thought I was a genius until I started looking for backers. Everyone I approached thought I was either a swindler, or a nut. As a last desperate hope I went to IBA."

"What's IBA

"Interstellar Business Advisers. It's a private company with some pretty canny people working for them. They dug up somebody who promised to back me halfway, then they approached the Federation with this

undercover idea. Since I'd be able to get on otherwise unfriendly planets, the Federation put up the rest of the money. So now I'm a full-time Ratman and a part-time Fed man. And when my reputation spreads, IBA has got some ideas for starting a corporation and selling franchises."

They entered the bridge as he was speaking and Jessica noticed that it was as meticulously ordered as his quarters. Two additions to the standard console caught her eye immediately.

"Improvements?" she asked, pointing to a brace of toggle switches.

Orz flipped one of the toggles to "off" and turned to her. "Those are the high-frequency signals for my rats. They've got an effective range of about two kilometers and when a rat hears the proper tone, he makes a beeline for this ship."

"And what's that?" She indicated a bright red lever with three safety catches and "Danger" written in white letters along its length.

The lightness left his voice. "For the direst of emergencies only," replied.

Feminine curiosity aroused, Jessica went to touch it. "What does it do?"

"That's my secret," Orz replied with a tight smile and snatched wrist away from the lever. "I've to use it and I hope the day never comes when I do." To draw her attention elsewhere he pointed to

far wall. "See that inconspicuous little switch over there by the intercom speaker? When that's in the down position—like now—the controls are locked,"

"You're just full of tricks, aren't you?" she said, trying to hide a smile. He was like a little boy showing off a new toy.

"Can't be too careful."

Lesno, Rabb , Houghton and a few others were ready and waiting when Orz pulled up in front of the Traders League offices with the truck.

"Straight ahead," said Lesno as he hopped in beside Orz . "We'll start with Rabb's places first since they're the closest." Two left turns brought them up before a huge structure With a " Rabb& Co." sign above the sliding doors. Orz waited until the others had arrived, then addressed the group.

"First of all," he told them, "you must keep all humans away from any warehouse where, my rats are at work, so give whatever employees you have the day off. Next, let me explain that space rats set up a close-knit community within a warehouse—one community per warehouse—and that each community has a leader who achieved his position by being the most cunning and the most ferocious in the community."

He reached into the back of the truck and brought out a simple cage. Inside was a very large and very vicious-looking space rat. "This is one of my Judas rats. I've selectively

bred them for ferocity and any one of these is a match for any three ordinary space rats. Within hours after his release, my Judas rat will have established himself at the top of the community's pecking order."

Once again Orz reached into the back of the truck and brought out a cage, but this one was larger and empty. "Normally a space rat wouldn't go near a trap like this, but he'll follow the Judas if the Judas is the community leader. And once the community has followed him inside and is buy at the bait, the Judas hops outside, releases this catch and a spring closes and locks the door. He then returns to the ship. The cage is made of a lightweight titanium alloy that not even a space rat's teeth can dent." He held up the cage. "Tomorrow morning this should be filled with a community of very angry space rats."

"Is that's all there is to it?" Hough-ton blurted incredulously. Orz could imagine the man's mind tallying and totaling, and deciding that no matter what his overhead, Ratman charged too much. "This is outrageous! I'll have nothing to do with such nonsense! We're being hoodwinked!"

Somebody doesn't want me in his warehouse, Orz thought and was about to say something when Rabb beat him to it

"The League has already retained Ratman , Malcomb , and we voted to use the treasury to do so ... remember? So you have, in effect, already paid for his services, and it

would be foolish of you not to take advantage of them."

Houghton paused, considering Rabb's words, then he glanced at the cage and shrugged. "I guess I don't have much choice," he said sullenly and turned toward his car. "Let me know when you get to my places."

It was late in the day when they finally did get around to Houghton's warehouses, but Orz had preferred it that way. He had his suspicions and wanted to see as many of the other warehouses as possible before confronting Houghton. There had been nothing suspect in the others, although Lesno's computer setups had been somewhat larger than most, but nowhere near big enough to house a subspace radio.

Houghton met them outside.

"I've only got a few cages left," Orz told him, "so we'll do as many as we can and I'll get the rest tomorrow after I collect the cages I've set out today."

"Might as well start with the main house," Houghton replied and led them toward the largest building of his complex. The doors slid open to reveal a huge expanse of concrete floor with crates and boxes stacked almost to the ceiling. Huge cranes— controlled by a computer that knew the exact location of every item in storage—swung from above. Looming against the far wall was a large, metal-paneled structure.

Orz pointed to it. "Is that your computer?"

"Yes," the bearded man replied absently, "now let's get on with this . . . I haven't got all day."

"Mind if I take a look at it?" Orz asked and started walking toward it. This was what he had been looking for; it was big enough to house two subspace transmitters. "Rats love to nest in those things, you know."

"I assure you there are no rats in there so stay away from it!" Houghton almost shouted. He began to follow Orz and Lesno and Rabb trailed along.

Orz went to the nearest inspection plate and began loosening the screws which held it in place.

"Get away from there!" Houghton yelled as he came up. "You don't know what you're doing! You could mess up my whole operation!"

"Look, if I'm going to do my job right, I've got to check this out!" The inspection plate came off in his hands then and he stuck his head inside. Nothing unusual. He replaced it and went to the next plate with the same result. Four more inspection plates later he was sure there was no subspace transmitter hidden within.

Houghton was standing behind him and tugging angrily on his beard as Orz replaced the last screw. "Are you quite through, Ratman?"

Orz stood and faced him. "Awful big computer you've got there, Mr.; Houghton," he said matter-of-factly. He was chagrined, but refused to show it.

"That's the computer for my whole operation. I found it easier to

centralize the system: instead of installing new units all the time, I just add to the central unit and feed it into the new buildings as they are built. It's much more convenient."

"More economical, too, I'll bet," Orz added laconically.

"Why, yes. How did you know?"

"Lucky guess."

Jessica was waiting for him back at the ship. "Don't bother telling me you didn't find anything," she said as he collapsed in a chair, "that look on your face tells me the whole story."

"I was so sure it was Houghton! The way he objected to the League retaining me, the way he tried to rake me over the coals at the meeting last night, the way he blew up this morning, I was sure he had something to hide. Turns out he's only a cheapskate with a centralized computer."

"What makes you so sure he hasn't got it stashed somewhere else?" Jessica asked, coming over and handing him a drink.

He accepted it gratefully and took a long slow swallow before answering. "I'm not sure of anything right now. But, if that transmitter's here—and we know it is—it's got to be in one of those warehouses. Which reminds me ..." He got to his feet slowly and trudged to the rat room.

Jessica didn't follow, but glanced out into the corridor when she heard the clang of cage doors. Furry gray and brown shapes were scurrying toward the hatch.

"What are you up to?" she asked as Orz reappeared.

"I had a brainstorm on my way back to the ship. We'll find out if it worked tomorrow."

Orz noticed Jessica in the crowd outside Rabb's main warehouse. She smiled and winked mischievously, knowing he couldn't acknowledge her. The crowd was waiting to see if Ratman could live up to his claims and watched intently as he and Rabb disappeared inside. An uncertain cheer began and died as he reappeared dragging—with little help from Rabb—a cageful of clawing, squealing, snarling, snapping space rats. Having retreated to what it considered a safer distance, the crowd applauded.

Lesno strode forward, beaming. "Well, Ratman, I knew you could do it! But what are you going to do with the little monsters now that you've caught them?"

"Most of them will have to be gassed and killed, but I'll save a few of the best for breeding purposes ... I like to keep my working stock as strong as possible."

They completed the rounds of Rabb's buildings, then moved on to Lesno's. The novelty had worn off and the crowd was beginning to thin by the time they got around to Lesno's third warehouse, but interest was renewed at the sound of Orz's voice calling from within.

"Mr. Lesno! There's something you ought to see in here!"

Lesno went in. Rabb, Houghton and some of the braver members of the crowd—Jessica among them—followed him in.

It looked as if a bomb had gone off inside. Every crate, every package had been torn open. Even some of the computer paneling had been torn away.

"What happened?" Lesno cried, staggered by the destruction.

Orz shrugged and pointed to the full cage. "I don't know. There's your community, caged and ready to go. But I've never seen anything like this before."

Houghton was looking over the ravaged computer. "Never seen a computer that looked like this," he

muttered. "Is this some new model, Aaron?" he asked Lesno .

Rabbcame up. "Looks like part of a subspace radio!"

"Ridiculous!" Lesno sputtered. "What would I be doing with—"

"You're a spy!" Houghton declared. "A Federation spy!"

A blaster suddenly appeared in Lesno's hand. "Don't insult me by linking me to the Federation!"

Houghton shrugged. "So you're a Restructurist spy, then. Just as bad. You get twenty years either way."

"I'm not going to argue with you, Malcomb . Just stay where you are."

"You can't escape, Aaron!" Rabb warned.

Lesnosmiled. "Of course I can," he said and pointed the blaster at Orz . " Ratmanis going to volunteer the use of his ship. He's even going

to come along for the tide to make sure no one gets trigger-happy."

Orzcaught Jessica's eye. She was readying to make a move, but he shook his head. They had succeeded in destroying Lesno's effectiveness as a spy. It didn't matter if he escaped. And so, with a blaster at the back of his head, Orz preceded the little man to the truck.

"You work for the Federation, don't you?" Lesno said as Orz drove them toward the spaceport.

"I'm afraid I don't have time to work for anyone other than Sam Orzechowski ."

"Come now, Ratman . I was suspicious yesterday when I saw the way you gave Houghton's computer a going over and this morning's revelation confirmed my suspicions. Why deny it?"

Orzshrugged. "O.K., I occasionally do some snooping for the Federation."

"How did you get on to me?" Lesno asked earnestly. "I thought I had a foolproof arrangement."

"Well, I wasn't sure, but Houghton's centralized setup started me on a new approach. I figured that if one man could centralize his computers, another could decentralize a sub-space transmitter. Then it struck me that you'd have to take the transmitter apart in order to sneak it into town. And since it was already in pieces, why not leave it that way? At least that's what I would have done. So the next thing to do was to look

for the man with the *slightly* larger computers. You fit the bill."

"But how did-you manage to tear the place apart?"

"That was easy. If you could go hack to that warehouse now, you'd find a tiny, high-frequency *labeler*



attached to the door. I have a "number of vandal rats trained to be specialists in making a mess out of a building. The *labeler* told them where to go to work."

Shaking his head in admiration, Lesno remarked, "You should be working for us."

"But I don't want a Restructured Federation," Orz replied. "I sort of like it the way it is."

"But there are such inequalities in the galaxy! Some planets are drowning in their surpluses while other planets are starving, and the Federation does nothing!"

"The Federation doesn't think such matters are within its scope."

"They will be when we win!" Lesno replied righteously.

Orzknew argument was futile and allowed a shrug to be his only reply.

Once on the ship, it was evident to Orz that Lesno knew his way around freighters. He retracted the ramp, secured the hatch and then followed Orz to the bridge.

He gestured to the extra seat "You just sit there and keep out of the way, Mr. Ratman , and you won't get hurt. I'm not a murderer. If all goes well, I'll drop you off at the first neutral port we reach. But I won't

hesitate to shoot you if you, try anything."

"Don't worry," Orz told him. "My mission was to stop you, not capture you. I really don't ,care if you get way."

Lesno's eyes narrowed. This lack of chauvinism did not fit his conception of a Fed man. Something was up. His suspicions were reinforced when he found the console inoperable.

"Where's the lock?" he demanded.

Orz pointed across the room. "By the speaker." But Lesno made no move. Instead his eyes roved the room until they came to rest on the red lever. His face creased into a smile.

"You didn't think anyone would be fooled by that, did you?"

Orz nearly leaped from his seat as the Restructurist reached for the lever. "Don't touch that!"

" Sitdown!" Lesno warned, pointing die gun at Orz's chest "I told you before, I'm not a killer but—"

"I know you're not!" Orz said frantically. "Neither am I. That's why you've got to leave that lever alone!"

Lesno merely smiled and kept him covered while he released the first two safety catches. "listen to me, Lesno ! That lever sets off a special tone stimulus and releases every one of my rats! They've all been trained to attack anyone and everyone but me when they hear that tone ... I installed it for use in a situation when it was either kill or be killed!

This is not one of those situations!"

Lesno was having some trouble with the third catch, but it finally yielded. "A good try, Ratman ," he said

and, ignoring Orz's cry of protest, pulled the lever.

Faintly, from far down the corridor, came a metallic clang. A loud, wailing tone filled the ship. Lesno paled and turned anxiously toward his captive.

"Why didn't you listen to me, you fool!" Orz yelled.

Lesno suddenly believed. Horror stricken, he began to push and pull the lever back and forth but with no effect. He was still working at it when the squealing, gray brown carpet swept through the door.

Orz turned away and tried unsuccessfully to block out the screams and sickening sounds of carnage that filled the bridge. He had trained the rats too well. . . there would be no stopping them.

And when all was quiet again, Orz congratulated himself on having kept his stomach in place. But then 62 leaped up- to his accustomed spot on his shoulder and began with great contentment to clean his reddened claws and jowls.

Only Jessica came to see him off, Orz had cleaned up the rat problem and the people were appreciative, but they had either seen the corpse that had been removed from his ship, or they had heard about it

"I see the red lever's been removed," Jessica remarked. She hadn't been near the ship since the incident.

Orz avoided her gaze. "Yeah. I took it out. . . can't quite look at it." He changed the subject abruptly. "Well, now that this thing's been cleared up, what'll you be doing with yourself?"

"I've no intention of settling down and becoming a good Neekan citizen, you can be sure of that!" she replied. "I'm putting in for an assignment as soon as possible. There's too much going on out there for me to get tucked away on this rock!"

Orz smiled for the first time in several days. "That's funny. I was thinking of taking on an assistant. This business is getting a little too complicated for me to handle alone."

He paused as Jessica waited eagerly.

"You like rats?" he asked. |