

THE STORY WRITER

by Richard Wilson

A man at a flea market sat at a typewriter reading. His table was the barest of all. On it were a ream of paper, a pencil and a sign: "This Typewriter for Hire. A Story Written about You: \$1 a Page." The typewriter was an old Remington office model on a stand next to the table.

Other tables were crowded with curios, knickknacks, carnival and depression glass, insulators, china, woodenware, campaign buttons, barbed wire and other collectibles and by-gones. Few dealers brought valuable antiques to an outdoor flea market; there was always the threat of pilferage or breakage or rain.

The story writer was a man of 55 with a tidy mustache. He was William Wylie Ross, one of the last of the old-time pulp writers. He was smoking a pipe and reading a book of short stories by Slawomir Mrozek called *The Elephant*.

A boy of 10, who had stood watching Ross, went up to him and said: "Dzien dobry."

"I beg your pardon?" Ross said.

"I said good morning in Polish. You are reading a book by a Pole and I am of Polish descent. I thought you might be too."

"No. I read Mrozek only in translation. Good morning. What is your name?"

"Nazywam sie Henry. Jak sie pan nazywa? I said in Polish: 'My name is Henry. What is your name?' My father, who was born in Poland, says it is good to preserve the traditions. I am bilingual."

"Your father is wise," Ross said. "My name—Nazywam sie Ross. Did I say it right?"

"Very well. Is Ross your first or your last name?"

Ross gave the boy a card. It said: *William Wylie Ross, freelance writer; short paragraphs at the going rate, full-fledged autobiographies by arrangement.*

The boy read the card. "It says nothing of a story about me."

"That could be a biography; they run 300 pages up. In your case maybe 20 pages, depending on how intensely you've lived. A shorter work, as the sign says, is a dollar a page. Would you like one?"

"Can you write a ghost story?" Henry asked.

"Would you like a sample? No charge."

"Yes, please."

Ross put down his book and rolled a sheet of paper into the typewriter. He wrote. "Henry sat alone in his room. He was the last person on Earth. There was a knock at the door."

He took the sheet out and gave it to Henry. "That's the world's shortest ghost story."

"It doesn't have a title. And it doesn't say who wrote it."

"A critic, are you?" Ross put it back in the machine. He typed **WORLD'S SHORTEST GHOST STORY** and, below that, by *W. W. Ross*. He said to the boy: "I don't use my full name on such a short piece. Besides, it's not original except for the name of the protagonist."

"What's a protagonist?"

"You are. The main character. The boy in the room. The one who knocked at the door may be the antagonist."

"Oh. Can you write a true story about me?"

"I can."

Henry took a dollar from his pocket and put it on the table. Ross wrote a story about a ghost writer and a boy named Henry who asked him to write a ghost story. He worked quickly on the story, which was similar to what you have just read, except that he left out the Polish because he couldn't spell it. Double-spaced, it ran to two pages plus a paragraph on the third.

Henry looked embarrassed. "I have only a dollar."

Ross handed him the pages. "No extra charge. It's really a collaboration."

A man had come to watch. He said to Ross: "I am Henry's father."

"How do you do."

"I am well, thank you. I am glad Henry spent his dollar here instead of in a foolish way. You read Mrozek. Do you admire Polish writers? Korzeniowski? Later he called himself Conrad."

"I admire good writers whatever their nationality. I admire Conrad."

"Dziekuje bardzo. Thank you very much. And thank you for what you have written for Henry, moj syn. My son. I think he could be a writer one day. Dowidzenia. Good-by."

"Dowidzenia," Ross said. "Dziekuje bardzo, Henry."

Several tables away a young dealer had set up at the back of his camper. His sign read *Mad Wayne Anthony, Stony Point, N.Y., ANTIQUES 1870 UP*. Ross supposed it meant some of his wares qualified as antiques by being at least a hundred years old and that Wayne had combined an allusion to their price; his least expensive was marked \$18.70. There was a small hand-lettered card on his table which said *We haggle*.

Wayne Anthony had old 78-rpm records. He played one now and again on a Victrola. He had a ritual of wiping it with a treated cloth, holding it by its edges as he settled it over the spindle, winding the machine and carefully placing the needle. The music, not amplified except by the big old horn, was clear but unobtrusive. Ross could ignore it if he chose or he could give it his attention and savor the old melodies. At the moment, Wayne, who explained to his fellow dealers that the records were not for sale and that he was planning to go to Heuvelton where there was a barn full of real oldies, was playing *It's Like Old Times*.

Ross saw his next customer. Sometimes he could tell who it would be. She was a plump young woman who had stood within earshot until Henry and his father left. She walked sideways to Ross's table as if she were going somewhere else. Ross became engrossed in relighting his pipe until the girl was at his elbow. He picked up his book, said casually "Hello, young lady," found his place and pretended to read.

The girl said: "Excuse me. Could you write a story about me?" . /

He exhaled smoke and put the book down. "If I knew something about you I could try."

"There's not much to tell."

"There might be. Let's start with names. Mine's Ross. What's yours?"

"It's funny you should ask that because I've changed it."

"*Did* you? That's a beginning. Tell me about it."

Ross and the girl talked. People who had watched while he wrote Henry's story went away. She talked more freely. She said things to him, a stranger, that it was possible she'd never told another.

"Yes," he said. "I can write your story. If you don't care for it you needn't pay. But you haven't told me your name or why you changed it."

"My name is Mabel." She talked some more.

Ross wrote this story:

Once a young woman named Mabel who thought she was plain changed her name to May-Belle because she wanted something about her to be beautiful. She was not really plain. She had good features and a ripe, honest figure. But she was afraid her boy friend found her unattractive. She thought he preferred Jane, who painted her face and had a fashion-model figure. The boy, Ralph, went off to war and came back blind.

Jane went to see him once, out of duty, at his parents' house. She never went again.

May-Belle invited Ralph to a picnic and they had a fine day. After that they were together often. Inevitably they talked about Jane. Ralph said: "You know, I used to like Jane but I don't any more."

"I can't understand why," May-Belle said. "She's prettier than ever."

"Is she?" Ralph asked. "It must be skin-deep pretty because I can't see it. I can see you, though, and I see you beautiful, Mabel." The blind boy called her by her old name and she liked it.

Ralph learned Braille and got a job at a radio station and after awhile he was a popular disk jockey. And when he and the girl of his choice went to the town clerk to get a marriage license she spelled her name Mabel because he liked it that way.

A simple story for a simple girl? No, a straightforward story for a straightforward girl. Ross had felt good writing it and she'd been pleased with her dollar's worth.

Ross didn't wish the boy blindness, except to Jane's skin-deep beauty. He wished heartily for the happiness of May-Belle, by any name. He had an idea her last name would be Ralph's.

William Wylie Ross had not been as prolific as Max Brand or Lester Dent but he had done well enough in the pulp magazines after a stint in reporting. He had come to the pulp field later than the veterans but had earned his two or three cents a word when that was good money. He used a distinctive three-name byline as many had before him—Carroll John

Daly, William MacLeod Raine, Joel Tinsley Rogers, Edgar Rice Burroughs.

After the paperbacks killed the pulps he wrote for them and later for television. He adapted one of his western tales as a pilot for a television series. It sold to a network, caught on with the public and was renewed year after year. Ross had a good agent and got one of the best of the early contracts. He owned a piece of the property and wrote the scripts for many seasons. Later he became story editor and executive producer. Others wrote them, hewing to his guidelines. Royalties, residuals and foreign rights made him rich and he retired before he was 50. The series still ran in prime time and reruns were syndicated around the world.

Ross had married once but he and his wife had no children. They learned that it was he who was sterile. They joked about it sometimes, referring to him as the barren one, and once he signed them into a hotel as Baron and Lady Ross. Another time he registered as W. W. Ross, Bart., and Lady and during their stay some of the staff called them Mr. and Mrs. Bart.

They were content for a while but she always resented the hours his writing demanded and his refusal to adopt a child. On the day she turned 30 she divorced him and married a widower with three children by whom she subsequently had three of her own. He remained friends with her and got to like her husband, a professor of American literature, who came to like him. The six kids knew him as Uncle Bart.

After he retired he collected. At first he sought copies of his old pulp stories in second-hand stores. He had written more than he remembered—detective, adventure, air-war, science fiction, westerns. Before long he decided he was indulging in narcissistic nonsense. He began to collect American first editions—specializing in former pulp writers who had made it big—Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Cornell Woolrich.

He retired because his old friend Marv had told him to slow down. Doctor Marv had told him straight, not in his office but in his home after dinner in the presence of Doctor Tina—Marv's wife who'd just earned her Ph.D. with a concentration in gerontology. It was stress, high blood pressure, hypertension, whatever the current terms were, brought on by who knows what but helped along by overweight and alcohol. Smoking two packs a day wasn't helping any, either.

Marv had told him: "Quit the stress and do what you'd really like to do because if you don't—Just do it, Will. For me, if not for yourself. I want you around a bit longer." Tina told him please to keep on aging so she

could study him properly now that she had her degree.

So he moved out of New York, to which he had returned after his long television stint in Hollywood, and went upstate, where he had been raised. He bought a house in Auburn, the small city which had been the home of Samuel Hopkins Adams, the writer, and before that, William Henry Seward, who had bought Alaska.

It was a fine old house. He filled it with period furniture, Adams' first editions and Seward memorabilia. He bought a few canvases by Auburn painters Barney, Rising and Sunter.

He liked a morning walk and a late breakfast at the Auburn Inn. He wore suntan pants and shirt and an old-fashioned vest which held pens, pencils, a slim notebook and paraphernalia for his pipe. He ate scrambled eggs, whole wheat toast, marmalade and coffee. Liz, the waitress, who was as old as he was, called him Will. He always tipped her a dollar.

From the inn he walked to the old brick and frame gallery on William Street to see whether Bob Muggleton had found anything of interest.

In his absence from the house Minnie Barnes let herself in once a week and cleaned. Then she visited a friend who was serving a term for armed robbery in the Auburn prison. Minnie carried a Bible in a brown paper bag and often invited Ross to attend a service at her church. He went once and sat in the back row. He was the only white person there and although he enjoyed the sermon and the singing he felt like an intruder and didn't go again. He had put a hundred-dollar bill in the collection plate and made a note to send an annual contribution.

From church he went to an auction in a barn near Skaneateles and sat in the second row while bids went by him on cast iron banks, barbed wire, a mammy bench, post-hole diggers and a cranberry scoop. His only bid was on a Little Big Book based on his western hero. It cost six-fifty to take it home.

Home was where the heart should have been. He put his acquisition on a shelf next to old stuff he'd written. A re-run of his series was on television but he didn't watch it. He had a drink and smoked a pipe and went to bed.

His collecting led him to the flea market. Jud Ransom, a dealer friend, had invited him. "You never know what you'll find," he told Ross. "Too much of it is junk but I'm often surprised."

Jud had a shop in town. It specialized in mechanical banks, old

typewriters, penny movie machines and other things that people collected now. The shop had a good trade; other dealers made their way to it from many states.

They went to the flea market in Jud's Econoline van, shun-piking at an easy speed and enjoying the scenery along the older roads.

"I'm satisfied if I clear expenses," Jud said. "I bring two or three fine pieces. It's good advertising; people notice them and take my cards. Weeks later they telephone or drop in at the shop. The rest is stuff I sell cheap."

At the First Original Famous Flea Market, in the lee of a farmhouse on Route 3 north of Port Ontario, Ross helped Jud unload the big table, two camp chairs, the penny machine that showed an early Charlie Chaplin short, an Oliver typewriter, a bank that shot a coin into a tree trunk, a cherry pitter, a broken spinning wheel and other bygones. The biggest was the old Gypsy Fortune Teller. They eased her from the van to a level place near the table. "Never could have brought her without you," Jud said. "Takes two to handle her."

It was a big rectangular box whose glass top enclosed a gray-haired wax figure of a woman in faded Romany garb. Her hand hovered over playing cards fanned out in an arc. A sign said: "Gypsy Granny Tells Your Fortune—5¢."

Ross put a nickel in the slot. Hidden machinery came to reluctant life. The head turned from side to side. The hand moved back and forth above the cards, then stopped. A pasteboard fortune fell into a tray. Ross read it: "You will do a good deed and happiness will result."

"Granny always has an upbeat message," Jud said. "She attracts trade and earns me a few nickels."

They finished setting up and relaxed in the camp chairs. Jud poured coffee from a Thermos. "Don't expect a roaring trade. I enjoy the fresh air and the people."

There were few customers that early. Dealers dropped by and chatted. One said he had a gadget that might interest Jud, who went to see it. Ross finished his coffee and lit his pipe. A few cars came off the road and parked in the field down the hill. A man stopped to look at the typewriter. "Does it work?"

"Probably," Ross said. He took a page from his vest-pocket notebook and rolled it into the Oliver. He tapped out: "My name is Oliver. Oliver Twist. What the Dickens—I really write! More?"

The man nodded. "When I was a boy I had H-O Oats for breakfast.

There was a picture of Oliver Twist on the box, asking for more. How much is it?"

"The tag says thirty dollars."

"I see that. What do you have to get for it?"

"I'm just minding the store. Come back when Jud Ransom's here. Maybe you can work out something better."

"I may do that." The man went to look at a set of Jerry Todd books at another table.

A young couple came by. The girl took up the cherry picker. "I saw one of these in Joel Salter's paper," she said. "See? The prongs go down and push out the pits and the prongs come up with the cherries and they fall into this thing down here."

"I suppose that means you can't live without it?" the young man said.

"Not if you want cherry pie like your grandmother made."

"We'll take it," he said. "Seven-fifty?"

"That's it, plus tax." They worked it out and Ross took the money, feeling as good as if he had sold a story.

Jud returned with an elongated wooden object that scissored open. It had grooves in unlikely places. "Nobody knows what it is but I never saw anything like it."

"Couldn't live without it?"

"You're picking up the jargon."

"A few people were here," Ross said. "I sold your cherry picker and got a feeler on the typewriter."

"Good man. The price on the Oliver is firm. It cost me twenty."

A plump blue-haired woman in sun glasses put a nickel in the Gypsy machine. It whirred as before and the wax head and hand moved. But then it clanked to a stop. No fortune dropped.

Jud said: "Sorry, ma'am. I'll refund your nickel."

"I'd rather have the fortune."

"I suppose I could open it up and get you one. No. I didn't bring the key."

Ross said: "That's all right, madam; there is a backup arrangement. In case of malfunction Granny's message is transmitted to the keys of this venerable typewriter."

"Really?" the woman said.

"Yes. You see, the patent dates of the Gypsy and the typewriter are the same. They also happen to be the year of my birth. Thus an affinity is established."

"You're putting me on. But I love charlatans. For a nickel—"

"Make yourself comfortable in Mr. Ransom's chair and I'll see what Oliver has to say. You realize I haven't the Gypsy's years of experience in this work."

"Charming. Just make up something. It doesn't have to be Romany. A cookie fortune would do."

Ross took the other chair. He poised his fingers over the keys of the old typewriter. "You realize there are professionals in that line of work? They're the people who write greeting card verses."

"Well, pretend you're a professional and write me an upbeat fortune."

Ross bit his pipestem. He said: "First your name."

"Effie Ostrander. Miss."

"Excellent. The initials E and O start us off—Each of us has hidden talents; yours will help another."

"Lovely. Go on."

"As the sun shines on you today so it will for infinite tomorrows. May all kinds of ethnic fortune smile on you. Romany, Chinese or USAmerican, your happy future is assured."

Miss Ostrander said: "It's a fine message. Please elaborate."

"For five cents Oliver can go no further," Ross said. "Like most of us he has his price."

"Thirty dollars," Jud said in the background.

"That's for Oliver, not his words," Ross said.

"I must admit I've had more than my nickel's worth," Miss Ostrander said. "What would he charge to go on?"

"It's a question that hasn't come up before. A dollar?"

"Fair enough."

They spoke a little longer and this told Ross some things about her. He filled three pages, recapitulating events of the morning from her point of view. Part of it was about him. The last paragraph read:

"Miss Ostrander spent a dollar and five cents. She had the satisfaction of passing the time pleasantly in the open air and the bonus of having been the catalyst that fed Ross's springs of invention, making him something of the story writer he had been."

She took the typed pages and went away reading them again, her blue hair reflecting the morning sunlight.

On the drive home Ross said: "I forgot. I owe you Miss Ostrander's dollar."

"Keep it. You earned it."

Back home with his recollections of the day Ross thought he might go again with Jud but with proper paper and his own typewriter. Another Sunday he could set up his own table. It was a vagrant thought but it intrigued him. People would be there, each with a story. He could draw them out and write about them. For the first time in many nights he went to sleep thinking ahead instead of back.

It was early August at the First Original Famous Flea Market and Ross had had his own table for many Sundays.

Jud, having seen him settled in, was off on a buying trip to Vermont. The weather had been wonderfully good. Not once had the dealers been forced indoors to the crowded old barn; it rained in midweek, as if the gods smiled on their Sundays.

Ross had packed a lunch. A chunk of Swiss cheese, a small box of raisins, a spiced beef stick, a raw carrot and hot coffee in a Thermos. And after the eating the reaming of the dottle from the pipe and the refilling and the luxuriant lighting-up and the first mouthful of satisfying smoke.

Savoring his pipe, Ross listened to Mad Wayne Anthony's Victrola playing *Mad Dogs and Englishmen*, an orchestral arrangement of the Noel Coward song. Ross thought: No dog shall bark—Mad Anthony Wayne's infamous but necessary order as he prepared to storm the British-held height at Stony Point.

Associating, Ross thought for the first time in months of his friend Dirk Easterly and Dirk's dog Drool, a Labrador retriever who never hurt you when he gentled your hand in his jaws but whose saliva wet you in a loving way. In the presence of slobbering, loving Drool he and Dirk had signed a youthful pact at the base of a tree in the urban-bound woods of Alley Pond Park, Queens. Dirk said in 17-year-old solemnity: "One day one of us will need the other and we vow here in our blood—get down, Drool!—that nothing will interfere with that. There may be no one else to help—wife,

dog, lawyer, friend—but each will know the other will come if needed, if the blood oath is invoked. This we swear, knowing all it may mean, whether we're a continent or worlds apart. You call, I come. I call, you come. This we swear, on pain not only of death, which is bearable, but of disillusionment, which would be too much."

Dirk read a lot and his language showed it. They had not invoked the pledge but in infrequent meetings over the years they recalled it, laughed about it and then, in an adult but not denigrating way, reaffirmed it. Laughing on the surface, as if to indulge their younger selves, but meaning it underneath they reswore, sealing the other with a toast to the departed Drool, their friend and bond.

People walked past Ross's table. He had a good place, between the lady with the treen, which is what they call woodenware in the trade, and the family with new and old books and prints. Ross had bought his Mrozek paperback from them for ten cents.

Trade being slow, he refilled his pipe and read Mrozek's story about spring in Poland, which was a season other than any he'd known. Ah, to be in Poland in such a spring! It was good to be here, too, close to the burgeoning fields, within earshot of a lowing cow and a squawking crow and a brook gurgling as heartily as if still fed by snowmelt.

Nevertheless he was marking time. There was more to be said than he had ever written. Long ago he knew he'd not write the great novel or the immortal story. Somewhere, because he was professionally good with words, he knew there was a challenge to meet that would give him satisfaction. But there weren't as many futures now as when he'd been twenty, when the horizons were infinite. Since then he had spent a lot of time learning his trade until he could write almost anything passably well. But he recognized his limitations. Not for him the Nobel or the Pulitzer. His limited talent had earned him a good living but it would not bring immortality.

He was in this frame of mind, reflective, semi-sad but satisfied with what he had, enjoying nature's sounds and his pipe and taking comfort from the presence of his typewriter, filled with untapped tales, when the cloaked stranger stopped at his table.

Ross had known weirdos and freaks, as they called themselves. He could sympathize with their dramatic ways, having been one of them himself, long ago.

(If only then he had known his potential; the freedom to do anything that could be done! But he hadn't known. He'd been limited by his

needs—to make a living, bring in the extra dollar, take the higher-paying job.)

The stranger regarded him with knowing eyes. "I know you and you will know me and we needn't go on about that now."

"Possibly so," Ross said.

"It's as so as I stand here. Explanations later. William Wylie Ross, will you, for the purposes of the story you will write, accept me on faith?"

"I have no faith," Ross said. "I've lived too long."

"Hardly long enough," the stranger said, "You are on the threshold. Believe this. You have been investigated and chosen, if you will agree."

"I think I know who you are. I don't know if I will agree."

"Tell me who I am. I'll be what you say."

Ross considered him, letting his mind wander. Another customer to while away the day. "Your name is Street. First name?"

"None. Or anything you wish."

"John? There's a John Street in New York, downtown."

"If you say so."

"You're one of the street people—once called beats or beatniks, then hippies, freaks, weirdos. You're a mystery man, a local character, odd but harmless."

"I sound dull."

"You roam by night, scanning the sky and talking to it."

"That's better. Does the sky talk to me?"

"Recently it did. You encoded the message on the back of a picture postcard of the First Baptist Church of somewhere. Whilomville? You signed it 'St.'"

"What message?"

"Decoded, it meant 'Contact established.' But what you wrote was 'Nothing new but hello anyway. St.'"

" 'Hello' was the key word?"

"Probably. A postal clerk read your card and mentioned it to a friend, who told a reporter. The reporter didn't write a story but word spread that a man with long hair and a long cloak was calling himself a saint."

"Street abbreviated 'St.,'" said Street.

"And because the postcard showed the First Baptist Church there was talk that you considered yourself St. John the Baptist. There's John again."

"You do tie things together. Do I look like a saint?"

"You might pass. You're nothing like Simon Templar, of course."

"The name means nothing to me."

"I suppose not. They keep a sharper eye on you now, in case you're dangerous. A religious fanatic. A potential threat."

"Am I?"

"You may be a threat to our way of life. Because you're alien."

"My papers show I was born in Canastota, New York."

"Sure they do. And possibly your papers say you're seventh or eighth in a long line of Streets. Do you know Eighth Street? In the Village?"

"The village of Canastota?"

"Greenwich Village. Nobody'd give you a second glance there, among the street people of Eighth Street."

"It sounds more friendly than John Street. Why do you call me alien?"

"You're lonely. You wonder if you have been abandoned by your kind but your loyalty prevents your making friends here."

"Yet I've sought you out."

"Tell me why."

"You tell me. Write a story about it."

Ross considered it. He'd already begun, in his mind, as they talked. But it would take many pages—many more than the simple stories he'd written for Henry and May-Belle and Effie Ostrander. The stranger called Street was probably no more than he seemed—a Kesey-Kerouac type who had seen his youth go by, who had rejected the establishment but had been rejected himself by the new youth. An outcast, a weirdo now not weird enough. All at once Ross felt close to the man who stood there, tall, composed but lonely in his assumed grandeur, defiantly costumed.

"I'll write your story," Ross said.

"Thank you. It may be your story as well."

"Possibly. I rarely know how a story will end."

This is what the story writer wrote:

"A man at a flea market sat at a typewriter reading. His table..."

He wrote that and the other words you've read so far. Though he typed steadily it took him a long time. Street was patient.

People came by. Some paused and, seeing Ross engrossed, passed by.

Ross stopped typing. "I've taken it up to now," he told Street.

"Take it further."

"It's tiring work. I've written many dollars worth but I've seen no money."

"I offer more than money. That's not your need."

"What do you offer?"

"Write," Street said. "Put it down now. Whatever you say is possible. What can you lose? An hour of your time?"

"Shall I write a fantasy?"

"Anything. Put it down and see how it comes out."

Ross stretched in his chair and relit his pipe. He drew in a great mouthful of smoke. As it trickled out he thought what he might write, half-listening to the cows and the brook and the old Victrola *Bye, Bye, Blackbird*.

"You hesitate," Street said.

"I'm a skeptic. Who can believe you?"

"Aren't you also a romantic?"

"Yes, I am. But what's better is that you've given me a deadline. I find that I want to do it and I will."

"I'll load your other pipe."

"Thank you. I'll want it." Ross rolled a clean page, into the typewriter. He asked: "Anything?"

The stranger sat on the ground and stuffed the pipe with tobacco and tamped it well. "Anything," he said.

Ross began to write.

This is what he wrote:

Think of the possibilities. Ignore the likelihood that this fantastically-garbed stranger called Street is other than he hints he is. Take him at his word. As he says, what's to be lost?

Let us assume he's what he implies he is, how I imagine him to be, and let's get words on paper, in the old way, one after another, revisions later.

Let's take a 55-year-old hack writer with nothing in his future except more money than he needs and let's just imagine. What else is there to do this Sunday afternoon?

This isn't really the time or place for so large a work. Another time: late evening, when the mystery would be greater than it is here in the sunshine. Another place: home in privacy where I could bang it out in first draft with refinements and corrections to come.

But I make excuses. I'm a professional. I can do what I must.

Must I do this? No, but I want to. I can't explain. It may become clearer as I write.

Let me describe Street, my cloaked stranger, my catalyst. Not a physical description but what, for the purpose of the story, he must be. Let me pretend I am writing fiction, which is my skill or talent.

Street is a visitor here, or hereabouts, from a far-off place I'll name later. He has a specific purpose. Street needs me, or someone like me, or he'd not have sought me out.

He is a foreign service officer in his alien government; an important person not quite in the top hierarchy. I see him as the alien equivalent of a deputy assistant Secretary of State in the United States Department of State. A career man, skilled, dedicated, with limited authority in his area of expertise but with some powers of decision delegated to him.

We need a name for his government—short for easy pronunciation and typing, with an X in it for the unknown. Lux? Good in Latin, but here it's just soap. Lex, for law? As a freelance who once ghosted a Burroughs novel I think Lex Barker, whilom screen Tarzan. Sax as in Rohmer? Bix as in Beiderbecke? Max as in Brand? Lox as with bagels? You see my problem. The name mustn't be associative or comic.

Street (obviously not his real name) is silent as I write and I flank the X with vowels—Axa, Exe, Ixi, Oxo, Uxu. One sounds like a weapon, two is a river, Ixi sounds icky, four is a bullion cube. Five will do. Uxu. Pronounced *ticks—oo*.

The Uxu had problems. (Past tense now. Shift your point of view, please.) They'd lived long on scattered planets to which they'd fled when their own world gave signs that it would be destroyed at the impact of a free-flying planet with an affinity for their world's magnetic core. Their calculations told them none could survive such a collision. So off they went

in many small spacecraft to the many little worlds they'd tested and found congenial. There could be no mass migration to any other world; none within their reach was big enough for all of them.

So they migrated in different directions but kept in touch over the years.

And while they were apart they built a great ship in sections, a bit here, a bit there, which eventually was assembled in space, tested and deemed suitable for star travel. It was big enough for all, and capable of the extended journey there had been no time to prepare for when the iron planet precipitated their exodus.

Now a reunion was in order. No more diaspora. Time to put it all together again. The fatherland, the homeland, the promised land awaits, they told each other. It's reunion time, alumni, and alma mater calls. Sing the anthem, wave the flag, appeal to the ethnos. Let's regroup, gang. Everybody back in the house.

They all fitted in nicely, having reduced themselves in size, just as the separate parts of the star ship had merged into a working whole.

Now they were ready to roam the galaxies, going from sun to sun, comfortably self-contained as they sought a new world suitable for them all.

They had been on their way for many years when a great helioc eruption affected their sun-powered engines. Their ship was tossed as by a tempest and they were thrown irrevocably off course.

Thus by chance they made landfall on this island in a far system, this Earth.

They had expected that they would be somewhat different when they reached their destination but they did not expect a change of such magnitude—that they would suffer a space change, though "suffer" could be less than the accurate word. Their suffering was mingled with hope; they realized that the sun storm could have destroyed them and it was possible that the change they had experienced had benefited them. After all, as Ariel told Ferdinand some hundreds of years earlier, the change was into something rich and strange.

Some changes result from suffering. But suffer has another meaning; it means let. So after the great storm they let it happen to them, whatever it was, as their journey continued on a new course. The space change they had suffered, or let happen because they had no choice, was indeed a beneficial one. It prepared them for the alien conditions they had to adapt

to when they got here and came to know us as creatures not too dissimilar from themselves. Street's people had been modified to the way they needed to be to survive among us, in my world.

I tend to forget, as I write, that the truth is what I say it is in these growing pages of manuscript. I have no special interest except to write a story for him, to keep the keys clacking as honestly as possible.

The length bothers me a bit. At a dollar a page I wonder if he'll be able to afford my discursive typescript.

Street looks over my shoulder. He says nothing.

The Victrola plays *Where Is the Life That Late I Led?* A loneliness creeps in. For them? For me?

The world they found was Earth, and they began to make their home on it, in an interstitial way. But Earth was giving them a hard time because Earth was scared of them.

Who on Earth?...

Not the ordinary man or woman in the United States, China, Russia, Lapland or Uruguay, because the ordinary people hadn't heard about them. The frightened ones were at the highest echelons—the presidents and prime ministers, the semi-autonomous investigative agencies, the military, the foreign ministries.

All had contingency plans for alien contact but the plans were out of date. They had been drawn up first in the dark ages of modern diplomacy, when a Frenchman named Verne wrote persuasive extraplanetary stories about the moon. Suppose some day somebody actually went to the moon and found a threat there? So plans to deal with that contingency were drawn up. Later an Englishman named Wells excited people with a story about Martians invading Earth. But Wells' vision was fiction; real invaders would not necessarily succumb to the common cold. The contingency plans were updated. (They really have people doing this. You'd be surprised at their titles and salaries.) .

Then a transplanted European named Gernsback upset them anew with a stream of publications from Hudson Street in which authors from around the world wrote convincingly of menaces from all the universe and beyond.

Then, in a relatively new medium, came Orson Welles, a theatrical type who borrowed from the English Wells and scared a nation one Halloween. Then came specialized periodicals whose writers told of interplanetary intrigue that threatened the wellbeing of Earth.

These visionaries made fictional but putative menaces cheap and available to the masses.

Not only was it necessary for the rulers of Earth to be aware of the extraterrestrial threat—it was necessary for them to make the masses see that they were doing something about it.

And so, just as in years past there had been appointed an atomic chief, a transportation czar, an energy boss, an inflation fighter, the great minds of Earth established a bureau to consolidate all the other bureaus that had been dealing theoretically with the possibility of extraterrestrial contact. And in their wisdom they endowed it with extralegal powers and gave it the code name Stab.

Some thought Stab was an abbreviation for Establishment but nobody knew for sure, and nobody knew who headed it. Nobody but a relative handful of higher-ups who saw to it that a public information office was set up to issue press releases that assured everybody else that everything was Under Control, that the Alien Menace, if menace there was, would be Dealt With.

In a once-popular parlor game the victim was told the others would make up a story he could reconstruct by asking questions. His questions would be answered Yes, No or Maybe. He was told the answers would give him clues.

He didn't know there was no story, that the answers were based on a formula. If the last word of his question ended in a consonant the answer was No. If it ended in a vowel the answer was Yes. If it ended in a Y the answer was Maybe. Thus the questioner made up a story of his own that sometimes looked into his subconscious.

I think I'm doing that with Street. I question him and he replies. But as in the parlor game I wonder how much of what I write is from my subconscious or my imagination.

It is decreed in their philosophy (religion?) that in a new land they will find a philosopher—a prophet?—and that although he will make great demands on them he will guarantee them security. He will protect them from potential enemies. Though his price is high it is fair because it will enable them to settle and regroup and rebuild and multiply.

They call it their future book. Maybe I'm not the philosopher-prophet their book foretold but I'm the best they have. They apparently searched far before they found me and I have to believe their faith is justified.

I'd like to quote from their future book—their *Tome of Time*, as it

translates. But of course I haven't seen it. I know only what Street has told me about it; more accurately, what I've pieced together from his answers to my questions. You must bear this caveat in mind: all he has said has been filtered through my ears and into my typing fingers; my understanding may be imperfect but I must believe that what I write is true.

Street nods approval. On the Victrola George Brunis is singing *I'm Gonna Sit Right Down and Write Myself a Letter*.

I must believe what their philosophy holds: that only what is written endures. My moving fingers type, leaving a record that will not be erased. Because it exists it is so. It is so because it exists. It is true because I have said it and believed it. It stands as an addendum to the *Tome of Time*, the future book becomes present, then past and immutable.

Street nods: I have said it. It is written, as foretold, and joins other prophecies that control their lives and now guide mine.

I've suspended my disbelief to the extent that I see logic in this. It's an attractive concept for a man who's created a kind of reality from gossamer things—the idle thought, the 2 a.m. inspiration, the hope that vagrant words, inked on paper from ribbon or pen, will persuade their readers, at least during the reading, that such things can be.

It's not easy to say where the Uxu are. They're not physically among us on the Earth we know. It's a dimensional phenomenon. I can put it best in nonscientific words, the only ones I command.

Try this: Railroaders dispatch trains in opposite directions over single-track lines. The runs are precisely scheduled and no train meets another at a wrong place. The dispatchers use sidings, bypasses, lay-bys; the terms differ around the world but the result is the same—minimum space accommodates maximum traffic.

In a more sophisticated way communications engineers find room in their undersea cables and telephone, radio and satellite circuits for more than one message at a time. What was once a single, or at best dual, circuit now carries many messages simultaneously.

There are lots of unused spaces. Dr. Dolittle used them when he wrote upside down between lines and in margins.

Factory workers used these spaces in World War II when housing was short and people on different shifts slept in the same beds at different times.

So with us and the Uxu. It's clear now that they coinhabit the Earth in a

separate dimension, on a plane that they, but not we, have discovered. They coexist with us, sharing land, sea and sky, in the interstices of our being. Their heartbeats complement ours. We breathe in while they breathe out. They ecologize our waste spaces, utilize our not-yet-depleted plenty: two trains on a single track; hundreds of messages on a single beam; twice as many words on a page; twice as many people in a bed.

They're not quite here and only a few of us have had an inkling that there are aliens in our midst, interstitially. They're literally among us but invisible, as we are to them— except when they deliberately cross the dimensional border. Yet they're uneasily sensed, uncomfortably poised just beyond the threshold of perception. They're like figures in Escher's symmetry drawings—flocks of geese, schools of fish flying, swimming in opposite directions, one group light and one dark, each apparently unaware of the other and each taking up exactly as much space as the other leaves unfilled.

"Rest for a time," Street said (or I wrote that he said it, needing a few minutes away from the typewriter). "Stretch your legs."

"Good idea." I got up and headed for the old farm privy that had been reactivated for exhibitors and customers. At the cook shed I bought a root beer. Sipping it, I went round the tables, saying hello and looking at wares.

Mrs. Shearer said: "I saved something for you." It was a fine old Autofiller made by the Schaaf Foundation Pen Co. of Toledo, patented June 30, 1903. "It doesn't fill anymore," she said, "but it writes a lot with one dip and a writer should have it."

"It's a beauty," I said. "How much do you have to get for it?"

"Fifty cents?"

"That's not enough, surely."

"It was in a box from an attic in Weedsport. I couldn't ask more."

Pleased to have it, I paid with a Franklin half dollar. I knew Mrs. Shearer collected them.

Nearby was Hester Goodbout's display of tramp art—old cigar box wood intricately whittled and carved and glued to form picture frames, jewel boxes, letter holders. A vanished and little-known craft only lately appreciated. I bought two pieces from Miss Goodbout, to give her some trade, and we talked about the art of homeless men who hadn't begged but had exchanged their special talent for meals or shelter.

Back at my table I looked for Street. He was not in sight.

I finished the root beer and looked at the sheet of paper in the Remington. Refreshed, I wanted to get back to work. I was annoyed at Street's absence. The devil with him; maybe I could go on without him. Was he not a saint but a devil? Was I Faust and he come to tempt me? Undeniably I am a latter-day Faust; before me there was a pulp writer named Frederick Faust, better known as Max Brand, creator of Dr. Kildare and millions of words of westerns.

The neighborly Victrola played the Furtwangler version of a scene from Gounod's Faust.

As a former story editor I knew there were one or two things in the plotline that needed fixing. I set the bottle on the table and my fingers stroked the guide keys: a s d f, j k l ; ...I...

I looked beyond the flea market to the drumlin that hid part of Lake Ontario, shimmering bright on each side. The slope of the hill seemed to move. A slow down avalanche against the green growth. But not a dirt slide. No; a procession of people. A mass of cowled figures. A multitude in monk's cloth, moving down, coming this way. Thirty, fifty, sixty of them; I couldn't count. Far enough away to be indistinguishable one from another; near enough to fear. They were coming here.

On level ground now, they came determinedly across the flat of the land between. The outer exhibitors saw them and called to others. Eyes turned, then stopped. Then everything stopped except the brown mass of cowled monks.

The other exhibitors had been immobilized in the middle of a gesture, a sale.

Only I had special dispensation, to type away, to put it all down.

The strangers came among us, faces hidden deep inside their cowls, and went from table to table, touching the goods quickly, moving on. One came to my table, bringing a chill breeze as a cloud crossed the sun. The figure stood at my side as if to know what I wrote. I strained to see past the shadow of the cowl but could find no face, only a darkness punctuated by what might have been stars, or eyes. The being touched the page in my typewriter and exchanged words in a strange musical tongue with another of its kind. All the others moved away. The visitor remained, the star-eyes as inscrutable as before, the presence as awesome.

The others moved back up the drumlin. As they topped its rise and vanished the flea market came to life. People moved, fingered goods, haggled, bought, moved to other tables. The Victrola played *When the Saints Go Marching In* and I gathered courage to look directly into the

star eyes of the cowled figure who had remained at my side.

I saw the features of a woman. I stood in greeting and regarded her frankly. She wore leather sandals and her small feet were perfect. I looked from toe to head and said, "Good afternoon."

"Good afternoon," she replied. "I came as you would have wished, had you known me sooner."

"I know you now," I said, and dared to add: "You are Uxura. You must be."

"Because you've written it so?"

"Do we need a because?" I realized that she was not young, observing the sun wrinkles at her eyes and the smile lines at her mouth. I appreciated them, having creases of my own.

"Welcome to our Earth," I said.

"Thank you, if Earth this be. I'll meet you closer later, perhaps, through the barrier."

"I see no impediment between us."

"If you see that, so it must be. You are the prophet, the seer and scribe, the molder of our destiny."

"I write. I know little of prophecy."

"You know my name and I know yours, Mr. William Wylie Ross."

"You are Uxura but why do I know that? And you have most delightfully come, Uxura, but why?"

"You reply. Write it and we both will know."

"It may be known later, when the story is finished."

"It is in your hands. Let them make me a useful person. Let your fingers give me depth and purpose, to contribute to the peace and security of our peoples."

I hardly knew what I wrote, what consciousness guided my words. "My fingers write that you have already given much. Your husband, a great man, piloted an early Uxu ship. He died when it crashed in a test. You are Street's mother. Yet you are so young."

"I am proud to be all of these, except young. My son tells me you are the scribe the gods foretold, that you were always in our destiny."

"Waiting in the wings with a workable scenario? I can't really accept this god business."

"Then better for us all. Rather a doubting but well-intentioned godservant than an arrogant unfeeling one who delights in power for its own sake." She smiled. "I beg your pardon, but it is you who puts the words in my mouth— which longs to know yours . . ." She stopped in surprise.

"Really—" I said, as surprised as she at the reality of her saying the words that had been in my thoughts.

The presence of this woman who appealed to me so vitally and who said the words I'd dared not say aloud made me want to race ahead with the narrative, to reach the obligatory setback, to overcome it logically and get on to an ending, preferably happy.

There's not space here to describe Uxura. I'd have to ask many a man what kind of woman he admires. Twain's Joan? A childhood sweetheart? Doyle's Holmes' Irene Adler? Lena Home? Margaret Sullavan? Amelia Earhart? The grandmother you ran to when your mother punished you?

Put them all together and they spell mother, wife, lover, companion, love object, sweetheart, the eternal woman. My feelings, still chaotic, about Uxura. So soon? So late?

If the women I've named are too old for you—I'm an old party myself—how about Jenny Agutter, Becky Thatcher, Tatum O'Neal, Peter Pan's Wendy Darling?

That much I wrote and, though much must have been strange to her, she responded in an age-old feminine way. She drew my head to her breast and put her lips to my forehead.

It was more than an embrace. In that brief contact we exchanged two lifetimes of experience. I felt her life flow into mine and fill me with understanding of all she had known. I knew that at the same time she was absorbing everything that had made me whatever I was or believed myself to be.

In that moment we came to know each other in a more intimate way than I'd known any other, even—I thought of my marriage—even after living with someone for nearly a decade.

I learned from that touch between Uxura and me that the difference in our ages was far greater than the distance which had once separated us. She was not the young middle-aged woman of 50-odd years my eyes saw her to be, but three times that, Her son Street was not 30 but 90. I, a mere 55, with three years to live or a hope for twice that if I took care of myself, as Doctor Marv and I knew I probably wouldn't, could expect a lifespan of

many more years on Uxu if I allowed myself to be transported there—to live not to an unfulfilled 58 or 61 but possibly to a robust 64 or 73.

This she told me in knowledge greater than words and this I believed.

Much more passed between us then; more than I can tell here; more than I could care to tell if I had all the space and time to tell it.

As we drew apart I felt we had woven a bond impossible to sever. Her warm glance said the same was true for her.

But then I wondered how many others she had shared herself with in such a way and I was saddened. She was quick to sense my thought. She touched me lightly, fingers to cheek, and I knew I was the first beyond her family to know her thus, and I was comforted. Even in that brief aftertouch, as I questioned why, she told me I was different, I was special.

I believed and was satisfied.

Thus my decision to go where she dwelt—I hoped, not only for the pleasure of her company but to give her the pleasure of mine for more than a moment of time. Sweet Uxura. Selfishly I chose to go not for the wish to save our two worlds as I had begun to believe I might, not for the adventure of it and the new experiences I might translate into fiction; no—only so I could cling longer to life and in the respite cling to Uxura.

It was time to write an exit line for her, knowing I'd write her in again, and return her son Street to the stage. Mad Wayne Anthony's Victrola played *Somewhere I'll Find You*.

I delayed Street's entrance and said to Uxura: "You know we'll meet again? And that when we do there will be more time for us and for many other things?"

"Yes," she said, "but you write in question marks. There are things you must accomplish. Some do not concern me but others do, most vitally. You will say it in the writings. It is a charming quark."

Why had she used that word? I searched my memory and recalled that a physicist had invested some nuclear particles with certain wondrous qualities. He called these particles quarks, borrowing the word from Joyce.

Later other physicists spoke of refined particles they called charmed quarks that one day might help make clear to man the basic nature of matter. Then they combined a charmed quark with its negative number and produced what they called a charmonium.

Whatever the scientists postulated, their speculations ended in question

marks, as most good theories should pending another Einstein.

But long before that a humbler breed of men had made quarks part of their everyday, if specialized, language. They were the telegraph operators.

When I was a cub reporter in awe of their easy professionalism they used "quark" routinely in their messages. It was an abbreviation that shortened their Morse transmissions, just as they shortened White House to WHU, Supreme Court of the United States to SCOTUS and, later, Nelson Rockefeller's recurring phrase "brotherhood of man under the Fatherhood of God" to BOMFOG. To these hamfisted realists, quark was simply the abbreviation of question mark. Play that on your charmonium.

I thought of Murray Gell-Man, James Bjorken, Theodore Kalegeropoulos and other physicists who pondered the ultimate. Uxura's amber eyes recalled me to the present.

"These things are beyond me," she said. "You among others control my destiny. I am glad we have met, Will."

Her token of farewell was a touch of her hand to my cheek. I gave her a warm symbol of my own, a kiss on that hand.

"When will you come again?" I asked.

"I'll be near when there is need," she replied. I made that her exit line. There are needs and needs. She was gone. Would I see her again? A charming quark whose answer I knew.

Uxura was gone and in her place was Street, somber, disturbed.

"I met your mother," I told him. "She—"

"No time for that. Is it true that your people plan to obliterate us?"

Street was casting a pall over what had been, all in all, a pretty nice day. Why was I letting him? I much preferred his mother.

He went on: "Can it be that such a plan, which we know exists, would be implemented? Are there those in your government so callous—"

Street spoke of a pre-emptive strike, a massive retaliation ordered by Earth's military chiefs. Angry, looking betrayed, he said it had been plotted by second-level people who nevertheless had the power to set it in motion.

He brandished a paper he called a secret document. I tried to get him to hold it still so I could see it but he talked with an intensity that was working into fury.

Finally I was able to take the paper from him. It was a much-Xeroxed Jack Anderson column from an unidentified newspaper, undated. What looked like a memo from one high-ranking officer to another had been copied on the same page. It said something like "Great opportunity to try out Plan P. Can we persuade K to consider?"

K might be Kronwald, a high functionary at the State Department. The names of the officers meant nothing to me.

I tried to tell Street that Anderson produced hundreds of columns a year and that not all of his informants could be believed. I tried to explain that chairborne officers in the Pentagon forever filled their time by playing war games. War was their trade, after all, but their games were just games.

"Policy is made at a much higher level," I said, and offered to seek out the facts from a friend who knew truth from talk and right from wrong and who, with his access to high places, could confirm that what alarmed Street was no more than a niongered rumor.

In fact, I offered to visit Dirk Easterly, who with his access to the highest councils, could guarantee that my interpretation was correct and that the Uxurans had nothing to fear from Earth.

"You would go?" Street asked, and I said I would, happily, to reassure him if he no longer trusted me.

He demurred, saying it was not me he distrusted but others.

How could he not trust me, I asked, if I was their prophet? This led to a philosophical discussion that ended with renewed assurances of his confidence in me—but only while I was with him, where he could keep an eye on me.

"That confidence will be immeasurably strengthened when you are resident with us on Uxu," he said. "Your high friend will then protect you and therefore us."

"It is not my wish to travel to Uxu," I told him. I don't know why I lied.

"Nevertheless it is the only solution."

"You would hold me hostage?"

"That is not a word we use."

"Captive, then?" I was indignant.

"You are our prophet and scribe," he said. "We have agreed to that; you are one of us. Therefore you belong among us."

"And if I refuse to go?" I was careful not to say I refused. The thought of Uxura was in my mind. But I'd have preferred to travel to her land of my own will.

"It is not a question of going," Street told me. "You are already on Uxu."

What he said after that made it clear that I had been transported to his land during the time-stop when the wave of cowled monklike figures descended the hill. This meant that the people of my friendly flea market were not the people they had been before. They were duplicates of the original Earthpeople, mockups created by the aliens.

My indignation returned. I told Street kidnapping was a federal offense. I said I would not be their scribe under duress. I said he had betrayed our mutual trust. I told him I could not live away from my beloved house in Auburn, where all my possessions were.

As if to placate me, Street said I would perceive no difference. All I had known would be the same. They had duplicated my house and everything in it just as they had replicated the flea market.

"Am I to be a prisoner in my own house?" I asked, feeling less annoyed. Thoughts of Uxura helped. Nevertheless I went on a bit: "Won't I be able to go to the Auburn Inn for breakfast? Can't I visit the library and museum?"

Street reassured me. Nearly a square mile of the territory around my house in Auburn had been duplicated in their interstitial way. Other requirements of mine would be met on demand.

I accepted the compromise, and told him so.

But why had I accepted? It was self-evident, now that I thought about it. It was my salvation as well as theirs. For them I was, if not a hostage, at least a guarantee that I would not let anything happen to them that I did not want to happen to me. The safety of their world depended on my well-being. My own well-being, indeed my future existence, depended on their environment offering an extended life expectancy. My days were numbered wherever I was, but the numbers were greater in the other land.

There were still other cards in my hand. I could set the terms. I could make demands. I could ask and what I asked would be granted because that was the way it was written in their book and I was the author of that book. I had only to take my fingers from the typewriter to wreck their plans. And so I asked, leaving it to them to agree gracefully, lest my reasonable requests escalate into demands which could not be denied. Mine was the pen that wrote their book of existence and it was a pen

mightier than any sword they might wield. I ticked off my requests in a matter-of-fact way, as if to say These are the least of my needs, without which I cannot function, and there will be more, not needs but wants which I shall also expect from you.

Street looked troubled, and two or three times his face withdrew deep within his cowl as if he were communicating with a higher authority, but he always agreed, and I wrote it that way and it became our compact, our contract.

My reconstituted house in Ux-Auburn was not altogether to my liking. They'd fixed me up more faithfully than I'd expected, but it wasn't home. It had a desk identically like mine but it didn't have the shelves of books that sat on the back of my desk at home—the rarely consulted but comforting books where I could look up, if I wanted to, the name of George Washington's dentist, the date of the crossing of the Rubicon, the words that rhymed with sang, the number of miles between Coventry and Stonehenge, the descriptions of ships I'd traveled in.

There was my typewriter but not the folders of manuscripts I planned to finish one day. Nor was there the big box of articles I'd torn from newspapers for later reference. A bookcase I recognized was there but it was empty of the books and magazines and scripts I'd written or contributed to. There was nothing printed at all, although there were a few reams of blank paper.

This alarmed me until I found that my typewriter produced words just as it always had. I had feared that no written words of Earth could exist on Uxu. There are many of them here now but all of them are words of my own, most of them those of this work in progress.

There was a refrigerator in the kitchen and there was food in it and on the pantry shelves but it was their kind of food, wholesome I supposed but unfamiliar. They didn't replace it until I complained. Then they provided Earth-style eggs and bread and butter and milk and coffee and other goods I demanded. They were all right but not altogether satisfactory. It was like the difference between getting my copy of the *New York Times* fresh on the doorstep each morning (they couldn't manage that) versus looking at a microfilm copy in a library years later. There's something about the genuine article. The reconstruction, the duplication, the replica—none is ever as good.

And of course they reneged on the library. The building was there, an empty shell, locked, but I could see through the windows that there were

no books inside. The museum was there, not locked, and pictures hung on its walls but they were not titled and there was no reference materials of any kind.

There was no radio in the house and I missed that. I'd kept mine tuned to a noncommercial station that satisfied my tastes in music and my daily need to know what was going on in the world.

I missed the voice of Terry Johnson, the morning man on Auburn's FM station, who told me the time and what the weather was like. His way of speaking sometimes amused me. He used the odd aural punctuation of Radioland—"From our bin of golden oldies we have brought you the music of (a pause, longish for radio) Tommy Dorsey and now the weather."

And I remember that once he'd said "At 7:30 I'm Terry Johnson." I wondered who he thought he had been at 7 and whether he would be someone else at 8.

There was no FM set in Ux-Auburn but something else spoke to me. I became aware of it gradually. Many days had passed before I realized that someone had been communicating subliminally. Rarely to me directly but to me among others.

The voice, if it was a voice, never identified itself but I came to know the speaker, or rather the transmitter of the words or thoughts, as Exus. The messages of Exus reached me not by transistor but inside my head. He recapitulated the important events of his world, not mine, and spoke occasionally of me.

It startled me at first to be referred to in this public way, to be singled out by this commentator as one of the important people of their world. I record in this narrative some of my impressions of him.

On one of Street's visits I asked him to tell me about Exus but he only smiled as if to say You invented him, you tell me. But I feel it's more than my invention here; there is a person whose words reflect Vox Populi, the Everyman of the Uxu people I know only dimly. I call him Exus because the name embodies the mandatory X and because from him, through him, come the thoughts and comments of the multitude of Uxurans I have been thrust among. Exus distills their feelings and gives them artistic form.

Unlike Terry Johnson, Exus knew who he was at all times and I heard him whenever he wanted me to. One of his first observations went something like this:

"Eggs he wants, and books by Dickens; We have to evolutionize to chickens And reproduce endless novels At the expense of unroofed hovels."

Who is Exus and what is he telling me?

In describing Exus through his words I give you an alien scribe, not unlike me, who synopsis, compressing to stanzas what I'd need pages to say. He's a newsman of a certain kind, transmitting facts—sometimes flawed facts—fresh to those who hear his distillations.

I never did get the Dickens, or any printed matter and I had to conclude that Exus allows himself a certain poetic license.

My alien colleague encapsulates complicated events into little space. I feel I have come to know him. I can't reach him but he reaches me. I endow him with certain freedoms of language and alien cliches. You'll grasp them in their context. Listen to Exus:

"Pens he craves and spending money
And a craft of bees he calls honey.
Halt the de-sal of a sea!
Hurry up and plan a bee."

But another verse was less harsh:

"I voice the words, the gripes, the woes
Of him who can't see past his nose;
Others see him as he's painted:
Our prophet come and partly tainted."

I sense a fraternal bond with this fellow of the alien airwaves. Both of us write. We seem to be of an approximate age, the fires of youth spent. That gives us a certain objectivity and a mordant way of looking at things. Neither is a hireling. We freelance, in the best and oldest sense of the word, defending truth and honor, telling what we believe is true. We may exaggerate, ironically, to make a point.

Still, Exus is dim, I'll have to limn him, get him out from behind the scrim of mystery and myth.

Where does he churn out his stuff? High on an alien hilltop, it may be. I like to think of him there, in a golden afternoon, far horizons broadening his viewpoint.

I use a typewriter, a relatively recent invention. His instrument is an ancient but superior device through which his thoughts roam, to be edited—much as I might X out—until in a more Uxuran way they reach

me and others.

I hear what he says and believe we think alike despite our differences. One difference is obvious: my words remain on the sheets where I type them; his fly to all his world—and to my ears now that I am a part of it.

Even as I write of him, he speaks of me:

"Is it worth it, many ask,
Bending to the ordained task?
Weighing prophet against loss,
Do we need you, Mister Ross?"

Exus has a bite to him, but he softens it:

"To steal his phrase, we knock on wood;
We need him for the greater good.
So let him have his precious bees
To put him at his proper ease."

Street visited from time to time to see how I was getting on, to talk, to know what I was writing about our mutual problem.

I was sorry for their troubles that I hadn't caused them. I was sorry for Earth's troubles too, if the Earthpeople's resources were to be diminished by having to share them with uninvited visitors. If there was room for both, I wanted peace between us; if there was not enough room—I thought of Abe Burrows' parody of a popular song: You came to me from out of nowhere so why don't you go back where you came from?

But then there was Street's belief that the Earthpeople, or some villains among them, were prepared to obliterate the visitors who had been tossed on an alien shore and who hoped only for peaceful coexistence in a land with plenty for all—but could it be that its fabled wealth was limited? That its bounty was bounded by human overgrowth? That its largely empty continents would be overrun in a matter of decades by its own burgeoning billions?

If this were true it was easy to believe the "documentary" evidence Street had acquired—the widely disseminated warning that a secret group of Earthpeople had decreed doom for the Uxurans—a secret strike by paragovernmental forces of a dozen major powers that would annihilate the storm-tossed, the spacechanged involuntary immigrants. The Uxurans

had asked only to share, at no loss to anyone, the interstitial wealth of a world whose surface resources were finite but whose submagma and supratropospheric treasures waited to be tapped and could be, easily, with the knowledge the new inhabitants had brought with them.

We had always welcomed refugees, up to now. With certain exceptions we had taken in the homeless, the tempest-tossed.

But now some people in the hierarchy wanted to draw the line at alien aliens. Nowhere, they claimed, was there a mandate to gather flotsam from beyond the stars. They argued that this would threaten our own kind. We had had no compunctions about wiping out the anopheles mosquito, the tse tse fly, the screw worm. If we warred on fellow creatures such as these for the greater *good* of the rest of us, how could we extend friendship to even greater potential threats to our well-being? So spoke the exclusionists whose words, interpreted by Jack Anderson, had so alarmed Street.

I told Street it was unthinkable that the good people of Earth, most of them mired in poverty, should be deprived of a bounty beyond their belief by the act of a handful of irregulars whose fealty was to the status quo and not to the promise the aliens—no fellow terrestrials—held out to them.

Street was only half convinced, although I hinted that the Uxurans' spacechanged engines, instead of mining the jointly-held Earth and the resources below and above it, could harness their power in another way and, with their interstitial ingenuity, blow us all to kingdom come.

Street said: "If your irregulars attack, you share our fate. If Uxuran engines can mine your land and ours exponentially, you share our bounty. If we answer Earth's attack by invading interstitially, Earth is doomed. You are with us and will share our fate, whatever it may be. That is why you are with us."

There was tension between Street and me; tension I didn't need; a sullen standoff.

Street has gained presence on his native Uxu. The verses of Exus refer to him often. I sense that Street speaks for his world virtually with full authority. He is far more representative of his people than I am of mine. If I could speak as he did we could arrange a summit meeting at this tired typewriter, manned by a tired scribe, and solve all the problems of two worlds. I acknowledge that I lack the kind of authority he has but he is content to wait, implying that as I chafe in my hostage status the solution will occur to me.

He is satisfied that as their prophet I will work out the details in a way acceptable to me and therefore to him. I am to be the Prince of Concinity, with the burden of making gospel of a bold but unconvincing narrative. Poo-Bah's law. A dash of verisimilitude will do it if I can find the recipe, the key.

I find only the guide keys of my typewriter but am inspired to think Exus, my versifying colleague, may help. I address him directly. My words are poor compared to his but I trust him to hear the core of meaning. Exus the sweet singer of Uxu and Ross the freewheeling freelance of Earth, communicating in a transdimensional bond, seeking to avoid a stalemate, looking for a way to achieve a common good that transcends artificial boundaries. My words flow out in an Exuslike stanza:

"Are we close, my alien poet?
Is there a chance that we can go it?
I think there is; the door's ajar.
Are we friends? I think we are."

Exus does not reply. I am disappointed. I am restless. I roam the house, unable to sit at the typewriter. I wander outdoors and pace the grounds. There is a lawn chair in the dappled shade of a tree. I sit in it briefly, then am up again. Without a book to hand I cannot properly relax; and there are no books on Uxu. Nothing to read except what I write, and I am growing sick of that.

I find the little garden I have started and abandoned. It is weed-choked. A shovel is stuck in the ground. I pull it out. Garden needs spading, I think. I shove it back in the ground. Dig is what a space does.

I chop away at the weeds. Work is what a man does. Cry is what a babe does. What am I saying? Mewl is what a cat does. Bark is what a dog does. Drool is what a fool does. Drool? Stab is what a dirk does. Dirk? Heal is what a wound does. Drool? Dirk heal?

I run to the house, to the typewriter. I write the chaotic words and soon Street is there.

"I need help," I tell him. "I am only half effective without my blood brother, Dirk Easterly." I tell Street of our pact, of our mute witness, Drool the dog. "I have invoked our solemn agreement. Obviously he cannot come to me; therefore I must go to him. It is the only possible way."

Street is dubious. I can see he is torn between my persuasiveness as prophet and the possible defection of his hostage.

"Then keep me here," I say, "but send my image. It will be as real as the people at the flea market at the time I joined your cause. Yet my true self will remain to share your fate if my mission fails."

Street seems to listen to words I cannot hear. He is silent for some moments, then agrees to my plan to go to Washington across the dimensional divide.

"It will be done; with your special help, of course," Street said. "Our programmers are relieved that no major recreation is involved. It will be a simple transsubstantiation, such as brought you among us."

"You mean I have to write it that way," I said resignedly. I was tired.

"You need not write it now. You will later."

"Oh? It sounds like a loan. I have to write it to make it happen. But because I will write it you'll advance me a trip that I'll pay for with a future account of it?"

Street almost smiled. "Describe it as you will. I believe your people have been known to trade in futures?"

Within an hour of my agreement with Street, after packing a small bag, I was set down, or I materialized—I can't describe it—at the end of the Glen Echo trolley line in suburban Washington. It had been my choice.

I don't know why I had wanted this means of getting to Washington. It stood to reason that the trolley line had been long abandoned, just as the Glen Echo Amusement Park no longer existed. Yet the pleasure of both lived in my memory; that must have been enough for Street.

"It's a nickel," the trolley car conductor said in answer to my question; "same as always."

I asked no more. It was a cheap and wonderful ride through the glen beside the waterway, the trolley bucketing along, its bell clanging at intersections or whenever the motorman felt like treading on the foot pedal in the sheer pleasure of transporting his passengers on a sunny day.

At the terminal I exchanged smiles of goodbye with my fellow passengers and found a cab whose driver knew the old tavern where I was to meet Dirk Easterly.

Despite the many years between I recognized Dirk easily. He knew me too and with a clap on the shoulder led me to a booth where the waiter had set out two brimming beers in sweat-beaded glasses. I had been there last in the forties, when Dirk was off in the Balkans, or maybe the Baltic. "It looks the same," I said. "A little dustier, maybe."

"Nobody's dusted since Lincoln drank here, or so they say. Here's to Drool and the high school kids." We sipped in pleasure.

Stab (short for establishment?) was the bureau the OWI, OSS and CIA had evolved into. It was a unit of the executive office of the White House and of the United Nations, sometimes written STAB as if it were an acronym. The hundred or so people who knew about Stab occupied themselves in trying to pin down its function by making up a name for the letters: Space Travel Accessibility Bureau; Substation Terra, Authenticating Branch; Search, Travel, Assess, Bomb; Seek Terrestrialoids and Beneficize; Section Two, Alien Bureau; Scientists Terrestrializing Alien Beings; Something Traumatic Always Begins.

Dirk Easterly, my childhood blood brother, was a civil servant of awesome background, respected or deplored by his colleagues, consulted by the President but little known beyond a small international circle.

Dirk and I had gone to the same high school and had traded copies of H. G. Wells and Wonder Stories magazine. We'd seen each other only rarely since that time. There had been occasional post cards to each other from odd places on our separate paths but there'd never been a call until today, when I'd sent him my message from Uxu.

We have had other bonds, he as a civil servant, I as a reporter. He'd known Tasha, who was Tito's woman in the Balkans, and I'd known Tasha. We'd both known Philip before he married his queen-to-be. We had played chess at different times against the same Russian who's been privy to the secrets of Stalin and Khrushchev and Brezhnev and we almost always lost.

He was Dirk Easterly of Stab and, as I had lately recalled, stab is what a dirk does.

His outward idiosyncrasy was to affect the trappings of a Hollywood-style soldier of fortune. He habitually wore a belted and shoulder-strapped trench coat and a pulled-down hat and almost always had a cigarette going in the corner of his mouth. I must have seemed as odd to him with my deliberately Ronald Colman mustache, my Dolittle-like note-taking on insides of match covers and margins of newspapers and my flea market business card.

Our reunion was pleasant. We drank beer and ate peanuts and gabbed of intervening years. We spoke of lost friends and recalled how it had been when we were among a precious few who were convinced that man would reach another planet or that men of another planet would find us.

We recalled our youthful appreciation of prophetic comic strips. Young

Dirk had pasted up the Brick Bradford daily strips. I collected them later in Big Little Book reprints at fancy prices.

We understood each other. We associated still.

"Nov shmoz ka pop," Dirk said.

"The Nut Brothers, Ches and Wai," I replied.

"Thimble Theatre."

"Segar. Popeye and the Sea Hag."

Our oysters came, reminding me of the Potomac and the Hudson, which recalled Stony Point. "No dog shall bark," I said.

"Mad Anthony Wayne," Dirk said. "Melville; Ishmael." "Isfa Kabibble. Kay Kyser's Kollege of Musical Knowledge."

"Old-time radio. Hard times. Two chickens in every pot." "Pot. The grass is always greener. It's better on the other side."

"The other side. We have seen the natives and they are friendly."

We paused as the waiter brought a fresh pitcher of beer.

He set down two clean clamshell ashtrays and took away those we'd filled with butts and dottle.

"I smoke too much," Dirk said. "I just noticed."

"Why worry? You could be run down tonight by a Treasury truck."

"Or an interstitial alien."

"So you know." I told him what I'd been doing and he told me much I hadn't known. I said: "It seems unreal, here in Washington, but obviously I've been doing more than fooling around in a flea market."

Dirk said: "We're making policy here. What I recommend will be approved because hardly anybody else knows what it's all about. Are the Uxu a real threat? If they are you'd better tell me now."

It was hard to say, I told him. "Maybe It depends on how much I demand of them. The more I require, the greater the drain on their economy. I try not to sap their energies too much when they're recycling waste or reclaiming a desert. But what will they do if they're convinced Earth is planning a pre-emptive strike?"

"They'll invade. Territoriality makes for inevitability."

"Only if I permit it," I said. "You see, what I'm scribbling here on match covers and what I owe them in manuscript is the definitive text. There's something cabalistic about them. What I write will happen."

"You're writing their constitution?"

"I'm writing something; it's more like their Bible."

"And what you prophesy will come to pass?"

"As in our Bible? 'Now write what you see, what is and what is to take place hereafter.' Revised Standard Version. Or, in the King James: 'He knows the future and is able to control it.' Others have said it. So it would be more exact to say that what I write is happening. Or that what I've written has happened. I'm their historian and when I say something is so, it's so. Irrevocably."

"You sound as if they've made you their god. Why would they do that?"

"I don't know that they have. Prophet, they call it. They seem to trust me."

"Is that trust deserved?" Dirk asked. "Do they know what we're talking about here?"

"They'll know what I've written. I owe them that. I consider you the guarantor of the stability of two worlds."

"You believe that."

"Once I wouldn't have," I said. "I do now. Maybe they'll include you in their prayers. The great brother god. God Brother of Stability."

"Would they offer up nubile maidens to me?"

"If I wrote it that way. Is nubile maidens what you want?"

"Not in groups. I'm your age, you know. But one at a time? That's a kind of benefit I don't get from Stab."

"Then you shouldn't expect it from the Uxu."

"Let the sacred writings show that I'm only kidding. Make me a small-g god with a sense of humor. Unless you're in upper case; then I'd expect equal billing."

"I don't want to be God or a god," I said. "I should make that clear."

"I'm glad you did because it wasn't clear to me. I'd better sort out what I'll have to tell the President. He may not want details at this point but I've got to be ready for him."

"What does he know so far?"

"He has the facts on the Uxu. Where they are—coexistent, dimensionally, with us. He isn't concerned about them now and neither is the Sec-Gen. You do know I report jointly to the White House and to N. K.

Mboto, Secretary-General of the United Nations?"

"I've kept track. Then your guarantee is also that of the UN. Anything you've said, over beer and oysters here, is what Earth says. Is that right?"

"It's right enough," Dirk said. "But don't forget that if what you tell me about your prophesying is true, the Uxu are only an incantation away from being physically among us on Earth. So watch your language. They can have their interstices and we intend to keep ours. I'm depending on you not to write anything you don't want to happen."

"I give you my word, blood brother."

"Good enough. Somebody has to advise the White House and the UN on the interstitial situation. Stab does that. And for all practical purposes I'm Stab."

"With the same disclaimer, I'm Uxu," I said. "Then if you and I have a drink on it, it's as good as a treaty. Is that right?"

We shook hands and drank some beer. The stability of Uxu and of Earth was assured. There's a way of doing these things.

We went to Harvey's for a seafood dinner. Afterwards we got a cab and Dirk dropped me off at my hotel, where I wrote up what you see here, paying my debt to Street.

I finished typing my notes in the Washington hotel after leaving Dirk—fulfilling my futures contract with Street—and considered my return to Uxu. I was looking forward to getting back; anxious, in fact. I'd had my sentimental journey on the Glen Echo trolley and wanted a faster return trip.

The business atmosphere of the capital almost made me forget that I had the means at hand—the rented typewriter I'd been pounding for an hour. I rolled a fresh sheet of paper into it to do a postscript. But I found my fingers writing:

"The threat of interstitial kill
Was lifted by our Prophet Will
In concert with unstabbing Dirk—
What a lovely piece of work!"

Unmistakably Exus. So they already knew.

Later I wrote, of my own volition, that I was tired and ready for bed.

That I would prepare for sleep in Washington. That as slumber neared I would prophesy that I would wake in my house in Ux-Auburn. That I would have a reunion breakfast among friends.

It happened.

Except that there was only one friend. "I'm glad you forced us to invent the hen," Uxura said as she served eggs, whole wheat toast and coffee.

I was delighted to see her but wondered where Street was.

She said she had sent him on his way. "He has much to do. He was glad to shed his diplomat's cloak and get back into his more comfortable laboratory jacket. His job is to halt the building of war engines and convert our economy to peace and trade with our new-found friends. There is much we can share with you."

We talked of that for a time and I said: "Then Street really is Uxu's top man. I rather suspected it."

"Yes; he's inherited his father's genius and whatever I've been able to give him. My son has done well and I'm proud of him. He has earned the right to be top man, as you call it. But he's not the boss."

"Oh?" I was confused. "Then who is? Will I meet him?"

"Not him," Uxura said. "And we have already met."

I could only look at her, wordless, as she poured more coffee.

"It was not always so," she said. "You told us of the space change we have undergone. We learned many things from our Prophet Will."

Speechless still, I lifted my cup. Then I said inanely: "You make excellent coffee."

"That too," she said, and smiled.

Then she said: "My instincts are important. I'm not fust a woman—I'm Woman, from far back. And woman's instincts are more than just feminine intuition. Our whole experience shows we have age-old ways of knowing more than we are credited with."

I knew what she was talking about. I'd read in a journal that women had greater sensitivity to the character of others, a sensitivity honed by the needs of thousands of generations of silent subservience to the more powerful males of their tribe or society. The enforced silences gave them opportunity, more than their men, to be attentive to nonverbal signs, to store up knowledge thus learned and to be able to act on it in time of danger. Not only mothers protecting their children were respected by the

men for their instincts, but older women with acknowledged abilities became high priestesses whose canniness and prescience were respected by all in the tribe.

And then we talked of things that need concern no one else. There was a kiss of a kind different from the one at the flea market and we made certain plans...

And then there was a glimmering of subliminal thought that turned to words inside my head:

"There's a later bridge to cross: Could you share a woman boss?"

I knew she'd also heard it. She was smiling sweetly, eyes cast down, looking almost girlish.

I didn't answer the question. I said: "You're not Exus too?"

"No, no," she said, "though he is all of us, as you said his name implies." She added softly: "You didn't answer the question."

"You must know—" I began. "I think I prefer to write the answer. I will do that soon."

"That will be fitting," she said. "I am content to wait."

"It will take only a little while," I said. "I'd like to go back to the flea market to do it properly. May I?"

"Street will escort you," she said and Street appeared at the door, looking interrupted. His mother explained. "It's our prophet's sense of continuity," she said. "Take him there one more time."

"I have missed some of the narrative, being busy elsewhere," Street said, masking annoyance.

"You will know it later, at your convenience," his mother said. "Take him there now. It is his obligatory scene. We have our ways; he has his."

Street took me there; it was the place I had known.

One asks: Was my trip to Washington an actuality or was it theatrically programmed for me by the Uxurans? The question is academic. By their own rules what I have written is fact because I have written it. It is so. Ask Street or Exus or Uxura. Ask Dirk Easterly. Ask the President of the United States or the Secretary-General of the United Nations.

Ask ten-year-old Henry, for whom I also write.

Things happen or they don't. This happened. Has the sun risen? Does a bird sing in a tree? Can you go for a walk or kiss your beloved or pick up

the phone and have a pizza delivered?

Everything is as it was, pretty near. What's good is still good and what's bad is still bad but, by and large, aren't you content?

We're coexisting with an alien race, not on our block but just around a dimensional corner, and we're still very much alive. Nothing has changed that wouldn't have changed anyway, for better or for worse.

Contrariwise, nobody is taking up cudgels against the foe. Nobody hankers today to go with pike and sword to Christianize the infidel, or to loose uncontrollable weapons to make the planets safe for our particular brand of life. Probably we've had enough crusading in foreign climes, minding other people's business when there are injustices of our own to correct.

It would be good if this were so. I hope it is..

In fact, the power of my word being what it is, I decree it.

As for them, their way is that of a peaceable people. As they borrowed my mind and familiarity with Earth to give them what they needed, so did I permeate their destiny to prevent them from harming us. And I've absorbed enough of their knowledge to benefit us all in ways that will be apparent in good time. Their space change has affected us as well.

They are as incapable of waging war on us as I am incapable of letting it happen in these writings. As Dirk Easterly cautioned me solemnly: "Don't let the moving finger write anything it couldn't cancel out."

It's my finger he was talking about. I won't let it happen.

Is that a strong enough guarantee? For me it is. Either you take me on faith, you of Uxu and you of Earth, or you gave up on me some time ago. If you're still with me you must be convinced that a common-sense arrangement had to be made to keep things from exploding. And sometimes things are arranged by concerned people of less than the highest rank who are accidentally well placed, like Dirk and me.

It may be a flimsy reed to lean on but if we lean gently and keep talking to each other, all of us may survive.

William Wylie Ross was nearly at the end of his story. The back of his neck hurt because he had sat so long. He pulled the last page from the typewriter, put the sheets together and handed them to Street, who waved them away. "I know all that you have written."

"Is that how it will happen?" Ross asked.

"It is the way it has happened," Street said.

Ross looked around. Many dealers had left and others were packing their wares, folding their tables. The Victrola Man was playing a coda: *Good Night, Ladies*. Few customers remained. The sun was low.

"It's hard to believe I'm on Uxu," Ross said. "Or have I gone and come back?"

"You are where you want to be. Call it Earth, call it Uxu, call it simply the First Original Famous Flea Market. They're all yours, you know."

Ross looked at the familiar land and sky. Cars went by on Route 3. A man took down the roadside sign that said Flea Market Every Sunday May to Oct. Park in Field Below.

"It's quite real, isn't it?" Street said. "Can all of us be merely the product of your imagination? Be satisfied. Hasn't it been a good day?"

"We've traveled in time?" Ross asked. "After all that has happened everything is the same as it was?"

"We are here, now or again. It is a good moment in time, which is relative, anyway. Why limit it by tense? You question too much."

Ross examined the scene he was told he'd made. He looked for flaws, for the possibility that it would dissolve like a dream or the end of a movie. Nothing changed. It was as solid and simple as any warm Sunday afternoon in the field back of the old farmhouse that was the weekly summer setting of the First Original Famous Flea Market.

Mrs. Ellis, from three tables away, brought doughnuts in a paper napkin. "Last Sunday the sugar glaze didn't go well," she said. "This time it's the cinnamon sprinkles. I know you like both. Give one to our friend."

"Thank you, Mrs. Ellis," Ross said. "When will you let me write your story? On the house, of course."

"Oh, some day when we're all less busy. I'll come over; I'll be your shill."

"Do that, Mrs. Ellis. Thanks for the doughnuts." To Street he said: "Mrs. Ellis used to work carnivals. She's a pro."

Street smiled at her. "I've eaten Mrs. Ellis' doughnuts before. Thank you, ma'am."—

"You're welcome, Mr. Street. I hope you enjoy them." She went to pack up.

Ross stood and stretched. "I suppose you'll tell me I wrote that dialog in my head, on Uxu."

"Sure you did," Street told him. "Shall we go?"

"Where?"

"To your house in Ux-Auburn and all that awaits yon there."

"How? As easily as we came?"

"Yes, or if you prefer, in your Volkswagen."

"Let's go, then. No, wait. Henry and his father are still here."

"The boy you wrote a story for?"

"Yes. I want to do something for him. Maybe he'd like my typewriter."

"Make it happen, then."

Ross sat and relit his pipe. Then he wrote:

"This typewriter, once for hire, is now at liberty. W. W. Ross needs it no longer. Take it and use it. Dowidzenia, Henry."

Mr. Ross had been in plain sight when Henry decided to go back and say goodbye. But when Henry got there, after walking around a truck, Mr. Ross and the other man were gone. There was only the typewriter on the table with the note in it.

Henry asked: "May I have it, father?"

"He means it to be yours. It would not be courteous to refuse."

Henry's father carried the machine to the back of their station wagon and Henry jumped up on the tailgate. Henry rolled the paper a little and, using two fingers, typed: "Dowidzenia, Mr. Ross. Goodby, sir."

"Is that the end?" somebody asked. "That's the end," Ross said. It was written.

It was almost the end.

Henry sat in the back with the typewriter as his father drove away. Under Mr. Ross's words he typed, just for fun: "A man at a flea market..."

The End