

Comber

Gene Wolfe

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The news whispered by his radio this morning was the same as the news when he and Mona had gone to bed: the city had topped the crest, and everything was flat and wonderful--if only for a day or two. "You're flat yourselves," he told it softly, and switched it off.

Mona was still asleep when he had shaved and dressed, her swollen belly at rest on the mattress, her face full of peace, and her slow inhalations loud to his acute hearing. He grabbed a breakfast bar on his way through the kitchen and wondered how the hell he could start the car without waking her up.

There was a ball on the driveway, a chewed-up rubber ball some dog had stopped chasing when it had stopped running. He picked it up and bounced it off the concrete. It bounced a few more times and settled down to rest again, as round as Mona, though not quite as happy. He tossed it into the car and followed it.

Press the accelerator, let it up, twist the key. The little engine purred to life as if it knew its work would be easy today. The suburb passed in a familiar blur.

From the tollway, he eyed the tall buildings that marked the center of the city. The last crest had come before he was born (the crest of a wholly different wave, something he found hard to imagine) but he knew that not one of those spumecatchers had been built then. Now the city might have to pay for its pride and the convenience of having so many offices close together. Pay with its very existence, perhaps.

The brass inclinometer he had bought when he had foreseen the danger the year before was waiting for him when he reached his desk, solidly screwed to the desktop, its long axis coinciding exactly with the direction of motion of the plate. He squinted at the needle, and at last got out a magnifying glass. Zero. It seemed supernatural: a portent.

A memo taped to his monitor warned him that the new angle "which will soon grow steep" would be the reverse of what it called "the accustomed angle." Everything was to be secured a second time with that new angle in mind. Workmen would make the rounds of all offices. He was asked to cooperate for the good of the company. He tossed the memo, woke his processor, and opened Mona's private dream house instead. His design was waiting there to be tinkered with, as it would not have been if anyone in authority had found it.

"Okay if I look at your gadget?" It was Phil, and Phil looked without waiting for his permission. "Flat," Phil said happily, and laughed. "The plate's flat. First time in my life."

"The last time, too." He closed Mona's dream-house. "For either one of us."

Phil rubbed his hands. "It will all be different. Entirely different. A new slant on everything. Want to go up to the roof, ol' buddy? Should be a great view."

He shook his head.

It would be very different indeed, he reflected when Phil had left, if the plate overturned. As it very well might. If the building did not break up when it hit the water, it would point down and would be submerged. Water would short out the electrical equipment, probably at once; and in any event, the

elevators would no longer operate. Rooms and corridors might (or might not) hold some air for a few hours--most it down on what were now the lower floors. He might, perhaps, break a window and so escape; if he lived long enough to rise to street level, the edge of the plate, and air, would be what? Thirty miles away? Forty?

Back home, Mona would have drowned. If the plate were going to turn over, he decided, it would be better if it did it while he was at home with her. Better if they died together with their unborn child.

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Next day the inclinometer was no longer on zero, and the chewed ball he had left on his desk had rolled to one side; as he wrote letters and called contacts, as he began to sketch the outline of his next project, he watched the space between the end of the needle and the hair-thin zero line grow.

By Friday the needle was no longer near zero, and there were intervening marks which he did not trouble to read. Because on Friday, at not-quite eleven o'clock of that bright and still almost-level morning, Edith Benson called to say that Mona had gone into labor while they chatted across the fence, and that she had driven Mona to the hospital.

He took some time off. By the time he returned to his desk, the needle was no more than a pencil's width from the peg. It seemed to him to tremble there, and he was reminded of his conversation with the proprietor of the little shop in which he had bought the inclinometer. He had asked why the scale went no further; and the proprietor had grinned, showing beautifully regular teeth that had certainly been false. "Because you won't be there to look at it if she goes farther than that," the proprietor had told him.

A note taped to his desk informed him that he had neglected to set the brake on his swivel chair. It had pushed open the door of his office and crashed into Mrs. Patterson's desk. He apologized to her in person.

At quitting time, the space between the point of the needle and the peg would admit three of his business cards, but not four.

That evening he and Mona sat up until their son's next feeding, talking about colleges and professions. It would be up to Adrian to choose, they agreed on that. But would not their own attitudes, the training the gave him, and their very table-talk, influence Adrian's choices? At ten they kissed, looked in on Adrian, and kissed again.

"Goodnight, honey," Mona said; and he, knowing that she did not want him to watch, "Goodnight, darling."

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As he combed his hair the next morning, he found that his thoughts, which should have been focused on work, were full of Adrian--and the plate. More and taller buildings would go up when this was over. More and taller building would be built, that was to say, if there was anyone left alive to plan and build them. His firm would have a part of that, and would profit by it. Those profits would contribute to his profit-sharing plan.

He shrugged, rinsed his comb, and put it away. The new and wonderful house that he himself had designed--with a den and a sewing room, and enough bedrooms for five children--would not be quite so far off then.

At work, he found the needle not quite so near the peg as it had been. Three business cards slipped into

the opening easily. Four would just clear.

Up on the roof, a little knot of his coworkers were marveling at the vastness of the tossing green waters that stretched to the horizon in every direction. The secretary with the gold pince-nez gripped his arm. "I come up here every morning. We'll never be able to see anything like this again, and today will be the last day we're this high up."

He nodded, trying to look serious and pleased. The secretary with the gold pince-nez was the CEO's, and although he had seen her often he had never spoken to her--much less been spoken to.

An executive vice president laid large soft hands on his shoulders. "Take a good long look, young man. If it sticks with you, you'll think big. We always need people who think big."

He said, "I will, sir."

Yet he found himself looking at the people who looked, and not at the boundless ocean. There was the freckled kid from the mailroom who whistled, and over there the pretty blonde who never smiled.

All alone at the very edge of the gently slanting roof, was old Parsons. Hadn't Parsons retired? Clearly Parsons had not; and Parsons had set up a tarnished brass telescope on a tripod--a telescope through which he peered down into the watery abyss that had opened before the city, not out at the grandeur of the horizon.

"Something in the water?"

Parsons straightened up. "Sure is."

"What is it?"

Gnarled fingers stroked bristling, almost invisible white whiskers. "That," Parsons said slowly, "is what I'm trying to figure, young feller."

"A whale?" he asked.

Parsons shook his head. "Nope. 'Tain't that. You might think it'd be easy to figure, with a good glass. But 'tain't." Parsons stepped aside. "You want to look?"

He bent as Parsons had and made a slight adjustment to the focus.

It was a city, or a town at least, nestled now in the trough. Narrow streets, roofs that seemed to be largely of red tiles. A white spire rose above its houses and shops, and for an instant--only an instant, it seemed to him that he had caught the gleam of the gold cross atop the spire.

He straightened up, swallowed as though his throat and stomach had some part in absorbing what he had just seen, and bent to look again.

Something white fluttered and vanished above one red roof. A pigeon, he felt certain. There were pigeons as well as gulls there, circling above the houses and shops; pigeons that no doubt nested in the eaves and scavenged the town's streets for whatever food might be found in them.

"Been lookin' on my old computer at home," Parsons said. "There's views of various places on there, if you know where to look. My guess is Les Sables-d'Olonne. Mind now, I'm not sayin' I'm right. Just my guess, I said. You got one?"

He shook his head. "If--It'll be out of the way, won't it? By the time we get there? The next wave will

pick it up first, won't it?" As he spoke, he discovered that he did not believe a word of it.

"Can't say." Parsons scratched his bristling jaw. "Pretty slow, generally, goin' up. Slidin' down's faster 'n blazes, and you go a long way." Turning his head, he spat. "We're heading right at it."

"If it wasn't, if it was still in the way ... And we hit--"

"Might bust our plate. I dunno. I phoned up one of them geologists. They're s'posed to know all about all that. He said he didn't know neither. Depend on how fast each was goin'. Only you ought to think 'bout this, young feller--ain't a buildin' on ours that could stand it if we bump with much speed a-tall. Knock 'em flat, ever' last one of 'em."

Reluctantly he nodded. "You're right, it will. May I ask who you called, sir?"

"Doctor Lantz, his name was. Said don't talk about it, only he don't have any right to give *me* orders." Old Parsons appeared to hesitate. "Won't matter to me. I'll be gone long before. You might still be around, though, a healthy young feller like you."

"Yes," he said. Images of the baby, of Adrian, filled his mind; he continued to talk almost by reflex. "I asked about the geologist because I know a geologist. Slightly. I've gotten to know him slightly. His name isn't Lantz, though. It's Sutton. Martin Sutton. He lives one street over from us."

He had debated the matter with himself for more than an hour before telephoning Sutton. "You know some things I need to know, Marty," he said when the preliminaries were complete, "and I'm going to pick your brain, if you'll let me. This city or town or whatever it is in the trough--are we going to hit it?"

There was a lengthy silence before Sutton said, "You know about it, too."

"Correct."

"They've kept it off TV. They'll keep it out of the papers, if they can. I wonder how many people know."

"I have no idea. Are we, Marty?"

"That's not my field. I'm a geologist, okay? I study the plate."

"But you know. Are we?"

Sutton sighed. "Probably. How'd you find out?"

"I looked though a telescope, that's all. There's a town down there. Or a small city--take your pick. It's got fields and gardens around it. What are the odds?"

Sutton's shrug was almost audible. "One in ten, maybe."

"One in ten of hitting?"

"No. One in ten of missing. They were calling it one in five yesterday. You mustn't tell anybody I've told you, okay?"

"I won't. But they told you. So you could tell them whether our plate would break?"

Another silence, this one nearly as long as the first. Then: "Yeah."

"They did, but that wasn't the main reason. What's the other thing? It might help if you'd tell me."

"For God's sake keep it under your hat." Even over the phone, Sutton sounded desperate.

"I will, I swear. What is it?"

"They wanted to talk about the feasibility of breaking up the other plate in advance. You know--the one we're going to hit."

"I understand. Go on."

"Suppose we could do it. Suppose we could break it into three pieces. They'd drift apart, and we might not hit all three."

He nodded slowly to himself. "And even if we did, three small shocks wouldn't be as damaging as one big one."

"Right." Sutton seemed a little less nervous now.

"They'll try to prepare for them too, of course. We've got a crew going through our offices double-bolting everything. Steel boots to hold the legs of the desks, and they're screwing our file cabinets to the walls as well as the floor. I was watching it a few minutes ago."

"I suppose we'll get that here too," Sutton said, "but it hasn't started yet."

"Your superiors don't know."

"I guess not."

"I see. I suppose mine have been asked whether it would be practical to reinforce certain buildings. One more question, please, Marty, and it may be the last one. Would what they asked you about be feasible? Breaking up the plate we're going to hit like that?"

"I think so. Probably.... Listen, I'm not supposed to talk about this, but I'd like to get it off my chest. First, I've had to assume that their plate's pretty much like ours. Ours is the only one we're familiar with."

"Sure."

"Assuming that it is, we'd have to drill into it and plant charges about a hundred feet down. I said the people there aren't going to stand still for that, and they said they'd take them by surprise. It's not very big, okay? A thousand men, well trained and heavily armed. Hydrofoils that will launch when we're close. I'll probably be one of the men on the boats. Everyone else here is older, they'll be old men by the time it happens. I'm not much older than you are. I'll still be active."

"What about somebody younger? Somebody who hasn't graduated yet?"

"There won't be anybody like that." Sutton's voice went flat, stripped of all emotion. "I might as well tell you this, too--it's the kind of thing that can't be kept secret. The university's dropped geology. They've closed the whole department, effective immediately."

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That night, over wieners and sauerkraut, he told Mona. "I promised a person who trusted me that I wouldn't talk about this, but you're going to have to know."

When he had finished outlining the situation, she said, "But won't it work? This man you talked to said it would."

"Probably not." He paused, listening to the trees murmur in the wind that would soon become a years-long gale: the wind of the city's swift descent. "They must surely see us coming at them, just as we see them in our path. They'll start preparing, and both sides have ten or fifteen years to prepare in. They can arm everyone who's willing to fight, and put up obstacles to keep our people from landing. I think we can count on both those."

"They could break up their plate for us."

He nodded. "Yes, they could. We could break up ours, too. Do you think the government will?"

For a long moment Mona stared at him. At last she said, "How horrible! No. Of course they won't."

"But we could do it ourselves." The idea had come to full flower during his long call to Sutton; he had seized it eagerly, and hoped now to inspire her to an equal acceptance. "We could plant charges that would exploit known weaknesses in our plate. The force of the explosions would start our piece moving away from the city, and out of the collision path the city's on now."

"But, darling--"

"Adrian would have a future. Don't you see, Mona? We wouldn't take just this residential neighborhood, but a piece of the infrastructure big enough to be economically viable. We could make things for ourselves then, make things to trade, grow gardens, and fish. That town the city's going to hit--French or Belgian or whatever it is--people survive there. They even prosper. I've bounced this off of a man over on the next street, a geologist. He agrees it might be possible, and he's coming over to talk about it."

"Bumpers! We could build bumpers, things with springs in them. Or--or big sacks full of air."

He shook his head. "Nothing we could build would have much effect on a mass as great as the plate's, and if we succeeded in slowing it down much--we wouldn't--the wave would break over us and drown everybody."

"But..." Mona looked desperate. "But, Honey--"

He glanced at his watch. "Sutton's coming at eight. You won't have to feed him, but coffee and cookies might be nice. Or cake. Something like that."

"Okay." Mona's voice was scarcely audible.

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An hour later she said, "Won't you please stop combing your hair with your fingers like that? And pacing up and down and up and down?"

For the twentieth time he looked at his watch. "Sutton could be here right now."

"He could," Mona conceded, "if he'd come at least ten minutes early. Honestly, I'm going to get hysterical. Sit down and relax. Or--or go outside where you can see his headlights as soon as he turns onto the street. Please? If I start screaming I'll wake Adrian. Won't you, pretty please, Honey, for me?"

He nodded, suddenly grateful, and discovered that he had been on the point of running his fingers through his hair again. "Okay. I'll do that. I won't come back in until he gets here."

The wind had turned the night cold. He walked out to the street. How many charges would they need, and how big would each have to be? Would they have to enlist a chemist to make the explosives?

Dynamite, or whatever? To his right, looming white above the treetops though far more distant, he could only just glimpse the boiling crest of the wave. Those trees were wrongly slanted now. Come morning, they would find themselves pointed away from the sun. He chuckled softly. It could not be often that smug suburban trees received such an unpleasant surprise.

When he returned to the house to sit on the stoop, Mona had drawn the blinds. She was being overly cautious, he decided, but he could not find it in his heart to blame her.

Out at the curb again and still nervous, he held his breath as headlights turned off Miller Road. They crept up the sloping street as though the driver were checking house numbers, and then--incredibly, miraculously--swung into the driveway.

Sutton climbed out, and they shook hands. "I hadn't forgotten where you live," Sutton said, "but this new angle has me a little disoriented.

He nodded. "All of us are. I think that may work in our favor."

"Maybe you're right." The wind snatched away Sutton's baseball cap. Sutton grabbed for it, missing by a foot or more. "Help me find that, will you? I'd hate to lose it."

They had searched the bushes for a minute or more when Sutton straightened up and said, "Something wrong? What's the matter with you?"

He had straightened up already. "Sirens." He pointed east, northeast, and after a momentary hesitation, north. "Don't you hear them?"

Sutton shook his head. "No, I don't."

"Well, I do. Three or four cars, and they're getting closer."

One by one, the sirens grew louder--and abruptly fell silent. For almost the last time, he ran nervous fingers through his hair.

"What's up?" Sutton began. "If you--"

Before the third word, he had turned and sprinted for the door. It was locked. His key turned the lock and the bolt clicked back, but the night bolt was engaged. Once only, his shoulder struck the unyielding wood.

By that time the first police car had turned the corner on two screaming wheels, and it was too late to hide.