

Sta-nine Zero

A Collection of Short Stories and Articles

by Mack Hitch



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Much of this story is true. It is set during that time when I lived at 590 S. Sherman in Denver and worked for The Associated Press. The lady, whose real name was Rose Murphy, lived in the apartment above me in the fine, old brick house.

Lila, You Kill Me

by Mack Hitch

Lila herself picked this chill winter's day to die, picked it the moment she counted the coins onto Carl's counter for the two quarts of wine, complaining all the while that a little sweet wine for the heart cost an arm and a leg now-a-days, not like in the honest bygone days when prices were Christian and the Devil's own didn't dispense what she considered God's libation.

Carl's not like me. He can ignore her. There's a small profit in the wine for him, and he's used to working for ol' Scratch anyway, at least of being accused of such employment.

Me? I've stood all I'll stand. Tonight she's going to that vintner in the sky, and that brace of bottles will be her one-way ticket. She'll be rapping at my door in a few minutes, the bottles under her arms, begging me to open them. She can't do

it herself because of her arthritis. I'll pull the corks for her and she'll lug them upstairs to her apartment above mine. It's a Friday ritual with us.

Usually I take a sip or two before pushing the corks half way back in so that she can extract them later with a pair of pliers. Tonight I won't have to drink very much because what I'll be pouring in won't take up much space. Benzedrine. I've already crushed the tablets and the powder is nestled in the bowls of two spoons in the kitchen right this moment. Maybe Benzedrine doesn't sound so sinister, but I haven't told you everything. Lila had open heart surgery twelve years ago, and I don't think her ticker will tolerate the excitement.

That's the plan. Deceptively simply. No one will ever guess. After all, who's going to perform a serious autopsy on an elderly woman with a history of heart trouble, including an operation?

This killing of Lila isn't a spur of the moment thing at all. I'm not like that. Such crimes show a want of intellect. Simply by daydreaming I've come up with several murder scenarios, but they all lack that certain *elan* with which I wish to mark my life. Since I work for The Associated Press, I tend to see those murders as they would appear in the following day's newspaper. Being the good little AP mule that I am, I have already written leads for both the morning and afternoon papers. I like the afternoon story best because of its action lead, but I'll give you the AM lead first. I think I have it sufficiently in my mind to recite it to you. Let's see.

DENVER (AP)--The body of an elderly woman, strangled and beaten to death, was discovered early today near the telephone in the apartment of a 26-year-

old man. The suspect, whom police declined to identify, had lived in the same converted apartment house with the victim for the past three years.

Officers said the cool, collected suspect refused to be booked until he had watered his house plants.

Even I'll admit it's not a brilliant lead, but it is adequate. Trust me. I do it for a living. This particular lead, triple spaced and ready to go, is in the drawer under the word processor on a stand next to my bed. The afternoon lead is still on the screen, though the computer is in its sleep mode and dark at the moment. Let me tap a key and wake it up. That way I can read it to you word for word

DENVER (AP)--While horrified residents of a lower downtown apartment screamed in terror yesterday, an unidentified 26-year-old man gleefully strangled and pummeled an elderly woman to death.

Occupants of the apartment house said the elderly woman had only wished to use the young man's telephone, but when she knocked at his door, he pounced upon her, screaming that she had been mutilating his house plants.

As I've already told you, I discarded this method of murder. It's pedestrian. Anyway, I'd have to go to prison for life if I did it that way, and then who would water my plants. I only recited the leads to you so that you can see my resolve. The plants? Oh, I say plants but I really mean my African violet. Each day Lila returns from her free lunch at the old folks' center downtown, comes in here, and rubs its leaves between her thumb and forefinger. She says it feels like a fine gown she once owned and wore to wakes. She can't resist free finger food.

The real problem--let's forget the African violet for the moment--is that Lila is a royal Catholic pain. But don't take my word for it. She'll be in here in a few minutes and you can judge for yourself. You'd think that with her arthritic hips she'd be anything but punctual, but there is a military regularity to her movements. She's a real Soldier of the Cross. Her inner clock has been sharpened from umpteen years of early morning masses.

It's because of this regularity, this regime of hers, that I know she's going to be at my door in just a few minutes. She'll have those bottles of cheap wine in each hand and she'll be chirping my name from her beaked lips.

Just so you'll know that I'm not babbling on, that I really know my quarry, let me tell you exactly what she's going to do when she gets to the house. She's going to totter around in the foyer for two minutes and forty-five seconds before she starts pounding on my door with one of the wine bottles and calling out my name. When I let her in she's going to tell me what a nice boy I am--what a nice Christian boy, that is,--what a nice house we live in, and then she's going to ask to use my phone.

I could give you her exact words, I could block her movements about the apartment like a playwright. Really. And I can guarantee you that she will maliciously damage the African violet I just spoke of.

As you can see, I'm head ruled. But let's forget about that. I can hear her opening the outside door. It's a big door and she doesn't open it wide, just cracks it enough to squeeze her frail frame through.

She's tottering around out there in the foyer now. Hear her? When you see her walk it'll remind you of a pickle on toothpick stilts. It's her arthritic hips. Generally she hobbles through a couple of practice circles in the foyer before

approaching my door. I think she only does it to warm up her fingers so she can press the buttons on my telephone.

As the news stories indicated, that's another thing that irritates me. Lila wanting to use my phone all the time. Anything to save a quarter. I bet she hobbles to church each morning reciting "tap the bottom of the collection plate and use Mack's phone." She probably repeats it five hundred times a block considering how many steps she has to take. And each time she recites it, she's probably hearing two saved coins falling into an empty tin-can bank that's nailed securely to a wooden floor.

Oh, oh. Here it comes. Can't you hear her steps tottering this way?

Knock. Knock. "Mack, Mack, Mack."

When I was a child in Sterling, Colorado, I had a baby magpie that used to sit on a croquet mallet outside the kitchen door and make similar sounds when it was hungry.

"Mack, Mack, Mack."

Lila's like that magpie, except that she won't be satisfied with a lump of hamburger or a piece of bread soaked in milk. Unless I open the door and humor her, she'll never shut up. Well, here goes. I'm opening the door.

"Oh, good. You're home." She coos like a pigeon in a church loft, contented that the organ has finally fallen into silence.

Just look at her poking her beak into the room before I've hardly cracked the door. And see that grin? I call it her Uriah Heep face. She makes it when she knows she's saved a coin. You can almost see her pinching it with her eyelids.

Now, it's my turn to reply.

"Lila, you syphilitic old reprobate, gather up your weak ankles and arthritic hips and shuffle the hell out of here."

No. You've guessed right. I didn't say that. I've threatened to a hundred times, but I never have. Listen to what I really say.

"Oh, hi, Lila. Come on in and get warm. Here, let me take your wrap."
She just stands there looking at me, and I can see that there's something different, but I can't make out what. She's got on the same old strawberry-blond cloth coat, the one with the parted seam in the back, and she has the same fox choker around her neck, the one she bought at the St. Vincent de Paul's Thrift Shop for a quarter. It's none of these, though. There's something else wrong.

Is it her face? No. It still looks like a cobweb-covered mirror. The little blue capillaries under the skin intertwine with the wrinkles until there is a jungle of lines, a maze of ancient avenues. Her face is as lost in those crevices as a drunken tourist without a map in the unearthed city of Pompeii

Say, that's it. That's what's wrong. Why didn't I notice it sooner?

"Your bottles, Lila? Where are your bottles of wine?"

"Oh, dear me," her eyes flutter and she scurries to the old over-stuffed chair just outside my door. "I placed them under the cushion when I went out this morning so I wouldn't have to climb the stairs again when I got home."
So, she's not as habitual as I thought. Bought the wine yesterday instead of today. But look at her cradle those bottles. They could be three-week-old kittens.

"You're such a nice boy to let me use your phone," she trills. "A fine, Christian boy."

What'd I tell you. Isn't it just as I said it would be, her telling me what a nice boy I am and all? Next she's going to comment on the apartment and then ask to

use the telephone. Trust me. It never fails. And as for my plants, they're as good as harvested.

"Oh this is such a lovely apartment." She's looking at the twelve-foot-high ceiling with her ill-fitting teeth. I'm not going to tell you what she's going to do anymore. I'll just let her do it.

"Here, Lila," I say graciously, "let me take your bottles and open them for you." I hope I didn't sound too unctuous. Sometimes I get carried away and fairly mew with sarcasm. I don't have to worry about Lila complaining, however. I find that burlesque and satire are lost on those who have already swallowed transubstantiation.

As I head for the kitchen with the bottles, she seats herself beside my phone and pulls off her gloves. She's either warming her hands up now or trying to erase the liver spots. I'm not sure which.

"Hello, operator?...would you give me the number for Thelma Green?...I think she lives on Fourteenth Avenue...yes, I have a telephone directory but it's too heavy to lift...thank you."

While I'm funneling the Benzedrine into the bottles, why don't you listen to Lila. Hear what I have to go through daily. You'd have killed her long ago.

"Hello, Thelma? This is Lila...fine thank you. Did you know that Leon Trotsky had a soul?...he sure did. That's what we decided in our Bible class yesterday...but he deserved what he got anyway, the Bolshevik so-and-so. ...Karl asked me out to supper this evening, but I told him no...yes, he did...just after pinochle...I almost cried when Notre Dame lost. They're such fine Catholic boys...I don't want to call your friend a Communist, but she's certainly not a very good Christian."

Maybe you're having trouble following her conversation. Don't feel bad, so's Thelma. Sometimes Lila has to call up four or five people to get all that's on her mind off. They keep hanging up on her. Maybe after you listen to her a while you'll know why I'm as edgy as I am. Listening to Lila is like being a practice wall at a tennis court. It's just bang, bang, bang until she's tired.

"I'd call Karl back and accept his invitation to dinner, but it'd cost sixty cents bus fare and I can get a meal almost that cheaply at the drugstore without going downtown to see that silly old man. His teeth stink...most of the girls at the old folks center play pinochle. I don't see how anyone can play pinochle. I think it's the silliest game I ever saw...I could have married for money...I could have, you know."

Hah, they must have hung up on her. Look at her press the buttons trying to get the operator. Oh, oh. She's given up and is coming into the kitchen.

"Finished talking, Lila?"

"No, we were cut off. I think that telephone company is full of Communists. Do you listen to the Dean Manyon radio program? You should. He sure gives those old Bolsheviks a kick in the pants."

It's really hard to dislike Lila. She's so full of fire and so sincere about her prejudices. At least for as long as it takes her to vent them, anyway. I think her problem is that she's still living in the 50's. Maybe if she bought a new radio it would stop receiving those long gone programs. Dean Manyon for instance.

"And you should listen to that H. L. Hunt program from Dallas, too," she nods, clucking as if she's privy to state secrets. How long, I wonder but don't ask, has he been dead anyway? "He knows who's behind all this hanky-panky in the

government. It's the Communists. Yea, you scratch my palm and I'll scratch yours. Sure." She nods again and makes sure she catches my eye.

Normally, I don't invite Lila to sit down in the living room because once she gets her old hips into the chair it's hard to get her out again. But I'm getting nervous with her in the kitchen. She might ask about the spoons and paper funnel. I'll have to take the chance, I guess. Once she talked me into driving her downtown to the old folks' center. It was no trouble getting her into my car, a low Corvette. She just sort of fell into it. But getting her out was another matter. I stopped at Broadway and Colfax and she swung her weak ankles to the asphalt, but that was all she could do. She just held onto the door frame with her frail fingers, rocking back and fourth, but making no progress. I had to get out and go around to her side and pull her out. All the people at the bus stop were watching, and I just knew they thought I was some kind of pervert.

"Say, Lila, you look a little tired. Would you like to sit down a while and rest before attempting the stairs?"

Look at her scurry. She took to that suggestion like a hungry dog to a friendly whistle. There's little wrong with her hips when she wants to move.

Click.

There goes the TV set.

Plop.

Well, as you can see for yourself, she's ensconced.

"Here's your bottles, Lila." I extend them to her and she takes them in with the reverence Moses must have given the tablets.

"Thank you, Mack. You're such a dear, a fine Christian boy. I don't know what I'd do without you. I really need my wine. It's for my heart, you know. A little sweet wine for my heart. It eases the palpitations."

The set is warming up and I see the announcer's jowls focusing into view. I like to listen to him, but with Lila in the room it will be impossible. Oh, oh, more minority troubles. Why'd the newscast have to lead with that subject? I'll never get her to shut up now.

"All those Mexicans and Niggers are going to unite in this civil rights thing," Lila crackles, turning in the chair so she can get a look at my face. "The Niggers by themselves couldn't do enough damage."

I pretend not to have heard and continue watching.

"...those dirty black bastards. They caused a lot of trouble. Millions and millions of dollars."

She doesn't turn back to the TV but continues to watch me. I continue to stare at the set, wondering what current events she's referring to.

"Those hippies are awful, aren't they? They're dirty. They don't even wash themselves. They call themselves love children, but they don't have me fooled. Not for a minute. I told Karl that if they really loved they'd go out and get jobs instead of laying around, and get some responsibility instead of having all those illegitimate babies. They should send all those hippies to Vietnam and get them killed. That's what I think."

I'd forgotten about hippies, but the more immediate problem is that she's going to try to sing. She makes a stab at it everyday. I don't know what it's about because she never gets farther than the first few words. It must be a World War

One song because she seems to be reaching way back into her decaying gray cells for it.

Here goes. "If you don't like your Uncle Sammy and..."

What'd I tell you. She always stops at Uncle Sammy. And it doesn't seem like a real song either, not with a tune. Either that or she sings like George Burns.

"If you don't like your Uncle Sammy and...I can't quite remember how it goes but if you don't like your Uncle Sammy you know what you can do?"

The question is to me but I'm still pretending to watch the television. If I even nod my head she'll try to sing it again.

"Well," she settles back into the chair and looks at the tube, too. "Who am I to say what's right."

This is her moment of atonement. It usually means she's ready to go to her own apartment.

"It's not our place to judge, you know. The Lord must see something good in them, or he wouldn't allow them to live," she says. "Although I can't see for the life of me what it is."

The bottles next to her are rattling and I glance over to catch her licking her lips. That's why she's ready to go. Her heart. It must be palpitating. Either that or she's ready for her weekly Friday night bout with the saints.

More about that later.

"This certainly is a lovely apartment," she says again, looking at the fireplace. "They don't make fireplaces and walnut book cabinets like that anymore." I look where she indicates and see a cheap fireplace in which the flue has long ago been stuffed with newspapers to keep out the cold. The glass-fronted bookcase she

likes so well is packed with my underwear and T-shirts. The plants on top of the cabinets are nice, however.

"I remember when Mrs. Fox used to own this fine old home," she reminisces. "She put a telephone out in the hall, and anyone in the house could use it. Free. Oh, she was a fine old woman, that Mrs. Fox."

Lila tries to get out of the chair and finally makes it but teeters a few steps toward the front window before she can get her head over her feet.

"Oh, African violets."

Panic. She's moving toward my violet. I can't move. The announcer's talking about something, and I can't take my eyes off him. It's not that I want to look at him. It's just that I'm afraid to look at Lila. Afraid that if I see her do it I'll kill her right here and now and the newspaper stories I've written will come true and my own words will send me to the cyanide shrouded chair at Canon City.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize they were so delicate."

I don't have to look to know what's happened. She's moving back in front of me again, anyway.

"See?" she says, holding her blue, petal-covered fingers before my face. "The little blossom just disintegrated when I touched it." I can see the angel-hair fine velvet from the leaves covering her fingers.

Just one chop, I think. If I could just give her one good Judo chop. Bam. She'd fall dead. Maybe I could tell the coroner she fainted and hit her neck on the fireplace before I could grab her. I'd reach out with my arms to show the coroner how I had vainly tried to save her.

No chance anyway. She's licking her lips again. I can hear the dry crackling around her old mouth. It's always a good sign when her lips start drying on a

Friday evening. It means she's teetering on the balls of her feet, trying to get a start toward the door.

"I think I'll go up to my apartment now."

That's my cue, and I don't want to miss it. I get up and hustle over to her chair and get the bottles before she can change her mind.

"I'll walk you to the door, Lila." She nods, grinning like an ape, and shuffles along behind me as we enter the bedroom.

We have to go through my bedroom because that's where the door to the foyer is. It makes sense when you realize my bedroom used to be the dining room before the old house was partitioned into apartments.

"I had open heart surgery twelve years ago, you know." She's clutching the bottles so sincerely that I have to believe her. "And I have to practice my Bingo tonight, too."

I almost shove her into the foyer, close the door in her face, and collapse onto my bed. Watching her ascend the stairs is something I don't care to do. It's hard enough for her on normal days. Today she has to lug along the bottles as well as her coat and purse.

I think I'll just lie here and listen. It won't be long before her Bingo game starts. That's something you've got to hear for yourself. I'll give you a running narration, but I don't think you'd believe me unless you can sit right here with me and listen to the noises coming from upstairs yourself.

We shouldn't have to wait too long and meantime we can watch a little television.

It's been quiet a long time up there. I wonder if the wine is working yet. I know she's been into it already. She was probably struggling with the corks on her way up the stairs. You may believe her story about needing the wine for her heart, but I've never heard of any doctor prescribing two quarts every Friday night.

I guess I shouldn't complain about her Bingo games so much because they do bring a number of ladies to my bed on Friday nights. They're not the best of ladies, though, usually those who dance with snakes or roll around naked on glass while swallowing fire. But what do you expect? I can't invite them over to see my etchings or to listen to my stereo. And there's only a certain type of girl who will come over to listen to a drunk old Catholic spinster practice a galactic game of Bingo.

Let me explain the galactic part.

Lila never misses the Monday and Thursday night Bingo sessions at the church, she gets an old-age discount, and on Friday nights she practices for the upcoming games. Don't ask me what good practice is in a game of chance for I've never been able to figure it out. Ask her.

What she does is place the Bingo cards around the four sides of her small Formica-topped kitchen table. At the head of each of these cards she places a plaster statue of one of the four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. They do the playing while she calls out the numbers. In reality, of course, she does the moving too. She calls out the number and then you can hear her feet shuffling about the table as she places the kernels of corn on the appropriate numbers for the saints.

The galactic part comes later in the evening. Early in the game the numbers sound normal enough, B-14, G-62, I-27 and so forth. But later in the evening, say

after the first bottle of wine when her heart is really eased, the numbers become something else. I've heard, and you have to believe me on this, such numbers as R-forty-eleven, Z-46, Rover-5,492, and zillion-eight hundred and 49-ZB.

Even with such numbers she manages to declare winners. That's when the entertaining point really comes, for she storms out of her door with the Catholic Bible in one hand and a bottle in the other and stomps to the head of the stairs where she stands silently for a few seconds while she catches her breath. Then, she reads a passage from the Bible as it was written by the saint who won the Bingo game.

As lunatical as all this sounds, it would all be quite orderly if it weren't for the other tenant of her apartment. No, she's not alone up there. I haven't mentioned the other tenant before because it's not a person and it doesn't enter into the normal affairs of the week until Friday night.

The other tenant is a large blue and yellow macaw named Bingo. She won him at a church raffle some years back, and she named him Bingo because of her favorite game.

I don't think the poor bird is all there. How could he be? All she feeds him is communion wafers. Lila's the only communicant I know who takes a doggy bag to the rail.

A normal parrot, or macaw, would sit around asking for a cracker. Not Bingo. He asks for wafers. How Lila gets these wafers I don't know. I'm sure, however, they aren't obtained with the priests' blessings. Anyway, complicating this poor diet is the fact that Bingo has TB. At least I think he does. He coughs all the time. It's because of the incense Lila burns in her apartment day and night. You'd burn

incense too if the garbage can was downstairs and out the back door and you had bad hips.

Instead of carrying her garbage clear downstairs, Lila used to flush it down the stool. That is she did until the stool overflowed one day, soaked the plaster ceiling in my kitchen, and caused it to crash to the floor. I was sitting in the living room at the time, thank fortune, and thought an airplane had hit the kitchen wall. Dust was everywhere, and it took days to clean up the mess. It's an old house, remember, not one of those modern ones boxed in by sheet rock. When I say plaster I mean plaster. Old lathe, chicken wire, and all.

Now, instead of flushing her garbage down the stool, she lets it sit around in paper bags for weeks. Once she talked me into carrying it out, and I had to carry it out in a bucket because all the sacks had soaked through. Since then, I've talked her into placing sacks inside sacks to make them stronger. This way she can keep up to three months of garbage in her small efficiency apartment before the landlord next door begins smelling it and comes to haul it out while she's at church or the old folks' center.

There's another smell in there, too, that isn't quite so bad. Several months back Lila ran across a bargain she just couldn't pass up and bought a hundred-pound sack of potatoes. One guess as to who had to carry them upstairs. Anyway, I don't think she's used a one because the last time I was up there they were still sitting under the sink getting soft.

But back to Bingo, the macaw. He gets a little high on these Friday nights and begins calling out his name. It's all right if he calls out his name when there is a winner, but usually he sings out his name without regard to the progress of the contest, and Lila flies into a rage. She can't stand anyone or any bird that doesn't

understand the finer points of Bingo, the game. At such times she usually chases him around her apartment with a broom. Normally a macaw could keep ahead of an old woman with a broom, but Bingo, remember, is in an appalling state of health. For instance, he has been molting for the entire three years I have known him. He looks more like the skinny, dressed Cornish hens you see wrapped in cellophane in the super markets than he does a macaw.

Shsssss. I think I heard something. I think the game is really going in earnest now. Listen to her feet move, would you. Sounds like she's warming up for a square dance.

"Bingo."

Was that Lila or the bird?

Bam.

I don't have to guess any longer. Did you hear that? It sounded like an empty bottle crashing up against the wall. Poor Bingo. She's going to nail him with an empty bottle one of these days.

If she lives.

No, wait a minute. Maybe it wasn't Bingo, the bird. Maybe she's declared a real winner because she's opened her door and you can hear her stumbling toward the head of the stairs for yourself.

"Moreover, if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother."

Well, it appears as if St. Matthew has won that round. I've learned a lot about the four books since moving in here. I can recognize most of the passages, at least the passages she reads while she's still coherent. Later on in the evenings they start to resemble Kafka.

You're probably wondering why it's quiet up there right now. She's taking a swig out of her bottle, that's why. If you sneak out and take a peek up the stairwell, you'll be able to glimpse her before she goes back to her room. She's probably wearing that long, white nightgown of hers, and maybe she has one of those hair nets over her head. You know, the kind that is so thick it looks like an old onion sack.

Too late. She's going back now. Sounds like she's shaking up the peas for another round. Sometimes these games go on all night. Depends on how heavily she's hitting the bottle.

What was that? Oh, god, it's Bingo again. When is that bird going to learn to keep his beak shut? What's she after him with this time? It sounds like the broom again. Yes, that's it. You can hear her sweeping the walls with it.

Hot damn, the bird is under the bed again. That's his usual refuge. He gets under there, and she has to get the broom to get after him. She'll rattle around after him for a while, but not long. She hates to leave her game.

What's she opening the door for? Has she got another winner already? She hasn't even called out five numbers since the last winner.

Swish-THUMP.

Oh, Christ, she's coming. She's going to come down **here**.

Maybe you're surprised at the agility with which I just jumped out of my bed, but I haven't told you everything. If there's one thing worse than watching her ascend the stairs it's hearing her descend them. She doesn't just come down them. She haunts them. She grabs the railing with both hands and then brings her better leg down solidly. It thumps to the stair and then she follows with her weak leg. It makes a Swish-THUMP sound.

I always know when the Swish-THUMP is meant for me. I've memorized all the times she goes out, and when the Swish-THUMP starts down at an odd hour I know she's coming for me. And that's what she's doing now. She's coming for me. Hide if you can.

Even when I have a lot of guests over here I don't do well when I hear her coming. I panic. I do. I run through the apartment crying "The Swish-THUMP thing is after me." Strangers, usually, cower in embarrassment on the sofa when I start, but my friends know me better. They join in and traipse after me through the apartment wailing that the Swish-THUMP thing is after them too.

Swish-THUMP.

You answer the door. I can't. Look at the muscles standing out on my neck. They feel as if they're way out. Are they? Please open the door for me. I can't look at that pallid, sepulchral face.

Coward, huh? You're going to hide and leave me here with her? Well, go ahead. I'm going to get in bed and pretend to be asleep. Maybe she'll go away, think I'm out or something.

"Mack, Mack, Mack." Knock, knock, knock.

She must be frantic. It sounds like a magpie with a hammer. It couldn't be her knuckles. They'd have shattered after the first rap.

"Mack, Mack, Mack."

Is she in the **room**? Sounds like it. I didn't hear the door open, but her voice is too loud. Oh, god, she is. Jesus. I can see her looming at the corner of my vision. She's just a floating mass of ectoplasm, but she's floating nearer. Oh, that face. Please, God, take that face away.

"Are you asleep?" she cries, poking me in the ribs. My body springs as taut as an arcing spark of electricity, and only my head and ankles are touching the mattress.

"Mack, wake up." Welling vitriolic fluid somehow finds release and my body eases back into the soft mattress.

"I," I gasp, "I...I'm awake."

"I feel like I want to talk," she pleads. "I can't concentrate on my game tonight, and there's no use practicing on Bingo if you can't concentrate."

"Okay," I breathe easier. "Just give me a second to wake up."

While I pretend to be waking up she roams around my bedroom. I can see that she has brought her broom with her. That's where the knocking came from. I don't know how she got it down the stairs, but it's with her. She's leaning on it now looking at a work of art I tore from an Associated Press Teletype machine Christmas Eve. It's a New England scene with a chapel nestled among towering, snow-capped peaks. At the top it says Peace on Earth. It's machine art, the kind composed solely of H's and I's and M's. Someone in the New York bureau did it. Christmas Eves are slow news nights.

"That's what American is all about," she confides to me. She has stopped studying the picture and has pulled a chair up next to the Macintosh beside my bed. "But I don't think we're going to have an America very long--not with that silly pill and those Communists in the Supreme Court taking the prayers out of school and legalizing abortions."

She seems calm, but I can tell the Benzedrine is working. I can't actually see anything, but she reminds me of a tuning fork that's vibrating at a pitch too high for me to hear. I'm not feeling too mellow myself, so I think I'll roll me a cigarette.

"That smells funny," Lila notes as I bring the old cigar box out from under my bed. Well, let it smell funny. All I want is a few drags, and she can say anything she wants.

"That's what made us a great country," she continues in earnest. "Our faith in God. If we aren't allowed to ask God for his guidance, he just won't favor us and then he'll go elsewhere."

I picture God going elsewhere, walking heavily.

"Maybe he'll go to one of those silly little countries in South America where they're always robbing people and raping those poor little barefooted girls. And where their governments are always playing footsie with the Communists."

I picture governments playing footsie with Communists. The barefooted girls are too much for me at the moment.

"No, no, he wouldn't do that," she decides, nervously wringing her hands. "I don't think he'd join the Communist camp. That's silly."

I picture God walking heavily into the Communist camp.

She's quiet now, but I can tell that her life systems are coursing at full gush. Me? I'm mellow finally. I can handle it, meaning her.

"I'm so glad you moved your bed so your feet point east," she spurts like a garden hose and leans forward to pat my leg.

There are things I could say, but I only ask, "Why?"

"Because," she nods knowingly, "when your feet are pointing east you get the best cosmic rays, the healthiest rays."

I study this for a moment and then have to agree. "Right on, Lila." Instead of answering she just sits there moving her head from side to side, stretching the skin at her neck.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm exercising my neck," she says, and keeps doing it. "I went to one of those lectures by Harry Hollywood, and he said if you did this you wouldn't develop wrinkles."

Again I could say something but I opt for this: "I stand on my head." It's the only health hint I can think of.

"Oh," she chuckles. "I'm too old to try that, but I do lie on the bed and hang my head over the side. That gets the blood to the face just as well, don't you think?"

She looks as if she needs an affirmative answer so I nod my head and smile. The answer doesn't seem to have helped, though, as she has stopped moving her head from side to side and is looking at the floor.

"I should have married for money," she confides.

Even in my present state I can't picture anyone putting up with Lila, especially Lila and a telephone.

"I could have, you know. A fine gentleman. A fine Catholic gentleman." She starts teasing my carpet with the broom in her hands. "Have you heard of William E. Barrett?"

"Lilies of the Field," I say, showing my erudition. "The Left Hand of God." Lila doesn't know, but I work in the same room with the author's daughter at the newspaper.

"Yes, a fine Catholic gentleman." She looks where she has been sweeping and sniffs. "I could have married him. I should have. Then I wouldn't be living in that little apartment upstairs." She pokes her finger in the air. "I should have married him."

There's a commotion in the hall I can't figure out, and Lila notices it too. It's the parrot. He's flown downstairs, and it sounds as if he's sitting on the banister. Lila's out of her seat like a shot and at the door before I can even exhale. I can't see all that's happening, but she rears back and heaves the broom as if it were a javelin, and I hear it clatter against the rungs on the railing and then fall against the outside door. I think it's the big door, anyway, judging by the sound of the thump.

Bingo, it seems, has survived because I can hear a pair of featherless wings beating their way up the stairwell. I don't think he's really flying. Probably scuttling along like a grounded bat.

I'll have to cool it now because Lila's coming back in. She falls into the chair, and I expect to hear bones shatter, but nothing snaps and she just sits there. Only her mind seems to be moving, in weird circles granted, but moving.

"Oh, yes. Home, Home on the Range. That was Delano Roosevelt's favorite song." I don't have the slightest idea what she's talking about, but one finger on her right hand seems to be keeping time to the tune she's just mentioned.

"But he was a horse's ass anyway," she resumes, stopping her finger. "I don't mean that disparagingly. I learned that word--disparagingly--from the song Home, Home on the Range. We sang that in group singing down at the center yesterday." I can't picture anything of what she's saying now.

"This sure is a fine old house. It was such a nice place to live when Mrs. Fox owned it." For some reason she always looks at the high ceiling and the dangling light fixtures when she talks about the place. She ignores the hanging strips of wallpaper.

"She's dead," I say.

"Who?"

"Mrs. Fox, she's dead." While she considers this I put my cigarette out and place the butt back into the cigar box with a collection of others.

"Why, no she isn't. She's in an old folks home somewhere."

"She may have been, but she's dead now. I hear her outside my door early every morning." I'm telling Lila the truth. "You know that little rug outside my door?"

She nods. "Yes."

"Well, every night when I go to bed it's all crumpled up and lying in a corner. But sometimes, early in the morning, I hear kind of a rustling and shuffling outside the door, you know, some scraping around."

"You're joshing."

"No, I'm not." I try to show her that I'm in earnest by sitting up on the bed. "And when I open the door real quick there's nothing out there. Nothing but a neatly arranged rug. It's been going on like that for about the last two months. I hear her feet scraping around out there, and when I look the rug's all neat and straight again."

Judging by the width of her eyes, I think she has taken what I've just said as gospel. At least her eyes are wide with the inner vision old people sometimes seem to have. Maybe its just cataracts.

"I suppose," she breathes easier, "if a person dies, and can't get into Heaven right away, they might just as well wait around this fine old home."

She's just sitting there now, fingering my PowerBook computer. I hope she doesn't open the lead about her death that's still hidden on the sleeping screen. Ah,

good. She's moving now. Is the parrot out in the hall again? No. I guess she just feels like moving.

"I think I'll go back and practice my Bingo some more," she says dreamily. There's a pleasant look on her face, at least pleasant for Lila. I think she's seeing something I'm not. "Maybe I'll have a little sweet wine, you know, to ease my heart."

I didn't describe the sounds of her going upstairs to you before, and I don't think I'm going to now either. It's not the Swish-THUMP of her coming downstairs. And it's not as bad either. It's just a Tap-THUMP, but I don't want to talk about it. Just thinking about it hurts my own hips. I think I'll just lie down and put my head under the pillow until she gets upstairs.

Oh, welcome back. Where did you disappear to? Couldn't take the heat while she was ascending? Well you better hurry and sit down because the game has been going on a while and it's really getting good. She's really becoming wild. Judging by the sounds, I think she's standing on top of her kitchen table right now.

"Bingo."

Hot damn. What'd I tell you. That was Bingo, the bird. Hot damn. What? What? What was that? Is she throwing something up there again? Listen to that, will you. I'll bet she's throwing the potatoes, those slimy, fungus-blanketed potatoes. If Bingo doesn't mind his P's and Q's he's going to get his ass nailed for sure this time. It's not as if it were a broom. She's got all kinds of ammunition this time.

Rumble, rumble, clunk.

My god, she's emptied that whole hundred-pound bag of spuds on the floor. Sounds like she's stomping on them. Maybe it's Bingo. Do you think she's already downed Bingo and is stomping on him?

No, wait. The sound's changed. She's working under the bed again. Good ol' Bingo. Found his favorite hiding place again. Wonder how Lila's going to get at him now with the broom still downstairs?

Hey, she's leaving her room now. Is she going to go down the stairs to get the broom? No. She's heading for the bathroom. No, that's not the bathroom door. She's into the utility closet. Listen. She's running water into the mop bucket. Wonder what she's going to do with the water?

She's heading back now. Listen to those labored steps. She can hardly make it. I think she's going to kill herself before the Benzedrine has a chance to do its stuff.

It sure is quiet up there now. Not a sound.

There goes Bingo again. Listen to him squawk. My god, what's she doing? Oh, Christ, no. She's poured the water under her bed to get at Bingo and it's leaking through the ceiling. Look at it stream down. It's going to soak my bed. Quick. Help me move it out of the way. Don't just sit there, help me.

That poor bird. If she doesn't wring his neck tonight, she's going to drown him.

"Verily, verily, I say unto you."

How'd she get out to the stairwell all ready? I didn't even hear her moving. Must have been making too much noise while I was moving the bed.

"He that entereth not by the door into the sheepfold, but climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber."

I don't know how she did it, but St. John seems to have won that last game. Either that or she's giving a eulogy for Bingo. She'll be starting back to her room in just a moment and then we'll know.

Swish-THUMP.

Holy terror, she's coming down. Sweet Jesus, no. Protect me. Do something.

Thump-SWISH. Thump-SWISH.

I'm going to go into the bathroom and lock the door. I need the consolation of the cool sink next to my cheek and the smell of toilet water. You can do what you want to.

Swish-THUMP. Swish-clump. Rumble-bump-thump, bounce, plump, plop.

Silence.

She's fallen. Her heart finally caved in. I've got to see this. I don't care if I'm still in my underwear. I've got to see this. Now don't get ahead of me. This is my moment. Come on, door. Open.

Will you look at that. She's not moving. Just lying there at the foot of the stairs on her back with her feet on the last step. Do you think she's dead? She looks dead. Sort of. See. Her skin's already white, and now that the blood's gone you can see her gaudy make-up. She looks like a clown. Hah! Just look at that. It's laughable. Gaudy red lips. A ball of vermilion on each cheek and a powdered-white nose. See the blood veins in her forehead? They're just lying there, blue. Not pulsing or anything.

There's the wine bottle. It's slid under the corner table where the mailman puts the magazines. And look at the Bible over there. Looks like she's been chewing on it. I better pull my pants on and call the police.

"I don't believe this, Charlie," I can hear one of the cops tell the other. "And her identification says she was seventy-nine. I don't believe it."

I think I'll go out and see what they're doing. I'll probably have to sign something anyway. Maybe they'll want to ask some questions.

The one investigator is still standing over Lila and the other is up at the top of the stairwell. I can't see him too well, but I can see that he is holding something.

"It must have been the old ticker," I volunteer. "She said she had undergone heart surgery twelve years ago."

"Weak ticker, hell," the cop at the top of the stairs says. "A healthy ticker couldn't stand what went on up there tonight. Go up and have a look."

"No, thanks," I say, but I can see he wishes I would. He has one of those buddy-you've-got-to-see-it-to-believe-it expressions on his face.

The cop, now that I've declined his offer, comes down the stairs and extends his arm to me. "Here," he says. "You might as well keep this until someone comes to claim him. I found it hiding under the sink."

It's Bingo. He's alive, but he looks as if he wishes he weren't. If I had to judge by his eyes alone, I'd say he was a snake hiding in a hole. Not a bird at all. The pupils in a bird's eyes don't look like that.

"You say she had open heart surgery?" the man bending over Lila asks. I think he's the coroner's investigator because he's not in uniform.

"That's what she always told me."

He loosens the neck-to-toe night gown Lila is wearing and looks for a scar. There isn't one.

"She was lying," I gasp. "What a con artist."

"Did she drink often?" The investigator is looking from me to the empty bottle and well-gnawed Bible.

"Does the Pope pray? I'll say she drank. She tied one on every Friday, real wallop-a-loozers."

He ignores what I say and picks up the bottle and turns it butt up. Only a couple of drops fall out. "I think for the sake of her family," he says, "that I'd better list her death as natural causes."

"No autopsy?" the cop who handed me Bingo asks.

"Autopsy hell. It's a wonder she lived this long, the way that room looks." Two men in white uniforms come in and start to lift Lila's body onto a cot with wheels. The cop who's holding the door open so they can get out looks at me.

"Could you use some potatoes?" he asks.

"Not really, why?"

"The floor's covered with them up there. And most of them are all ready mashed for you."

It's been quiet around here since Lila left. I have to look at the clock now to tell what time it is. Sometimes I even forget what day it is. Her regularity held me together in ways I never realized. The only days I don't have trouble recognizing are Fridays.

Bingo helps me to remember them.

Yes, the bird's still with me. I didn't go to the funeral, and I didn't come out of my apartment when Lila's relatives came to clean up the mess, so I guess they forgot she ever had the bird.

Bingo is kind of a normal bird now. He's even getting some feathers back. You wouldn't know he had ever lived all those years with Lila. At least you wouldn't know until Fridays come. He kind of goes crazy around eight in the evening and tries to fly into the mirror over the fireplace.

I've had to give up my hobby of growing plants because of him. He ate the rest of the African violets the first day he was in my apartment. The mother-in-law tongue went the following week and the begonias soon after. I can't really blame him, though. He can't help himself. It's probably the result of a dietary deficiency. There's another thing that's kind of different around the house, too. Maybe I shouldn't even mention it, but I will. It happens early in the mornings, say about four or five. I hear feet shuffling just outside my door, and I know the rug is being straightened. It doesn't sound much different than it did before, except that now I hear two sets of feet shuffling about. I've never opened the door to check.

Oh, yes. I've changed my routine of Fridays a bit to sort of help Bingo through his trauma. I play Bingo with him. And I'm kinder to him than Lila was, too. I don't even scold him when he calls out his name without regard to the actual progress of the game. I suppose his rantings would get to me now and then if I didn't ease my nerves with an occasional drink while we play.

It's only a little wine, though. A little sweet wine for my nerves. You of all people would understand.

The true setting for this story is Bennett, Colorado, where Irv used to teach. He kept his rabbits in this old woman's barn. Much of what happened is true, including the cottontail rabbit.

Tending the Rabbits

by Mack Hitch

She was sitting on a wooden bench beneath the windmill with a harness trailing across her lap when we drove up. But she was of only passing interest. I was more taken with the windmill and its rusty incantations. The sounds, rhythmic and insistent, seemed to come from some primal yearnings--the earth, perhaps, groaning on its axis. This sound, coupled with the wine and talk and cigarettes of the night before, made me receptive to the crisp autumn morning and to the farm scene before me.

Aaron honked the horn once, scattering bantams from the drive and awakening a pair of friendly dogs from their sunny naps beside the house to our left. They recognized the car and ran ahead, their tongues lolling happily from the sides of their mouths. As they crossed in front of us and loped into the sun, I had

to close my eyes against its brilliance. It was one of those slanting October suns that renders the prairie yellow and silvers the snow on the distant mountains.

The old woman beneath the windmill didn't even glance at the car. With her eyes on the ground, she seemed intent on making sense of the mill's creakings as it spun above her. She also seemed oblivious to the other sounds around her. The clucking of chickens, the snorting of horses, and the inquisitive snickering of goats. Sounds that punctuated the silence, making it more intense, a silence my years in the city had caused me to forget.

When I stepped from the car--the morning's coolness evaporating the sweat of my night's dissipation--I had forgotten about the rabbits in the barn--the purpose of our visit--until I slammed the door, making them thump about their cages. They had been stretching in the sun as it poured through the barn doors and printed its yellowness on the earthen floor. But instead of continuing to wrinkle their noises contentedly, they now cowered in the shadowed corners of their cages.

When I entered the barn I couldn't see the cages until my eyes adjusted to the smokey dimness. They were spread across the floor atop wooden boxes and boards. Beneath the wire cages were fresh piles of alfalfa. These were to absorb the droppings and as a result the smell in the barn was pleasant, a dreamy composting of time. When Aaron pulled the top off the barrel of rabbit pellets, the dry aroma of processed alfalfa was added to the other verdant and animal smells. "Would you get the water?" he asked, handing me a plastic bucket. "Don't get it out of the horse troughs. Get it out of the drinking-water barrel."

I took the pail and went back out into the sun. The old woman was still sitting on the bench beneath the windmill. A gray, frayed sweater and thick, onion-yellow hose protected her from the coolness.

"You know," she spoke without looking at me, "this is a singular morning."

"Sure is," I admitted, looking around. She had no idea how I had greeted the day, lying on a strange bathroom floor while a cold sweat burned my pallid face. She was looking at the mountains to the west. They rested in a haze, but the haze wasn't of the morning or of the mountains or of the Chianti I had drunk. It came from the city at the foot of the mountains, from Denver. A grayness oozed from its clustered lives and filled the basin which separated the prairie on which I stood from the front range of the Rockies.

While she continued gazing at the mountains, I busied myself with the drinking barrel next to her. It was a small cedar cask, surrounded by sand and encased in a large, weathered wooden box. The water looked green and dark, but when I scooped a coffee can full I saw that it was clear and cold.

"Oh, Lord, is this good," I confessed as I lowered the can from my lips. I could feel its freshness coursing through my dehydrated body.

"It's sweet," she turned stiffly to me and nodded. She continued watching me as I filled the pail by dipping the coffee can repeatedly into the cedar barrel. As she watched, she dreamily slapped the reins of the bridle against her thigh. She owned no horses. Aaron had told me that. But she did let the neighbor girls keep their ponies in the corral.

One of the girls was in the corral now, rattling oats around in a smaller coffee can and trying to attract her pony. It was a Shetland, fat and broad like an over-fed, spayed cocker spaniel and with a thick, dusty, autumn coat.

The old woman turned with the noise and looked into the corral, but she didn't look at the fat pony or the girl. She looked instead at the manure in the straw-strewn corral and watched as it moldered in the warning sun.

"The mountains," I asked, "do they come in clear very often?"

Her reverie broken, she rotated heavily on the bench and lifted her head to look at the mountains beyond Denver.

"A week or so ago they were clear. Real clear. Used to be they was always clear," she said wearily. "But it was before all that." She waved a heavy hand toward the city and then let it drop into her lap next to the bridle.

She was tired and the silence following her words emphasized it.

An errant breeze renewed the windmill's complaint, and I looked up to watch its sails crank lazily against the muted sky. I could have continued watching its tranquil revolutions, but another breeze was spinning the sails of the old lady's mind.

"I don't know what it all means," she sighed and waved her blood-spotted hand in the direction of the land around the barn. "We got it for pennies on today's dollar, but it was never worth even that. Course it didn't promise nothing either," she conceded. "It was honest that way."

Even though the land was marginal at best, it was obvious it had become part of her.

"Yet, Lord did we work. And hard. And what come of it? Varicose veins and arthritis. I can hardly walk, and he's been gone years. Long dead."

She wasn't afraid of the word--*dead*. In the city people *passed away* or were *called home*.

For a moment we were both mesmerized by the windmill cranking above us. I stared at my face as it shimmered in the water barrel. She inspected the hands in her lap.

As if lifting by itself, unwilling by the mind, her right hand rose and pointed to the haze above the city. "But at least we was away from that. We didn't have to live in *that*." She nodded superiorly but the effort exhausted her and the hand fluttered back into her lap. "It's coming this way, though," she nodded to herself. "It's been coming for years. I thought I'd be long gone before it got here, but every time I'm ready to go this blessed earth freezes solid and won't let me in." She tried to stomp the gravel at her feet but the effort was feeble and painful. Instead, she gave it a limp slap with the bridle reins.

I had already filled the bucket with water, but I was hesitant to leave. I didn't want to be rude. Instead, I crouched and began playing with pebbles in the driveway. In response, a large gray tom cat, an American tabby, bounded from the corral and stopped just short of me.

The old lady quit staring at the ground and watched me try to coax the tom to my hand. But he wouldn't come.

"He's shy," she observed, breaking her silence. "He wants to let you pet him, but he's shy. Look at him roll in the gravel," she pointed, her eyes no longer tired. "He wants to be petted so bad he's itching."

The tom finally quit rubbing himself in the gravel when the old lady tempted him with the dancing tips of the reins. When he came just short of his goal, she pulled the leather strips from his reach, and the cat ambled back into the corral, feinting an attack on a proud but nervous bantam rooster that tried heroically to maintain his dignity.

She placed the bridle back into her lap and looked back toward Denver. "But it's here now. It's here. They came out here last month and bought some of my land. Going to put trailer houses on it. Long, narrow bedrooms."

I only smiled and nodded and looked to the barn where Aaron was filling the rabbit dishes with pellets.

"That land I sold them won't graze even one calf," she shook her head in disbelief. "But I guess they know what they're doing. They're going to raise human babies. That's where the money is."

The little girl in the corral had finally caught her pony and was leading it out the gate. "Look, Mrs. Whittaker," the child called to the old woman. "I got a new bridle."

"It looks nice," the old woman called back. "Very nice."

"I cut the strap off that's supposed to go under his neck," the child said and pointed to the spot. "Coffee doesn't like that strap."

The old lady got up stiffly from the bench and hobbled slowly over to the animal. She rested the hand holding the bridle on the pony's back and patted its coat with the other. Dust exploded in little clouds. "Now you be good to Coffee," she instructed the little girl and patted the pony on the flank as it passed.

We watched as the child grabbed the pony's mane, pulled herself astride, and trotted down the road towards Bennett. The old lady watched longer than I did, and I was headed toward the barn with the water when she spoke.

"Listen," she said. "The geese are flying." She was looking into the sky and listening intently. "Several flocks flew over yesterday evening but I couldn't tell which way they were going."

I looked up but couldn't see anything. All I heard was the complaining of the windmill.

"Can you see them?" she asked. Her eyes were on me, but her ears were listening to the geese. "Listen." She motioned for me to be quiet and to stop

disturbing the gravel with my feet. "I can't tell which way they are going," she complained sadly and looked to the sky, shading her eyes with an unsteady hand. For a moment I thought I saw something, but I wasn't sure.

"I just can't tell which way they're flying any more," she whispered and hobbled off to tend her goat. It was tied in the sun just outside the corral where it was eating scraps she had thrown to it.

When I re-entered the barn, Aaron was still putting handfuls of pellets into the feeding dishes. "What took you so long?" he asked.

"I was just talking to the old lady out there."

Next to the barrel with the pellets was a small pitcher, and I filled it with water from the bucket. It was easier to fill the rabbits' water dishes with the pitcher than with the bucket.

Most of the rabbits came to the front of their cages and looked at me through the wire while I poured water. But one of them didn't. He sat in the far corner of his cage looking the other way.

"Hey, isn't this a cottontail?"

Aaron paused with a handful of pellets still in his fist. "Yes, it's Mrs. Whittaker's. One of the girls caught it when it was little and gave it to her." "But why a wild rabbit?"

"I don't know. She just wanted it and asked if she could use one of my cages." "But it'll die, won't it?"

"No, it does okay," Aaron said and went back to dropping the pellets into the dishes. "It won't breed though. It won't mate. She's tried to cross it with some of her domestic rabbits, but it just won't mate."

I poured the water for the cottontail, but it didn't move. It just sat staring at the back wall. Its ears were alert, however, and I knew it was listening.

"I'll bet it knows which way the geese are flying," I said. But there weren't any real geese, and the only noise in the barn was the crunching of processed pellets by the busy-nosed domestic rabbits.

Aaron held his question until he finished feeding a row of rabbits. When the last of the feeding dishes had been filled, he stood and looked at me. "Which way the geese are flying?" he asked. "What are you talking about."

"Nothing we'll have to worry about for some years," I said and moved on to water the next rabbit.

Saguaro Revenge

Marshall wondered if his son would scream when he poked the needle into his body. Or--like Georgi Markow on that London street years ago--would he cock his head in amazement at the sudden pain, walk irritably on, and then die horribly four days later, surrounded by a team of mystified doctors and toxicologists?

He had little time to ponder the question, however, because a man in the traffic behind him leaned on his horn again. Marshall eyed the old man in his rearview mirror. He looked as if he desperately needed to urinate but was physically unable to. His sunken gray eyes burned with an agony that suggested he could only find relief from a catheter twisted up through his prostate and into his bladder.

Trapped, Marshall thought. Trapped like all of us in an insane society that daily greases its banister to oblivion.

Lowering his eyes from the mirror, Marshall looked ahead of him in the stalled line of Tucson traffic to the problem. It was a giant saguaro, the largest cactus on earth. It inched across his vision at the intersection, still regal and majestic in spite of being wrapped in burlap and propped lengthwise on a flatbed truck. The puny remains of its root system, balled in more burlap, weren't enough to allow this 35-foot behemoth to survive but some fool no doubt had paid \$4,500 or more for it. Maybe it was one of those plants being transported to a golf course in the southern California desert where it would be scorched to death by the sun in spite of being irrigated by re-claimed sewage water previously stolen from salmon rivers hundreds of miles to the north.

Too many people, Marshall thought. Too many ignorant people. Then he brightened at the thought of taking one of the spines from the saguaro and jabbing it into his son's thigh.

Again the horn sounded behind him. When he looked into the mirror he saw that the old man's agony had increased. His moist eyes floated above his bony fingers as they gripped and re-gripped the wheel. He rocked stiffly back and forth in an impotent attempt to get the traffic moving.

Marshall decided to feel sorrow for the old man--as a fellow pilgrim--but changed his mind the instant he noticed that the old man's car windows were up. God, he fumed, 120 degrees out, jetliners aren't even being allowed to take off, and that old idiot is pumping more fluorocarbons into the atmosphere.

When he looked at the other cars in the halted traffic, he saw that all the windows were up. All the windows but his. In disgust he grabbed the car's wheel and pulled himself forward. His sweat-soaked shirt clung to the vinyl seat.

The old man could use a needle too, he thought. They could all use a needle. The problem wasn't too many cars or leaded fuel or chemical wastes or nuclear reactors or faulty recycling. The problem was people. Too many people. Not too many ignorant or uncaring or greedy people, he decided. Just too many people, period.

Marshall shook his head. Even all the needles of the saguaro wouldn't be enough.

He couldn't remember when he first heard of the Georgi Markow incident or why he had remembered it. All he knew was that was how he was going to kill his son.

In fact, if it wasn't for his son, Brett, and a conversation they had had at the kitchen table two hours earlier, Marshall wouldn't have been stuck in this traffic jam on the hottest day in Tucson history.

"If it's meant to happen, it'll happen," Brett had said.

"What?" Marshall had gasped. He pretended not to believe what he had heard. "We're talking about responsibility here."

"Oh come off it. We're talking about whether I'm bangin' my chick or not." Brett, named by his mother, tossed the lank, oily hair from his right eye and then tucked it behind his ear. The left side of his head was shaved burr close and someone with a razor had used this strange canvas to carve a pentagram. Below the design, and dangling from the left earlobe, was a silver crucifix.

"No," Marshall said evenly, putting both hands around the sweating glass of sun tea on the table before him. "We're not talking about whether you are *bangin'* your *chick* or not. We're talking about responsibility. Responsibility to yourself, to your country, to your planet."

"Shit," Brett spat. "I don't want to hear any more of that *spacecraft earth* shit."

Marshall rang the glass before him with his fingernail. "Then let's forget the earth, Brett. Let's just remember you're seventeen. You don't have a job. It doesn't look like you're going to graduate. And even if you do graduate, I don't think there's a college that'd have you with your grades. You're in no position to even think of getting married."

"Who's said anything about marriage."

"You have if you've been having sex without taking--" Marshall knew Brett would roll his eyes at the word *precaution*.

"You mean use a condom, don't you?" Brett said. His shoulders slouched as if spent from the effort of his reply, and his sleeveless muscle shirt slacked open to reveal a concave chest. "Rubbers are for dweebs. Besides, if she gets pregnant it's her problem."

Marshall turned his tea glass in the pool of condensation at its base and silently mouthed the word *dweebs*.

"If things are gonna happen, man, they're gonna happen. It's not for us to go around messin' with the cosmic thing," he said, his mouth remaining open--as it did perpetually--as if he had just snarled "Oh, yea?"

"But you've got to plan."

"And what good has it done you? This house? If you think it's class I got a clue for you. And what's so great about that job of yours. You're just a fuckin' teacher in a white coat."

"Most of my time is spent in the lab."

"Oh, that's right. You're supposed to be a big chemist. I don't see you inventin' stuff. Hell, you can't even make chocolate milk."

Marshall looked up suddenly, not to object but to fathom what his son was talking about.

"Yea, that's right, chocolate milk. After mom left you couldn't even do that. It always stuck to the bottom of the glass. You're probably just as--" He wanted the word *inept* but it wasn't there. "You probably don't know any more at work either. What you supposed to be doin' there, anyway?"

"It's a little job. My size. I'm trying to identify one infinitesimally tiny portion of the human genome." Marshall almost lacked the breath to expel the words.

"More of that scientific shit. You guys are just a bunch of phonies. You think big words make you sound important. And even if you could do whatever you said--make that map--what good would it do, anyway?"

Marshall watched Brett, full of self-importance, pull a cigarette from the pack inside his muscle shirt. "I don't know. Maybe, somehow, help--"

Brett let the butane lighter flame long after the cigarette was lighted. "I'm going hunting," he exhaled. "I can't hang around all day and listen to this *help the world* crap. Why don't you wise up to yourself. You're one of those nerds who always sees the glass as *half empty* instead of *half full*." He leaned across the table to confront his father, but Marshall avoided Brett's eyes. "You make your own

reality, man. Your reality is right here," he pointed to his head with the cigarette. "It's not out there or in some laboratory." The cigarette now pointed to the kitchen door.

"You're wrong, Brett." The unexpected resolve in his father's voice caused him to remove his eyes from the door. "What I do know is that no matter *how* a person views the world, the volume in the glass remains unchanged. I do wonder, I confess, if perhaps there is still a pitcher of water around somewhere to refill that glass should it become empty."

Marshall wasn't sure Brett followed the argument or even listened to it. His son's only response was to go to his room and return with a 12-gauge shotgun and two boxes of shells.

"What's that for?"

Before Brett could answer a horn sounded in the driveway and he broke for the back door. "I'm going hunting with some guys."

"But nothing's in season. There's nothing to shoot."

"Don't have a cow," his voice broke, punctuated by the slamming door behind him. "We'll find something."

Marshall parted the curtain and watched his son move toward the car, overstriding so ridiculously that his head bobbed like flotsam on a choppy sea. His right thumb was hitched with exaggerated nonchalance into his rear pants pocket. The shotgun, hanging parallel to the earth from his left arm, pointed carelessly toward the street. As he neared the car, Marshall could read the back of Brett's muscle shirt--*Shit Happens*. It was this sight and the sight of the razor-cut jeans exposing hunks of his son's legs that made Marshall realize that Brett would die that night, or at least receive the fatal injection.

As soon as the car squealed from his sight, and after the thumping concussion of the stereo exploding against the inside of the vehicle had faded, Marshall cracked the back door and looked at the barren plot of land next to the foundation where he had planted the castor beans. On those frequent days when the world became too heavy for him, he had often retreated in his mind to this leafy glade of castor beans. Those plants and their seeds would correct his one mistake in the world.

Shortly after Brett's birth Marshall realized that he had made a mistake, not in Brett himself, but in the selection of Brett's mother. She was, well--lacking. It was about that time that he had formulated a new philosophy: "If you can't leave something of value, leave a space." Later he had altered it slightly: "Even if you can leave something of value, still leave a space." Regardless of the wording, Brett was an obvious encumbrance to the earth.

Still looking at his garden, Marshall mouthed the word *ouch*. "Ouch" is what Brett would say this night. "Ouch" is what Bulgarian defector Georgi Markov had said as he walked near Waterloo Bridge in London. When he turned to discover the cause of his pain, he had seen a heavy-set man carrying an umbrella. "I am sorry," the man muttered thickly and hopped into a black cab.

That night Markov developed a high fever and four days later he died. The postmortem discovered no poison, but it did reveal a 1.7 mm hollow metal ball with two holes, each 0.4 mm in diameter. Within that ball, though it was never detected, was almost certainly the extremely deadly toxin ricin. It, Marshall learned, had originally been developed as a chemical warfare agent. And, he learned, that ricin is an extract from the seed of the castor-bean plant.

Marshall, who only vaguely remembered the facts, had learned all he needed in one afternoon's visit to the public library. What he didn't discover in the magazines and journal he studied was what he, as a chemist, already knew. How to distil and concentrate the toxin.

That toxin, the ricin, already distilled and loaded into an automatic, spring-charged syringe, rested on the car seat beside him as he waited at the intersection for the saguaro to clear and free the traffic. The syringe was housed in a three-inch firecracker-looking tub, green on one end and white on the other. Marshall remembered the tube from his army days. One of his barrack's mates at Fort Carson had slapped the green end of one of the tubes against his thigh. This one was loaded with atropine, an antidote to nerve gas. The spring inside the tube snapped and injected the leg with the atropine. "I thought it went off when you pressed the white end to your leg," the soldier had lamented as he was hurried to the base hospital. Aside from a powerful thirst, the private had suffered no lasting effects.

Marshall looked down at the needle again and patted it. "A glass of water will not slake *thy* venom," he crooned, but his voice was scarcely audible above the cacophony of horns.

The syringe had almost prophetically fallen into his lap. It had been there in his lab since he could remember, locked away in a closet filled with civil defense supplies. Most of the people in the lab had broken into the closet to satisfy their curiosities. When it was his turn, Marshall had found the tan carton of atropine syringes and remembered them from his army days.

Two weeks ago he had begun the distillation. While the solution steeped, he had dissected one of the syringes and learned how it worked. The next week,

hoping he had successfully extracted the toxin, but fearful he had not, he had loaded what he hoped was a lethal dose into another syringe. That syringe now rested on the car seat beside him. It was in a box that had contained Christmas cards from the World Wildlife Fund.

Removing his eyes from the box, Marshall watched the saguaro's slow progress. It was 150 to 170 years old, much older than the infestation that had come to its desert and uprooted it only to plunk it down somewhere and surround it with concrete and glass. With luck, it would stand for five to seven years, sustaining life from its massive inner reservoir, and then it would die and the people in nearby buildings would look out from their air-conditioned environments and wonder why.

"Give it space."

Ahead, the helpless saguaro finally slid through the intersection. As Marshall urged his overheated car forward, he looked down the side street for a final glimpse of the fallen giant. Each of its hundred thousand spines lay impotent and helpless, not like the needle that had pierced the leg of Georgi Markov, not like the needle his son would feel that night.

When he arrived home, the mail box was stuffed with junk mail. He sorted through it as he entered the front door and tossed most of it into the trash basket placed there for that purpose. The only piece worth saving was his weekly copy of *Science News*. Its cover displayed a color-enhanced satellite photo of the ozone hole over the Antarctic.

In the kitchen he set the magazine and the Christmas card box with the needle in it on the table and went to the refrigerator for a glass of sun tea. He had the jar in his hand before he changed his mind. He wanted a beer instead. He had hidden

a six-pack beneath the sink, hidden it from Brett, so it was warm and he had to pour the contents of the can over a glass of ice. He was drinking the frothy mixture when Marla sprung through the back door without knocking.

"Oh, go on," she said, "you're not drinking a beer this early, are you? Oh, go on."

Marshall didn't answer. He just gave that silly smirk he always gave when she bounced into his life. She was the first lady, girl actually, he had gone with since his wife left. She was clean and thin, small breasted, and filled the jeans she was wearing with a pubescent zeal. And she was, well--modern. That was the only kind word Marshall could ever think of when trying to picture her. *Modern*. When he described her to friends at work they raised their eyebrows. He didn't know if it was from jealousy or censure.

She was a college student. Had in fact, to his chagrin, been a student in a beginning chemistry class he had been roped into. He had flunked her, and she didn't seem to mind. Although she was a student, she was strangely uninterested in knowledge. He had never seen her carrying a book and she never said anything to suggest she had read one.

At nights, after their lovemaking, she would lie carelessly back as if nothing had happened, as if it were her birth right, something she could have within fifteen minutes of the urge. Sex to her was what fast food was to Marshall.

Once, when she had mentioned the possibility of marriage, Marshall had wondered aloud if a blood test was still required.

"A blood test," she sat up. The prospect of a test far outweighed the uncertainties of marriage.

"Don't worry," Marshall had reassured her. "You won't have to study for it."

The remembrance of this caused him to roll his eyes and they lighted on the box with the syringe. Without seeming too obvious, he removed it from the table and placed it on the chair beside him, the one away from Marla.

"Sit down," he offered, pulling out the chair on the other side for her. Marla sat but looked into his eyes, mildly concerned. "You don't look right today. Are you feeling okay?"

He nodded.

"I'll bet your energies are out of alignment."

"No, I'm fine. Just tired." He lifted the beer to indicate that was why he was drinking so early.

"Oh, go on," she chided. "Your Yin and Yang need balancing and you're just too stubborn to admit it. Here," she said, reaching for the needle-shaped crystal depending from a chain just above her breasts. "Let me make you well."

She rose and pressed the crystal into the center of his forehead. "Your third eye," she explained. The closeness of her clean body did refresh Marshall and he allowed his head to lean against her chest. "Center your personal energies," she softly commanded. Her voice was flat. "Let your negative attitudes flow into the crystal. Tap into your psychic powers and heal yourself."

Almost miraculously, Marshall did feel better, but as a scientist he realized the waters of his rejuvenation sprang from the sight of her small but precious breasts. He didn't have the heart to tell her that she was playing with a piece of quartz, an inferior gem with no magical powers and whose ability to reflect and scatter light was no better than ordinary window glass.

"There," she said backing away. "All better?"

He had to admit he did feel better.

"It's from the cleansing harmonics, the vibrations, the resonances. Here," she held the crystal toward him. "Feel it resonate. That's what sucked the negative toxins from your system and cleansed you."

He took the crystal and rolled it between his thumb and forefinger, slowly feeling all eight of its sides. He couldn't tell her that almost the only value of crystals was that they *didn't* expand or resonate greatly when subjected to heat. She took it back and looked into it. "It's very strong today because I soaked it in salt water last night."

"Salt water?" The flatness of his voice unconsciously mimicked hers when she was ministering to him.

"Yes, that makes it strong and pure." She nodded earnestly to him. "And look here." She pointed to a tiny imperfection within the crystal. "See that little bit of copper color in there?"

He saw it.

"That was put in there by aliens."

Marshall ignored much to make their relationship work and this bit about aliens didn't surprise him. He even stifled the urge to ask her if by *aliens* she meant wetbacks or Martians. At such times he let nothingness into his mind, placed his hands around her delicious jeans, and drew her belly to his face. He did that now.

"And it only cost me fifteen dollars." She was oblivious to his hands. "Wasn't that a *ganga* deal?"

He removed his hands but continued to look where they had been. "A real *ganga* deal," he admitted. "Are you coming back over tonight?" As soon as he asked he knew it had been a mistake.

"Maybe after church," she said, no more enthused than ever. "Why don't you go with me tonight?" she brightened. "It's Wednesday."

He had made the mistake of going once, and he had found himself trapped as a link in a chain of chanting, swaying savants who sought salvation in total, mindless ignorance. It was called the (Y)Our Universal Unity Church and the night he attended the lead savant had pounded the floor hypnotically with his staff for an hour and fifteen minutes. "What," he hesitated, "is so special about tonight?"

"It's Wednesday. Wednesdays are always channeling night. Oh, go with me. You'd love it. It's so scientific."

She seemed hurt when he finally persuaded her he didn't want to talk to anybody in the past or future. "I'm still trying to find someone in this century I can talk with."

When she skipped out to her little car, Marshall felt lonely. It wasn't simply her leaving; it was the realization he had no real connection with her. He could touch her physically, and she would respond, but they could never really know each other. They had as much chance of knowing each other as anyone at that night's channeling would have of touching a being from another dimension.

But loneliness wasn't new to him. He had felt the same thing with his former wife, Jane, though she was different from Marla. Jane had named Brett, had insisted upon the name. She named him for a television character, not for the quality or integrity or accomplishment of the character, but for his failure to shave regularly.

Whereas Marla was always going and investigating her quirky view of life, Jane never was interested in anything though she often lamented that she wanted to

find herself. According to a mutual friend, she was currently attempting to find herself in clay. The friend had told Marshall that he saw one of her finished products, but he didn't know if it was an ashtray or a dog dish. In any case, however, it would make a good doorstep.

The night Marshall learned his marriage was finally over the two of them were watching something on television. Actually she was daydreaming to television and he was reading a magazine, pausing only to watch the commercials.

"I don't know," she had sighed, "whether to divorce you or to buy a large screen T.V."

When she finally left, and it took her several months to get around to it--she was going to sue on grounds of mental cruelty before her lawyer informed her of no-fault divorce--she told her friends that she had "outgrown Marshall."

As Marshall pushed the back door open to get a final glimpse of Marla's car darting purposefully down the development's curved street, the creaking of the door reminded him of his wife's leaving. She had paused in the door, looking back to see if anything remained that she wanted. As near as he could figure the divorce settlement, that's what she got. Anything she wanted.

What she really wanted wasn't in the house and she wouldn't find it, even in clay. After Brett's birth, the doctor told her she would be unable to have more babies. Marshall was secretly pleased. He was already formulating his belief that what the earth needed was more space.

Jane, conversely, was devastated. The entire twenty years before her marriage had molded her to be one thing--a baby-making machine. It wasn't her; it was her society, his, everyone's society. The present one. Bitterly, Marshall knew that beneath her glittery, *now* surface, even Marla had been programmed to be little

more than a baby-making machine, albeit a machine that would place a crystal to her baby's forehead whenever it cried from hunger or fear.

That was their special secret, the women's secret, and Marshall knew they carefully concealed it, were trained from birth to conceal it. But he had one of his own that Jane hadn't known and that Marla didn't know. Shortly before Jane went into labor with Brett, he had gone into a doctor's office one afternoon when he was supposed to be at work and had undergone a vasectomy.

Marshall felt a twinge in his groin and reached down to rub it when he realized he was halfway through the backdoor and didn't know why. On impulse, he poked his head out and glanced at the plot next to the house where he had nurtured the castor-bean plants through the moist spring and into the heat of June. Gently he pulled the door to behind him and walked to the bare ground and stood over the spot. After the prickly seed pods had dried and after he had removed the oblong, mottled seeds, Marshall had pulled up the plants, bagged them, and watched as the green barrel containing the bag was hoisted by the mechanical arm of the garbage truck, emptied it into the back, and the contents compacted.

No trail remained to connect him with a poison extracted from castor-bean seeds. Marla hadn't seen the plants. His son hadn't seen the plants. They simply didn't notice natural things unless they were glitzyly packaged, highly advertised, and labeled *natural*. Besides, though the castor-bean plant was old world in origin, it had adapted and now grew wild in Arizona.

Even Mrs. Taggart who lived on the other side of the spite fence to the west wouldn't have noticed because she didn't approve of anything Marshall did. She had called him a "NIMBYer or a Not-in-my-backyard Eco-nut." He had wanted to

call her an *Outlander*--an emigre from the East who insisted on bringing the East with her--but she intimidated him.

"Nature will take care of itself," she had huffed the last time he looked over the fence into her backyard jungle. He had simply told her that she lived in a desert and that trying to grow all the plants she had back home in New Jersey was ludicrous.

He remembered her, standing there with both hands on her hips. The hose, clutched in one hand, continued to flow as she talked. "All you people rant about is the water table," she had said. "If you eco-nuts will keep your silly notions to yourself everything will just work out fine and dandy. You people are just a bunch of worrybeads, silly ol' worrybeads."

Sometimes Marshall took consolation in the words of Edward Abbey, the late monkey-wrenching gadfly. Let them come in and blade hell out of the desert, he had said. Let them pump it dry and get it over with. Once there's no more water here for swimming pools, fountains, fake waterfalls, and lawns, the idiots will go back East and dive into that cesspool. It'll be wet and they won't notice the stench.

"And besides," she had concluded that day with a flourish of water from her hose, "I happen to think people are more important than species, anyhow." No doubt she had seen the current T.V. babble about the desert pup fish. Its pools and streams were disappearing as the water table dropped.

"More important than species." That, Marshall knew, was the motto of all who believed in growth.

"There's something wrong with a community that is *not* growing," she had added before disappearing back into her jungle.

Secretly, Marshall had placed a cancer-hex on her. When she discovered it growing, he wondered if she would still think unrestrained growth was healthy. Fuming at the remembrance, Marshall looked around his bare backyard at the cactus and other low-water-use plants. People, *too*, were a species, he told himself. And that species needs culling.

How to begin that culling had never been a problem for Marshall. He knew instantly how he was going to inject the ricin into Brett's leg. He had purchased a new shirt, one with many pins holding it straight in its wrapper, and he was going to make Brett think one of the pins stuck him. The syringe containing the ricin would be hidden within the shirt.

Marshall had seen himself fall many times during his planning. He would walk into the kitchen while Brett was eating, something sapid, no doubt, and he would pretend to trip and try to catch himself on Brett's leg. His son would yell "Ouch" when the needle injected the toxin, but he would accept the explanation of the pin in the new shirt.

After the death there would be an autopsy, but Marshall didn't fear that. A toxicological make-up on Brett's blood would probably turn up a myriad of chemicals. Like most of his friends, Brett would ingest anything that could be stuffed between the two halves of a gelatin capsule.

Marshall didn't fear getting caught, but he did fear failure. If he should inject the ricin, get caught, and Brett live, his failure would be mortifying. Any investigation would probably show that he had never extracted ricin from the castor-bean seeds at all. He would not only be a bungling attempted murderer, he would be a failure as a chemist as well, his profession.

And the thought of his son alive and laughing at his ineptitude was worse. He wouldn't be able to bear hearing Brett utter some banal childish pap as "Neah, neah, can't even mix chocolate milk."

"Shut up, you little bastard. You brainless snot." Marshall stood looking at the bare ground, yelling at it. "You're a nothing. A waste of protoplasm."

"Who are you talking to?"

Sheepishly, Marshall turned and saw Mrs. Taggart's nose and eyes poking above the fence. She was wearing silver-opaqued sunglasses and her nose was caked with zinc oxide. Fountaining near her right shoulder was a parabolic curl of water.

"Talking?" Marshall was at a loss. "I was talking to my dog."

"You were doing no such thing. You were ranting to yourself. I heard you. And besides, that fool dog of yours was run over and killed more than a year ago."

He *had* been ranting, and Marshall could not remember having ever stepped away so completely from the present. As he turned and shuffled absently back to his house, he heard Mrs. Taggart still badgering him. "Crazy eco-nut," she snapped, followed by the sound of water hitting his fence.

Back inside his house he pulled another warm beer from beneath the sink and poured it over a glass of ice. He swayed dizzily to the table and was nearly seated when his mind, crazily delaying messages from his senses, told him he was about to sit on the box containing the syringe.

He caught his weight with his forearms on the table and slid instead to the chair to the left. Once seated, he sipped the beer slowly, wondering what was happening to him. He had just been caught yelling at nothing in the backyard. In

traffic he had yelled at a sick old man. His relationship with Marla wasn't just hopeless, it was silly and shallow--*modern*, in fact.

And his dog, his poor dog, run down by some teen-aged girl in a Mercedes, her hair in curlers, rushing to a convenience store to buy a Diet Pepsi.

He lifted the cold glass of beer in utter exhaustion and placed it to his forehead. Slowly, he rocked it back and fourth, massaging the very spot Marla had earlier pressed with her crystal pendant. The remembrance of her cool, young breasts swelled in his memory, but as he reached mentally for them they were replaced by the taunting face of his son.

He removed the glass and looked helplessly about the kitchen. On the refrigerator door was a Nature Conservancy sticker and a magnet in the shape of a hummingbird. To the left of the stove was a Sierra Club calendar and stuck to one cupboard door was a Greenpeace banner.

"Mrs. Taggart, you're right," he sighed and felt no impulse to inhale. He had ridiculed his wife for trying to find herself in clay, albeit in a clunky dog dish. And he, feeling the same vague hollowness as his ex-wife, had the insane vanity to think he could re-mold the world, not simply a lump of clay.

"When is it going to stop?" he asked the glass of beer.

The act of questioning his drink froze his gaze to the glass. *He* was the crazy one. *He* was the problem, the anomaly. *He* occupied the space that needed to be freed. Those he ridiculed seemed well adjusted and content.

Marshall slammed the glass to the table and picked up the box on the chair beside him. Deftly he lifted the lid and removed the automatic syringe. It was shaped exactly like a firecracker without a fuse. One end was green and the other

white. Carefully, he cartwheeled it between the fingers of both hands, watching first the green twirl into view and then the white.

Finally, and suddenly, without allowing time for thought or fear, he stopped the twirling, pointed the green end down, and jammed it into his right thigh. It burned instantly and his ears filled with an intermittent ringing. Only slowly, after five or six rings, did he realize that the sound filling his ears was coming from the kitchen telephone.

He stood to answer it but realized the syringe was still dangling from his thigh. After pulling it free and tossing it onto the table, he went to the phone and lifted it gently from its receiver.

"Yes?" he asked calmly.

"Is this Mr. Quarles? Father of Brett Quarles?"

Marshall walked slowly back to the kitchen table to sit down and, in so doing, stretched the coiled phone cord taut. "Yes, I am."

"This is Deputy Vasques of the Pima County Sheriff's Department. I'm afraid I have some terrible news for you."

Marshall said nothing and the deputy had to ask, "Are you still there, Mr. Quarles?"

"Yes, I'm listening. Please go on."

"I hate to be the one to tell you this Mr. Quarles, but your son is dead."

Marshall heard the message and then asked calmly, "Are you sure?"

"I'm afraid so, sir. A saguaro fell on him."

The incongruity of the statement almost amused Marshall. "A saguaro fell on him? I don't understand."

"They were shooting it, sir," the deputy explained. "He was with a bunch of teenagers and they were taking turns shooting a saguaro in two with a 12-gauge shotgun."

"Please go on."

"They must have used five boxes of shells, but they got it done. Your son was the last to shoot, at least according to the boys involved, and when his blast severed the last rib, the saguaro fell and crushed him."

Marshall didn't answer and the deputy waited politely before continuing. "You can take consolation in the fact that the death was instantaneous," he said. "You know those things weigh five to ten tons."

"I do," Marshall replied. "And I thank you for the directness of your information and I appreciate the difficulty in making such a call."

The remainder of the conversation was clinical. Where the body would go and what would be done with it and when.

After he returned the phone to its receiver, Marshall walked slowly to the table and sat down. The syringe was still there, rocking gently as he rested his arms on the table. Picking it up, he turned the green end toward him and inspected the protruding needle. A tiny drop of fluid glistened at its tip, but the syringe was empty. The poison had been injected.

He placed the tube back on the table and rolled it under his palm. Then, he flicked it with his finger and sent it spinning dizzily across the table, where, still twirling garishly, it disappeared over the far edge.

Besides not knowing whether to smile or cry, Marshall wasn't even sure he had successfully made chocolate milk.

Nathanael West Lives

Can you see?

"I'm not sure. They haven't taken the bandages off yet. It doesn't matter though. I can think and that's where the deliciousness is."

Deliciousness?

"Yes, the delicious drippings of the mind, the synaptic snappings of energy arcing bluey through amber, aqueous carotene. That's deliciousness. All pleasure is in the mind. Mental copulation, for instance, is far superior to the base, ridiculous, tactile experiences. The body's too clumsy an instrument to handle serious matters."

I take it you enjoy the English language?

"Oh, the English language tastes delicious in my mouth. It moves easily and eagerly through my mind, pulsing warmly to the cool neonic green and pink hues of vicarious creations. Love the vicarious. Love it."

Vicarious? You must be kidding. How can you lie there in a full body cast and have the temerity to tell me all that is important in life are vicarious experiences? I know what you did. I know how you got here.

"No, no. You've got me wrong. It's not my doing that brought me here. It's not my fault."

Then whose fault was it?

"Nathanael West's."

Nathanael West was killed in a car wreck decades ago. How could he have been responsible?

"It was something he wrote in *The Day of the Locust*. An innocent something, really. Just a few sentences, but they always arouse women, cause something dark within them to swell. It's too challenging, I guess. They can't resist the challenge, and I can't resist the words. They're so delicious."

Maybe you'd better tell me about it. The whole incident.

"Who are you anyway? I didn't hear anyone come in. And your voice sounds as if it were coming from a distance, through a megaphone or a weak public address system. Say, are you a doctor or something? Maybe you're talking through a surgical mask."

Trust me. I'm here for your benefit.

"But do you really want to hear? I mean why do you want to hear it? Are you a detective or something?"

Trust me. And leave the bandages around your eyes alone. I'm here because I want to hear your story. I want to hear it as much as you want to tell it.

"Oh, yes, the deliciousness."

*That's right. The English language does taste delicious during remembrance.
Mouth your story as slickly as a tongue sliding around a Tootsie Pop.*

"Hey, even though I can't see you, I like you. You love the language. I can tell. But who are you anyway? I mean you're not a doctor. I didn't hear you come in. You must have been here even before they wheeled me back from the operating room."

The story, please.

"Well, I'm a high school English teacher..."

Don't bore me with the mundane, and get on with your story.

"But it's important. You try teaching English to a senseless bog of high school seniors every day. They're so damned bored and boring. They're nothing. They have the personalities of blank DVD disks, and they don't feel secure, really secure, unless they have a hand around a can of Coca-Cola, the other on their crotches, and condescending smiles on their faces."

Less art and more matter, please. You're boring me .

"But they think they know what love is all about. They think it's simply a gonadal function. They don't make love. All they do is exactly what they say they do--ball their chicks."

Please, could you get to your story. I know all about your students.

"But they're obstinate fools. They don't want to learn what love really can be. I mean with the mind. I can make more love to the word lollipop than they can to the sweetest, cuddliest little Chicana in all of New Mexico."

*Quit trying to squirm, your body cast won't allow it, and get on with the story.
Please.*

"All right, I walked into the La Fonda bar here in Santa Fe and was standing just inside the door waiting for my eyes to adjust to the darkness when I saw her. She was sitting at the bar where it horseshoes around the pillar."

I know the place.

"Well, she was the only person at the bar, and I felt like talking to someone so I sat down beside her. Is that a crime, I ask you? I mean just because she was the only person at the bar I didn't have to sit elsewhere, did I?"

I'm not here to answer. I know why you sat there. I know what happened. I know why you're here. I just want you to tell the story.

"Who are you, anyway?"

The story, please.

"All right, but don't rush me. As soon as my eyes had adjusted, I sat down beside her, and she gave me this haughty, austere look and moved her drink away from me. It was a Beefeater's martini. I would have liked a martini for myself, but I ordered a Coors instead. You know what teachers get paid."

How did you know it was a Beefeater's martini? I don't remember that.

"Easy. I asked her. That's how I broke the ice and believe me it was ice. Say, what do you mean you don't remember she had a Beefeater's? Who are you anyway? There was no one else at the bar but the girl and me."

Please try to ignore me, as you always have, and continue with your story.

"Am I out from under the anesthetic yet?"

Please continue with your story.

"And if I don't, what are you going to do, beat me bodily?"

I'm not a masochist. Please continue with your story?

"I feel as though I'm being coerced, but I'll continue anyway. I like the deliciousness. I had just asked her how she liked her martinis when she sneered again and said, 'You're trying to seduce me, aren't you?'"

"Maybe I should stop here and tell you who she was. Perhaps you've seen her. That movie actress. The one with the nice long legs and the boyish haircut that reminds me of a shaggy dog."

I know the girl. What I want from you is to tell the story.

"But I like girls who look like shaggy dogs. I was looking at her hair, the way it hung down the back of her neck, when she accused me of trying to seduce her."

And what did you reply?

"I don't remember. Probably nothing. It must have been nothing, no more than a negative swing of the head."

And what did she reply?

"Don't give me that shit fellow,' she said. 'I know your type.' She went on to say I was one of those crass bastards who think they can spread a little verbal shit and drag a woman off to bed."

She said that? Those are her words?

"You don't think I'm that crass, do you?"

But did she really mean it?

"I couldn't tell. She had this dry little smile at the edge of her mouth. Maybe it wasn't a smile, but there was a tension in her lips. I wasn't sure if it were disgust or anticipation, and I remember hoping a pink little tongue would slide out and lick it into a smile. Say, who is that breathing heavily? Is that you?"

Please ignore my presence and continue with the story.

"But I feel something, something inside my body cast."

Ignore that something as you always have and tell the story. Please, please.

"All right, but don't get so huffy. When she accused me of trying to seduce her, I told her that her accusation was completely untrue. In fact, I told her I was afraid of her. I told her I knew she was more than I could handle, more than my mind could take. As soon as I said this, she eased forward against the bar a little more confidently and the dryness at the corners of her lips *did* become a smile.

"You're afraid of me?" she asked, sipping her martini and licking her lower lip as if she were suggesting fellatio. Anyway, I went on to admit again that I was afraid of her, and she said it was a great pity because I would never know the real world because of my timidity.

"Well you know how I am, or do you? Anyway, I told her the way I feel on the matter, how the mind is a more capable instrument for receiving sensuality than is any other organ of the body, how all true pleasure is through the mind, and how I always prefer the vicarious to the actual.

"She cocked her head at me coquettishly and was about to say something when her voice cracked with a nervous laugh. I swear she was almost blushing. "Go ahead," I encouraged her. "Say what you were going to say." She drew back at my words and actually seemed to become shy. I had to place a reassuring hand on her shoulder before she would continue."

Yes, I remember, I remember.

"If you're going to be so immaturely eager, I just may stop my story right here. What are you, anyway? Some type of pervert? Are you some overgrown adolescent who still thinks with his secretory glands?"

Oh, please, please don't stop. I'll behave. I'll be very quiet. Just tell your story. Tell it softly, deliciously, softly, softly.

"All right, I will. But if you make one more outburst like that I'll stop. Say, I still feel something inside my body cast. Are you doing something? Is that you? Speak up."

You told me not to talk.

"Oh, the people they let in hospital rooms these days."

Please tell your story, sir.

"My story, my story. Where was I? Oh, yes. I had just put my hand on her shoulder to get her to tell me what she was about to say before she broke into the nervous laughter. She seemed to quiet at my touch and looked directly into my eyes. That I couldn't take and had to look away. I don't trust eyes. The only people who look me directly in the eyes are used car and encyclopedia salesmen. When I brought my eyes back to her face, I looked only at her lips.

"'What would it be like to go to bed with me?' she asked nervously, trying to look into my eyes and weaken my resolve. 'I mean could you tell, vicariously, how I would be?'

"Oh course I knew how it would be, but I didn't want to tell her. I had made that mistake before and was judiciously trying to avoid a second embarrassing incident. But she kept insisting that I tell her.

"'Please tell me,' she kept saying, and she started cuddling up to me."

Oh?

"I told her, finally, that I had read a description of what she would be like in a Nathanael West novel. She, of course, asked who Nathanael West was which would have cooled my ardor even if I had been a person interested in the base physical. I wasn't going to tell her at all, I really wasn't, but I do love the taste of

his words in my mouth, and I did hope that she would remove her hands from my leg once I had told her."

The words, please tell me the words.

"Oh, I guess I can tell you. But let me think. I want the words to be exact. They're so delicious, so accurate. Ah, yes. Here they are:

Her invitation wasn't to pleasure, but to struggle, hard and sharp, closer to murder than to love. If you threw yourself on her, it would be like throwing yourself from the parapet of a skyscraper. You would do it with a scream. You couldn't expect to rise again. Your teeth would be driven into your skull like nails into a pine board and your back would be broken. You wouldn't even have time to sweat or close your eyes.

"That's what I told her. That's it exactly. For a moment she sat there looking at me. Her whole essence, her being, was softer and for a moment I felt some compassion for this merely physical creature."

Bully for you.

"Her next comment, as expected, was inane. Completely childish.

"Do you really think I'd be like that?" she asked. I knew she would, but she kept insisting how I knew. She wanted to know how I could be so sure without experiencing her. I tried to tell her orgasmic experiences were merely clumsy gropings at best. I told her that the mind, vicariously, could pick up the sensual waves and understand and appreciate them far better than could filthy flesh-to-flesh contact."

Love the alliteration.

"But she kept arguing and wanting to know how I could possibly compare intercourse with her to falling off a skyscraper since I had experienced neither. She

was a complete idiot. I couldn't make her understand even the rudiments of intellectual appreciation."

So what happened?

"So she got me up to her room."

Her room?

"Yes, she had a room right there in the hotel. It was on the third floor overlooking the hotel's enclosed plaza, not the Santa Fe plaza, but the hotel's plaza, the one with the fountain and the pond filled with water lilies.

"She had a pitcher of martinis sent up to her room and was forcing them down me. I have to admit I was feeling pretty good even though I knew the alcohol was destroying my mind. Each time I took a drink I'd spill a little over the edge of her balcony from my glass and watch it splatter in the shallow water of the fish pond below. She was drinking, too, and trying to excite me by kissing me on the neck and probing my ear with her tongue. Thinking back on it now, it's all so ludicrous."

Ludicrous? I think I'm going to cry.

"Do I detect a tear in your voice? You are a true lover of the language, aren't you? You liked my alliteration a moment ago when I said 'filthy flesh-to-flesh contact.'"

I loved it. I loved it. Now take her to her bed. You did. I know, but tell me about it.

"I'd just as soon not dwell on such matters if you don't mind."

I mind, I mind.

"Oh, you couldn't possibly be interested in such base, animalistic relations, such sordid little struggles."

Speak for yourself, John.

"How often do I have to tell you that appreciation, understanding is not derived from the act but from the metaphor. Only through comprehension of the metaphor can we appreciate the fact, and the animalistic body is such a poor perceiver of sensual data that it really lends nothing to the mind for the creation of the metaphor. The mind can do it so much better, even in a void. It can understand transcendentially.

"A description of her breasts without the use of metaphor would be useless. Wallace Stevens proved that in his poem 'Study of Two Pears.'"

Were they like pears?

"Why, yes, if you insist. I have to admit the simile is useful in this instance."

Oh, such a juicy simile. Oooh.

"Upon my word, I think you're actually deriving some manner of physical pleasure from my story. I don't think I should continue with such a crass audience, especially an audience I can't see and one I don't even know."

What was she like?

"I'm not going to answer your question. I'm only continuing because that's the exact question she asked me after we had finished our sordid little struggle. I was sitting on the railing of her balcony drinking, and she was asking that question repeatedly and kissing and biting the hair on my legs. I only had my shorts on at the time, though why I wasn't more fully dressed I'll never know.

"'How was I?' she kept asking. 'How was I?'

"Finally I relented a little and told her she was better than a poke in the eye with a sharp stick, but this didn't seem to satisfy her. Once I said that she only became more exact in her questioning.

"Was it like falling off a skyscraper?" she asked.

"I tried to avoid a direct answer, but she kept pestering me. Why I told her what I finally did I'll never know. It makes no sense, at least as far as my belief in the vicarious is concerned."

What did you tell her?

"I told her I didn't know if going to bed with her was like falling off a skyscraper because I had never fallen off a skyscraper."

Was that a mistake?

"Oh, indeed. Her hands stopped caressing my thighs and the next thing I knew I was lying back on nothing with my martini hanging above me in the sky. I couldn't figure out what was holding it up and why the martini and olive hung in an amoebic glob just outside the lip of the glass. I think, to my credit, that I solved the problem, somewhat vicariously actually, before my body impacted into the fountain below."

Oh.

"You said that differently from the 'ohs' you have uttered previously in our little conversation. Why? The others seemed more pleasurable. That one actually seemed filled with pain."

Ignore me, as you always have. But before I go, tell me if you still prefer the vicarious experience to the actual, the real experience.

"Of course I prefer the vicarious. What other experience of importance could there possibly be?"

Your tumble with the movie starlet in the bed, wasn't that worth something, wasn't that an experience, a physical experience worth having?

"Why, yes, my good man. But even so, I still prefer the *Tale* to the *Tail*."

A curse upon the English language.

"Are you upset? Are you leaving?"

Yes. Forever.

"Well, good-bye. And please don't slam the door. I don't think my ears could stand it at this moment."

You will hear no doors.

"It's sure quiet in here. And why is it getting darker? The bandages over my eyes don't permit light, so how could it be getting darker? No problem really, though. I'll just lie here and solve the problem, vicariously of course."

"Why is it getting darker? Is my mind dying?"

There is not an incident in this story that did not happen to me.

Belated Circumcision

I suppose I knew something was coming, knew the way a cat knows company is coming for dinner and disappears at noon or the way a dog knows lightning is coming and hides in the barn a day before. That I was trying to climb over the hog wire fence between my yard and Myrtie Short's vacant lot might have indicated I knew, but really I was just drawn to the black currents on the far side.

"Come down from there, you little raccoon," my Mom scolded as she slammed open the back screen door. But by the time she reached me she was chuckling and trying to pry my chubby but tenacious fingers from the galvanized

wire. I'm sure she wasn't worried I'd break my neck. Her real concern was for the tiny, white sailor suit I wore.

"Inez," she called over her shoulder, "come help me, please." But the help was unneeded. My grasp relaxed and she held me at arm's length from her body as if I *were* a baby raccoon, a bitey one.

As she wheeled me about, the vacant lot disappeared and the side of our house slid into view. Beneath the clothesline, and hanging by nails from the wall, were the three washtubs I played in on cool, sunny mornings. Sometimes, as I sat in a tub, pretending it was a boat or airplane cockpit, I babbled seriously to my pet baby crow as it struggled for purchase on the rim. But this picture too slid past to be replaced by the crouching figure of my grandmother.

"Here we go, little man," she cooed unctuously, advancing on me with a graying patchwork quilt. "Come to your Grandmom."

I struggled as the quilt enveloped me, pinioning my arms. Only my head protruded and I'm sure my face looked as if it would explode with my impotent rage. Fortunately, my tight-fitting sailor cap prevented the explosion.

I struggled like a caterpillar in that cocoon, trying to metamorphose, but my mother had hurried ahead and opened the back door of the '35 DeSoto, allowing Inez, that's my grandmother, my Dad's mother, to slid her writhing bundle onto the seat where I, whom they called Little Mack, continued to wriggle.

Inez sat next to my feet and patted my belly through the quilt. "There, there, Little Mack. You be a good fellow and we'll get you a surprise when we get to Hutchinson."

"What?" I erupted and stopped squirming to try and find my grandmother's eyes within the narrow gold rims of her glasses.

She considered for a moment and then assured me. "We'll get you a hot dog." She smiled and shook her head *yes* in the exaggerated way older people do when trying to coerce toddlers into believing that their suggestions are good ones.

My mother, Laura, questioned the rearview mirror, trying to discover a hint of tongue-in-cheek humor in her mother-in-law's features, but she saw nothing but the cloth hat clutching Inez' grey hair and the matching blue earrings clipped to each lobe.

As we drove down Main Street I was still a prisoner on the back seat so I couldn't have seen the reaction to our passing, though having lived in Burrton for ten years and knowing its living fixtures I am pretty sure the following is accurate. At the Masonic Temple the car turned left and proceeded toward U.S. 50. As the tires crunched along the gravel street all that would have been visible were the two ladies sitting sedately in that fine, old, gray DeSoto. My mother drove and Inez sat stiffly erect in the back as if being chauffeured. No one could have seen the precious Little Me.

Mell Edwards almost certainly waved a greeting to the ladies as he swept the walk in front of his grocery store and Max Cavern, across the street, did the same from in front of his furniture store. As they passed the corner pool hall the barber surely looked up from a game of dominos, but there would have been no recognition in his eyes. Across the street, however, Bill Groninger watched the ladies cruise by from the caged window of his post office and chuckled. He didn't know about the third party in the car, but he knew it was wise the two ladies were separated by such a high front seat.

After turning onto the highway and thumping along for half a mile, my mother glanced back into the mirror. "We might as well unwrap him. He isn't going to hurt himself."

As soon as I was free, I scrambled from the comforter and stood behind the front seat, my hands clutching the cloth safety cord and my chin resting on the top of the seat. "I'm gonna get a ott dog, aren't I Mommy?"

She was still miffed at her mother-in-law for even bringing up the subject, hotdogs and tallywhackers having similar shapes, and didn't answer.

"Just how did you learn that this operation was deemed necessary?" Inez asked. She sat squarely against the back seat with her eyes on the seat in front of her. She could have looked at me, but I was directly between the two ladies and she felt uncomfortable looking in that direction.

"The skin started growing together or stopped growing or something. Anyway," she tried to sound pleasant, "it has to be done."

"Skin?" asked my grandmother, but maybe it wasn't a question. Inez' intonation was probably intentionally vague.

"Skin," my mother repeated. She didn't know just how much Inez understood. She wasn't Little Me's natural grandmother, you see. She was a step grandmother. A childless step grandmother. My grandfather had found her in the Arizona desert teaching at a little school in Light, a clapboard collection of buildings east of Tombstone. Grandfather was working on the railroad, lucky to have a job during the Depression, and when he offered her the chance to return with him to Kansas and to Burrton, it seemed almost too good. Even at 752 residents, Burrton was a metropolis compared to Light.

"Does he know the difference?"

"In a way he does. He's been pestering me lately as to why he doesn't have a pretty--" she paused, not knowing which word to use. Ultimately she decided on Little Me's own word. "Peepee," she said. "He wants to know why he doesn't have a pretty peepee like his brother's."

"Pretty?" It was a question that issued from the older woman's lips this time, but the question was at the preposterousness of the word. The use of the word *pretty* as an adjective to describe a--well the whole idea was an absurdity not to be countenanced.

After inwardly shuddering, she changed her tact, but her voice still registered criticism. "Well, if J.R. was circumcised when he was born, why wasn't Little Mack?"

"The doctor," Laura almost spat at the mirror, "said that if the boy comes from a clean, fine family there is no need for the operation."

"Well," Inez smoldered and folded her arms across her breasts. "I should have wondered at the sagacity of such a statement."

"Well, I trusted him. Besides, we were sixes and sevens on the matter anyway."

"Sixes and Sevens?"

"Oh, it's an old saying, Sixes and Sevens. It means you're uncertain, confused--maybe indifferent."

"I shouldn't wonder." Inez refused to relent and looked out the side window instead.

Truthfully, I was barely conscious of the women, let alone their feuding. With my child's brain, then little more developed than that of a lizard's, I was more

interested in the white lines racing from the road ahead and disappearing under the hood of the car.

"Mack notices things," my mother tried to explain--explain what she didn't know. "He knows things. Just last week for example I heard him in the bathroom say 'Yep, there they are.' And I went in to see what he was talking about."

"And?" questioned my grandmother. She didn't care that Laura had to halt her conversation in order to miss an approaching car.

"There were three marbles in the stool."

"He put marbles in the toilet?"

"He didn't exactly place them in the toilet. He--" And here was the word problem again. "He didn't place them," she decided. "He *Number Twoed* them." The older lady's mouth flew open but nothing came out so Laura continued. "He knew that if he swallowed marbles, they'd come out with his Number Two."

"You allow this child to swallow marbles?" Inez gasped finally and grabbed Little Me, hugging me protectively.

"Of course not. I wouldn't have told you if I'd thought you'd carry on like this. I was just trying to show you that he is aware of things, physical things we wouldn't expect."

"Why, I declare," the older woman shook her head. "Why did you allow this child to have marbles at all?"

"Kids have marbles. J.R. has marbles. So I gave him a little bag of marbles."

"I shouldn't be surprised."

As the thirteen-mile journey to Hutchinson continued, the car thumped rhythmically over the tarred expansion joints between the concrete slabs, somewhat lulling the ladies. Inez picked Little Me from her lap and stood me on

her knees. "Such a handsome little sailor, you are. Just like your Daddy." She inspected me from my white shoes--no they weren't soiling her grey suit--to my little sailor cap. "That scar in your eyebrow is healing nicely," she observed and stroked it with her thumb.

Laura cringed in the front seat.

"It's a miracle the fishhook caught you in the eyebrow and didn't blind you for life. I declare," she tsked, "I don't know what your mother was thinking letting a baby play with fishhooks."

"I wasn't letting him play with fishhooks. He was supposed to be looking at baby robins. J.R. was hoisting him up on his shoulders so he could get a look into the nest."

"A likely story."

"It's true," Laura yelled and turned around in the seat to face Inez.

"Mind the wheel," Grandma instructed, unruffled.

Laura turned back to the wheel but the car was scarcely more in control than she was. "How was I to know Jimmy Dole was going to be there trying to hook the nest down with a cane fishing pole?"

"All the same," Inez observed. Her idea of motherhood was a picture of eternal vigilance--an Indian scout forever scanning the horizon with hand-shaded eyes. "You poor, sweet baby," she cooed to Little Me and pecked me on the cheek. "It was just like J.R. to hold you up there like some kind of fish bait, wasn't it?"

Little Me was her favorite, probably because of my name. Her father was Mister McFall and everybody called him Mr. Mac. *Mack*, with the "K" on the end,

was named for her father. The "K", as everyone who is educated knows, means the name is a *name* and not a nickname.

But Little Me didn't remember the episode with the fishhook. If I ever thought of the scar in the future it would be as another day to remember, or rather a day to remember being told about. I had no recollection of being held down while a man I didn't know took a pair of pliers and forced the hook on through the eyebrow so he could cut off the barb and then curl the remainder of the hook out the way it went in.

What I did remember was the now, the present, and I marveled at what I saw. "See da cows," I pointed, and the two women looked at the activity on the other side of the fence. *Both* of the animals certainly were not *cows* .

Little Me responded to the animals' activities by suddenly remembering that "I wan a ott dog."

"When we get to Hutch," my grandmother assured me and patted my leg. She sat quietly for a few more bumps in the road before observing that "The scar above your other eye hardly shows at all."

"Now you can't blame that on me. He was sitting on the back porch with his brother when that happened. I had no way of knowing that clod was going to come out of the dark and hit him."

"Even so, a small boy out at night..."

"I wasn't ten feet from him. I was in the kitchen. And besides. It wasn't just any night. You remember the eclipse of the moon?"

"What does a baby know of eclipses?"

"Almost nothing," Laura granted, "but J.R. was sitting out there watching and he wanted to be with his big brother."

"Jimmy Dole again?" Inez cocked her eye in expectation.

"Either Jimmy or Butchie Castleman. I don't know which. Neither of them would own up to it when I grabbed them the next day."

Little Me didn't remember this episode either. I didn't remember running into the kitchen with my face and shirt covered with blood though I've heard that story enough times since.

Inez bounced me and wrinkled her face. "Still, in all, it's a wonder this child has managed to survive this long. It's one for the books, I tell you. What with the rat poison and all."

"Aaah," Mom pounded the wheel. "He didn't eat rat poison."

"Then why, may I ask, did you have his stomach pumped, the poor little dear?"

"I did it because J.R. said he had eaten the rat poison."

"What I don't understand is why you would give a child rat poison in the first place."

"I didn't and you know it. Why do you make me go over and over this? The poison was on a muffin--to get the rat. The muffin was locked--I repeat locked--in the closet. J.R. said Mack somehow got into the closet and ate the muffin."

"Really, Laura. A child getting into a locked closet."

"Well, J.R. said he did and why wasn't I to believe him. If Mack knows that if marbles go in one end and come out the other he just might know how to open a locked closet. Besides, there were teeth marks in the muffin."

"But J.R. told you Mack didn't eat the muffin. I distinctly remember him telling you so. But you went ahead and had the poor little child's stomach pumped anyway."

"J.R. told me Mack didn't eat the rat poison, but he told me that *after* he had already said he did. Which was I to believe? I can't believe anything J.R. says anyhow."

There was weight to this argument and even Inez had to agree.

I was still teetering my weight from one of Grandmom's knees to the other and watching the fence posts zip by. "Goin' like sixty," was one of my habitual phrases and I said it but the ladies weren't interested in anything I had to say. I didn't remember the rat poison episode, either. I didn't remember a muffin laced with poison, and I didn't remember the brouhaha when it was thought I had eaten it, and I didn't remember the rubber hoses shoved down my nose or the liquid slurping of my Bologna sandwich lunch being pumped into the sink in the emergency room. But I remember now. It has been a good story in the family for years

"I'm surprised," Laura barked from the front seat, "that you don't bring up the time he got his hand caught in the Mix Master or the time he pulled the bookcase over on himself while trying to get away from me and Gladys Cousins when we were trying to give him a cedar chip enema for his worms."

"Mrs. Graham told me all about the Mix Master. Told me how she had to kneed his poor little hand in a bowl of ice water for an hour before she could mould any semblance of a hand back into it. I'm surprised he has any fingers left at all. If the Mix Master doesn't get them, then that crow you keep around the backyard is bound to snip them off. And what are you letting a child play with a Mix Master for anyway?"

Mom's teeth ground. "I wasn't letting him play with the Mix Master."

Inez conjured up that picture of the Indian scout scanning the horizon again.
"You didn't tell me about *pushing* the bookcase over on him."

Luckily, another round was averted as we were entering the outskirts of Hutchinson and had to make a right turn into the hospital parking lot. From outside, the building looked like a bank to Little Me and my suspicions were confirmed when my mother walked right up to the teller behind the cage inside and began talking to her.

I went to my mother's side and craned my neck to see the teller. "Hello, brown eyes," she said, looking down at me and smiling.

"Can I haf sum money?" I asked. It was worth a shot. The lady laughed and resumed talking to my mother so I walked about, practicing scuffing my white shoes loudly on the marble floor. I had forgotten my grandmother but was reminded when she grabbed my arm and shushed me. Quiet in a bank? I wondered. "Can I haf my ott dog now?"

"Afterward," she shushed me again. "I'll see you *after* and then we can have a hot dog. Now you stay here with your mother." With that she walked to the outside door and disappeared into a flood of light.

"Over here, Mack." My mother was motioning me to her side but my interests were elsewhere. Through one of the interior doors I had spotted an enormously tall bed and wanted to crawl onto it. While my mother's back was still turned, I scooted into the room but the best I could do was grab the top edge of the bed. At eye level was nothing more than a maze of wires and the bottom of the mattress.

"That'll be enough, young man," a woman in white scolded and pulled me away from my quest and returned me to the lobby. "Is this our young patient?" she

asked my mother who nodded. "Then we'd better get *you* into a gown." She punctuated the word by extending a long index finger to the tip of Little Me's nose.

The lady in white, not like any bank teller I had seen, carried me into a room with huge lights hanging from the ceiling. The walls were lined with white metal cabinets, and in the center of the room was a table. It was about the size and height of Mell Edward's butcher's table, but this one was made of metal.

"Here we go, young fellow," the lady in white said as she stripped my sailor suit from me and tied a gown around my neck and back. When she was done, I found myself walking barefooted around the room in a white shirt that was easily big enough for my brother or dad. In my wanderings I came across a set of knees, also dressed in white, which had just entered the room.

A confident masculine voice boomed down reassuringly. "I'll bet you're the young man I'm here to see." I leaned back to peer up at the huge man in white. He didn't look anything like banker Hidelbrecht or the butcher Edwards.

"Can I haf a ott dog?" I asked earnestly.

The doctor half laughed, looked at my mother and then back down to me. "We'll see," he said. "But first I'd like you to crawl up on that table for me." The table was much higher than the bed I had failed at earlier, but I was willing to give it a try. I thought really hard how to do it and suddenly I was rising and flying toward it. Only when my feet missed the table entirely and I landed on my bottom did I realize that I had been lifted by the man in white.

Mom came to the side of the table, took my hand and forced me to lie back. Automatically, my legs came up--because I didn't want to lie down, I wanted a hot dog--but the lady in white pushed them down and strapped them to the table. Then

she came around the table, around the back of the doctor, and placed another strap over my chest. This strap had the added irritation of forcing my arms to my side.

"Do you listen to the Lone Ranger on radio?" the huge man in white asked, bending down to stare directly into my eyes. His hair was hidden by a white cap and his nose and mouth were behind a white mask.

I didn't answer. I was looking into those adult eyes and wondering what they really wanted.

"Okay, then," the man continued as if he had received an answer. "I have this mask I want *you* to wear. It's just like the Lone Ranger's," he said holding it up, but when he placed it over my face something was wrong. This mask didn't have any holes for my eyes.

"I'm Red Ryder," I insisted and tried to rock free from the restraints. "I'm Red Ryder."

Maybe my mother knew who Red Ryder was because she had bought me some Red Ryder chaps, but the doctor apparently didn't know. "Now Mack," said a strange voice, "I'm going to let you smell something. It smells just like roses. When you smell it, breathe it in real deep."

Suddenly I was suffocating, dying. I couldn't breathe and I fought the restraints. "Count," the doctor ordered me. "Count," my mother encouraged and squeezed my hand and patted me on the chest. "You know how to count."

"One," Little Me gasped obediently. "Two, three, five, six, seven, nine, eleven, twelve, thirteen...." I panicked. I didn't know any more numbers.

"That's as high as he can go," I heard my mother tell the doctor.

"Count backwards," the male voice then ordered, but it was too late. The breathing came easier and Little Me fell into a world of lights and circular sounds.

This other side of everything that I knew was entertaining, and I trudged on to see what wonders lived here. One of the sounds I thought I heard was the man in white, far away now--maybe in another world--say, "It won't be much longer now."

I know that's an old circumcision joke but I swear that's what I heard.

Then the light returned. Not the light of the other world but my altered world's light. The light in Hutchinson, Kansas. And the light was coming through the back window of the '35 DeSoto.

"Look what I bought you." It was my grandmother's voice. She was holding something but because of the light and the horrible odor I was breathing in and out I couldn't see it. "It's Mickey Mouse and Goofy," she insisted and opened the comic book before my confused eyes.

But it wasn't. That wasn't Mickey and that wasn't Goofy. They were strange cartoon characters, and I couldn't understand how my grandmother could have gotten it so wrong. This mouse had small beady eyes, a tiny forehead, and a huge jaw. This Goofy snarled and had saliva dripping from his tongue. These were mean--not cuddly--playmates. Mickey and Goofy's bizarro cousins.

In protest, I struggled and discovered I was lying across my grandmother's lap, once again wrapped in the suffocating quilt my mother had gotten from Auntie Bird. But it was different than earlier that morning. This time my arms and hands were outside the quilt. Its fabric was protecting my body from *my* hands.

"Whaa?" I questioned, still in a lingering cloud of ether, and tried to get my hands under the quilt. Something was wrong down there.

"No, no. You leave well enough alone," my grandmother patted my hands.

"Am I gonna get a ott dog?" I didn't care if she answered or not. I just didn't know what else to say. Something had happened and I could feel it down there.

With an awareness, a maturity, that overwhelmed me, I lay back in my grandmother's arms and just took it. I didn't know what had happened or why. I just exhaled and acquiesced.

Inez ran the tip of a finger over my forehead, aimlessly at first. When she realized what she was doing, she traced her father's full name across my forehead, down my cheek, and across my chin. I know because she told me years later.

"I think the ether has him again," she spoke quietly to my Mom who was once again driving down U.S. 50, this time towards home.

But I wasn't sleeping. I was thinking. And I wasn't thinking of the days ahead either, those days filled with Vaseline coated gauze pads wrapped around my-- tallywhacker. And I wasn't thinking of the times I would have to run back to the house to get the whole mess re-greased and re-taped to my belly.

And I wasn't thinking if I would remember this day, for I *knew* I would. I was just wondering if I was ever going to forgive them. Eventually I did. It took twenty or thirty minutes, whatever the length of my nap. As for the operation itself? Just another card in my deck of life. Not a face card. Not a deuce. I have to side with my folks who had the burden of selecting that card for me.

Like them I am Sixes and Sevens on the matter. I've no reason to complain.

This is the way Samuel Taylor Coleridge would have written it had he lived today-- and been an atheist.

Leaving the Sargasso

Maybe I can blame it on the toothpick. Maybe it *was* the toothpick, but more than likely it was the bird, that improbable bird. But whether the toothpick or the bird, of one thing I am sure. If the Waufre had told me what it was that was following us, I wouldn't be here, suspended among uncharted stars, watching the cracked hull of my ship spiral into the blackness beneath my feet.

The toothpick I smuggled aboard in my shirt pocket simply because it was forbidden. It wasn't so much that it was a toothpick as that it was made of wood. The use of wood was a sacrilege to the Waufre because they were wooden creatures themselves, an odd concretion of cellulose held together by little more than static electricity.

Yes, the Waufre were a strange people, *were* because they died days ago. Maybe they didn't know what the bird was. Maybe the strange creature winging through the void of space behind us was as enigmatic to them as to me. But I think not. I think they knew and simply declined to tell me, knowing that I would never understand. What they accepted implicitly, knew without bothering to know, would have been an unfathomable conundrum to me. Explanations would have been wasted.

Maybe that was it. But more than likely it was the toothpick, the toothpick I had carefully hidden within the framework of my bunk. It was cleverly hidden, but the first time I looked for it, it was gone. They had found it as easily as a mother finds a crying baby in a dark room. If not for the toothpick, I might have gotten along better with the Waufre.

I was the only one of my kind assigned to their ship. Our mission was to give aid to the thousands of hermit traders who plied the routes in our section of the

galaxy in search of markets for their foofaraw, the trinkets and gimcracks of carnival life that the larger and more serious traders could not bother with. They were called hermit traders because in earlier days they would have been hermits, men hiding in caves or in the dark flats of slum districts. They chose the capsuled life of space traders because the isolation was more complete.

My duties aboard the ship were largely ornamental. I was to do what the Waufre were unable to do for themselves, which, under ordinary circumstances, was nothing. It was because of their one physical limitation that they are dead. They could not tolerate weightlessness.

If the artificial gravity aboard the ship should fail, they would disintegrate, become clouds of white cellulose. Only their large, round, blue iris less eyes would retain their shape. Aside from that I never learned much about the Waufre even though I lived among them for two or so of the old solar years. I'm a little vague on the time. But they *were* an inscrutable people, at least to me. Maybe it was because they were telepathic and I am not. At least I was told they were. Maybe among themselves they were a garrulous bunch, as riotous *internally* as drunken teenagers but all placidity without. I'm just guessing because all I knew of them was the external. They looked like unbending gingerbread men cut from white dough instead of the brown ginger. If they were sexed, I didn't know it. If they ate or slept, I never learned how or when.

I had even quit wondering about them and was living only within the theater of my mind when I first saw it, the creature. As was my custom I had been standing alone, staring into the tranquility of space when something glided past my viewing screen. I wasn't stunned by the sudden appearance, but I did turn from the window in disbelief and try to reconstruct what I had seen. It had feathers and

long, very long wings. Its legs, seemingly too frail for the size of the bird, were tucked into the body and its toes curled into fists at the point where the fluted tail spread its symmetry.

A bird in space? A living, warm-blooded creature wafting on undetected currents in a vacuum? Impossible.

When I turned back to the window there was nothing. I scanned the blackness between the stars but could not rediscover the silvery body with bronzed legs that I thought I had seen. There was no obliteration of stars that its passage would have caused. There was nothing but sky. Perhaps the loneliness that I had begun to enjoy, even to think of as a superior adaptation, was playing tricks on me.

But no sooner had I convinced myself it was an hallucination than the bird reappeared. It soared up from beneath the ship and looped directly in front of me. It was as graceful as a thought. As smugly confident of its existence as a monarch. It never beat its wings. That would have been ungainly. Instead, it maneuvered with subtle adjustments of its primary flight feathers. On what currents this mariner without a wave soared I did not know. After completing its loop, it glided directly toward my window and that is when I first saw its eyes. They were large and golden, doughnut sized with massive black pupils that mesmerized. The creature drifted to the window and hovered, questioning me with those golden orbs. But what was it asking? What did it want?

"A bird," I cried and turned to the Waufre who stood stolidly at the controls gazing into the space before the ship. "There's a bird out there," I pointed.

Only one of the crew rotated a single lazy eye to my voice, but when I pointed again to the window the creature was gone. The Waufre looked steadily in my direction, and then, with the apparent disinterest of a house cat, the eye rolled back

to the controls. I had no idea if the creature even knew what I was talking about. And, to make matters more frustrating, because of its iris-less and pupil-less eye, I hadn't even been sure it was looking at me.

My frustration was relieved somewhat, however, when the bird swooped to the front of the ship and glided just off its bow as if it were a dolphin. The creature was directly in front of the Waufre at the controls, and I was sure they had seen it. There might have been a slight inclination of their heads on their stiff necks as if they were acknowledging its presence, but they didn't turn to one another, as humans would have.

I spent much of the remainder of that day at the communication screen--my only avenue of conversing with the Waufre--trying to pry from them information about the bird, but all I got were proverbs and epigrams which I am sure were meaningful to them but which only increased the mystery for me. It was like trying to talk to an ancient Chinese philosopher who disdained declarative thought because it ignored the infinite possibilities. An additional frustration was that I wasn't sure I was addressing or even being received by the Waufre. I always suspected that I was talking to the machine itself, and that it had been programmed to humor me when it was not assigning me tasks.

My efforts in the days that followed also failed. The sole means I had of gaining information was through personal observation and that was maddening. All I could do was stand before the window at the ship's aft and watch as the bird? creature? soared through the heavens behind us. At times its body was indistinct from the blackness and all that showed were its luminous eyes, and I was sure they were watching me, trying to tell me something.

The only consolation I received in the weeks that it followed us came in a rare intuitive moment. While watching the spangled darkness one evening? day? it occurred to me that there are more unbelievable than believable natures in this universe, and that I should marvel more and wonder less. I don't know why, but I found this reassuring.

During those weeks that I puzzled over the bird the ship ran smoothly and there was no break in the routine, a routine that unfortunately left me idle. Regardless of what I wanted to do, I repeatedly found myself gravitating to the aft window to search for those golden eyes in the darkness. But even when I wasn't at the window those eyes were always there like two pin holes of light in a dream.

One morning? evening? I found that the Waufre had posted the duty roster on the communication screen and my name was on it. Maybe the Waufre posted it, maybe the computer did, but at any rate I was relieved for the opportunity to be active. I was to venture outside the ship and spray a thin adhesive solution over the hull. Its purpose was to cover the pits in the protective coating caused by impacting micro meteorites. Even though I knew it was only busy work, I welcomed it. It was something I could do that the Waufre couldn't.

I scrambled to the task and was already outside the ship patching up the rougher areas when I remembered the bird. I hadn't seen it, and search as I might I couldn't find it. It was that search, and the resultant pause from my duties, that alone may have caused the destruction of the ship. While I looked about, I negligently forgot to clear the tip of the long nozzle on my spray gun and the liquid froze, sealing the hole.

Such accidents had been foreseen, however, and I crouched as best I could and pulled the cleaning rod from the holster at my hip. As I rammed it down the

barrel, clearing away the debris, I glanced toward the ship's conning tower and then to the antennas sticking from it. And there it was.

It stood on its long, bronze, stork-like legs and watched me, its doleful eyes welling with an eagerness I couldn't tolerate. It was otherwise motionless, a part of the antenna on which it stood and yet alone in the infinitude of space.

What was it trying to tell me? Or conversely, what did it want to ask? Terrified of further confronting those questions, or confronting myself perhaps, I raised the spray gun, the ramrod still in the barrel, and pointed it at the creature's eyes. Without thought, I squeezed the trigger and a cloud of spray fogged from the nozzle. Through it, like a miniature rocket, flew the ramrod.

I saw no more as the unexpected thrust sent me backward. When I finally righted myself and looked back to the antenna, the bird was no longer standing. One foot had caught in the girder-work and the creature's body and wings, now grotesquely awkward, floated, the ramrod piercing its breast.

Gazing at it, I felt a sudden euphoria as if my troubles were over, but after I worked my way to the antenna and loosened the body, I felt a sudden weight, not the weight of the bird, but of the knowledge that I might never know what it was and what it wanted. And, too, I realized that it had been my only companion in space, the only thing toward which I had felt an affinity. The Waufre, though they were bipeds and sapient creatures, were totally unlike me. I would have felt more at home among non-humanoid robots.

When I re-entered the ship, the Waufre were waiting for me, their blue, translucent eyes beacons of fear as they watched me remove my suit. It was the first time they had collectively recognized my presence, but they hadn't moved--at least they hadn't taken a step. Their heads, which I had never actually seen pivot,

were slightly inclined toward me, just enough so that one eye could roll in my direction. I didn't know if what had upset them was the bird slung over my arm or the subtle vibrations of the normally smooth running ship that I felt through my feet.

No longer were the Waufre inscrutable: I could sense their malignity, even more so than the hostility I felt the day my toothpick came up missing. What happened next illustrates why I must be vague about time aboard the ship. I had often felt that I slept or awakened at their convenience, not my own. I was never sure if a night's sleep was eight hours or eight years long. Maybe the Waufre eyes paralyzed me or placed me into a trance, but I don't recall any such sensation. The first indication that the Waufre *might* have moved, might have left their stations and came to me, was a tugging sensation at my neck. When I reached a hand up to investigate, I discovered that I was no longer wearing my pressure suite. Even more startling was the loose noose I found encircling my neck. The other end of the rope was tied around the bird's neck. I was wearing the creature as if it were a giant pendant.

It was a burden I could scarcely bear, but bear it I knew I must. The Waufre still stood before the controls as I last remembered them, their heads ever so slightly inclined toward me, but the new hatred I perceived told me not to remove the bird. What would happen if I did, I did not know, and I was unwilling to learn. The thing dangled clumsily from my neck and got in the way of my every movement. When I walked, I had to straddle its feet which touched the floor and dragged beneath my crotch. I was loath to put food into my mouth because my hands were constantly touching the bird, positioning it so that I might sit down or

reach to pick something up. I must have washed my hands thirty times that first day.

But as bad as the days were the nights that followed were worse. I wouldn't take off my clothes because I didn't want the thing touching my naked body, and, too, I had to lie on my back with the bird atop me. Its large, triangular, black beak rested at my throat and if I tossed in my sleep the point would jab my carotid arteries. Often I would awaken with a start to find myself staring into those large, never-closing, golden eyes. They swelled from my breast like giant mammaries. Strangely, the creature never rotted and in fact it never smelled. For that I was grateful.

If the Waufre had ignored me before I shot the bird, they now considered me to be dead and gone, a thing they had jettisoned years ago. But they didn't have time to ignore me. They were busier than usual, perhaps because the ship was acting queerly. Though they wouldn't tell me, I suspected the craft was now out of their control.

And then that night came. Though I had slept fitfully for weeks, I suddenly felt myself slipping into a deep, restful sleep. I dreamed that the creature no longer rested atop me and that I was free of its burden. The dream was so real, and the ease with which my body lay in its berth so startling that I awoke and looked down my chin to make sure those large golden eyes were still there.

They weren't.

Ecstatic, I started to leap from my bunk when I felt a sharp jab at my forehead and looked up. The creature was floating above me, its eyes still open, still watching. It was then that I noticed I too was floating ever so slightly above my

bunk. Though the other life-supporting systems were operating, there was no gravity.

The Waufre. They couldn't live without gravity.

Trailing the creature behind me, I pulled myself from my sleeping quarters and floated down the passageway to the helm. When I entered the control room, the Waufre were gone. I spoke a message into the communication screen, saw it printed in my own language and in that of the Waufre, but there was no response. Even the computer, which I was probably talking to, didn't reply.

Dazed, alone, I pulled myself into my chair and wrapped its belt around me. The bird floated before me, its beak nearly touching my lips. I considered freeing myself from the creature, but my hands, already in motion, stopped. Though I no longer feared the Waufre, there was something else. Somehow I felt responsible for the plight of the ship. I had committed the sin or the sacrilege that had caused its erratic behavior--whether the bird or the toothpick--, and I knew I must continue to suffer, to atone for a wrong I didn't yet understand.

Assessing the situation, I looked about the craft and noted that it was still operating, heading for an unknown destination as if controlled from above and below by a power beyond my reasoning. On the ship's communication console was the Waufre's last message, a May Day of sorts. All it said was MURPHY SPACE.

Murphy Space. That explained some things. Though never before encountered, it was a postulated region where all or most known physical laws seemingly did not hold. If anything could ever go wrong, it would go wrong in Murphy Space. Whatever it was, the ship was now adrift in it, helpless in a vast sargasso sea of conflicting laws, or of no laws at all.

A slight roll of the ship settled my body into my chair and as my chin was tilted upward by the unexpected gravity, I saw the Waufre, or what remained of them.

A fine white powder covered the hull of the ship, collected there either by the very slight centrifugal force or by static electricity. It looked like finely ground flour or jeweler's rouge. And rolling through the powder, leaving long, smooth trails, were Waufre eyes.

I must have watched those blue eyes for hours as they rolled back and forth across the friction-less hull above me. When I finally came to myself, drew my eyes from that macabre dance, I was more lonely than I had ever been. I was totally alone and for the first time I feared it. Before, I had considered the ability to be alone to be a sign of character, a strength most people never developed.

I had to break that mood or I would go insane. Still trailing the bird, I left my chair and floated about the ship looking for food, anything to take my mind off the loneliness. But the automatic food dispensers were not working. All I had to sustain me were several squeeze bottles of water I found floating in a locker. For two days I lived on that water. Maybe they were days and maybe they were only hours. I didn't know. All I know is that I hungered unreasonably and at one point thought of dissecting the creature about my neck and eating it. But I couldn't. Its eyes were still watching me and, though dead, they still seemed to beseech me. I began to suspect that the bird had been as lonely as I now was and had followed the craft hoping only for companionship.

When my hunger finally became overpowering, I found my eyes drifting up to the powdered remains of the Waufre. Their scattered bodies looked appetizingly

like flour, so like it that I was sure it contained the proteins and nutrients that would sustain me.

Pressing slightly up from the floor, a squeeze bottle in my hand, I floated to the ceiling and pressed an undulating globule of water from the bottle. With my fingers, I gently maneuvered the globule against the hull and rolled it through the powder. It worked. It collected the powder as if I were rolling a snowball.

Floating, my back to the ceiling and the creature hanging beneath me, I contemplated the ball, molding it between my palms and kneading it slightly. As I was rolling it, I wondered if I would really eat it, fearing then that I might perhaps be inhibited from doing so, fearing that if I did I might suffer recriminations, be hounded by the taboos against eating another sentient being.

But no. When it was of the desired consistency, I almost blithely plopped it into my mouth and chewed and sucked and savored it. It was sweeter than I had expected, and, after finishing it, I turned about to roll another ball.

I was still rolling the powder into balls and stashing them in a box for later consumption when I began to feel a presence, not a presence within the ship, but without. Pushing the container of Waufre meat beneath my chair to keep it from floating about, I drifted to the forward windows and looked out. Perhaps a hermit trader was also trapped in the sargasso and was trying to reach my ship for aid. Scanning the space and stars I could see nothing. Nothing that looked to me like a hermit trader at least. To the right of the window, however, and at a great distance, I saw a slight haze, perhaps a frail nebula. But as I watched, it grew in size and I realized it was some sort of a craft, a ghostly craft emitting an eerie St. Elmo's aura.

"A ship," I tried to cry aloud but my mouth was still caked by the Waufre I had eaten and I only managed a rasp. Biting my arm in frustration, I began to salivate and finally managed to make my cry audible. But there was no one aboard to hear. I was alone with the creature still hanging from my neck, and it still looked up at me with its disquieting eyes.

"Damn, you," I screamed at the thing and started to remove it. But again I stopped. Why I don't know. It was a constant agony, a reminder of my own frailties.

When I looked up from the bird, the craft was already much nearer and again I cried but this time in fear. It wasn't a ship but the remains of one or the beginnings. And it wasn't of a design for space but for an atmosphere. I had seen such designs before but only in flight histories.

It was a dirigible, a lighter-than-air craft. And it was only the girder work of such a craft. I could see stars through it.

As it neared, I became aware of movement within the craft, on the girders actually. I couldn't make out just what the movement was at first, but after the ship drifted nearer and its skeletal structure became more obvious, I could see, or imagine, the figure of a woman.

It was a woman! The strange ship, rotating around its shorter axis like a giant Ferris wheel, spun through the space separating us and positioned itself in front of the windows through which I was looking, and I could see her plainly.

She was dancing on one of the girders, long, black, diaphanous veils floating behind her. When she turned to me, she laughed insanely. Her gaudy red lips and cheek bones were stark against her kabuki-white skin. The glow I had earlier perceived about the ghost craft emanated from her iridescent golden hair which

trailed about her to nearly the length of the veils. Though she was laughing, I saw that her eyes resembled those of the creature about my neck. The sadness and loneliness in them contrasted grotesquely with her laughter.

In her right hand she held a ring, about a foot in diameter, and it was when she beckoned with it that I saw her companion on the strange craft. He, or it, had been watching us from behind a girder and all I could see of him at first was his black-hooded head. I don't think I actually saw his face. What I did see was a faint blue glow from within the hood as if I were seeing light shining through bone.

Cautiously, the figure emerged from behind the girder and walked slowly along the framework. He, too, held a ring, and when they came together they nodded to one another and began feinting tosses of the rings as though they were warming up for a match at quoits.

On the side of the ship opposite them was a peg, and I realized that they *did* intend to play a game. But what was the prize? There had to be a prize, they were so intent.

Turning from me and brushing the hair from her eyes, the woman crouched and tossed her ring through the ship's skeleton. Rotating slowly and traveling as if through thickened air, the hoop caught the tip of the peg and settled comfortably about its base. The hooded figure then took his turn. With more care than that shown by the woman, he spun his ring toward the target and watched as it sailed smoothly, hovered just over the peg, and then sailed past to disappear into space. The two did not exchange words. Instead, the death-like figure turned and stalked away along a girder until he vanished into the metal superstructure. When the woman spun to look at me, she was no longer laughing, but her eyes were as lonely

as ever. Replacing her laughter was a faint line of hope, almost a pleasant smile, that lifted the corners of her lips.

I tried to hail her, but at that moment the ghost ship began spinning like a pinwheel and tumbled from my view as if it were bouncing down a giant celestial staircase.

"No," I pleaded and pressed my face to the window to watch the craft as it bounded obliquely away from me. But it was gone and I was alone.

"Damn, you," I screamed impotently after the fleeting ship and raised my hands to my face to discover tears. I hadn't cried in ages. That, too, along with loneliness, I had considered a weakness which the strong man, the worthwhile man, eventually overcame.

As the tears streamed down my face, I looked out the helm windows to the stars and hated them. They were so complacent, so sure of themselves. They seemed so at home and by contrast I was lost in a vast sargasso, homeless and alone.

"Damn, you," I repeated, but this time to the stars only.

Leaving the window, I floated through the room, trying to find something to lessen my agony. There was nothing. No doors to a new world. I was as encapsuled and as alone as the hermit traders. But they reveled in it. Or did they? Did they really, or were they just hurt individuals hiding from more hurt? Or were they men who were merely afraid to reach out for companionship, afraid to test their tentacles of love?

Wondering, I looked down and saw the eyes of the creature gazing into mine. The look in them had changed subtly, and I knew what it wanted and reached out

to gently smooth the feathers on its head. With each stroke, the look in the eyes softened, and if I hadn't known better I would have sworn the thing was purring. Why hadn't I done this before? Why hadn't I reached out to man? I couldn't remember when I had last touched another person, laid my hand on a shoulder reassuringly or hugged anyone joyfully.

And I had killed the poor creature that had flown for ages through a lonely space to search me out and tell me to love. Hugging the creature, I floated to the window and looked out upon the stars, bright specks of hope, and I loved them. I knew they were there for me and I for them. I was part of the whole and only just realized it.

"You're beautiful," I laughed and cried to the stars and spread my arms to their magnificence.

Immediately the creature dropped from my neck and the ship was enveloped in a fire that did not burn. Above my head rose a chorus of soprano voices, and when I looked the powdered Waufre and their eyes were a swirling cloud. The cloud descended from the ceiling and hovered just above the control panels. Within the cloud the blue eyes circled in frenetic orbits as if they were the electrons of an insane atom.

I stumbled or was pushed into my chair and without my aid the strap buckled itself and secured me to the seat. As I sat dazed, the swirling mass of Waufre parted into many little clouds and the eyes, two by two, followed. When the blue orbs were positioned, the clouds elongated into cylinders until I saw standing before me the Waufre, alive and whole.

Ropes of fire fell from the ceiling and disappeared into their heads and they turned to the controls, and the ship began to move. It moved through space with a

sleekness it had never possessed. The fire without and within the ship was hurrying it to a rendezvous I didn't understand and was in no hurry to know.

The stars flew past the ship like rice at a wedding and still the speed increased. Time screeched past my ears until I had to plug them with my fingers. We were going too fast. Our bodies could not take it. The edges of the Waufre grew as ragged as fog in a breeze, and, as I watched, the frayed edges grew into long threads that passed directly through the ship's hull and disappeared, the last thread trailing the still attached eyeballs.

The creature that had been around my neck for weeks rose from the floor and slid through the hull, following the Waufre. Its feet slid through last.

I thought I would again be alone, but when I looked back to the control panel the fiery figures of men stood where the Waufre had been. The face of each was drawn in anguish and each held a raised hand as if it had started to wave to an old friend who had snubbed him. They were frozen in this position and yet they burned.

Beyond them, through the window, I saw three hermit traders and rose from my seat to hail them. As I did, the fiery figures dissipated and expanded about the ship. The atmosphere increased many times, and I felt the blood pooling in my organs and I was sure I would hemorrhage and die.

But I didn't. Under the pressure the ship cracked like an egg giving birth, and I was jettisoned, suit less, into the new life of space.

I floated, wheeling, my arms and legs spread. And I lived. I was outside the ship, unprotected, and I was alive.

There is a new loneliness out here. I see my old ship, my old self, descending further and further into the void beneath my feet, but I don't need that life anymore.

I have a new mission, not one of loneliness, but one of connection. At all cost I must spread this message, this message so simple but so misunderstood. Here before me is an opportunity, three hermit trading vessels. What lonely, confused beings they must be. I must select one--the one in the vessel displaying the fewest lights--and tell him what I have learned.

But how do I get to him? How do I cover the distance between the two of us? I'll just spread my wings and fly to him. If he doesn't understand my language, surely he will understand my message.

He will see it in my large, golden eyes.

Would You Like Fries With That Order, Sir?

Gerald looked up from the hot grill and blinked through the haze of atomized hamburger grease and smoke. No customers, thank god. They had been coming in like flies all afternoon, swarming and buzzing with excitement about the game, their mouths salivating for 'burgers and shakes.

And today, of all days, that fester-faced little bitch he had hired only the week before had called in sick. "I don't think I feel so good," she had said, and even then Gerald had wanted to tell her what she could do with the job. But he didn't.

He had one of those meek Christian personalities which seemed to say, "Here I am, walk all over me."

And people walked all over him.

Even so, he would have fired her later in the afternoon if she had stopped by. He had been up to his filthy apron strings in customers and sizzling hamburgers and was silently cursing the grease clogged filters above the grill, when he glanced up and saw her cruise past.

She and that damned sugar beet-hoer boyfriend of hers.

He had seen the car as it passed, its front bumper raked nearly to the pavement. No one in the shop could have missed it. A cherry black and yellow '57 Chevrolet with fender skirts and all. It hadn't even been dark, but that ducktailed spic she called "Tony" had already flipped on the lights under the fender wells to show off the spinner hubs on the front wheels.

"Ah, what a frizzie-headed bitch," Gerald growled and started pumicing the grill. What kind of help could you expect for a buck and change an hour anyway. What he needed was an adult, someone who was willing to take a little responsibility, someone who could make change, accurate change, someone who knew what cleanliness was, someone who had better sense than to work for sixty-five cents an hour.

Someone like the man who had just stumbled into the trash can out in the parking lot.

Gerald heard the can lid clatter to the asphalt surface of the lot and looked up from his pumicing to wearily shake his head at the sight of the stranger dutifully trying to right the container. The man had apparently just walked up because there were no cars in the parking lot. Walk-in customers were not all that unusual, though. Greeley was a college town full of weirdos and health nuts who thought nothing of walking or bicycling a couple of blocks. But not Gerald. He wouldn't walk ten feet if he had a car like Tony's.

What did puzzle him was the angle at which the trash can had fallen. Somehow the man had gotten between the can and the cinder block wall against which it rested and had pushed the can forward into the traffic lane. There couldn't have been more than three or four inches clearance between the wall and the can, if that.

Scarcely paying attention to the man, and yet fully expecting him to enter and order something, Gerald busied himself by wiping the pumiced surface of the grill clean with a towel. He was scraping the blade of his spatula clean on the edge of the grease trough when the man finally did enter.

"Over a hundred thousand of them, huh?" the stranger smiled as if he were in on some important secret joke.

Gerald walked around the grill to the cash register. "Pardon?" he asked. "You've sold over a hundred thousand of your Hamburgers," the man repeated, still smiling like an idiot but this time pointing at the golden arch sign outside that announced the six-digit number.

"Spoze so," Gerald shrugged. The number seemed unrealistically large to him, too, but he wasn't about to argue with the people who ran the franchise. "What'll it be?"

"Oh," the man sighed with strange delight and looked at the bill of fare on the soffit above the grill. "I guess I'll have one of your fifteen-cent 'burgers."

"Would you like fries with that order, sir?" Gerald asked absently, no longer aware that the little sticker above the cash register drawer ordered him to ask that question.

The man chuckled. "Here it is in the early 60's and you're already pushing the fries. I thought that didn't come 'till later with the onion rings and apple turnovers."

Gerald stared at the man. "Pardon?" he asked wearily, blinking his smoke-wearied eyes in confusion.

"The fries," the man explained. "That's where your real profit is.

"'Spoze so," Gerald pondered, running his hand over his flattop. He had never thought of it that way, but what the man said seemed to make sense. Where the profit came from didn't concern him, though. All he worried about was the dollar and seven cents an hour he received for running the place.

Wondering only slightly about the economics of fries, Gerald went back and threw a meat patty on the griddle. He had just cleaned it and already it was getting dirty again. While the patty cooked, he looked out at the man who was busily inspecting the mechanics of the straw dispenser.

"Been jogging?" Gerald asked, trying to make polite conversation while the meat cooked. He was referring to the man's clothing, something between a sweat suit and overalls.

"No, these are my regular togs."

The man was obviously a weirdo, so Gerald dropped the conversation. When the hamburger was done, he wrapped it in a white tissue and walked to the cash register. "That'll be fifteen cents."

Chuckling, the man squeezed a single dime from a roll of coins and paired it with a nickel from his pocket. "There you are, my good man, he smiled, pressing the coins into Gerald's palm. "Don't spend it all in one place."

Only after the man had skipped out did Gerald look at the coins. "The bastard," he exclaimed. "Gave me some damned foreign money."

But it wasn't foreign. The pictures on the coins were different, but they were still stamped with "In God We Trust." And the *E Pluribus Unum* was on the back. Looking closer, he discovered the date.

2025

"Hey, wait a minute," Gerald called after the man and looked up just in time to see him walk through the seemingly solid cinder block wall.

"Not again," a voice whined as Lindsey, extricating his hamburger from the white tissue, walked into his office. Sheepishly, he took a bite out of his sandwich and, with his mouth full, grinned guiltily at his research associate, Melvin Winterowd.

"For Christ's sake, Lindsey. This is the second time this week I've caught you. If you don't stop it, and I mean immediately, we're going to get our tits caught in a wringer."

"But it was only fifteen cents," Lindsey protested, holding the uneaten portion of his hamburger out for Winterowd's inspection.

"I don't give a damn how hard it is to live with the present inflation and food rationing. You've got to quit raiding the food larders of the past."

"But who's going to miss a lousy fifteen-cent hamburger?"

"That's not the point, and you know it. When the story got out last month that you'd been back in the late fifties buying three pounds of ground round for a dollar, the government damn near had to call out the guard to clear the people from the institute's gates."

"Well," Lindsey swallowed, "if you don't tell them, who's to know?"
Finishing the last bite of the burger, he wadded the wrapper and tossed it toward his trash basket, but Winterowd intercepted it.

"Where the hell have you been this time?" he grumbled, unfolding the tissue and smoothing it out on the top of Lindsey's desk. "Greeley, Colorado, huh? That's the place that's all cattle feed lots and foreigners now, isn't it?"

"Feed lots and human waste recycling plants," Lindsey amended.

"Crap," Winterowd erupted in disgust. "And where was it the last time I caught you? Somewhere in Texas buying hard-shell tacos at ninety-eight cents a dozen?"

"The shells were a little soggy," Lindsey admitted, licking his fingers.

"You're so willful, Lindsey, it's disgusting," Winterowd snapped and started rifling Lindsey's desk drawers for a lighter. When he found one, he ignited the tissue paper and burned it until it was a fine black powder. After the last cinder had cooled, he leaned back in Lindsey's chair and looked at him malevolently.

"I know you want my job, Melvin," Lindsey said dryly, "but could I at least have the use of my chair for the time being?" Cowed, momentarily, Winterowd

grudgingly rose and shuffled to the guest's chair. "And while I'm on the subject, stay the hell away from my secretary," added Lindsey.

Though peeved, Winterowd had not given up. "And the people trying to get to the machine to buy cheap groceries ain't half the story. Some brass from the Pentagon have been buddying up to members of the institute's board."

"What do they want?"

"Materiels, that's what. Raw goods. Let some hungry little senator up on the hill get wind of that and you'll see just how fast he can pull our plug. Already the hue and cry against us, and what has been called our tampering with the past, is probably more than we can weather."

"What do you know anyway," Lindsey belched and attempted to wave Winterowd out of his office. The hamburger hadn't been quite enough to fill him, and he wished he had taken up the cook's offer on that order of fries. He would have if the fries hadn't been so over-priced. The dime they were asking for them was too much. Lindsey knew they were making six or seven cents profit, and that was obscene.

Winterowd had continued talking while Lindsey smacked his lips over the memory of the missed French fries.

"You try any of your fancy crap food shopping again," he threatened, "and you'll get more than a brow beating from me."

Lindsey was not intimidated. "On your way out, Melvin," he yawned, "see to it that you don't dawdle around my secretary. I'm sure you can find some work to do. Surely there's some knobs somewhere to be polished."

Winterowd was nearly out the door but stopped. "And there's something else I want to talk to you about," he said, reentering and closing the door. "It's that damn letter you sent me, not an e-mail. A letter."

"What letter?" Lindsey took his feet off his desk and confronted Winterowd as if the subject really interested him.

"You know what letter. The one you sent to me just a week or two *after* I was born. I'd almost forgotten about it until your recent antics."

"Are you kidding? You're older than I am, so how could I have written you a letter?"

"Don't play the innocent role," Winterowd countered. "You must have sent it on one of your little shopping sprees into the past, you cheap bastard. 'Save-a-dime Lindsey.' That's what the girls in the compute pool call you. Did you know that?"

"Forget about those dumb broads. What I want to know is where you get off calling me a bastard?"

"What do you mean where do I get off? You're the one who started it. That's what you called me in the letter."

"What damn letter? How could I send you a letter years ago, even back in time? I wouldn't even know where to send it, let alone have a reason for sending it."

"It wasn't sent to my address, or rather my mother's address back then. It was sent to this damn address," he pointed to the office floor. "I remember the letter now. My mother puzzled over that thing 'till her dying day. And to make it even more mysterious, there wasn't even such a street back then, and if the town hadn't

been smaller and the postman a personal friend of my mother's, the letter would never have been delivered."

"What'd it say?"

"'YOU BASTARD' is all it said. Upset my mother no end. It didn't say anything else. Not even a signature." Winterowd paused, surprised. "What are you asking me for anyway? You're the one who sent it."

"Where was it sent from?" Lindsey was trying to remain calm.

"A dinky little burg in Arizona called Ajo."

"Ajo? Not only have I never been there I don't even know where it is."

"In a pig's eye you don't. Thought you were pulling one over on me, didn't you? I've been plagued by that name all my life and only recently did I discover it had been part of the Gadsen Purchase made in 1853. You know, the purchase the government rescinded a couple of years ago and gave back to the Mexicans. Thought I wouldn't find it, didn't you? But I got out a couple of old maps. It's not even listed on Mexico's maps today because the town disappeared years ago. Some kind of military mishap or something."

Lindsey considered Winterowd's tirade for a few seconds and then raised his eyes. "Melvin," he said calmly, "I've two things to say to you just at the moment. Firstly, I don't know what in hell you're talking about, and, secondly, get you sniveling carcass out of my office."

As Winterowd left, Lindsey noticed that his secretary, Miranda, had just been ready to enter but had changed her mind upon seeing Winterowd's face.

"The hell with her, too," he muttered to himself in the empty office. "The fickle bitch, anyway."

Though not admitting it, Lindsey had been somewhat intimidated by Winterowd and refrained from taking shopping trips into the past, no matter how strapped he became for ready cash. But a newly discovered weakness was helping him to overcome the fear of his associate.

He had developed a definite passion for French fries.

And if French fries hadn't been selling for fourteen dollars and seventy-five cents a *Snacker's Pack*, he would never have thought of Greeley and the bored fry cook who had been pushing them at a dime a bag.

One night, after being unable to resist the potential bargain, and after carefully determining the Zulu Time which corresponded to the old Mountain Standard Time, Lindsey returned to the world of stale grease and the dime bag.

This time he was careful and didn't run smack into the garbage can. It was the side of a spiffy, white '57 Chevrolet that he walked into.

"Easy on the machine, buddy," a superior voice accosted him from the back of the hamburger joint. It was Gerald, the cook-slash-manager. When he came closer and saw who had touched his car, he grew excited. "Hey, mister," he drooled over Lindsey and looked nervously at the cinder block wall. "Nice to have you back."

"Nice to be back," Lindsey shrugged, surprised at the greeting. "I'd like a bag of your ten-cent French fries."

"For you, two bags for a dime."

"Why the special treatment?"

"Hah," Gerald laughed as if it weren't already obvious and ran his hand through his flat top. "My life's changed in a big way since you were here."

"Oh, yea?"

"Sure it has," Gerald insisted, indicating the immaculately polished '57 Chevrolet. "Feast your eyes on this baby."

Lindsey looked at the car, somewhat impressed. "I saw one a lot like it in the Smithsonian," he observed, looking at the interior which swirled in a blizzard of white Terry Cloth. "And the fuzzy white dice on the rearview mirror are nice, too."

"Ain't they, though," Gerald agreed proudly. "I'd have put my high school graduation tassel on the mirror, too, if old High Pockets, my principal, hadn't of kicked me out."

Lindsey wasn't that interested in the babblings of an idiot from the past century, but somehow he had been responsible for the fry cook's recent good fortune. "How did I change your life?" he asked, withdrawing his head from the interior of the car.

"Those coins you gave me, man. You know, that dime and nickel? I sold them to a coin collector for a lot of money. They said they were a misstamp or something, and a reporter from the *Greeley Tribune* come and talked to me and everything."

"Oh?" Lindsey inquired, growing more interested.

"Don't worry, man," Gerald soothed. "I didn't tell them about you. You think I want them to think I'm loony or something? Besides, I been waiting for you to come back."

"Why?"

"Why? For some more of the coins, man. I been chief honcho around here since you gave me those coins. I bought the car with some of the money I got from the dime," he bubbled. "I got money in the bank. And not only is my boss giving

me a percentage of the take, he's trying to set me up with my own franchise somewhere in the Southwest."

"Making it big, huh?"

"I'm doing all right," Gerald admitted, but jiggled his hand to admit that it was only so-so compared to what it could be. "But if I had somebody working for me that I could trust, I'd really be in the clover. Someone better than those dumb broads in there," he indicated the hamburger joint. "Them scatter-brained broads drive off more customers than if I was to drop my drawers and do my duty on the counter."

Lindsey grimaced at the picture, but he did recognize a modicum of native intelligence in the boy. "Why don't you pay a little more and get better help?"

Gerald eyed him. "And have it come out of my own pocket, man? You got to be kidding."

"Well, it's your life, I suppose," Lindsey said and started to walk past Gerald to get his French fries.

Gerald put his hand on his shoulder. "Just a minute, friend. What say you sell me all the coins you got in your pocket. I'll give you fair money for them."

Lindsey reached into his pocket and brought out his single coin. "I only brought a dime with me this time."

"A dime," Gerald exploded. "A single, lousy dime? What are you, some kind of time traveling cheap skate?"

"You got to be out of your mind talking to me like that," Lindsey said. "What do you take me for, your personal benefactor? Am I supposed to set you up in life or something."

"Don't bad mouth me, Dad," Gerald threatened. "Besides, what's it to you? A god damned dime's what it is. All you got to do is pull it out of your pocket. I ain't no yesterday's fool."

Lindsey edged away from the cook but Gerald kept after him. "The dime, man. I'll give you all the fries you can carry out of here for it."

"Is this what you want?" Lindsey asked, pulling the dime from his pocket and displaying it for Gerald.

"Give it to me," Gerald lunged, but Lindsey hurled it at the cinder block wall and it disappeared.

"It's in another century now," Lindsey chuckled, "and there's not a damn thing you can do about it."

Gerald fell back against his car and stared at the spot where the dime had disappeared. He knew where it was and how to get it, but he was afraid to try.

Lindsey looked at the stunned cook and chuckled again. "If it's all right with you, I'll return to my own time," he said and walked into the wall.

And walk into the wall is exactly what he did. His nose shattered at the surprising impact, and he felt the pain in the back of his head even before it hit the pavement. Though he was unconscious for several seconds, he was completely aware of what had happened the instant his eyes refocused and found the face of Gerald looking into his.

"Winterowd, you bastard," he shrieked and got up to start feeling the length of the cinder block wall with his palms.

From the main drag to the back alley it was solid cinder block. Lindsey searched it up and down without finding so much as a loose seam. He had been

checking the wall for thirty minutes when Gerald reappeared with a Coke and a bag of fries for him.

"I been thinking," Gerald said confidently as he handed Lindsey the eats, "that since you're here you're going to be needing a job." He smiled smugly at Lindsey who was choking on a soggy fry. "I could use a good man," he smiled.

"Me?" Lindsey scoffed, spitting out a burned tip. "Me work for you? I got two doctorates in time refractory physics."

Gerald wasn't rattled. "Anything you say, Dad. How about letting me see the diplomas?"

Lindsey was had and his face showed it. "I can't," he admitted. "I haven't even been born yet."

"Too bad," Gerald spoke dramatically and placed his hand over his chest. "My heart bleeds for you." He lowered his hand and looked coldly at Lindsey. "I offered you a job. Are you going to take it and work for me, or am I going to turn you in as the man who gave me the dime and tell them that you come from another time?"

Lindsey was trying to think but his mind reeled. "Give me a minute, a minute. I can't think."

"I'll give you a minute, *pinko*," Gerald nodded. "But just a minute."

"*Pinko* ?" Lindsey asked, surfacing from his daze. "*Pinko* ? What in hell are you talking about?"

"I've been thinking that maybe Joseph McCarthy and that House UnAmerican Activities Committee or whatever replaced it would like to hear about you. I don't think they'd have much truck with time travelers. I doubt they'd see a hell of a lot of difference between a time traveler and a Red."

"Oh, Christ," Lindsey deflated instantly, remembering his high school history and the horror stories about the fifties. "Are those witch hunters still in power?" He remembered that Senator McCarthy was the man who ruined people's careers and threw them into jail just because they could write or think or even wonder.

"That outfit you're wearing is as Commie as hell," Gerald observed. "And that funny dime. I'll bet it was some kind of Communist trick to undermine our economic system."

"How much do I get an hour?" Lindsey relented, knowing he would have to lie low for at least a while, perhaps forever.

"The going rate for unskilled food handlers is a buck and change an hour. Take it or leave it."

"But no one can live on that" Lindsey protested.

"This is free enterprise, Dad," Gerald smirked. "Some people gets it, and some people gets it you know where."

Under Gerald's domineering eyes, Lindsey moped to the hamburger joint and entered by the back the door. When the pimply-faced girl behind the counter went off duty, he tied on an apron and replaced her.

"You're going to like it, Dad," Gerald promised from behind the grill. "In about a year or two it'll get in your blood. Grease in the blood," he laughed.

Lindsey tried not to hear. Instead he stared blindly out the window at the sign reading "Over 100 thousand Sold." If he lived a normal life, he would see that sign read close to a trillion.

"My god," he screamed, protecting his temples with his hands, "trapped in a McDonald's hamburger stand for the rest of my life."

"Cool it, Dad," Gerald yelled. "We got a customer coming." Just then the phone rang and Gerald went to the rear of the store to answer it while Lindsey waited for the customer to enter.

When the man finally arrived, Lindsey took the order and sacked it for him. It was for a single hamburger, and, having anticipated it, Gerald had already wrapped it and tossed it into the ready bin. Gerald had changed dramatically in the months since his last visit.

When Gerald came back from his telephone conversation, Lindsey was busily writing on the back of a paper sack.

"What are you doing, Dad?" he demanded. "Do you think this is a secretary's office or something? I hired you to tend the counter and keep the customers happy."

"I was only writing a letter to a business associate I used to know," Lindsey protested. "A very short letter."

Gerald jerked the paper away from him and threw it into the basket under the counter. "You can write him later. First we're going to have to get the hell out of town. That was my old boss on the line. I'm going to get my own franchise and you're coming with me."

"Where?"

"I don't know where it is exactly, but it's somewhere in Arizona. A town called Ajo."

Lindsey didn't twitch a muscle at the news. All he could think of was what he was going to write Winterrowd as soon as they got settled in Ajo.

He was still thinking of the letter when another customer entered.

"Can I help you?" Lindsey asked stoically.

It was another pimply-faced teenager. This time a boy.

"I'd like a 'burger, sir," his voice cracked.

Lindsey turned around and held up one finger for Gerald to see. "One," he called wearily.

Surprisingly, Gerald didn't seem at all pleased. "Ain't you forgetting something, Mac?" he leered, pointing at the cash register.

Lindsey turned slowly around, looked at the cash register, and nodded in understanding. Painfully, he leaned over the counter and looked down into the erupting face of the youth.

"Would you like fries with that order, sir?"

The Courtship of Jonathan Tidley

Jonathan Tidley ran his fingers over the two words beneath the roll of toilet paper in the far stall and felt the heat rise in his throat. Just two words, fourteen simple ciphers, but their message was more salacious, more incendiary than the neonic red felt-tipped pen used to render them: *Priscilla Talks*.

A suppliant to the script, almost reverentially, he pushed aside the institutional paper obscuring them for a better look: P-r-i-s-c-i-l-l-a T-a-l-k-s. He was attempting to repeat them with his mouth closed when he heard a Tongue Crab scuttling up the stairs and onto the polished hallway floor outside the bathroom.

Guiltily confident that he was its target, he rose from his knees, backed out of the stall, and climbed into one of the sinks attached to the opposite wall. He had

chosen the sink instinctively because rumor had it that the Crab, though swift, though lethal, was stymied when required to find purchase on slick surfaces such as porcelain.

Lifting his legs higher, he studied the distance between them and the floor. Would he be safer standing on top of one of the toilets, he wondered, but quickly realized the bowls weren't higher than a Crab could reach.

He turned the water on in the adjacent sink and pumped liquid soap from the dispenser. He had never heard of it working, but desperation forced him to try. Maybe the smell of chlorine in the water or the glycerine and perfumes in the soap would flood the Crab's olfactory sensors, causing it to misread the distinctive molecules of his own DNA.

But why, he pouted, did *he* feel guilty? Why was he the one cowering in a porcelain sink, his feet sticking into the air? He wasn't the one who had spoken. He hadn't even opened his mouth. True, he had fantasized seeing Priscilla part her moistened lips. He had salivated at the thought of her glistening tongue pistoning sounds toward him like little puffs of smoke, puffs that she massaged with full lips into round vowels--Ohs and Ahs.

But that wasn't a crime, his eyes pled for support from his reflection in the mirror. When the rejection nodded its agreement, he lowered his feet. He was simply being male, he decided. Granted, it was a maleness that had to be suppressed, had to be sublimated, but his thought of Priscilla talking was not a crime in itself. The crime was the deed--the actual spoken word. *The Violation of Voice* as the government posters defined it. *The Sedition of Sound. The Treachery of Tautology.*

Jonathan was stepping confidently from the sink when the Crab whirled to and bumped into the bathroom door. It was a heavy door, stiff on its pneumatic hinge, but the Crab persisted, its pea-sized reactor whining as it torqued power to its rubber rollers. Finally, the door parted from the jam just enough to permit one claw. Its pincers widened the opening until there was room enough for one eye stalk to snake through followed by an olfactory cilium.

For no more than five seconds these two appendages waved as if in an ocean current before retracting from sight like frightened tube worms. The claw followed and the door closed.

Safe. He hadn't been the target, and the tongue that had tried to crawl down his throat relaxed and stretched within the valley of his teeth. Safe. Unsevered. Jonathan slid limply from the sink, padded quietly to the door and pulled it ajar just a crack. All he saw was his work mate Miles who had come up the stairs, apparently following the Crab. He stood transfixed, staring past the bathroom door until he noticed Jonathan.

--Peed your pants, didn't you? Miles chided, the letters sliding along the Piccadilly strip across his chest. Jonathan made a face at the immaturity of the message, but Miles had returned his attention to a spot down the hall. Judging from his gaze the Crab was just a few feet beyond the bathroom door.

When Jonathan hesitated, Miles' right hand grew busy, its fingers tapping the steno points in its palm. --It's not after you, the Piccadilly strip scrolled.

Jonathan wanted to believe Miles, but after he had botched the attempt to set Miles up with Priscilla he could no longer trust his work mate. Little things had caused him to think so. Little things like ink in his coffee cup in the morning that turned his tongue black, or the points broken off all the pencils in the holder he

kept on his desk. Also, anonymous E-Mail messages questioning his sexual prowess.

Almost in defiance of those accusation, Jonathan pulled the bathroom door open and looked down the hall. The Crab, now rocking on its claws, the rollers retracted, gazed through one of the office doors with the interest of a diner choosing a lobster from the restaurant's aquarium.

Counterpoint to the quiet, controlled Crab, the room was chaos. Chairs thudded to the floor, trash cans rolled metallically, and rubber soled shoes squeaked and squealed. Absent were those sounds that might have been expected generations earlier: the anguished cries of frightened women, the basso cursing of men in mock bravado.

One man, obviously pushed by the melee inside, fell through the door and slid toward the Crab, nearly touching it. But the Crab didn't respond. It continued to peer into the room, rocking from side to side on its claws, humming with confident energy. The body before it was of no interest. Its prey quailed elsewhere.

When the man sprang to his feet and fled down the hall away from Jonathan and the Crab, the floodgate opened. Like frightened sheep bolting after their bell wether, the workers emptied the room in a diminishing stream. As each worker fled, the Crab pivoted for an advantageous sniff of the fleeing ankle. When the last of the feet leapt over its shiny, saucer-shaped body, the Crab moved like a miniature tank to the threshold of the room.

Jonathan knew the Crab's target was still in the room when the lights inside went off. Ridiculous, he thought, the Crab doesn't need eyes anymore than a bloodhound needs ears. As if to prove it, the Crab, elevating its rear legs and

tilting forward, wedged into the darkened room and disappeared from Jonathan's view.

Thrown objects bounced from the walls and clattered to the floor, but the Crab remained calmly relentless. Jonathan could hear it whirring on its rollers when the coast was clear or scuttling over obstacles with its dexterous claws. The sheep-like workers who had fled the room now milled at the far end of the hall, listening, their eyes dulled, opiated by the knowledge that they were not to be victims.

One of them was Priscilla, the fair skinned, red haired Irish enchantress who had haunted his thoughts since she came to work in the building two months ago. It was she Jonathan had tried to set up with Miles, and he had failed utterly. His palms had sweat so that he was unable to key the steno points accurately. He wasn't sure but what the message that scrolled across his Piccadilly strip was gibberish. Regardless, her cheeks had glowed crimson and she had blinked a demur reply--No, thank you.

Dating, meeting anyone in the new society, was such an obstacle. Without the spoken word, with its subtlety of nuance and its suggestive intonation, clues to one's true feelings were difficult to find, and, because of a lack of practice, body and facial language were nearly impossible to read with any degree of accuracy, particularly since facial deception had long ago become such a practiced art. That is what made the Agapurgy, the go between, absolutely essential. How Miles had prevailed upon him to take that most thankless of roles eluded him, reciprocity at some future date no doubt. All he could remember of the day he met her in the hall was that he wished the roles were reversed, that Miles was acting as *his* Agapurgy.

When the blush rose to her cheeks, he was positive it was a response to

disappointment, not of anger or insult. He was sure she had hoped he was there on his own behalf.

His remembrance of that day was broken when her shoulder *Hello Salutation* glowed warmly from the far end of the hall, the two coal-dot eyes and black single-line sweep of a smile pulsing meaningfully. The button almost purred its joy at seeing him. He was in the act of responding, his elbow just ready to depress the switch at his side, when he noticed a glow to his right, another firefly signaling its hope for love. It was Miles. Had her warm blinks been meant for Miles all along and not for him?

He snapped his head back to determine the direction of her eyes but immediately forgot the purpose of his movement when a thick scream issued from the now almost empty office room. It was the scream of flaccid, seldom used vocal chords. A scream followed by words, screamed words, that might have been "Help me, God." They came from such an unpracticed voice that they might have been nothing more than a gargle.

What followed was a choking, and then silence. When the man emerged from the room his co-workers turned or brought their hands to their eyes, not just in horror, but to hide their shame for the man.

But far from showing shame, he was grinning fiendishly. It was a face-splitting grin, maniacal. When Jonathan recognized the reason for the contorted face, he retched. The Crab, a pair of pincers attached to the neck, another pair grasping the ears, and still another pair pulling the lips and teeth apart, was feeding in the man's mouth.

The gurgling and whirring didn't last long. It ended with a bright flash followed by a pop. The Crab had severed the tongue and seared the wound to

staunch the flow of blood. After the now semi-conscious man slumped to the floor, the Crab backed out of his mouth and dropped the tongue on its victim's chest. Mechanically, but precisely, the Crab cleaned its pincers on the man's shirt and then used the cleaned pincers to remove bits of debris from its eye stalks. Finished, it climbed from the limp body, retracted its legs and extended its rollers, and raced past Jonathan and Miles to the stairwell. After its scuttling on the stairs had ceased echoing, the government intercom spoke:

"Please be reminded that oral communication is the exclusive property of the government. Private verbalizations, or labial attempts at such, are acts of sedition and will be dealt with accordingly."

The voice was probably that of a human but it had been made to sound metallic, mechanical, monotonic. Even the government strove to avoid the nuance of intonation, something the printed word was bare and innocent of. Had Marc Antony's speech been printed and handed to the multitude of mourners viewing Caesar's body, Brutus would not have had to fall upon his sword.

The *printed* word was not to be feared. It was the spoken word that possessed power. And memory, without the mnemonic benefit of oral repetition, was also insubstantial, fleeting, as evidenced by the workers who followed their leader back to work, stepping over the still quiescent body of their former co-worker.

Before Priscilla disappeared back to work, she paused in the doorway and flashed Jonathan a Hi, the message definitely meant for him this time, though not as pulsing, not as warm as her first call.

--I have a remembrance for you, his Piccadilly scrolled, but she had already disappeared. Today was the day he was finally going to give her the card, the Agapurgy of *his* love. That was why he had gone to the bathroom, to sear into his

mind once again those two words and, this time, to prove conclusively that *she* was the person who had written those words.

The proof would be the neonic red felt-tipped pen he had stolen from the container on her desk. She had many pens, the office was filled with many pens, but this was the only one he had observed that was neonic.

Pulling it from his inside pocket as he backed into the bathroom, he hurried to the rear stall and again knelt before the words. First he tested the pen on a sheet of the dangling toilet paper. It looked the same, but he had to be sure. He had to test it on the painted surface of the metal partition.

Slowly, after placing the pen's cap between his teeth, he drew a single line beneath the word *Priscilla*. When the alcohol evaporated and the line dried, the match was perfect.

She, she Priscilla, had left the message herself. Somehow she had learned that he, he Jonathan, always used the rear stall, that he was as unthinkingly habituated to its use as he was to flicking on the light switch as soon as he entered his apartment each evening.

Rising from the stall and turning to the mirror, Jonathan saw the cap of the pen protruding from his mouth and removed it, chagrined at such an affront to decency. It was almost as bad as onerously brushing ones teeth before a bathroom mirror, or, horror of horrors, actually watching as the teeth masticated a piece of meat protein.

No child was innocent of such behavior, at least no male child was. Jonathan couldn't vouch for the other sex. As the saying went, ninety-eight percent of male children had inspected the insides of their mouths. The other two percent were liars. His own memory of being caught by his mother was embarrassing in the

extreme. She had gone shopping and was not expected to return for several hours.

After double checking to make sure no one was around, and turning the government instrumental music station up loud, he had taken the family Bible from its resting place and locked himself with it in the bathroom. He had been so mesmerized by the sound of his own voice that he hadn't heard his mother return home and insert her own key into the bathroom door to catch him red mouthed.

Lifting the flap of his jacket to replace the pen, nearly as red as his face had been that day, Jonathan felt the envelope containing the Agapurgy card he had hoped to present to Priscilla that day. Because of the mechanical device it contained it was thick and felt heavy as he tumbled it through his fingers. Removing it, he looked again upon the cover, two lambs nosing each other in a flower dappled meadow. On the back was the card company's hallmark, the dictionary definition of the word itself:

A-GA-Pur-GY / a-gə-per-gi/ n. [LL. fr. GK agape, lit., love + ME purgen, fr. OE purgier, fr. purigare, to purify] 1: the industrialization of affection 2: more currently, non-verbal communication 3: a go-between 4: Agapurgy Day, Feb. 14

When he opened the card it said "I love you." It repeated the message each time he opened it, and he opened it five times before he grew tired of that institutionalized voice, the sanctioned voice, the same voice heard over the government intercom.

Steeling himself, he left the bathroom and marched toward the office he shared with Priscilla, Miles, and two score others. He didn't care who saw him. He was on a mission. Only one part of his mission needed to be covert, the replacing of the neonic red pen from where he had taken it. As to the other--the tossing of the Agapurgy of love into her in box--he didn't care who saw. He was no

shrinking Lothario unsure of his love. For him this was the posting of the banns. After this Priscilla would be able to adjust the Agapurgy Arrow she wore on her blouse collar. Instead of pointing up to indicate she was searching, she could now point it toward her heart to indicate that it had been pierced.

Of course his feet made noise as he strode into the office, probably the intention of the ergonomic architects. The government was indulgent that way, surrounding the workers with some auditory relief much as a farmer plays music to his caged laying hens. In response to the squeaks, heads prairie dogged above their cubicles, flashed closed mouth smiles, and disappeared.

Efficiently, he threaded the maze of aisles, not pausing to return the *Hi* flashes from his colleagues. It was with disappointment, yet relief, that he found her desk empty. She had probably gone on break or to the bathroom. Removing the neonic pen from his inside jacket pocket and replacing it was childishly easy. When it came time to drop the envelope into her in-box, he held it pregnantly aloft, hoping he would be seen. He looked about for observers, but they had all disappeared into their holes. Only when he turned to leave did he spot Miles' head. It was two partitions over and disappeared as soon as spotted.

--Pee your own pants, Miles, his Piccadilly scrolled, but no workers saw the message or would have understood it if they had.

At lunch break he couldn't think of food. Instead of eating he walked through the neighboring parks, listening to the orchestral music made rich by the trees' dusty leaves. The litter in the gutters didn't even bother him today, and he didn't pause to read the chalked messages on the sidewalks written to strangers. He felt sorry for the people he saw touching themselves, rubbing their hands along their

necks or absently stroking their hair, tactile reassurances to replace the spoken words of comfort they never received.

Today Jonathan felt superior to such needs.

He returned late from his lunch break but was not challenged by the foreman. Instead of walking around the perimeter of the room to his cubicle, he wove through the aisles, weaving ever closer to the center, until he was on the aisle where Priscilla worked. She heard the approach of his feet and turned to smile faintly. Jonathan's *Salutation Button* blazed with a furnace of warmth and repeated its glow, but her button blinked only once, noncommittally, as she returned to her work.

Crest fallen, he wandered in a daze until he accidentally found the edge of the room and, finally, the way to his own work station. He plopped into his chair, swiveled sullenly, and wondered how he could have gone so wrong. How could he have misread her. The words *Priscilla Talks* coiled through his mind until he found himself fingering the letters onto the partition before him. Turning back to his desk for a pencil with which to practice the words, as love struck youngsters have done since charcoal, he found a small package lying before the pencil holder.

It was a small, flat, ribbon festooned package. The ribbon was a bright red, nearly as bright as the neonic red used in the bathroom stall. Surely it was from Priscilla. She must have found his card and bought him the gift on her lunch break. That is why her earlier *Hi* had been noncommittal. She had simply been acting coy to heighten the surprise when he found the gift.

He smiled at the beauty of her strategy. Love was an interesting game when played by two such well-matched suitors as they.

Being careful not to tear it or the pink wrapping, Jonathan removed the ribbon and withdrew Priscilla's gift from the folds of paper. It was a volume of poetry, not unlike those that were ever present in gift shops and supermarkets. This volume, however, contained a single poem, "The Courtship of Miles Standish" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

Why such a gift, he wondered, leafing through the pages. He was little interested in poetry, especially the historical sappiness of Longfellow. Perplexed, he was about to close the small volume when his eyes fell upon a single line of red neon ink, the very color he now found so feverishly redolent of prospect. The underlining wasn't part of the printing process. It had been added later, probably that very noon, he judged after sniffing the still vaporous alcohol. And the entire line hadn't been underlined, just four words:

...speak for yourself, John

Not even the question mark after the word *John* had been underlined. What remained was a simple imperative sentence: *Speak for yourself, John*. It was more than a challenge. It was a command.

Now interested in the poem, Jonathan opened the booklet and read from the beginning. It was easy to follow in spite of its Pilgrim setting and hexameter verse. It retold the adventures of Captain Miles Standish and his attempt to woo one Puritan maiden named Priscilla. To this end, he asked his good friend John Alden to act as his Agapurgy. It was in this section that the underlining occurred. When John asked Priscilla to give her hand in marriage to Miles, the lady had looked demurely into his eyes and said, "Why don't you speak for yourself, John?"

That is almost exactly what had happened when he acted as a go-between for Miles. Except that now, Priscilla could not speak plainly. She had to find the

opportunity and the Agapurgy, and, fortunately, Jonathan had presented his card so that she could respond with the poem, a poem she had probably been holding in ready.

Love was a crazy shadow dance. Jonathan raised the poem and pressed it to his closed lips. Whoever had written that new human relations text *Silently Together* was certainly correct when he wrote "No action is so considered, or so considerate, as that which is written."

Just to make certain that the ink was the same--he was already certainly certain--but just to make doubly certain, he decided to take the booklet into the bathroom and compare it with the writing in the stall. Getting there was no problem. He had only to wait until all the workers were quietly busy in their little holes before scurrying toward the bathroom as if surprised by a sudden need. The poetry booklet was secreted inside his sports jacket.

But, he hesitated in the hallway, was she the sort of woman who would sneak into men's restrooms to leave sorted advertisements of her own promiscuity? Sick men did such things, but would she? Because of the times he couldn't be sure. The ineffectiveness, the sheer clumsiness, of most Agapurgies could drive the most moral to desperate, to unseemly, measures out of sheer frustration.

For him to judge her for such behavior would reveal a lack of understanding, a lack of compassion.

No one was in the restroom when he entered and he almost wished there had been. The sound of running or flushing water would have drowned the timid squeaking of his shoe soles as he inched toward the rear stall and opened its door. Closing it behind him, he knelt before the roll of toilet paper and withdrew the poetry booklet from his jacket. After opening it to the underlined page, he lifted it

to the cubicle wall and brushed aside the dangling sheets of paper for a proper comparison.

The ink was identical but that is not what caused his jaw to drop, that caused the saliva to flow in his throat. The two words had been altered. *He* had underlined the word *Priscilla* that morning to check the color of the pen, but since then someone had entered the stall and underlined the word *Talks*--twice, and with the same neon red pen.

He had to feign illness and leave work early. He couldn't even return to his desk, knowing she was in that very room, knowing that she was propelling him toward, exciting him to, sedition. Delicious, unseemly, salivic sedition.

At home, in his guiltily darkened apartment, he sat and ordered those steps toward sedition in his mind: the *words* in the bathroom, the ink, his Agapurgy card, her gift book of poetry, the underlined words it contained, the ink again, and finally the doubly emphasized word *Talks* in the bathroom stall.

Each link secured the next until they were bound within a chain of desire that would ineluctably compel the spoken word, force its ejaculation from his wet lips, a force as ineluctable and pregnant with promise as tomorrow's sunrise. That night the *word* would be consummated.

"I love you, Priscilla."

As he closed his apartment door behind him, he felt as if he were closing a door he had inadvertently opened--to a broom closet, say--a door that had nothing to do with his life at all. It wasn't even a lived past as compared to the new world he was about to enter. From that moment on his life would be brightly lit, good music would be played, and the floors would be softly carpeted. He had left brooms, and mops, and buckets, and brown-stained, dripping sinks forever.

At the very thought of delivering those four words, candied agony melted deliciously across his tongue. At the prospect of her reply, his knees grew fluid. He was too swollen with the prospect to go to her apartment directly. He wasn't in control. He would blurt out his words prematurely and spoil the moment. He had to attack the rough edges of his desire, to slaken his needs, and he knew just where to go--The Verbo District, that quasi legal, vaguely zoned, dimly-lit section where men could find cathartic release without jeopardizing themselves or society.

The Night Owl Trolley carried him past the block of apartments where Priscilla lived, but he didn't get off. He waited until the streetlights thinned, until the curb and gutters gave way to refuge filled ditches, until the pools of water in the pocked dirt streets looked like stepping stones only a Satyr could negotiate. He had been there before as a college student when experimentation was not only condoned but was nearly obligatory. His excuse then, an excuse used by all his age, was an ancient American proverb by an author unknown: "No one falls farther than he who does not know the depths." It was as popular as the line used by those who frequented the sex palaces: "It is better to plant the seed of life in the belly of a whore than to scatter it upon the ground." That author, too, was unknown.

Jonathan particularly remembered his college visit to the Verbo District. He and his buddies had stood nervously outside one of the shops, hesitant to enter, until one of them, not he, had flashed across his Piccadilly Strip, --Okay, men, put your fazers on stun.

Lacking such a humorous statement to propel him through the door, Jonathan moved hesitantly to the first shop he encountered and made a ceremony of scraping

the mud and debris from his shoes. The door activated the clapper on a rusting bell, but the proprietor, at least the man behind the counter, didn't look up. He wore earphones and stared into vacancy. Jonathan could hear the bird calls he was listening to.

Except for the door that led into the back rooms, the walls were lined with otherwise illegal magazines. Each showed a variety of moist lips and tumescent uvula, some glistening with what he had learned was liquid powdered sugar. Beneath the glass in the case behind which the man sat were nickel-plated lip spreaders, tongue enlargers, and plastic and rubber model tongues, some so realistic as to duplicate the veins and raised taste buds.

Through the door to the back Jonathan could see over coated men standing singly before one-armed Talkers, feeding the machines quarters and jerking the handles. Their faces were bent close to the screens, almost regurgitating onto them as if they were lonely parakeets trying to feed their own images in a row of mirrors.

Jonathan entered the room and deposited several coins into a vacant machine but nothing happened. The picture of the girl on the front of the Talker gazed provocatively but said nothing. All she did was wink at him each time he deposited a quarter. A positive response from a machine was as random as three cherries from a slot machine.

The man next to him had better luck. "Hello, sailor," a soft, mellifluous voice crooned. "Where have you been all my life."

Jonathan tried to slide behind the man to see the woman's lips, but the man had draw his overcoat over his head and over the machine. His face was obviously

against the face of the woman on the screen, and the ball of his head rocked illegally beneath the fabric of the coat.

Looking at the spectacle, Jonathan was reminded of the American Medical Association poster plastered inside and on the sides of most of the means of conveyance in the city: "The osculatory activities of our depraved forefathers can now be seen for what they really were: the greatest purveyor of disease and moral pestilence since the rat."

In repulsion at the sight of the man's rocking head, or perhaps in envy of it--Jonathan was unsure--he walked away from the man and into one of the curtained booths lining the ends of the room. Before him in the booth was the Verbo Shop's gold mine, the Verbo-Mouth. By shoving half dollars into the slit and placing his eyes to the periscope viewer, a man could see the face of a woman moving her lips, a real woman. As the number of half dollars fed into the machine increased, the more illegal became her movements.

For his first coin, Jonathan did little more than prompt the woman--pretty in that trashiness called "trailer"--to purse her lips and run a finger suggestively into her mouth. At no time would she talk. Only the Talkers spoke, and even then they didn't move their lips. For the picture of a woman to do both, to move her lips and to talk, would have been stretching the permissiveness of the state too far.

Between coins the woman tried to hold her last pose and Jonathan could see that she was bored, but such women were easily bored. They were usually the less disciplined members of society. Those who found school boring and who thus were not employable in anything productive. Those for whom alarm clocks were not intended. Those who blamed their condition on *The Man*, that unidentifiable, Machiavellian puppet master who pulled their unseen strings and who--by

compelling them to indolence and defiance, their only weapons--caused their superfluousness.

That was why she was selling the only thing anyone wanted from her--her Mouth. It was an organ Nature had given her, and Jonathan could see that she was not only using it unwisely, she was using it unwell.

As he fed the machine coins, the woman became more salacious--uglyly so, Jonathan felt--, but he was not seeing her. The woman before his eyes was clean, moral, circumspect in her coyness, desirable. He was seeing a vision of Priscilla. When the woman in the periscope, mouth painfully agape, approached the lens of the machine, her uvula lit by the pen light she thrust into her orifice, Jonathan was barely aware. Even when the eye of the machine irised closed he remained at the eyepiece. What he saw was his raised fist rapping politely at Priscilla's door. He saw her open it, chewing a morsel of something daintily, probably a dry fat free cracker snack.

Turning from the periscope, but still sitting on the stool in the dark, Jonathan realized why he savored Priscilla's image--even her closed-mouth image--over the seamy display of the Verbo-Mouth. She was intelligent, understanding. She, among all the women he had ever known, was the only one who realized that to be fulfilled, a man needed at least a taste of the forbidden.

Priscilla knew what he was just beginning to realize, that the vicarious can never produce a true catharsis. Nothing can replace the real.

"Speak for yourself, John." Those underlined words propelled, compelled. She was correct. The printed word was static, lifeless. The shadow of a thing. To be true, the word must be made whole. It must be spoken. Agapurgy cards were lifeless compared to the spoken word. Agapurgies of any type were at best

vicarious, as unlike the real thing as the Verbo-Mouth was unlike the soft, warm, moist mouth of a woman in love.

"Speak for yourself, John."

--I will, the words scrolled across his Piccadilly strip. When they scrolled a second time they were all capitals.

Rushing from the Verbo Shop, he ran to the teleprinter booth on the corner and fumbled through the directory until he found her number and address. Before he could change his mind, he typed the message "I must see you at once." He almost typed *Speak* instead of *See*, an error that could have raised the suspicion of the Verbo Police, an error that could have caused them to program his DNA into a Tongue Crab just on the possibility that it might be needed.

Her response was crisp and curious. "Wondering why? But why not." That crazy shadow dance of love, Jonathan smiled. She performs it so well.

On his way to a paved street and the light-rail line, Jonathan danced around the pools of water in the Verbo District as if he were Gene Kelly skirting spots of light on a stage. If he had worn taps and carried an umbrella, he would have found a lamp post to twirl around. He could have walked up walls with Donald O'Connor. He could have finessed Astaire himself.

When he leaped into the light-rail car, enough of a twinkle remained in his step to cause the conductor to turn and wonder at the fluid figure floating down the aisle. Each streetlight the car passed became Priscilla. She twirled from the darkness and smiled brightly into Jonathan's window before turning shyly back to the darkened world, the glow of her hidden features spectering on her shoulder.

When he walked down the hallway of her apartment house searching for her number, the specter still floated before him. All the doors, as seen through the

smoke of her memory, seemed alike, not in number, but in vibrating texture. Each shivered to the notes of a full symphony. Though television had not survived into the new regime--probably because the silent movies that were first tried had required some reading ability, an ability long atrophied in those who watched the tube--the once decomposing composers had undergone a regeneration. People whose grandparents would have pretended to retch at such names were now intimately familiar with such composers as Benjamin Britten, Antonin Dvorak, Copeland, and Grieg.

The door that held Priscilla's number vibrated to "In the Hall of the Mountain King" by Edvard Grieg. The future was boding well. Jonathan, too, loved Peer Gynt.

But as he reached for her doorbell, reached through a fog of trepidation, his mind became a paralyzed buzz. He hardly heard the bell, the music up and down the hall ceased for him. His total focus was on the turning doorknob.

And then she was there, just as he had dreamed her--dressed in something light, diaphanous, hanging from the shoulders, unbelted. And she was eating. He could hear it crunch. A light cracker, perhaps. She turned her head, puzzled, and looked at him quizzically, not unlike the dog in the ancient RCA record player ad listening to the giant horn of a speaker. Her chewing pushed a crumb to the corner of her mouth and she reached up a curled finger to knuckle it free, tossing her deep red hair as she did so.

At first Jonathan thought the tossing of her hair was just a feminine gesture, but when she turned with the motion he realized she was inviting him inside. The vision of her retreating figure caused him to freeze just outside her door. He didn't

know if he paused at the sight of her receding beauty--at that fluid mechanics of hips and flesh--or if it was the lovely liquefaction of her clothes.

"I love you," he said aloud. It was thick. It was unpracticed, but it was understandable.

She turned abruptly. Her dress, little more than a negligee, lagged in its response, caught up to her body, and passed it in the other direction before twirling back to hang limply. Again her head cocked to one side like the quizzical RCA dog.

"I love you," he repeated.

Her chewing stopped but Jonathan didn't see her swallow. Hesitantly at first, but more bold with each step, she approached him. When she stood with her head just below his chin, she looked up, seeking his eyes. When he lowered them to hers, she raised a single finger and wagged it at him as if to say "naughty."

Prepared for bed as she was, she wasn't wearing a Piccadilly strip.

The dance continues, he thought and smiled at her, but she didn't return the smile. She closed the door in his face.

He was dumbfounded. Had he been wrong? In a haze of befuddlement he backed toward the stairwell. Was she on the teleprinter at this moment typing a message to the Verbo Police? Was an officer in the Building of Silence reading her message and calling up his dossier? Transferring his DNA code to a Crab?

No. No, he reassured himself. The game was simply continuing. That Apache dance of love, that flaunting of rejection that only made the attraction stronger. She was probably laughing at this very moment, her hand over her mouth even though she was in the privacy of her apartment. That's what was happening.

He knew it. Maybe she would even send him an Agapurgy card that would cleverly admonish him for his breach of the law.

Secretly she would be pleased that her feminine wiles had driven him to such passionate measures. But on the morrow, he was sure, she would make it up to him by presenting him with a gift, a condolence, for having shut the door in his face. He almost couldn't wait for the next day to discover what it would be. In bed that night he was less sure that she would present him with a gift. The cold of his darkened bedroom made him wonder if he had misread her. Perhaps she *had* been truly offended. Maybe she was only jesting when she sent him the poetry book. Or, instead of requesting that he actually *speak* for himself, she was just being metaphoric, not asking him to become oral, but to become more bold. That, he regretted, was probably it. He had taken the simple suggestion and completely misread it. He would correct his mistake. He would find a new Agapurgy card that would tactfully express the regret he felt for his behavior. She would forgive him, he was sure, sure at least until he remembered the old bromide from *Bartlett's Familiar Paraphrases*: "To err is human; to forgive is at the discretion of the offended."

Before leaving for work in the morning, he carefully checked the operation of his Salutation Flasher and Piccadilly Strip in front of the bathroom mirror. He could read the strip as it ran in reverse in the mirror before him. All in the new society could, particularly those accustomed to *talking* to themselves.

Before going to the office he stopped at a drug store and found the perfect card. Sincere, sweet, and humorous all at once. He couldn't have written a better one himself. He was fingering it when he entered his office, preparing to take it out and sign it before dropping it into Priscilla's box.

It was quiet in the room--as expected. But today it was even quieter. The machines weren't operating. He could see the employees in their cubicles, but none of them was working. When they saw him they rose but instead of flashing him a Hi or offering him a short Piccadilly, they lowered their eyes or averted their heads as if busy with something else. But they didn't move to that task. Strange behavior. He had always thought himself popular. Perhaps there had been a death among the workers and they simply didn't want to be the one to break the news. That could explain it.

He would have accepted that explanation and disappeared into his own cubicle to sign the card if not for the activity in Priscilla's cubicle. Almost frantically she waved a piece of paper at him, waved it so erratically that he was unable to read what she had scribbled onto it. When he saw a hand reach up to try to drag hers down, he saw what was happening.

Miles was in her cubicle. He was trying to keep her from displaying the sign. Finally, after thrashing at Miles with her free hand, she was able to extend the paper over the side of her cubicle. "Your lower desk drawer," it read.

She *had* gotten him a present. But why was Miles trying to keep her from communicating the information? Jealousy no doubt. He had seen her place the gift in his drawer and was trying to keep Jonathan from getting it. How childish. But that was Miles.

Jonathan waved a palm at the pair, dismissing such childishness, and sat in his chair for easy access to the bottom drawer of his desk. What had she gotten him that she would need to hide in there? His desk top had been sufficient for the first gift. This one must be really special. She must have expended considerable thought in its selection.

The interior of the drawer was dark when he opened it, but he could see something shiny inside. It was probably one of those friendship plates that people set on their mantels. Depending upon who gave them, they were often called *Love Platters*.

When he reached for it, it reached for him.

The Tongue Crab was crawling up his arm before he quite realized the finality of it. Its eight tiny legs, each with a tiny pincer, were extremely quick but delicate as they seized the material of his shirt sleeve. It was beautiful in its hurried grace, its steady insistence. For all its lack of clumsiness, it might have been on an escalator.

When it mounted onto his shoulder, Jonathan stood and looked over the top of his cubicle wall. The horror on the turning faces in the room told him what was happening. He didn't need to feel the pincers grab first his right ear and then the left corner of his mouth. Priscilla's hands covered her face and she was probably crying, unconsolated by the arm around her shoulder. It was Mile's arm, but Jonathan was no longer concerned with the girl he had once loved. His attention was riveted to Mile's shirt pocket. It held a red pen, a neonic red pen, undoubtedly the pen that had written the words in the bathroom, underlined the line in the poetry book, and sealed his life to utter muteness.

If Miles, the only individual in the room who had not averted his eyes, could have parted his lips in a sadistic, sardonic grin, he would have. Instead, he settled for a *Try-to-steal-my-girl-will-you* smirk that barely lifted the left corner of his mouth.

Jonathan was strangely ambivalent about Miles' smirk. It was no more troubling to him than the tic in the eye of an all-night reveler. What he did wish, however, was that he could wipe the maniacal grin from his own face.

Dream Boy

Gerald spit the toothpaste into the sink, rinsed his mouth, and smiled at his clean shaven, nobly browed visage in the bathroom mirror. God, but he was a handsome brute, he thought. Brave. Virile. Manly. And last night he had almost proved it. Who else, he questioned the mirror, alternately arching one eyebrow and lowering the other, had stood toe to toe with a Neanderthal and taken a swing at it.

This was a real Neanderthal, not one of those slow, molasses witted slugs who stood in line with him at the Day Labor Force assignment office.

The event of the night before was so singular that while polishing his earring Gerald decided to forego another day of manual labor--he was weary of trimming hedges and cleaning chicken coops--and join his buddy at the Burger King for breakfast. He could queue up with the sloths in the work force another day.

Everett was already there, sipping his second cup of coffee, when Gerald strode into the dining area and announced to anyone in hearing that he had taken a swing at a Neanderthal. Only one of the sorry derelicts in the cafe besides Everett showed the slightest interest. That was the man they referred to as the *Perfessor*, though they had never spoken to him. He was the reading teacher at the nearby

high school and took his morning break there rather than in the noisy school cafeteria. The remainder of the customers had been busy trying to make sense of the voices in their own heads and had not noticed Gerald's entrance.

"A Neanderthal?" Everett asked. "I thought they were extinct."

"So suggests one line of reasoning," the *Perfessor* interjected unexpectedly, and softly. His voice had that quiet insouciance that, to them at least, demanded attention. Gerald and Everett watched the man as he lowered his coffee cup, his *own* coffee cup, one that read **The Reason I'm Not Hurrying Is Because I Did It Correctly The First Time.**

"But they are extinct," Everett reasoned. "We're *Cro-Magnon*. We're the ones that survived."

"Oh, the sapient ones, you mean," the *Perfessor* nodded, the arching eyebrows suggesting that he might be just the tiniest bit facetious. "That is the case if you subscribe to the paleo-anthropologists championed by the late William Golding." Everett and Gerald stood mute. "Modern man killed the Neanderthal," he explained. "That's the simple of it, but it ignores the probable fact that we are all Neanderthals to greater or lesser degrees. We carry their genes."

Gerald looked at Everett for support before he spoke. "If we killed them, then how can we be carrying their genes?"

The *Perfessor* leisurely raised his coffee mug to his lips and sipped daintily so as not to soil his graying mustache. While one hand replaced the mug precisely on the table, the other stroked his indifferently trimmed beard as if in search of an answer to Gerald's question. "Hominids being Hominids should be answer enough," he gently waved Gerald to a seat near Everett. "But let me explain."

Gerald and Everett indulged the man because they knew he would get up to leave in exactly four minutes, walking leisurely to his car before buckling himself in and returning--just under the speed limit--to his job.

"Nature's answer to reproduction appears to be nothing short of reckless abundance. If each sperm, for instance,"--he orchestrated his thoughts with leisured motions of his elevated little finger--"resulted in a pregnancy, a single ejaculation would populate an entire city. And as for copulation, when it comes to Hominids, the preferred time and place is *Any Time* and *Any Place*." He might well have been remembering portions of his own youth, but judging by the strained expression on his face those memories appeared to have been seared and largely effaced by that same youth. "And further," he recovered the string of his thought, "for Hominids, the anytime-anyplace scenario can be extended to include *Any Thing*."

"So Cro-Magnons copulated"--Everett consciously used the *Perfessor's* vocabulary--"with Neanderthals?"

"And vice versa," the *Perfessor* said, cleaning the spot on the table before him with a napkin. "I think it can safely be stated that a male Hominid in heat will fuck most anything." The word seemed out of place coming from the *Perfessor*, but he pronounced it as if it were the precise, anthropological term. "Look at all the horribly ugly, yet pregnant, women if you will. The male Hominid will literally fuck anything that moves or will stand still, knot holes will serve as an example. This holds whether the Hominid be a howler monkey or a President. Surely you realize that the old bromide *I'd fuck a bush if I thought there was a snake in it* is not a metaphor. It's a fact."

With that, the *Perfessor* seemed to have said his piece and signaled so by flipping up an edge of the paper he had been reading and began perusing it studiously. Everett recognized it as the obituary page.

Realizing the teacher had left them, figuratively, Gerald bought a cup of coffee and sat down to tell Everett how it had happened. "You've heard of hypnogogic dreams or hallucinations, haven't you?"

"No," Everett screwed up his face at the very suggestion but noticed out of the corner of his eye that the *Perfessor* had lowered the edge of his paper at Gerald's question.

"They're associated with nighttime panics," Gerald explained, not having noticed the *Perfessor's* interest in his topic. "Those are the times when people spring awake suddenly, terrified, yet they don't know why they are frightened or what scared them. Strangely, they go back to sleep immediately. Sometimes they feel paralyzed."

"That's what you had?" Everett asked.

"No, mine was the true hypnogogic dream. Some call it the Hag Dream because when they wake up with a start they see an old hag sitting on their bed. It terrifies them, but they go back to sleep immediately."

"Such dreams"--the voice came from the *Perfessor* and was heard above the neat re-folding of his newspaper--"most certainly account for all the alien abduction stories and for the unjust deaths of not a few *witches*." The way he pronounced the word told Everett and Gerald that he didn't believe in such creatures.

"But what I saw wasn't a hag," Gerald said. "It was a Neanderthal. A young one. No longer a boy but not quite a man."

"Really?" the *Perfessor* wondered aloud. "But then, the differences between a hag and a Neanderthal aren't all that great. Primitive peoples--not knowing of Neanderthals--might describe them as hags. Perhaps we have some genetic fear of Neanderthals, just as we seem to have a natural, untaught, aversion to snakes and the dark."

Everett and Gerald had no observations to add, but the *Perfessor* wouldn't have heard them if they had, for he was already shambling toward his car, a briefcase in one hand and a cardigan draped over the same forearm. The other hand held ready the key to the ignition and probably--as ordered and methodical as he was--to his classroom door as well. His paced, cautious lifestyle was no doubt the logical culmination of a dissolute, drug-abusive youth, a life that had traded the syncopatic, psychedelic sixties for the mantra of a leisurely stroked metronome. Everett watched the car creep forward from its parking place before turning to Gerald. "Well, what happened?"

"I took a swing at it."

"What'd it do?"

"Dissolved. My fist went through air and I found myself on all fours at the foot of my bed. It was 3:12."

"How'd you know?"

"I was looking at my clock. It's on the wall opposite where I sleep so that I can open my eyes at any time during the night and know what time it is. It has a lighted dial."

"But what did it look like?" Everett was irritated by the pace of the conversation.

"That's what was funny. That's how I know it was real. Not a dream. I mean it was really in my room--or maybe, for just an instant, I was in its cave or wherever it was."

Everett beat the air with his hand, trying to get Gerald to crack the seed of his story.

"I know it was real by the way it looked at me. It was surprised at my springing from sleep and taking a swing at it, but it wasn't frightened. It acted as if it had been watching me sleep, studying me the way I might study a Neanderthal exhibit in a museum."

"But you were terrified of it?"

"Not really. And that's what's kind of strange. All the time I was swinging--it must have been fast, but it seemed to be in slow motion--I wasn't afraid of it either. I knew what it was. I knew it was a hypnogogic dream. I've read about them in *Skeptical Inquirer* magazine. I'd been wanting to have such a dream because I've never had one. They're not uncommon," he explained, aware of Everett's own obvious skepticism.

"You still haven't told me what it looked like."

"Young, like I said. Smallish. Maybe five-foot-two, judging by the height of the clock on the wall. Its hair--reddish to blondish--was down to its shoulders, and it had a wispy beard. Its shoulders were both sloping and rolled forward, like it had just stooped over to get a better look at me."

"And then it disappeared?"

"Yes, but I was swinging at it. And that's another funny thing. It had stopped looking into my eyes and was watching my fist. I saw its eyes rise. Then I opened my eyes."

"You mean you saw this thing with your eyes closed?"

"Of course. It dissolved when I opened my eyes. It was light in the room--or wherever I was--and I could see the Neanderthal plainly, even the leather pouch tied to its waist by a thong."

"How did you know that your eyes were closed?"

"Because when I opened them the Neanderthal dissolved, the bright room became dark, and I saw the face on the clock. 3:12," he said. "But the next time I'm going to keep my eyes closed so that it won't disappear. Maybe, just maybe, I'll be able to communicate with it. Maybe make a trade with it for something so people won't think I'm crazy."

"Nobody's going to believe you no matter what you say or do," Everett attempted to bring Gerald back to reality. "No more than most people believe in alien abductions. The *Perfessor* as much as told you that. Besides, you've only had one of those dreams in your life. What makes you think you'll have another one?"

"Eight ounces of coconut cream pie yogurt, a couple ounces of peanut butter--extra crunchy, and two bottles of Guinness Extra Stout."

"What?"

"That's what I ate before I went to bed. I've never eaten that combination before and I'm sure that's what did it. What put me in the proper state to have such a dream--or, maybe, to slip into that other reality, the Neanderthal one."

"Gerald," Everett advised--they had been friends since grade school--"why don't you have a glass of warm milk before bed and forget this whole thing." He let the sudden transition in conversation slip in before continuing. "You've always been smarter than me, but you refuse to choke your intelligence down, to make a

clustered pattern of it. You're always shot gunning all over. Focus for a change. You've always tried to get by on your good looks. Forget this dream and get a job. Something with a future. This day laborer existence of yours is going to kill you. You have gifts, use them. Use them for your own good."

"Like you, for instance?"

With chagrin Everett had to admit, "I'm between jobs. But at least they are real jobs, jobs with long-term possibilities."

Gerald listened but didn't really hear. "I've got to go clean out a chicken house," he said.

"Why?"

"I need a little money to live on," he told Everett as he got up to leave. "Same time tomorrow?"

"Why not. Maybe the *Perfessor* will be here, too." He pictured the avuncular gentleman sipping his coffee carefully and then daubing the corner of his mouth with a meticulously folded white handkerchief.

Everett was still finishing his coffee when Gerald left, waving a cheerful goodbye. He needed money, all right, but it wasn't just to live on. He needed it for coconut cream pie yogurt, crunchy peanut butter, and Guinness Extra Stout.

He'd show them who was dreaming.

The next morning Gerald was so excited he almost neglected to inspect his face in the mirror. He didn't have time to shave, he realized. He had to get to the Burger King and show Everett and the *Perfessor* what he had traded for. A cursory glance from his noble brow to his manly, square jaw revealed that little more than a splash of water was needed to clean an unexplained fleck of blood from the cleft in

his chin. Was the cleft actually deeper? Nah, just his imagination. To clean it he turned the faucet on the left to increase the volume of hot water and immersed his face into a double palm full of the liquid.

Raising his dripping face to the mirror again, he couldn't help but realize and comment upon the truth. Lord, but he was a handsome brute.

Entering the Burger King, Gerald saw the usual crowd, including Everett and the *Perfessor*, both engrossed in their papers and ignoring each other. Gerald said nothing but moved instead to the space between their two tables and held up the item he was confident would rock their worlds.

"A stone?" Everett asked.

The *Perfessor* was less condescending and actually reached for the object. After turning it in his fingers, and after inspecting it both with and without his reading glasses, he returned it to Gerald. "Not a bad replica," he said. "Did you make it yourself?"

Gerald couldn't believe their nonchalance. "I traded for it," he gasped. He was stupefied. Mystified. "With a Neanderthal. It was like I told you," he turned hopefully to Everett. "Last night I didn't open my eyes and the Neanderthal didn't disappear. I couldn't talk to it, but I was able to trade for what he carried in the leather pouch at his waist."

"Let's back up a second here," the *Perfessor* said, laying his paper carefully aside. "Are you telling us that you traded something to that Neanderthal that you said you dreamed of?" Gerald nodded. "What did you trade?"

"A knife."

"A modern knife for a Neanderthal hand ax," the *Perfessor* said. For two slow beats of the metronome that was his life, he sat without moving. Then he squared and folded his paper, drained the last of his coffee, and reached for his briefcase. "I told you yesterday," he said unhurriedly, though he was preparing to leave, "that we are all Neanderthal--to a degree."

He, and anyone in the restaurant wishing quiet, was interrupted by the noisy entrance of a clutch of teenage boys. "Hi, Mister Fynal," one of them called to the *Perfessor*.

The *Perfessor*, Mister Fynal, turned slowly in his chair to the voice. "Horatio, aren't you supposed to be in school?"

The student had trouble with the language but made it evident that they were running late but would be on time for his class.

"I know you yahoos are on the free breakfast and lunch programs. Why are you here spending your money?"

The garbled answer could as easily have been answered by a shrug. The student next to the youth who had spoken had not taken part in the conversation. He was talking excitedly into a cell phone that apparently didn't understand English.

"As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted," he raised his voice at *rudely interrupted* for the benefit of the boys, who were pointing at pictures of menu items in an effort to communicate with the cashier, "we are all Neanderthal to a degree. And on the chance--a quad zillion to one, I should judge--that you might actually have met a living Neanderthal, one living forty or fifty thousand years ago, you could be placing our present genetic makeup in jeopardy."

Everett smirked. "You've been in the old textbooks too long, *Perfessor*. It's passe to believe that we can go back into time and affect the future. Even hardened Trekkies don't fall for that anymore."

The *Perfessor*, unperturbed, shrugged. "We are, of course, being only hypothetical. I am simply pointing out how precarious our hominid ancestry is. A slip here, a tumble there, and we might be markedly different creatures. Had your friend here," he indicated Gerald, "actually managed to exchange a pocket knife for a hand ax, that simple act could have caused--"

"We know the story," Everett cut him short. "And the Neanderthals would have dominated and today we'd all be savage beasts."

"Actually," the *Perfessor* rose to leave, "when I said we are all Neanderthal to some degree, I was not eliminating the possibility that the Neanderthal might be the gentler side of us."

"I don't believe this," Gerald said, pressing the hand ax before the *Perfessor's* face. "I traded a Neanderthal for this. What have I got to show you to convince you that I am actually communicating with them?"

"That," the *Perfessor* said, "shifting his briefcase to the other hand and reaching into his pocket for his car keys, "I really couldn't say. But it isn't a crude piece of stone work. That rock of yours is obviously flaked, and flaked a number of times, but a rock is a rock. Determining its age is difficult at best, and that stone looks as if it were shaped yesterday."

"Maybe it just was," Gerald retorted, obviously meaning that the young Neanderthal had done it.

"Perhaps if it were wood or bone, something that could be more easily dated," the *Perfessor* said, but immediately changed his mind. "But them, even if you were correct in what you say, it would reveal only a recent date."

"But what could I trade for?" Gerald yelled to the *Perfessor's* slowly receding form. When he turned back, Everett was already reimmersed in his morning paper. "You don't believe me either," he said in a tone that challenged their friendship.

"What can I say," Everett lowered his paper, a sick look on his face, "like the *Perfessor* said. A rock is a rock." He felt guilty, but he raised the paper and excluded Gerald from his morning.

"I'll show you who's dreaming," Gerald said to anyone in the room who would listen. He included the *Perfessor's* students who were still there, but they only raised their heads at the commotion, not understanding the words.

"Tonight," he said even louder, looking at the paper before Everett's face, "I'm going to bed with a machete."

It was cold in the morning when Gerald awoke, but he didn't even notice it. He was too excited by his new possession and couldn't wait to once again show off before his buddies. Rolling off his blanket he grabbed the thin, sharp implement from the wall where he had leaned it and crawled outside.

The wooden handle fit nicely in his thick hand and he couldn't resist slashing at the few dead sticks poking from the ground in front of his home, just as he had done on recent mornings. He was amazed at how sharp the implement was, and sturdy. It wasn't brittle like all other stone he had seen. And when he flicked the

blade with his finger, it sounded pleasantly. It had none of that thuddishness of stone.

As always the first place Gerald visited each morning was the pond. It was brackish and green with scum, but it was water and it was convenient. Kneeling at the shore's edge, he took the implement he had traded for and skimmed the film from the water. The image he saw reflected there was nothing like the hairless monkey that had been visiting him in his dreams recently. At first he and the monkey had traded things, but recently the hairless monkey seemed to be pleading for him to return the sharp things he had previously been so eager to trade. Last night the monkey had acted frantic, even insane, but Gerald had resisted and rolled over in his sleep.

How ugly that creature had been, Gerald thought. It lacked his massive, matted hair, the mane of a lion. Its forehead was flat and smooth, not furrowed and beautifully beetling. And the jaw--weak, feminine. Gerald lowered his own huge, square jaw and displayed its large, yellow teeth.

My, he couldn't help but think, he was one handsome brute.

Sta-nine Zero

Flesh against metal.

Cassius Furnivall, a reedy old man with the protruding teeth of a clarinet player and the taut humor of a harp string, felt the sound more than heard it. He was perched on the iron railing around the town plaza in Ajo, Arizona, and the vibrations from the rail jellied his spare buttocks.

Flesh against metal..

Sliding from his perch and looking down the railing, Furnival discovered the origin of the vibrations and his piano key teeth glistened forth in an arpeggio of light that brightened the town square the way a calliope does a one-elephant circus. A resident of the village, his tongue swinging like a wet metronome, was beating his head against the lower rung of the railing with all the melancholy persistence of a cud chewer. Adding counterpoint to this medley of motion and sound was the dripping, stretching saliva that oiled down his chin.

Around, Furnivall, dotting the plaza like fly specks on a lamp shade, were the town's residents. Most of them were no longer able to walk and were curled like little seeds on the rye grass encircled by the iron railing. Some rested, or dreamed, or whatever they were now capable of, on the asphalt road that bordered the palm-lined plaza.

"I wonder if they ever realized what was happening to them?" Furnivall mused aloud. "Probably not," he answered himself. "Probably thought they were just taking another siesta."

The few Ajo residents who still had partially functioning minds and limbs were attempting to ape Furnivall by sitting on the railing. They were having little success, however, as one by one they lost their purchase and fell like frozen grackles from rural power lines. The sound of their heads hitting the grass or asphalt reminded Furnivall of spent shot falling on shake shingles, and he drew a notebook from the breast pocket of his bib overalls to record the fact.

Though he was a hack writer, or at least a writer who would have settled for hack writer status, Furnivall had been keeping notes on Ajo like an anthropologist. His three-year task had been unplanned, a serendipitous lark. It began innocently enough when he settled his hovercraft down at a service station on the north edge of town three years before.

To look at the attendants, they had seemed efficient enough. They had swarmed over his hovercraft like ants over an aphid. But, inexplicably, they had filled his fuel tank with oil, his radiator with diesel, and his crankcase with gasoline. And, after innocently sabotaging his vehicle, they had presented themselves for head-patting like mongrel puppies named Curley, Moe, and Larry.

Ignoring the fact that his just washed windshield was dirtier than when he had landed, Furnivall tipped the three grinning stooges and took to the air. He had gone about a mile before the engine sputtered, nearly plunging him into the gummy pond atop a gigantic, gray flume pile, the moonscape remnant of decades of copper mining. Skillfully, he had managed to turn the craft about and crashland on the football field.

The craft still rested there, rusting at midfield, though the Ajo Red Raiders had played a complete schedule that year, their last. It remained there because, with all their intelligence pooled, the Ajoans were incapable of understanding the principle

of the lever. Even though it did rest at midfield, smack in the center where the toss of the coin usually took place, it proved no obstacle. The game was always played in the Ajo half of the field. The opponents ran through the Ajo defense like rain water through a storm sewer grating. Only once did the Red Raiders get past midfield, and that was on a fortuitous fumble against the Phoenix Indians.

Furnivall had been puzzled for a time, wondering how Ajo even managed to field a team, let alone recognize the difference between a football and a barrel cactus. It finally occurred to him one Friday evening while watching the Raider quarterback trying to find his way out of the huddle: football in Ajo was a reflex action much as nose picking and crotch scratching were in other communities.

In fact, all that remained in Ajo when Furnivall arrived had been the habitual--that done because it had always been done. Students habitually went to the school grounds each day though school, apart from football, had not been held in years, not since the *Stanine Zero*. Workers still went to the mine each morning, ignoring the fact that it had been closed for five years. Shoppers, eager for over-priced *gangas*, lined up in front of the company store at 10 each morning even though the doors and windows were boarded shut as they had been since the mining company moved out. On the positive side, old Mexican women still made tortillas each morning. This habitual practice had lasted until a week ago when the stores of corn and wheat had been exhausted.

And, like clockwork, each Friday night the solid citizens thronged en mass to the football stadium to sit and mutely stare at the rusting remains of Furnivall's hovercraft.

Once, playfully, Furnivall had fired up the boiler at the mine and blown the community whistle, the whistle Ajoans had lived by for generations. He blew the

6:30 a.m. whistle, and the Ajoans arose from their beds like waking automatons-- even though it was two in the morning. Ten minutes later he blew the noon whistle, and they rested, eating the tortillas which were still habitually arriving at their doors, carried by little Indian girls.

And then, in rapid succession, he blew the five o'clock, nine o'clock, midnight, and 6:30 a.m. whistles and the Ajoans jerked spastically about their floors and babbled in tongues as if they were roasting in Pentecostal fires.

"These fools have eaten Sta-nine Zero the way I eat jalapeno peppers," Furnivall sneered, stepping back from the railing on which he had been sitting to get a wider view of the Ajoans as they sprawled about the plaza like the terminally retarded in a state institution.

He doubled his left hand into a fist and shook it at them.

"Sweet, wasn't it? If you'd stuck to the spicy fire of pepper reality you wouldn't be where you are today." He sometimes talked that way, especially to himself. And in Ajo he was the only person who could speak or listen.

"But no, no. That wouldn't do you, would it? You had to nurse your ignorance, didn't you?" The satisfaction he had first felt at their predicament was twisting into rage.

"No, don't die yet. Don't curl into your little balls of nothingness and die. That's what you want, but I'm not going to let you have it. At least not yet. I want you paranoid blobs to know that the final decision was mine. Just as you're ready to go, just as you've finally made up your minds to jump, I want to push you."

Shaking like an inspired paraclete, Cassius Furnivall thrust the notebook back into his bib pocket and shouldered a newspaper boy's bag pregnant with the pages

of a novel that he was sure would make him famous and bring Ajo to the attention of the world, show it to be the canker it was.

He had first toyed with the idea of titling his novel *Stanine Zero* but had at last settled on *The Lotus Eaters of Ajo*. This title more fit the epic proportions of his work: the heroic (gridiron action), the setting (as vast as the psychedelic decaying of a mind), the appeal to the muses (the implicit trust placed in the feudal paternalism of a company town), the supernatural forces (greedy Ids devouring themselves), the style of sustained elevation (the rhetoric of decaying minds justifying and ignoblizing that decay), and the descent into hell (the state in which he, Cassius Furnivall, was not leaving them).

"Ruminate, you sheep. Chew slowly because this is going to be your last meal."

With that, he adjusted the weight on the newspaper bag on his thin shoulders and picked up the tongue of the child's red wagon that had accompanied him everywhere since his arrival in Ajo. It was piled high with boxes and papers and trinkets, the paraphernalia and documentation of a dying town. There were yearbooks, ribbons, buttons, newspapers, food stamps, ore samples, rebate charts, shoulder pads, broken glass, head bands.

Radios, baggies of marijuana, many colored capsules, work schedules, National Education Development Test scores, a seed from the world's tallest blue palo verde tree, a property tax bill, graduation exercise programs, a picture of a Judas goat, a plaque reading *Today Ajo, Tomorrow Ajo*, a wine glass, a cue ball, the dried, severed head of a fighting cock, a picture of an open pit mine and another picture of two smokestacks billowing black soot, plastic flowers from the

graveyard, a six pack of non-returnable soft drink bottles, a picture of Brigham Young, and one well-thumbed, but unopened, Bible.

And a ten-by-thirteen manila envelope marked *Sta-nine Zero*.

Dropping the tongue, Furnivall shuffled to the wagon and began tightening the straps that secured the mountain of trash. He would have to leave town on foot, pulling the wagon, because Ajo had never gone hover, had refused to adjust with the times and accept the new modes of transportation. Their parents and grandparents had moved about the country in four-wheeled internal combustion-driven vehicles and so would they. Of course, none of the vehicles were now operational, and even if they were, he wouldn't have gotten more than ten miles from town in any direction because the government had ceased maintaining the antiquated pathways.

Satisfied with the straps, Furnivall pried a small can of jalapenos from a corner of the wagon and opened it. He plopped one of the green furnaces into his mouth, chewed it rapidly, delicately, and swallowed.

He was sucking cooling air into his mouth and fanning his lips with a frantic hand when he decided to bid a final farewell to Ajo. He knotted his fingers into a fist and thrust his whole arm into the anus of the sky, accompanying the gesture with a jalapeno-spewn Bronx cheer.

2

Metal against metal.

Colonel Walker Flint heard the sound but put it immediately from his mind. Normally he would have responded to the clanging, but he was still bothered by

the attack upon the blockade the night before by semian-like creatures from Ajo.

"The gas shouldn't have affected them that way," he thought.

Metal against metal.

Slowly, his face showing only incipient awareness, he gazed lazily through the open flaps of his command post tent and saw the origin of the sound--a member of his militia beating the guardrail on a hovercraft with a spanner tool.

It was an appealing tableau: the man, silhouetted by the fierce desert sun, rotated powerfully at his hips with each blow as if he were sounding an ancient bronze gong. The lunacy of his action contrasted with the sharp profile of his body. Every line lay distinctly and black before the desert, every line but the profile of the face.

Colonel Flint's own face whitened as he leaned forward in his chair for a closer inspection of the laboring militia man. The silhouette was clean and exact, humanoid in every detail, except for the face--the mandibled visage of a grasshopper.

"Gas," warned the militia man sprinting across the sand toward Flint. The cry was muffled by the insect-looking mask on his face. "Gas, colonel--your mask." Cursing himself silently, Flint drew his mask from the pouch at his hip and stretched it over his face, sucking in with his palm over the intake to make sure it was well seated.

"Metal against metal," he thought. How basic. How obvious. The non-verbal warning of a gas or biological attack.

"Someone or something's coming down the old highway from Ajo," the militia man, a Captain Kaasa, panted beneath his mask. "The spotters on both Black and Child's Mountains report seeing it."

"Oh, god, not again," the colonel hesitated, remembering the creatures as they had bounced about in the shaft of light surrounding the blockade the night before. Recovering, he ordered Kaasa to see that the guards had a back-up supply of pepper fog and that the remainder of the militia be placed on standby.

After striding determinedly across the sand, Flint silenced the man who was still beating the guardrail on the hovercraft with a spanner and peered through binoculars at the object moving down the old highway.

"It's a man," he said after adjusting the binoculars, "a man pulling a wagon." Flint exchanged a questioning glance with Kaasa who had just returned from carrying out his orders.

The captain was incredulous. "You don't mean he's not affected by the gas, do you, sir?"

The colonel fidgeted with the glasses, trying to improve the clumsy view through the lens of his gas mask. "I don't see how he could be," he answered after a pause, "and still be able to walk, let alone pull a wagon."

The colonel was remembering the creatures which had attacked the blockade the night before. They could walk only in a rudimentary sense. Flint had even hesitated to credit their actions as an *attack*. Though their appearance had been terrifying and their antics upsetting, he later reasoned they had been drawn to the activity around the blockade by much the same force that propels dogs onto football fields.

When fixed in the beam of a spotlight, the Ajoans, hunkering in a symbiotic circle beneath an ironwood tree, left their preoccupation with the lice on each other's bodies and looked absently about, their eyelids blinking casually. After discovering the source of the sudden illumination, and perhaps assuming it to be an

early-risen sun, they went back to grooming one another, their filthy fingers sliding through oily hair and rotting clothing.

When they captured one of the elusive little lice, the Ajoans would position it between their finger tips, tilt their heads back, bare their yellow teeth, and bite delicately into it, lapping quickly as the juices flowed. Only when a guard yelled did one of the creatures take further notice. It stood erect, or semi-erect, and peered with pongid-like interest into the blinding light while sucking mucous insect viscera from its grimy fingers.

Called from his bed, Colonel Flint had stumbled sleepily across the sand, braving the desert night chill, to stare dumbly at the creature dancing in the spotlight. "Something's wrong here," he had mouthed.

Though the debilitating agent had never been tested on humans, the Ajoan before him manifested completely unexpected symptoms. Victims of the gas should have been unable to walk or move but would have been normal in all other respects. Only the motor responses were to have been interrupted.

"Maybe," the colonel blinked back to the present, "the gas didn't fall on Ajo at all."

"But, sir," Kaasa protested, "how do you account for last night? Those couldn't have been normal Ajoans."

The colonel just shrugged his shoulders and looked back at the man pulling the wagon down the road toward them. "This one," he pointed with the binoculars, "doesn't seem to be affected."

"Sir," Kaasa quailed, "if what we saw last night is the price to pay if you're wrong, I don't think we should take the chance." His eyes were pleading.

"Now I see why your men call you 'Circle-the-Wagons Kaasa,'" he half snorted.

"But you're right," he admitted, and ordered the guards to gas the approaching figure when it neared.

And they did gas the approaching old man, gassed him even before he knew the blockade was there, gassed him as he paused to fish into a small can for an oily jalapeno.

The pepper fog hung in the air after the hissing of the blowers stopped and Flint and Kaasa listened, holding their breaths for fear they should miss any sound, wondering if the old man had collapsed and was suffering, unseen, from the lung-burning irritant.

And then the sounds came: the scrapping of feet and the rolling of wheels. Slowly, the gas swirled and dissipated to reveal a grasshopper-faced figure moving toward them through the mist like a phantom traversing the fevered fields of a nightmare.

"Again," the colonel yelled, and the gas whooshed out toward the wagon-pulling specter, enveloping it.

But still the figure moved on with the persistence of a lingering melody. It was moving toward a large, box-like machine mounted on a specially built hovercraft.

Unordered, the guards hit the masked figure with another blast of the gas but the figure didn't stop. It was at the blockade and then under it. Instead of stopping once it had breached the barrier, it continued to the large plastic machine and ran its hands wonderingly over the smooth surface.

"Is this what I think it is?" came the muffled voice of the intruder.

"How'd, how'd..." the colonel sputtered.

"Furnivall's the name," the old man replied, not taking his hands from the gaudy pink machine. Cassius Furnivall."

Wonderful," the colonel's voice shook in spite of his choice of words. "But how'd you do it. How'd you avoid the gas?"

Furnivall only half heard, or half understood, the colonel. "My mask," he answered absently, touching the gas mask on his face and then moving his fingers lovingly back to the machine.

"No, no, not the riot agent. I'm talking about the D-27, the debilitating gas, the gas that fell on Ajo yesterday."

Like rosined bows sliding slowly from the strings of a violin, Furnivall's arms floated to his sides and his eyes dropped thoughtfully, contemplating his nicotine-colored tennis shoes.

"Gas?" he asked. "On Ajo yesterday?"

Flint peered questioningly at Furnivall's expressionless face. "You were there, weren't you? I mean you did just come from Ajo?"

Furnivall nodded.

Suspicious of the old man's failure to commit himself, Flint pursued the questioning. "Come, man, surely you can remember, surely you noticed if the people were acting strangely?"

A lyrical little smile creased the edges of Furnivall's lips and wiggled toward his eyes like eighth notes squiggling to life across an unscored page of sheet music. "I should say they were acting strangely," the old man beamed, the highlights in his eyes dancing with an insane idea. "Yes, I would say they were acting very

strangely indeed. And when did you say the gas fell?" he asked, cocking his head and shifting the burden of the interrogation. "You did say fell?"

"Are you suggesting," the colonel asked, looking quickly to Captain Kaasa and then back to the old man, "that the residents of Ajo were acting strangely *before* yesterday?"

This time Furnivall completely avoided the question. He placed his hands on the machine behind him and spoke more to it than to the colonel. "Is this an Hieronymus machine?"

The colonel reached for Furnivall's hands and pulled them from the machine. "Answer my questions or I'll be forced to place you under arrest. Now, were the people of Ajo acting strangely before yesterday?"

Subdued, his hands again at his sides, the old man shook his head. "No," he lied, "they were fine until yesterday."

"Then how'd you avoid the gas?"

"I was inside," he answered simply, another lie.

"But it's an airborne gas. Even if you somehow avoided it when it came down you would have come into contact with it. It's communicable. It can be spread from person to person. Once it's inside the victim's lungs it not only intoxicates the host but combines with the mucus therein to produce more of the agent. They breathe out the gas. And the worst part is we don't know just how long that chain of infection can continue."

"I'm an asthmatic," Furnivall explained. "My room was equipped with an air filter."

"But you left your room. That's obvious."

"I was lucky," he said, holding out his mask. "When I looked out my window, I saw the people acting strangely and feared some type of gas had gotten loose. So I put on my mask before I went out."

The colonel squinted at Furnivall suspiciously and then looked to Kaasa for support of his hunch, but got none.

When the colonel didn't pursue his questioning immediately, Furnivall filled the void. "Just why, may I ask, was this gas dumped on Ajo, however deserving its residents may have been?"

"It wasn't dumped. It was an accident," Flint defended. "All I'm allowed to say is that a satellite malfunctioned in orbit and jettisoned a capsule that impacted somewhere in the Sonoran Desert of Mexico or Arizona."

"But what made you think Ajo had been hit?" Furnivall watched the colonel closely.

"A couple heading from Phoenix to Puerto Penasco tried to land in Ajo last night. I think their names were Bloom and Osterhaus, or something like that. They reported that the place looked like a loony bin and when the report reached my desk I knew what it had to be."

Furnivall smiled at his good fortune. "You're going to use the machine, aren't you?"

"You mean the Hieronymus?" Flint asked, aghast. "You've got to be out of your mind."

"Perhaps," Furnivall conceded, "but if the people in Ajo take it into their heads to leave you've got to stop them. It doesn't sound as if that gas will wear off in a hurry, if it wears off at all."

"The people are my problem. Now why don't you just get out of here and let me worry about them?"

"But you do have the machine with you?" Furnivall prodded. "Surely it's not along as a showpiece, I trust?"

"Forget the machine, Furnivall, if that is your name. It has never been anything more than a last resort and never will be. Your point is moot anyhow because we have an antidote."

"And it'll work?"

"Of course it'll work."

"Then you've gassed humans before?"

"Of course we haven't. But the antidote will work. Believe me."

"And if it doesn't work? What then? You can't just send your men in and mop up, can you? I mean you couldn't take the chance of getting your men infected."

"What's your point, Furnivall? Spill it. We're busy here."

"My point is this. If the antidote fails, you will be faced with last resorts. And that's the machine."

The colonel didn't answer. He just faced Furnivall and tried not to glance at the machine.

"Should the antidote fail," Furnivall smiled. "I'm just saying *should* it fail, you can call on me. My wagon is full of what you will need."

Flint eyed first the wagon and then Furnivall. "Where'd you learn about the machine?"

Getting no answer from the inscrutable gentleman, the colonel motioned impatiently for a militia man to help Furnivall haul his wagon away from the blockade and the machine. Anything to get the old man out of his sight for a while.

By the time the hovercraft departed toward Ajo with its load of antidote, Furnivall had ensconced himself in the shade of the colonel's tent and was opening a new can of jalapenos. The young militia man who helped him pull his wagon through the sand remained with him, apparently as a guard. He watched with interest as Furnivall plopped the jalapenos onto his tongue and rolled them against his palate before biting delicately into them and savoring the fiery juices as they coursed down his throat.

About the time the hovercraft was dumping its powder-fine antidote over Ajo, the young militia man had mustered the courage to bite into one of Furnivall's offered delicacies. He spent the ensuing fifteen minutes writing on the sand, suffering the agony of a flaming esophagus and the wrenching of near fatal hiccups.

As the militia man was just overcoming the spasticity of his body and catching his first full breaths in five minutes, Furnivall, smiling benignly, leaned down and asked him when he customarily went to the restroom.

"Just before breakfast. Why?"

"Why?" Furnivall shrugged. "Because if I should be here tomorrow, I'll know to ignore any shrieks of agony from the latrine at that hour. That's why."

The young man paled, but Furnivall didn't notice. He was watching, instead, the return of the hovercraft and the anguished gestures of the colonel.

"Little wagon," Furnivall spoke softly, patting the side of the laden vehicle, "they're going to need us." He stood and began tugging the wagon through the sand to the Hieronymus machine.

The colonel saw him coming but made no effort to turn him back.

"Might I surmise," Furnivall called politely when he was close enough, "that you will be requiring my services?"

Flint didn't answer but went instead into a hasty conference with Captain Kaasa. Furnivall only caught snatches of their conversation, but he did hear the colonel snap "But I've got to stop it at all costs." A short time later, after much haggling, he heard Kaasa plead "But, colonel, you have no choice. You've got to use it."

By this time, Furnivall had edged near enough to the pair to distract them with his chuckling. "Apparently," he spoke after the eyes of Flint and Kaasa had turned on him, "the chemists producing the antidote didn't account for certain biological differences between the ape and the essence of man. It didn't work I take it?"

"Like salt on a bird's tail," the colonel admitted through clenched teeth. "That wagon of yours," he said finally, pointing. "You think it contains what we'll need?"

"Did the first man on the moon resort to foolish hyperbole?"

Flint was shaking. "Furnivall," he threatened.

"Don't worry," the old man soothed the situation with a calming gesture. "Trust me. I am the man you need. Perhaps the only man who can produce what you need. And what you need is the essence of Ajo, almost a burlesque. You need someone who can coalesce the salient and the subtle. The literary equivalent of a political cartoonist."

"How, how do you know about the Hieronymus? It's an ultimately secret weapon, and it hasn't even been successfully used."

"Why a machine patented in the middle of the last century should be a mystery to me *is* a mystery to me. Particularly since it is the most beautiful ultimate weapon ever conceived," Furnivall snarled, growing bolder. "To operate

the machine successfully, the belligerent must be on intimate terms with the victim. Past efforts to use the machine have failed because the operator knew only one side of the intended victim. Improperly primed, the machine will not work. The essence must be exact. And when complete information on the enemy was obtained, it was discovered that the enemy was not really so bad after all. Just a misunderstood friend."

"Look," Flint pleaded, pointing toward Ajo. "We don't need philosophies now. We need to destroy Ajo. We haven't got time to worry about Christian brotherhood. It's the rest of mankind I'm being held responsible for."

"Destroyed, Ajo will be," Furnivall promised. "Never you fret, colonel. But just understand that to me this machine is more than a weapon; it is a literary device. A vehicle to project my hate. I loathe Ajo and all it has ever stood for. I'm going to feed that machine with hateful facts. If my hate is justified, that town will burn. If I'm wrong in my hate, if my hate springs from nothing but petty prejudices, then Ajo will stand and I will be destroyed. My life will have been proven a hollow gesture. I will have been proven the classic fool, full of sound and fury, full of a ranting that boils solely from my own ignorance."

"Enough of your rantings. Feed the machine."

Feverishly, Captain Kaasa opened the machine and pulled out its collection drawer. With the drawer withdrawn, the innards of the machine were visible. They were childishly simple. There were two embossed sheets of plastic containing nothing but circuitry diagrams. The machine contained only diagrams, not real electronic. Suspended above the diagrams, with enough space between to permit the collection drawer, was a flat aluminum triangle. It was attached to a rod that led up through the top of the machine to a simple black dial. There were other

features to the machine but they were purely ornamental. What appeared to be an antenna was connected to nothing. A sheet of glass near the black dial looked purposeful but had only a theatrical function. The entire machine was a ghost trap, a mandala to capture and direct the psychic powers of the operator.

"Now let's get with it," Furnivall spoke hurriedly, pulling a piece of paper from the pile in his wagon. "I'll start with this since it is what most Ajoans started with. It's the bill for the birth of a child. It covers all prenatal care and all expenses for hospitalization of the mother and child. The bill would normally have totaled zero, but this bill is for six dollars. It was a male child and the parents wished it circumcised. Hence, the six dollars."

Captain Kaasa took the paper and placed it in the tray.

"Next I have a bill for fifty dollars. It was accessed a teacher at Ajo High School for treatment after he stepped on a nail. Six dollars for a tetanus shot and forty-four dollars for an emergency call. It was considered an emergency because he was not directly employed by the mine, and thus, could be taken for all the cash he walked in with."

"Next," he continued, "is a picture of the mine's two smokestacks billowing black suit before the pollution arrest devices were implemented. Here is a picture of the same stacks after the devices were implemented."

"But there's not difference," Kaasa protested, handling the snapshot.

Furnivall smiled.

"What I have next is quite important. They are computer readouts showing results of the National Education Development Tests administered to each year's sophomore class. What these sheets reveal is that Ajoans have always been below

average in intelligence. Further, the NED tests show the town's intelligence level has taken a steady dive since 1956, a nose dive not halted until this day, providing of course that the machine doesn't fail us."

They fed the machine almost as fast as their hands could work, Furnivall drawing it from his wagon and Kaasa placing it in the tray, arranging it so there would be room for all the articles needed.

"Coupled with the NED test scores is this 1948 high school annual, the *Treasure Chest*. Through a little investigative work, I discovered that only two percent of those graduating from Ajo High ever successfully left town to seek employment elsewhere. These went to a carwash in Tucson. The result is an isolated gene pool, not all that bad unless you consider the genes that were pooled.

"As an example, all children in Ajo families look alike except that the girls have long hair and the boys flattops. Some might say this strong family resemblance is the result of strong genes. But actually, it's the result of tired, uninspired genes, genes so tired and washed out they can't do anything but repeat what they've done before.

They continued to add bits and pieces of the town's life to the drawer. For most of it Furnivall made no comment as little was needed.

There were advertisements for Wednesday night bingo and taco feasts, a rubberband-held collection of raffle tickets promising prizes ranging from sides of beef, rifles, sleeping bags, Indian blankets and dolls with fabulous wardrobes to baskets of booze and a date with an acne-scarred cheerleader.

"Now here is something that has always been near and dear to my heart." Furnivall pulled out a plaque lettered with the motto of the high school graduating

class of 1984. "It shows that somewhere in their decaying minds was a spark of awareness."

Flint took the plaque and read it. *Today Ajo, Tomorrow--Ajo.*

"They didn't do as well with their mottoes in ensuing years. They didn't understand the word *motto*, I'm afraid. The class of 1991 chose *Go Navy* as its motto and the class of 1994 selected *Longer, and they are Mild*. It had a touch of antiquity, I suppose, hence its appeal.

"Another favorite of mine," he said, handing Flint a glossy eight-by-ten picture.

"A goat?"

"Not just any goat, a Judas Goat. By 1992 it became an acknowledged fact that graduation from Ajo High was tantamount to the kiss of death. It was such an undisputed fact that graduating seniors were led across the auditorium stage to receive their diplomas by a Judas Goat."

While Flint and Kaasa studied the picture, Furnivall piled other articles into the drawer.

There were miniature footballs, spirit ribbons reading "Maul the Dust Devils" or "Stomp Eloy." Included also were suspicious looking capsules, marijuana, a head band reeking of incense, a small piece of copper, a dog leash never used, a stop sign never read, and a secret document from the mine's head office ordering that the higher one rose in the affairs of the mine the higher his home was to be situated on the hill around which Ajo was built. The edict further stated that the very highest home, the one that perched on the crest of the small mountain like a medieval castle, was to be occupied by the winning football coach. Losing football coaches were to be told there were two roads out of town and then shown those

roads. (The teachers had already discovered there were three if they wanted to go through the Indian graveyard.)

"I think I'm falling in love with their simple ways," Furnivall confessed.

Flint and Kaasa stopped their perusal of the picture of the Judas Goat to peer at the certificate handed them by Furnivall.

"It's a driver of the year award given by the high school safety council. It went to a male student who managed to put 85,047 miles on his automobile in one year without getting more than two miles from the center of town.

"The runner-up award went to a young gentleman who managed to burn four sets of tires off his 1991 Chevrolet in six months while receiving only one citation for reckless driving."

Kaasa sniffed the certificate for any lingering gas fumes and studied the greasy thumb prints around its border.

"I suppose this will be the last item necessary," Furnivall sighed, mopping his brow with his right forearm. "Just stick it in with the rest of the garbage." He tried to shove it into the drawer without allowing Flint or Kaasa to touch it.

"Just a minute, please," the colonel said, lifting the envelope from the top of the pile and turning it over. "What's this?" he asked, pointing to the large block letters on the front of the envelope. "What's a STA-NINE ZERO?"

Furnivall tried to affect a quality of nonchalance, but his voice failed him. "Nothing, really," he tensed. "Just some papers, another test result similar to the one I showed you earlier."

"If it's just more of the same," the colonel asked, eying the old man, "why don't we just leave it out?"

"No, no. I think you'd better include it. Just to be on the safe side." His smile was forced.

Flint opened the envelope slowly, looking at the old man as he did so. Furnivall avoided his eyes and felt better once the colonel began inspecting the material inside the envelope. There were several sheets of paper, each containing lists of names. In a column to the right of the names were a series of zeros.

"Okay," Flint relented, "we'll include the envelope, but if the machine doesn't work we'll take it out and try again."

An audible rush of air escaped from Furnivall's lips. "Quite fair," he agreed. "Quite fair."

The stuffed drawer was inserted into the machine and the door sealed tightly. Colonel Flint hesitantly placed his hand on the dial atop the Hieronymus but pulled it away quickly as if he had been shocked and reached instead for his military issue sunglasses in his breast pocket.

"I just wish I could be sure," he spoke quietly while stretching the wire bands around his ears. After settling the glasses on the bridge of his nose, he looked slowly at Furnivall, a look tinged with fear and mistrust.

Furnivall did not notice the colonel's scrutiny. He was looking into the distance. He was looking past the miles-long rock pile that guarded the eastern edge of the town, past the smokeless stacks, and past the palm trees in the plaza. He was staring at the large whitewashed "A" glistening boldly from the side of A Mountain. In better years the Ajoans had applied fresh wash to it each September. The ritual ceased, however, when they forgot what the "A" stood for. With sudden resolve the colonel reached for the dial and prepared to spin it.

Hooves against ancient asphalt.

Flint hadn't been expecting the interruption and looked irritably away from the machine to Captain Kaasa.

"I don't know, sir," the captain answered the unasked question, shrugging his shoulders. He backed away from the machine to get a better look in the direction from which the sound was coming.

Nop, nop, nop--hooves against asphalt.

The steady trot of the hooves increased to a lope and then to a gallop. Flint left the machine reluctantly and joined Kaasa in looking down the old highway that led to Lukeville and the Mexican border.

Galloping toward them was a tiny figure on a skinny burro. The rider leaned close to the animal for speed and his eyes, a brilliant glint of sun off glasses, burned satanically before the dark poncho billowing from his narrow shoulders. The equestrian would have reached Flint had not two militiamen leaped forward and grabbed the reins of the burro.

"Hey, mon, you got to hep me quik," the rider yelled after seeing the insignia of rank of Flint's shoulders. "You got to, mon, you jis got to."

Flint motioned for the militiamen to free the rider and his burro and they did so, patting the animal's flank as it bounced past them toward the colonel.

Glancing imperially at the stranger, Flint saw a skinny, myopic Mexican wearing only a navy blue poncho and leather sandals. "What's your problem? I haven't the time to waste," he stiffened, looking at the wooly-haired legs bowing nakedly beneath the poncho.

"It be me animals, mon, mi burros. They no act so gud. Like maybe they bin kicked in the *cabeza*. *Muy loco*." He twirled a skinny finger at his temple.

"Take it slower, fellow," said the colonel, placing a steadying hand on the man's bony shoulder. "Slow down and tell me from the beginning. Slower," he repeated, raising his voice so he would be understood.

"Maybe this'll help him a little," Furnivall interjected, offering the man a dripping jalapeno.

The man took it, ate it, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Chure gud," he pronounced breathlessly before continuing with his tale.

"Pacheco my name. Octavio Pacheco. I bin watch a herd of wild burros on the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument for *ochenta* --for 87 day now."

"Really?" was Flint's bemused reply. "Why?"

"For my doctoral thesis in animal husbandry. The burros, you know, mon, are the *minos* of burros bringed here by Padre Kino three, four hundred year *pasado*. *Muy importante* burros, you betchu, mon."

"I believe you, but what's this with your burros" Why do you think I can help?"

"You can help," Pacheco nodded sincerely. "You can hep plenty, I think, *porque* I think you make them the way they be now. Mon, they chure act funny."

"How do you mean?" Flint was growing more interested and glanced suspiciously toward Furnivall.

"Yesterday, the day before today, you know, I was watch from a hill by Quitobaquito springs. Something fall from the sky and go boom." He was emphatic about this. "Burros act funny ever since boom. They can no walk now, not to drink or eat or nothing. They gun die, mon. *El Muerto*."

"*Quieres otro jalapeno, compadre?*" Furnivall asked Pacheco, proffering the open can of chilies to the fellow and trying to get between him and the colonel.

"Chure, mon," Pacheco brightened, dipping his fingers into the can.

"Mr. Furnivall," the colonel called, tapping the old man on his shoulder. "I'd like a word with you."

Furnivall had a whole jalapeno in his mouth and spoke around it. "You don't want one?" he asked timidly, shaking his head "no" at the same time.

"No." He motioned for a militia man to take Pacheco out of hearing.

Furnivall avoided the colonel's eyes by probing the can of jalapenos aimlessly with his index finger.

The colonel, aware of the old man's embarrassment, was surprisingly calm. "Don't you think there's something you should tell me?" he asked.

"It's not going to make any difference," Furnivall replied submissively. "You'll end up spinning the dial anyway."

"Try me. You might be surprised." He helped Furnivall to the wagon. "There now," he cooed after clearing a space on the wagon and guiding Furnivall into it.

"I tell you, it's not going to make any difference. And you're better off not knowing anyway."

"Does it have something to do with the envelope marked *Sta-nine Zero*?"

"Everything and nothing."

"Is it a gas?"

Furnivall placed his jalapenos in a safe corner of the wagon and picked up the dried head of a fighting cock.

"I used to know a man who made trout flies out of these," he said absently. "Can I tell my story from the beginning?" he pleaded, looking up from the chicken head.

"Have we got time?"

"Yes, I suppose."

The colonel nodded, giving permission.

"A few years back, three or so, I had this idea for a novel, a good one, and I was heading for Puerto Lobos, Sonora, to write it. It concerned this planet where people mated and communicated by shaking hands. Sounds wild, huh? Anyway, the problem was that the planet's civilization was crumbling because of over-population. Now don't get ahead of me; it wasn't a sexual preoccupation. Their problem was that they were compulsive greeters and couldn't stop shaking hands."

"Is this necessary?"

"I'm trying to show you where my mind was when I entered Ajo. But no matter how wild I thought my plot outline was, it was mundane compared to what was really occurring in this little town." He pointed the chicken's head toward Ajo. "I knew I could never dream up a plot that wild and yet that true, so I decided to stay and write the Ajo story, the story of regressive evolution, the descent back into the primordial ooze. You know, laziness abetted and allowed to devolve to its logical end."

As Flint and Kaasa stared captivated, he told of the zombi-like community he had found, a system that at first functioned with the efficiency of a termite colony or ant hill. He told how each child took the job that had been his father's without questioning or training. It was almost as if any intelligence they had was obtained genetically.

"Though it had all started as a matter of personal greed, there was nothing left of the individual by the time I arrived. The only concern was for the mine, for the big hole and the machinery around it. They treated it as if it were a giant, egg-

laying termite queen, something to be pampered and cared for. To sacrifice one's life for it was nothing. It wasn't expected, or heroic, or taught. It was simply done. Remember, the mine had long since been closed. They were tending a graveyard of metal and rock.

"But that was the good times. It lasted about the first two years I was there and then their minds decayed even further until they weren't even capable of insect intelligence. Whatever intelligence was left was locked inside non-communicating skulls."

The colonel was showing slight impatience. "But the *Sta-nine Zero*?"

"Anti-climactic really. I tried to slip it past you because I thought you'd get suspicious--suspect that the gas wasn't the culprit. The *Sta-nine* simply showed, graphically, what I've been telling you, the story of regressive evolution.

"I don't know if you know it or not, but the *Sta-nine* is, or was, an intelligence test. It replaced the old general Intelligence Quotient test, the IQ test. Educators felt it was too stigmatized. People used the score to pigeon-hole people. To discourage this they introduced the *Sta-nine*.

"You see there could be no immediate pejorative implications. The test scores ranged from one to nine and for a long time the general public didn't know which was good and which bad. Actually, one was as low a score as possible. The fact that a lower Score was impossible indicated that educators believed all children had some intelligence. If the student taking the test missed all the questions it was assumed the test was at fault and not the child."

"So?"

"So Ajo marked the first and only time when even the liberal educators conceded that the test was right and the student was wrong. Not only were the

Ajoans unable to take the test, they were unable to understand it when it was read to them.

"At first the test's administrators thought it was a language problem, but they soon learned the Ajoans had no language. It had been lost. The testers finally became aware that the students didn't even know that they, the testers, were there. The students showed no more awareness of the testers than dogs do of their tapeworms.

"Well, the testers fled but not before giving the school and town an all encompassing mark of zero, an impossibly low score."

"But, but," the colonel tried, "what caused it? Was it poor teachers, bad environment, bad genes, or what?"

"Oh, it is much more simple than that. Granted, the Ajoans are inferior, pathetically so but this inferiority isn't the result of education or environment or inbreeding. They're inferior by choice."

"Choice?"

"Exactly, colonel. Choice. What Ajo is today is a culmination of all their dreams. In fact, they are no doubt happy beyond their wildest dreams. It is the culmination of blissful, bullheaded indolence."

Flint and Kaasa stared toward Ajo, their faces puckered by bemusement.

"Now, I would like to make my request, colonel. I tried by deceit to get you to destroy the town earlier. Now I'm asking that you put them out of their bliss. For their own good. They can't even feed themselves now. They are beyond help.

"Please, colonel, spin that dial. My reasons are not humane at all, but if they were my request would still be the same. Put them out of their ignorance. Give me my vengeance. Those people are so damned bullheaded that they would be

proud of their condition if they could somehow be made aware of it. The fools are happy."

The colonel looked as if he needed no encouragement. He gazed at Ajo as if it were a favorite horse with an irreparably broken leg.

"Okay," he said. "Okay." Without reluctance he reached up and placed his hand on the dial.

"*Senior, senior,*" Pacheco called, breaking away from his guard and running across the sand toward the colonel. "My burros. What you gun do for mi burros?"

Colonel Flint brushed him aside and motioned for him to stand beside Furnivall. "Don't worry," he promised. "The jackasses we can salvage."

With that he spun the dial and Ajo burned like the ant hill it was, burned with a pale blue, smokeless flame. Flint and Kaasa watched the conflagration with dry, unemotional eyes.

But there were tears in Pacheco's and Furnivall's eyes. They had just bitten into a pair of beautifully delicious jalapenos.

Into the Corn

Field corn. Tall. Other worldly. Stretching in the midnight heat to its mother, the moon. Beckoning her with fibrous, rasping arms. Tempting her with the hypnotic swaying of its silken-tasseled heads. Beseeching her with the hushed rustle of a primordial incantation.

Come O mother moon with your dark power
And walk among my moist, black furrows.
Tread among my rows with heavy,
Lumbering steps.
Crush my deaf ears
With the silence of your omnipotence.
Mangle my stocks with primal fury
And spread my sporas genes
To the Stygian
Horizons.

As if waiting for an answer, the field of corn grew still. Beads of moisture, attracted by the listlessness, oozed from individual leaves and clustered, resting in sequined silence.

Waiting, waiting.

To the east, a pair of lights rose over the crest of a gentle rise and pitched downward to illuminate the field. Squaring purposefully toward the corn, the twin shafts of light slid down its muddy, irrigated rows, piercing the shadows and driving them back.

Propelling the lights was a machine. It moved through the adjacent alfalfa field, turning this way, now that, looking for entrance into the corn. Finding none,

it moved out into the alfalfa, skirting ditches and circling once the moldering remains of a haystack before returning to the side of the corn and stopping.

After sitting quietly for a moment, the twin lights winked out and a partition in the side of the vehicle slid down to eject a stubby cylindrical tube. It struck a patch of bare ground, ringing hollowly, rolled busily to the edge of the alfalfa, and stopped, revealing its printed message to the sky--*Coors Light*.

Following the beer can from the passenger window of the car was a head. It poked out and looked first into the corn and then into the sky.

"You're kidding. You didn't really bring me all the way out here to look for flying saucers?" Hanley asked. He drew his head back inside and looked at the driver who nervously looked through the windshield and tapped his beer can against the steering wheel.

"Where'd you expect me to take you?" Aaron quipped. "Downtown Denver?"

"But out here?"

"Saucers aren't interested in people," Aaron insisted, still tapping his can against the wheel. "They prefer corn."

"Oh, Aaron," a girl's voice whined in boredom. "You don't believe in flying saucers any more than we do. All you wanted to come out here for was to drink."

Aaron looked at his wife, Lola, slouching on the seat between them, and snapped, "I suppose the pedestrian mind couldn't understand corn." In disgust, he crushed his beer can and threw it out after savagely cranking down the window.

"I don't know what you're so mad about," Lola protested feebly, trying to calm him. "All I said was..."

"All you said was crap." His huge arms nearly crushed her legs as he reached across for one of the beers at Hanley's feet. "But then what should I expect from someone who's so full of progestic crap?" He tried to open the beer, but his fingers were too large to maneuver the pull tab easily and he bawled irritably to Lola. "Why don't you crawl in the backseat and contemplate your naval, something you're familiar with."

Lola shook her head in helpless embarrassment but "Oh, Aaron," was all she ventured.

"Get," he flared, raising his right hand as if to give her the back of it. "Why in hell did you come along anyway?"

Hanley looked out the window rather than watch Lola's embarrassment as she crawled into the backseat and plopped down sullenly. He knew why she had come. Aaron wouldn't let her out of his sight.

"Maybe we're making a mistake drinking beer," Hanley interrupted, trying to protest Lola from further humiliation. "If saucers like corn so much, we should be drinking whiskey, or at least something with a partial corn base." He grinned vacantly at Aaron.

The grin produced its desired effect as Aaron quit abusing Lola and turned to look through the windshield. "Let's get the telescope set up," he said finally, turning to Lola.

She produced the small scope and tripod obediently, but instead of handing them to Aaron, she shoved them over the seat to Hanley. She knew what Aaron meant when he said "let's."

Hanley accepted the instrument and got out of the car to set it up. Occasionally, he looked back into the car at Aaron to make sure he was doing it properly, but Aaron said nothing, or feigned indifference.

After the scope was mounted on the tripod, Aaron emerged from his side of the car and sat on the hood drinking beer and looking at the few clouds drifting above.

"When I was little," he remembered, lapsing into that confiding voice Hanley craved to hear, "corn fields used to scare the hell out of me."

Hanley finished sighting the telescope on the moon and stood up to look into the corn. "It isn't exactly *not* terrifying to me right now."

Aaron nodded his head in agreement, and Hanley felt as if he had said something important.

"There's something about a corn field, any field really, that seems alive. I mean more than just alive. There's something about them that makes them aware, knowing and--*alive* ."

"Now that you mention it," Hanley smiled, looking to Aaron for confirmation, "this one seems to be whispering."

"No," Aaron corrected. "What I'm talking about goes beyond whispering. A corn field has avenues of communication that go beyond simple sensors. Maybe its the root systems, the way they intertwine." He made a broad gesture to the corn with his beer hand. "Every corner of the field seems to know what each stalk is feeling, how each kernel is ripening."

"That's why you think flying saucers prefer corn to people?" Hanley asked as he walked cautiously to the edge of the ditch separating the alfalfa from the corn.

The ditch was filled with water and aluminum irrigation pipes were siphoning it from the ditch and into every fourth row.

Aaron avoided the question. "Listen," he said, holding his hand up to command silence. "You can almost hear the field sucking the water. It's being sucked in by the corn. It has a strange power at night." He was nodding his head knowingly. "That's why it does its best growing at night." His eyes still stared into the corn and he no longer paid attention to the beer in his hand.

Both continued to gaze into the corn without speaking until Hanley became uneasy. "I head it grows best when there's a full moon?"

Aaron didn't answer at all, this time. His gaze was held by the corn. "Let's go into the corn," he said, still without moving his eyes.

"Are you kidding?"

"No. When I was little my brother Frank took me into a corn field at night near Fort Collins, stripped me naked, and left me to find my way out."

"Nice brother."

"I damn near went crazy in there. It was like being in the land of OZ. Really," he said in earnest, "only not so colorful. And there were no nice witches to help, either. The corn, I remember, seemed alive. I'd try to run but it seemed to bend down and hold me to the ground."

"How'd you get out?"

"Frank had to come and get me. It was a big corn field," he remembered with his eyes, "but he didn't have any trouble finding me. I was screaming my lungs out." He paused to take a drink and then continued staring into the corn.

"Fine, I'll wait for you right here."

"No, you're going in with me," he pronounced. "And so's Lola." He turned to look through the windshield and yelled at his wife. "Lola, get your ass out here. We're going into the corn."

"Oh, Aaron!" As she reluctantly opened the door, she exchanged a pleading glance with Hanley, but they were unable to muster enough courage to stand up to Aaron.

"Come on," Aaron said, pushing himself off the car and walking to the corn field. He went into one of the dry rows for about ten feet and then returned to smirk at Hanley and Lola who stood together by the car.

"We'll have to take our clothes off," he said, and started unbuckling his belt. When he saw the others balking, he offered a gruff explanation. "We can't take any of our civilization in there. It's got to be us and the corn. Nothing else. We've got to respect the corn."

Lola and Hanley exchanged a timid glance but began undressing, shoes first. When their feet touched the cool alfalfa and the smell of corn pollen reached their nostrils, they quickened their pace. Hanley covertly appraised Lola's growing nakedness as he took off his trousers and looked up just in time to see that she had also been inspecting him.

"Do I have to take my panties off, too?" she asked. Lola was asking Aaron but looked coyly into Hanley's eyes. Aaron didn't turn from the corn but called over his shoulder.

"Everything."

Without hesitating, almost before Aaron had stopped talking, Lola slipped her panties off and turned to place them on the hood of the car. As she turned, her

body brushed Hanley's and neither made an effort to break contact. Hanley started to touch her reassuringly on the small of her back but stopped just short.

"What are you two waiting for," Aaron yelled and turned to look at them just as they parted. He gave no indication he had seen, or, if he had seen, that he even cared. Something about the corn dominated his interest.

After stacking their clothes and looking shyly at each other's body, Hanley and Lola joined Aaron at the edge of the corn and together they walked into the field. It was another world, a dark swollen world, and it enveloped them immediately. The long, narrow paths between the rows of corn were canopied with leaves and to see any distance at all as they went, they had to get down on their hands and knees and crawl.

Aaron was the first on his knees. He moved through the corn like a knowing, wary animal. Behind him came Lola and Hanley, terrified but uncomplaining, scurrying obediently after Aaron like cubs after a mother bear.

Lola and Hanley held their eyes shut most of the time and were unaware when Aaron slipped from the row in which they were crawling and let them pass within inches of him. Lola still thought she was following him and crawled for several years before stopping and sitting up.

"Aaron?"

There was a stillness filled only with the rustling of leaves. Then Aaron started howling like a wolf in the corn behind them. When the howling dissolved into laughter, Hanley and Lola crawled back down the row until they were even with the laughter. Even though they were only a couple of feet from him, they couldn't see him until he pushed the stalks aside and leered through.

"Scared hell out of you, didn't I?" he laughed. His face was pallid and drained as if in death.

Relieved that Aaron had consented to recognize them and was no longer pretending to be insane, Hanley brushed the stickers from the raised earth of the row behind him and gingerly sat down.

"How happy I am for you that you've overcome your fear of corn fields," he intoned wryly. "Now could we go back to the car and look for flying saucers?"

"No," Aaron commanded and disappeared back into the opposite row. "I've got a game we can play."

They couldn't see him. They could only hear his voice and at times it dropped to the rasping of the leaves and became inseparable from the dark growing sounds around them.

"We're going to play Indian. One of us will crawl ahead while the others wait. They can't come until the other signals."

"What's the signal?" asked Hanley, looking wistfully back in the direction of the car.

"Some kind of animal cry. That'll be the signal to come find the Indian. When we all get together again, then someone else will go hide. You don't have to stay in the same row. To make it interesting you shouldn't. The other two have to find you."

Lola was sitting on the earth between the two rows. "I don't want to play," she pleaded, looking at Hanley, who she could barely see, rather than at Aaron who she couldn't see at all.

"You're going to play or we'll leave you out here by yourself." Aaron took it for granted Hanley would play. "Now, I'll go first. Stay here and wait for some kind of animal cry. Then come and find me."

Hanley looked nervously around him at the close darkness. "How big is this field, anyway? Isn't there some limit on how far away you can go, fifty feet or so?"

Aaron waited before answering while Hanley and Lola sat squinting anxiously into the darkness. "Two minutes," he said finally. "You can take two minutes to get there but you don't have to call until you want. You can wait as long as you want, within reason."

As soon as he stopped talking, Hanley and Lola heard the leaves parting as Aaron moved further into the corn. At first they could hear him clearly, but the crashing of leaves grew fainter until it was swallowed by the other sounds in the field. Then they were alone. A moist eeriness settled around them, but still they strained their ears, imagining sounds but hearing nothing that seemed to be Aaron.

Nervously, Hanley dug his toes into the earth. The soil was wet and yielded easily. Suddenly it began to feel alive and was grappling back. His toes had met Lola's and for a brief moment their feet curled around each other like cold burrowing animals snuggling together for warmth.

Instinctively, they moved together, touched each other gingerly, and looked about expectantly, afraid of the dark, afraid of their weakness, and afraid of their vulnerability.

Anxious to end this fear, and not waiting for a signal, Lola turned onto all fours and began crawling into the wet, cavernous darkness before her where Aaron had disappeared. She moved slowly, seeking and requiring the closeness of Hanley

behind her, needing his touch. He kept close, fearful of losing the only animal companionship remaining for him in the field.

They moved cautiously through their burrow, pawing the earth and trying to fathom the alienness around them. Even in their eagerness to find Aaron, they snuggled closer together, becoming one animal, now with eight legs, now with six.

Often Lola's rump bulged against Hanley's chest and belly, and his forearms straddled her waist, alternately cupping her belly or supporting his weight on the earth, his fingers digging into the mud. Still, they were agonizingly alone, separate.

Trying to break this fearful loneliness, trying to verify the existence of the animal before him, Hanley lowered his head and bit her straining back.

Lola's crawling ceased and slowly her rump moved up, pressing his belly. Like a doe in heat, not knowing, not understanding, but offering the ultimate security and togetherness that lay in her ovaries, she reared to the mount and lowered her head to the earth.

Hanley's paws moved over her back and sought her shoulders. Crouching on his toes, he thrust in the darkness, searching for union, seeking its reassurance, and finding it for an instant. Just as he was responding blindly to the season, Lola rolled beneath him, spread her arms and legs, and drew him into her.

Together they labored between the dark rows of corn until the separateness that was theirs spilled into the oneness that was becoming them.

Spastically, he withdrew from her, his hands loosening and clutching until they had slid down her belly and locked around her thighs. Lola's head rolled to the side, her cheek resting on her moist palm and her glazed eyes staring at

nothing, as if she were internally counting seeds, waiting for the sucking attack upon her body of reassuring umbilical life.

Then she rolled to her side and curled into herself. The movement caused Hanley to loosen his grip on her thighs and he stretched, opened his eyes, and again became aware of the night.

There was no noise in the corn. The leaves hung limp and spent. He could hear pheasants calling mysteriously from the alfalfa. Still, it was silent in the corn. It was as if the field were aware of what had occurred in its darkness, as if it had been interrupted in something more ethereal and was appalled at the animal sacrilege.

Lola relaxed from her fetal position, stretched, and sat up suddenly, startled.

"What was that?"

Hanley was listening, too. Something was moving in the corn, something which could have been crouching and watching but which was now moving away from them.

"Oh, God," she gasped, looking at Hanley and trying to cover her nakedness with her hands. "Do you think he saw us?"

"Jesus, I hope not," his teeth chattered. A cool breeze had sprung up and was evaporating the moisture from his body.

"What would he do?" she asked. Hanley couldn't see her face, but he could hear the agony in her voice.

It seemed to be even darker in the corn, now. "I don't know what he'd do," Hanley blurted. "Let's just act as if nothing happened. Even if he was hiding

somewhere around here, he couldn't know for sure. Only guess. He probably wouldn't say anything. Afraid he'd be wrong."

As he spoke, he could hear a wolf baying somewhere ahead of them in the corn. "That's him. Let's go."

This time they didn't crawl. They ran down the row, holding their arms in front of them to ward off the slashing blades. They were still running when Lola screamed and fell to the ground sobbing hysterically.

"What the hell's wrong with you?" It was Aaron's voice.

Lola lay on the ground convulsed by sobbing. "Gutless bitch," he said as if spitting at her. "All I did was reach out and grab you. You'd think I'd tried to kill you or something."

"You scared me," she choked and continued crying.

"Big deal."

"Come on," Hanley pleaded, "I'm getting muddy as hell. Let's go back to the car and watch for flying saucers. And the beer's getting warm, besides."

"No, I don't want to leave here," Aaron said, looking about. "It's spooky out here. And besides, Lola can go back to the car and bring the beer out here."

Lola was sitting up now. "No. No, I'm not going. If you want your god damned beer," she enunciated, "you can get it yourself."

"For Christ's sake," Aaron bawled at her. "All you have to do is go back down the row, get it, and come back up the same row. A baby could do it."

The way she shook her head convinced even Aaron that she wasn't going to change her mind.

"Okay," he relented, pushing the stalks back so he could look at the moon.

"Let's do it again and this time you can be *it* ." He pushed Hanley to show who he meant

Not wanting to go, afraid, but doing it anyway, Hanley edged past Aaron and Lola and started down the row.

"What kept you so long?" Aaron called just as Hanley was about to disappear.

"I howled and howled before you finally came."

Hanley froze. "It must have been the wind," he ventured, trying to see Aaron's face. "We couldn't hear you." Aaron didn't reply, only looked at him for a second before motioning him to go on.

Hanley turned with some relief and went into the corn. He didn't want to get lost, so he kept to the row in which Aaron and Lola were standing. After crawling and stooping for about fifty yards, he stopped and sat down to listen. All he could hear was the wind in the corn. It swirled unevenly, causing the leaves to rustle in different locations as if an animal were stalking him, looking for a momentary weakness. Standing cautiously, he parted the leaves over head so he could see the moon, something familiar, something reassuring.

"Moooo," he called, hoping it would sound like a cow and give them something to laugh about when retelling the story of their adventure later. But there was no answer.

"Moooo," he called again and then stood poised, trying to hear Aaron and Lola breaking through the corn to him. But, he could hear nothing except the wind through the leaves.

Back where he had left them, the wind seemed to be stronger. He could hear the stalks slapping against each other like dueling swords. Gradually, the whirlwind, or whatever it was moved away across the field and he called again.

"Moooo." It was quiet enough now for them to have heard. He was sure they had heard and thought of slipping into an adjoining row and scaring them as Aaron had done, but he decided against it. He was too frightened to play that game and only wanted them to arrive so he could talk Aaron into turning back. He was sure Lola would refuse her turn.

He sat down to wait, but when his buttocks became cold and tingly he knew he had waited too long. Something was wrong. They should have arrived.

Slowly, almost sheepishly, he started back toward them, peering cautiously into the corn as he went. Counting his paces, he returned to the place where he thought he had left them.

"Okay, you can come out now," he laughed nervously. There was no answer. He knew they were waiting to jump out and scare him, embarrass him with his fear.

"I can see you," he lied. "Come on out."

Again there was no answer, but he thought he heard something moving in the corn about five rows in front of him. "Hey, I hear you. Come on, let's get back to the car. I want to look for saucers."

Finally, he could stand it no longer. "I'm going back to the car. You can do what you want." As he started, he discovered he had gotten into a different row because there was water around his feet. He moved to the next row, which was drier, and started running in the direction he thought the car was parked. He was

running with his arms in front of his face when his foot caught something in the row and he fell.

"Very funny," he groaned and sat up. Someone had been lying directly in his path. He crawled over and found Lola lying on her belly with her face resting on her hands.

"What the hell are you doing here? And where's Aaron, anyway?" She didn't move, so he grabbed her shoulder and tried to coax her to roll over and sit up. Something on her cheek was wet. "Oh, for Christ's sake," he scolded, "are you still crying."

When she didn't reply, he looked closer at the moisture. To see, he had to place his face inches from hers. "Oh, no," he cried, withdrawing and knotting his fists between his thighs. Her throat had been torn open, not cut, torn. Blood was still spilling from her exposed jugulars.

"Oh, Jesus. Why? Why?" He wanted to get up and strike out. At first it was from rage, but it soon became fear. He struck blindly at the corn about him, and then crouched into a defensive position, protecting his neck and intestines.

The darkness became unbearable and he spun in circles, his back always feeling exposed. He had to get out of the corn. He had to get to someplace where his eyes could focus. He wanted to be near Aaron, and then the thought terrified him.

"Aaron, you bastard. Why for Christ's sake, why did you do it?" He found himself sobbing. He was sobbing so loudly he almost didn't hear the corn crashing as something moved toward him.

"No," he pleaded, but it was almost inaudible. Blindly he started running from the crashing sound. "I didn't mean to, Aaron. Sweet Jesus I didn't mean to." He was yelling and pleading to no one for he knew Aaron wouldn't listen.

Once he stopped and cried back to Aaron. There was no reply. Even the corn was quiet. Shortly after he called, however, the corn began crashing again as if Aaron had been waiting for a sound to home in on.

Where's the car? Hanley kept asking himself. Where's the car? "If I can just get to it," he reasoned aloud, trying to calm himself, "I'll be all right." As he was running, he suddenly realized he didn't know in which direction he was going. The rows were straight, he reasoned, maybe only a little curved.

"Water flows down. Water flows down," he repeated to himself and dropped to his knees, trying to feel the water. "The water was flowing in from the ditch," he remembered. "Just see where it's coming from and follow it to the car."

But Hanley was well into the field and the water was just standing. He knew it had piled up against the far end of the field and was standing back on itself, soaking into the ground. It was impossible to tell if it had come from up or down the row.

Off to his left he could hear Aaron thrashing through the corn toward him. He must have been flailing his arms for the sound seemed all out of proportion to his size. The commotion was at once tornadic and maniacal. It had the fury of the elements but the insane bent of the lunatic seemed to be guiding it directly toward him.

Hanley crawled from the muddy row in which he had been hunkering to the drier adjoining row and tried again to determine in which direction the car waited.

Looking to the moon offered no help. It held the zenith too solidly. He couldn't tell if it were rising or setting. All directions from it were meaningless. Those stars which had not been washed into darkness by the moon's dominance offered no help. He reached high to hold the tassels and leaves back, but he could not find the Big Dipper, the only constellation he understood.

As the sounds of Aaron's thrashing drew nearer, Hanley started and crashed into the corn. He ran over stalks, thrusting them quickly between his legs and plunging on. He no longer cared what the knife edges of the leaves did to his naked body. He ran with the rows at times but would bolt at sudden shadows or reflections and run against them.

He had to reach the car. If he could reach it first, he could escape. But were the keys in the ignition? If they weren't, they were surely in Aaron's clothes piled along the ditch bank near the corn. Even if he couldn't find the car, he would be relieved just to get out of the corn. The corn itself seemed to be arms trying to hug him while the tasseled heads jerked about with ejaculatory abandon, laughing.

Hanley knew there was something about the corn, maybe its stifling darkness, that heightened his terror and fed Aaron's insanity. What else could it be? What else could have caused him to do what he had done? Was it his nakedness or the animal within him? Or was it the corn itself? Was there really something in what Aaron had said? Was there a power, a malevolence, which all growing things possessed, a power which hated being violated.

"Just get me out of the corn," he begged to nothing in particular. Out of the corn he could reason with Aaron. They could see each other and understand what they had done. At least try to understand. Hanley was sure reason would return once they were out of the corn, once they were free from its power.

He dropped to his knees, partly from exhaustion and partly from hoping to see light at the end of the row. For a moment he thought he heard something behind him, but he was breathing so heavily he could only hear the heaving of his own lungs. As soon as the gasping subsided, he was able to hold his breath just long enough to listen. It was still there, still coming. He lay flat on his belly in the mud, getting his eyes as low as possible, trying to see beneath the lowest hanging leaves.

There was light, but there was something blocking it, something no more than an arm's length away. Was it a clod of earth, a mole's hill, or perhaps debris blown into the field by the wind?

He reached out and felt it. It was hair, human hair. My God, he thought, all this running and I'm back where I started, back with Lola's body. As he scrambled over the body to the light beyond, he realized it was not Lola's body. It was too large. Pushing the stalks back to allow the moon's rays to penetrate, he saw that it was not a woman's body at all. It was Aaron's.

The body had been crushed. There were no open rends. The blood had been expelled from every pore and was seeping into the ground, fertilizing the corn. Aaron's arms and legs were spread in complete submission to the power that had taken him. His eyes were wide and bulging and his lips were drawn back in a last powerful exhalation of breath and life that had left his gums and the roof of his mouth rough, dry, and bloodless. The pale light of the moon had stuffed his gaping orifice and stifled his final scream.

Hanley tried to get up and run, but each time he lunged forward he ran into the corn and fell into the mud. The stalks pinioned him to the ground, and the sounds about him drove him insane. The rustling leaves conjoined with other

sounds of the night and with sounds Hanley knew he must be imagining. He thought he could hear Aaron's blood being sucked into the root systems and crying upward through turgid fibers until it was flung free into the wind by the whipping tassels. The tops of the corn stalks were swirling and beckoning, pointing for something to come. Pleading and swaying with a growing madness. Crying with spastic desire.

"Come O mother."

Had he said it? He looked up for the answer only to realize he was in a vortex of motion, sucked to the center and held, immobile. He listened as whatever it was came for him. Something powerful. Something which was crushing rows of corn six abreast as it came. Hanley cried aloud but his mouth was stuffed with mud as he pitched forward and locked his hands around the backs of his thighs, curling into a ball.

Above the thrashing corn and above the noise of his choking, he could hear it coming nearer. Something was coming for him out of the field of corn, out of the Stygian unknown.

Meddling With their Mettle

I wouldn't call it *murder*, and when the prosecutor used that word even the jury squirmed in their seats and wondered at his sanity. To press his point he picked up my bat from the evidence table and swung it clumsily, his thin shoulders popping beneath the precise seams of his richly understated, blue pin-stripped suit.

"This is your bat, is it not?" he turned to address me, replacing the thirty-two inches of aluminum back onto the table. He regretted having even picked it up, for it was, after all, the recreational implement of a plebeian, not the graphite shaft of a gentleman's driver or the leather-wrapped grip of a made-to-order tennis racket.

I shrugged and pursed my lower lip as was the expected response of someone of my cast. "You know it's mine," I told him. "Your cops took it from my room. Besides, I scratched my name on it with a nail."

He pointed to the crude scroll on the bat for the members of the jury to see, but he didn't look at them. They weren't of his station; they lived somewhere other than the cantonment area from which he had ventured this morning and, hence, their hygiene, the very virus of their being, was suspect and to be avoided. The only other members of his Brahman class were the parents of the *deceased*, and they huddled in a back corner of the room, warily eying the citizens around them and loathing their nearness.

"How," I inquired from behind the defense table, not worrying about interrupting the sanctity of the trial, "can you call it murder when the supposed victim is out in the hallway smoking a cigarette and chewing gum?" I retained the

plebeian nasality in my voice even though I could have imitated the prosecutor's intonation and vocabulary had I wished.

"There are degrees of murder," he said without explaining. When he spun to see the jury's response his thumb nail was suggestively pressed against the underside of his lower lip. With that crew he figured he needed to use all the visual signals he could semaphore.

I knew what he meant, even if they didn't, but I carefully guarded the joy I felt from showing in my face. The victim, Jerry, or Georald as his parents would have it, at least that was one of his four non-sur names, was out in the hallway, but he was not waiting to be a witness. Though *he* would have enjoyed the attention, his parents would have found it too embarrassing. He was now so much unlike them. This morning had been example enough to bear. They had seen him exchanging high fives with any of the spectators or jury members who would raise a hand. Whereas before his *death* he would have stood out as readily as a blooded stallion in a herd of Shetland ponies, he was now indistinguishable from the rabble about him. He was wearing *Dockers* pants for god's sake. His shirt and shoes, in addition to sporting corporate logos, had come off the rack and they were *mediums*. What kind of a size is that? What about length of foot and width? What about neck circumference and arm length? Medium? *Medium*? The word had never even been permitted in his home.

Welcoming another chance to distance himself from the jury, the prosecutor approached the evidence table again. "You are not denying, are you," he pointed to the bat, "that you did wantingly wield this implement and strike a fatal blow to the side of the head of Georald Wigen Clinesfeld Dresden?"

The poor fellow. He couldn't remember Jerry's other name either.

That my trial for murder was taking place at all was a matter of principle for the parents, a way of saving face, a way of explaining to their kind why Jerry might remain among them because of his birth on the Hill but would always be--their polite phrase for it was--*one of the others*. Sometimes they used the word *Citizen*. We down here would just call him *folk*.

I don't think the prosecutor, he wasn't one of our prosecutors--in fact he had been brought down from the Hill by the parents--expected to win or was even pressured to do so. Usually they left us to ourselves so long as we labored for them cheerfully and consumed adequately. Our courts were informal affairs. Little more than a forum for venting imagined grievances. For this trial I hadn't even bothered to bring an attorney. I knew I wouldn't need one. I had absolute confidence. For you see, I knew that shortly I would no longer be one of *us*. I would be one of *them*.

It happened occasionally. Talent and genius will out. Even in the most stagnant of gene pools an individual will occasionally raise his head above the scummy surface and draw a fresh breath.

That's where their problem with me began. Unlike the others of my kind, I liked to read, enjoyed learning. In fact, I was called that most derisive of names by my classmates--School Boy. Our lot, as my mates lived it, was to play, not to learn. We were the Eloi and those on the hill were the Morlocks, but how I could convey that insight to my playmates whose reading ability was limited to recognizing brand names I never learned. Now I no longer care. My only concern is that after I establish my residence on the Hill will I hire one of them as my chauffeur, or will I drive myself.

It is a weighty decision. Weighty because although they will be both literally and figuratively beneath me, they will still be my responsibility. It is a burden I, in my new station, must accept. After all, to be special entails obligation. Even so, I shall be more careful in discharging my duties toward them than they had been with me. For you see their mistake, the mistake that now has Jerry clothed in *Dockers* began the day the Dresdens invited me into their home.

My father was their gardener. That is to say he tended the growth near the house, or as they described it--their demesne. At a distance from the lawn the trees were arranged esthetically, the river tended, regulated, and stocked, and the wildlife strategically placed on the hills opposite so as to inspire viewers from the windows of the mansion.

If Georald--Jerry--hadn't been interested in the leaf blower, we might never have met. The blower was my job because my father, more attuned to the quiet snip snip of careful pruning, detested mechanical noises. He even used a push mower and cleaned up the cuttings with a hand rake. The Dresdens considered it quaint just as surely as the Coopers and Barrymores in Hollywood had considered their Japanese gardeners to be quaint, and beneath them.

Even then, as a child, I knew I was not destined for such menial tasks. Not that I intended to really work, mind you, but I intended to live well off of them, my own birth mates. Free enterprise still rules, you remember, not that it is quite as free as it once was, meaning not as available to *them* as it once was.

On that formative morning I was pretending to blow the debris from the flagstone walk while salivating over the shelves of books I saw in the Dresden library. Georald, pretending to read, was drooling over the leaf blower. When he

emerged from the French doors which opened into the garden and covetously eyed the machine suspended by a strap from my shoulder, I knew he was mine.

I was sure I had read *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and he had not. And if he had, he had forgotten how Tom had gotten the fence whitewashed.

When his mother discovered me, I was ensconced in a huge wingbacked leather chair devouring volume one of the three-volume *Sartor Resartus* by Thomas Carlyle and envying his access to the London libraries and his friendship with John Stuart Mill.

As fate would have it, and their ill fortune, she thought it cute and had the maid bring me an orange-tasting tea and dry biscuits which tasted of flour, sugar, and butter. I didn't know what they were then, but in the future I don't intend to be without shortbread cookies. The various teas I will experiment with.

Their children and ours do intermingle. They consider it beneficial. After all, when you are sipping a cool drink following eighteen holes of manicured heaven, it is necessary to know just how well you really have it. I and my ilk had provided the base line.

Even outside of our public schools which we both attended, their parents did permit us to socialize, just as the antebellum southern parents had permitted their children to run barefooted with the slave children. But, as with that plantation life, the severing was necessary. For the southerner it came at age ten or eleven--for obvious maturation reasons. For us, it came after the tenth grade when they were removed to preparatory schools in the hills.

The single difference was that I, because I still assisted my father about the demesne, still had access to Georald and to their library. I was kind of their pet.

They were liberal, something I now know better than to be. Those in control must be taught never to soften. It is so unbecoming, so dangerous.

Jerry and I continued as friends in spite of this separation, and since his library was really the focal point of our interests, we became reading buddies, though I always thought his tastes tended toward the common. Take our science fiction period for example. When he was reading Burroughs, I was immersed in Olaf Stapledon. He was Lovecraft; I was early L. Sprague De Camp. When he took up John Brunner, I gravitated to Pohl and Kornbluth, particularly enjoying their *Space Merchants*, thinking I could discern the alternating hands. And finally, to my Karel Capek, he was Jules Verne.

To be precise, I thought his mind lacked that acuity which denotes true intellect. But then, again, it could simply have been his want of taste.

As if to prove my hunch, Jerry did something his parents wept over: he married one of my kind, a beautiful girl who hung around the backstop when we ventured down the Hill to play baseball with my friends, and his too since his transformation had not yet begun.

Marriage was another avenue by which my kind could ascend the Hill, but it came at a cost. Such women had to be sterilized before they could move up. It wasn't that they were forced. It was simply a requirement if they wished to dine on ambrosia. Hence the Dresden tears. Jerry was their only child and he had chosen what would be a childless marriage, a grandchild-less marriage as they saw it, an end to that scion of the Dresden name.

It wasn't prejudice against such marriages that caused the rule. It was simply a matter of space. The non-Hill folk in such marriages found it difficult to confine themselves to a single child, a requirement those born to the Hill never challenged.

They knew, you see, that in the pyramid of human life there is only so much room in the Darwinian Penthouse.

The abrupt change in my relationship with Jerry came the first year we went away to college: he to one of those fine, storied schools, the kind founded on old stone and devoured by ivy and patina, a school that produced statesman after statesman with an occasional poet-cum-supreme court justice thrown in just to keep them honest; I went to a, let's be frank, land grant school. Yes, a Normal school, one of those institutions tooled to stamp out teachers to educate the drudges and factory managers to later oversee those same drudges so that the profits from the factories would continue to flow up Hill.

He seemed taller that next summer when he opened the French doors from the library and came into the garden. Maybe it was just the blazer and school tie, I first thought. But that wasn't quite it. His bearing was regal, assured, and something I found disconcerting--superior.

"What say we go to Starbuck's?" he asked, referring, I assumed, to one of the establishments on the Hill that I wasn't permitted to enter unless accompanied by one of them.

"Starbuck?" I questioned. "The only Starbuck I know was second mate on the *Pequod*."

If it wasn't a supercilious look he gave me, it was at least one that caused a distancing. "That was Stubb," he corrected me. "Starbuck was the *first* mate."

I stood corrected and let the matter slide. After all, it had been a couple of years since I had read *Moby Dick* and the brain can't hold every little detail, can it? He must have just read it, since I remembered it as one of the books I had read that he had not.

While drinking the coffee, he informed me that I was no longer to call him Jerry. His name was Georald. He pronounced it with the deep-jowled solemnity I usually reserved for *Geoffrey*, as in Chaucer.

Oh well, he was of the Hill and I was not. Birth and genetics have their privileges.

Back at the mansion I was picking up my tools--I had summer employment with my father again--when Georald emerged from the library and pointed at a movement beneath a bougainvillea covered arbor. "Would you take that with you please. They give me the willies."

It was a simple box turtle.

"Those guys can live a long time," I said. We had always loved sharing what we had learned. "I read about one Captain Cook had that lived to be nearly 200 years old."

"You must be referring to the one he is said to have given the King of Tonga in 1773 or 1777. Whatever, the dates are fuzzy. It is said to have survived two forest fires, being run over by a cart and kicked by a horse. It died in 1966, if you can believe the Tongans, giving it a minimum age of 189 years."

Such facts and figures at the tip of his tongue amazed me, but he hadn't finished.

"Captain Cook never mentioned such a gift in his journals. Should you prefer better documented evidence for longevity, there are the Marion tortoises. The French explorer Marion de Fresne captured five of these radiated tortoise on the Seychelles in 1776. He delivered them to the Mauritius and the last of them died in 1918 after 152 years in captivity. It was blind and died because it fell into a gun

emplacement. As it was probably mature when it was captured, its age at death was probably near that of 200 years."

This information he reeled off as if it were scrolling before his eyes. I didn't know how to respond. The school he was attending must be fabulous. What tricks did the professors possess to perform such miracles? I was so envious I didn't realize I had picked up the turtle until I was at my father's car.

Mrs. Dresden, that is to say Georald's wife--a former friend of mine though those ties had been cast asunder, so to speak--pulled into the drive as I was about to leave. Not knowing how to address a person of her stature, though formerly of my station, and given the fact I knew she was now sterile, I could only blurt out as she slid from the car that "Georald must read constantly."

She relaxed her lithe, tanned body against her vehicle, it would have cost her father two-years' salary, and considered my comment. "I've never seen him reading," she confessed. "I've seen him dusting the books and moving them to different locations, but I can't say I've ever seen him open one except to learn if it is a signed copy or a first edition or both. No," she shook her head. "Movies, yes movies. He watches them all the time, but only if they are in black and white."

There was a sub current to his genetic and educational superiority I didn't understand, and from that moment I had vowed to fathom it. In the mean time, I read voraciously. I wasn't going to let Georald--the former Jerry--leave me in the dust of futility and irrelevance.

The next day, as arranged, we meet beneath the Hill for a pick-up baseball game. The usual fellows were there, but Georald was not as popular as he had once been. After striking a double and sliding into second, the baseman there, my

old classmate Ron, confided to me that Georald had become somewhat of a smart ass, and no one likes a smart ass, he said.

I had already noticed. While we were choosing up sides a boom box was blaring, banal fare as one might expect from such ruffians, but what struck us all was Georald's comments. He had always insisted upon rating the music, but in the past he used such adjectives as *loud*, *cool*, *heavy*, *far-out*. This time, however, he sprinkled his observations with *tenuto*, *portato*, *arpeggio*, *tremolo*. We, collectively, wondered what country we were in and I, personally, wrote the words on my wrist in order to check their meanings later.

I had to get into his school. A single year ago I considered myself to be his intellectual superior. Today I was a humble cup bearer, albeit a suspicious one. A week later Georald called to see if I would accompany him to an exhibition of pre-Raphaelite paintings under the Hill. The works had already been shown on the Hill while he was away, but the good fathers there had decided to make them available to those of us below. It was their *gram of soma*, so to speak.

Any excuse to titillate my gray matter was welcome and I readily accepted. After all, we had never restricted our learning to printed matter or simply to novels or history. The milieu was our forte. The humanities. At least that is what I had thought when I had considered myself an equal. But this day my equality disappeared completely.

We had seen paintings by Rosetti, James Collinson, and Holman Hunt and three sculptures by Thomas Woolner when Georald paused before Rosetti's *Beata Beatrix* and began talking of its placid flatness, its overtones of Catholicism. "Hunt and John Everet Millaise, as you can see," he pointed to two works we had already passed, "obviously represent the protestant view of the Pre-Raphaelite

Brotherhood. See," he indicated some aspect of the Hunt I couldn't discover, "he has in almost puritanical self-denial when it comes to glamor." He pronounced the word *glamor* as if he were implying the British spelling.

As we moved along he noted that "Charles Dickens loathed them, you know. He said they were blasphemous."

The next painting had long been a favorite of mine, Millais' *Ophelia*, the portrait of Hamlet's drowned lover, holding a clutch of flowers in her right hand while lying in a crystalline stream. To me it was the essence of art and beauty. Georald was less pleased. "I can see why Dickens objected," he tsked. "The background, the woman, and the flowers are each obvious truths, but those truths clash so." He dismissed the work with a wave of his hand and moved on as one would pass a blinking roadside neon sign advertising eats.

When I got home I found I had written three words on my wrist: *chiaroscuro*, *gloriole*, *sfumato*. I was so humbled by Georald's grasp of the world and its knowledge that I felt crushed, minor. A cipher in the genome of life. They on the Hill deserved everything they had and more. They, simply, were our superiors. As the worker ant to the queen, my duty was clear. To serve.

Relieved of my duties in the garden, I was summoned into the now rapidly growing library. Georald's parents had semi-retired to an island off the Florida coast, one of those islands that was The Island just as the hill above my hometown was The Hill. Georald was left as lord of the manse and his wife was the lady. I was all but placed in a butler's uniform and given a feather duster, though the missus was less condescending than her spouse. I seldom spoke to Georald anymore except to ask him to clarify those orders that I lacked the intelligence to understand after only a single recitation.

Still, I was near the library.

Now that he was in charge, Georald knocked out a wall and doubled the square footage. He tripled the book space by having me install free-standing shelves. When the remodeling was completed, I was asked to arrange the books according to genre and subject. Once that was completed, Georald felt that serious study could best be served if the same arrangement was continued, though separated according to their epoch.

Shortly after that task was finished, Mrs. Dresden felt, and her husband concurred, that what was most important was the view of the books from the garden. To satisfy her decorator's eye, I lined those shelves which were visible from the garden table with matched sets, arranging the various colors so as to mimic a patchwork quilt.

I was being paid, so I didn't mind greatly. I was worried, however, that no one but me would be able to find anything in the library, a worry I soon discarded because I was the only one who ever seemed to enter it. Georald, as his wife had told me earlier, never seemed to read. As near as I could tell he spent his days watching old movies in another wing of the mansion. Mrs. Dresden's proclivities, or interests, had never been literary.

Bookmarks I left out to be used were never moved. I had the keys to the locked cases where the rarer books were kept, but I was never asked for them. Hairs placed across the door and the jamb were never broken. The library was mine alone.

Still, Georald's intellect seemed to be mushrooming. But it couldn't be coming from the television.

The week before we were both to return to our respective universities, I was in the garden with a leather bound copy of Millay's sonnets when Georald strode over from the croquet pad.

"You know," he began introspectively, and I was just sure he was feigning that introspection, "I was just thinking that perhaps Kennewick man did not kill off the megafauna after all."

"Oh?"

"Yes, you know, with the warming climate the grasses were changing. Grasses, you realize"--his voice suggested I couldn't possibly realize it--"have different photosynthesis cycles--the three-carbon cycle and the four-carbon cycle. The three-carbon grasses would have provided more nutrients to the mammoths and mastodons, but those grasses grow only in colder climates. When the warmth-loving four-cycle grasses replaced the three, the megafauna simply starved."

I wished I had had something to tell him, but he strode immediately back to the croquet course as if he knew I didn't have and would never have. He gave me no more heed than he would have given a chattering magpie.

I closed the book of sonnets at his receding back and resolved that come next summer I would possess knowledge that he could not possibly have. Knowing his library, I knew what it did *not* contain and I searched local book stores and public libraries for something he could not know about. I found it at a yard sale, *The Pleasant History of John Winchcomb in His Younger Years Called Jack of Newberry*, the story of a weaver first published in Elizabethan England in 1597, circa 1597. The original publication date wasn't even known. It was written by Thomas Deloney, whose birth and death dates were simply question marks.

Searching my town, the internet, and antiquarian catalogs, I was able to find its companion publications, *Thomas of Reading*, about a clothier, and *The Gentle Craft*, about a shoemaker. These I memorized, my other studies suffering.

When Georald finally returned to the Hill the next summer, I waited until after our annual welcome-home baseball game before broaching the subject of Deloney.

"That hack," he said, dismissing him as a common pamphleteer and ballad writer. "A lightweight," he said, "though Thomas Dekker was able to make something of his *Gentle Craft* in 1599 when he turned it into a popular play, *The Shoemaker's Holiday*. Don't you have something better to do with your time?" he asked seriously.

Crushed is a word that does not describe how I felt. I considered myself to be the sole living authority on Deloney, and Georald had just given me some information I had not know. Jealousy raged within but its only external sign was the twitching of the bat in my hand.

Being a second banana or a mere cleric in the search for intellectual excellency I could handle, but to be so haughtily dismissed as a *thing* I could not. His birth advantages did not give him that right.

Back at his mansion I was heading to the library to give it a thorough spring cleaning when his wife passed by with a tennis racket bouncing on her shoulder. She was on her way to a private lesson at the courts beyond the croquet pad.

"Pardon me," I hesitated, the disdain I felt from her husband now spectering about her shoulders, "but what were Georald's study habits at school?"

"Study? You must be kidding. I never saw any of the students back there studying or reading. They don't even go to classes."

"What?" I remembered my many hours in the library and the weeks spent poring over my texts in my ill-lit, cold dorm room.

"The closest they came to anything like that was the weekend retreats they went on, but I and the other girls weren't permitted to attend. It was a guy thing, I guess," she said and skipped on toward the courts.

I didn't realize I was still carrying the bat until I felt my left hand stinging. When I looked to the cause, I found I was pounding it into the palm of my hand. Dust had settled over some of the shelves and I was carefully vacuuming the tops of the books when Georald condescended to speak to me. "There's a box of books in the trunk of my car," he called from the hall. "Would you get them and shelve them?" I was starting toward the drive when he called again. "Oh, and I think it's time we started a computer cataloging of the stock. We're developing quite a library here." The imperial *We*, which meant I would do the work.

When I got back with the books and was unpacking them, Georald actually entered the library.

"Charles Pierre Baudelaire," I said, holding up one volume of the complete works of the French poet and writer.

"Yes, a rare 1908 edition. I was fortunate to find them."

I turned the volume in my hand and admired the craftsmanship in the binding. Georald said: "I particularly liked *Les Fleurs du Mal* with its recurring motifs of ships, the sea, and travel. No doubt a remnant of the 10-month cruise to the East his mother and stepfather sent him on when he was twenty." When he saw me look into the box for the other volumes he added, "He was persecuted for immoral writings because of *Les Fleurs*, you know."

"I've heard of him," I admitted, "but I don't think I've ever read anything by him." I felt horrible. I was Igor to his Frankenstein, the Igor who couldn't even recognize a good brain if it was floating in a bottle of formaldehyde.

"You would probably find him a challenge," he exhaled, boredom in his voice, "though I loved plucking from his poems the inspirations he derived from his half-cast mistress Jeanne Duval. The actress Marie Daubrun also had her influence on him as did Mme. Sabatier with whom he had a brief flirtation in 1857."

My hands trembled so that I had to replace the book in the box. "When did you find time to read these?" I asked.

"Those?" he waved a dismissive hand at them. "I tossed those off last week. A trifling nothing." He swept from the room, leaving me stooped physically and emotionally over the box of Baudelaire.

Genes will out, I thought, swallowing the lump in my throat that had become my life. Like my father before me, I would be nothing more than the worker ant laboring until I was spent, at which point the dried husk of my carcass would be carried out and rolled down the Hill. I didn't possess the capacity to read and understand. Oh, I could recognize the alphabet and piece a few of its sounds together. Maybe I could catch a notion here or there, but true understanding was beyond my grasp. Georald and the others on the Hill were reading from a shelf I could not reach.

The best way I could serve was to dust and care for the receptacles that contained the wisdom I was incapable of acquiring. All I could do was smell the pages or enjoy the pretty pictures.

Glumly wondering if the Baudelaire was illustrated, I opened a volume and found to my dismay that two of the pages were stuck together. No. They weren't

stuck. They had never been cut. Quality books in that era were cut at the tops and bottoms of the pages, and the tops gilt-edged, but the outer edges were left uncut. The first reader required a pen knife or a special tool to cut the edges so that the pages could be laid open.

Frantically, I pulled the remaining books from the box and checked each volume. None of the pages had been cut. No one had ever read a word of those books. Why had Georald said he had read them only a week ago? I didn't know how he had garnered their essence, but I was sure why he had lied to me. He was a Hill person and I was not. Ridicule and subjugation of my kind was a parlor sport for some of them.

To him I was a movable, abusable piece on some board game that I lacked the capacity to understand or even to recognize. I loathed myself and I loathed him even more for loathing me. Even pity would have been preferable.

When I heard him returning, I was conscious of the fact that I was rising and reaching for my bat. I was aware enough of my movements to know what I was going to do, but I was also aware that I didn't fully know why. Further evidence of my inabilities, I assumed. I was simply passion without plan. Or purpose without preamble, if you will.

As soon as he stepped from the hall, I swung as if aiming for the fences, but I pulled my left shoulder back too soon--an old flaw in my technique--and nearly missed. Instead of a solid hit, the round of the barrel meeting the round of the head, the tip of the bat just caught the edge of his cheek and slid along the side of his head.

Even so he hit the floor like a load of books.

I had expected to see blood and acknowledge the horror of it, but, instead, I stood transfixed. True, there was some blood, but what drew my attention was a shining wafer of what looked to be metal just behind his right ear. It pulsed, rising and falling, with the flow of the blood in the vein beneath it.

So, the Hill people weren't the evolutionary step ahead of us they led us to believe.

He was unconscious for several minutes and I used each second of those minutes to study the chip. It had been covered by a layer of skin and hair which now flapped toward the back of his head. The chip's attachment to the tissues beneath was not all that complex. A veterinarian could easily implant it, and I knew just the man. If the chip would do for me what I expected, we would both be satisfied with the benefits.

As I was hurrying from the library, the bloody chip clutched in my fist, he regained consciousness and called to my back. "Hey, Dude," he asked. "Que paso?"

The jury considering my fate had been out of the room for ten minutes. I was sure they would return in just a few more. All the spectators had left the room and were in the hallway pitching pennies with the *deceased*, Georald, or Jerry as they were calling him, and he wasn't objecting.

That left just me in the room along with the prosecutor who huddled in the back with Georald's parents. I wasn't afraid of them. They would do nothing to me. I was one of them. Undeniably so. In this age, hardware is destiny. It's thicker than blood. How did I know they would not come after me or hire someone else to do me harm?

How did I know that in a week Telexafuture would announce a two-for-one split and that those holding the stock would realize a thirty percent profit within a month. At which time, of course, I would sell my shares and they would be greedily snapped up by those with a few pennies at the foot of the Hill.

How did I know that the coming fad among teenagers in the valley would be faux tombstones and that their bedrooms would be filled with them. How had I know what number to call in order to become a partner in a marble quarry, using my coming Telexafuture profits as leverage.

I don't know myself. But I do know why the Dresdens are mourning their son. The reimplantation of dislodged chips has yet to be successful. The few times it has been tried, the recipient awoke an idiot. For some reason the neural pathways can't be reconnected and a meltdown results.

Georald's future isn't all that bleak. The few of his kind, automobile accidents and such, have remained on the Hill for a time, but eventually they meander down to the valley and become indistinguishable from the rest of the folk. There they buy anything advertised by an athlete and kowtow to the current logos. Music for them is good so long as it is loud. Movies without dialogue are best. Reading is for Dweebs. The Dweebs are easily recognized as those *not* standing in the welfare lines or wearing clothing that is little more than advertising billboards. And, for some reason, those like Georald become inordinately interested in soccer. I must admit that their antics are of some interest to me but only academically and financially. After all, their function as Elois is to serve as consumer-workers. We Morlocks are not half so dark as Mister Welles has painted us. In fact we love the sun. I plan to work on my tan just as soon as this trial is finished.

Why I am still sitting here, I don't know. I might as well leave. The jury will return shortly with full acquittal. And why not? Three members of the jury were on our baseball team. What I did to Georald resulted in an improvement as far as they can see. Before, he was a smart ass. Now he's one of the guys. And he seems happier than he ever was. He is now even capable of appreciating the beauty of his wife, though she has refused to come down the Hill.

I have seen the looks given me by some of the members of my former cast. Those looks seem to suggest that I have forsaken, abandoned my own kind.

Piff, I say. The order of the universe is now clear to me. Some individuals are naturally superior and, hence, destined to control, to marshal. Most humans are content to follow any bellwether. Which bellwether or what direction concerns them little. Why shouldn't I be the one to ring that bell? Besides, whether this ordering is natural or mechanical, it is, after all, inevitable.

You'll have to trust me on this.

A Universe Unobserved

“He didn’t just say that, did he? Boring didn’t just say that there was a *god*, did he?”

The man addressed could do little more than shrug as if to say *It sounded like that to me*.

The object of the question was an old man, a very aged man, who clung to the podium waiting for such murmurings to subside. “Now I am not saying there is a god, per say,” he tried to resume, but his ancient voice so quavered that he wasn’t

certain he was understood. To collect himself, he pulled a white handkerchief from his inside jacket pocket and daubed at the dry corners of his mouth.

“What I am convinced of, however,”--clearing phlegm from his throat--“is that I have discovered evidence of an intelligent design.”

Again the murmurs swelled but he attempted to still them by continuing. “Be that as it may,”--more phlegm, more coughing--“I wouldn’t have called you here today if I wasn’t concerned about the *quality* of that intelligence.”

“*Quality?*” the same man asked the same physicist beside him who didn’t bother shrugging this time. “Is he saying we have a *dumb* god?” No answer came from his fellow conferee, but Professor Boring responded as if he had heard, or anticipated, the question.

“A quality so questionable,” he said, “that I not only fear for the survival of mankind, but for the survival of sentience itself.”

Now *all* the physicists in meeting room B of the Hilton in San Angelo, Texas, were questioning their colleagues. They had responded to Boring’s siren call and were prepared for something on the cusp, but this was beyond the pale.

Each of them had dropped a pet project or classes and flown to Texas simply because Gyles Boring--*the* Gyles Boring--had called the conference, demanded it actually. That alone would have been enough, but he had further enticed them with the promise that he had the definitive answer to the question: *Does the universe exist if we’re not watching?*

Had any other physicist uttered such words about that quantum/stringy mystery, no conference would have been called. But Gyles Boring, even in his nineties, was a voice to be considered. He, after all, was the man who had sat at the feet of Niels Bohr, had tuned violins with Albert Einstein, had held Fermi’s

hand that day beneath the Chicago University stadium, and had been one of the very few trusted to jury Stephen Hawkings' string theory publications.

The hair on his scalp was white and thinning, but the mind beneath that ancient thatch was as sharp as Occum's razor. That is why the men and a few ladies in the hall fell silent one by one, returned to their seats, and sat in a fearful silence.

* * * *

Down the hall in the same Hilton hotel--Conrad's first--the meeting was smaller, more congenial, relaxed. The gentleman leading this confab was young. His jacket looked as if it had been recently cleaned, its elbow patches barely used. Instead of using a podium, he leaned back casually on the rear two legs of his chair and gestured at the computer generated illustration on the screen above him. The object in the picture, which he circled importantly with the red dot of his laser pointer, was a turtle--a Midland Painted Turtle, to be precise.

* * * *

Reunion Quiroz Zapata Tapia stood on the long-ago asphalted main street in Sonoita, Sonora, just across the border from Lukeville, Arizona, and clutched two aspirin-sized tablets in his palm. He and his two companions--all Indians from Puebla--had just emerged from *Farmica Estrella*. While in the pharmacy, they had stood in line behind Gringos buying blood pressure and stomach medications and Viagra, but their coyote had told them the tiny tablets would give them endurance for their trek across the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument to the highway near Ajo where they would be picked up.

Their ultimate destination was a meat packing plant in Colorado. They were assured of jobs there. In fact, each man had tucked somewhere in his clothing a handout printed in Spanish that said just that.

As soon as their coyote came out of the pharmacy--following a strange looking Gringo who had bought medication for a dog (The men laughed when the coyote translated what the silly American had bought.) they began their two mile walk to a rural bar and sometimes house of pleasure called *Los Colores*. Just across the highway from this bar was a three-strand barbed wire fence and, beyond that, America.

By nightfall their numbers had grown. Not all of the men looked as if they were seeking jobs. Some carried heavy packs and those who had made several trips into America called them *mules*. Reunion realized they were drug mules. Some even carried pistols, something very illegal in his country.

As soon as it was full dark, their coyote and other coyotes led the now large group across the highway and into the desert. When the headlights of a large vehicle blinked on, Reunion hid behind an ocotillo and prayed to the Virgin of Guadalupe that he would not be stopped before he had even crossed the fence. The coyotes laughed as their charges scattered and then walked up to the vehicle and extended their hands, holding money. Reunion did not know to call it a Humvee, but he recognized the Mexican federal soldiers and the machine guns they carried.

The men in the Humvee also laughed and fired a few shots into the air by way of celebration. Then the driver started the vehicle and rammed it through the fence and drove defiantly into America. He drove for two hundred meters, flattening cactus and creosote bushes, before stopping. The soldiers standing in the back of the vehicle fired more shots into the air and then several laterally as if a challenge to American border guards who might be out there in the dark.

Reunion thought the soldiers' actions were not just unnecessary, they were impolite. He, himself, may be committing a criminal act, but he was doing it respectfully.

When the Humvee finally returned--and Reunion could still hear the soldiers talking and laughing even after they had re-entered Mexico--the men were left alone in the dark. Nothing was said. Even the mules for whom this was a weekly trip were quiet. If Reunion's eyes had not adjusted to the darkness, he might not have seen the line of men snaking through the desert in time to catch its tail.

* * * *

"The classic two-slit experiment no longer works," Professor Boring said by way of explanation. His audience sat so stunned that he thought they must not have understood.

"You remember, the experiment where protons are directed at a sheet containing two slits. When we place proton detectors next to each slit to measure the protons as they pass through, they produce a pattern on the target board behind the slits as if they were distinct particles, showing that light is particles.

"But if we remove the proton detectors--the same as if we were not watching--the pattern on the target board is different. One that could only be produced if light was, not particles, but a wave."

His audience still sat silent. Perhaps they were still stunned. Perhaps they were trying to understand why he was telling them of the classic experiment nearly all of them had tried while still undergraduates. Perhaps they simply couldn't understand the implications of what Boring had just said.

"Before a week ago," the professor tried to raise his voice unsuccessfully, "our observing made a difference. If we watched--particles. If we didn't watch--

waves. But now it makes no difference. It's always waves. The universe no longer cares whether we are watching or not."

* * * *

"I know it's just a painted Turtle," the young scientist told his small, smiling audience, "but this animal is a survivor. See the scar tissue on its back?" He bathed the scar with the giggling dot of his laser pointer.

"She was hit by a car, her carapace nearly split in two, and all I did was close it with a piece of duct tape and epoxy over that. In a year the shell had healed itself, and my patch had fallen off.

"She's nearly sixty now--by our best guess (We've been following her for forty-one years and estimated her age at about twenty when my predecessor first captured her.)--and yet she's still quite fertile. In fact, her egg clutches are larger than those of what we would normally think of as young female turtles in their prime, and her young have a much higher survival rate.

"This creature, once it has a developed carapace, is nearly invulnerable. About its only enemies are automobile wheels and the raccoons that eat its eggs. A few, however, do end up in ornamental backyard ponds which is usually a death sentence unless they can escape.

"But this is one marvelous creature," the lecturer smiled. "We could not be blamed for envying it."

* * * *

Six hours after sunrise, Reunion Zapata thought he was going to die. The gallon of water he started with was long gone as was the container that had held it. One of his companions who thought he could make it with only a two liter bottle of coke had been left behind in the heat. The last Reunion saw of him, he was lying beneath a creosote bush kicking his life out with a convulsion. The dying man's

heels dug into the sand. The coyotes said to forget him. The Border Patrol would find the body and ship it back to Puebla.

Two hours later the coyotes left them. “That way,” they pointed. “You’ll find water that way.”

And they did. It was in a plastic tank at the base of a tall pole flying a blue pennant. Reunion had not heard of such stations, but other members of the group still with him had. Reunion did not understand this odd thing. The Border Patrol was chasing them to send them back, but other people were placing water along their path to aid them.

They were drinking their fill and filling their containers--Reunion wished he had not thrown his empty plastic container away--when they heard a vehicle approaching and scattered.

The two men in the pickup were not dressed in the green of the Border Patrol and they carried containers of water from the back of their truck to refill the container at the base of the pole. Some of the Mexicans, but not Reunion, came out of hiding and talked to the men who had brought the water. They shook hands and the men who brought the water gave them pieces of paper.

Reunion saw one of the papers later. It talked in Spanish about church and Christ and being saved. Reunion didn’t understand it all, but he could tell it wasn’t Catholic.

With the fresh water, they managed to continue until they reached an Indian graveyard--many of the graves little more than deeply-sunken holes--just outside Ajo, Arizona. It was night and they sat among the faded white wooden crosses and waited. Some of the men smoked. One offered Reunion a cigarette but after a day and a half in the desert he didn’t feel like smoking.

Sometime very early, Reunion didn't know--maybe it was 2 a.m.--a very old white van rolled along the dirt road and pulled into the graveyard. It was their ride deeper into America. Colorado, Reunion hoped.

* * * *

"Consciousness and the universe are a pair," Boring said. "One can not exist without the other. Schrodinger's experiment with the cat in the box is the perfect example. Place a cat in a box with a vial of poisonous gas. Add to this a piece of uranium and a Geiger counter. If, or when, the piece of uranium emits a particle, the Geiger counter will detect it and a device will cause the vial of poisonous gas to break and the cat will die.

"But, until we open that sealed box, we will not know if the cat is dead or alive. It requires our consciousness--human consciousness--to complete the universe, to make it real, to insure that it actually occurs. If we do not look into that box, the universe it contains *does not exist--never existed*.

"We," Boring raked the audience with his eyes, "are the cats in those boxes. But we are no longer the consciousness that wonders about that box, the consciousness that will eventually open it."

He fell silent.

"Then who is watching it?" a voice in the audience asked. It was followed by nervous laughter.

Boring's lips parted but it was a moment before he made a sound. "I do not know. I only know that *that* consciousness is not human. Obviously we are still here, but who is now the partner with the universe I do not know? The real question, I fear, is not *who* has taken our place, but *What*."

The same voice that had asked the previous question spoke again, less sardonically this time. "This is more than just a new twist to Frankenstein's

monster. You're saying that this new monster, or whatever it is, is creating us instead of the other way around? Which *consciousness*, which species, do you think is now paired with the universe?"

Boring swung his head slowly and wearily from side to side. He looked as if he would cry. "If only it were a species," he said. "*That* would be hope. My fear, and I prefaced my remarks with my concerns for the intelligence that is designing our universe, is that it is either senile or--as Intelligent Designers go--perhaps an inexperienced toddler.

"Obviously, and the experiment with the protons through the slits proves it, we are no longer the consciousness in question. Perhaps the Intelligent Designer fears we are too warlike or that we will destroy ourselves in other, even more innocent, ways. We are no longer a reliable consciousness as far as the Designer is concerned.

"My real fear, and I have avoided broaching it as long as possible, is that the new consciousness is not a species or even a small sub-species, but a single individual. Possibly a gnat, a no-see-em, a single sloth somewhere in the Amazon. A jack rabbit in Wyoming, a wildebeest on an African savanna. Something short lived, soon gone. And with its demise dissolves the universe."

With that, Boring shuffled from the podium so bent and fatigued that no member of the audience would have been surprised if he had died just after disappearing behind the curtain at the edge of the stage. But no member of the audience had the courage to leave his seat and look behind that curtain, just as no member of the audience wished to open Schrodinger's box and check on the cat.

* * * *

The red laser dot still danced across the wall, but the object of illustration was no longer the Midland Painted Turtle. The object of illustration was the telomere,

the non-genetic DNA sequence that sheathes the ends of the chromosomes of the Painted Turtle.

“Senescence, the Grim Reaper, is not the foe of our turtle,” the smug young fellow continued. “Each time the human cell divides, it loses a little of the length of this telomere. Eventually it disappears, no longer able to protect the chromosome, and the cell dies and with it, eventually, the human.

“But our friend, the Midland Painted Turtle, may be *immortal*. Its telomeres--as with cancer cells--do not shorten. It does not suffer senescence. If we could somehow duplicate in humans these turtle telomeres, the human life span could be lengthened by hundreds of years. Like the turtle, we would be invulnerable to nearly everything but accident.

“Look at her,” he flipped back to the picture of the turtle and dizzied it with the dot of his laser pointer. “When the ancients chose a turtle to carry the earth on its back, they could not have made a better choice.”

* * * *

Reunion Zapata could not have known it, but the white van in which he crouched along with sixteen others was hurtling along Colorado 71 between Rocky Ford and Limon at a rate of speed all out of proportion to its need. In fact, a van like it, any van loaded with any number of people or things or concepts would have gone unnoticed if it had not been exceeding the speed limit on the narrow asphalt highway by twenty miles an hour. Add to that one missing headlight, a lens-less tail light, and no license plate light.

Even a sleepy, bored, apolitical highway patrolman could not have ignored it. And he didn't.

When the blinking red lights flashed in the side mirror of the van, the driver's first, last, and only impulse was to run for it. And to run at a speed that in any

other diver would have immediately been correctly labeled as insane. But for this driver it was simply cultural.

The patrolman followed for less than a mile before he decided to abort the chase and to hang back, choosing to radio ahead and warn the patrolman on Interstate 70 near Limon of the approaching problem. For him to continue the chase would almost certainly cause injury or death to himself or to the occupants of the hurtling white van. Highway 71 was a narrow, shoulder-less, dangerous stretch of road even in daylight.

* * * *

She had no name. Let's call her Irma. No, let's call her Inez--that was my grandmother's name. For fifty some years after maturing, she had always split the difference between the two bright stars in the east and after three or four days of crawling had found the bank of fine sand where she burrowed in deeply to lay her eggs.

She felt as good, as healthy, as alert as she had a half century ago. The impulse that drew her east each time she felt that seasonal swelling within her carapace was not to be denied or feared. Not to be begrudged or judged an inconvenience. It was life. It was purpose itself. It was affirmation. It was love. It was hope. It was continuance. It was reverence for ancestors and a pledge to the future. It was the continuation of a toil began eons previous. A promise and a commitment to life everlasting.

She pulled her heavy body from the ditch onto the still warm, paved surface that was gravel when she first began making her annual pilgrimages. At first it felt welcome compared to the moist coolness of the earth in the weed choked ditch. Too soon, however, the warmth became uncomfortable and she hastened her scurrying.

Off to the right, far down the packed track she was crossing, a one-eyed monster approached, roaring and fuming and swerving dangerously on bald tires. It held no fear for her. She had survived coyotes and hawks and badgers and skunks and droughts and floods and feasts and famines.

She was a Midland Painted Turtle. She withdrew into her shell. This too would pass. After all, she could survive anyt. . .

This is a very early effort. But I liked it then--and why not now?

Laugh, Skudlo, Laugh

Horace Horatio Skudlo had a personality like a Kansas grain elevator: it looked large and ghostly above the lesser of the intellectual plane and seemed to bask and glow in those fading and rosy rays of enlightenment which threatened to slip below the horizon of hope and become lost.

But, upon closer inspection, Horace Horatio Skudlo proved quite morose. In fact he had a personality like a Mobius band; there appeared to be intricacies and subtilties, but there was just that one odious facade he presented to the world. With Skudlo, the facade was the whole. It was as representative of his real self as the glowing surface of a red hot coal is indicative of its inner most recesses.

Skudlo didn't even attempt to hide his hatefulness behind a veneer of eccentricity. As time showed, this personality of Skudlo's which seemed, at first, to be a towering grain elevator of hope, proved to be more akin to a sore and festering thumb.

Biographers of his day penned glowing accolades to the man and his great contribution to humanity, always dwelling on his Horatio Alger beginnings. Any picture I would paint would be tainted with excretion and vinegar. But then I have the advantage of hindsight. It's not a long story at all and even if it were, god knows I have the time to put it down. It's not that I am the greatest authority on Skudlo or that I'm the only authority on Skudlo, but more to the point, I'm the only man alive to tell it.

Skudlo was born in a log cabin near Manitou Springs, Colorado. The cabin rested on the crest of a hill between Mount Manitou and Colorado Springs and afforded the young Skudlo a view of the Air Force Academy to the north, Ent Air Force Base to the east and Fort Carson and the North American Air Defense Command Center to the south.

A portion of Skudlo's loathing of mankind obviously stemmed from his association with the lower military dregs of humanity which teemed in the shadow of Pikes Peak. But there is even a simpler explanation.

Skudlo was the bastard son of a sometimes prostitute, sometimes society reporter by the name of Bitty Bit. His father was a drunken printer who at the age of 45 was still an apprentice.

One evening, while in a fit of drunken pique, he attempted to cast a headline on the back shop's Skudlo Headline Setter and received a permanent and devastating injury to his groin. How he could have been injured on the perfectly

safe and efficient Skudlo was a mystery until subsequent investigation showed that it was not the Skudlo which had rendered the blow at all, but an innocent galley of overset type. It seems Skudlo's father had jumped atop the machine and was stomping on it in an effort to hurry the casting so that he could repair to his favorite pub when he slipped and fell across the galleys of type.

It is said that the poor man's last, and bitter, drop of fecundity fathered the boy we know as Skudlo. The drunken printer began to blame all his worldly ills on the machine and refused to take credit for fathering the boy. He even went so far as to name the boy after the Skudlo. Hence, Horace Horatio Skudlo.

Even as a red-haired tot, toddling bull leggedly along in his diapers like a diminutive dwarf, Skudlo was humiliated by his name. As he grew older, the other children ridiculed him and called him names until he became an introvert, engrossed in his studies. The curse of the name stayed with him and upon graduation from high school as valedictorian of his class, he was known as Horatio Horatio "Skuzzie" Skudlo.

And, as he matured, people began to joke about Skudlo and suggest it was quite possible he had been fathered by the machine. He possessed the mental agility of a computer, the tireless energies of a machine and the feelings and compunctions of cold metal.

Skudlo obtained his undergraduate degree from the University of Colorado and summarily turned down a Rhodes Scholarship to attend the Colorado School of Mines in Golden.

He wanted to become the world's foremost metallurgist.

And he did.

But it wasn't to his work with metals that Denver erected a statue in his honor. And a most anachronous statue it is today. It stands atop a large column of bluish granite easily as tall as the Washington monument. In life he was six foot eight with an unruly red beard and shoulder length hair. While in school, he once posed as God for a picture in the campus literary magazine.

The statue's size alone would make it appear out of place, even when in juxtaposition with the mountains. But what makes it all the more bizarre is the huge sardonic laugh which spreads across the statue's face.

I can see it now from my vantage point atop Lookout Mountain near Golden. With my binoculars I can see directly down the length of Colfax Avenue. Many of the buildings are still standing though the lights from their numerous bars no longer beckon customers with their promises of topless dancers.

Just to the right of Colfax is the Capitol building of Colorado. The dome has weathered badly and very little its golden hue remains. A block in front of the Capitol, and in the center of Denver's Civic Center, looms the statue of Skudlo. He still laughs. His face is covered with a laugh even though it was never risen to laughter while he lived.

Denver's prominent sculptor, Charles E. Joseph, welcomed the challenge when he was commissioned to cast the likeness of Skudlo. He nearly refused the lucrative offer, however, when he found that Skudlo wished the statue to be laughing. Nevertheless, Joseph rose to the occasion and produced a creditable, if not too wide, a laugh. And Skudlo is still laughing despite the pigeons which are roosting on his curled lip.

Towards the end, bottles of ink were thrown at the base of the statue and obscenities carved into the granite. The ink has faded completely away and the

shallow carvings will soon erode from legibility. If Earth were to be visited by beings from another planet, they would mistake Skudlo for a great saint or patriot or perhaps a god. The end came too quickly for the victims to realize that it had been foreseen by Skudlo. I alone am writing the story of Skudlo so that future generations or inhabitants of Earth will know the truth.

Perhaps I have dwelled too long on the interesting trivialities of Skudlo, but I hoped to convey the awesome magnanimity which was the living Skudlo.

At the Colorado School of Mines, Skudlo again excelled in all phases of the academic life. But of special interest to him was the mining of molybdenite, the ore from which molybdenum is derived. Molly, as it was called, was used to make very hard steel alloys. Since the world's largest known deposit of molly was located at Climax, Colorado, two miles above sea level, Skudlo decided to spend a summer working in the mine and studying production procedures.

Skudlo seemed at home in the hollow echoing chambers of the mine. He spent many extra shifts underground, always favoring the graveyard shift, and even helped to blast anew cavern.

It was probably because he spent much more time in the new chamber than the other men that he was the only one to notice the change in himself. Certain of his normal bodily functions had ceased. Thinking he was nothing more than a bit irregular, he took a laxative and went about his work.

His condition continued throughout the summer with no ill effects. But as soon as he stopped going into the new portions of the mine, he returned to normal. Upon his return to school in the fall, he took a portion of the molly with him for further study. In the laboratory below Lookout Mountain, Skudlo found that the molly emitted a weak radioactive ray so weak that it could have been mistaken for

the radioactivity in the luminous dial of a watch. The intensity and length of the wave was such that it could pass through the human body with no ill effect.

Our young genius secluded himself in his laboratory and began an exhaustive series of tests. After subjecting rats to the ray, he noticed that they left no excrement in their cages.

Dissection disclosed that all waste materials had disappeared from the portion of the rat's digestive tract which corresponded to the lower intestines in the human. It's hard to say if Skudlo actually knew the diabolical consequences which could result from the use of the ray. Chances are that he didn't know the inevitable outcome, but he surely knew of the limited supply of the irradiated form of molly and the difficulty, if not impossibility, of synthesizing it.

But in his declining years his being seemed to be washed by an unseen sea of serenity which I suspect was the growing awareness of what the prolonged use of his invention would bring.

This revelation no doubt gave him the confidence to demand that the statue of his likeness be laughing. In short, the last laugh to end last laughs.

In commercializing his invention, Skudlo created what he discretely referred to as the concurrent restroom. It was a telephone-booth-sized cabinet with floor operated controls. The subject simply stepped into the booth fully clothed and was subjected to the rays, thus relieving them of the more vulgar method of elimination.

When the device was first introduced on the market, the merchants called it the conjugal restroom. When the larger, room sized version of it was introduced on the college campuses, it was called the coeducational restroom. It was nothing to see couples walking hand in hand toward the toilet.

Suffice it to say the machines sold like hot cakes.

I'm afraid I shall have to digress again. But then that's the freedom one has when he is reminiscing. I no longer have teachers or critics who demand that my thoughts be ordered. I prefer to let the details slip out as in normal conversation: words triggering thoughts instead of vice versa. I can't help but think that you, my reader, (should you ever come along) would rather read something light and pleasant rather than something stilted and:

A. Topic paragraph

1. Expansion of topic paragraph

a. Conclusion

So I'll continue.

Being Skudlo was nearly as bad as being President. Anyone who ever wiped haziness felt obligated to make a million out of it by writing a book. My study shelves here are lined with books about Skudlo. The books leave me cold though. What I really get a kick out of is his diary. Why no one ever found it and did an expose on it I don't know. Maybe it was because no one dared say anything derogatory about the demigod Skudlo. At least not until toward the end. But that diary. Minga! It's something else.

It seems that as a youngster, say 19 or 20 or somewhere thereabouts, Skudlo began having problems with girls. He was a nice boy. And as you know there is little demand for nice boys on the sexual market.

Page after page laments the fact that he always did everything right to no avail. "I talked to Lucy again tonight," one entry said.

I brought her some flowers and she took them and only smiled. She didn't even say how lovely they were or put them in some water. She just sat on the edge

of the couch rocking and snapping her fingers to some music which seemed to have no other rhythm or sound except “jug, jug, jug, jug and pop.”

Then the phone rang and she threw her legs across the arm of the chair by the phone and talked and laughed for about an hour and a half. i gut up, acting as if I could care less, and let myself out. I didn’t even say good-bye.

That probably tore her up.

But he did improve. He increased in statue and scope and soon became quite the conversationalist. All eyes in a room would focus on him and every ear would tune with interest to his comments. But he was still plagued with the greatest handicap a man can have. He was nice, kind, considerate and understanding. “I was with Irene in my car tonight,” he told his diary.

I placed my hand on her knee and began kissing her neck passionately. My hand began a slow search up the inside of her thigh and I bit huge hunks of lust from the nape of her neck. Gently, she extracted my errant hand from her milky flesh and placed it in my lap with the other. She then held my head between her tiny hands and kissed me on my forehead.

“You’re nice,” she said.

“No I’m not,” I retorted. “I lust for you. I want your body.”

She smiled sweetly and said: “You’re just saying hat. I know you’re a sweet, sweet boy.”

“No, I’m evil,” I screamed. “I want to make love to you.”

“Horace,” she smiled, “you’re a sweet boy. I know you’re not the kind of boy you say you are.”

“But I am,” I pleaded. “I go down. I do. I really do. I go down, Irene. Honest I do.”

*I went on pleading until I ran out of spittle and had to quit and take her home.
She shook my hand at the door.*

That tore me up.

And then, slowly and surely, and of course finally, he moved into that state of human relations, that island of loneliness, that world of grays between just living and breathing and living and lusting, yes, he evolved into that hapless being whose every relationship is platonic.

He became confidant and consoler to every slut within a radius of 125 miles of the Capitol in Denver.

During that period, he wrote:

I crave the seductive greens and blues of neon lights in after-hour bars. I feel at home in the dark, womb-like caves lined with subdued colors in velvet and peopled with firm-bosomed strippers.

Trite college and working girls hold no sway with my heart. i detest their little games. I am aroused only by the prospect of complicity with a colored stripper who is caressing my crotch and blowing my ear.

Oh, Dinah, I see your lithe black body dancing before my eyes and I want. Oh, God I want. I want desperately to place my hand on your thigh and to fill that tiny space of nothing between the swelling of your thighs and the blueness of your G-string. I love you, you stately ebony goddess with a lustful love more consuming than any paltry love Bacchus could produce with his wines and opiates. And It shall be consummated. I promise.

Judging from later entries in his diary I believe the declarations of love from a eunuch would have come closer to being fulfilled than the above mentioned declaration of Skudlo's.

I see here a tear-stained passage in his diary. This looks like as good a place as any to begin.

Tonight Dinah came down from the stage in her skimpy costume and sat beside me. There were tears in her eyes.

“What now, my sweets,” I consoled her, placing my hand on her thigh.

“The man I have been living with is going to California. What am I going to do, Horace?”

“Come live with me, my love, and we shall live always in connubial bliss,” I begged her. My eager mouth fell to sucking her protruding lower lip as my hand on her thigh worked feverishly in the darkness.

“Oh, Horace, you’re so nice. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

She stared dispassionately in the direction of the bar, paying no heed what so ever to my declarations of love. Both verbal and manual.

“My husband called this evening and said my two babies miss me. He wants me to come back, Horace, should I?”

”No, my pet. Take me to your apartment and together we shall create concentric, and infinite, circles of accord which shall flow endlessly until they lap the shores of distant worlds.”

“What?” she questioned irritably.

“Make love to me, my love.”

“Oh, Horace. I can’t do that. You’re like a brother o me.” My hand pulsed rhythmically and she paid no more attention to it than she would the rhythmic sounds of n old man pounding the ashes from his pipe into the palm of his hand.

“Horace, do you think my husband will like the way I have my hair done now?”

“I’ll give you \$10 if you will come home with me tonight,” I entreated. I attacked the pasties which covered her delicate, nearly black nipples with my lips and began sucking until the sequins began popping off and I nearly strangled as I inhaled them into my wind pipe.

“You’re my dearest friend, Horace. Like a brother. I couldn’t do that.”

“I’ll give you \$25 if you let me take you home,” I implored. My lips fell further and I began suckling her navel and licking the pale lines which crossed her belly, her badges of child birth.

“Oh, sweetie,” she said, grabbing a handful of my hair to make sure my lips delved no further. “I like you as a friend, a brother. Let’s not spoil it. I want to remember you always as you are. Sweet, shy, kind and considerate.”

I was on my knees under the table now. “I beseech you, my Passionate, \$50 for your address that I might walk past in the night wearing over-sized boots and let my broken heart cry and rattle against your window pane.”

She leaned down and kissed my forehead maternally. My hands gripped tightly at her thighs as she rose and went to the man in the next booth and began kissing his ear and playing with his thigh.

His diary mentioned girls precious little after the above entry. Now and then he did mention his loathing for them. Once he even said that he could no longer carry a conversation with a woman. “If I can’t play with her thigh or feel for the silicone injections in her breasts or ask if they are using the pills or the loop, I have nothing to say to them,” he wrote.

There were just a few other entries of note. He professed his hope that one day he would be allowed to create a TV variety show which did not have dancers

and that he could find a pair of actors who could carry the passion of a love scene without being backed by a 100-piece orchestra.

The sun is nearly setting now and only the head of Skudlo's statue is lit. Minga, but that's a monstrous statue. Just now it looked as if his sickening grin were growing wider. No, that was just the pigeons taking off for an evening drink.

The result of prolonged use of the machine was obvious. The only thing startling was the rapidity with which it came about. Even the slower of grade schoolers knew of the principles of evolution and how it was facilitated by selection of the species.

Ancient miners knew that mules which worked in the mines soon lost their eye sight as did fish which lived in underground caverns.

In the case of the human, that which was not used became of no value. It was a mere several thousand years before children began to be born without anal openings.

I suppose it was all part of the Lord's use-it-or-lose-it policy. By that time, however, the machine was in such wide use that no one really panicked. The day-to-day pedestrian was continually bathed in the ray as he stepped into elevators or walked under theater marquees or read a magazine in a doctor's waiting room or lunched with friends in an intimate cafe.

No one was farther from the machine than the urge. Engineers had even designed a light pack which could be attached to the belts of campers or persons who expected to be in the savage wilds.

That's where I come in. I'm the savage. Probably the last.

For the first few hundred years those who were born mutants were looked down upon. But as their numbers increased, things began going their way and soon it was actually IN to be a mutant.

Then the normal people, who could practice excretion as nature had meant it, began to become the minority. Whereas the smoking room conversation used to run--"Really, some of my best friends are mutants, but I can't say I'd want to see one of them marry my daughter,"--the shoe was now on the other foot.

Fraternal organizations, always with their fingers on the pulse of society, soon began accepting only mutants. If someone had an enemy he wished to destroy, he merely spread the rumor that he was a savage.

Finally, the fraternal organizations incorporated into their ritual a scene designed to show that the candidates and members were really all birds of a feather.

As the lights dimmed and the candles flickered, the candidates faced the radiantly robed Highly Exalted Imperial Mutant and dropped their drawers and bent broadly away from their applauding brethren.

In this way, they proved they really belonged. They were all one of a kind.

Savages were hounded from the streets and pushed into the wilds to starve or to truly become savages. If the outcasts attempted to form communities for their own protection, they were raided at night by mutants wearing multi-colored hoods. In the winters, the snow and cold drove the savages from the mountains, and the night-darkened alleys of Denver became a din of clanging garbage can lids as the savages foraged for their existence.

The heads of mutant families, protecting their home and heath, loosened their firearms and rained lead about the alleys as the savages scampered over fences and through snow-covered backyards.

Before the bounty was put on our heads, I was told by a passing savage that there were nearly as many savages begging for handouts in Yellowstone National Park as bears. Brochures advertising the park were sure to contain pictures of Old Faithful, a mother bear and her cubs, and a scruffily bearded male savage with his hand out and his mouth gaping.

After a price was put on our heads, hordes of mutants came into the mountains with clubs and scatter guns. They encircled the savages and beat them as they tried to break the perimeter of the ring.

A flat-bedded truck usually followed the mutants and the bodies of the savages were heaped aboard. Sometimes if space was scarce, they merely cut off a telltale portion of the savage's body and threw it into a basket to be counted later. The drives were usually sponsored by civic organizations seeking additional funds for the annual rodeo festivities.

Thanks to my cunning and my ability to breathe the air atop Mount Elbert, the highest peak in Colorado, I was able to survive. And I'm glad I survived or I would not have seen the wars.

Skudlo knew it was coming. And maybe others knew it. But they kept it quiet as long as possible.

Public concern first rose when it was announced that the molybdenite mine near Climax was probing into a nearby mountain in an attempt to find a new supply of the irradiated molly. The reserves were running short, but officials assuaged the people's fears by telling them new reserves would surely be found.

But they weren't and efforts at synthesizing it failed.

That's when the hell broke loose. At first, as with civilized people, it was country against country. It wasn't long before that broke down to state against state, then city against city, then ghetto against ghetto and, finally, person against person.

The havenots did run in packs to better trap those who had a supply of molly. But after the owner was dispensed with, it devolved into jackals over a carcass. The last major battle in this area was at the Federal Center between Denver and Lookout Mountain where I now sit. Doubtless similar battles took place in all parts of the world, but this one was of special interest to me as I could sit, unmolested, atop Lookout Mountain, and watch the proceedings.

Before the panic, it had been widely publicized that the entire Federal complex could survive for years on its own stores in case of emergency. This no doubt meant an adequate supply of molly.

The word passed and packs of mutants converged on the flagstone edifices, crumbling them to the ground. But the inhabitants had gone underground and the hordes could not find the entry into the catacombs below. The siege continued for weeks with the maniacal mutants dropping to the ground, writhing in fatal and bloating agony.

Above it all loomed the statue of Skudlo. He surveyed both the mountains and plains and laughed broadly at the growing quietness. Occasionally, I laughed with him to see my former enemy running about madly without direction as the futile buzzings of a freshly gassed house fly before it plops on to its back and draws its legs into its body in death.

But now it's too quiet.

I look back with envy on the days when I was hunted like a savage. I had no hopes then, but I at least had fears. Now I have no hopes or fears, and God but it's lonely.

I put out a little garden this spring but the bunnies have played havoc with it. My two pet dogs seem delighted to chase the pesky little critters all day and it is heartening at least to see the happy, tongue-dripping smiles on the faces of Hunger and Pestilent.

A big afternoon for me is watching the rain. When the storm is high and the light good, I can see the lightning strike Skudlo's head. I keep hoping it'll knock his head off, but he seems to get a charge out of it.

It's a lazy summer afternoon, but I have nothing to measure the laziness by. There is no one mopping the perspiration from his brow or fanning himself with a magazine. At least I don't have to put up with the inane comments I used to hear about the weather.

I suppose if anyone is ever reading this, you won't mind if I take an hour or two away from the typewriter to catch a snooze in my hammock. Wait a second. Hunger and Pestilent are raising havoc outside. They must have run onto something big.

Oh, God. I can't believe it. There is someone walking up 19th Street toward my mountain. I'll be back later. I've got to get my binoculars on it. Christ, it's a woman. Minga, a woman. Minga, I can't believe it. Oh, you savage little beauty.

Oh, Christ, I don't know. What a day. Skudlo's laughing and I'm laughing. Well, laugh Skudlo. Laugh you bastard.

I have some laughing of my own to do.

Always a Critic

I don't generally relish sitting at tables under the luna lights, but it was Jarvis who made the appointment. When he suggested a drink or two at The Mesipo, I nearly turned him down because of the desolation and loneliness of the topside. I prefer good solid earth over my head, not the insubstantial ethers of space. But in spite of my fears, here I am. After all, he is a friend, of sorts.

He said he would meet me at 22:30 hours, but it's already 22:45. He'll be here by 23:02, though: That's when Thorus crests above the eastern horizon, and he said he had something to tell me about that moon. This is the first night it has been full in nearly thirty days, but so what.

Some people, the cloyingly romantic, swoon when one or the other of our lunas looms full at the end of its cycle, especially just as it crests and hangs ripe above the horizon. Not me. Spare me the capriciousness of the elements. I prefer the security of our long ago ancestors' caves.

Jarvis, as you've guessed, is another story. He loves the vastness of the planet's surface. Maybe it's because he's an artist. At least that's what he calls himself, a spatial artist. He won't do anything unless it's gigantic, and such projects can only be accomplished topside. Truth or beauty to him is secondary to immensity.

The last time I saw him, he had just returned from hanging a curtain between two mountain peaks in the Valley of Piautus. I wasn't one of the millions who

flocked to the valley to watch it ripple in the wind, but I did consent to look at a few of his visuals. You can bet he's never without them. Holding one at arm's length he tried to elucidate for me the transcendental qualities of that garish (and it goes without saying--Brobdingnagian) piece of cloth.

"It's symbolic of the curtain between man and his spiritual self," he had said. "It represents," and his eyes here lost focus, "the mysteries awaiting us after man's last act."

A little whistle of impatience parted my lips at this puerile notion of an existence beyond this pale, but he continued anyway as my attention drifted elsewhere.

I have ceased caring whether Jarvis is truly crazy or simply an artist. Even so, that night might have ended on a happier note if he hadn't asked me what I thought of his curtain. I told him it looked like the bloody sheet of man's inhumanity to man and the quicker it was taken down the better.

So I lack tact.

The only relenting I did that night was to inform him that as a critic it was my duty to help shape the concepts of the artist and that if I didn't speak honestly, I would be doing him a disservice.

The turning heads and smattering of gasps from the patrons of our open-air restaurant alerted me to Jarvis' arrival. It had to be Jarvis for nothing short of Jarvis would have elicited such a response from the Mesipo's clientele. These were the staid, creme-de-la-creme, intractable elite of the underground, lured to the surface by the call of liquors distilled in the multiple stomachs of mammal-like creatures on planets light years distant and by the Vuldevian chocolates collected from even more distant planets as they dripped from florescent leaves.

Yes, it was Jarvis, clad anachronistically in buckskins and looking disdainfully at the struck faces of the diners. His hair hung to his shoulders and was held back by a beaded band which crossed his forehead just above his eyes. Probably an adornment of one of the near-forgotten aboriginal peoples of this globe. Whatever, it was vintage Jarvis: juxtaposing the hopelessly anachronistic with the prescient present--and calling it art.

He floated regally into the chair opposite me and motioned for the waiter to bring him one of what I was having, a flute of Ucandian excrescence, mauve in this millennium instead of oh-so out-of-fashion ecru.

“And what do you have for me this evening, Jarvis?” When he said Thorus, the soon to rise moon, I feigned surprise and said, “Really, I hope it’s a more interesting than the bales of *triticum* you have been arranging on the planes of Steppus.”

“Oh, you’ve heard of that, have you?”

“I endeavor to stay current,” I half smiled. “And I also remember that you have been plowing archetypal figures in winter *zea mays* fields of the Kananus Province.”

Jarvis seemed in a tolerant mood and returned my half smile. “No wheat or corn for you this evening,” he said and fingered the stem of his Ucandian excrescence. “Tonight my palate contains fire and thunder. And Thorus.”

When he said “Thorus” he was mimicking my voice. He enjoys making fun of my speech and mannerisms. Sometimes he jokingly crosses his legs and bats his eye lashes at me, but I know it is all in good fun. And I, myself, am not free of jests.

The east was beginning to suggest the approach of the luna in question. “What,” I asked, endeavoring to break the confident hold his eyes held on mine, “is so special about Thorus? I know it’s face is always toward us, but it’s only one of our six natural satellites. Frodus and Bilbous are both larger and Beowufus is much brighter than the other five.”

“Duration,” was his one word explanation.

For an instant I almost understood. “Duration,” I mused aloud. It made sense. All his other works were by necessity seasonal. If nature didn’t have a hand in their eradication the civil authorities certainly did, forcing him to take down the curtain, uncover the fabric-wrapped building, dismantle the giant umbrellas or cause to reappear the “Disappeared River.”

“Duration,” Jarvis sounded the word for the third time. “Thorus will still be in the sky long after Frodus and Bilbous and Beowulfus have all broken free from their orbits. Someday, it will circle this planet alone. It alone will give light to the night. It will have the power and the presence and the Oneness of a God. Billions of people yet unborn will gaze at its face and marvel at its wonder.

“And my name will be on their lips.”

As he spoke he grew louder and arose. By the end of his speech he was no longer addressing me alone but the scores of diners as well. Startled by his unwanted intrusion on their solemnity, they peered at him with palpable disdain.

Far from chagrinned by their coldness, Jarvis welcomed it. He extracted a tiny wand from a pocket in his leather jacket and held it aloft as if checking a jewel for flaws or a nectar for clarity. He then eyed me first and then his larger audience before moving to the balustrade around the veranda.

Thorus was rising and Jarvis awaited. He extended his arms as if he were a prophet welcoming his flock. The leather fringe dangled from his open arms and swayed in the penumbral aura of the rising satellite. In his right hand the tiny wand began to glow.

Gently, his extended hands, palms up, encouraged the orb to rise. And inexorably it did, looming, sliding, slipping upward like a sleepy, reluctant cyclopiian god. As Jarvis' arms rose higher, the diners behind him also rose, as if summoned to their feet by a power greater than their own. They stood silently in their many colored formal robes. The waiters, in their more constricting attire and tails, stood frozen, the unmoving trays still balanced before them.

Just as Thorus lifted from the desert horizon, just as it slipped free, Jarvis thrust his arms forward and upward as a conductor commanding an orchestra to life. The wand was still in his right hand. For scant seconds he held that pose until Thorus awoke to his desires.

An orange billowing grew silently on the upper right quadrant of the pale yellow orb. It raced to quadruple its radius before imploding to jettison a shaft of sodium yellow-blue light from the until them lifeless surface.

Behind Jarvis the staid, still standing diners in unison placed fingers over their lips to ensure that no embarrassing sounds of amazement escape. But he was just beginning.

Like a sorcerer's apprentice exercising its newly acquired magic, Jarvis attacked with flailing arms. He all but threw himself onto his celestial canvas. Insanely he inspected his explosive palate and rose from it to attack the air with thermitic power. He moved mountains, he rerouted rivers, piled oceans upon oceans, cracked continents and created unknown elements.

And Thorus responded, awakening the darkness with the Tannhauserian yellows and greens of Venus, fields of cesium rolled with plutonial brilliance across its surface, Zoroastrian fires raged in vortices so violent as to devour a Devas.

The moon novaed above the veranda in the desert. The formally robed denizens of the planet's depths did not move. Had they done so, they would have seen their first shadows. Known their first false sun.

Slowly, as novas must, it dimmed, its brilliance contracting until the moon was the darker yoke in a broken egg. Then, the albumen shrunk, the glittering white fell back to its mothering body. What was left was the moon. Thorus. The New Thorus.

Spent from his orchestration and his months of preparation on Thorus, Jarvis stiffened his drooping body, leaned unsteadily with one hand against the balustrade, and and gestured toward the newly re-surfaced satellite.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he announced with a weary nonchalance, "I give you *The Man in the Moon*."

Silence.

Finally I could bear it no longer. "Really," I asked. "Where?"

"Where?" he sputtered and took his hand off the balustrade. "There. There." As he pointed and repointed and pointed again, the diners began to daub napkins to their lips and seek the exit.

Alarmed by his agitation, I tried my best to palliate him. "There is something to what you say," I said, "but I must disagree with your interpretation of the shadows."

“With my interpretation?” he heated. “I created them. I ought to know what those mars and valleys and craters represent.”

“Certainly you have a voice in the matter,” I further tried to calm him, “but it is equally as certain that you don’t have the final voice. There are eyes other than the artist’s.”

“Granted,” he confessed, exasperation cracking his disbelieving voice .

“And I think those eyes might see something different. A million years from now, if indeed there are mothers to bring children out into the night, I think they might see something different. Perhaps they might--and I say might--point into the sky and say ‘Look, children, look. Do you see *The Man in the Moon*?’”

As I was pointing a waiter, familiarly appeared at my elbow, and unasked, intruded upon our conversation. “Man?” he questioned. “No, that’s not a man. It looks more like an eagle sitting on a cactus holding a snake in its mouth.”

“No, no, no,” remonstrated one of the dowager patricians, pausing in her flight and shaking a finger at the waiter. “It’s obviously a woman wearing a hat with a feather in it.”

“No, no, no,” the gentleman with the dowager observed. “More of a rabbit, I should say.”

When I left, Jarvis had stumbled to our table and, instead of sitting properly, was resting his forehead on its glass top. Inspecting his shoes, I should hazard. His right arm lay across the table and with two fingers and a thumb he was twisting the stem of his flute of Ucandian excrescence, twisting it, and twisting it, and twisting it. . .

The reader of the magazine I sent this to said "Not enough dirty talk."

Big Bazoonarino Grandes

Wanda had a pair of big Bazoonarino Grandes, and Randy would do anything or say anything to get his hands on them.

"What kind of a sentence is that?" Wanda asked, leaning over Randy's shoulder and looking at the word processor screen. "And what are Bazoonarino Grandes anyway?"

Randy knew. One of them, the size of casaba melon, lay across his right shoulder and he reached up to pat it.

"Stop that!" Wanda scolded, slapping his hand and stepping back.

"Well, that's what a Bazoonarino Grande is." He tried to soothe her with his voice, but his mind still relished the thought of Wanda's breasts beneath her fuzzy sweater. And hers were big. Big. So big she tried to hide them by wearing loose-fitting tops.

At the moment her arms were folded beneath them, and she held that stance that forecast a long cold, dry spell in their relationship unless he did something quickly. "That's disgusting. You're treating women like some chunk of meat on a hook in a cold storage warehouse."

Randy imagined one of them on a hook. A Big hook.

"Come on baby. You know I'm a writer. I've got to write this stuff."

"Well, I read, and I've never read anything like that." She pointed accusingly at the inoffensive screen.

"But you don't read magazines in the market I'm shooting for. You know, the golden oldies like Swank and Dude, and maybe Cavalier--Swank' is still around, anyway--but that's what their readers want. Meaty, ready women--on the hook if you insist. And they demand Big Bazoonarinos."

"Maybe if they didn't treat women as if they were--" she shuddered at the thought--"meat on a hook, they wouldn't need to sublimate their desires with such a magazine."

"You're not being generous. You'd be surprised at the men who read such magazines--quality men. There are reasons to read other than for vicarious sex. There's the simple joy of seeing a relationship, for instance. The stories are often just fun. And this you probably won't believe, but men and women read them together."

"Together?"

"You heard me. There's more than one couple in this country that starts an evening by fantasizing to the pictures and stories in such magazines and who end up in a frenzied little fantasy world of their own, the magazine discarded on the floor."

"I've heard of them renting X-rated videos for such--evenings." She swallowed uneasily, maybe self-consciously, and Randy could see that she was becoming more than a little interested.

He watched her swallow again and said, "There are still one or two couples left who read. Video hasn't taken over the world yet. The superior, more educated couples can still read. And they enjoy it." He looked at Wanda with what he knew was his let's-snuggle look, and she responded involuntarily, although she tried to pretend she was just being coy.

"It wouldn't work with me," she breathed. "I don't think it would work with me." She let one arm drop to her side, a promising response. Her left arm, however, remained in place and her right breast rested in its hand.

"Would you like to try?" Randy challenged her with a smile.

"You couldn't do it with Big Bazoonarinos. I'll tell you that now. You'll need something softer. Something sweeter. Something more loving."

"Come over here and stand behind me," Randy motioned. "Just watch. Watch and read. But be open and honest." He turned to see her just as her breasts crushed against his back. "Don't pretend it's not effective if it is.

Randy scrolled the sentence on the screen up and began typing, the words racing the cursor across the screen.

Anxious to end this fear, and not waiting for a signal, Wanda turned her naked body onto all fours and began crawling into the wet, cavernous darkness before her. She moved slowly, seeking and requiring the closeness of Randy behind her, needing his touch. He kept close, fearful of losing the only animal companionship remaining for him in the dark, dank, corn field.

They moved cautiously through the burrow of stalks, pawing the earth and trying to fathom the alienness around them. Even in their eagerness to escape the field, they snuggled closer together, becoming one animal, now with eight legs, now with six.

Often Wanda's naked rump bulged against Randy's chest and belly, and his forearms straddled her waist, alternately cupping her belly or supporting his weight on the earth, his fingers digging into the mud. Still, they were agonizingly alone, separate.

Trying to break this fearful loneliness, trying to verify the existence of the animal before him, Randy lowered his head and bit her straining back.

Wanda's crawling ceased and slowly her rump moved up, pressing his belly. Like a doe in heat, not knowing, not understanding, but offering the ultimate security and togetherness that lay in her ovaries, she reared to the mount and lowered her head to the earth.

Randy's paws moved over her back and sought her shoulders. Crouching on his toes, he thrust in the darkness, searching for union, seeking its reassurance, and finding it for an instant. Just as he was responding blindly to the season, Wanda rolled beneath him, spread her arms and legs, and drew him into her.

Together they labored between the dark rows of corn until the separateness that was theirs spilled into the oneness that was becoming them.

"How's that?" Randy didn't really have to ask for he could hear her increased breathing and feel the swelling points of her mammoth grandes nosing into his back. He knew he liked his contour chair for reasons other than the comfort it provided the small of his back.

"It's nice," she relented, pressing a massive mauler between his shoulder blades, causing him to straighten. "But it's a little too animalish. It's like they're in heat, not love."

"Love, love," Randy nodded, all the while thinking Lust, lust. "If you want love and desire, I'll give you love and desire." He bent to the Macintosh and pounded the keys:

Wanda was intoxicated by the clean, manly scent clinging vaporously to Randy's chest. Perhaps, she thought, there was something to what scientists called pheromones--scents animals use to attract mates. Each time she inhaled, she grew more tender, more yielding, and snuggled into Randy's chest as a sleepy kitten might curl into its mother's warmth.

When Randy laid her on the blanket and drew the clothing from her, she contentedly let him slip to the side of her view and she cast her gaze instead into the azure heavens. Wheeling still, were the pair of eagles, wafting gracefully on heated currents. They rose and circled, higher and higher, responding effortlessly to the unseen force much as Wanda responded to the love and passion welling in her--a thermal of passion rising, screaming to float free.

She moved her eyes from the eagles only when she felt Randy's warm, tender lips caress her flat, taut stomach and move effortlessly up past her belly button. Sliding a hand beneath her, he unsnapped the bikini top, freeing her swollen breasts and allowing them to bulge slightly to the sides, their nipples enticingly distended.

He enveloped one of the nipples in his mouth and drew it in slowly, curling his tongue deftly around it at the same time. Strongly, he drew more of her breast into his mouth and then expelled it slowly only to draw it in again and expel it again.

Randy," she tensed and raised her limp arms from her sides to cradle his nursing head and to slide her fingers into his dark hair. As he moved to the other

breast, sought and swallowed the nipple, Wanda's hips began to grind slowly, wantingly.

Sensing the movement, Randy slid an hand down her belly and cupped her swelling passion beneath his fingers, pressing and responding to her welling desires as she arched powerfully and slowly.

"You're so beautiful," Randy spoke quietly, lifting his head from her breast and rubbing his cleanly shaved cheek across the flawless skin of her belly. "So beautiful."

The fever rising in her groin spread an aching desire throughout her hips and in response she gently pressed Randy's head lower. He responded and his lips moved until they met his hand as it rose over her joy. Her bikini was between his lips and their goal and his teeth moved to her hip to worry the knot free that bound the garment to his prize.

Unloosened, he drew it aside with his teeth and paused to gaze lovingly at his desire as she parted her legs and arched it feverishly toward his eager mouth. Hungrily, Randy crawled between her legs and further parted them, raising her knees and lowering his head into the burning tender flesh of her thighs.

"Randy. Randy," she cried weakly as he nursed a new nipple. "Randy, my love." Her mind was riveted to the consuming heat that was further fired by Randy's lust, but her eyes still followed the eagles as they circled higher. The trailing eagle, had she been aware, overtook the larger one and pecked its back between its wings.

"I want you, Randy. I want you." She grabbed his hair and gently drew him over her, he reluctantly leaving his labor of love. "I want you," she repeated, cupping his manliness between her palms and guiding it surely towards its goal.

"I want you, too." He positioned himself over her, allowing her to guide him to their mutual needs. Effortlessly, he entered her and she closed her thighs tightly about his hips and reveled in them as they rose powerfully and thrust home, sending her aquiver with ecstasies she had previously only dreamed of.

At times rhythmically. At times teasingly, he drew her to intoxicating heights. She soared with the eagles, wafting higher and higher on torrid currents of passion that made her giddy. Her fingers rose in tense little arches on his back, mirroring the tension that was growing and coiling in her groin.

Her movements grew urgent. She grasped about Randy's sweating back for a purchase from which to spring free, but she couldn't find it and thrashed even more with her arms and hips in frantic search for release.

"Oh, yes. Oh, yes," Randy moaned

He too was seeking release. It was too much. His need too great to delay. Wanda, at heights that frightened her, clutched his back for security and found it. Free of worry, free of the fear of losing herself, Wanda opened her eyes just as the larger eagle turned onto her back and was mounted by the trailing male.

Together, the eagles, Randy and Wanda fell weightlessly through time and in this freedom Wanda exploded in release. The coil sprang. Her hips arched and held in an ecstasy of delicious timelessness, of hopes fulfilled, of waking dreams. And she cried in joy as she had never cried before.

"Screeeeeeeeeeee."

Again, Randy didn't need to ask, but he did. "Is that better?"

"Oh, yes. Don't stop. Don't." Wanda had enveloped his chest with her arms , she was blowing excitedly into his ear and hair, and one humongous

Hindenburgerino rested on each of his shoulders. Their nearness caused Randy's mouth to gap like the doors of a giant dirigible hanger.

"More, Randy. More."

It would be more difficult this time, what with Wanda cooing about his head, even though the sound was often muffled by one of her bushel-sized pumpkins, but Randy bent to the task manfully:

Randy, who had been holding the lifeless water spout of the windmill, released it and began slowly to breast stroke across the tank to Wanda. But at mid point he stopped.

"Shss," he placed a finger to his lips. "Behind you."

Wanda turned slowly and saw, silhouetted on the hill behind her, an American pronghorn, an antelope. It stood motionless, looking at them. It knew they were there but it was apparently transfixed by the fact that people were in the cattle tank. It moved hesitantly a few paces laterally and stopped again, still not quite believing. After assuring itself that people were indeed in the tank, and that it would have to wait before drinking the spill at its sides, it loped over the hill and disappeared.

"Fat, wasn't he," Randy said and began breast stroking toward her again. "It's been a good spring." Wanda could tell in his eyes that he wasn't referring to the lush grass the antelope had been feeding on--she was the good spring.

As he reached her, he placed his arms on either side of her and grabbed the edge of the tank. She was trapped between him and the edge, and she surrendered easily. Finding herself so tenderly confined, she leaned forward and kissed him lightly on the lips.

Still with his hands on the edge and his feet braced against the tank's walls, Randy sought her lips as she retracted, found them and tasted them slowly but with a growing hunger.

As his passion mounted, he slid his lips down her throat and she lifted herself in the water to accommodate him as his mouth found her breasts, their light-brown areolae half submerged in the water. Wanda leaned back and thrust them, pointed and passionate, to his hungry orifice. As he drew one partially into his mouth, Wanda moaned and released her hold on the side of the tank to wrap his head in her arms.

Not expecting the extra weight, Randy's head and her arms slipped beneath the surface.

"What?" he came up sputtering. "I'm trying to make love to you, and you're trying to drown me."

"No, no," she assured him, wrapping her arms around his neck and consoling him with a shower of kisses across his dripping face. He had meanwhile gotten a firmer grip on the edge and could now easily support both their weights. Sensing the support, Wanda drew her legs up and wrapped them around his waist. Boldly, she snuggled into his warm body and began nibbling about his neck.

He responded by lowering his mouth to her shoulder.

"No," Wanda breathed. "This is for you. Just for you. I want to give only, to make love to you."

He nodded and closed his eyes.

Consciously at first, and with much calculation, Wanda moved her lips about the portion of his body that floated above the water. To maneuver better, she withdrew her legs from his waist and placed her feet on the outsides of his calves

for support. From this position she could easily move her hands about his body and she sought and found his firm buttocks and drew him to her. In doing so, she felt his hardening passion against her stomach and brought her hands around to encircle it and to stroke it.

Randy responded by tensing his body and thrusting his pelvis toward her.

"No," she admonished. "You don't move. Let me give you pleasure." Still holding his manhood, she removed her feet from his calves and closed the insides of her thighs on it. Then, she slipped her hands free and re-grasped his back with both arms. Seeking even more closeness, she slid her hands up over the back of his shoulders and rested her head on her left hand.

Aided by the water, she massaged his passion between her thighs, occasionally stroking and re-stroking its length with the nest of her desire. Growing excited herself at inflaming Randy's lust, Wanda raised her head and sought his mouth. Finding it, she dissolved into a blindness of pleasure and her legs floated up to again encircle Randy's waist. Floating in a pool of desire of her own, she sought the tip of his passion with her fiery nest and found it. Slowly, precisely, and with growing need, she lowered herself, working her body around his stiffened anticipation, enveloping it, drawing it in.

Randy whispered, "Wanda."

Slowly, agonizingly, she moved up and down its length. She was as free to move as she felt; Randy was trapped. He held them above the surface and she clung to him, a passionate animal peaking him to delicious heights. A gentle breeze rolled across the prairie and turned the windmill's wheel, causing a rhythmic thrust of the pump rod. Wanda matched its motion, thrusting downward on Randy's shaft as the pump rod probed the earth.

She continued the synchronized, rhythmic lovemaking until Randy's breath began to catch and the tendons on his neck tensed. Then she paused and waited, waited. Then, again, slowly, she resumed her thrusting, controlling and heightening his passion by listening to his breathing at her ear and the continued murmuring of her name.

Finally, melting, unable to control it any longer and giving into her own needs, she thrust madly and repeatedly, grinding into him with an urgency that brought cries of joy from Randy and caused her to stifle her own squeal of ecstasy by burying it in his neck.

As the heat of passion waned, love filling the departing sweet agony, she drew him ever closer. Of themselves, her eyes--pupils dilated--opened and she beheld the swollen brilliance of the full moon, rising with inexorable promise from the east.

Randy was going to ask if he had at last found the formula Wanda wanted, but the words were forced inarticulately from his mouth as she pulled him backward off the contour chair.

He saw the ceiling slid past his view to be replaced by two cumulonimbusarinos swelling promisingly in the heavens above him. Wanda nearly pulled him from the chair, leaving only his feet on the seat, and moved over him. As she lowered to her knees and spread her skirt over Randy's face, he realized, for the first time, that she was not wearing panties. He thrust his tongue forward and welcomed the nearing gift.

While Wanda moaned, Randy worked her moist button. Then, almost as an after thought, his hands slid slowly up her belly and found those brace of Mobies.

As he kneaded them and played tunes on their taut nipples, he wished, like Captain Ahab, he could be lashed to them forever.

Later, while Wanda still lay on the floor, sleeping tranquilly, the gigantic whales sounding at her side, Randy, with great effort, pulled himself back onto his contour chair and looked at the silent eye of his word processor. He took the mouse in his right hand, pulled down the menu under Edit, and erased all he had written. He had a new beginning for his story:

Wanda had a pair of big Bazoonarino Grandes, and Randy would do anything, say anything, or write anything to get his hands on them.

This was the cover story for the American Atheist Magazine of October 1988.

The Monster who was Mark Twain

In 1870 Joe Goodman, owner of the Virginia City, Nevada, *Enterprise*, traveled to Buffalo, New York, to visit his old drinking and carousing buddy, Sam Clemens. Though they had been separated a few years, Goodman felt he really knew his old friend. After all, it was he who had first allowed Clemens to use his

pen name--Mark Twain--in print. But what he found in the home of the newly married Clemens astounded him.

Not only was the formerly irreverent Mark Twain delivering grace before each meal, he was assembling the servants for a Bible reading and discussion each morning before breakfast. (1)

What the astonished Goodman discovered was what anyone learned who spent much time with Clemens. Samuel Langhorne Clemens was two men. He was Mark Twain, the self-educated, self-made, self-created, freethinking man, and he was Sam Clemens, the product of his time, his early training, and his mother's religious teachings.

To say he was an Atheist is only half correct. To say he was a theist is also half correct, but it was that half that tormented him his entire life, that saddled him with guilt, and that nearly smothered his humanity.

In short, while Mark Twain may have been an interestingly handsome man physically, he was a grotesque monster emotionally. And he knew it. He was never fully in control of who he might be at any time. When life flowed as beautifully as the spring-fed Mississippi on a clean morning, he was Mark Twain. But when life presented its snags, hidden sandbars, and low water, the frightened, uncertain, superstitious Sammy sought the apron strings of his mother's Presbyterianism.

Other writers, contemporaries of his, recognized this also. They knew something was holding him back, keeping him from becoming a less restrained personality. While his longtime friend, William Dean Howells, termed him "The Lincoln of our Literature," (2) Upton Sinclair was more perceptive when he wrote,

“Twain was the most repressed personality, the most completely cowed, shamed, and tormented great man in the history of letters.” (3)

Because of these two personalities, a reader coming to Mark Twain for the first time can find whatever he wants philosophically. Albert Bigelow Paine, in his monumental biography of the author, quoted Clemens as saying:

No one who thinks can imagine the universe made by chance. It is too nicely assembled and regulated. There is, of course, a great master mind. . . (4)

Paine, while recognizing the existence of the two Twains, chose to believe that Sam Clemens, the theist, was the true personality. In the biography he wrote: His belief in God, the creator, was absolute; but it was a God far removed from the Creator of his early teaching. (5)

As often as not, however, another personality emerged from his writing. In *The Mysterious Stranger*, written later in life and published after his death, first in a much truncated, bowdlerized edition and finally in its true form, Twain had the major character mouth what was obviously the author’s belief:

There is no God, no universe, no human race, no earthly life, no heaven, no hell. It is all a Dream, a grotesque and foolish dream. (6)

Not only could he be frank with readers, Mark Twain was cruelly honest at times about religious beliefs with friends and acquaintances. In 1885, the year *Huckleberry Finn* was published in the United States, Charles Warren Stoddard, a minor poet and onetime secretary to the author, wrote to tell Clemens of his joy at converting to Roman Catholicism and at finally feeling secure in his beliefs.

Clemens responded by writing:

I look back with the same shuddering horror upon the days when I believed I believed, as you do upon the days when you were afraid you did not believe. (7)

With his absolute best friend of thirty years, the Rev. Joseph Twichell, he was no less frank. On one of their tramps about Europe he said, “I don’t believe in your religion at all.” Later he added further insult by saying:

I don’t believe one word of your Bible was inspired by God any more than any other book. I believe it is entirely the work of man from beginning to end. . . (8)

But whatever his belief, he seldom forced it upon others. At times he actually encouraged others’ beliefs if those beliefs gave them comfort. Once, while eavesdropping on his daughter Jean during her bedtime prayers, he heard her ask for a pair of ponies and a cart. She even wanted them delivered by morning. Rather than disappoint her childish belief, Clemens began dressing to go out that very night to scour Hartford, Connecticut, for a pair of ponies and a cart. He was finally dissuaded by his wife Livy when she asked what he would do when his daughter prayed for something he couldn’t buy. (9)

He evidenced a similar consideration for his wife during her long illness. “Livy,” he said, “if it comforts you to lean on the Christian faith do so.” (10) When she was near death in Florence, he momentarily swallowed his doubts and told her, “I more believe in the immortality of the soul than misbelieve in it.” (11)

But that was for Livy on her deathbed. There was also the other Mark Twain. Had Joe Goodman hung around the Clemens’ home in Buffalo long enough, he would have witnessed the end of the grace saying and daily Bible readings.

“Livy,” the reemerging Mark Twain told his wife one morning, “you may keep this up if you want to, but I must ask you to excuse me from it. It is making me a hypocrite. I don’t believe in his Bible. It contradicts my reason. I

can't sit here and listen to it, letting you believe that I regard it, as you do, in the light of gospel, the word of God." (12)

Obviously Mark Twain was in agony regarding belief and disbelief. He wanted to be an Atheist, a materialist, a man moved by scientific principle. He often was such a man. And he often wasn't. Intellectually he was an Atheist; emotionally he was a believer. A graphic hint that he wanted to be a freethinker and admired freethinkers is found in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. All but two of the characters in that novel were ignorant, prejudiced, superstitious, or criminal. The two exceptions, David Wilson and York Leicester Driscoll, were the only two members of the town's Freethinkers' Society. (13)

Freethinking to Clemens meant science and to him science was beautiful. "The difference between that universe [as described in the Bible] and the modern one revealed by science is as the difference between a dust-flecked ray in a barn and the sublime arch of the Milky Way in the skies." (14)

Pudd'nhead Wilson may also reveal the origins of Mark Twain's two personalities. The Judge Driscoll and his wife characterized in this novel were probably modeled after his own parents. Mark Twain's father, John Clemens, who died at forty-eight when Sam was not yet twelve, was almost certainly a freethinker, and like Driscoll, was also a judge. Jane Clemens, Sam's mother, was most definitely a Presbyterian, as was Mrs. Driscoll in the novel. Two such philosophies under one roof would create a tension easily discernible to a quick-witted, bright blue-eyed little boy.

Though Mr. Clemens died too early to have had serious philosophical discussions with his son, Mark Twain was observant and probably read his father's character quite accurately. The few words that were exchanged in his parents'

loveless households, first in Florida, Missouri, and lastly in Hannibal, would have revealed an emotionless man who believed in the law, hard work and scientific determinism. What trappings of religion he did display were only those necessary for the performance of his job in a nearly lawless frontier society.

While the character of Mark Twain's father is open to conjecture, no doubts remain as to his mother's beliefs. Clemens' biographer wrote that her religion was of that clean-cut, strenuous kind which regards as necessary institutions of Hell and Satan. . . . (15)

Occasionally, she visited a farmer's wife who cured patients by laying on of hands. (16) She also attended camp meetings, prayed for the devil (he was surrounded by such poor society), (17) and suspected those with creative impulses.

This suspicion surely caused her concern since she had a son who would rather sit up in bed and dramatically recount the day's events than say his evening prayers.

If what Mark Twain put into *Pudd'nhead Wilson* revealed the origins of his muddled beliefs, what he took *out* illustrates his lifelong struggle to reconcile those divergent philosophies or to cast one from him. Mark Twain's struggle to be a believer and an Atheist simultaneously is pictured in the character(s) of Luigi and Angelo Capello. They (or it) were Siamese twins.

This monster, representing Mark Twain and Sam Clemens, was a creature with two legs, a single body, four arms, and two heads. One head, Luigi, was a freethinker, drinker, and smoker; the other head, Angelo, was a Methodist who abstained from both liquor and tobacco. Obviously, when Angelo went to the temperance hall, Luigi had to attend, and when Luigi visited a smoke-filled tavern, Angelo had to suffer. If Luigi swallowed a tumbler of whiskey, Angelo took a pill

to keep from getting a headache. He suffered for Luigi's debauchery while Luigi felt nothing. Angelo got back at Luigi, however, when he decided to be baptized to total immersion. Sputtering and coughing, Luigi nearly drowned. At night, when they settled down to read, Luigi would read Paine's *Age of Reason* and Angelo his *Whole Duty of Man*.

The whole affair proved too comic and silly for Mark Twain, and he extracted the twins from *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and relegated them, monsters that they were, to an appendix to the novel. It wasn't as easy, however, for Clemens to handle the personality split within himself. While the Siamese twins took turns, week by week, controlling their single pair of legs, Mark Twain often stumbled through life because his single pair of legs was driven by two minds. The ultimate solution Clemens gave the twins was one he could not give himself but often wished for in later life--death. In the twins' tale, Luigi got into trouble and was hanged. Angelo, of course, went along for the ride.

By choosing Luigi, the freethinking, smoking imbiber, to commit the fatal crime, Mark Twain revealed the unkindest canker of his mother's religious teachings--guilt. He suffered guilt pangs his entire life. He was often prostrate, paralyzed by guilt. Just as Angelo had suffered death for Luigi's transgressions, Clemens felt the world suffered for his.

In his *Autobiography* he wrote of witnessing many violent deaths. He saw two playmates drown, a slave killed by a blow to the head, a man shot, another fatally knifed. On another occasion he handed a box of Lucifer matches through the barred window of the Hannibal jail only to watch the prisoner immolate himself before his eyes. At four he watched his sister Margaret die of bilious fever. Three

years later his brother Benjamin died. His brother Henry suffered an agonizing death following a steamboat explosion.

Clemens knew why these deaths occurred. He even knew why buddy Tom Nast fell through the ice on the Mississippi, contracted scarlet fever, and went permanently deaf.

My teaching and training enabled me to see deeper into these tragedies than an ignorant person could have done,
he wrote in his *Autobiography*.

I knew what they were for. I tried to disguise it from myself but down in the secret deeps of my troubled heart I knew--and I *knew* I knew. They were inventions of Providence to beguile me to a better life. (18)

The young Mark Twain was terrified of Providence. It was after him. When the man he later characterized as Injun Joe in *Tom Sawyer* was buried, the community was tormented by thunder and lightning. Clemens said that as a boy he was sure the devil was coming for the dead man's soul and prayed in terror for his own. The young author-to-be was so terrified by hell and god in his youth that he considered becoming a minister. "It was the most earnest ambition I ever had," he said. "Not that I ever really wanted to be a preacher, but because it never occurred to me that a preacher could be damned. It looked like a safe job." (19)

The guilt and fear he cowered under as a boy followed the author to the end. he was so sure that his actions necessarily affected the cosmos that he just knew he was responsible for the deaths of his son, two daughters, and wife as well as the incidental deaths of friends and acquaintances. The death of his premature and sickly son, Langedon, shows to what extremes he would go to assume blame. While sleigh riding with his son, he absentmindedly allowed the baby's feet to

become uncovered. It was a small incident. Even so, Clemens admitted to a murder. “Yes,” he told his friend Howells, “I killed him.” His guilty conscience would not permit reason. It made his common sense jump through progressively higher and smaller hoops until it failed. The baby *did* die, but it did not die that winter of pneumonia. It died the following June of diphtheria. (20)

Clemens knew this conscience of his was a strange and sick animal. Occasionally he took it out, belittled it and ridiculed it, but it always crawled back and reattached itself to his logic center. Once he said of his conscience: *I would trade mine for the small-pox and seven kinds of consumption, and be glad of the chance.* (21)

And he knew where it come from, too.

Mine was a trained Presbyterian conscience and knew but one duty--to hurt and harry its slave upon all pretexts and on all occasions, particularly when there was no sense no reason in it. (22)

Mark Twain placed this same conscience into Huck in *Huckleberry Finn*. After an innocuous adventure Huck said:

I warn't feeling so brash as I was before but kind of ornery, and humble, and to blame, somehow--though I hadn't done nothing. But that's always the way; it don't make no difference whether you do right or wrong, a person's conscience ain't got no sense, and just goes for him anyway. (23)

Clemens said he would trade his conscience for smallpox. Huck said: *If I had a yaller dog that didn't know no more than a person's conscience does, I would pison him. It takes up more room than all the rest of a person's insides* [Mark Twain originally wrote “bowels”], *and yet ain't no good, nohow.* (24)

Though he knew the source of his sick conscience, he never blamed the person who helped to mold its monstrous being. But what he did announce was that it was not his own, though he was bridled by it through life. It could not have attached itself, and he would not have bridled himself. It was trained into him; it became second nature to him before he was even mature enough to question it. It came from nightly prayers, school prayers, and motherly admonitions. It came from being forced to kneel beside his father's coffin and promise, on the dead man's soul, to be good. It came from the seemingly intelligent adults around him. By the time he knew what had happened it was too late. Values learned early are broken only by the first shovel of dirt on the coffin. Hank Morgan in *Connecticut Yankee* learned his lesson in his attempt to move the people in King Arthur's times from superstition to science. He might have succeeded, but the Roman Catholic church had been there first and the peasants had been *trained*. "Training--training is everything;" Hank complained when he couldn't get them to accept anything but magic:

Training is all there is to a person. We speak of nature; it is folly; there is no such thing as nature; what we call by this misleading name is merely heredity and training. (25)

To show the power of the church over the minds of its people, MarkTwain had Hank Morgan try to retrain the peasants. If they seemed to have functioning minds, Hank sent them to his "man factories." In the final battle between Hank's reasoning science and the church's dogmatic superstition, Hank found that his hundreds of soldiers had deserted him when the church called an Interdiction, a refusal to perform such services as baptism and burial. Instead of hundreds of

soldiers, Hank had fifty-two boys. “Why did you select boys?” Hank asked Clarence, his chief lieutenant. “Because,” Clarence replied:

All the others were born in an atmosphere of superstition and reared in it. It is in their blood and bones. We imagined we had educated it out of them; they thought so too; the Interdict woke them up like a thunderclap! It revealed them to themselves. . . (26)

MarkTwain explained in a later work why he could never shake his guilty conscience or his early training. He is talking here about belief in the authorship of Shakespeare’s writing, but says:

. . . I am aware that when even the brightest mind in our world has been trained up from childhood in a superstition of any kind, it will never be possible for that mind, in its maturity, to examine sincerely, dispassionately, and conscientiously any evidence or any circumstance which shall seem to cast a doubt upon the validity of that superstition. I doubt if I could do it myself. (27)

Even though Mark Twain could never shake the silliness washed into him as a child, one of his characters did escape. That was the triumphant Huckleberry Finn. It is for this victory--not the supposed racism or delinquency--that some parents and organizations petition schools to remove the book from their reading lists. The book sets a *bad* example. What the young Huck did was to reject the superstition and ignorance of his society and to opt, instead, for reason. A terrifying precept, indeed, for parents trying to instill into their children an unquestioned dogma.

Huck’s transgression against society involved slavery. In helping Jim escape, he was violating the codes and beliefs of 1849 Missouri; he was flouting the dogma delivered from every pulpit in the state--that slavery was sanctioned by god; and he was ignoring the biblical lessons administered by the well-meaning Widow

Douglas. Because of this, Huck was positive his soul was damned to hell. He was terrified and sought solace in prayer, but it didn't work. He noticed, in his agony, that his conscience bothered him no matter what he did. If he turned Jim in as a runaway, his conscience would bother him. If he didn't and continued to hide Jim, his conscience still nettled him.

At this point in the novel Huck reaches a decision that makes him the most triumphant character in American fiction. In an effort to do what he has been taught is right, he pens a letter to Miss Watson, Jim's owner, telling where her slave can be found. He didn't want to do this, but his Christian conscience was goading him. But, the human side in Huck was growing:

I took it [the letter] up, and held it in my hand. I was trembling, because I'd got to decide, for ever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself: "All right, then, I'll go to hell"--and tore it up. (28)

There can be no doubt that Mark Twain knew what he was doing. He was setting Huck free, giving him an unfettered mind, allowing him to escape the guilty conscience the author, himself, never lost. As Clemens said years after writing the novel, *Huckleberry Finn* was "...a book of mine where a sound heart and a deformed conscience come into collision and the conscience suffers defeat." (29)

In Mark Twain's personal battle for freedom, he lost. Yes, he lost, but he did so with that duplicity that marked his character and his writings. Almost his last comment on the matter of the hereafter seemed to issue from two mouths--from first the freethinker's and lastly from the trained Presbyterian's. "I have never seen what to me seemed an atom of proof that there is a future life," Mark Twain's

biographer wrote. Then, after that characteristic pause, Samuel Clemens added, “And yet--I am strongly inclined to expect one.” (30)

Had he been able to become one or the other--an Atheist or a theist--he would have been a happier man. But no one would have heard of the name Mark Twain.

Notes

1. Albert Bigelow Paine, *Mark Twain, a Biography* (New York: Chelsea House: 1980), p. 441.
2. John Steelye, *Mark Twain in the Movies* (Viking Press: New York, 1977), p. 48.
3. Michael Patrick Hearn, ed, *The Annotated Huckleberry Finn* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1981), p. 37.
4. Paine, *Biography*, p. 1353.
5. Ibid., p. 1582.
6. Mark Twain, *The Mysterious Stranger* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p. 405.
7. Justin Kaplan, *Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966), p. 327.
8. Paine, *Biography*, p. 631.
9. Mary Lawton, *A Lifetime with Mark Twain* (as told by Katy Leary) New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1925), p. 43.
10. Paine, *Biography*, p. 631.
11. Kaplan, *Clemens & Twain*, p. 369.
12. Paine, *Biography*, p. 411.
13. Mark Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co., 1968), p. 70.
14. Paine, *Biography*, p. 412.
15. Ibid., p. 36.
16. Charles Neider, ed., *The Outrageous Mark Twain* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), p. 205.
17. Paine, *Biography*, p. 36.
18. Mark Twain, *The Autobiography of Mark Twain* (New York: Perennial Library, 1975), p. 45.
19. Paine, *Biography*, p. 84.
20. Kaplan, *Clemens & Twain*, p. 149.

21. Hearn, *Annotated Huckleberry Finn*, p. 155.
22. Twain, *Autobiography*, p. 155.
23. Hearn, *Annotated Huckleberry Finn*, p. 301.
24. Ibid., p. 301.
25. Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (New York: Signet Classic, 1963), p. 114.
26. Ibid., p. 300.
27. Neider, *Outrageous*, p. 181.
28. Hearn, *Annotated Huckleberry Finn*, p. 285.
29. Kaplan, *Clemens & Twain*, p. 198.
30. Paine, *Biography*, p. 1431.

Yankee took the first couple hundred words of this for its April 1990 issue.

Mark Twain's Furry Royalty

Even though she was only thirteen when she wrote a biography of her famous father, Mark Twain's daughter, Susy, was as perceptive about the world renowned author as any of his subsequent chroniclers. "The difference between papa and mama," she wrote, "is that mama loves morals and papa loves cats."

This worship of cats began with Mark Twain's boyhood in Hannibal, Missouri, and continued for more than seventy years until his death in the mansion he had built in Redding, Connecticut. He was never without cats, even when he

traveled. In a pinch, he would rent kittens from neighbors and then treat them as visiting royalty.

Although Susy's punctuation could drive an English teacher to distraction, one of the word pictures of her father is especially endearing and telling: "Papa is very fond of animals particularly of cats, we had a dear little gray kitten once that he named Lazy (papa always wears gray to match his hair and eyes) and he would carry him around on his shoulder, it was a mighty pretty sight! The cat sound asleep against papa's gray coat and hair."

This fascination with cats probably began with Twain's mother whose sense of pity for animals was inconsistent if not perverse. She refused even to kill a fly and would punish cats for killing mice. Once she stepped from a wooden sidewalk into a muddy St. Louis street to stop a teamster from beating his mud-wearied horse.

In Hannibal she fed stray cats and, consequently, "We had nineteen cats at one time, in 1845," Twain wrote. "And there wasn't one in the lot that had any merit...."

But it probably was not his mother's feeding of strays that molded Twain's later concern for cats: it was what she did with the resultant excess of kittens. She drowned them, lowering them one at a time into a dishpan, but not before warming the water to lessen the shock. Twain never wrote of these drownings though he must have witnessed, or at least known about, them. For a man who meticulously recorded the events of his childhood, this silence is telling.

Even with the drownings, cats by the legions appeared around Twain's home in Hannibal, and he had his favorite. Albert Bigelow Paine, in his monumental biography of the author wrote that Twain "had indeed a genuine passion for cats." Each summer Mark would travel about forty miles to his uncle's farm in Florida,

Missouri, but he didn't travel alone. "...he never failed to take his cat in a basket," Paine wrote. "When he ate, it sat in a chair beside him at the table."

Significantly, the first humorous yarn Twain is known to have spun concerned a cat. Jim Wolfe, a fellow printer's apprentice in Hannibal, tried to shoo a noisy cat off the snow-covered porch roof of the Twain home on Hill Street. Instead, he slipped on the snow, scooted down the roof, and fell into the middle of a taffy-pulling party below. These bare facts no doubt gained in the telling, especially when delivered in Mark's slow, drawling speech.

The only misuse of cats by Twain also appears about this time. In the novel *Adventures of Tom Sawyer* it is Tom who gave the cat Peter the painkiller intended for him and who then watched Peter race about the kitchen. This incident was based on real life and the culprit was Mark Twain himself. Also, *Huckleberry Finn* is introduced to literature in this novel, and, much to the horror of cat lovers, he appears to posterity swinging a dead cat by the tail. The purpose of the cat was to help rid Huck of warts. It was this dead cat that led Tom and Huck to the cemetery where they witnessed Injun Joe's murder of Dr. Robinson. A dog, though a fine creature, simply wouldn't serve.

It's not surprising that Twain placed cats in *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*. He was surrounded by them as he wrote those novels. Most of his early writing was accomplished at his sister-in-law's home, Quarry Farm, on a hill above Elmira, New York.

Katy Leary, the Twain family housekeeper for thirty years, said the author was inundated by cats at Quarry Farm. "There was one summer that they had eleven cats up there at the farm," Katy said. "Mr. Clemens (Twain), you know, was so crazy about cats that he'd stop anything--even his writing, to speak to a cat."

"He used to have them cats right in a chair in front of him when he was walking up and down," Katy said, "and he used to talk to them--and I declare I think they knew everything he said."

Some of the cats that season at the farm were named Deuteronomy, Genesis, and Fannie. His favorite, according to his daughter Susy, was a tortoise-shell kitten named Sour Mash. "Papa's great care now is Sour Mash," she wrote, still using her indifferent spelling, "and he will come way down from his studdy on the hill to see how she is getting along."

During a prolonged stay at a rented home on Fifth Avenue in New York City, Twain brought along a little cat named Bambino. He had borrowed it from his daughter Clara. Katy, who was still tending house, said, "He used to have this kitten up in his room at the Fifth Avenue house, and he taught it to put out the light, too."

According to Katy, "Bambino would jump on the bed, look at Mr. Clemens to see if he was through with the light, and when Mr. Clemens would bow twice to him, he'd jump over on to the table quick, and put his little paw right on the lamp."

The problem with Bambino began when he became lost. In answer to an advertisement for the missing Bambino, lines of people showed up with all descriptions of cats under their arms. They knew the cats weren't Twain's; they just wanted to meet the author.

When Katy later found Bambino, Twain advertised the fact, but it did no good. People still knocked at his door hoping to show him a cat--one they had probably borrowed.

The most famous "cat-renting" episode occurred in Dublin, New Hampshire, in 1906, four years before Twain's death. Paine, who had gone to the Mount

Monadnock retreat to be with Twain and to work on the author's official biography, said "He didn't wish to own them (kittens), for then he would have to leave them behind uncared-for, so he preferred to rent them and pay sufficiently to insure their subsequent care."

The kittens Twain rented this trip were Sackcloth and Ashes. Actually there were three kittens, but two were identical. They went under the joint name of Ashes and didn't seem to mind.

Even if Twain was in the midst of dictation, Paine said, he would stop to tend to his kittens. "Once, as he was about to enter the screen door that led into the hall, two kittens ran up in front of him and stood waiting. With grave politeness he opened the door, made a low bow, and stepped back and said: 'Walk in, gentlemen. I always give precedence to royalty.'"

In one of his novels, *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, Twain suggested that human monarchs be removed and cats put in their place. The Twain-like protagonist in this novel wrote that "as rule the character of these cats would be considerably above the character of the average king, and this would be an immense moral advantage to the nation, for the reason that a nation always models its morals after its monarch's."

In his final years Twain built a huge home in Redding, Connecticut. This small palace, which he named Stormfield after one his short story characters, had nearly everything including its own acetylene lighting plant and 100-ton ice-house. He took almost no interest in its construction, leaving that to his eminently capable secretary and girl Friday, Isabel Lyon.

Almost the only direction he gave Isabel was to furnish the house with cats. "I don't want to see it until the cat is purring on the hearth," he told her.

Three kittens were found. They were Sinbad, Danbury, and Billiards. Mark Twain was delighted. "No matter what he was doing," Paine wrote of Twain, "let Danbury appear in the offing and he was observed and greeted with due deference, and complimented and made comfortable."

"There were never too many cats at Stormfield," Paine observed, "and the 'hearth' included the entire house, even the billiard-table."

Now billiards was a serious sport for Twain. He called it the best sport in the world. Even so, as Paine noted, when any of the kittens "would decide to hop up and play with the balls, or sit in the pockets and grab at them as they went by, the game simply added this element of chance...."

From birth to death Mark Twain was seldom far from a cat. Whatever distance there was could usually be spanned simply by the author's bending slightly at the waist, extending his arm, and reaching out to pet an appreciative, furry head.

Twain probably summed up his regard for cats when he wrote "A home without a cat--and a well-fed, well-petted and properly revered cat--may be a perfect home, perhaps, but how can it prove title?"

As the sun was setting on April 21, 1910, Mark Twain exhaled his last breath. Though he had only lived briefly at Stormfield, it was his home and he had proof. Somewhere about the house--perhaps beneath a chair or on a forbidden counterpane--Sinbad, Danbury, and Billiards, napped contentedly.

Didn't No Body Read My Book?

By H. B. Finn

(with Mack Hitch)

You don't know about me, without you have read my book by the name of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, but that ain't no matter. What matters is that you probably ain't read my book. And that rankles me.

You think you know bout me, but you don't. Most of you only know about me from the movies. And believe me, the difference between the movies and my book is the difference between waking up in a bed and waking up on a pile of crisp leaves beside the Mississippi and listening to the birds just a goin' it.

One's the lightning and the other's just a lightning bug. If you don't know which is which, just stop reading now for I'm commencing to say something in English, and by-and-by you might fetch up on a word you don't know.

I wouldn't be here at all, putting my fingers to this here Macintosh Plus, if it weren't for the fellow who gets part of the writing credit for this here paper. His name is Mr. Mack Hitch and he's middling pushy. I was just fixing to go fishin' when he stops me--offered me a factory-rolled cigarette actually--and asked me if I wanted to watch some movies, movies made about my book.

He said he wanted to know which movie I thought was tolerable close to my book. That's the one he was going to show his class, he said. When I pestered him to know why he wanted to show a movie in a book-learning literature class, he just flushed up red like my Pap's face when he was drinking heavy and said nothing.

At first it didn't sound like too much work--you know me and work--so I reckoned I'd risk it. That was upwards to thirteen hours ago. That fool's got every movie ever made of my book. Long time ago I told Miss Watson that I wanted to go to hell. What I meant was that I wanted to be anywheres but with her. After watching them movies, I'm going to be more particular about what I say. I'm afraid now that if I go to the bad place they'll make me watch them again.

It was a low-down mean trick Mr. Mack Hitch pulled on me, but after I survived the movies I told him which movie I'd show my students if I was a teacher. I told him I wouldn't show any of the movies no how. I'd make 'em read the book. Heck, I wrote it, and I'm just a kid, so why can't kids my own age read it? Mr. Mack Hitch seemed in a considerable tight place on that question, too.

But that warn't good enough for him, and he kept pestering me for more. He wanted to know why. I think what he asked for were "concrete specifics." So here goes. I'll just take them first to last, just as they come. Kind of the way my book is put together.

In the first movie I saw I was played by this actor named Mickey Rooney. I liked him tolerably well. He's just about as ugly as me, and he can smoke and swim like he come to it natural. The only real trouble with this movie is that the fellows what put it together never fetched up to my book at all. They never read it. They just must have listened to somebody talk who *did* read it.

And there's some considerable stretchers in it. They forgot that me and Tom Sawyer found that \$12,000. They think Pap came back to sell me to the widow for \$800. That's why the widow and her sister are going to sell Jim--so's they can buy me. Now ain't that a caution?

According to this here movie, the real reason I ran away was because I warn't going to be promoted in school. I was about as much concerned about school as a fly on a bloated cow's body is concerned about etticut. The guys what wrote this movie was idiots, genuwine idiots. Instead of having me kill a pig and spread its blood around during my escape, those dumb writers had me pour a bottle of some kinda sauce over everything. The sheriff and men in Petersburg may be dumb, but they ain't as dumb as them writers.

And for another thing, they made Jim look low and mean. He warn't no way. Them writers had Jim ask me if I'd go back to Petersburg if I knew my Pap was dead. I said I would. Well, Jim had already seen Pap's body, and those writers made him keep his mouth shut. Jim warn't that way. He'd a told me the truth.

Another meddlesome thing them writers did, this time to me, was have me, instead of the King, play the part of Juliet in the Duke's play. The funny thing about that play was the old King was playing Juliet. Now that was funny. And then to make it worse, them writers have the audience think they'd been sold when they find out it's me. Shucks, women didn't act on the stage back then. The audience woulda been surprised if Juliet warn't played by a boy. Them writers is dangersome dumb?

There's a whole passel of problems with this movie, but I ain't got that much time. The real corker came at the end. Somehow I pilot a riverboat back to Petersburg and get there just in time to save Jim from a hanging. How all this

came about is just too ridiculous to line out here. Anyways, at the very end the Widow promises to let Jim free. This was confusing enough to me because she didn't own him. Miss Watson did. But that's no matter. She said she'd let him go free if I agreed to go to school, stop smoking, and wear shoes. Now I'm a liberal body, but they was taking a powerful chance I might say "no."

I was really in a sweat while watching the next movie. It was so singular, I was a full fifteen minutes into it before I realized it was supposed to be *my* book. All of these movies have pretty much the same name, meaning my name, but to help you avoid this one I'll tell you who was in it. Brock Peters, a nice enough fellow, played Jim. He warn't nothing like Jim though. The Duke and the King are played by Larry Storch and Forrest Tucker. I didn't get the names of the guys what played Tom and me. I reckon they paid so their names wouldn't be used.

This movie stinks more than a string of week-old catfish. For starters it begins with a scene in a graveyard. That was in another book. That one was by Mr. Mark Twain, and it was named for a buddy of mine. You remember Tom.

One thing in this movie is flat beyond belief. It has me and Jim wearing the two halves of a lucky penny. It was lucky because a Southern Pacific train had squashed it. Not only were there no Southern Pacific trains around Petersburg, there were no rails at all. What did them writers think the steamboats were used for. I got Mr. Mack Hitch to look it up, and he told me the name Southern Pacific wasn't even coined until 1878. That's close on to 30 years after I went down the river. And, the Southern Pacific never did go through Petersburg. I think it was the Cotton Belt or something like that.

If you think that is bad, you ain't seen nothing. The end of this movie is enough to make one toss his victuals. Instead of Tom getting shot, I'm the one that

gets shot in the leg. Now I already knew that the guys what wrote this movie hadn't read my book, but I didn't know where they had gotten some of the story, you know, my name and Jim's name and the fact that it was near the Mississippi River.

Well, the answer to that finally struck me. In this movie, when I went to Petersburg disguised as a girl, I fell backwards through this door and there was the woman I got the information from. Somehow I'd seen this before. The scene was identical to one in that Mickey Rooney movie. The guys what wrote this movie never read my book. They just watched the Mickey Rooney movie.

I did feel sympathy for something in this movie though. It was the little steamboat that kept puffing up and down in the background. It was the same boat every time. That poor little *Julia Belle Swain* had to pretend to be the whole Mississippi River. I guess you could call this a one-boat movie.

One movie that really had me on briars was a CBS-TV *Climax* show from Sept. 1, 1955. It was done live--live television--and the stage had water and all. And the backgrounds moved so's to make the actors look like they was moving. I was just waiting for one of the actors to forget his lines or for someone to fall into the water. I was having such a good time it was a half hour before I ciphered out that the writers had left Jim out of the movie. I most wished I was dead when this struck me. What these movies was doing to Jim was worse than slavery. As near as I could figure, the writers had read the last chapter of Mr. Mark Twain's book *Tom Sawyer* and just kind of imagined everything from there. No one who saw this movie could think for a minute that the writers had even held my book. If it had a fetched up along side them in a library or somewheres, they would probably have tried to hit it with a stick.

Another movie I saw starred Ron Howard as me. Not only is this guy about 180 pounds and me only 120, and that's when I'm carrying a string of catfish, but he has wholesome written all over his face. This fellow looks as if he could take up a collection for the widows and orphans' fund and actually give them the money. Shucks, I'd give it to them too, but I'd take something out for my troubles first.

There's other things strange about this movie, not the least of which Tom is left-handed. And get this, Jim talks about Captain Hook, you know of Peter Pan fame. That book wasn't written until 1904. I think the guys what wrote this movie fell out of those other guys' Southern Pacific train and landed on their heads.

And where the heck are the Grangerfords and the feud. They and the Shepherdsons weren't in this movie or any of the others I've seen so far. Also, why didn't I get to dress up as a girl in this movie? Kids always like that part best.

Something else that has bothered me about these movies is that when they do mention the Wilks family and the Duke and King's rascality in selling off the whole property, they always leave out the third girl--the hair-lip. They never forget Mary Jane and her red hair and sometimes they have Susan, but they never show Joanner, the hair-lip. I can't help it if she was hair-lipped. It was common enough back then. What I'd like to know is where are all the hair-lips hiding now?

There's only one spot in this movie I like. During the burial of Mr. Wilks, a dog was giving a rat what for down in the cellar. I had something like that in my book, and the undertaker eased down during the ceremony and took care of it. I like those little details.

The last movie Mr. Mack Hitch made me watch was one that was first shown on the PBS American Playhouse. This was the best of the litter, but that ain't saying much. Not only did he make me watch the four-hour version as it was

shown on television, he made me watch the two-hour version put out by MCA. He said it was because he smooched the four-hour version off TV and it wasn't legal. The shorter one he actually paid for and could show to his class and not worry about the principal calling him into her office.

Right from the muzzle, I'd like to tell you about the kid what played me, Patrick Day. He acts real good, but he's way too purty. Now I'm not saying I'm down right mud-fence homely, but little kids did poke their faces into their mother's skirts when I came around. Generally, the boys in Petersburg didn't pay much attention to me until they got old enough to smoke, seven or so. Then they most wished I was their particular buddy.

If I'd a looked like this Patrick Day fellow, I wouldn't have been able to walk down the street without little old ladies running out from their yards and pinching my cheek. They'd have filled me so full of victuals I couldn't a got around Petersburg without the boys hauling me about in a wheelbarrow.

The guys what wrote this movie didn't read my book either. Apparently no one has read it, so they just thought they could put anything in they wanted to, what ever came to hand easiest. For instance, they didn't know that I had that \$6,000 bringing in a dollar a day interest. That's six percent, you know. They thought Pap came back to 'prentice me out to earn drinking money for him. Pap was a mean, evil, no count reprobate, but he warn't mean enough to put me to work. He knew the evil of that.

Another example to show they never read my book is the fellow they got to play Pap. He's a bully enough actor, but he looks about 35 or so. I plainly wrote that Pap was 50 and looked like a hard drinking 50. Course I wrote that book in English and that may be the problem.

And anyway, where did they get away with having Pap take a pistol and threaten the Widow Douglas while all the town was gawking around? I didn't write that. If that wasn't enough, they wrote the movie so's that Jim comes out and stands between Pap and the Widow. There's two reason that would never have happened. First off, Jim wasn't dumb enough to do that, and second off, if he had of, Pap would a shot him.

All the writers of these movies don't know the characters they're moving around either. It's kind of like little kids with a colorin' book. You know, red trees and purple suns and black skies. They do attract attention, but they ain't right. One thing they did get right in this movie, though, is that they used the word *nigger*. Not upwards of enough times, but the other movies didn't use it at all. Heck, I used it all the time when I was little. Everyone did. It means slave. Don't everybody know that? But even though they used the word now and then, they cleaned up Jim's language considerable. And they made him smarter. Jim had a good head, but he warn't book learned. I showed that when we talked about King Solomon. Just because Jim wasn't smart didn't mean he didn't have a good heart. Folks have to remember that it was again the law to teach a nigger to read and write. And they had to keep off the streets after nine at night. It warn't easy being a slave, even in Petersburg. Jim was Jim and that's all there was too it. These movie writers keep trying to make him be like they want him to be, not like he was.

But that's never no matter mind. There's other things in this movie that are singular. First off it is set in 1844. It was really 1848 or 1849. I forget which. Another thing is that the writers can't keep their stories straight. They have me going to my own funeral. That was in Tom Sawyer's book. And when I dressed up

like a girl, I went to a lady who just arrived in Petersburg and who lived at the edge of town. I knew my getup wasn't very good, and anyone who knew me would recognize me. So where do the movie writers put the scene? Right smack on the main street dock in broad daylight is where.

I'm still miserableness all over yet about the crazy scenes they threw into the movie. They leave out Jim getting bit by a snake, but they add in an abolitionist getting hanged. Then they steal a chapter out of Mr. Mark Twain's Mississippi River book and put it in the movie. That's where I meet the raft men and hear the ghost story and get painted blue. It's a fair enough story, but it ain't mine. To make the whole thing look ever dumber, they move the scene to the riverbank instead of putting it on a timber raft where it happened.

I asked Mr. Mack Hitch why they left so much of my book out and added in so much of other folks' books. He said it was probably because of some of the experts hired to help make the movie look real. Two of them were Hamlin Hill and Justin Kaplan, I think. Mr. Mack Hitch said they was just probably showing off, letting everyone know they had read another book.

One part of this movie that went through me like a shot was when they made Jim look bad. In this movie he says he didn't tell me Pap was dead because he was afraid I'd leave him on Jackson's Island. These writers can't keep their directions straight. One minute they're trying to make Jim look smarter than he is, and the next they're trying to make him look selfish and mean.

But what really got me about this movie was that they left out the Wilks story. You know, the one with that pretty Mary Jane. Instead they threw in some bumpology hogwash about the Duke reading my head and pushing needles into my

arm. I think I put a sentence or two in about the bumpology somewheres, but I put in six whole chapters about the Wilks.

I've been blubbering enough. Now I'm going to say something tolerably good about this movie. The best part of any of the movies I've seen was the Grangerford and Shepherdson feud. And was it done bully. The writers must have read those chapters because they got the crockery animals and the clock and the house fixtures all in the movie. And they got Col. Grangerford and his genteel ways right down to his clothes. What was really good was that they got in Emmeline Grangerford's charcoal drawings, particularly the one with six arms, and they got in that beautiful poem of hers about little Stevie Botts. I most cried over that one.

Another good part was the little church the Grangerfords and Shepherdsons went to. When I went back to get Sophia's Testament, there was pigs in the church, just like in my book. I already told you how much I like those little touches. The problem, though, is that MCA didn't put this bully scene in the two-hour movie. What I want to know is how they could do such a fine, crisp job on this part of my book and trash the rest. Different writers, I suppose.

The ending of this movie wasn't like what I wrote, but that's no never mind. I didn't like that ending either. That was Tom's bookie foolishness. But my book is the way it happened, though, so they might just as well have done it. They had four hours after all.

Another part of this movie that left me a-howling was the Duke and the King. These fellows was more than middling good. They was peachy. Those two actors had those rapsallions down to a nubbin. It's just a shame the writers didn't cut 'em loose and let 'em do my book.

But now, back to the reason I'm writing this. As I says before, if I was to show one of these movies to a bunch of students who couldn't read, I wouldn't. But I would show them the Grangerford-Shepherdson feud in the MCA movie. I might show them a little bit of the Duke and the King, especially the part where we go to the camp-meeting in Bricksville.

Another thing I'd do is to show them a movie that Mr. Mark Twain wrote. That one's called *Life on the Mississippi*. That movie has the river right down to the bullfrogs. And the steamboat looks real, though the smoke coming out of the stacks is awful white instead of the black it should be.

Before I strike out for my fishin' hole, I gotta say I was powerful disappointed with all the movies I saw. I wish some day they would make a movie of *my* book. And when they do I want them to look me up so's I can help them get it right. They know where to find me.

I'm in *The Book*.

(H.B. Finn is a night watchman at the Mark Twain Birthplace Shrine in Mark Twain State Park and an occasional proofreader for *The Twainian* published in nearby Perry, Mo.)

Mark Twain Afloat

One summer afternoon in the early 1840's two slaves pulled the limp, slender body of a white boy from a local swimming hole and carried it home to his mother. She took the pallid, unpromising body and plied it with Mullein tea and castor oil. Eventually, the home remedy worked and the boy sat up and smiled weakly. That was the first time Mark Twain nearly drowned.

Though the future author of *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* would become the best young swimmer in Hannibal, Missouri, his "sink or swim" learning method nearly resulted in his death *eight* more times and did result in the drownings of two of his swimming companions.

In spite of this horrible learning method, the author in later years could joke about these tragedies. "It was usual for one or two of our lads to get drowned in the Mississippi or Bear Creek [each year]," he said, "but I was pulled out in a two-thirds drowned condition nine times before I learned to swim and was considered to be a cat in disguise."

For the young Mark and his buddies the best swimming hole was usually not found in the Mississippi but in the much smaller Bear Creek which joined the

larger river at the edge of Hannibal. "I used to get drowned in it every summer regularly," Twain wrote, "and be drained out, and inflated and set going again by some chance enemy."

Most of these *enemies* who rescued the young Twain remain nameless. One, however, is alive in history. He was Neal Champ, a slave who worked for the Pavey Hotel in Hannibal. Perhaps it was these rescues, usually by slaves, that awakened Twain to the worth of his black neighbors, for he later spent much of his time, both in fiction and in person, appealing for their better treatment.

The most horrible of the drownings Twain witnessed was that of a boy the author identified only as "Dutchy." Somewhat wryly, Twain noted that this drowning occurred just one week after Dutchy had successfully recited 3,000 verses of scripture without missing a word.

As boys will do, they were trying to see who could stay under the water longest. To aid this endeavor, they dove down to a pile of hickory hoop-poles and hung on. This pile had been sunk twelve feet under water by coopers who would later use the soaked wood in making barrels.

Twain and the other boys one-by-one bobbed to the surface and sucked air greedily, but not Dutchy.

At first they thought he had won the contest, but when he didn't rise, they panicked. It was young Mark Twain who dived into the dark waters to find Dutchy entangled in the hoop-poles. Unable to free him themselves, the boys ran for adult help, but it was too late.

Finally, and almost miraculously, Mark Twain became a good swimmer, if not a great one. When he was about twelve years old, he and his buddies would perform fetes that would set present day mothers to pulling their hair. The most

common of these was the swim from Hannibal to Glassock's Island in the middle of the Mississippi River.

A foolish superstition at the time held that the Mississippi would not buoy a swimmer, and when that swimmer drowned the river would not allow the body to rise. Even so, the boys knew better. They would discard their clothing and dive into the river naked. Bathing suits to these poor boys were considered not only to be a luxury but a nuisance.

The swim to Glassock's Island was about a half mile each way in a strong current. Once there, they would play on a sandbar at the head of the island until dusk. Then, as Mark Twain's biographer described, "they would swim back in the dusk...breasting the strong steady Mississippi current without exhaustion or fear."

As an author, Mark Twain used this swim and this island several times. It first appeared in the novel *Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. That is where Tom and his buddies hid out while playing "Black Avengers." In the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* Huck and Nigger Jim hid out there. Huck was hiding from his drunken Pa, and Jim was hiding from runaway-slave hunters and from those who wanted to hang him for murdering Huck.

Yes, for murdering Huck. The townspeople didn't know Huck had faked his own murder in order to escape his violent father. In both books when the boys were on the island, the folks in Hannibal thought they were dead. They thought Tom had drowned and that Huck had been murdered by Jim and his body thrown into the river.

And, in both books the residents of Hannibal set out to recover the bodies in the traditional way. They floated down the river on a boat while firing cannon blasts across the water. These blasts, they believed, would

burst the gall bladder of the drowning victim. This would produce a gas, and the body would rise.

Next, the people in the boat cut a plug out of the center of an uncut loaf of bread and poured mercury, or liquid silver, into the hole. Then, they replaced the plug, as if it were a cork, and had the minister aboard the boat bless the loaf.

The blessed bread was lowered into the water, and, in theory, it would float to the body the cannon blasts had caused to rise.

Whether the blasts would raise the body or whether the bread would find it are extremely doubtful. Both practices were superstitions without any bases in fact, then or today. Even so, the bread did find Huck. He heard the cannon--it woke him. He saw the loaf floating by and grabbed it. He was very happy for it ,too, because after emptying the loaf of its mercury, he ate the bread for breakfast.

Mark Twain claimed that the cannon and bread were once used to recover his body. It started one windy day when he was on a ferryboat crossing from Hannibal, Missouri, to the Illinois shore.

Halfway across, his hat blew off, and, being a boy, it was his favorite hat and not one to give up easily. Twain jumped--but let him tell it as he recounted the incident in a letter to a friend of his boyhood:

I jumped overboard from the ferryboat in the middle of the river that stormy day to get my hat and swam two or three miles after it (and got it), while all the town collected on the wharf and for an hour or so looked out across...toward where people said Sam Clemens was last seen before he went down. (Sam Clemens was Mark Twain's name before he became an author

and changed it.)

The people on the wharf didn't know what a good swimmer Twain was or how much he prized that hat. According to Twain, they eventually boarded a boat, complete with cannon, bread, and mercury, and went looking for his body.

Another swimming adventure Mark Twain had that found its way into a book concerned lumber rafts. These were three and four block long rafts of freshly cut lumber. The timber had been cut up north and was being floated to such downriver markets as St. Louis and New Orleans.

Mark Twain said these rafts of sweet-smelling boards covered an acre or more. "...we used to swim out a quarter or a third of a mile and get on those rafts and have a ride," he wrote.

In a chapter intended for the book *Huckleberry Finn*, Huck swims to a huge raft and floats for miles down the Mississippi River while listening to the men fight and tell ghost stories. They eventually discover Huck behind a pile of lumber and paint him blue before throwing him overboard.

Somehow, this chapter was left out of *Huckleberry Finn* and found its way into another great book of Twain's, *Life on the Mississippi*.

The greatest of Mark Twain's swimming accomplishments came when he was sixteen. His goal was to swim from Hannibal to the Illinois side of the river and back again without stopping. This was a distance of at least two miles. On the return trip he suffered a cramp and could only use his tiring arms to pull himself along.

In 1902 when Twain returned to Hannibal as an old man, he pointed to the section of the river he swam and recounted the anguish that cramp produced. "Once, near the shore," he said, "I thought I would let down, but was afraid to,

knowing that if the water was deep I was a goner, but finally my knees struck sand and I crawled out. That was the closest call I ever had."

With such a checkered swimming history one would think Twain's mother would have tried to keep him from the water. She did, but it didn't work.

The swimming incident in *Tom Sawyer* is almost identical to the one Twain experienced in real life. To keep Tom from swimming his Aunt Polly had sewn his collar together across his throat. He couldn't get out of the shirt without breaking the thread. Thus, he couldn't sneak away from school and go swimming.

That evening Tom showed up at the supper table with the collar still sewed together. He might have gotten away with his trick if his half-brother Sid had not pointed out that the thread was a different color than the one Aunt Polly had used that morning.

In real life, Mark Twain was betrayed by his little brother Henry.

As a boy Mark Twain was such a rascal that his mother wasn't shocked to see her son's limp body being carried home from some swimming hole. It was an all too common occurrence.

In fact, what she is reported to have said after reviving him with castor oil and Mullein tea following that first near drowning might seem callous if one didn't know the boy.

Looking into Mark's still pallid face, she said "I guess there wasn't much danger. People born to be hanged are safe in the water."

A Christmas Carol for the Self-Actualized

The London winter evening had already lowered its chilly pall about the cobbled streets, but the mullioned windows in the shipping offices of *Scrooge & Marley* crackled brightly, casting cheery rays into the otherwise gloom.

Inside Bob Cratchit, already feeling the abundance of heat from the fire, had removed his waistcoat and was loosening the silk ascot at his neck when his employer spoke.

“If it’s still too chilly for you, Bob, we can throw some more anthracite on the fire. After all, it’s only money.”

“No, thank you, Uncle Scrooge. It’s just that I have overstuffed myself on the tea and tarts you provided this afternoon. You’ll turn me into a portly employee if you keep this up.

“Nonsense,” Scrooge responded from the other end of the office. “A man *should* be judged by his girth. The fullness of the paunch matches the goodness of the heart and the munificence of the mind. It is the *lean* who one should fear.”

Cratchit’s uncle, having followed his own advice, stood with his hands contentedly conjoined at his back and rocked pleasantly on the balls of his feet. A gold watch chain and fob draped across the plush vest that restrained the healthful swell of his belly. Scrooge was a man who knew how to dress; his erect carriage--in spite of his years--was a tailor’s delight.

Before Cratchit could concede Scrooge's point, the bell sounded, announcing the entrance of a red-cheeked fellow into the office. "Scrooge, you old hat," the man called familiarly. "I'm collecting for the widow and orphans' fund. It's that time of year again, you know."

Scrooge removed a hand from his back and waved it off-handedly at the man. "Put me down for the usual fifty quid, Talbert. No," he reconsidered, returning his hand to his back and rocking forward on his toes, "let's make that a hundred this year."

"Knew I could count on you, Ebenezer ol' man," the fellow said and removed his head from the door, the bell again sounding and accenting the stillness of the room.

"Tell you what, Bob," Scrooge said, pursing his lips and arching his immaculately groomed gray mustache. "I know it's only the twenty-second, but why don't you take off for the holidays. Don't bother coming in the next two days. No, no. . .why not make it the day after New Year's day. Have yourself a good long holiday. At my expense, of course."

Cratchit was about to protest and pretend it was a surprise--as he had done last Twelfth Night, Easter, the Queen's birthday, and Guy Fawke's Day, but Scrooge interceded.

"You know, as I was passing the butcher's shop this afternoon, I saw a particularly fat goose hanging in his window. Why don't you take it along home with you?" He strode across the room and forced several gold pieces into Cratchit's hand. "And use what's left over to purchase something really nice for the children and that lovely wife of yours."

Flushed with Scrooge's generosity, Cratchit hardly knew what to say. "You *will* have Christmas dinner with us this year, won't you?" he finally blurted.

"Heavens no, Bob. But thanks for remembering me. No way could I disappoint the staff at home. You know how they love to dote on me. Cook would be absolutely distraught if she couldn't prepare a banquet for me this year."

Though it was still early, in spite of the darkness, the two men closed up the shop and headed for their homes. "It's only money," Scrooge had said when Cratchit worried about missing a possible customer.

At the top of his steps, Scrooge was reaching for the brass knocker beneath the smiling cherub when the door opened of itself and the maid took his coat, welcoming him home effusively. The housekeeper appeared and, after apologizing for letting the maid beat her to the door, ushered him into the dining room where his meal was awaiting, as the porter--who had been cleaning an upstairs window--had seen him coming down the street.

The repast complete, Scrooge daubed the corners of his mouth with a napkin and complimented the cook as she backed, beaming with pride, from the room. Later he sat by the fire in his reading room and looked into Priestly *On the Will*, briefly, and read from--once again--Blylock's *On Being a Good Man*.

Two hours later, with his sleeping cap pulled snugly to his ears, Scrooge eased into his bed--the chamber maid already having warmed the sheets with the coal-fired pan--and slept the dreamless, peaceful, refreshing sleep of the guiltless.

The next morning, springing from his bed as if the entire world awaited, Scrooge went downstairs and sat at the table in his breakfast nook where he sipped tea and bit into marmalade covered toast. As was his want, at such times, he opened his journal and began entering the past day's events and thoughts.

As he finished entering the request that Cratchit buy the fat goose, and while he was re-dipping his quill pen, Scrooge resolved that he would send the Cratchit family a large Twelfth Night cake as well, a cake as big as the Tower of London. And while he was at it, Scrooge decided, he would drop into a farrier's shop and purchase a new brass ferrule for the end of Tiny Tim's crutch.

After recording these new thoughts, Ebenezer blew across the pages, drying the ink and scattering toast crumbs. He then laid the journal aside and stared blankly out the bay window into his winter-stark side yard where a flight of sparrows pecked at the food he had the porter spread each evening.

"You know," he said aloud--perhaps to the sparrows--, "if I didn't lead such a Goody-Two-Shoes life, that journal of mine might be a much more interesting read."