

Crosstown Traffic (A Fantastic Voyage)

Darkness was once my home. It was once your home too. We've all lived in darkness. We usually live there alone. I did. Darkness is only a temporary home. With the help of a gigantic hand, it's able to make us evacuate. I had been secure and content in my darkness. So were you in yours. The gigantic hand pulled me out of my home by the head. I wished my warm darkness a farewell and splashed into my new home.

My new home is a sea. We all live in a sea and a sea lives in all of us. They are very strong and powerful, as you know. In addition, each of them has a main river and many tributaries. This story tells of my trip down my sea's main river.

The gigantic hand pulled me into the sea. I was naked. I floated. It was easy because the sea held me up. The sea was and often is my pleasurable friend. It helps me. I couldn't live without it. But sometimes it gives me help I don't really need. You'll see. I floated. Sinking deep into the sea can be disastrous for it contains infinite destructive power. I floated. I was drifting towards the mouth of the sea's main river. It took a long time to get there. The closer I got the more I felt the strong tug of destiny assuming the role of the giant hand. Destiny is stronger than the sea.

My river is very strong. It is backed by a powerful sea. The river sucked me from the sea faster than a vacuum cleaner eats pieces of air. I was speeding downstream in an infinite vacuum. I felt free. Expression of that freedom was my objective. The rivers' waters rushed through me. They were warm and soothing. I felt like a melting piece of licorice in someone's hot saliva. I tasted fine. I floated and dreamed contently. But soon the robust taste of the licorice began to stagnate the mouth. The warm rain on my body wanted a cool day as much as a warm day enjoys a cool rain. I wanted to dry off. I was soaked with stagnating warm water. I experienced uncontent dreams of dryness. Ah yes. They were beautiful dreams in need of satisfaction. Unsatisfied dreams dream of satisfaction. Mine did. They would come true in town. Town would be my salvation. It was just a little ways up the river. Ah yes, so soon.

Can you understand my journey? Can you understand our seas, our rivers, our lives? Does this mean anything to you at all? The sea is utilitarian. I am utilitarian. You are utilitarian. The seas are reservoirs and this river is my main irrigation ditch stemming from my sea. You've flowed down the main irrigation ditch that stems from your sea too. We all have. Most of us still do. We flow in utilitarian water all the time. I hope

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you continue flowing while reading my journey. Maybe yours has been similar. Understand by daming your rivers and controlling the flow over these lines.

Can't you feel it? The sea and it's power is great. It's waves are constantly rolling you through every action and volition. It controls us every minute of every day. Can't you feel that flow guiding your individual lives? Are you falling through it or swimming where you want? A good swimmer can build a great dam.

That water is there for a purpose. We use the water to satisfy our wet thirst for survival. When that thirst is dry, it's gone. It is very difficult to get totally dry. That water keeps on flowing and flowing. You just keep on flowing and flowing. I was.

No one can leave the town unless they are good enough swimmers. We eventually become good enough if we don't sink. But by that time we are very old, usually. We swim within a circle. The river enters the town and circles it, eventually to meet back up with itself. The town looks like a tennis racket from above. The frame is the main part of the river while the strings are the many streams that infiltrate the city. Those streams spread out like sprouting veins in the little squares between the strings. It is a very veiny tennis racket. The entire town is infiltrated with water. We drive around in the water in an effort to eventually get dry, then wet, then dry, then wet, then dry, etc. Constantly trying to get dry conflicts with motivations to get to be a good swimmer. We live in true dilemmas.

You and I are so much the same. When we each enter our towns we travel crosstown in the same manner. The heaviest traffic is downtown in the center of the tennis racket. That's inevitably head our first time in crosstown traffic.

where we

I watered into town fast as hell. I really wanted to slow down and dry off. It's hard to get dry in our watery towns. But ah yes, there is intrinsic pleasure in drying off. Good swimmers can dry off just by getting out of town. It has taken me a long time to learn that that will be the ultimate pleasure. Then my flow will be my own. I whooshed on ahead.

The river in front of me swept out and raked the town. I was heading down the rakes middle finger. That was the fastest way downtown. It would take a very long time to get there. That disturbed me so I began to aggressively kick my way downstream. Frustrated and excited, I violently paddled my way through life as this fantastic voyage continued.

Well...

My anxiety to reach town was in vain, as so many of our attempts to

secure personal satisfaction. Passive acquiescence would have been the most logical state of mind. The inevitable and destructive sociological falls were murmering in the distance. Murmer...urmer...urmerOAR...ROAR...
The sociological falls were ROARING in the distance. They were dogmatically drumming societies beat.

Chance determines our falls. Each crosstown route has as many sociological falls as it needs. The ones I encountered heading straight downtown were the longest and steepest. They were crowded with huge normative boulders and sharp mores. The water powerfully poured over them, unaffected. It was a shame I couldn't slide through with such ease. There was no dry towel to greet me if I tried to leave the stream. There was no escape. The stream I was going down was already chosen, by chance, as were my parents and their parents, and their parents, and their parents. My parents pushed me over the falls.....and I was falling, falling., falling.., falling....

Falling through the falls was very painful. Bouncing from status to status, role to role, and through rugged conceptual rocks bigger than mens' minds censored my dreams as well as tied my head in a bow of consciousness. The experience was relatively short but the consequences were great. I momentarily lay among the last symbols of compliance when the driving water tugged me off on my journey once again. I continued, a crippled and inhibited swimmer.

The falls were over. They had taken their toll. I floated in a limp lull. I was entering the suburbs. There were huge, bazaar objects scattered along the shores of the stream. They were mine to dry off on if I wanted them. I can only remember a few. I didn't stop to try drying off on any of the symbols in the suburbs. I wasn't wounded so badly by the falls that I couldn't make it downtown. I was fortunate. Too many of us have to stop in the suburbs to rest our wounds. Those stops cause irreversible lifestyles that keep many from getting all the way downtown. They will never understand their towns completely. I was heading downtown.

The objects in the suburbs were attractive, but I pushed on. I saw a huge bag of sand with a football helmet painted on it. The words "run into me" were etched across the face-mask. Then I saw a fingernail embracing the words "bite me" I pushed on. I also remember seeing a movie screen with all sorts of violence, horrors, and strange sexual acts being performed within it's boundries set by the falls. All this just caused me to forget my wounds and push on harder and harder and harder to reach my jewel. I remember an odor. It smelled stronger and stronger as I made my way down the stream. Then I saw it's source. There was a giant cup of coffee, steaming mightily, surrounded by thousands of smoking cigarettes. One of them fell from it's position among the others on the saucer and came

rolling towards me. Using every bit of strength in my body, I was able to jump out of that driving river and hurl myself over that tombstick. It was a close one. I successfully pulled myself through the suburbs, driving fast and stroking hard.

The first object I saw in the urban district was the hugest symbol I encountered traveling crosstown. The closer I approached, the more it attracted my attention. My harvested energy drove me forward in an attentive trance. I experienced compulsive dream flashback. It was a woman's breast the size of an observatory dome. I wanted to be its telescope. Here I saw a fraction of my salvation and a milestone of my journey. I had to dry off. It was a great feeling knowing that I could. That breast was like a big sponge to dry myself off with. I would sail around on it in an effort to get dry. Ah yes, dry. It was such a beautiful breast and so big! I side-stroked to the edge of the stream and grabbed the sponge, or rather, the sponge grabbed my water. It felt delightful. I burrowed inside for a long stay.

Eventually this captain ran out of sea. That's a rare situation. I was just damp enough to be able to find my way back to the stream. A captain needs water to continue through his life. That sponge had no effect on that dampness still left. I realised then how strong that will to get dry is. It caused me to loose precious driving time. Maybe there would be time for expression of that emotion in a genuine and purposeful way (other than just trying to get dry) after my crosstown journey. I jumped back into the stream, a little drier.

The warm waters of the river were soothing. They quenched my thirst but, sure enough, I was once again satiated with that warm water. I decided to try a new method of getting dry, downtown. I splashed down the sucking stream, kicking and screaming in aggressive anxiety.

I arrived at the center of the tennis racket. Downtown was ~~surrounded~~ full of huge objects crammed together like buildings in New York City. I saw one that caught my attention for a long time. I decided to get dry in it. It was a huge bottle of dry wine. I figured if it is drier than this stream I might as well try it out. Yeah heah! This water is O.K. It flowed right into that bottle of wine. And I was right. I did dry off.

One day I was singing to myself about how dry I was (when I was actually still very wet). I suddenly realised the impossibility of crawling the side of a glass bottle. I was trapped! The wine level always stayed a little below the label. This realisation frustrated me. I was severely frustrated, oh so frustrated! I quit singing about how dry I was and turned my thoughts to methods of escape. I decided to try a rain song/swim in

hopes of raising the level of the wine to the top of the bottle. This would enable me to jump from its lips into the stream driving hard below. I had been very content in the bottle of wine, but I realised that I couldn't get much drier (though I was wetter than I thought).

With all my efforts I finally got rain. But it was not conventional wet rain, it was much wetter. As a result, I got much wetter. I got extremely high on this rain. The heavens of downtown rained reds and reefers in response to my rain song/swim. My fantastic voyage climaxed with reds and reefers! Ah yes. Those reds and reefers were a delight. Reds and reefers are always a delight if you are still floundering in your river. Down and down and down we go. Down, ah yes.....Lilly is a fine company. Ah yes, down. As I was getting drunker and drunker, stoned and more stoned, down and more down, I realised I was also getting wetter and wetter. I was mixed up and frustrated. My aggression flowed as fast as the river. I thought I was in the dry wine! I was getting wetter! This was all very strange to me, then. I concluded that the wine must be coming back into the bottle. I floated higher and higher. I was lost, dazed and confused. It was a pity to get lost in such a small part of town. It's easy to get lost downtown. All I could think about was reds and reefers. Reds and reefers, ah yes. Nothing like those reds and reefers. Higher and higher I floated. I drifted up the bottle, the wine level following me. I reached the top of the bottle and sat down on its lips. I could see the whole town and that was all I could see. I was tied up within myself. I was bound to live in that little town my entire life. What a pity. The wine level caught up with me and we poured back down into the stream. I was as wet as ever. The wine still encompassed me. It was now part of the stream, making me wetter and wetter and wetter. I flowed down the stream singing about reds and reefers to the tune of "God-damn the pusher man!" Downtown had taken its toll.

I lulled in a sleeping heaven. I drifted in drives. I shook the red hand of heaven. We fell freely. We embraced the shore and sung to the symbols. I slipped through heaven and heaven slipped through me. But heaven wouldn't leave me. We drifted everywhere together. Heaven was in my mind. It's in all of our minds. We clung to each other. We clung to the symbols. We were wet in a wasteland. My thirst drank wet waste. I was a dead fish floating in the water. My tombstones were the corroding objects. Heaven and I wasted the town. My symbols died with every feeble attempt I made at drying off on them. They were as much a part of the wasteland as my mind. My aspirations were smashed in heavens grip. Nothing seemed to matter any more. The wet wasteland was my stagnant worn-out home. The

whole town was a slum. I tried drying off on every shore but it was impossible with heaven always at my door. I knew there had to be a way out. I had to leave that town.

I damned the corroding wasteland. I damned heaven. I damned the symbols and my corresponding emotions. I learned to control that river by understanding to swim as well as the old folk. I understood. Understanding is the key to control. I built grail-shaped dams of understanding and controlled the flow into my hand. Now the town travelled through me. It all happened because I understood. I understood the town. I understood myself. I understood others. We've all got to understand each other. We must escape the wasteland.

Let's learn and join together in understanding. Time is getting short. Let the seas dominate animals' lives, not ours. Let's control our rivers through the doors of understanding. These words have been the product from the control of my dams' waters. Now they are yours if you want them.

CITIES

The line was busy, again.

"Dammit," John muttered, "who the hell can she be talking to?" He was loosing his cool. His usual calm disposition was fading like the last of the wick in a fading candle. Something stable, something unquestionable—that was all he was looking for.

Had he said too much to her earlier that day in the park? Had he scared her away with all his "intellectual blabbermouthing," as she had called it? Who could she be talking to for such a long time?

He tried again: no luck.

The monotonous buzz of the busy signal seemed to him like a wall between them, like the truth about their relationship. But he knew he was getting carried away. He would get through to her in another minute or so. No need to worry.

The mighty city, it sat calm, it sat ready.

Dialing again, he could feel the hard backspin of the dial pushing him into himself. The wall was crumbling.

"Yes?"

"Barb! God! who have you been talking to?"

"Oh, John. Hi."

"I've been trying to get through for hours. Who were you talking to?"

"My sister. We just talked ourselves into quite the telephone bill, let me tell you."

"Your sister? Barb, you two never talk . . ."

"She called me."

"What about?"

"Lots of things."

"Like?"

"You know. Things things."

"I see."

"So, what's on the agenda tonight?"

"Oh, I thought we might take in a movie—or maybe see a show. There's some sort of big theatrical marathon going on over at the high school. I hear it's pretty good."

"That sounds fun."

"Yeah."

"John?"

"Yes?"

"I told her we're getting married, possibly."

"Who? Your sister?"

"Yes."

"What did she say?"

"Oh, nothing much."

"What! Nothing much? Her sister is getting married and she says 'nothing much'!"

"Well, I guess she said a little more than that."

"What?"

People started preparing their houses and stores for the storm. Windows and doors were locked, children were called home. Some took shelter in basements, others in official city shelters: they felt safe down there.

"John, I don't really think she likes the idea."

"Shit on her."

"Don't say that about my sister. She cares for me—my health, my security, the man I marry. She's a good sister. She wants me to make the right decisions about my life. If she didn't, she wouldn't have called."

"Why did she call?"

"I told you: she doesn't like the idea of our marriage."

"That's why she called?"

"Yes."

"I thought you just told her about our plans tonight."

"No, I told her in a letter."

"You told her in a letter! . . . and you didn't tell me you had told her. That's bad, Barb. Real bad. You should have told me first. It's important that we're spreading the word."

"Oh! I wasn't spreading the word, I just wanted to tell her to see what she thought."

"Isn't that spreading the word?"

"No, not really. Not in our circumstances."

"Our circumstances?"

"Yes, you know."

"You mean our different ages?"

"No, John. Don't try to act stupid."

"Now I see. You mean the fact that I'm a nigger, huh?"

In came the storm. But even though the sky was dense with dust

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and city trash, the buildings' outlines were still easily seen.

"John! Of course not! How could you say such a thing!"

"Don't bullshit me Barb—I know what's happening. We both knew this was coming. Tell it straight, for once."

"Now John, don't get all excited. Please don't."

"Don't! What the hell am I supposed to do? My future family-in-law doesn't want to be my future family-in-law, and you tell me not to get excited. You want me to laugh it off?"

"Now John, let's be reasonable."

"Damn Barb, you sound like some old lady. Aren't you upset?"

"Of course I am."

"You sure don't sound like it."

"Well what do you expect? I just went through a hellish conversation that I thought would never end, so I've just about run out of getting upset emotions!"

"Oh that's nice. Couldn't you have saved a few for me? Maybe you could have stashed a few away in your bank and brought them out when I called."

"Don't be so sarcastic."

"Sarcastic—shit. I'm on the level. A little pissed-off, but on the level. So just to show you how on the level I really am, let me ask you this one simple question: Just how do you feel on the matter of our getting married?"

"You know the answer, John."

"I'm not so sure anymore."

"Yes I do. Yes, yes, yes!"

"You sound programmed."

There was a silence, a lasting silence that seemed to make time stand still. There were thoughts silently transferring between them; thoughts that mixed and fought in passing, but settled peacefully when they found their source.

The wind subsided, leaving the buildings crisp and clear. They somehow looked more stable than they had before the storm. And their rugged beauty shimmered in the sun.

"So where do we go from here John? To a show?"

"I'm not sure. . . . Maybe we ought to wait awhile. You know, just to kind of let things calm down a bit more."

"OK."

"But Barb, tell me one more thing: Has anything changed?"

"Not that I can see."

"Well, that's not saying much. Excuse me for saying this, but I'm not so sure that you know what change is."

"Now don't start that blabbermouthing like you did this afternoon." But she said this not exactly knowing just what he had been trying to say that afternoon.

"Why not? What I said this afternoon was very important. But then I wasn't directing my comments at you; now I am. They apply."

"Oh no. Here goes Joe Intellectual again."

"God Barb! Don't you see? What you just said is a perfect example of what I was talking about. What you say is totally predictable. You are a social law as easy to figure out as mathematical laws. Don't you ever think; change?"

She had absolutely no idea what he had just said. She simply dismissed it as babble. "OK," she said. "We aren't getting anywhere here. Let me just talk. And don't interrupt, please. I'm going to tell you how things really are between us."

"Are you sure you know just what that would entail? I mean it's pretty complicated. You'd probably be better off just trying to tell me how things are with just you—and you only. That would be a great achievement in itself."

"See—you're interrupting. Do you want to hear what I have to say or not?"

"OK, I'm sorry. Go ahead. I want to hear."

She thought about what she wanted to say, then began. "The people of the city came out of their shelters to see what damage—if any—had been done. There was very little: nothing that couldn't be cleaned up in a short time. One little girl found a can, all bent and smashed-up. She immediately plied it back into its original shape and took it to her mother. "That's a good girl," her mother said.

"Alright," Barb began. "When we first started seeing each other, I never told my parents a thing about us. But then we started getting serious. I first realized that when we began sleeping together. And we've been serious ever since then, maybe always. I'm not sure. But we definitely were after we started sleeping together: that's for sure. But then I started wondering about whether or not we were doing the right thing; you know, you being black and all and my father being so worried about who I marry. I don't think we'd get the money he

promised me. John: quite frankly, it'd just be a big hassle—but you know how I love you and how I always will. We can always be friends."

"Done?" He didn't sound upset.

"Yes . . ."

"Well, good job. You did very well. It was almost as if you were recalling a Platonic form or something. But have you come to this decision because society wouldn't praise us, or because you wouldn't praise us?"

"Society, of course." She felt her voice quivering.

"Of course."

She didn't notice the obvious irony in his voice. "I knew you'd understand."

"Of course," and this time he didn't sound ironical. "Barb?"

"Yes John?"

"Just tell me one more thing and I'll leave you alone. Did you call your sister?"

"John!" She pried out her most sincere voice. "How could you say such a thing?"

"Oh, I was just wondering because you once told me that your sister was too cheap to ever call you. And seeing as you two talked for such a long time . . . you understand."

"Well yes, but there are always exceptions to rules."

"I'm surprised to hear you say that."

"Why?"

"Never mind."

"Don't sound so God-damned cold—" and slowly her voice began to break.

"Are you crying?"

No answer.

Silence, except for her sobbing.

"John?"

"Yes?"

"Oh John—yes! Yes I did call her. I'm so sorry." Then she asked herself, Why am I apologizing? He should be the one apologizing after doubting me so. "What difference does it make?" she asked him, defiantly.

"Plenty," he replied, and hung-up.

She listened to the click of his phone and the resulting silence, and realized she wasn't crying anymore. Suddenly, she actually began

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to feel happy: she didn't have to tell him face-to-face.

And all the people of the city rejoiced. Together they came in groups, and talked of their fair but mighty city. And together they praised the durability of their creation; it would last forever and protect their childrens' childrens' children. They were thankful for what would stand tall and mighty forever, and ever, and ever—regardless of of anything.

It's easy to imagine Barb sitting somewhere in the realm of one of those massive conglomerations of symmetrical cement, brick, and steel—in the realm of one of our most stoic cities.

AND THE SNOW KEPT FALLING

Sly, sly, very sly. I crept—I slid—I coasted through the night. No one knew my intentions.

The weather was wet and cold and dark and snowy: a perfect time to commit my deeds. Yes, my deeds. Do you know what a deed is? It's something that no one expects from you. My deeds, yes, my deeds.

The snow looked like little pins shooting down from the moon; it urged me onto my deeds.

"Hey; Joe."

"Yeah?"

"Get a load of that guy."

"Ha Looks like some kind of worm in a black raincoat."

"Shhhhit."

"Hey I think he heard us. Keep walking."

Ah look at those fools staring at me They're frightened. Scared. Yes My deeds! Yes!

I kept walking and hardly payed any attention to passers-by. All were frightened of the man in black prowling through the night.

I looked into the headlights of approaching cars: they swerved and sped up in fright. The man in black and his deeds, yes

I felt for my knife. It was there; sharp as ever. Yes

And the snow kept falling, and sparkling, and covering my tracks. They'd never catch the man in black; black as the night. Ah But the snow

"Bob?"

"Yes hon?"

"It's getting stuffy in here. And the music's too loud. And I have to go the bathroom—bad, real bad."

"Then go."

"I want to go home. I'm tired. This is a boring party."

"Oh hon. You always want to leave early. Just let's stay a little longer . . . huh?"

"Bob!"

"O.K. I'll get our coats."

I think someone's getting ready to go. Yes! Deeds! I wonder if that's his wife. Oh how pretty. She shall taste deeds from the man in black; frightening and horrible deeds. Yes!

I hid behind a tree and watched a party—waiting, waiting, waiting.

And I saw a couple getting ^{ready} to leave. They were to feel my deeds. Yes! Deeds from the man in black. Yes! The black man in the blackest of nights. Oh but that snow!

"Bob?"

"Huh?"

"Let's call a cab. It's late and cold. I don't want to walk home

"Gee hon. A cab's so expensive. We can't afford one. I'll protect you."

"Bob!"

"Hon!"

"O.K. We'll walk."

I must look as fierce as possible. Here they come. Fierce. Deeds.

The couple left, walked down the sidewalk, made the snow crunch.

I crunched up from behind them making my knife ready. It was still stained from the last victim! Yes. Yes. Yes!

Oh the crunchy snow It kept falling and changing the crunches: higher, lower, crunchier. Oh! The snow

"Bob?"

"Yes hon?"

"There's a man following us.

". . . So there is. Ha! But a man? He looks more like a worm in a black raincoat."

"Don't get funny . . . I'm scared."

"Ha! I could bend him around my finger with a tweesers."

"Don't keep looking back."

"I can't help it. It's funny. That coat he's wearing: he must have stolen it from the dump!"

"Bob . . . I'm scared."

"O.K. hon. We'll stop and let him pass. I'd like to get a better look at this clown anyway."

They're stopping! In fright, no doubt. Ah My appearance has scared them; the man in black. Yes!

The couple stopped when they saw my fearful appearance. I looked up and down the street watching for cars. None. Yes Deeds in the dark

My eyes sparkled meanly as I approached them. They were standing in a drift off to the side; the man was laughing in horror.

I eyed them keenly . . . I slowed down . . . I stopped in front of them and pulled my knife from my coat. Yes!

"Give me your money, your wife, and your car keys," said the robber.

"I don't have a car, you can have my wife, and I'll write you a check," said the man.

"No checks," said the robber.

The man pulled out a handkerchief and gave it to the robber. "This will have to do," he said.

"What's this for?" said the robber.

"Your hand."

The robber looked at his hand. He had been holding the wrong end of his knife. There was blood dripping into the snow. He started crying.

"I take it you seem to have problems with robbing people, huh?" said the man.

"Yes," sobbed the robber, "but you seem to have problems with getting robbed."

"Why?"

"Look at your wife."

He did: She was passed out in the snow. "My goodness," said the man. "See what you've done?"

"I'm sorry. I'll help you carry her home."

"O.K., but don't get blood on her new shoes. They were very expensive."

"I won't."

Ah . . . the deeds . . . over.

Note from the narrator: The snow kept falling and covered all the blood. . . . The robber decided to quit trying to rob people when the couple convinced him to that night. They talked about it over a plea.

sant bowl of soup and some cookies. . . . He sometimes visits them and their newborn. . . . And the snow keeps falling . . .

HOME AGAIN I FIND

In front of the little church called St. Paul, there was a statue; a beautiful thing it was. And in my vision's frame, I depicted it. It fell with the other pieces of beauty found in my mind.

She was a marble maiden; and in her hand she held a branch, a bold and beautiful piece of tree. I asked of what she knew, and the answer I got was her chastity fine and true.

Downtown; the whore. That's all she was and I just another patron. She lay beneath a rank and crusty sheet, and a filthy odor filled the room; I imagined it to be like the stench of fallen bodies on a broken battlefield. The whore.

I asked her of her name, and she said it was Tina. She arched her back and the sheet fell below her knees. I mounted and loosened my steel in the death that once was so beautiful.

I entered the church through the soft red drapes that held the threshold. It was dark and moments passed before I could make out the colored patterns cast on the alter from the plated glass.

The minister came to my side fitted in warm velvet. "God be with you," he said.

The flashing neons shadowed the glow of the moon. Broken drunks and nightclubs faded with the night. Downtown erred.

I looked to the rusty moon; I looked only inside myself; I looked only at the neon lights.

So home again I find a knife, sharp and dully fine.

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STRANGE MAN

Somewhere and somehow in some world in some universe in some time, two guys lived. One of them was Strange Man.

He was still thinking of himself and others as blackboards.

Life scribbled some half-assed scrawls on these two blackboards and sent them on their way into the world. Both found places to live right away, because that's the way it was when you were a blackboard filled with life's chalk. So let's follow these two creatures on one of their chalky travels.

Strange Man was still very strange and he still knew that lots of chalky blackboards didn't like him. But he didn't care: going places and seeing things were his only concerns.

He'd been living in his glass tulip auto. It had a brand-new set of radials, and Strange Man was very proud of them.

He drove around in his glass tulip with radials and looked at everybody and everything everywhere! And he never made any calculated value judgements about anything he saw. He was just that way. He didn't have opinions. I do.

Strange Man never liked to commit himself to any one place for any long period of time, whether it was a boat, cloud, closet, continent, balloon, bingo game, whatever. Whenever he felt like he was getting tied down, he'd just tune-up the old tulip and move on . . . Boy, was he in for a surprise.

He liked to sit in his glass tulip with his back to the stem. This made him feel like he was growing as part of the tulip. It made him dizzy when he'd turn around and look out behind him at all the tulipy waste shooting out of the stem back into space. So he didn't if he didn't have to.

And Strange Man didn't think of anything as "ugly." I do.

So there he was driving along one day. He'd spent the early-morning hours engaged in his favorite activity: trying to erase himself and rearrange the chalk in a different design. It hadn't worked.

So he sat back and watched the world fly by. He saw dinosaurs bathing in the ocean, kites, and a house burning down in its own chalk.

latter scared him terribly: Would he burn down if he couldn't

keep messing with his chalk?

He watched and watched and inspected and inspected and inspected the house dying, dying, dying. He didn't look where he was going going though—

And he crashed, into a big wall composed of dead typewriters and new typewriter ribbons.

His glass tulip shattered in a wet glow, melting into nothingness. His body did the same.

Only Strange Man's mind lived on, and it went to where it had never been before: The void.

About this time, Prago—the other hero of this story—was picking his nose and watching and watching and inspecting and inspecting and inspecting what came out of it.

Prago was much different from Strange Man; in fact, you could say he was opposite from him: Prago thought that he had all the answers, and he thought that everybody and everything everywhere were exactly the same, and he was utterly unable to derive thrills from looking at things do things and be things whatever these things happened to be doing or happened to be being at the time, and he was considered as very normal, and was well-liked by all . . . Boy, was he in for a surprise.

Prago lived in a steel box that didn't go anywhere except for where it already was. It was black inside and out, and had neither windows nor doors. And when snow fell on the box, it turned into a bunch of numbers and crumbled apart. Prago couldn't live in it when this happened, obviously.

All in all, the box was. It was, and nobody could do anything to change that.

Prago was always to be found sitting in the box with its one and only light on. It was a floodlight. It was weird.

Prago was always to be found sitting in the box with its one and only light on, staring at the dots. The dots were black. They had come with the box.

Prago pretended to be very interested in the dots. But he knew he was deceiving himself. What he really wanted to do was to look into the light. The light of the floodlight.

About this time, Prago was picking his nose and inspecting what came out of it. He had just gotten out of bed after a long and refreshing sleep.

So there he sat. Picking his nose. Until . . . there . . . was nothing left to pick.

Which meant trouble.

He'd been in this perilous situation before. Why was it perilous? It was perilous because it meant that he had to again start trying to cough-up some interest in the dots. But today, for some strange reason, Prago couldn't do it. He just couldn't do it.

Instead, he let his eyes do what he'd never let them do before: look into the light.

He started pretending things. He pretended that the light was his breath, and that he was a dragon, and that dragons hate black dots and eat steel boxes. Or something like that.

Anyway, this was a dramatic change in Prago's mind. It was very different from anything he'd ever experienced before—and he liked it immensely.

He liked it so much that he took those stupid (his word) dots and set them on fire with his dragon breath.

And they exploded.

The black box mushroomed into flames, dissipating into nothingness. Prago's body did the same.

Only his mind lived on, and it also went to where it had never been before: The void.

2.

Strange Man is suspended in the void . . .

He puts his thoughts together. First he thinks a thought. Then he looks at the thought.

A fine thought.

Then he grabs another thought.

Another fine thought.

Thought on top of thought until he has a mountain of thought. He looks at the mountain. It looks good.

He smashes the mountain.

And builds again.

He creates freely. Until . . .

Strange Man lost control. Thought on top of thought they started building. What they were to make, no-one knew. Not even Strange Man himself.

He felt like he was shrinking . . . like paste oozing through a sieve . . . smaller and smaller . . . the structure built . . . into another sieve . . . down and down . . . smaller and smaller . . . the structure built.

Complete. The void gone, the structure stood tall.

It was a building, an apartment building, submerged in what was once a sea of possibility. Now the sea was frozen.

Everybody in Strange Man's world lived in this apartment building. They had no other choice.

The building was sturdy and very well-planned. It had three floors, and an elevator constantly moving between them—up and down, up and down.

Beep beep. Strange Man materialized deep down in the elevator shaft. Beep beep. "EEEEEEEEE." The elevator was on its way. "EEEEEEEEE."

It stopped right in front of where Strange Man was standing. The doors opened, parting in sleekly-automated fashion.

And there stood the elevator operator, alone.

"How'd you get down here?" he immediately asked Strange Man.

"I materialized."

"What! Materialized? Are you crazy? I bet you snuck down here."

"You look like a dinosaur," Strange Man stated, flatly.

"What! I look like a dinosaur? What is this? What are you? A thirder?"

"A thirder?"

"Yeah, you know. A thirder: a wierdo: a goon."

"A thirder?"

"What floor you live on."

"Floor?"

"Yup, I knew it," said the elevator operator. "You're a thirder all right. You guys are always getting lost."

Strange Man didn't say anything. He was too busy staring down at the elevator operator's shoes.

"Well, come on. Don't just stand there. Get in!"

Strange Man got in. "EEEEEEEEE," and they were off.

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"I got to stop off at the other two floors before taking you up to your third-floor pals," said the elevator operator. "It'll only take a minute. Just stay calm and don't do anything funny."

Strange Man stayed calm and didn't do anything funny.

When the elevator doors opened exposing the first-floor lobby, Strange Man carefully observed several nude girls running around and giggling. They had been waiting for the elevator.

"Who are they?" he asked the elevator operator.

"The nudies."

"Oh."

Strange Man stepped out into the lobby to greet them, they ran past him back into the elevator, the doors closed, "EEEEEEEEE," and everyone was gone. Strange Man was left stranded.

The lobby was perfectly square and all the walls were totally bare, painted a dirty-white color. The steel elevator shaft looked like a floor-to-ceiling outhouse sitting there right square in the middle of the lobby. It was black.

There were three doors, each on a different wall. The wall that didn't have a door was without a door, so it was just a wall. There was a sign on each door. One read TOP SECRET; another, PARTIALLY SECRET; and the last, HARDLY SECRET AT ALL. Strange Man decided to find out what was so TOP SECRET.

He knocked on the door.

"Go away!" yelled a machine-like voice.

"No!" replied Strange Man. He tried to open the door but it was locked.

"GO AWAY!" screamed the same voice.

"NO!" replied Strange Man. He kicked down the door.

Nobody inside noticed. There were approximately two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand men in there, all dressed in white coats, all feverishly working at tables.

A lot of apparatus gave the room its decor: test tubes, tweezers, toothpicks, a big beautiful machine of some sort, and some other stuff.

The machine was located right next to the door where Strange Man had come in, and it had many, many different-colored flashing lights, and a whole bunch of buttons and switches. It interested Strange Man immensely. He stared deep into the flashing lights, pretending it was Christmastime. "Wow!" he said. "It's Christmastime!"

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But when he started pushing buttons and flipping switches, he'd gone too far.

A test tube on the other side of the room started shooting off a wierd kind of snow. Big sound speakers shouted out complex chemical equations. Fire broke out in all the wastebaskets.

Strange Man thought all this was pretty funny and laughed loudly. "Hahahahahahahahaha!" he said. "This is pretty funny." He proceeded to push more buttons and flip more switches.

Soon, one of the whitecoats looked up from the table he was working at and saw what was happening.

After briefly contemplating the situation, he picked up an experimental mouse and marched over to Strange Man. He beat Strange Man with the mouse. It squeeked.

Strange Man hit another button, which caused the whitecoat to stop beating him and to say, "Dr. Barfunkle, statistics." Strange Man flipped a big red switch. The whitecoat melted, making a gooey mess on the floor.

By this time, more whitecoats had observed the phenomenon Strange Man was causing. They marched over and beat him with more experimental mice. The mice squeeked.

Strange Man hit one last button and all the whitecoats turned into mice and all the mice turned into whitecoats and beat on him some more.

He fled from the room, unpursued.

And waited for the elevator.

It came. The elevator operator was in there, alone.

"Well, well, well," he said. "If it ain't old wierdo again. How you doing, wierdo?"

Strange Man didn't answer, just got into the elevator.

"EEEEEEEEE."

"So how'd you like first floor?" asked the elevator operator.

"Didn't. Not at all."

"That's what I figured. You're a thirder, that's for sure."

"Does the third floor have mice?" asked Strange Man.

"Probably. But I don't really know. Never actually seen the place. Why do you ask?"

"Just wondering."

Brief silence. Then the elevator operator, again:

"Yes sir. I just don't know anymore. The way things are changing—

God, you wouldn't think we're living in the same apartment building. Everyone always changing floors. Especially between first and second. Up and down. Up and down. First then second. Second then first. Sheeeee-it! Before you know it, they'll only be needing me and my elevator to take you wierdos up to third: first and second will have stairs! Or better yet, they'll be building a whole new building! Never know what they'll do next."

"Does 'they' include me?" asked Strange Man.

The elevator operator paused. Then: "Of course not! What a stupid question! Don't ask me any questions, wierdo. Just be quiet."

The second-floor lobby: the nudies again. And Strange Man again stepped out to greet them. And again they ran past him. "EEEEEEEEE." Strange Man was stranded on the second-floor lobby.

It was exactly like the first, except the signs were different: LOTS OF FUN; A GOOD BIT OF FUN; and FUN. The sheer simplicity of the latter impressed Strange Man immeasurably.

He walked right in. No locked doors on this floor.

There was a big party going on. Some of the people were costumed, some were naked, and some were somewhere in between. The room was very dark and smokey, and a band was playing up on a stage.

A girl walked up to Strange Man. She was costumed as a turtle, and a drink swooshed around between her claws. "Hey you," she said. "How 'bout a beverage?"

"Sure," said Strange Man.

On the way to the bar, they tripped over climaxing orgies, passed through silhouettes of dancing tulips, etc. She poured him a drink when they finally reached the bar.

"What kind of drink is this?" asked Strange Man, smiling.

"A Turtle Soup Cocktail."

"Oh." Now he was frowning.

"So," she continued, "want to have some fun?"

"I am. Lots of fun. Ha, ha, ha, ho!"

"No-ooo silly, I mean some real fun." She started making fish-like motions with her lips.

Strange Man imitated her. "This isn't much fun," he said.

She laughed, took off all her clothes, and lay down on the floor.

"Come on," she said.

Strange Man walked off so as to mingle with the guests.

"I love parties," he said to one guy. "They're so . . . together!"

"Yes, I know what you mean," the guy replied. "Parties are great. Nothing like a party. PARTY, PARTY, PARTY!"

Strange Man was feeling good. He walked up to another guy and said, "That coat you're wearing looks like it was stolen off a dead wino."

"You're right," the guy replied, taking off the coat. He gave it to Strange Man. "Now you have it back again."

Strange Man went up on the stage so as to mingle with the band. But they didn't want to mingle. They just wanted to keep on playing.

So Strange Man grabbed one of the extra guitars and joined in, even though he had no idea what to do to make a guitar play. But the band didn't mind and let him stay.

He was really getting into it. In fact, he got into it so much that he thought he was the star of the whole show, and wanted to please his audience.

He took the guitar by its neck and started smashing it down against the floor of the stage.

Everyone cheered.

He took the guitar by its neck and started smashing it over his head.

Everyone found this to be very strange.

Strange Man soon found himself back out in the lobby, upside-down.

"I knew it, I knew it, I knew it!" yelled the elevator operator from his elevator. "You damned goons never fit in!" He went out and dragged Strange Man back into the elevator.

Strange Man lay slumped in a corner as they traveled up to the third, and last, floor. "They're really brutal on us goons down there," he said.

"Damn right."

Silence.

The elevator operator removed his handkerchief from his pocket. "Do me a favor, will you?" he said.

"What?"

"Blindfold me with this. I don't ever plan on seeing where you goons live. Bet it's really dirty and smelly."

As Strange Man blindfolded the elevator operator, he wondered if the nudies would be up on the third floor, too.

The nudies were up on the third floor, too. They got into the elevator as Strange Man got out. He turned around to watch everyone

leave.

"Stay here wierdo," said the blind elevator operator. "Stay away from the elevator shaft: no good will ever come from trying to escape the inescapable . . .

"Well," he continued, "I may not like you goons too much, but I will have to admit one thing: you're consistent. Once a goon, always a goon. So long."

Strange Man smiled and waved goodbye. The nudies waved back, giggling and blushing. The elevator operator remained stolid. The doors closed, and they were gone.

Strange Man looked about him. The third floor was one big room with glass walls and ceiling. He could see the frozen sea surrounding the building, and the sun shone through all the ice, making everything clear and bright. It was nothing like the other two sombre floors.

And Strange Man was there all alone.

Strange Man is pushing in and through himself. He is reaching for his essence. He is reaching for beauty. He is breaking away from the slow structure and joining with the sea. It is melting and breaking through the glass, gushing and warm. Strange Man breathes the water that surrounds. He has returned to the void.

3.

Strange Man felt uncomfortable sitting on the shore watching the fixed sun brood in its own colors. He wished it would just hurry-up and set so his domain could rest in peace.

His was a small island. He took all his jungles, deserts, glaciers—everything in his whole world—and rolled it all up into one round piece of land from which he could enjoy life.

It was a beautiful place. The sea swept out all around and joined with the distant blue horizon, isolating his island in serenity. He loved to sit facing the sea from his favorite beach, opening all his senses, letting his thoughts flow uninterrupted in the gentle rhythm of the waves washing up against the shore. But tonight that flow just wasn't flowing, and the sun was stuck out on the horizon.

From the exact center of the island, the first ring started its

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gentle ascent to the sky. It was made of smoke and dead brown leaf, and as it slowly climbed, it spiraled out its perimeter . . . until it matched that of the island. It then slowly fluttered back down to the island's shore while another ring of the exact same type rose to follow the exact same pattern. They were building a wall around Strange Man's island, working at a constant, slow pace, like the rhythm of the surf.

When the first smoldering bits of dead brown leaf settled in front of Strange Man, he panicked. He turned around and looked back on his island, and saw more rings rising in the distance. First the sun, now the rings: something terrible was happening, he could feel it.

He ran along the shore, next to the growing wall, searching frantically for a gap through which he might still be able to view the sea after the wall would grow too high to see over; but he collapsed from fatigue before finding one.

The sky, now a cloudy mass of dense gray smoke and morbid leaf. The stuck sun, only adding a dark translucent quality to the blackness.

As the wall grew, it began to curve over the island: It was now obvious that the rings were creating a dome.

Strange Man lay still and closed his eyes. He felt like ice. He was scared and searching for an explanation—afraid he had done this to himself. The rings had come to dominate his land, and he loathed them for it. His icy fear was becoming a fiery hate.

And not too far from him, in the woods beyond the beach, a machine was growing parallel with his building thoughts of contempt for all.

Building: he knew he had to stop the rings before they could complete the dome.

So-filled with a burning lust for accomplishment, he decided to destroy them. He had to get to their source and destroy them before they destroyed him. Yes . . .

The machine finished growing. And burst into flames—lifting Strange Man from the ground and smashing him up against the growing dome—pinned. He burned in passion.

The flaming machine cast its fiery glow throughout the land, attracting the attention of two men, natives of the island. One was tall and dark, his eyes like rock. The other was shorter and lighter, and his eyes were like water—glassy and reflective. They were scouts in Strange Man's land, always together helping each other

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out, sharing knowledge, sharing hopes, omnisciently searching and protecting.

They ran to the burning machine and put out the flames as best they could with dirt and sand. Then they sat, and rested, and watched the black machine glow like a passing coal.

When the fire had ceased, Strange Man fell from the dome. But his mind blazed on like hot blood that won't coagulate in a wound that will never heal.

He slithered along the ground on his belly towards the two resting natives. When he reached them he stood tall and breathed deeply. They jumped up and spun around to face him. Eyes met—substance flashed. Hate flourished. They fought like animals.

And Strange Man still stood tall after the battle. He looked down at the two unconscious bodies, the two scarred and bleeding bodies that lay piled in the dirt and sand. A final rage and he cut out what life remained in them by twisting them and tearing them on the jagged edges of the machine—the still hot and glowing metallic machine—until all that remained were mangled pieces of torso and limb strewn about the woods. Only their plush, streaming blood marked the spot of their deaths: the machine crusty, the ground running hot and cold.

Strange Man looked to the rings. Now they were launching very rapidly, pumping into the gray sky, completing the final stages of the dome: only a small hole at the top remained a lighter brown than the rest. This increased his fury.

Strange Man joined and became one with the black machine. He was a cutting gear, a jagged blade, and it was in this form that he started his journey to the source of the rings.

The atmosphere was sweet, cool and hard. The machine smashed through the land, leaving a deep and rusty track in the tangled, dying growth. Nothing stood in its way—nothing. Destruction, everywhere, destruction.

The machine picked up speed at a constant, unalterable pace. Its momentum attracted all the land in a cutting, circular action. Mountains fell and curved with the motion. The air swirled with fluttering elements as all fell into the deep and jagged trail.

It came across a herd of natives fleeing from the torment. They clung together in pastey mobs of fear. The machine cut right through them—leaving their naked bodies crushed and broken and dying the

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bloodiest of deaths.

Now—the rings were very close. Their turbulent nature was meticulously observed by the depicting eye of the rushing machine.

Only a bleak-white ice field separated the two. And when the machine skidded onto it, the field started rising, breaking towards the dome, becoming a mountain—a growing mountain of hard, impenetrable ice. And the rings' source rose with it, for they were launching off its sharpening peak, the summit.

The machine struggled, slipping in its attempt to climb the steepening incline. On it pushed, as the rapid launching of the rings began to slow, as the dome grew a darker and darker brown.

But its efforts were only to be rewarded by defeat:

Snow. Drifts and drifts of snow. The machine had made it to snow—soft and pliable snow—which gave it needed traction. But as soon as the machine had used it to push ahead, the snow was turning to ice, leaving the machine stranded higher and higher on the growing, slick incline of the growing, slick mountain: There would be no way of getting back down.

The drifts of snow got deeper and deeper, giving the machine more and more trouble pushing through . . . so it slowed . . . and slowed . . . and stopped.

Strange Man abandoned the machine. It was no longer of any use. It had already delivered him—to his downfall.

As soon as Strange Man separated from the machine, it slid backwards and skated freely down the steep still-rising mountain of gloomy ice . . . He watched it smash at the bottom and explode, creating a red and lingering mist. Its final moments of shattered glory were ended, dissolved, gone in the wrath of the land it had destroyed.

The rings stopped, the dome complete.

Strange Man was finished: abandoned and left to die in the snow.

He thought he realized his mistake: he could have lived contently without having had to destroy the rings: he could have just let what was to happen happen. But no. He had to strive, achieve. Why? Was there something to be gained? Answers? Satisfaction? Glory? Now these things seemed like the snow: flexible and subject to change. Everything seemed an illusion . . .

But these things didn't matter. Nothing mattered.

He started climbing through the snow towards the top of the moun-

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tain. A last look at his land was all he cared to see . . .

He made it to the summit. I don't know how long it took nor how far it was. I don't know. Any answer is possible.

There was a statue up there. It was square, made of hard dead human bodies stacked in perfect symmetry: limbs twisted in smooth balance and harmony with others; horror-stricken and confused faces lined-up above one another at the corners. It rose high up towards the dome, and seemed to bend and sway—evenly, proportionally, exactingly.

And Strange Man could see where the rings had been launching from, though their actual source still remained a mystery buried deep in the snow and ice of the mountain: A ring of smoke and dead brown leaf still lingered around the base of the statue. They had encompassed it at the beginning of their soaring journey.

As the sun finally continued to set, Strange Man stepped inside the lingering ring and climbed the statue. The death was as hard as the ice had been.

He stood on the top. The dome was almost within his reach and getting closer as the mountain continued to grow. He looked down over his doomed land. . . .

And saw fire and buildings and industries with black smoke pouring out of their smokestacks, and trains and cars and billions and billions of people walking along the streets and sidewalks, their heads bent low and their eyes fixed on the hard ground of cement and steel. He could see nothing more.

Strange Man died.

And the mountain with its statue broke through the top of the dome, and the rings started their gentle ascent into the black night once again.

4.

Hey. Guess what.

Strange Man's alive and well, living in Seattle. Prago's there too.

Just like it used to be.

CRIME?

"It's all very simple. First, go out to the mailbox and put the cash in."

The sirens go fading off into the night, then come back faster than they left. Feels like they're pulling me apart one minute and putting me back together the next. Feels wierd.

Nicky's still in that room. I can see the silhouette of his head on those thick plastic windows separating us.

"Next, come back here in the house and look out the front window. After you see the car pick up the cash, go back out to the mailbox. They said they'd be back around after counting it. OK?"

"Yeah," I said, "but what are you going to be doing the whole time?"

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"I'll come to that in a minute." He then went on to describe how I was to go about checking to make sure we were getting exactly what we were about to pay for--most of which I already knew but let him tell me again. Nicky had more experience than me.

After we got the procedure all straightened out, I again asked him what he was going to be doing while I did all the shitty work.

"Well," he said, "I was coming to that. It's all very simple. Now that you know the plan, I got a little addition. It mostly involves you—if you're up to it, which I'm sure you are."

"What is it?"

"We're going to score that cocaine and get our money back.

"How?"

"With this gun."

The whole scene; it all came so natural. Cruising into that life was just like sliding up an escalator: each step just kind of fading into the next

Too bad we had to fall back down in such a short time. Seems like we should've somehow safeguarded each step we took so that we couldn't fall back down; or at least so that we wouldn't fall back down so hard and so fast.

But the way it came so easy just gliding on up there made us forget how far we'd actually been coming; what was left to climb was the only important thing.

When I saw the gun, I knew we'd made it to the top. But seeing it was one thing, and actually pulling the trigger was another. That was the test: pulling the trigger.

And those sirens are terrible, and Nicky's still in that room.

"How'd you get it?" I asked him.

"Easy. No problem. Just fell into my hands."

"Well if it's so suited to your hands, why don't you be the one to use it?"

"Because you'd botch it with the car."

"Your car?"

"Yeah," he said. "You don't expect to just walk away from someone you've just robbed, do you?"

"I see."

"I'm picking you up in the street and we're splitting. Get their car keys so they can't follow us."

"But we got to come back here sometime."

"No problem. I sold the house—furniture and all. I got the cash right here." He pulled out an envelope. "With this and with what we've already got, we can ask them to bring twice the coke, which I already took the liberty to do. So: twice the cash makes twice the stash and with both stash and cash we're going to have a vacation in Tahiti! Can you dig it?"

"They'll find us, Nicky, I know it."

"Not in Tahiti they won't. It's all figured out, just do what I say."

"I don't like it, Nicky. Especially the gun. That's not us, that's not our league, guns. There's a point where we got to draw the line."

"Yeah yeah. We will. Drawing lines probably comes real easy in Tahiti. Don't you see? We'll be able to do anything we want!"

Brief silence, then I broke it, hard—

"This is bullshit! Those are our brothers who are going to be out in that car, and you don't go pulling guns on your brothers! We're all in this same shitty business together so it doesn't make any sense making it shittier. You've told me this, you know it. We're all together."

"I've changed views."

"Have you? Or is this just a continuation of the way you've always felt but you don't realize it because you don't realize the intensity of what we've been doing!"

"What? Intensity of what we've been doing? You're not making any sense. In fact, you're full of crap! I do what I do and that's that."

I saw the first cop when I was taking the money out to the mailbox. Those lights and sirens on top of his car were just waiting for the magic button to be pushed so they could start their flashing and screaming.

I tried to imagine what it would be like if all the cops in the city started flashing their lights on at the same time.

I saw it as happening at night. Suddenly right there in the midst of all that quiet darkness--the flashing red starts to light up the sky. The whole city turns red, like a big, glowing net lowered right down on top of us all.

Then the sirens start.

Trying to forget about this idea was hard: I could just see big net dangling above me ready to fall flashing down. But I had to forget about it. They'd be driving up to the mailbox any minute now.

I guess what we were really doing was playing pool. Nicky picked

out a good shot and we both tried for it. All we could watch the whole time was that ball we were trying to knock in, paying absolutely no attention to the cue ball except, of course, when we used it to make our shot.

Well, that cue ball fell in another pocket at just about the same instant our shot went in. But we didn't even see it happen. We hadn't been watching the whole table.

When we finally found out what had happened, that big net was already falling, and our game was over.

Nicky hadn't told me we were dealing with what we were actually dealing with. I figured it out pretty fast when I saw them out there in their big Chryslers: all decked out in ties and coats; three of them—one crouched low and sneaky in the backseat, the other two leaning towards each other, talking, in the front. They were real official, that much I knew for certain.

They slid right on up to the curb and got the money out of the mailbox. It seemed strange that none of the guys were looking all around like I'd have been doing if I'd been them. They quickly slid away just as fast and sneaky as they'd come.

I put the gun inside my coat, the barrel jammed down my pants. Scared and shaking, I walked back out to the mailbox.

Now there were important decisions to be made. I was torn between my faith in Nicky and my faith in myself. Nicky'd pulled me in this far, and he had confidence in me and in what we were doing. But then I started thinking that maybe I could see something in this whole caper that he couldn't, like that big net surrounding us from above.

If these guys were really as important as they looked, I knew I'd better forget about getting both coke and money. But then I

started figuring that that big net of cops was pretty important too, which I'd always taken for granted and went from there. Why couldn't I just do that with these guys?

It seemed that that must have been the reason why Nicky didn't look at these guys as our brothers: they were involved in the same kind of network the cops were in, just a different scheme. And we weren't part of that scheme, not in the same way they were.

But shouldn't that have been what we wanted? to be part of that scheme? That way we could've been sure we weren't going to crash back down. We'd be at the top and could stay there. That seemed to be the very top, the real top where the gun would have its full meaning. I could easily pull the trigger knowing that I had a big network like that backing me up. It was the authority that went with the gun that was important.

Nicky must not have thought so. He must have figured that we were our own miniature net, and we could sneak around and in and out of all the others. Yeah, that's what he must have figured.

So I did too.

Nicky just came out of that room. He looked like a corpse. I asked him how he felt and all he could say was, "I hope your old man can swing it . . ." They took him down the hall, down to the jail cells.

"Yes sir, that's right. I'm glad you know him. Best lawyer in town. As soon as he gets here I'm sure that we can straighten the whole thing out."

The guy looks up from his big desk and stares me right in the eye. But he doesn't look mad. I guess he knows my father better than I thought he might.

"Yes," he says, "I know him quite well. We've worked together. But that doesn't mean you're getting any priority around here; remember that. Everyone's equal in the eyes of the law. You're just another individual it's looking at. You've done a terrible thing messing with these organizations, and we're going to make damn sure you get properly punished. Understand?"

"Yeah but it wasn't my idea."

"No?"

"It was Nick's. He set the whole thing up from the very start. I didn't do anything but the dirty work—and he forced me to do that. I'm totally innocent believe me. You've got to believe me."

"We'll see when your father gets here . . ."

The gun's gouging into my leg. Got to keep pushing it down, concealing it better. But God! it's not my gun! What am I doing with it? I have nothing to do with it.

They'll notice. My leg, the gouging, I'm giving myself away. The gun, it's giving me away.

The Chrysler pulled up to the curb, the passenger-side window in the front jettisoned down. I was confronted with a guy who had a face like stone, like ice. I could see he knew exactly what he was doing.

"OK," he said, "I count enough for all twenty." He picked up a case off the car floor and opened it. There, strapped to the inside, the ounces were lined up in two rows of ten. He looked up to see if I was looking at them, and when he saw I was, closed the case back up and handed it to me through the window

"But how do I know

"Just another chance you're going to have to take, kid."

"No—no fucking way Let me in, just for a second. So I can check.

"Sorry." He turned to the driver. "Let's go."

I felt helpless. What could I do? I stared, motionless, into the car as the window went back up. They pulled out into the street.

The gun! Now! Now you coward—before they get away—

I grabbed the cold steel and screamed "I got a gun!" The sights tore my flesh as I pulled it out. Aiming at the car speeding farther and farther away, I slowly squeezed down on the trigger . . . And felt so very alone.

FRESHMAN WRESTLING

I wrestled on the freshman wrestling team my senior year in high school. My friends called me Mad Dog. My enemies called me Mad Dog, too. Mad Dog Jones.

It wasn't because I was a bad wrestler that they put me on the freshman team, but because I weighed so little. I weighed eighty-three pounds. I would have been torn apart wrestling varsity.

Our team color was red. I had my very own uniform. But mine wasn't like everyone else's because even wrestling on the freshman wrestling team didn't mean I'd fit into a regular uniform. Instead they gave me one of the school's very first uniforms; it was more than forty years old and had been washed and rewashed so many times that it had shrunken down to just the right size for me, though holes were numerous and its original bright red color had faded until it was a dull, misty orange. No matter. I was a freshman wrestler and that was all that was important.

About halfway through the season we wrestled West High. West High was always a big match because the west side of town was famous for its incredibly-built men of all ages. It was pretty well-known that West High started training their athletes shortly before they were out of nursery school. West High always had fine teams.

On the day of the match I was discussing its prospects with Andy, the fattest friend I've ever had, while we were walking to the cafeteria for lunch. Andy was the one who'd come up with "Mad Dog."

"So Mad Dog," he said, "ready for the big match?"

"You bet."

"Better not eat too much. Don't want to weigh-in overweight."

"Very funny," I replied, "but I don't have to worry about that today even if I weighed close to my weight class: Coach Barnes moved me up a couple of classes so his son can wrestle."

"He's letting that little punk wrestle in your weight class?"

"Yeah."

"What weight you going up to then?"

"One-twenty-five."

"Oh no," Andy said. "That's Moose's weight class."

"You mean the Moose?"

"That's right."

"Oh no." I was done for.

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We had spaghetti for lunch. I couldn't get any into my mouth. It kept slipping off my fork because my hands were writhing with fear. You see, Moose was at least thirty-six years old. He'd never gone to school till he was thirty. He'd spent his life up till then on the back streets of New York City knifing people in the back. I'd never actually seen the guy, but I'd heard enough about him to be able to write his biography.

"Well if you won't eat it I will!"

It was Andy. He was asking people for their leftover food. They wouldn't give him any more up at the serving line because he'd already been back for seconds, thirds and fourths.

"Here, fatman," yelled a guy whose name I can't remember, "soak your face in this for awhile!" He slid a glass down the table that looked like it was filled with iced tea and pineapple chunks, and maybe a few raisins—it was kind of hard to tell.

Andy drank (?) it right down. "Thanks," he said. "Anymore?" He turned to me. "You don't want the rest of that spaghetti, do you?"

"No."

I gave it to him and he shoveled it right down regardless of the fact that the kid on the other side of him was flicking bits of pear into it between Andy's forkfulls. "Hmmm good," Andy said. "When you run out of pear, start in with some more of that pineapple."

It was pretty well-known that Moose had been lifting weights since he was three. And he never had any parents at any time during his whole life. (Some, in fact, had said that he was born and raised in a test tube like Superman.) And they said that he lived in the West High gymnasium and spent all his time lifting weights, taking showers, and eating vitamin C. This was all he ever did.

Andy came back and sat down. He'd been making the rounds at all the other tables collecting cookies from those who didn't want theirs or from those who owed them to him for one reason or another.

"Yeah," he said, chomping on a cookie, "you're really going to get torn apart, Mad Dog. Crushed. Smooshed. Rubbed out. Should be fun to watch. Wouldn't miss it for the world."

"I don't know about that," I replied. "I'm not such a bad wrestler myself. After all, it has been half a season now."

"Makes no difference, Mad Dog. None at all. By the end of today you and that ancient uniform of yours are going to be in shreds."

"Don't be so sure of yourself, Andy. Moose doesn't scare me! I have

a few things up my sleeve, you know."

"Better include a machine gun!" Andy said, and burst into laughter at his own joke.

"Shut up."

"Just preparing you for the truth, Mad Dog. You are already beat."

"Why don't you say something positive for once, huh?"

"OK," he replied. "I know you can win."

"Ha ha."

"No, seriously. I know you can win."

"How?"

"Give me your cookies and I'll tell you."

I did.

"OK," he said. "Here's how. I've been following Moose's matches." He stuffed one of my cookies into his mouth. "I go see him wrestle all the time. So far this season he has wrestled forty-six matches and it has taken him no longer than fourteen seconds to pin in any of them."

"That's inspiring."

"Wait till I finish. So far, only two guys have lasted all fourteen seconds. I saw both matches. The first was the first match of the season, the one that established the fourteen second mark. Moose was in bad shape, which was why it took him so long to make the pin. The other one was just last week. The guy Moose was wrestling slid off the mat after ten seconds, stopping the action. It was obvious that Moose was very upset and flustered that the guy had already lasted so long. Moose was running all over the place like some sort of castrated dog and yelling obscenities at his coach. It was by sheer luck, and a little bit of fowl play, that he was able to pin his opponent after the ref started the match up again. You should have seen it! Moose was so flustered he could hardly wrestle! The only way he was able to pin the guy was by kneeing him in the balls, which the ref didn't see—luckily for Moose."

"Interesting. So you're telling me not to go at all, right?"

"Wrong. Do go. Just last more than fourteen seconds. Do it any way you can. Knee Moose in the balls if you have to. Just make sure you ride it out that long. If you're successful, Moose will be so upset, so flustered, so defeated that you'll be able to pin him easy." Andy then ate my last cookie and sat back in his chair, smiling.

"Are you sure?"

"Sure as my name's 'Andy.'"

"It all depends on those first fourteen seconds?"

"That's right."

"Oh boy—" I had a chance of winning. Good old Andy: fat but smart.

Now, if you've ever wrestled you'll know about weighing-in.

Weighing-in is when you get that first good look at your opponent. It involves both teams standing around a very accurate scale. Nobody wears any clothes. If you happen to be the least bit shy and wear your underwear, you've made a fatal mistake: you get your head beat in after the match is over. I never wore any underwear.

So everyone stands there naked and pretending not to be doing what they are in fact doing: checking out their opponent's muscles. When he gets up there on that scale you get your best chance because he knows you're looking at him and knowing this causes him to flex and when you get up there you know he's looking at you which causes you to flex and everyone's standing around flexing and bending their arms slightly very slightly at the elbow and flexing some more and looking some more and flexing and looking and looking and flexing and those without armpit hair keep their shoulders back and their chest straight out and everyone's hoping that their penis doesn't shrivel up which is a sure sign that you're just as scared as the next guy and everyone's hoping that their opponent's a pussy and that they'll be able to creamate him within ten seconds and wishing that they hadn't eaten so much for lunch because their stomachs feel like shit . . .

Well, Moose wasn't scared at all. And he had plenty of armpit hair. He just walked right on up to that scale, winked at the ref who was conducting this ceremony, then set his gaze on the scale's balance. And he didn't even need to flex his muscles. Everyone was plenty convinced that he was a midgit Hercules just by looking at one of his toes. They, like his whole body, pulsated. All his veins grew and shrunk with every heartbeat, and all his muscles twitched whenever he caught someone's gawking stare. But calm. Always calm. Like water in a toilet bowl, which was the metaphor that immediately came to mind when I first laid eyes on this vibrating mass of tendon, tendril, and ligament. And hair.

After weighing-in and suiting up, I grabbed my headgear and headed for the coaches room where Coach Barnes always had the team assemble right before the match in order that he could tell us how great we were and how the upcoming match was going to be an easy victory if

we would just put out like he knew we could.

"Mad Dog," he said upon my arrival, "we've got you a brand-new uniform. A special size. Here." He snapped it out from behind his back where he'd been hiding it in order that he could surprise me.

"Far out!" I said, and rushed back to my locker to put it on.

And—boy—did I look professional! I looked like the other freshman wrestlers now. I was one-hundred percent freshman wrestler. I felt like I had a brand-new body. The uniform fit like a glove. It fit like a bikini—and almost looked like one too: a tight red stretch shirt that showed the top of my manly chest and all of my manly arms (including, unfortunately, my hairless armpits); tight red stretch pants that showed none of my hairless but manly legs; and bright red wooly socks. Wow! I felt like dancing! Which I did—right out into the gymnasium, not bothering to return to the coaches room because I was in a hurry to show the audience my new uniform.

They were filing in by the hundreds: it was going to be packed this evening. Some of my friends were already sitting at the top of the bleachers and holding up a big sign: MAD DOG ROAMS AGAIN! They cheered when they saw me. And some of my enemies were up there too and they also had a big sign held up high above their heads: MAD DOG IS A FOOL! They booed when they saw me. Nothing like a little support during these wrestling matches, I said to myself.

I went over to one of our team's practice mats and started doing a few cals. The rest of the team was still with Coach Barnes. But the West Highers were already out on the main mat doing their cals in their shiny black and white uniforms. Those West Highers were strong: not unlike a herd of gorillas.

I looked for Moose. And there he was—doing about six times the cals anyone else was doing, which was because he moved so fast that it was hard to slow down to everyone else's pace.

Andy walked up to me while I was engaged in some rigorous deep knee bends. "That's right," he said. "One—two—three. One—two—three. Now a little to the left. Now a little to the right. One—two—three. One—"

"Will you please shut-up."

"Just showing a little concern for my Mad Dog," he said. "Or maybe I should say: Moose's Mad Dog."

"Very funny ha."

"Say, you got a regular uniform. My goodness. It sure ain't going

to look regular an hour from now."

I didn't say anything, just started practicing a few moves.

"But seriously," he continued, "you shouldn't have any problems at all. Just stay out there fourteen big ones and the match is yours."

"You really think so?"

"Yeah. I know so. And here's what I'll do: As soon as those fourteen big ones are up, I'll yell, 'Moose's fourteen second pinning record has just now been upset by the great Mad Dog Jones!'"

"OK. That's a good idea. That'll really get him flustered. Yeah." I burst into a few toe touchers.

Andy rambled on. "Say, what's this? Do I smell sweat, or is it just my imagination?"

"No, it's not your imagination."

"Good! Good! Shows you're getting. "

Just then the rest of our team jogged out of the locker room and out onto the main mat to start some cals.

"How come they didn't give you any sweat pants like the rest of the guys got on?" Andy asked.

I hadn't really thought about this. "I don't know. Guess they don't make those a special size too."

"That's a special size uniform?"

"Yeah."

"That doesn't matter. Sweats don't need to fit perfectly. I'll try to get you a pair." He waddled off towards the locker room.

I joined the rest of my teammates on the main mat for more cals. The main mat was a bright red like our uniforms, and it felt really good blending right into it with the rest of the freshman wrestlers. Everything matched. Everything was real professional. Everything except for the fact that I didn't have any sweat pants like the rest of the guys did, and except for Moose and his black and white teammates. Moose seemed to shine more in his black and white uniform, though.

All the West Highers were now sitting on their team's bench watching us doing our cals and giving us sly looks—especially Moose. I really put out when we started doing jumping jacks so as to impress him like he had impressed me when he was doing his cals. I tried speeding up faster than my teammates like he had done, but I wasn't able to because everyone else was trying to do the same thing.

The "let's go" buzzer rang, everyone in the audience cheered,

the coaches lined up their teams on their sides of the mat, the two lines walked towards each other—hands outstretched, teeth gritted, faces red—and merged in a flashing mass of black, red and white.

When Moose and I came together and our hands interlocked, I couldn't help but to notice that the guy smelled like he'd just taken about a ten mile run in the jungle. I looked deep into his eyes, giving him the fierce Mad Dog Stare, and do you know what the guy did? . . . he smiled.

The stupid idiot smiled! I said: "You won't be smiling after this is all over, Moose my man," Which was definitely a bad thing to do. Moose stopped smiling, and spit on my shoe. The ref didn't notice. The crowd did. I heard laughter, then some guy yelled: "Don't drown, Mad Dog!" I wished I knew who that was.

The teams returned to their benches and we all waited for our matches. I looked up at the audience. The bleachers were packed. And those guys were still holding up their signs, but they'd traded: Now my friends were my enemies, and my enemies were my friends. This was very discouraging. I wondered what I was doing sitting there; I wondered what wrestling matches were for; I wondered if they were for pleasure. If that was the case, then whose? It sure as hell wasn't the wrestler's. It must have been the spectator's. That seemed logical.

I looked over at Moose. He seemed to be growing while he sat there in his black and white uniform. That didn't seem logical, but it seemed true.

The first weight class to wrestle was the ninety-eight pound. Our ninety-eight pounder was usually me. But Coach Barnes put his kid in there instead of me, which was the cause of my being put up against Moose, as I explained earlier to Andy.

Barnes' kid was only twelve, but he was bigger than me—not by much, though! They'd given him an old school uniform like I had had—but not anymore! His pants were bagging at the knees (like mine had) and his shirt was so flimsy that the chest bagged down around his stomach (like mine had) and he looked like he was swimming in his uniform (like I had) and then I looked down at my uniform. I was having the same problems, again. All those cals I did messed it up. Damn.

I looked across at Moose. His uniform wasn't bagging. Not at all.

In fact, as he sat there growing, it was gradually getting too small for him. I decided not to look at him anymore until our match.

Barnes' kid swam out to the circle in the middle of the mat. The guy he was matched against must have been a good ten pounds heavier than him. Strong too. A midgit Moose.

Barnes' kid lasted nine seconds. He was pinned. It was probably the most awkward pin I've ever seen. Right when the match started, the midgit Moose picked Barnes' kid right up off the mat and, still standing, flipped him straight upside-down onto his head. He kept him like that for a few seconds, holding him by the calves, then lifted him again and pounded him back down like a piston. I thought I heard the kid's neck crack. But I was wrong. It was his back. He just sort of lay there looking up at the gymnasium lights until the ref declared him "pinned!" His opponent had never left his feet.

Coach Barnes came out and peeled his kid off the mat, threw him over his shoulder like a dead rabbit, and marched off back to the locker room to give him some instant first-aid.

They couldn't find our man who was supposed to wrestle next. They looked everywhere, including the bathroom (a favorite place to try escaping from these encounters), but he wasn't to be found. I was sure he ran away.

When the next match started, the third, I went over to a practice mat to start warming up. I watched the match going on while I did so. It ended in total defeat for our man, but he wasn't pinned, which was encouraging. He was decisioned 112 to 0. There weren't enough digit spaces on the scoreboard for that 112 so they stopped scoring at 99. I kept track of the rest on my own: it gave me encouragement just knowing that he wasn't going to be pinned. I shook his hand when he came off the mat, just before he collapsed. They had to carry him away too.

Now it was my turn. All the spectators suddenly became my best friends: "We know you can do it Mad Dog!"; "Go for it Mad Dog!"; "Mad Dog roams again!" (a favorite); "Let's go Smith! You may be a lousy math student, but we know you can wrestle!"

What math had to do with wrestling, I didn't know. Neither did I know who had yelled that. Didn't even get my name right!

Moose had already hopped out onto the mat. He was jumping around all over the place and twisting his neck in strange ways. He looked like some kind of alien being in that headgear of his: like a Martian

wrestler dressed in black and white.

As I snapped on my headgear, I looked for Coach Barnes so that he could tell me how great a wrestler I was and how easy this match was going to be if I would just put out like he knew I could; but he wasn't back from the locker room yet so I told myself these things. I think it helped. Until I looked down at my uniform pants which had now bagged down so far in the knees that it looked like someone had been swinging from them. And my shirt was so far stretched out that almost my entire hairless chest was now readily observable. And Moose now looked like he'd grown another two feet and his uniform had gotten so small on him that it barely covered his unmentionables, and did a poor job at that.

And Mad Dog swam out to the circle in the middle of that big red mat. Moose hopped up in front of me, sweat pouring down his face and dripping off his chin. He seemed to think the match had already started. He would have kept right on hopping if the ref hadn't stuck his arm between us, halting Moose's progress. A sudden realization seemed to come across his face that the match hadn't started, that it was just the beginning, that we were now supposed to shake hands.

Which we did.

The ref stepped back outside the circle and raised his whistle to his mouth. Moose charged—knocking me off my feet, sending me flying through the air back to our team's bench. I lay stunned at my teammates' feet.

The ref blew his whistle and started yelling at Moose. "You idiot! The match hadn't even started yet!"

Moose just looked down at his shoes and scraped his toe on the mat. "You should have told me before I attacked," he said.

Shaking his head, the ref came over to me and asked me if I was all right. I said yes but couldn't you please call my mother so I can go home now.

Coach Barnes suddenly popped out of nowhere. "You all right?" he asked.

"I just went through that with the ref," I replied. "Ask him."

"Is he all right?"

"Yes but he says he wants his mother."

"Nonsense," said Coach Barnes. "He's just fine."

"Why don't you go away again?" I said.

"Ha ha," replied Coach Barnes. "Always the joker, Mad Dog. Now

get up and go back into the ring."

"Let me rest a little longer."

I looked over at Moose who was still standing there scraping his toe on the mat.

"You can go now," the ref said to him. "You'll wrestle again later."

Moose neglectantly walked away without so much as looking at me. I stood up and sat back down with my teammates.

After the next match the ref again asked me if I was all right. I said yes but please let me rest another match. He said OK.

After the next match he asked me if I was ready. I said no, one more match please sir.

After the next match, Coach Barnes grabbed me by the arm and dragged me back out to that circle. He told me all those things I'd already told myself then left me alone. Moose hopped back up in front of me, ready and raring to go.

"You do that one more time," the ref said to him, "and I'll make damn sure you never wrestle in this league again!"

"But you should have told me before I attacked," Moose repeated. Now I knew what math had to do with wrestling: Those who aren't too smart make the best wrestlers. It was an important realization. I wanted to go talk it over with the guy who'd yelled it, but I didn't know who that was and, anyhow, the ref blew his whistle starting us up again.

I immediately ran off the mat as fast as I possibly could.

The ref seemed amused, so I knew I could get away with it again, which I did as soon as I heard that whistle.

By this time I had successfully wasted five seconds of wrestling Moose time. Only nine more remained before I could sew up the match in an easy victory.

I was warned by both the ref and the other team's coach that I was not to run off the mat again.

So the whistle blew once more. This time I ran around behind Moose. He kept turning in circles, really confused, trying to catch me. I successfully stayed about half a turn ahead of him until:

"Moose's fourteen second pinning record has just now been upset by none other than the great Mad Dog Jones!" Andy'd come through. Thank God for Andy. Everything was working out.

Moose slowed, and slowed, and slowed, and finally stopped spinning

when he realized he didn't need to because I'd already stopped. He looked completely flustered, antagonized, confused, defeated. I thought he was going to start crying. "Ah ha!" I thought. "Now he gives up and goes down on his back like a jellyfish!"

He looked at the ref, tears swelling in his eyes. "Yes!" I thought. "Now he asks for a time out so he can try to get himself back together!"

But no. He leaped at me—catching me off gaurd. Charge!

And there I was again. Lying next to my teammates' feet. It hurt much more, this time. I closed my eyes and waited for the ref to come over again.

But no. To my sullen surprise, I wasn't off the mat enough to stop the action. Moose grabbed me by the ankles and started dragging me back onto the mat. I in turn grabbed the ankles of one of my teammates, but Moose pulled so hard that he was able to drag us both back into the midst of the mat.

"Let go of me! will you?" said my teammate. Fine teammate he proved to be. I let go of him.

The last person I remember seeing was Andy. He was running towards me from the bleachers and had those sweat pants he'd said he'd bring held straight out in front of him. For a moment I thought he was trying to reach me so that he could hand them to me; but then it seemed like he wasn't even considering doing that: it seemed like he was going to try and stuff them over my head.

Andy and the red sweat pants quickly faded, though, into the sudden blur of the gymnasium swirling around me. Moose had me off the ground, spinning me around by my ankles.

Faster—faster—faster

And he let go.

I landed in my bed in my bedroom in my house. When I regained consciousness, there was Andy. He was sitting in my desk chair, reading Sports Illustrated.

"Andy?" I said.

"Oh! You're awake! How you doing, Mad Dog?"

"Don't call me that anymore."

"OK. Sure. Sorry."

"What happened?"

"You lost."

"No kidding?"

"Yeah, boy were you flying. Good six feet in the air. Never seen anything like it. Incredible."

I put my hand up to my face. My nose was all bandaged up. "Did I break it?"

"Yup. Not you though. Moose did."

"Don't be funny."

"Sorry."

"At least he didn't pin me in fourteen seconds."

"True."

"They'll probably put me in the school newspaper for that."

"Maybe so."

"I'm sure of it."

"Don't be."

"Why not?"

My mother knocked on the door before he could answer.

"Come in."

She did, and was carrying a tray with two glasses of milk and some cookies on it. "How's my Mad Dog?" she asked.

"Don't call me that anymore."

"How you feeling? The nose?"

"Not bad."

"Your friend . . . What's his name? What's your name?"

"Andy."

"Oh yes. Andy told me all about it. Sounds awful."

"It was."

"But you're feeling OK now?"

"Yes."

"Sure?"

"Yes."

"Want some cookies?"

"Yes," I said. "I'll take the milk too."

Andy suddenly propped himself up in my desk chair.

"You'd better get some more cookies," I said to my mother. "More milk, too. Andy here is a big eater."

"OK. Be right back." She left.

Andy'd pulled up his chair right next to my bed so as to get a better position on those cookies, which were all on one platter.

He was stuffing his face as if this was the last meal he'd ever have.

"You want your milk?", he asked.

"Yes. And leave me some cookies."

He continued eating. I hadn't touched a thing, yet.

"Andy?"

"What?"

"Why aren't you so sure I'll get in the school paper?"

He stopped chewing and picked up his Sports Illustrated again.

"Answer me, Andy."

"Just wait a second." He was leafing through the magazine.

I sat watching intently. I figured he must have been stalling. I figured Moose didn't even have a fourteen second pinning record.

When Andy came to a full-page cigarette advertisement, he lay the opened magazine down on my bed where I could see it, then continued chewing. The advertisement was for Winstons, and had a picture of a beautiful, beautiful woman sitting on a crowded bleacher with her boyfriend. She was smoking a Winston and had the bright red pack visibly slipped into her low-cut shirt between her absolutely gigantic breasts. Everybody was laughing and having a great old time. The red sweat pants Andy'd come running towards me with were lying at the foot of the bed next to the magazine.

"Well," I said, "are you going to answer my question or not?"

"Yes," he said, and paused.

"See that pretty girl?" he continued, pointing to the magazine picture with a cookie.

"Yes I do."

"Do you think that if you were to take up smoking Winstons you'd always be enjoying yourself as much as she obviously is in that picture?"

"I don't know. What does that have to do with my question?"

"I'll tell you: Moose and that pack of cigarettes have a lot in common. You see, Moose got thrown out of West High last year. I haven't heard a thing about him since. So, Mad Dog, if you get in the school newspaper, it won't be because you weren't pinned by a person who no longer exists in fourteen seconds, it will be because you had a fatal wrestling match with your own gullible imagination."

"You mean I wasn't even wrestling Moose?"

"You might as well have been, but you weren't."

"You son of a bitch, Andy! You are a true son of a bitch!"

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"Don't get upset. I was only trying to teach you a lesson. I think I was successful, too."

So I took a bite of cookie and decided right then and there that was going to quit the freshman wrestling team and join my senior friends and enemies in the bleachers at all future wrestling matches

The time has come to review the traditional concept of writing "from experience."

Traditionally, writing "from experience" has meant that the writer should draw the material for his art directly from what has happened to him, the meaning inherent in the experience. He was supposed to arrange these episodes from his life in a manner which would bring out the meaning and expand and amplify it. Faulkner is probably the best example of this. The good writer, by these standards, is he who can best make meaning out of his experience, and who can, at the same time, remain objective so as to make his literature a functioning part of literature as a whole. Literature has thus come to be an object subjective only in as far as the reader can share the author's experience. All else is guesswork—objective guesswork.'

It is, of course, impossible to have a completely subjective literature because, obviously, only the author would be able to understand his material. It is also impossible because total subjectivity is made impossible by the very nature of language itself. The author whose goal is subjective is mislead.

Most literature today aims towards the subjective. The reasons for this, probably, stem from modern skepticism about the possibility of any objective reality, at least in as far as the West is concerned. We have seen the great impact of science on Western thought all through history; in fact, if we were to point to the most drastic and most guiding force on literature, it would have to be the various types of world views imposed by science on intellectual man. The Neoclassic authors evolved as such because of the effect of Newton and the mechanical world view; and modern literature has most surely not been unaffected by Einstein and Heisenburg. Others such as the Romantics and Realists were reactions directly against what came before them: the Romantics being a reaction against the mechanical view of the Neoclassics, and the Realists reacting against the Romantics. But that's art: Man seeking his true self by looking at both sides of the situation. The only consistent thing we can really say is that Western art absorbs Western thought—metaphysical, theological, etc.—as soon as it changes. And this is what is happening today—literature is absorbing the uncertainty of any objective reality as described to us by the physicists and scientists and is thus becoming very subjective—meaning, in other words, is either non-existent (as

Hemingway's "nada") or it is purely subjective (as seen in Steven's and other recent poets' works).

This is why the concept of writing directly from one's own experience has become so vastly important.

But now is the time for the reaction. The Romantics revolted against the Neoclassical authors' mechanical certainty that made the world—the entire universe—a machine, and now is the time for us to revolt against the uncertainty of literature up to the present. We should no longer be interested in only what meaning comes out of one experience (regardless of its "universality"), but how we can touch on the universal independent of experience, independent of what one person thinks, independent and universal.

Everyone has five senses: This is certain. Who says everything is "nada," uncertain? We all know that $2+2=4$, don't we?

Let's keep it empirical. Let's keep it purely logical, simply logical. Let's find meaning in what we can see, not in some foreign, other-worldly concept known completely or as much as possible only by the scientists (if, in fact, there knowledge is "true"). The great minds have been "proved" wrong, like Aristotle's, so the same may be with Einstein's. Why must we rely on the scientists and their abstract speculations to tell us about us? What ever happened to the old Romantic faith in each man and his own faculties. Let's keep it empirical, let's keep it individualistic, but at the same time let's keep it objective.

We all have eyes. We've all seen a tree. We can all imagine a tree upside-down. But have we all seen something like: The gentle swell of the Hawaiian tide breaking over the sandstone and granite conglomerations." I sure haven't. I don't even know if something like that even exists. But if it did, and we look at that sentence in light of today's standards of writing "from experience," and we think of it as coming from the hand of a Hawaiian authors, it would be excellent; but it wouldn't mean shit to an Alaskan. Faulkner, in fact, wouldn't mean shit to an Alaskan. What do they care about the American south? Too subjective.

Now, there are certain "universal" things—objective and subjective—the subjective becoming objective by their universal nature, like feelings—hate, greed, and others brought out by mere living. But who knows? maybe nothing is universal. We can only touch on those things that appear to be.

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Like rocks, Or clouds. Everyone knows what a rock is. Everyone knows what a cloud is.

On the other hand, everyone knows what balance is. What time and space are. These are a priori, and maybe not universal, but seemingly so. When I read story where one person is compared or contrsted to another, I know it has balance. When I read a story divided into parts where each part has an obvious single purpose, I know the story has balance. I know the author is dealing with what is prima facie to him. None of this heavy speculative nonsense.

So, when I read a story about rocks and clouds and upside-down rocks and clouds, and where one part deals with a rock, another a cloud, another an upside-down rock, another an upside-down cloud, and the last all these things together, I know what's happening in the story, and, most importantly, I like it. It is an extension of me. It is an extension of everyone. It is both classical and romantic. It is true beauty. And far-out.

COMPLACENCY

He lived in the mountains and grew marijuana plants, and herded cows and ate green peppers (which were bought at the local Safeway food store).

Sometimes, usually late at night, he'd hike off into the mountains in search of wolves; to kill the wolves. He hated wolves.

And sometimes, when the sun was shining just right, he'd kill a cow, then go out that night and feed it the wolves, then kill them too.

It was a quiet life—complacent.

And sometimes when the sun was shining just right, and a dead cow lay behind his shack, and the wolves were satisfied, and his plants had just been watered, he'd assume the Lotus Position on the old rug that lay on his shack floor—and which was also bought at the local Safeway store (along with the green peppers) and he'd meditate on technology.

The End

Once upon a time there was a house. And in this house little people lived—little tiny people unknowing of what their house was really like. They thought the house was infinitely huge, big as the universe, and, sometimes, they thought it was even bigger than that. As a result, they never explored their house; why should they? after all it was infinitely big, and as everyone knows, you can't discover infinity.

But there was one little person named Fred who ~~thought~~ that the house wasn't infinitely big. He knew that it was only as big as it was known to be. He knew that it wasn't any bigger than just what had already been explored. So with this knowledge, Fred pushed on into unknown areas of the house.

"But that's silly," everyone said. "There's no use in exploring the infinite. You'll get lost. Stay here with us. Don't go into the unknown. It's dangerous."

Fred didn't listen to them. They didn't know what they were talking about. He couldn't be content with just sitting in the same parts of the house everyone else did; he had to move on—find his own parts of the house. He wasn't afraid of getting lost: "What does it matter if I get lost," he said to himself. "There's no danger in getting lost." So off he went.

He walked up stairs and down stairs and through walls and under floors and on top of roofs and down chimneys and everything. And he never thought that he might be getting lost in the house; this would have been a foolish idea, he thought. "If I'm always still in the same house, how can I be getting lost?" So on he continued. Through doors, down floors, passing through many, many different rooms, and enjoying it immensely. He loved it. Up chimneys, down chimneys and through them too. He went everywhere. And he never worried about getting lost.

One day, he was in this one particular room, a green room with red pictures on the walls, and all sorts of strange designs painted on the ceiling. He sat down to eat his lunch. As he sat there eating his lunch, he said to himself: "Boy O boy. I have really explored this place, and it is infinitely big. They were right the whole time." He pulled an apple out of his lunch box and chewed on it. "I have never been through the same room twice," he thought. "I have gone up and down and through many, many chimneys and they've never been the same. Boy O boy have I traveled!" He finished his apple. "I could keep on traveling forever if I wanted too. But I think it's

time I go back down to the other little people and tell them what I've seen. Boy O boy have I seen a lot!"

So off he went back to find the other little people to tell them what he'd seen. Up chimneys and down chimneys he went, through, past and inside new rooms he'd never seen before--more and more of them. He never saw someplace he'd been before. He looked and looked up stairs and down stairs and through stairs and in rooms and outside rooms and through doors and behind doors and in front of doors but he couldn't find any place he'd been before: Fred the little person was lost and all alone in the infinitely big house.

"I am lost," Fred said, "and I don't think I'll ever be able to find my way back to the other little people. This is terrible; I never thought it would happen." And little Fred started to cry and beat on walls and run up and down stairs screaming: "Other little people, where are you?!" He smashed his little fists on floors and ceilings and screamed: "Other little people, help me! I want to come back but I cannot find my way! Help! Help!"

But no one heard him. Little Fred was forever lost.

He stopped running and screaming in order that he could calmly think about what had happened to him. "I want to find the other little people again so badly," he thought to himself. "I feel so lonely and sad. I've got to find them again." So he took out a piece of paper and a pencil from his supply box and tried to draw a map of where he'd been; he was hoping he could trace his way back. But as soon as he started drawing the map, he stopped. "I don't know where to even start," he said to himself. "I can't remember and I don't know where I even started from. There is no reference point. I have traveled so far and so long that I don't know where I began." He sadly put his pencil and paper back in his supply bag and gave up all hope.

He started thinking that he had never even been with the other little people in the first place. "If I had been with them in the first place," he said, "then I would not have thought of traveling off into this infinitely big building. I would have wanted to stay with them forever and ever. 'Maybe,'" he thought, "'I'm not even a little person. Maybe I'm something else. Maybe I'm a dog.'" This sounded reasonable. "That's it!" he said aloud. "I'm a dog!" But he really wasn't. He only thought he was. But he believed he was a dog.

So little Fred decided not to even try to find his way back to

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the little people. He decided to try to find where in the infinitely big house the other dogs like him lived. Up and down stairs and through and above doors and ceilings he made his way. He felt happy that now he finally knew what he was. He was a dog. This made him very, very happy.

Up and down rooms and stairs and chimneys and floors and ceilings and all over the place he made his way. After much travel, he finally found the dogs. They were in one big kennel hanging upside-down from a ceiling. There was one dog sitting on the kennel porch smoking a pipe.

"Hello brother dog!" Fred yelled to him. "Hello! I'm so glad to be with my own kind at last!"

"With your own kind?" the dog with the pipe asked. "You are a little person, not a dog. Why, little person, do you think you are a dog?"

"I'm not a little person," Fred said. "I am a dog. I am a dog because I have never lived with the little people."

"Oh you foolish little person," the dog with the pipe said. "Just because you have never lived with the little people does not mean you are a dog. Besides, you had to have lived with the little people at one time or another since you were born a little person. You're a little person because you lived with your mother and father. You are their son. You must, therefore, be a little person."

Fred thought about this. It seemed to make real sense. "You must be right, dog. I am a little person. I'm not a dog. It was silly of me to even think I was."

"That's right," said the dog, puffing on his pipe. "Now go back to the other little people and live happily ever after. It was foolish of you to think you were a dog and go traveling off into this infinitely big house."

"But dog," Fred said, "I didn't go traveling off into this infinitely big house because I thought I was a dog. I traveled off into this infinitely big house because I wanted to see what I could find. And once I'd traveled off, I couldn't find my way back. That's why I thought I must be a dog."

"I see," said the dog, smoking his pipe. "I see your problem." The dog sat and thought about Fred's problem while he smoked his pipe. Soon he said, "Sorry little person. I cannot help you." And he went back into the kennel leaving Fred all alone, again.

This made little Fred very sad, as you can imagine. "The dog said I am a little person," he thought. "But I cannot find my way back to them. I am forever an exile from the race of little persons."

So he sadly wandered off back into the depths of the infinitely big house. He wandered for days and days up and down chimneys, above and through doors, down and behind ceilings and walls and never saw any place he'd ever been before. "I used to love doing this traveling," he said to himself. "It used to be great fun. Now I hate it."

On and on and on and on little Fred went. Little Fred the exile explored and explored, but he didn't like it like he had before. And on and on and on and on he went.

Little Fred is still wandering around the infinitely big house. But now it has become a way of life. He realized the hate he had developed for it was just a reaction to the total hopelessness he'd found himself in after not being able to find the little people again. He likes wandering now. He likes it like he had before. But he just can't help wondering if somehow, for some reason, that only the infinitely big house knows about, if he had stayed with the little people in the first place, his love for exploration would have been more gauged, more directed, more useful to every other little person that lives now or will ever live in times to come. Fred the little person is very sad. But on and on he goes.

A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG MAN: A SLIGHT RETURN

Steven Deadalus sat in his desk chair watching the prefect.

"Now children," the prefect said, "who has the correct answer?"

Deadalus raised his hand. "I do! I do!"

"What is it, Dead my boy?"

"Six!"

"Wrong! Out of this class right now! Go!"

Stephano negligantly walked out. It was the ninth time he had been that week. He felt exiled, beaten, pursued, eschewed. . . .

He went home.

"How did school go today, Steven?" his mother asked.

"As usual, Mom. Bad. Real bad."

"Well what's wrong with you!"

"I don't know, Mom. Guess I'm just dumb."

"I'll say. You just wait till your father gets home, and he'll give you a talking to!"

"That moron. He ain't no smarter than me."

"Well!" said Mrs. Deadalus. "You can pack you bags right now and leave!"

"But

"Go!"

Exiled again.

As Steven walked along the empty streets of Dudlin, he suddenly became aware of a voice calling to him: "Hey kid. Need a lay?"

"Yeah!"

When they were finished, the whore gave Steven two books instead of change for his twenty: Steven didn't have any smaller bills, and the whore had no change. The books were: 1) a dictionary, and 2) a

long and involved and complicated and boring novel about Hell.

Stephano read the latter with haste, realized he'd sinned, went to confession and told of all of his sins, and the priest threw him out for being such a dirty scoundrel.

He'd lost the bag he'd brought from home, he'd left the book about Hell in the confessional, and the only possession he had left was the dictionary (not including the clothes he did have on his back). Words! What was there about words? "A"; "abaca"; "abate": he said the words over to himself carefully: and was reminded of the whore. He suddenly saw her again in his imagination, but this time without desire. How could it be with desire???? It had only been fifteen minutes since he'd left her.

So he split for Paris.

The End

PLATONIC RELATIONSHIPS WITH COWS AND BLUEJAYS

Been about six years now. Yeah, that's about it. Six years on the farm with Jones and his wife Kate. They hired me to take care of the cows. Ain't seen anybody but cows and Jones and his wife for six years now. Man gets kind of lonely. Man needs conversation. Talked to Kate once, but old Jones thought I was trying to steal his wife and gave me a good beating I'll never forget. No sir. That Jones is a mean one. Ain't much to talk to neither. Tried talking to his wife once, but old Jones got real jealous, as I just told you.

So, as I say, a man gets real lonely all by hisself here on the farm. All I got to talk to is cows and bluejays. Many of them latter around here. Many of them former, too. Cows and bluejays, that's all. Old Jones takes care of the pigs hisself.

And I ain't no city fagot, either. No sir. I keep it clean with them cows. Ain't got much choice with the bluejays. Purely platonic with these animals. Rewarding, too. Like ol' Mark Twain used to say: animals talk just like humans do; all you got to figure out is what they say and how they say it. And I done it with the cows. The bluejays are a little tougher to get through to.

Sometimes my conversations with them cows go round and round. They can't say much more than a few things. Them bluejays different, though. Just harder to figure out what exactly it is they're saying. Yes sir. Real tough. But them cows are different seeing as they ain't got much to say, exceptin' "Duh," "Sheeit," and "Why?" Real dumb animals, but at least you can get through to 'em, at times, that is.

Well, Nelia is a little smarter than the rest of 'em. She's got what you call a big vocabulary: in addition to the above words, she can say: "Damn fine grass," and "What time is it?" Yup, she's a good cow. And the bluejays knows it too. They hang around on Nelia like she was ice cream with fudge toppin'. That's how good my old Nelia is. I think Nelia can talk to them bluejays better than me, but it's hard to say seein' as I don't know all the bluejay lingo as yet.

Damn fine here on the farm. Damn fine. Yes sir.

THE CHARISMATIC

It has been my fortunate experience to know Bruce's charismatic dog. In fact, I wouldn't have even met Bruce if he hadn't owned this unique canine. What I would like to tell you about is not my relationship, necessarily, with Bruce, but with his dog.

The dog was named Spot. Very original. Bruce had given his dog this name.

I met Spot some three years ago when he and Bruce were in the town park. I noticed the dog before I noticed Bruce. The dog smiling Yes, smiling one of his most charismatic features

Bruce and he were sitting on the park bench next to the deserted warm-up shack where, in the winter, we put on our ice skates to go skating on the town park ice rink. Spot was sitting there smiling, his paws tucked under him while he observed the surroundings, and seated next to his owner, who was sleeping.

The dog had such an effect on me that I wanted to go over and pet him. It was a charismatic effect, which is what this story is about.

So I went over to Bruce and Spot and petted the latter on his head while the former asleep. Soon, more people came over to pat this charismatic dog on the head, and soon there was a group of about ten of us. Bruce remained asleep and his dog remained smiling while he was receiving all this attention.

We all talked quietly so as not to wake Bruce up, but were unsuccessful.

Bruce woke, and to our surprise was not the least bit upset. In fact, he seemed to be truly enjoying the fact that he and his dog were receiving so much attention. Some of the people gathered around spot began to ask Bruce questions and make statements about his dog.

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Bruce responded enthusiastically, though he displayed his, shall we lack of intelligence, through these answers. He also lacked any charisma whatsoever. In addition to this, he stuttered. And on top of that, he smelled bad. And what's more, he was ugly beyond help.

His dog, though, was charismatic, handsome, friendly (and effective in his friendliness something his master lacked to an abundant degree and, all in all, one hell of a dog.

In other words, this charismatic dog made up for what his master lacked.

More and more people joined us. The dog should have been worn out by this time from all the vigorous affection, but he didn't show it. He kept on smiling and people kept on coming and everything was just swell.

I liked the dog much, and even considered buying it from his owner, but I heard others ask the same question and the only response Bruce gave was his address and an invitation to come visit the dog at any time.

One day, a couple of weeks after this memorable event, I went to Bruce's house to visit his dog. Spot, however, already had many visitors. They were crowded around him in, once again, true abundance. So, I sat down and waited for my turn. Bruce came over to talk to me. And what a dull fellow! In fact, he was a moron! But, I wanted to know his dog so well that I invited him over to my apartment, then left seeing as I doubted I would get my turn to pat Spot on his friendly little head for quite some time.

Bruce arrived when I'd expected him. Spot wasn't with him. Where's Spot, I asked. Outside the building, he replied. Get him! I said

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So Bruce did. It was great. I visited with Spot while his master watched TV (something I insisted on). They still come over and visit—or, rather, Spot visits while his master watches TV (something I make sure of) and everything works out well. It's just that when they leave, Bruce always has left his awful stench behind. But, no matter, I love to visit with the charismatic dog.

He used to love to sit and watch from his family's doorstep the Cadillacs and limosines go rolling on by on their way to the city airport, the chauffeurs' hats and the plush red interiors glimmering when the sun hit them just right. He used to sit and dream of what it would be like to be one of those fat fellows sitting in the back-seats, smoking their cigars and watching the poor districts go rolling by the window. It seemed such a subtle, cozy life that they must have led.

Sometimes he'd buy the big, thin magazines with the thick covers in the magazine store down the street. He'd buy them just to look at the advertisements—particularly those displaying the fancy homes those fat men in the Cadillacs lived in. He'd look at the pictures of the swimming pools with bars and Coke machines under tents surrounding on the outskirts of the patio; and he dreamed that one day he too would be sitting at one of those bars sipping a frosty beverage through a straw. And that someday he too would own one of those Cadillacs and have his own chauffeur and cigars imported from the far corners of the world. And that he'd have the finest woman seeing to his every need, and that he, possibly, would own a poodle, and could take it with him to the airport when venturing off to new horizons that only business men can get to.

And the food! How those fat men must have eaten Only the best; only the finest fruits and meats and drinks. How he loved to think of the feasts those men must have enjoyed. How he loved to dream and dream and dream of women with big fur coats accompanying him to the theaters and resorts far off on beautiful islands where only business men with chauffeurs and limosines could go to.

He kept his dreams a secret; he didn't want anyone to know because

that would spoil them, that would make them seem the illusions that deep inside, he knew them to be. They were his during the hours he was alone, and nobody but he could have them. How he loved them and wished that one day they would come true.

And now, it was possible. He had gone to college, and had done his best—lived alone, studying hard; and it all payed off: straight A's all the way through, a business major graduating at the top of his class. He'd denied himself all the pleasures the other students enjoyed, those they talked about before classes began. He saw very few girls, knowing that they would only distract him and push his dream that much further away. And now he was to graduate. Now he was to start to reap the benefits of his labors.

He got a good job. It wasn't hard to find. Companies needed good men like Blake. In fact, he had a choice. A wide variety ranging from production manager to out-of-state sales consultant. He accepted the latter because it assured promotion—soon.

He settled back into his college way of life but in a bigger way—a nicer apartment (with a bar and Coke machine by the pool), a

(something he'd never had before) and even started dating girls he'd met at the office. But he still worked very hard. He still

a higher dream to reach—greater wealth, influence, incedible vacations. It all seemed so near, and all he had to do was work for it. And he worked—how he worked! His social pleasures were few, they were more than they had been at college.

He sometimes felt he was climbing a long staircase. The hardest part was getting started, and that he'd done. Now, at this point, he saw himself as halfway up halfway to go, but easier and with a better chance of victory than the first half had been. His dreams continued—they had as their goal what was at the top of that staircase. And what was up there? He didn't know. He could only dream,

but his dreams were much realer and closer to grasp than they had been before. All he had to do was to look at his new Chrysler with its new radials and its new antenna for its new citizen's band radio; all he had to do was look at these things, have a drink at the pool and contemplate them, and his dreams began to solidify—become reality.

But soon this life began to seem tedious. He was tired of climbing. He had already entered the upper strata of society. And besides, he was getting an ulcer. His health in general was bad. The women he went out with were, at the most, boring. He was drinking too much. He wanted more excitement in his life. It was all becoming a total waste of his life. That staircase of his dreams had been conquered, and now it was like an escalator—going down.

His work had become routine; he'd gotten the promotions he was seeking. He got vacations now like he hadn't been able to get before. He skreetched towards the airport through the poor section with, sometimes, that woman in the fur coat that he'd dreamed about as a But women weren't the excitement he'd hoped for. He didn't want a chauffeur, either. And now he was almost forty.

He took up hunting and fishing trips to the Antarctic, Africa, the whole elite scene. But even there he found no meaning. There was nothing in wealth, he decided. Nothing at all. But still he kept up his life worthy of the upper class, and even considered (once) getting married. But the closer the wedding day came, the more he realized how little he loved the woman, how little there was to love. Money had even taken that away from him. Women, he decided, were nothing but greedy whores, and that was all there was to it. Love was something poets wrote about; not anything tangible. Money was the only tangible thing in the society in which he lived, and everything else stemmed from that. Life seemed shit

And yet, he continued his travels, stayed with his job regardless of how totally boring it was; and regardless of how much he'd helped the company to branch out, become more influential, become more powerful, become everything an industrialist dreams about. It was such shit. The only thing he found any pleasure in was traveling; but it didn't have to be a long journey to make him glad: it could just be a drive in his car. Movement—that was all that was important: something to distract him, give his attention something to hold

And so Blake lived out his life, retiring at sixty-five, dying at seventy-three of cancer. They buried him in a great huge place where all the tombstones costed a fortune. And, sometimes, people would come along and see his big huge tombstone and read his name and, perhaps, throw a flower on his grave. Blake had been a true American success story—except that he never got married.

The

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Dick and Emma expected their friends to be at the door. They had invited over the couple they'd met at the country club that day for drinks and dinner. Emma's roast was in the oven, and Dick had just finished refilling his cigarette holder with the novel Turkish brand smokes he'd been encouraged to test out by his friend at the club's tobacco shop.

Emma took one last quick glance in the mirror to see that all the folds in her evening gown were in place, and proceeded to the door. Dick hung back next to the bar, ready to start right in with the beverages. He was not in view of the door, happily-so seeing as he was a shy man at heart, but immediately rushed to his wife's aid when he heard her shriek.

Emma's over-reaction may have been due to the picture in the paper that morning of the man responsible for the murder of six suburban residents in a town nearby. For the person she confronted at the door—a far cry from what she'd expected—resembled the man in terms of hair length and general demeanor.

I guess I can't escape saying this: the boy she met at the door was a freak, a hippie (as they were at one time called), a flower person, whatever; and Dick and Emma, to continue with this inevitable need for placing people into social categories, were WASPs complete with suburban home and Cadillac.

"Are you Emma Tracy?" the boy had asked.

"Well . . . yes."

"I'm your son."

This was when the shriek had occurred.

Dick, upon arrival at the threshold, immediately questioned the boy: "Who are you?"

"Dad!"

Emma looked at Dick, and Dick looked at Emma, and the boy soon found himself again knocking at the closed door. But Dick and Emma did not this time respond. Their only responses were 1) a call to the Security Gaurd, and 2) a call to their lawyer, who wasn't home.

The Security Gaurd arrived without delay and carried the boy away. To the Security Gaurd Office.

The boy, despite pleading innocent to all charges of vagrancy,

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trespassing, and "unsanitary apparel in a private place," was soon sent to jail.

Emma and Dick knew it was true. They knew it had to come at one time or another. But they'd been hoping for a phone call or some other equally less direct means than those the boy had taken. They feared the people in the apartment next to them had seen the "creature" at their door, or—God forbid—the manager. This was all too much.

They finally got hold of their lawyer, in the midst, unfortunately, of their dinner party—the lawyer had bad news. The dinner guests were sent home as soon as they had finished their portions of Emma's roast, and Emma and Dick tried to somehow come to terms with what had happened. They drank it off. While their son remained in his rugged jail cell.

Emma and Dick had fornicated. The result of their fornication was their visitor this night. They'd given him to the neighbors after his birth. They had no other choice. They wouldn't have, for one thing, inherited a cent from Dick's grandfather who'd died six months into Emma's pregnancy. And, on Emma's side, an illegitimate child would have meant sure family exile and, as a result, no employment for Dick in her father's insurance company. They had no other choice.

Shit they didn't. They could have forfeited all that bullshit in favor of responsibility. They could have done what any sane person would have done: kept the child. But no. They couldn't do that. Fucking capitalists.

So, I have shown where I stand in respect to this story. I am telling it through Emma's and Dick's eyes so as to get full ironic implications about what I have to say: the generation gap is not to be blamed on the young—we are perfectly willing to change, to understand, to endure, which may be because we are young—but on the old, and those growing old from having started in the past when they were born and raised.

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A NIGHT WITH THE BELLows AT A "BEST WESTERN"

Frederick Bellows adjusted his new cowboy hat to just the right angle on his head, brushed off his new western-cut corduroy jacket, told his wife and son to stay in the car, got out of the car, and proceeded towards the motel lobby.

He was watched going in by his son Charles, who was sitting in the backseat of the Chrysler by himself. "Dad sure does look fine in his new cowboy outfit, huh?"

"Yes dear. He does," said Mrs. Bellows from where she was seated on the passenger's side of the front seat.

"Do you think I can get a coat like he's got?"

"We'll see, dear."

"I like my hat better than his."

"I like your hat too, dear."

"Thanks . . . Do you like your new cowboy scarf, Mom?"

"Yes, dear, I do. Very much."

"I don't."

Mr. Bellows returned. "They gave us a fine room," he said. "One down from the restaurant."

"Good, good," said Mrs. Bellows.

"Dad?"

"What?"

"Can I get a cowboy coat like yours?"

"We'll see."

"Please Dad. Just like yours."

"I said we'll see, son. Okay?"

"Oh, all right."

Mr. Bellows put the Chrysler in gear and drove to the parking space nearest their room.

Inside the room, Charles was disturbed because he had to sleep in a rollaway bed. "Dad?"

"What?"

"Why do I have to sleep in a rollaway bed?"

"Because . . . because . . . we want you with us, son."

"Well I won't sleep in no rollaway bed!"

"Now son, a rollaway bed isn't uncomfortable."

"Then you sleep in it."

"But where would you sleep?"

"With Mom."

"Now son, that wouldn't be decent. You're too old to be sleeping with your mother."

"Then let her sleep in the rollaway bed."

"Absolutely not," said Martha.

"Then both of you sleep in the rollaway bed."

"No, Charles, no!" said Mr. Bellows. "You are sleeping in the roll-away bed and that's that!"

The Bellows proceeded to the restaurant for dinner.

When they arrived, Charles immediately noticed a manikin cowboy set back in one of the dining room corners to give the place some décor. "Look! Look!" said Charles. "A cowboy! A stuffed cowboy! And he has a jacket just like yours, Dad."

"So he does, so he does."

"Let's sit next to him, Dad. Please."

"Well . . . all right, son. If you really want to."

"I do! I do!"

"I'll have to ask the hostess."

Which he did as soon as she came to seat them—a tall blond with so much makeup on her face she looked like a stereotype of a Cheyenne squaw. She said it would be perfectly all right if the Bellows sat next to the cowboy.

"I want this chair," said Charles when they got to the table. It was the chair closest to the manikin.

"Fine," said the hostess, putting a menu down there. "We sure do like cowboys, don't we?"

"We sure do," said Charles. "Why do you have so much makeup on your face, lady?"

"Because I like it on me," said the hostess, blushing (I think).

"It makes her pretty," said Frederick, then added quickly: "Prettier than she already is," then added even quicker: "Which is very, very pretty."

"That was pretty complicated, Dad. Would you mind running it by once more? I didn't quite catch it all the first time."

By this time, the hostess had turned four to nine different colors (I think). "Are we all set, then?" she asked.

Mr. Bellows managed a strangulated smile, and said: "Yes. Thank you

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very very much."

But Charles had to add one last thing: "Where do you sleep lady?"

"Charles!" said Martha.

"It's all right," said the hostess. "I sleep in a bed."

"I know that. I asked where."

"Just down the hall."

"What room number?"

"Charles!" Mr. Bellows this time.

"It's okay. Number 1. Why?"

"That's right next to ours, Dad! You sleep next to us, lady. Do you sleep in a rollaway bed?"

"No, I don't. Now is everything all right here?"

"Yes. Fine," said Frederick.

"Good," said the hostess, and walked away very abruptly.

Charles was given a long "talking to" during the ensuing meal of beefsteak and french fries.

After dinner, Charles' parents put him to bed right away—in the rollaway.

"We're going to the bar now," said Mr. Bellows. "And don't you try sneaking out, understand?"

"Yes father. I understand."

Five minutes after they had left, Charles snuck out. He proceeded directly, and very sneakily, to the room next door—number 1. The door was unlocked, and Charles snuck in, unseen.

He turned on the light and looked around. In the bathroom he happily discovered the hostess's makeup. She had a lot of it—not unlike the abundant supply a pharmacist has of pharmaceuticals. Charles swiped a few assorted cannisters, bottles, tubes, et cetera, and looked around some more. He found a spare room key in a drawer of the hostess's dressing table, then departed just as sneaky as he'd come—unseen, again.

He went back to his parents' room and climbed back into the roll-away, but didn't sleep.

He did fake it, though, when his parents returned—stumbling over each other and themselves and, finally, into their bed, falling asleep right away.

And Charles abruptly snuck back out again.

He proceeded directly to the restaurant, which was now closed, and

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ducked under the rope barricade on his way to the manikin.

"Hi Dad," he said to it when he got there. "How about a little makeup?"

He then pulled up a chair so as to be able to reach the manikin's head, stood on the chair and removed the manikin's cowboy hat, threw it across the room, and proceeded to paint the manikin's face. He gave it ruby-red lips, false eyelashes, pink cheeks, thick brown eyebrows, and a unique manikin hairdo.

"There," said Charles, admiring his work. "You look better than ever, Dad. Now give me your coat." He removed the corduroy jacket and tried it on.

It was a little big, but he liked it just the same.

And young Charles then picked up the manikin, heaved it over his shoulder, and proceeded with it back to his parents' room. They were still sleeping soundly when he entered and slipped the manikin into the rollaway bed.

Charles then grabbed his cowboy hat and left once again. He stood in the hallway for a few minutes admiring himself in a full-length mirror.

"Looks good," he said. "Especially the coat. But now, my fiance awaits!"

He then proceeded back to room number 1, unlocked the door, and tiptoed in.

The hostess was asleep and snoring loudly. Charles hung up his new coat in the closet, placed his hat on the top shelf, removed his shoes, (all this done very, very quietly), and slipped into bed with his fiance. He looked at her face. It didn't have makeup on it anymore. She was sleeping serenely, but still snoring.

Charles pulled the bedcovers up snugly around his neck and soon he too was asleep.

Morning came.

"Good morning dear," said Mrs. Bellows to her husband.

Mr. Bellows gradually opened his eyes. "Oh, it's you. Good morning."

"Of course it's me. Who'd you think it was?"

"No one dear. No one at all. How are you this morning?"

"All right." Mrs. Bellows then looked over at Charles' rollaway. "Wake up, Charlie. It's morning . . . Charlie?"

No answer.

Mrs. Bellows crawled out of bed and walked over to the rollaway.
"Ahhhhhhh!" she said.

"Ahhhhhhh!" came another scream from next door, like an echo.

"Ahhhhhhh!" repeated Mrs. Bellows.

"Ahhhhhhh!" repeated the voice next door.

"Charles is gone! There's just a dummy in here!"

"Who are you?"

"Charles is gone?"

"Yes."

"Why, you're the boy last night!"

"Where do you suppose he could be?"

"Hush," said Mr. Bellows. "Listen."

"How'd you get in here?"

"Walked."

"Why, that's Charles' voice!"

"Let's go!"

The Bellows, still in their pajamas, ran out into the hall and into the hostess's room. The hostess and Charlie were both sitting up in the bed.

"Charlie!" said Mrs. Bellows.

"Charles!" said Mr. Bellows.

"Charles?" said the hostess.

"That's me!" said Charlie. "Charles Bellows. So what do you say we all get dressed and put on some makeup and go visit the stuffed cowboy in my rollaway, huh?"

A FINAL AFTERNOON WITH THE BELLOWS

Frederick Bellows was interrupted while reading one of his favorite books by Dale Carnegie by a telephone call.

"Mr. Bellows?"

"Yes?"

"This is Mrs. Bigbodice."

"Well hello, Mrs. Bigbodice. How are you?"

"I'm fine. But this is no social call. I have just sent your son home from school for stealing."

"Stealing?"

"Yes."

"What did he steal?"

"Charles will tell you when he gets there."

"Well, all right, but . . ."

But Mrs. Bigbodice had already hung up.

"Who was it dear?" asked Martha, Frederick's wife.

"Charles' teacher, Mrs. Bigbodice. It seems he stole something."

"Stole something?"

"Yes. He's on his way home for doing it, too."

"But what would Charles want to steal?"

"She wouldn't tell me. She said Charles would tell us."

"Good gracious. I wonder what it could be."

"We'll soon find out."

The two parents went to the kitchen and stationed themselves by the back door with their arms crossed, and discussed the matter.

Charles soon arrived home, but through the front door. His parents immediately raced to intercept him but Charles, being a lad of great resources, heard them coming and took off for the bathroom, locking himself in as soon as he got there.

"Charles! Where are you?"

"I think he went in the bathroom, dear."

"That sneak."

They proceeded to the bathroom, and found the door locked.

"Charles!" said his father. "You let us in right now!"

"No!"

"Yes!"

"No!"

"Martha, I'm getting the key. Be right back. See if you can find

out what he stole."

"Okay." She hit the door with her hand a few times, then said:
"Charles! What did you steal?"

"Nothing."

"Charles!"

"I didn't steal nothing!"

"Don't use double negatives. What was it you stole?"

"Nothing, I'm telling you, nothing!"

"You didn't steal anything?"

"No."

"Then why did your teacher send you home?"

"'Cause she's a bean-head."

"Charles!"

"What?"

"What did you steal?"

"An eraser."

"An eraser?"

"Yeah."

"That's all?"

No answer.

"Charles—is that all?"

"Well . . ."

"Well what?"

"Well . . ."

"Well what! Charles!"

". . . And some . . . money."

"Money! How much, Charles? How much!"

"None."

"Charles!"

"Checks."

"How much money, Charles?"

"Money!" said Mr. Bellows, returning with the key. "Did you say
money?"

"Yes. He stole money!"

"Charles! I'm going to tan your hide!"

"Try it, Mister!"

"Did you hear that, Martha?"

"Yes. Now open the door."

He did. Charles, meantime, had jumped down the laundry chute. He

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was small enough and was able to keep himself from sliding all the way down by squatting and pushing against the chute walls with his knees and back. His parents peered down at him from the opening.

"Charles—get out of there right now!"

"No!"

"Charles. I'm counting to three . . . One . . . Two . . . Three!"

"Very good," said Charles. "Try for ten now."

"Why you! . . . Martha. Get a broom."

"The maid's using it."

"I don't care! Get something else then! And hurry!"

She returned with his Dale Carnegie book.

"Not that!"

"I couldn't find anything else."

"Oh, all right." He threw it down at Charles.

"Ow!" Charles said, and threw it right back up at his father, hitting him in the nose.

"Dammit!" Mr. Bellows said, and threw the book as hard as he could back down. Both parents then stepped back in fear of the return.

"Ouch!" screamed Charles, who then started ripping pages out of the book and tossing them below him down into the innermost depths of the chute. They floated out the end and into the hamper at the bottom on the basement floor.

"What's that ripping noise?" Mr. Bellows asked his wife.

"I don't know. Sounds like your book."

"My book! Oh my God! Charles!"

Charles' laugh was heard echoing up from the chute.

"Oh," said Mr. Bellows, "that little . . . something or other!" He looked back down at his son. "You little . . . goon!"

"You big bastard!"

Gasps.

"Martha! Did you hear what your son called me!"

"My son! He's your son too!"

"Not anymore!"

"Well," she stated, and tromped out of the bathroom.

"Charles! You get out of there right this instant or I'm going to do something terrible to you!"

The only reply Mr. Bellows got was the now empty binding of his Dale Carnegie book.

"That does it, Charles! That's the last straw! I'm calling the

police!"

"Fine with me, Dad."

"Oh you little shit."

Mr. Bellows then dived head first into the chute, while his son successfully avoided capture by slipping all the way down and out. Mr. Bellows continued sliding down until, finally, he got stuck at the end—the top half of his body having made it all the way, but the bottom half and his hands (which were tight against his sides during the dive) still stuck. His head was hanging down into the clothes and Dale Carnegie pages in the hamper.

"Stuck Dad?" said Charles, now standing nonchalantly next to his upside-down father.

"Help!" came the muffled cry from the depths of the hamper.

"I ain't helping you, Dad."

"Get me out of here right now!"

"Nope."

"Martha!"

"Your voice isn't too loud, Dad. Better get your head out of the hamper before saying anything else."

"I can't!"

"I'll help you, then." Charles then removed the hamper from below his hanging father, leaving him dangling in mid-air without any support whatsoever.

"You little shit! Help me more!"

But Charles was too busy searching through the hamper for something to reply. He found it. It was his very best shirt—the one his father had given him for his last birthday. It was very dirty seeing as Charles had played polo in it six times.

"Hey Dad. Watch this." He stuffed the shirt over his father's head.

"Why you!" came the, again, muffled cry. "I'll get you for this!"

Martha arrived on the scene. "Well, well, son," she said. "What do we have here? Has this man decided to start doing his own laundry?"

"Guess so, Mom."

"About time!"

"Martha!" came another muffled cry.

"Maybe, son, we should add a little something more, eh?"

"Good idea, Mom."

"How about a little ornamentation? Your father has always liked

ornaments." She removed a bobbypin from her hair and took one of the Dale Carnegie pages (the title page) out of the hamper and pinned it onto the shirt her son had put on her husband's dangling head.

"There now," she said. "Looks nice, eh Charlie?"

"Yeah, Mom. Real nice."

"Martha! I'll get you for this! The both of you!"

"Oh, you will?"

"Yes! Yes! Yes!"

Just then the maid appeared, saw what was happening, shrieked, and ran back upstairs yelling: "I'll save you Mr. Bellows!"

She went into the bathroom and lowered herself down the chute (feet first—a little smarter than her boss) and successfully pried Mr. Bellows out, who went crashing down on the basement floor at the feet of his wife and son.

Divorce proceedings began shortly thereafter, Charles being put into his mother's custody.

THE MOST IMPORTANT PICTURE

"Wilfred, this picture is very important. I can't stress enough how important it is—and if we get it right, science and man will have benefited beyond comprehension."

"Wow," replied Wilfred the assistant, "that is important!"

"Yes. Now, here's what you must do. Hold the bottom of the tripod with one hand, and the observation box with the other . . . That's it, Wilfred. But try squatting a little more to the right . . . That a boy, Wilfred. Got it tight?"

"Yup."

"Good."

"But just one question, sir."

"What?"

"What's the picture of?"

"A biological bisexual bilateral cross-section of an amphibious multroplasm."

"Oh . . . Where is it?"

"In the box, Wilfred. In the box! Now be quiet."

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"What are you doing now? sir."

"Never mind, Wilfred. Just be still."

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"Steadier! Wilfred, steadier!"

"OK. I got a good grip on it now."

"That a boy."

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"Sir?"

"What is it now, Wilfred?"

"This may . . . ah . . . be a stupid question, but what are we waiting for?"

"Noon, Wilfred, noon."

". . . Ah . . . Why?"

"Because it has to be noon before the multroplasm will start blooming. OK?"

"Yeah, OK, sir."

. . .
. . .

"Ten seconds, Wilfred. Are you ready?"

"Ready, sir."

. . .

"Wilfred! Stop shaking! Two . . . one . . . now!"

Click.

"We did it Wilfred! We did it!"

"Ya! Ya! We did it, sir! Ya! Ya! We got that picture of that old macroplastic."

"Macroplasm . . . I mean multoplasm, Wilfred—multroplasm.

"Oh."

"Science, Wilfred, has taken a great leap forward today. And we were part of it, Wilfred. We were part of it!"

"Ya! Bravo!"

. . .

"You get back up off the floor now, Wilfred. We're done."

"Oh. Good."

"Now go develop the picture, Wilfred. And be careful!"

"OK. I will."

Wilfred went to the darkroom with the roll of film.

Wow, he said to himself, what an important roll of film. I must be very careful. Very very careful.

His thoughts continued: . . . and it's all up to me. Ol' Wilfred. Boy, I must be important. Who knows? maybe someday I'll be a great scientist. Or a great photographer. This is so very important that it's like . . . like the world would end if it weren't for me. Wilfred the Great. Yes sir. I wonder what . . . oops . . . got to watch it with this developer . . . sure is smelly stuff . . . I wonder what would happen if I were awarded the Nobel Prize for this . . . damn, this thing's stuck . . . boy, science sure is important. Let's see now. Everything ready here? Roll, tank, scissors, yup . . . that's everything. I wonder if science will make man master of the universe? . . . Maybe so . . . guess everything's ready . . . well, here we go.

Wilfred opened the roll of film and started wrapping it on the tank spool.

. . . Gee . . . this film doesn't look very important . . . !!!!! the light! ***** Oh no.

Wilfred turned off the light.

. . . hope I didn't wreck it. Don't think so . . . Boy would I be in hot water if I did . . . I wonder why we could only take it today . . . and only at noon . . . hmmmm? . . . Science is very strange . . . Woops, where's the top to this thing? . . . probably under the table . . .

And so forth until Wilfred finally developed the picture.

"Very good, Wilfred," said his boss when he'd shone it to him. "Mankind has taken a great step forward. Interesting picture. Maybe Nasa will used it. Ha ha! kind of looks like it might have been taken in outer space with all these spots and streaks. Ha ha! Eh, Wilfred?"

"Yeah, sir. I didn't know a macrospasm would look so wierd."

"That's science, my boy, that's science. Never know how things will turn out. And we're always right. Eh, Wilfred?"

"Yeah."

Section 6.5: American Life.

This week our on-the-road interviewer found his way to that Great American City of Chicago. We are glad and proud to here print the interview he had there with Bob Cervice Vanbool, age 35, height 5'8", weight 198 pds., marriages 2, SS# 287-67-8456, savings account# 4358.7, checking account# 2387.65, income approx. \$23,458.27, address 276598735 N. 604705th St., apt. 3865, sec. 8.65, Chicago, 29845. Mr. Vanbool did not wish to have either his telephone# or credit rating printed.

US: Mr. Vanbool; the first question we would like to ask you is: "How do you like the American Way of Life?"

HIM: I like it. Nowhere in the world are such opportunities available for jobs, cars, everything, as here in the good old USA. How do you like it?

US: Fine. You sound as though you're well-traveled. Where have you been?

HIM: Many places. New York. Wisconsin. Idaho. How about you?

US: I mean where have you been outside the good old USA?

HIM: Oh. I haven't. How about you?

US: We're concerned here with you, Mr. Vanbool. Now, how do you like your job—account^{ant} with Bershmire Firm, 45867106 S. 4578432th, Bd# 34, Chicago, 29845?

HIM: I like it. I've been with the Firm half my life and I like it.

US: Satisfying, huh?

HIM: Yes.

US: And what do you do with your spare time? Read? Paint? Play golf?

HIM: I drive around in my car.

US: Oh yes. You travel.

HIM: Not really. I just drive around town. Those places I told you that I went I went to when I was looking for a job, half my life ago.

US: What kind of car do you have, Mr. Vanbool?

HIM: I drive a Buick. I like it. It corners excellently, handles like a dove, reaches high speeds in record-breaking times and stays at them without eating up everything in the gas tank or bouncing all over the road. It's white with a gold interior made of crushed velvet, has air-conditioning and, of course, AM-FM radio and tape deck, two

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ash trays, four interior lights, and a Delux glove compartment. As for the engine, it's an eight cylinderer, is turbo-charged, hardly ever needs the oil checked, runs like a bird, I love it. I've got all the accessories, of course. How about you, buddy; what kind of car you got?

US: A Cadillac.

HIM: How fast it go?

US: I usually cruise at about a hundred, and have all the accessories you've got—including the Delux glove compartment—and more. Also . . .

EDITOR: We have had to cut this interview five minutes short due to lack of space in this issue. Sorry.

US: And what are your future goals, Mr. Vanbool?

HIM: Well, listening to you talk about your car, I'm getting myself a Cad as soon as possible! That's all I have planned.

JOURNEYMEN

It was a journey they were to take together.

Neither of them knew just why they wanted to take it, or how they were going to go about it; but they did know that they had to take it. It was required.

One journeyman had many selves: each self different. Each self knew what it was and what it wanted and how to get what it wanted. But all selves together did not know what they were or how they related together or what their goal was.

The other journeyman had one self. That self knew what it was and what it wanted and how to get what it wanted. This journeyman detested the other for being so many selves: thought that he was confused and abstract

Neither of the two journeymen really liked each other. But they needed each other if they were to make the journey at all

The journey was a long one. On and on it went. It seemed as though it would never end, and it never did.

The journeyman with many selves defended his right to have many selves: said that with many selves he was more whole than the other journeyman.

But the other journeyman couldn't agree: said that the two of them could never make the journey if they couldn't both agree on just where they were going: said that the both of them must be able to understand themselves and join on one road together.

Actually though, this journeyman wanted to be just like the other journeyman but couldn't because his one self wouldn't let him. He called the journey off.

Both journeymen, in time, died. Neither ever finished the journey he had started.

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It was raining that morning, raining hard and raining heavy, raining by the sea, into the sea, raining by the river, into the river, raining, the sea, the river, the rain joining all, everything wet, hard and heavy with the rain.

And by the sea, by the river, between them, situated between banks like a lighthouse, stood a shack, barely standing, standing under the gray of the sky, under the grey early morning light, open under the rain, hard and heavy with the wet.

From inside the shack a boy sat watching the rain, the river, and the sea, watching through the jagged, worn cracks in the rough and ragged wood that his shack was built of, rough and ragged wood wet with rain, dank and damp and heavy, and the boy, he was very, very frightened.

From outside the shack, the boy's eyes could be seen peering through the cracks in the wood, peering into the rain, eyes wide and weary and wet and watching the rain, the river, the sea, eyes of gold.

And the boy kept watching, and the rain kept falling hard and heavy, and the river swelled, drawing its banks with it to the sea, and the river and the sea joined, the sea growing, the shack sinking, the rain falling, and all was gone.

Clearly, when I look back on my past, I see trains. Each train is carrying me to a different place, all trains going in different directions, but none knowing exactly in what direction it is going, going, trains, trains, trains all bursting out from a common starting point, which is myself.

And now, as I look at myself as I am, I realize that I am on just one more train, the same one I was on, maybe, when I was three, one more train not knowing exactly where it is going, going, but knowing that it started, at one time, from the same place as all my other trains, which is myself.

And tomorrow, when I wake up, that train will reach out and feel for its tracks and, finding them, will start back up again and take me where it will go, which, I hope, is back to the train terminal so I can get on another one. I'm sick of this train. Toot!

COMPLEX APARTMENT LIVING

The relentless sameness of each building and each floor in each building that characterizes all large apartment complexes gives the enterprising single man many opportunities to meet all kinds of young ladies under the most conversation-inspiring circumstances.

For example, if business has been slow, he can play the dummy by pretending he has gotten lost in all the sameness and "accidentally" walks into the wrong apartment.

"Hello miss. What are you doing in my apartment?"

"Excuse me, sir, but this is my apartment."

"It is?"

"Yes."

"Well, as long as I'm here . . ."

Yes, and elevators too, if the complex in question is equipped with them, are another fine source for "accidents."

"What floor are you off to, miss? I'll push your button for you."

"Sixth, thank you.

"Here you are."

"Thank you." She steps out into the lobby.

"Wait a minute, miss." He steps out too. The elevator doors close. The elevator is gone. "I'm sorry," he says, "but this is nine, my floor. I must have pushed the same button twice."

"That's easy to do," she replies. "I've done it too. I should have noticed before I lost the elevator, but these lobbies are all exactly the same."

"So true. More than once I've . . ." and off into the world of romance.

Also, there's those gigantic parking lots where at least one young lady owns the exact same car as some fortunate young man. If he times it right, both of them are reaching for the door handle at the same instant.

"Going my way, miss?"

"I'm going to McZoonies. Why?"

"How did you know? I'm off to McZoonies myself. Why don't you hop

in on the passenger's side?"

"Of my own car?"

"Oh! This is your car? I'm sorry. I have the exact same kind, same color, same year, same everything. But as long as we're both going to McZoonies, why don't I hop in on the passenger's side?"

And lastly, there's the laundromat-sized laundry room.

"Sir?"

"Yes miss?"

"I believe these are your clothes mixed in with mine."

"My goodness. How do you suppose that could have happened?"

"I'm sure I don't know. Here. These are yours, I think. And these too. Oh, and these."

"This one must be your sweater, miss. What a nice sweater!"

"Thank you."

"It must look very fine on you. It matches your . . ." and so on.

Easy as they may seem, these maneuvers are very difficult to handle just right. It is not my purpose here to describe how they should be handled (I've never been too successful with them myself), but to offer some examples of what could happen if they're all flubbed up.

Jerry is a young man, twenty-three, not bad looking, and very complete in whatever he attempts to do. Once he tried the laundry room mix-up maneuver.

"Why, isn't that a pretty sweater, miss!"

"Thank you. It was a present."

"Oh?" Jerry said, holding the wet, dripping thing up and admiring it. "What nice colors," he said.

"It looks better when it's dry," the young lady replied, taking it back into her own possession.

"I bet it does!"

"My husband, he's got so many big muscles that when he puts it on there's hardly a wrinkle in it. I had no idea it would fit so well when I bought it for our anniversary."

Jer smiled and left as quickly as possible.

He was a little more successful, but not much, at the old walk-in-the-wrong-apartment maneuver. After walking in and getting thrown out of two married couples' apartments (one of these couples made up of the lady with the sweater and her muscular husband—she hadn't been bluffing at all about his physique), and one truck driver's,

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he finally hit upon a single girl's.

"Hello miss. Can I help you?"

"Who are you?"

"Jerry. I live here. May I ask you your name?"

"You're in the wrong apartment. This is mine!"

"It is?" Jerry looked around him, innocently. "I'm sorry. Darn. I must have taken the elevator to the wrong floor again."

The girl laughed. "That happens," she said, directing him with her arm back out the open door.

"Yes," Jerry said, laughing too, "it's a human mistake."

"Oh yes, we all make them," the girl said, still directing.

"Yes," Jerry said, his foot in the door, "but as long as I'm here—"

The door closed on his foot, then he wandered back to his own apartment, limping.

The next day Jerry decided it was high time for the elevator maneuver.

After having to act as elevator operator for that same truck driver and (he couldn't bear it) same married couple, plus three elderly women who gave him dirty looks and two elderly men who smiled at him, he finally hit upon some potential. She was obviously younger than Jerry—at least three years, he thought—but that made her more seductive to him.

"Four," she answered to his asking what floor miss please.

• • •

"Here you are, miss."

"Thank you," she said, stepping out into the lobby but immediately realizing she was on the wrong floor; a painting hanging from one of the walls cluing her in. "This isn't my floor," she said, stepping back into the elevator.

"Oh! I'm so sorry!" Jerry said. "This is my floor. I must have pushed the same button twice."

"That's all right," the girl said. "No harm done."

"Yeah," Jer replied, getting out of the elevator. "By the way, miss, have you ever seen this painting here?" The elevator doors began closing but the girl jerked them to a halt by pushing the button that does that to them, and they opened back up again.

"Who's it by?" she said.

"Come here. I'll show you."

"But," the girl said, "my mother. She expects me . . ."

"Why Alice!" the girl's mother said, entering the lobby from one of the halls, another elderly lady with her.

"Hi Mom. Hi Mrs. Guernsey. Have you two been visiting?"

"Yes," her mother replied. "I'm just on my way back down. Are you going down?"

"Ah, I'm not sure. This nice gentleman here—" but old Jer was long gone.

Later that day, Jerry was finally successful, though not by his own successful maneuvering. It happened by accident: he did in fact mistake one young lady's car for his own, got in it, took his keys out of his pocket, and inserted them into the ignition.

"What are you doing?" a voice said from the backseat.

Jerry turned around, confronting a very pretty little face peering at him over the seat. She was kneeling down on the floor back there, looking for something.

"I'm going grocery shopping at McZoonies," Jerry said.

"In my car?"

"Oh God," Jerry said. "It's starting to happen when I'm not even trying."

"What?"

"Never mind. Excuse me miss. I'm very sorry." He opened the door and started getting out of the car.

"Wait a second," the girl said. "Maybe you can help me. I've lost an earring back here. Can you reach down under the seat for me? My arm isn't long enough."

"Sure."

Jerry climbed in the backseat with the girl and felt around for her earring. She asked what he had meant by it now happening when he wasn't even trying. "I didn't really mean anything," Jerry said. "It's just that these apartment complexes—they're so big, so confusing."

"Oh, I see," the girl said. "You mean how it's so easy to get lost? So easy to do things like get in a car that looks just like yours?"

"Yeah," Jerry replied. "That's what I mean." He found the earring. "Here you are," he said, giving it to her.

"Good. Thanks. At least something good came of the mix-up."

"Yeah."

"There are lots and lots of machines like ours here in this parking

lot. Same color, year, everything. It was an easy mistake. Thanks, though, for helping me find the earring. It's gold, all gold. Look."

Jerry looked, then got out of the car.

"What's your name again?" the girl asked. He hadn't told it to her before this.

"Jerry," he said, and began to walk away.

"You don't sound very happy about telling it to me, Jerry," the girl said, raising her voice. "What's wrong? Don't you like it?"

He stopped and turned around. "I like it well enough," he said. "But I guess I'm just sick of . . . well, sick of lots of things. Telling your name is just like telling your apartment number, or the kind of car you drive. It's just another label to group people by. They'd do better to give us numbers instead. Hi, I'm number four thousand, one hundred and eight-two. My car? A red Chevy. Age? Twenty three. Yeah, that's right; apartment ninety-three. Anything else?" He paused. "And to think I tried using it to my advantage. We're all just a bunch of objects. Everything's all screwed up."

"What do you mean, the situation to your advantage?"

"It's a long story. I'll tell you about it sometime, someday."

But he told it to her sooner than he'd thought. He related detail by detail what I've just described—the elevator, the laundry room, the "wrong" apartment. "I wanted to trap these girls," he said. "Shut us together and hope mutual desire—probably the only mutual thing there, too—would run its course. I'm glad it didn't work."

The girl had listened carefully to the whole story, giggling at the good parts, and when he was through she told him that she'd thought of doing the exact same things but hadn't realized it until now. Then she said that she was glad she wouldn't have to think about them anymore—at least not for a while—because at the moment she felt very happy and warm and secure, even though his bedroom was identical to her own.

So, the two lay there side by side, looking out Jerry's bedroom window at the rows and rows of lights outlining the many buildings in this huge apartment complex that they were a part of. But the relentless sameness of the place didn't seem quite so bad anymore; they were together.

I'd always dreamed of being a successful, high-paid writer for the popular market. And finally, one day, I went ahead and took those first big steps toward fame and fortune.

I went down to the drugstore and bought up twelve dollars worth of the finest, most talked about, most loved, most incredibly intriguing popular market magazines and rushed back home to pour through these issues that I deeply hoped would someday contain what I was about to write.

My favorite was True Confessions. I laughed and laughed for about two hours before realizing that if one is going to write for such a magazine as this he must first of all be able to take it seriously. But I just couldn't help breaking up reading articles like "I Went Ahead and Answered that Love Ad in the Newspaper—and Now I'm Ever So Happy!" and "He Raped and Beat Me Until We Finally Were Able to Make the Marriage Work." Yes, it was better than watching daytime television.

But joke time was over. It was necessary that I immediately get to work on some Serious Stories that the editors of these magazines couldn't help but to praise—and, possibly, even print. The stories, I decided, must not only appeal to the audiences of the magazines, but also have deep literary merits that would give them a universal quality and then, maybe, they would even go down in popular market history.

Yeah, that got me all excited. I ran down to the library and found some materials (Aristotle's Poetics and several of James' Prefaces among them) that I figured would engage me most in deep philosophical reflections on not only the art of fiction, but also on more general topics like What is Man. Then, thus-versed in these matters, I strode back home full of considerations, rubbing my chin and raising the corners of my eyebrows so that people driving past would be able to recognize me for what I was—a blooming author destined to be the hottest thing ever in the popular market.

Home again, I sat down at my typewriter and started rattling away, the plot developing, imagery balancing, tone and style perfect. I raced on . . .

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Three days later I was finished. Nine completed manuscripts, four going to True Confessions, two to Seventeen, two to 'Teen, and one to Sports Illustrated. Looking back, I'm not exactly sure how Sports Illustrated became eligible to receive one of these masterfully handled epics, but it did. It probably had something to do with a lost plot: one that was meant for True Confessions but that got detoured somewhere along the line, the main character falling in love with a high jumper, or something like that.

Anyhow, a month later I was reading ten rejection notices (Sports Illustrated had given me two for that one story, they were so pleased), looking between the lines, on the blank backs, along the edges, looking and looking, there had to be something other than just those cut and dried messages. But there wasn't.

So ended my attempt at fame and fortune in the popular market. Those turds.

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One Snowy Night

It happened last winter.

I was teaching a night course at a downtown extension of the university from eight to ten o'clock on Tuesdays and Thursdays. My subject was women's liberation in the twentieth century, something I knew much about because I'd been an active "women's libber" for most of my adult life. The students I had were, not surprisingly, mostly women. The few men who enrolled were there with their wives.

The first class of the third semester I taught came on a cold Tuesday night in January. I walked into the classroom promptly at eight o'clock and took my place behind the podium at the front. From there I took my first look at my new group of students. As usual, they were mostly women, the only men being with their wives, but I was somewhat startled to find sitting in the front row, the chairs on either side of him empty, a rather emaciated-looking young man with black hair and a scraggly mustache.

I greeted the class, told them my name and the other things

routinely conveyed to a new group of students, then began my opening lecture about the early-American roots of feminism. During my entire presentation of this subject, the man in the front row sat leaning forward in his desk, rubbing his chin and eyeing me up and down my entire body whenever he could get a glimpse of it behind the podium. Noticing this caused me to stammer and loose track of where I was in my lecture notes (I was always nervous and self-conscious enough up there the way it was, and he was so explicit in his trying to see every part of me except my face) so I did my best to keep my attention on the material being presented by having my eye contact with only the more intellectually attentive students in the class. But always I felt his presence somehow looming before me, his eyes watchful, and his face, to me, utterly detestable

I finished the lecture rather quickly, answered the few questions that were asked, then dismissed the class early. While everyone filed out, I remained at the front of the room in case someone needed to talk to me about the course. No one did, and much to my dismay, after everyone else had left, only one person remained—that man. He sat in his desk staring at me, at all of me, and I could hear him breathing heavily, almost panting.

"Is there something you need?" I asked.

He didn't answer. I walked quickly out of the room and to my office, which was in the same building. There, I sat, and thought. What was that man doing in a class on women's liberation? I was sure I didn't know.

I didn't own an automobile, so I had to walk both to and

from the school these two nights a week. My apartment house wasn't far away, but far enough that I didn't like making the walk all in one long stretch at ten-thirty in freezing temperatures. So I always made a point of stopping off at a particular coffee shop located approximately halfway through the distance of my short journey. I usually arrived right at ten-forty-five, and spent the fifteen minutes I was there drinking coffee and talking with the owner, a man named Pete. I had become to know Pete fairly intimately during these cold winter nights, and found a real source of pleasure in his conversation. He was a simple man, but good-natured and always smiling.

After leaving my office, still wondering about the intentions of my new student, I went directly to Pete's shop. I hadn't been there for two weeks because that was how long the break had been between semesters.

"Well Karen," Pete said when I walked in. "Right on time. A new semester begins, huh?"

"Yes, another one," I replied. "I see that you've been holding out all right."

"Fine, fine," he said.

I went and sat down at the table I usually sat at. The shop was empty, as it usually was at this hour.

Pete brought over my coffee, placed it in front of me, then sat down. "I was expecting you," he said. "I was beginning to miss you these last two weeks."

I smiled and said, "I'm afraid you're going to get tired of me now that I'll be here every Tuesday and Thursday night

again."

"Right at ten-forty-five, I know. But I won't ever get tired of you; you can be sure of that. How does the new class look?"

"Pretty good," I said. "Except for one person. A young man who it doesn't seem would be much interested in academic matters. He doesn't look at all intelligent."

"Oh!" Pete said. "He looks like me, you mean—except that he's young.

"No. He doesn't look at all like you, Pete. For one thing, he's not handsome like you are. In fact, he's rather frightening looking. I'm sure he's not there to learn about the liberation of women."

Pete laughed. "How do you know that? How do you know what he's there for?"

"I know. It's easy enough. I can tell from how a student looks at me while I lecture."

"How did he look at you?"

"Not intellectually, that's for sure."

Pete laughed again. "Are you worried that he's going to follow you home some night—with the intention of discussing philosophy?"

"Well, not that exactly. But it does worry me."

"Don't let it," Pete said. "The whole thing's probably just in your imagination. If he was some sort of crazy I don't think he'd take all the trouble of signing up in a school to find himself a victim."

"But that's just it: he wants me because of what I am—a

college professor and an advocate for women's liberation. Psychological tests have shown that many deviant males—certain types of rapists and the like are most sexually attracted to and most want to hurt females who represent obstacles to their ultimate authority in society. Women who somehow represent the Establishment, women who have authority and a certain amount of power—these are very potential rape victims. For example, one case involved a secretary of a man who refused a particular male deviant a job on the grounds of his unhonorable discharge from the army, and that deviant took out his aggressions from loosing the job on that secretary, who'd done nothing but admit him into her boss's office. He assaulted her, disguised, in her car after she was through with work that day. See? That's how the criminal male mind works. That's why I'm worried. Not about rape, really, but about that man's presence in my classroom. I represent power and authority to him both because of my position in the university and because I threaten his dominance as a male in society through my work for the liberation of women."

"Yeah, I see now," Pete said. "That's something. How do they know all that stuff? I always just look at rapists as nuts on the loose. Not, what do you call them? Deviants?"

"That's right. And that man tonight was a deviant if I've ever seen one. Maybe he won't show up at the next class."

I left Pete and his shop at about eleven-fifteen and walked back to my apartment house. The sidewalks were very icy and the temperature must have been well below zero. We hadn't had any fresh snow for about a week now, and the old drifts of it along

the sidewalks looked very muddy and dirty in the fluorescent glow of the streetlights. As I walked along I thought about that man and about Pete. Why couldn't all men be like Pete? He was always so willing to listen to what I had to say. I was sure he never viewed me as a "sex object." He accepted me as an individual with my own feelings and ideas, and regarded what I had to say as worth listening to. But that man in class . . . Wow, what was wrong with him? The word "drooling" came to my mind as the perfect description of what his behavior had been like. Rarely (if at all) had I seen a woman "drooling" like that over a man. It was frightening.

So frightening, in fact, that I had a dream about him that night, almost a nightmare. It wasn't a visual dream—it was a feeling: he was there as a force, a very threatening force pushing against me. It was like he was threatening the authority I had over myself. It was very strange. I awoke startled, the force disappearing. And when I lay back on my pillow again, I found it soggy with my own cold sweat.

On Thursday night, at the next class, there he was. But this time he'd brought one of his buddies. I somehow knew that this other man—an equally suspicious-looking character as the first but much bigger and stronger—was definitely not enrolled. He had not even brought paper or something to write with. Both of them sat in the front row where the first had been the class before. During my lecture, the first surveyed (I can't think of a better word for it) me in the same way he had before, while the new one shifting around in his seat, looking behind and to the sides

of him, and when he did look at me it was not with interest in what I was saying. I was, however, more composed this evening, and looked directly at these two without either loosing my train of thought or stammering. I was ready to confront this problem head on.

Which I did after class. The two, just as I had suspected, remained after everyone else had left.

"Are both of you enrolled in this class?" I said.

"Why?" said the new one.

"Because I need to know. May I see your registration slips?"

Both of them looked at each other. The new one winked at the other. He was obviously the big brother type to the first one, to the one who'd originally appeared in class.

"I forgot mine, Teach," he said.

"Yeah. Me too," said his little brother.

"Bring them to class next session or I shall have to ask you to leave," I said.

"What's the big deal?" said big brother. "You're a pretty ordinary one, Teach."

"Don't call me by that title. I am a university professor. The both of you have graduated from high school, I assume."

"That's right," said big brother. He was doing all the talking. The other one, it appeared, was shy—which I figured was why he had not replied when I spoke to him after the first class.

"And you?" I asked him.

"Yeah. I graduated."

"Well, make sure both of you bring your registration slips to

the next class session." I gathered up my lecture materials from the podium and walked towards the door.

"Can we see your slip, Teach?"

Both of them laughed. I spun around on my heel and stared intensely at them. "I do have the power to get the two of you suspended from this institution. I suggest you remember that." Right away I knew I'd said the wrong thing.

"Oh no! Big bad Teach going to send us to the principle's office. Please don't, Teach. My mommy would spank me little behind."

They both laughed again.

I was almost out the door by now.

"Where you going, Teach? Scared? Power-crazy bitch—"

I got to my office as fast as possible and locked the door. Their laughter was haunting me, ringing in my ears. I called on the telephone the girl who lived in the apartment right across the hall from mine, a young girl younger than me, whose acquaintance I'd had for some time. I asked her to pick me up at the school in her car.

"What's wrong?" she said. "Your voice is all shakey."

"I'll tell you when you get here. And hurry, please hurry."

"Okay. At your office?"

"Yes. You know where it is, second floor, above the street—"

"I know. See you in a few minutes."

"Bye Mary. And thanks."

"Right."

I sat in my office until I heard a knock.

"Yes?"

"What's up, Teach?"

away. Please go away."

"Just want to apologize, Teach. Right Jimmy?"

"Yeah. We apologize to you, miss."

"Alright. Now please go."

"Can't we come in, miss?" The doorknob turned. "It's locked."

"Go away!"

come on, Teach. Just for a few minutes—"

"I have a phone—I'm calling the police—"

"The police, Teach?"

"Yes Go away!"

"No need getting all upset. Let's go. She's serious. Bye miss."

long Teach. You bitch.

All was silent. Then I heard the door at the end of the corridor slam, the noise echoing down to my office.

It was ten-thirty. I looked out my window down onto the street. There was a heavy snow falling, and everything was already covered with the thin powder—the whole dark night lit up in a fluorescent brightness with the pure white snow and the glare from the streetlight. I saw below me the two men leave the building and walk into the snowy street. The talkative one turned around and looked up at my window, but I moved away, letting the shade fall back into place. I hoped Mary wasn't going to run into them, so I didn't chance looking out the window anymore—which, if they were still out there, would have kept their attention. I considered going downstairs to meet her in the hallway, but fear

kept me from even unlocking the door.

I heard the door at the end of the corridor slam again. Then came the knock.

"Who is it?"

"Me. Mary."

I unlocked the door and let her in. "Sit down," I said. "Did you see them?"

"Who?"

"The two men."

"I didn't see anybody, Karen. Why? What's going on?"

I filled her in.

When I was finished, she said, "I don't think they'll bother you anymore. They were just playing games."

"I wish I could be as sure as you."

"Well, at any rate, let's go. It's beautiful outside. It's snowing. Did you see? You've been all clogged up in this office, worrying. Come on." She took my hand and stood.

"What if they're waiting for us?"

"They're not. They're probably at a bar by now. Celebrating this pretty night. Let's go. You need to get outside. You're imagination has you all tense, Karen. Your hand is shaking. That's no way to be. Come on. Calm down. Let's go now."

"You're probably right. Thanks so for coming, Mary."

She smiled. "Sure."

We left my office and made it through the deserted building and down onto the deserted street without anything happening. The snow was almost pouring down now. I was still tense and nervous.

"Where'd you park?" I asked.

"Just down the street. See it down there all by its lonesome? It's all covered with white now. Everything's all covered with white now. Isn't it pretty? Look at it snow!"

"Very pretty," I said, and began walking very quickly towards the car.

"Slow down," Mary said. "It's already buried."

As we moved along towards it, I kept looking all around us and above us. Up there I saw the bare limbs of the tall trees that lined the sidewalk on either side. In the dark and in the snow these limbs looked strange and deformed, like dangling fingers sharply outlined in white and that were waiting for just the right moment to reach down and grab us. I kept looking all around us.

Mary's car was an old station wagon. Tonight it looked very large and grotesque, like the trees did. It was thickly blanketed the snow, the windows hidden everything covered. It was just a big hulk without line or form, but I felt better when I saw it.

I shouldn't have felt better. Right when we got to the car we should have checked for footprints or some other clue that would inform us as to whether or not someone had gotten into the car while we were away. But we didn't. Mary was perfectly happy, talkative, and smiling, like she usually was, and this put me off my guard.

I stood by the passenger's side while she unlocked the door on the driver's side. She asked me what I was going to do about my next class. "If those guys are there are you going to slap

them with a ruler?"

She giggled.

"I just hope they're not there at all," I said.

I heard her door unlock.

"They probably won't be," Mary said. "Probably just a couple of overgrown kids without anything else to do."

"I hope you're right."

"Probably am. Boy, is this car covered. Can you wipe off your side of the front windshield. I can't reach it from here. I'll unlock your door. Just a second." She opened her door and disappeared into the snow-covered car.

I pushed some snow off my side of the front window like she'd asked me to. It was totally black inside the car. I pushed some more away. "Mary?"

No answer. "Mary—"

Again no answer. With a frantic sweep of my arm I shoved as much snow as I possibly could off of the front windshield and saw Mary's face staring up at me from behind the steering wheel. I shuddered.

She smiled and got back out of the car. "What's wrong?" she asked.

My imagination had been playing tricks with me. I must have been barely whispering when I'd thought I'd been calling to her.

"Nothing," I said. "It's been a long night." But still I felt something strange: I began to experience the dream I'd had. It was becoming real.

Mary wiped off the rest of her side of the windshield, got

back into the car, closed her door, and reached across and opened mine. I got in and closed the door after I was comfortably seated.

"Strange," Mary said. "I didn't have to unlock it. I thought I'd locked your door."

"You sure?"

"Yes."

"She locked it, Teach—" and his arm came up and around from behind me and clasped around my throat, pulling my head firmly against his chest, and the sharp point of a knife pierced into my neck just below my ear, the hot blood beginning to flow immediately. The other one had Mary, was pulling her over the seat into the back with them, where they had the backseat of the station wagon down so they'd have plenty of room in which to commit their sexual crimes. "Scream, and it's all over."

I remember the car was very dark, the only light coming in through the front windshield. But as I sat there in the front seat, the man's arm still around my throat, the knife still piercing the wound that still bled, and while I heard Mary's muffled groans from the back, even that light dissipated behind the snow still piling up on the windshield.

I also remember the man saying, "Bitch. Power-crazy bitch. Your turn," just before he dragged me over the seat into the back of the station wagon to suffer the same fate as Mary. And I remember too his screaming when the long metal pole smashed through the back window and gouged him in the face, the glass shattering over us all but bringing with it needed light and air from the outside into the rank scene in the car. It was Pete.

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And by the time he was done with that pole, both rapists were unconscious and damn near dead.

Pete had come before they had the chance to completely abuse me too. Mary and the men were taken to the hospital in an ambulance, and Pete and I were taken to the police station where we did the reports and I got my wound bandaged up (it wasn't a bad wound, but it hurt) and they gave me an injection of something that calmed down. Then a policeman took Pete and me home to my apartment. Mary was still at the hospital. Pete and I went into my home. Pete said that he'd stay with me as long as I needed and wanted him. I was very groggy with the stuff they'd injected me with, but not groggy enough to sleep. I wanted to sit and see Pete. He sat with me in the livingroom we spoke with each other.

"Sure you can't sleep?" Pete said.

"I can't. I'm sure I can't. It's been so long, so awful.

Mary. God help poor Mary. What will ever happen to poor Mary?"

"She'll be fine. She's not the only one this has ever happened. There've been many others."

"Oh God. It's so awful. Poor Mary. Men. What ever happened to He's gone, gone. Men. Why are men so awful? What's wrong with them? Tell me, Pete."

"We're not all as bad as those two. They'll be punished. They'll be convicted and locked up."

"They should all be killed. All men must be killed."

"Are you sure you aren't sleepy, Karen? Do want some more

sedatives? They gave me some more for you. It's almost morning now. Maybe we should change your bandage."

"Morning. Morning? Poor Mary. Mary will never see morning again.

"Yes she will. She'll see many more mornings."

"Oh Pete. Why did they do this to her? They would have done it to me if it wasn't for you. You saved me, Pete. Poor Mary. Thanks so much for saving me Pete. Poor Mary."

"I wish I could have gotten there earlier."

"Poor Mary. How did you know that was happening to poor Mary?"

"You mean how did I happen to come to you?"

"How did you know, yes."

"I figured something was up when you didn't show up at your usual time for coffee. I got to thinking about what you'd said other night. You seemed pretty serious. So I closed the shop and walked to the school. I told all this to the police. Just wish I could have gotten there earlier."

"But the car. How did you know about the car?"

"I walked past it. But let's not talk about that. It's time for you to go to bed. You have to sleep, Karen. You're just tormenting yourself by staying up."

"But I can't sleep. Poor Mary—it was all my fault. I called and she came. No, it was my class's fault. No, it wasn't anybody's fault. Yes, it was that damn class's. It was my position. It was my power. They hated my power. They hurt Mary because of my power. Men! What's wrong with men! Why are they strong! How can they do this to us? What have we done? What have

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we ever ever done? Oh Pete, Pete. I love you Pete. Stay with me
Pete. Pete, Peter, Pete. Stay with me Pete. Goodbye, goodnight.
Pete . . ." and I was asleep in his arms.

End

About 4,500 words.

When Em was born, they put him in a room with his plant. The room was a small square thing, perfectly square, the distance from the floor to the ceiling being the same as each distance between each set of opposite walls—square. His plant wasn't particularly beautiful (objectively, that is—Em thought it was pretty damn nice) being more like a weed than a flower. It had green heart-shaped leaves and long thick stalks and it always needed lots of water.

Em spent the first years of his life fondling and playing with his plant while living in the room. He didn't realize how little the room was because relative to his small size as a baby it seemed very big: he could crawl around it all day and never cover the same area twice. But as he became older this was becoming impossible: he was getting bigger and bigger and the room was becoming relatively smaller and smaller to him.

Also, Em's plant flourished as Em grew older. It finally got so big that Em couldn't fondle and play with all its leaves in one day; it took at least two days to feel the whole thing. Em's plant was getting out of control in the growth department. And as it got bigger and bigger, the room slowly got to small for it; and this, in conjunction with the fact that Em himself was getting bigger and bigger made things more and more congested all around.

As Em reached puberty, the situation finally got out of control. Something had to happen: either the room would have to start growing, the plant shrinking, or Em finding himself a new place of residence, which, of course, would be quite impossible. Em spent his adolescent years up against the wall, as it were, because the plant wouldn't stop growing, stop extending its heart-shaped leaves farther and farther out. Em now had no idea how big his plant was: whenever he looked at it all he saw was an unfathomable jungle.

Something had to give. Em could no longer move by the time he became a man. He began to detest his plant, not to mention the room. Life for Em was totally uncomfortable; it was a frustrated matter of trying to find room to move, to think, to do what he wanted. The damn plant was restricting this more and more each day, and now Em knew something had to break.

It did. Em finally lunged into the depths of his plant, tearing

with his hands at the stalks, ripping the heart-shaped leaves he'd once fondled and played with and had thought so beautiful by their bases right off the stalks. The leaves wilted right away, shriveled and died as Em continued his journey toward the base, the roots, the very beginnings of his plant, fighting with it it and killing it, tearing at it like a madman.

Hours later he finally collapsed with fatigue and slept, his journey barely started, but enough damage done to give him a small bit more room in his small room. While he slept, the leaves and stalks he had destroyed dried and disintegrated where they lay, but as they did so more were on the way: the plant continued to grow, but at an even faster pace than it had ever before, engulfing Em in its leaves and twineing him in its stalks.

When Em woke he found himself trapped and began the fight anew. Tearing, ripping, killing, he progressed at an infinitely small rate compared to what he had to do to get to the roots of the plant. And once again, hours later, he collapsed with fatigue and slept, the plant sprouting and nullifying the work he had done, engulfing him again, waiting for him to awake and start his journey anew, which, a short while later, he did.

And so life went for Em, went and went, his youth trickling on, his journey never complete, his mind never satisfied, his life one long struggle. The room never changed, the plant kept competeing with Em for space, the dilemma never resolved. It happens to us all: lusty youth is one long competition with ourselves, always finding reward in the satisfaction we are forced to achieve, pleasure in the satiation, wonder in the growth, death in the killing, and fear in the endlessness. But, finally, old age dawns, and we're given a break, a chance to look back objectively on the fight our lives have been, and a chance to realize what folly the whole fucking thing has been.

Yesterday I was walking through the apartment complex in which I live, and on one of the sidewalks I came across a little boy who was playing with an erector set. He didn't see me approach, nor did he see me as I stood at a short distance away watching him build tall buildings, changing the design whenever he saw fit; watching him add rooms, subtract rooms, make rooms larger, make some smaller—always changing things around until he had a design that he liked.

He'd look at the finished product with great satisfaction: stand up and walk around it, getting down on all fours now and then and peeking into a window, getting back up and looking some more. Then he'd sit back down and take the whole thing apart and build again, creating freely, a whole different design each time.

I thought about going and getting him some more parts so he could build bigger buildings, then decided that wouldn't necessarily be good. He could make an infinite amount of buildings with just the pieces he had. I continued watching the changing, building, changing, adjusting, refining, breaking, starting anew, et cetera, until his mother came out of their apartment building, stuffed the building he was working on into a cardboard box, it shattered, picked up the cardboard box, put it under her arm, and took her son by the hand and into their apartment building and off to their apartment, I supposed.

Continuing my walk, I wondered what would happen to the little kid when he got older: I figured he'd go to college and get a degree, get a job with that degree, buy a car, get a house or apartment, find his place in society with a wife . . . 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9, and so on, each piece there, each piece working, but always making up the same structure in which he can live and barely move around.

George woke up one bright Monday morning feeling refreshed from his eight hours sleep on his extra hard orthoangular mattress developed specially for the particularly back problem George wished to avoid. He went into the bathroom and did all those things one does in the bathroom early on a bright Monday morning plus taking several little pills for his allergies, attaching his Doctor Phil foot pads (he'd once heard that the bottoms of one's feet take pressures as high as four-hundred pounds to the square inch during the course of the day's activities), and put in his contact lenses.

After dressing in clothes warm enough for the day's temperature (which he was able to know by simply looking at the thermometer outside his bedroom window) George went into the kitchen to prepare himself a breakfast that would not disappoint any Doctor in the United States because not only did it give George the recommended daily requirement for just about every single vitamin they've ever discovered, but it also gave him some things he didn't even need to stay alive but that were recommended for keeping one alive to a very ripe old age. George, by the way, was twenty-six.

After breakfast George called the Department of Transportation to get a report on road conditions. "All roads fine, traffic moving right along, no jams reported, please drive carefully," the report said. This made George feel confident that it was to be another safe drive to work. He went out to his garage, got into his car, fastened his seat-belt, checked to make sure the inflata-balloon in front of his seat was packed and ready in its compartment in case it needed to inflate in case of an accident in case someone was a bad driver and caused George to run into anything, felt better when he saw it was well-packed in place and the inflata-lines were connected securely to it, and then he started up his car, let it warm up (he'd heard that if he didn't let it warm up it might stall on the highway and cause a very terrible accident), and put the car into reverse.

Backing out, he crashed through the garage door (he'd forgotten to open it) went skidding out into the street out of control, was tail-ended by a semi, went smashing into a tree, and was found DOA.

MOUNTAIN

1.

We'd been driving through the mountains for about five hours before turning off onto an old potholey dirt road which led into their deepest depths. It was at this point that everybody, including me, hushed and took his first truly serious look at the rugged terrain around and above us—the peaks and cliffs and long rocky slopes, all of which we were to Scout and conquer during the week ahead.

It was my first time in the mountains. These were the Rocky Mountains. The season, fall. My companions, the Scouts of the Wilderness: a group of campers put together somewhat in the fashion of the Boy Scouts of America, except there were girls and grownups with us too.

Up to the time that we'd turned off onto the old potholey dirt road, the Scouts had been going wild with enthusiasm about . . . well, about everything, I guess; whistling, shouting, singing and yahooing, they much resembled a herd of gorilla tourists, their tennis hats and Bermuda shorts notwithstanding.

But now, thumping along over the big rocks and the hardened mud, all that was left of these joyous festivities was the click-click-clacking of empty beer and pop cans rolling around on the floor of the van, click-click-clacking in a way that sort of serenaded us in our mutual contemplations on our common fate—the journey we were just now beginning.

Soon we pulled off the old dirt road and coasted into a big meadow which was surrounded by a thick forest of aspen trees. Scout noise immediately resumed, reaching full intensity in a matter of seconds. There were several other Scout vans here, parked, the occupants having already evacuated into the meadow. Many many Scout leaders were running around and blowing their whistles and shouting into their megaphones at straying Scouts, herding them back into their groups. When I got out of the van

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one of these leaders approached me; in addition to the megaphone he had hanging down around his neck and the whistle hanging down around there too, he was also engulfed in clipboards.

"Howdy Scout," he said.

"Hello," I replied.

"You with your parents?"

"No."

"With anybody?"

"No."

"And what's your last name?"

"Blackly," I said.

He checked for my name on one of his many lists on one of his many clipboards and when he finally found it seemed exceedingly proud of himself. Then he said, "You, Scout, are a Red. I am your group leader."

"Oh? That's good."

"I am also Head Scout Leader."

"Great."

"Yes. My name's Ray," he said.

"I'm Paul," I replied.

He referred back to the list he had previously referred to. I assumed he was verifying the fact that my first name was indeed Paul. When he had finished referring, he said, "Nice to meet you Paul."

"Likewise, Ray."

"Now," he continued, sort of launching off, "a few things about what to keep in mind in regard to your behavior during this trip. First, do what I say. Second"—he was putting up fingers in order that I would not miss the order—"do whatever any other Scout leader says. And third and most importantly, remember that I am Head Scout Leader, in complete charge of this entire expedition. Organization is very important up here, understand?"

"Yes," I said, looking at the three fingers in front of my face. Two of them, though, fell back into place, leaving only the index one up. Ray now used it as a pointer.

"See over there?" he said pointing at a group of people standing at the edge of the meadow under a tall aspen tree that had a sign nailed to it. "Reds," the sign said.

"The people?" I said.

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"Yes. They are your fellow Reds. Go over and introduce yourself. You can pick up your backpack and supplies when the truck gets here Okay?"

"Right. But tell me one more thing. How many Scouts are there in all?"

"Fifty. Ten in each group. Five groups. Reds, Yellows, Blues, Greens and Pinks."

"Thank you."

"Yes."

I got my duffel out of the back of the van and walked over to my fellow Reds and introduced myself and all that. Only two people in this group are worthy of mention. First, there was a guy who had on a very bright pair of red sunglasses and who had several more pairs, all different colors, placed at various locations on his person. He was playing his harmonica when I introduced myself to him; thereupon he immediately stopped playing, smiled, shook my hand with the hand he was holding the harmonica in (a very awkward procedure), told me not only his name and where he was from (which was all my introduction had been composed of) but also his place of birth, past wives, past and present jobs, ^{the kind of car he drove} and several other things that I had not at all encouraged him to relate. He didn't, however, tell me how old he was, so I took a guess on my own; I guessed he was about twenty-five, nine years older than myself, but didn't bother to confirm or dispel this approximation by consulting with him further. I find that I can't now remember his name, so, for lack of a better label, I shall henceforth refer to this person as Sunglasses. Sunglasses caused a considerable amount of trouble on this trip, as I shall relate in due time.

Also, there was Jack. Jack too must have been older than me, but not by much; he was probably about twenty. After I'd introduced myself to him he replied curtly with only his name, his first name. I pressed him further. He said he was sick of everybody asking him questions all the time, gave me a dirty look, then went and sat down in the forest far away from us all. Some people are like that, I said to myself. Jack, it turned out, was one of my tentmates. The other one was just now arriving.

He was driving the truck that carried the backpacks and supplies. It was a big old army thing and it lugged along behind it a big old horse carrier carrying several big—but all crunched up together—

horses. Rocky, which was the name of the driver, was a huge guy with a thick beard and long curly hair. He rumbled over to an obscure corner of the meadow and parked.

Rocky, it should be explained right away, was neither a Scout leader nor a regular old Scout member like me. He had been hired by Scouts of the Wilderness Inc. to perform miscellaneous functions that required somebody strong and big—packing the horses, kicking the horses, wrestling down the bears and wolves, et cetera.

Everybody rushed like antelope to where Rocky had parked: nobody intended to be in any lack of supplies. Ray, Head Scout Leader and group leader of the Reds, unloaded the backpacks from the rear of the truck, handing one down to each of us, the little kids getting special little ones. There was just the right amount to go around.

Inside each backpack were to be found: 1) a whistle; 2) a book of official Scout matches, the words "Scouts of the Wilderness" beautifully engraved in bright gold letters on the cover; 3) a fake Swiss Army knife, though some person who had used mine had evidently mistaken it for an entrenching tool, breaking off all the blades except for the screwdriver-can opener one; 4) a tooth-brush; and 5) a compass (I was sure, after diligent testing, that mine lied). Scouts had been required to bring their own sleeping bags, clothing, hiking boots, and whatever personal items were desired. The horses carried the tents, pots and pans, food, the many paper and plastic things (cups and plates and knives and forks and spoons), medical supplies, et cetera.

Scout leaders walked around supervising Scout packing of Scout backpacks. Several arguments broke out because Scout leaders weren't allowing those who had them to tie their folding chairs onto their backpacks. Scout leaders deemed these things bad because of their bulk but were unsuccessful in their attempts to keep them from their owners, who were clutching them like security blankets.

By the time everything was ready to go—horses packed, backpacks packed, folding lounge chairs tied securely in place—the sun had already set. Very rapidly now the meadow was getting darker and darker and colder and colder and windier and windier too, and the white white aspens on all sides of us had become just silhouettes in the twilight. Ray called out through his megaphone to gather around him so that he could read to us the official Scout agenda, which was attached to one of his clipboards and which he now held

up directly in front of his face so as to be able to read it in the dusk.

"'Welcome Scouts!'" he read, his voice echoing out through the megaphone at us.

Everybody cheered.

"'We thank you for joining us!'"

More cheers.

"Please stop cheering," Ray said on his own. "How do you expect anyone to hear if you're cheering all the time?"

No more cheers.

"'In the week ahead you will ascend and descend Mount Baldy. Mount Baldy towers a full twelve and one half thousand feet above sea level. You are at nine thousand now. There are several approaches one can take to the top of the mountain, but the route we have selected for you is the easiest—challenging yes, but easy just the same.'"

Applause.

"'It won't be a difficult trip.'"

More applause.

"'You will ascend Mount Baldy in the first three and one half days, including today; cross over the pass at the top—Storm Pass; then descend the other side in the last three and one half days. That will be the full trip. Take all questions and problems, please, to your group leaders or, if necessary; to Head Scout Leader Ray'"—who paused at this point to see if there would be any more applause, but there wasn't—"and they will be glad to assist you. Thank you and have a pleasant trip.'"

Everybody immediately began talking and murmering and wondering and laughing. Then Ray interrupted, his megaphone turned up a little louder: "Any questions?"

For a moment all was silence except for the wind, then some guy yelled: "What if it snows while we're up there!"

Everybody immediately began chattering very loudly.

"It won't snow," Ray intoned. "Don't worry."

"How do you know? It's fall!" the same guy continued.

"Yes, but not late fall."

"It's late enough to snow! And I didn't even bring any gaiters!"

"What are gaiters?" somebody else yelled.

"They're to keep your feet dry."

"I don't have any either!"

"Nor I!"

"Me neither!"

"I brought myself a pair!"

"Got an extra?"

"No!"

"Hold it!" Ray yelled, turning up the volume even more. "Hold it!" Silence, except for the wind.

"You won't even need gaiters! What is this anyway?"

But the guy who'd started the whole thing kept the gaiters rolling.

"We'll have to cut up the tents! Wrap the canvas around our feet!" Gasps..

"Then what'll we do for shelter!" he added.

More gasping.

"Don't worry about it!" Ray yelled, full volume. "Just don't worry about it!" He dropped his megaphone, shoved his way out of the crowd, and walked away into the darkness.

Well, not much more happened that night except that I had my first experience hiking in my new mountain man hiking boots. These boots, I must say, were the most impractical things one can imagine for hiking in the mountains; yet they were made for precisely that purpose.

Let me describe them.

They were huge. They were like wearing two big bricks on my feet. The material they were made of was not unlike cardboard filled with cement. They rose way above my ankles, making it impossible to bend forward, much less walk. And on the bottoms, on the bottoms of these monstrosities were gigantic, thick chunks of hard very hard rubber protruding in irregularly-shaped patterns, much resembling radial tires—including, I was sure, the steel belts; all this designed for maximum foot flatness and total immovability.

But, in time, I got used to them.

2.

The following morning I got up early. Rocky was already up and gone; Jack was still asleep and snoring. I dressed quietly and snuck out of the tent into the morning freshness. It was just dawn, the sky brightly colored and very pretty, the air chilly and full of very pleasant odors.

We hadn't gotten too far up the mountain the night before: only about a half mile or so. The only reason we went anywhere, I figured, was because Ray was mad at us all and secretly hoped that if he sent us hiking through the darkness half of us would either twist our ankles in our new boots or fall off of a high mountain cliff.

Now, this morning, there was not another Scout to be seen; everybody was still fast asleep in the tents. We were in a meadow again—something I hadn't been able to totally discern the night before because it was total darkness when we arrived—and I saw it was crowded with the tents and lots of stumpy little bushes that looked like abstract hairdos. And too, this meadow was surrounded on all sides by aspen trees, their leaves turning and dying in honor of fall and very bright; bright reds and oranges and pinks but mostly bright golds—very pretty in the early morning light.

I walked around and in between the tents and stumpy hairdo bushes into the center of the meadow where I could make a meticulous inspection of the mountains, which were also surrounding the meadow—over the tops of the aspens. They were mostly covered with green green pines, like a thick blanket, except for some splotchy areas lower down where aspens were trying to make the blanket calico. Why the aspens were only growing lower down I didn't know, but they were; there seemed to be a specific level where they were not allowed to grow above, a timber line for them only. I figured that maybe the pines considered all the area above this line their own private territory and that the aspens were afraid of them and stayed where they were supposed to be. I didn't blame them either: those pines looked pretty mean.

There were some rocky cliffs and sheer mountain walls off to

my left, and some bare areas where it was too steep for anything to grow on off to my right. But nowhere could I see an area above the real timber line. I knew that the top of Mount Baldy was above it and I got this admittedly romantic notion that I should somehow be able to see it rising (up into some clouds, perhaps) in the near distance somewhere to the west (which was the direction we were hiking up the mountain in); I figured it would pop up just around the corner, so I took off that way.

I walked through the woods not following any definite trail or anything, just crunched along through the shriveled up dead aspen leaves; smelling the odors, passing a small dried-up ex-mountain stream every now and then, listening to the birds and watching them leap around from tree to tree, I was, in general, having a thoroughly enjoyable time during this first real walk through the mountainous terrain.

Soon I found myself progressing up a steep hill thick with underbrush and crowded with leaning aspens, my radials working not at all though these were the conditions, I supposed, in which they were supposed to work best. In addition to causing me to trip and fall every three feet or so, they kept coming untied and once one even fell off and rolled back down the hill a ways. But I didn't mind all this tripping and falling because, seeing as I was not yet accustomed to the high mountain altitude nor the mountains themselves, these moments proved to be enjoyable for two reasons: they were a fine chance to lie and rest myself, and they gave me the singular enjoyment of being able to contemplate my thick surroundings and the very strange but very pleasant odors and to feel very rustic and very natural and very much in touch with my environment while doing so.

But on I progressed until I emerged from this jungle and found myself confronted with a long, steep, bare but rocky area stretching off and up into the sky and which, if I didn't turn back in fear, would take me to the summit of the hill I had been slowly progressing up. I climbed courageously on, hoping that soon I would get that view of Mount Baldy I'd already come so far to find.

All out of breath I reached the top, only to be confronted by yet another of these bare but rocky areas shooting off into the endless blue ahead. This, I knew, was it—the end of my journey. Reward was soon to be enjoyed. Off I went again; this time on all

fours.

Sweaty and panting I made it. Only to be confronted by yet another of these areas. But hope! There was much hope that this was the last, the climax to my sufferings, the end of my struggles—for at the very top of the slope I saw a little aspen tree all by itself, its little heart-shaped leaves brown and gold and quivering in the early morning breeze and illuminated by the early morning sun now rising at my back. On I climbed.

And reached the top. And there she was: sitting at the base of the little aspen, facing away from me, facing west, contemplating the essences of nature, her shoulder-length brown hair flowing and shining in the sun. She hadn't realized that somebody had just intruded upon her because the task of contemplation was using all her senses, leaving her unguarded against the intentions of a love-forlorn Scout like myself. I spoke.

"Hello," I said.

She turned around, startled.

"I didn't mean to sneak up—" I added very quickly.

She seemed to relax a little. "That's alright," she said. "Are you with the camp?"

"Yup."

She turned away, wanting only, I figured, to continue in her contemplations. So I started some of my own. I looked around us.

The surroundings were incredible. We, the girl, the tree, and myself, were at the very top of a high cliff looking down on a stream where there were some beaver dams and some big bushes and lots of marshes and there were a few aspen groves here and there along the stream. And directly across from us, jutting up from the stream, up and up, above our heads, was a huge mountain wall with all kinds of cliffs and crags and chimneys and everything else any mountain wall has ever had, all conglomerated into one. And we had on all sides of us many of your basic mountains and mountain slopes too. But the top of Mount Baldy was still nowhere in sight.

After viewing all this plus contemplating on it too I looked back down at the pretty girl sitting Indian style at the base of the aspen and still, seemingly, lost in her contemplations.

"This is really some place," I said.

"I know," she replied.

"Really beautiful," I said.

"Yes," she replied.

Silence.

"Did you follow me all the way up here?" she asked.

"No. I found it all by myself. Honest. It just happened. You see, I was walking along through the woods back there when suddenly I found myself going uphill through the woods and bushes and stuff until I came to these long bare areas where nothing at all grew and kept walking and—"

"You ended up here."

"That's right. I kept walking and kept finding myself going up more and more of those bare areas and it was like I was on a long long journey."

"Oh."

Silence.

"Can I sit down?"

"Alright."

"Thanks." I did. But not right next to her.

"What's your color?" she asked.

"Color?"

"In the camp. Your group."

"Oh yeah; I'm a Red. How about you?"

"I'm a Blue."

"No kidding. What's it like being a Blue?"

"Not much different than being a Red, probably."

"Probably."

Silence; again.

"Nice place, huh?" she said, apparently wanting to cover this subject a little more thoroughly this time.

"Most definitely," I replied. "That wall there is really something."

"I know. I've been studying it ever since I got here. It's so . . . so . . . so big."

"Yes, it really is."

Silence one more time.

"This is my first time in the mountains," I said.

"Really?"

"Yup."

"Wow," she said. "You're lucky. I'd love to be experiencing them fresh all over again."

"Come up here a lot, huh?"

"Whenever I can. But I'm fairly new to them too. I've only been up three times. I could spend my whole life up, though."

"You like being with the Scouts?"

"Sort of. But it's kind of wierd. All the different ages and everything."

"I know," I said.

"Don't you like being with the Scouts?"

She had me there. "It's better than going to a boys' camp," I said.

"What?"

"My parents are always sending me off to a boys' camp. But this year they allowed me to do this instead."

"How old are you?"

"Sixteen."

She seemed amused. "So you're missing some of your high school, right?"

"Yeah."

"How'd you swing that with your parents?"

"Long story," I said, "but it can be summed up by saying that I told them that I refused to go back to good old Camp Mohawk ever again and that if they didn't like it they could . . . well, you get the gist of what went on between us. And I finally ended up here. How old are you, by the way?"

"Twenty," she said.

"In college?"

"Yes. In Denver. Denver University."

"Fine school," I said, though I'd never heard of it.

"It is. But I'm really from California. L.A." She said all this very proudly.

"Must be nice there." I said this in a sort of grumblymumble.

"You bet. I love the ocean. I surf."

"I was just about to guess that."

"Where you from?"

I filled my lungs with air, then stated: "Des Moines."

"Iowa?"

"Iowa."

She giggled. "Do you eat a lot of corn in Iowa?"

"Ha ha," I replied. Then launched off: "I've heard all that

before. People love to make cracks about Iowa and corn. Iowa eh?
How's the corn this year? That one's always a favorite. Yellow, I
always feel like replying. Another one they love is: Tell me, since
you're from Iowa, is it true that corn makes your ears grow? hee hee
hee. I never even consider replying to that one. Yes, I've heard it
all before. Yes . . . um . . . What's your name?"

"Barbara."

"Yes, Barbara, I do eat a lot of corn in Iowa. It makes my ears
grow."

"What's your name?"

"Paul."

"Nice meeting you Paul," she said, and stuck out her hand.

I took it and shook it. "Nice meeting you Barbara."

"Barb."

"Okay. Nice meeting you Barb."

We both smiled. And while we were smiling I happened to look down
below us and saw two beaver. "Look!" I said, pointing.

"What?"

"See the beavers? In the water there. By the second dam down from
the big clump of trees . . . See?"

"Yeah. Now I do. Wow. That's what I was hoping for."

Both beaver had sticks in their mouths and were swimming along
towards their dam through the small pool it created.

"They're working on their dam," I said.

"Yes. I see. They can probably hear us but they're working on it
anyway."

I took this statement to mean that I best shut-up or the beaver
wouldn't stick around much longer, so I did. But they didn't stick
around much longer anyway: after about five minutes had passed they
disappeared into their dam for good and the thrill was gone.

"Well," Barbara said, "that was really something."

"I've never seen anything like it before," I added.

"Neither have I."

"Let's go down there," I said. "We can look at the dam. Maybe
the little guys will come out again."

"You think so?"

"Yeah. And even if they don't we can do something else. Go
swimming."

"Swimming?"

"Sure."

"You'd freeze!"

"Sure," I said. "That'd be the best part. The sun would feel really good once you got out."

"I think getting in would be the problem. The cold."

"Let's give it a try, anyway," I said.

"No, I don't think so."

"Sure. Come on." I started getting up.

"No."

"Sure." I was standing.

"Well . . ."

I offered her my hand.

"Well . . . I . . . Why not?"

"Yeah. Why not."

She took my hand and I helped her up. "You lead—" she said. And off we went, back down into the woods, through the woods and to the stream.

"Do we have to take our clothes off?" Barb asked after we'd looked for the beaver but couldn't find them and looked at their dam and were very interested in it then went to a deep part of the stream and stood next to it.

"They'll get wet if you don't."

"True . . . Are you sure you wouldn't rather just go back to camp? It is getting late you know."

"They'll wait for us."

"Maybe . . . But I don't know . . . I don't want to catch cold."

"You won't catch cold. The sun's nice and warm, right? We're liberated youths, right?"

"I guess."

"We're capable of transcending the inhibitions of social norms, right?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"We're free and true to ourselves, right?"

"Okay, okay, I'll do it. But don't you watch. Go over there." She pointed at the top of a cliff that must have been two miles away.

"Where?"

"In the woods."

"I just came from there. I want to go swimming too."

"Well," she said, "then watch as little as possible."

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Finally we were both naked and ready to go swimming. We had our backs towards each other. The stream rushed by loudly, the water clear, the rocks below its surface shiney.

"How do we do this!" Barb shouted.

"Sit down in the stream, then bend backwards so that the water rushes over your head and body!" I replied shouting too.

I took the initiative and went and stood in the stream. My feet immediately froze. Then I s-s-sat down and l-l-lay back l-l-l-letting the water rush over my entire person, then got out as quickly as I possibly could.

Barb did the whole thing too—right after watching me do it. As she leaped back out I turned my head, pretending not to have seen a thing.

"Did you do it!" I shouted, my back towards her.

"Y-y-yes! Yes I did!" she replied happily.

"Good!"

"Yes!"

"Sun feels very fine, right?"

"Right!"

"Are you going to get dressed now?" I asked.

"I already am!"

I turned around and looked at her. She was!

I got dressed then joined her where she was lying in some grass.

"I think I've lost my social inhibitions now," she said.

"That's good," I replied. "Feels good as the sun, right?"

"Hmmm yes, the sun feels toasty." She sat up and put her arms around her knees and smiled at me. "I feel very, very good," she said.

At one point during our journey back to camp we passed under a sort of yellow and orange dome created by the leaves of several aspen trees in an almost perfect circle. The morning sun shone a brilliant gold down through this dome and onto us, and Barb and I stopped to take this in. But I spent these moments mostly looking at my companion, her face a golden rouge, her hair still damp from our swim. Yes; I was most definitely in love.

3.

We came upon a main trail that we figured was the one the Scouts were to continue on that day and that it would take us back to camp. We followed it down.

And sure enough. Here they came. The Scouts of the Wilderness. All decked out in bright clothing, sunglasses, binoculars, cameras, faces shiny with suntan lotion, zinc oxide on a few of the noses, the little kids running around and screaming and kicking each other while the older folks grunted along looking like they were about to drop dead with the sheer exhaustion of walking with their packs on, particularly those who had their bulky folding lounge chairs strapped on behind.

Barb and I stood off to one side of the trail and watched the troops go by, a glorious procession. Nobody said anything to us but we did get an occasional kick from the more courageous young ones and once or twice a nod of the head or extra heavy exhale from those older ones who figured we were not part of the camp but true mountain people out for an early morning jaunt in the woods.

We guessed we were in trouble: by the time the last straggler finally had wheezed by ^(I was one of the losers) I had not seen a single Red and Barb had not seen a single Blue. We rushed on down the trail.

Right when we came into the meadow Ray and Hulga, the latter Barb's only tentmate, immediately greeted us.

"Alright you guys," Ray said. "Where have you been? We were just about to leave without you."

"Yeah," echoed Hulga, who, by the way, was very fat and ugly. "Where? Huh? Just where?"

"We were walking," I said. Barb nodded in agreement.

"Why's your hair wet?" Ray said to Barb.

"The rain," I replied for her.

"Don't get smart," Ray said. "Why?"

"Yeah," said Hulga. "Smart. Why?"

"We went swimming," Barb said. "In a stream."

"Well isn't that nice. Swimming. You guys think you can just go walking off, doing whatever you like whenever you want?"

"Yeah. Do you? Huh? Answer us that."

"Sorry," I said. "Right Barb? We're sorry."

Barb nodded her head in agreement. "We're really sorry," she said.

"Jeez! You guys must think you run this expedition!"

"Sorry."

"Sorry."

"Come on. Let's get a little responsibility here, okay?"

"Yeah. Responsibility."

"We will," I said.

"Right," Barb agreed. "Responsibility's the word."

"Barbara," Hulga said. "Come here."

They walked off together, Hulga pulling Barb by the arm. Ray then assumed a very fatherly tone with me.

"You and the girl won't do that again, will you?"

"No Ray. We won't."

"I blame her as much as I do you, but you being the boy should have known better."

"Right. I'll go get my stuff now," I said, starting to walk away.

"Just a moment, Paul."

"What?"

"You haven't seen Rocky, have you?"

"That big guy?"

"Yes."

"No. Why?"

"Never mind. Go pack. And hurry yourself."

The Reds and Blues, properly divided into the two groups and with a considerable amount of ground between, were all sitting in the meadow ready to go. They had all watched this whole episode.

As I was finishing packing my things, which had ~~been~~ been thrown on the ground outside the tent in order that it could be packed, Jack approached me.

"Hello Jack."

"We're all going to have to walk that much faster now just to catch up with the others," he replied. "And all because of you."

"Sorry Jack. It won't happen again."

"And another thing. That girl, Hulga, yelled at me because of you. Just because of you and your silly antics."

"Sorry."

"You'd better be," he said, and walked away.

"They sure were upset," Barb said to me when we were back on the trail, walking side by side at the very end of the Red and Blue procession.

"Too upset," I said. "We didn't do anything wrong. At least not that wrong."

"Tell them that. Especially that Ray fellow. I don't like him at all."

"Neither do I."

"And Hulga. Wasn't that something?"

"It was. What'd she tell you when you two went away together?"

"She just bitched some more."

"I don't know about these people," I said.

"I guess you just got to do what they want you to and then they'll leave you alone," Barb said.

"Right. But they're not going to get what they want from me because I'm avoiding them from now on."

"So will I," Barb said. "It's a pact."

"Right. Let's shake on it."

We did.

The people walking in front of us had been listening to our conversation. They were Sunglasses (sporting a nice blue pair this morning) and some other guy—he must have been a Blue—whom I hadn't noticed before. He had a transistor radio stashed away somewhere in his clothing and an earphone, the chord dangling down as he jounced along, stuck in his ear. A few minutes before, I had heard him tell Sunglasses that he couldn't pick up a damn thing no matter what channel he tried and that if he missed this ballgame he'd be the laughingstock of the town when he got home.

When Barb and I made our pact they turned around and gave us strange looks. Barb and I looked at them and then at each other and giggled.

But we stopped giggling very abruptly when we saw ahead of us at the side of the trail who had pulled off to wait for us. Hulga and Jack. They looked stupid together.

"Ray told us to come back here and watch you guys," Hulga announced. "He doesn't want you sneaking off again. I didn't want to but he made us." She paused. Then: "Sneaks."

Boy, was she fat.

They fell into line behind us.

"You can tell Ray," I said, "that we aren't sneaking off anymore and that he should leave us alone. We've reformed. We are now good little boys and girls. Go tell him that, Hulga dear."

"Don't get sassy you baboon," she wittily retorted. "We're just going to stay back here and make sure you do the same. Right Jack?"

"I guess," Jack very neglectantly replied.

"Yeah," said Hulga.

"Don't you two go running off back there," Barb said, looking over at me and winking. "Ray wouldn't like that either."

"Don't worry about us," Hulga said. "We're responsible. Right Jack?"

"I s'pose."

"And we're older too. Right?"

"Hell, I don't know. How am I supposed to know? I don't go running around asking a bunch of fool questions."

"Enough," I said. This was sickening.

But as we walked on, my interjection went unheeded. Hulga further berated Barbara and myself—about what, I don't know, I wasn't listening anymore. But after a while she began to focus her loud voice on Jack only, telling him about how crummy people were and about how they two were the only ones in the entire universe that knew how to behave, and about how wonderful life was, and thus giving Barb and I the chance to talk between ourselves for a while.

We took it.

4.

We all had to help set up camp that night and we all did. Everybody was already very tired from the hike up the mountain and were even more so after this. Many Scouts, mostly the older ones, went directly to bed in their cozy sleeping bags in their canvas tents without even waiting around for dinner. The little kids, however, were still going strong, running all over the place and throwing rocks and sticks at each other.

All of us still up had a weenie roast. The weenies were roasted by groups, each group having its own campfire. It was dark by the time that we got down to the actual roasting and the fires burned fiercely in the evening wind, making strange patterns of red red light on the pines and the, now, since we were slowly creeping up into private pine property, few aspens around us.

Barb roasted right along with me and the rest of the Reds. But Ray insisted that, in order for this movement within the ranks to take place, some sort of exchange be performed. Jack suited the purpose perfectly: Hulga dragged him off to the Blues' campfire.

After roasting our weenies Barb and I sat with each other on the ground in front of the fire, next to the supply of wood—which was on Barb's side. The wood was pine wood and it crackled loudly in the fire and shot things out at us, burning things. I had a big dead pine log next to me; someone had dragged it up to the fire to sit on during the roast. Sunglasses was sitting on it now. We were ignoring him. There was nobody else around the fire. Barb and I considered it our own personal fire, the presence of Sunglasses notwithstanding. Barb kept throwing wood into it. I cheered her on.

The sky was dark and cloudy, a few stars visible here and there, those that were visible being very bright because, it seemed, we were very close to them way up here on the mountain. To be able to see the stars I had to stare up into the sky for a while until my eyes, which were accustomed to the bright fire, got used to the darkness. Every time Barb threw a hunk of wood on the fire sparks would launch off into the night and we could watch them until they disappeared or died. The moon, I might add, looked like a gigantic

streetlight.

"This firewood is going awfully fast," Barb said to me. "I'd better slow down a little."

"Yeah," I said. "We'll be needing some more in the morning."

"Want to wake up early and get some more. Wake up early like we did today?"

"Good idea. You wake me up, okay?"

"Okay. I'll be at your tent right at dawn."

"Good," I said. "We can use up the rest of the firewood, then."

"Right," she said, and threw some more into the already-blazing fire.

Sunglasses had been sitting there, a Coors beer in his hand, saying nothing. The impetus, though, was growing, and soon it broke through. Sunglasses spoke.

"Yup. I know. You betcha. May not look like I know, but I know. You can bet your blessed soul on that."

Barb looked at me, I looked at Barb, then we looked at Sunglasses. He was staring into the fire. His pair tonight was bright yellow, the fire reflecting red off them.

"What, sir, is it that you know?" I asked politely enough. Barb elbowed me in the side. "Tell us, please," she said. He had had enough Coors not to catch the sarcasm, though it's doubtful he would have been able to catch it no matter what state of mind he was in.

"Everything," he stated, turning and staring at us with glassy eyes. Then he took another chug of beer and continued.

"Yup. Everything. Damn right. Ask me a question and I'll tell you no lies; ask me no questions and I'll tell you no answers. No, that's not it. I got it all wrong. Yup. Ask me a . . . no. Aw, screw it. I'm a Scout," he said.

"So am I," I added.

"Me too," Barb echoed.

"Yup. Damn right." He burped. "'Cuse me." He took another chug of beer. "Oh God," he said. "I'm ready for bed."

During the course of this conversation our friend Sunglasses had had his boots resting on the rocks that had been placed around the fire to keep it defined. Now, as he picked himself up to go off to blissful bed, he discovered that he could not move one of these boots because it was melted and stuck to one of the larger of the rocks, the thick rubber sole still melting and dripping onto the hot coals and making

hissing noises. "Damn!" Sunglasses shouted, kicking his foot trying to shake the rock loose, saliva drooling down his chin and his yellow sunglasses falling down around his mouth. "Damn!" he shouted again, kicking some more, finally breaking the boot free of its burden, leaving the rock to tumble through the fire and stop at the other edge. He stormed off into the night, leaving his beer can tipped over on the ground, the beer drizzling out over the pebbles and twigs by the fire.

"That poor man," Barb said after he was far far away. "That poor poor man."

"He'll live through it," I replied.

Barb threw some more wood into the fire and we watched it blaze anew. I told Barb my simile about the moon looking like a gigantic streetlight. She didn't think it was any good.

Then we had another visitor. I'd seen him a couple of times before. He was a Blue. He looked like an overgrown Boy Scout in the clothes he wore: knickers with thick wool socks that fuzzed out over his mountain boots and a green corduroy coat that had a whole lot of little patches sewn on the sleeves and one huge patch on the back that said "Expedition" in big black letters and had a picture of a red red sun below it; and on his head was placed what looked to be a Canadian Mounties hat. This was the same outfit I'd seen him in before. I wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry. He had a cage with him tonight that, apparently, he'd made out of aspen wood.

"Excuse me," he said in a high, nasal voice that I assumed was his own.

"Hi," Barb said. He'd come upon us unexpectedly.

"Hello." He smiled. "Didn't mean to interrupt, but would you folks like to see something of utmost crucial import?"

"Sure," Barb said. "Why don't you sit down?"

I gave him a big smile and motioned at the log Sunglasses had occupied of late. He smiled again but even bigger this time, showing all his teeth and even his gums. I felt like I was engaged in a smile contest.

"Thank you," he said and plunked down. "Now look at this, will you?" He held up the cage. There was a little bird flapping around in there, flapping around and knocking against the walls, its feathers all ruffled up and falling off. "It's a real find," he said. "Do you know what it is?"

"A bird," I said

"Yes, that's correct. But do you know what kind?"

"No, tell us," Barb said.

"It's a Chat. A Yellow-breasted Chat."

"Wow!" I said. "That really is some find!"

"Yes, isn't it though?"

"What are you going to do with it?" Barb asked.

The bird, meanwhile, was going through hysterics.

"Keep it."

"Did you catch it?" she asked.

"Yes. I set a trap." His eyes lit up with the recollection. "It's very lucky that I got him. I want to show him to everybody back home."

"Well," Barb said, "I hope they like him."

"Thank you," he said, smiled again, then got up and left.

"Poor bird," I said.

Barb threw some more wood into the fire. "It's just about gone," she said. "Shall I finish it up?"

"Sure," I said. "Go ahead."

She did, and we watched it blaze, not saying a word, just watching. I scooted over a little closer to her until our thighs were touching, then put my arm around her. I believe this is called making the moves.

Anyway, she turned her face to mine and we quietly looked at each other in the red from the flames. I smiled. She smiled. Then we had another visitor, the last one of the night. His name, as I soon found out, was Jerry. He was probably about twelve, and had a huge wad of flaming hair that just begged to be pulled. He was upset because he hated his parents, who were also with the Scouts, and asked if he could sit down; we said Sure.

"I hate them I'm telling you. They're always making me brush my teeth and comb my hair and put on clean socks every morning and change my underwear too—even on this trip! I hate them! Hate! Hate! Hate! Hear me? I'm going to mutiny! Revolt! Rise against them! Split this scene and live the rest of my life by myself in the mountains and kill bears!"

"It can't be all that bad," I said.

But he wasn't listening, except to himself. "And I hate being a Yellow. The Yellows never do anything fun. I hate every last one of them—especially the leader. You know what? All that guy does is

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talk about trees! That's all. Just trees!"

"What do you want him to talk about?" Barb asked.

"I don't know. Anything but trees. That guy's such a drag. But in your group," the kid said to me, "you do lots of fun things."

"Like what?"

"Like climb big rocks faces." His hair seemed to light up with the happy thought, light up even more than it already was.

"What are you talking about? We don't climb any big rock faces."

"Yes you do! Don't lie to me, kid. I know what goes on!"

"Listen," I said. "What's your name?"

"Jerry."

"Listen Jerry. I don't know what you're talking about—the Reds climbing big rock faces. That's ridiculous. What makes you think that?"

"You calling me rid-dicklus? Huh kid?"

"No," I said. "I'm not. Sorry if you think I was. But why?"

"'Cus I saw that guy climbing them."

"What guy?"

"The guy with all the muscles. And don't tell me you don't know who I'm talking about because I know you do."

"You mean Rocky?"

"I don't know his name but I saw him come out of your tent."

"When?"

"This morning."

"Where'd he go?"

"I already told you. To climb big rock faces. I followed him."

"Boy," Barb said. "Sounds like half the camp was up early."

"Wouldn't know it when I left," I said.

"So am I going to climb big rock faces or aren't I?"

"Listen Jerry: Rocky isn't a regular Scout like you or me; he's not even a Red. He's just here to help out."

"Help out? Doing what? I ain't seen him all day."

"Well he's supposed to help out. Anyway, the Reds don't do anything more fun than the Yellows."

"Honest?"

"Honest. Just ask Barb here."

"Aw, she's just a girl. I don't talk to girls."

"That's your problem," I said.

"That's right," said Barb.

"Just so we've gotten everything straightened out here."

"I still hate my parents."

"Live with it. Someday you'll be on your own."

"But I want to be on my own right now!"

"So do I," I said. "Good night, Jerry."

"Aw, good night." He shuffled away in the direction of his tent.

The fire, now, was just a glow and I was getting cold. Barb said she was too. But we sat there quietly with each other until there was hardly anymore light at all.

"Too bad there's no more wood," I said.

"Time for beddy-bye?" Barb asked.

"Yup. Damn right. Good night, Barb." I kissed her. "See you in the morning. Don't forget to wake me up."

"I won't. Sleep well. And, here, take this with you." She kissed me this time, then we departed, each for our own regiment of the camp.

5.

I heard voices coming from my tent when I got there.

"Why not, Hulga?"

"Because it's not decent."

"Oh, all right."

"Haven't you had enough all ready?"

"No."

"Excuse me," I said. "But I have to get in there to get my sleeping bag." I had decided to sleep outside so as not to disturb the two lovers Jack and Hulga.

"Is that that big baboon prowling around out there?" Hulga said.

"I think so," Jack replied.

"It is," I said. "I'm coming in to get something."

"Alright but make it quick," Hulga said. "And keep your eyes glued to the floor."

I crawled into the now very silent tent (except for Hulga's heavy breathing) and unstrapped my sleeping bag from my pack, then returned outside into the chilly night. I found a fairly level place back in the woods far away from the rest of the Scouts and it was here that I slept, not too well, during my second night in the wilderness.

It began to rain about half an hour before sunrise, which was a real problem. I considered dragging myself and my sleeping bag back to the tent but came to the conclusion that I was better off sleeping in the rain than in the same tent with Hulga. So I sunk way down into the wet warmth and went back to sleep.

I couldn't have been asleep very long when suddenly something was shaking my by the legs. It was too violent a thing for Barb to be doing so I curled up into a small small ball, fearing it was a Grizzly out there.

"Hey you. Wake up."

No Grizzly. Voice is too deep.

I stuck my head out into the wet morning and saw a huge person towering above me, silhouetted against the pines in the gloomy dawn of the new day. It was Rocky.

"Oh, it's you," I said.

"Think it was someone else?"

"Yes. A Grizzly bear."

This was when I first experienced Rocky's laugh: so deep, so loud, so penetrating, so earth-shaking a thing it was that my first reaction was to look above me to see whether or not the pines were about to tumble down atop us both.

"I wasn't that far off," I said.

The ground and trees shook again.

"Listen kid," he said when he was through and the forest seemed to still be in tact, "did anyone ask~~y~~ about me yesterday?"

I thought back. "Yes. In the morning. That Ray guy asked me where you were."

"What'd you say?"

"Said I didn't know."

"Good. What's your name again?"

"Paul. I know yours. It's Rocky."

"That's right."

"Where have you been?" I asked.

He lowered his eyebrows, looking at me inquisitively. "Why?"

"Just wondering."

"Out there," he said pointing out at the gloomy, misty, dripping forest.

"Oh."

"What are you doing sleeping out here in the rain?"

"Getting some fresh air."

Everything shook again. I heard a pine crash to the ground a couple of miles off. "Is that so?"

"Yes."

"Well, kid, why don't you get out of that sleeping bag and follow me. I want to show you something."

"What?"

"Something back in the woods a ways."

I didn't really trust the guy. "Tell me and I'll tell you yes or no."

"It's an old miner's cabin, kid. Must be two hundred years old. But if you don't want to go it's fine with me."

I thought I heard another pine crash down somewhere out there, like a delayed response to the last eruption. "That sounds

"interesting," I said and crawled out of my nice warm wet sleeping bag into the cold drizzling morning. I had been using my shirt and pants for a pillow, so, since they were thoroughly soaked now, I had to unwad them before putting them on. Once on, they stuck to me and were all wrinkled. I sneezed.

"Let me get my raincoat," I said. "It's in the tent."

"I'll wait here."

"Okay. Be right back." I ran to the tent very fast, snuck in very quietly, and Hulga spoke.

"Who goes there?"

"Me. Paul. I'll just be a minute."

"You're trying to see something you're not supposed to see?"

"No," I said. "Not at all," and left the tent and ran back to Rocky. We went mushing off through the forest. It was still raining, making everything smell beautifully odoriferous, like an air freshener my mother always uses called Pine Essence.

Rocky walked faster than I could run. Dirt and pine needles shot up from beneath his boots with every step and flung back into my face. But I stumbled on faithfully behind, trying to stay up with him as best I could.

Everything was very foggy and the rain started coming down harder, running off the pines and making little streams through the forest. I heard some thunder off in the distance, accompanied by a quick flash of lightning. A real storm was rolling in.

"You spend a lot of time in the mountains?" Rocky asked, his voice echoing back to me, then continuing on like the thunder.

"No," I shouted.

"What?"

"No! This is my first trip into them!"

"You like the mountains?"

"Sure do!" I said, tripping over a big log, falling, getting mud all down the side of my pants. "They're just great!"

"You like snow?"

"Love it!"

"That's good," Rocky said, "because we're going to get some before you know it."

"Snow? Today!"

"Not this low, but there'll be some higher up."

"Higher up than Mount Baldy is?"

"There'll be plenty on Baldy by the end of the day."

"Uh oh," I said. "That's scarry."

Rocky and the thunder both laughed at the same time. Lightning flashed. I slipped in the mud and landed right on my—

"The cabin's just up a ways," Rocky said. "Try to stay on your feet until we get there."

We got there and I stayed on my feet most the time. Not much to see though: just this old wooden thing that was missing its roof. There were some old bottles lying around in the dirt and leaves where the floor was supposed to be, all different shapes and colors. They were kind of interesting but not worth the trip, or so I thought: since I've gotten back from the mountains I've found out that people actually collect these bottles and that they're worth money.

"Hey kid," Rocky said. "Look at this." He was pointing at one of the old logs in one of the old walls. "It says Sam."

I came over and took a look. The name had been cut into the log a very long time ago. The "S" was backwards. The logs of this structure were soaking wet and the name looked stained a darker brown than the rest of the log it was cut into.

"The guy who built this thing signed it," Rocky said.

"Some guy built this thing all by himself?"

"Probably. It's not hard to do. I built one once."

"Using a chain saw?"

"No. An axe. Spent a couple of days cutting down pines then notched 'em with dovetails and piled 'em up. You got to use pine. Aspen won't hold very long. See: this Sam fellow used only pine. Look at these sills. He really knew what he was doing."

I admired all this, thanked Rocky for the explanation, then said we'd better be getting back or Ray would be upset.

"Screw that guy," Rocky said.

"No, we'd better go."

"Then go, kid."

"Aren't you coming?"

"No."

"How am I supposed to get back? I don't know how we came."

"Ask Sam."

"Seriously."

"Got a compass?"

I fished around in my pockets and sure enough—the official Scout compass was there.

"Use that. Southwest." He pointed in that direction. "See ya, kid. Give my regards to Ray."

"I'll be sure to," I said and struck off in the southwesterly direction he'd shown me. My compass: the more I needed it, the more the needle did all kinds of crazy acrobatics—spinning around and jumping up and down. I gave it a couple of good whacks and soon it was behaving just fine.

The rain, as I walked, was still falling, but not quite so hard as before. It felt creepy walking through the forest all alone, the gloom making me feel closed in. The day had come without a sunrise.

When I got back to camp everyone was just getting up and greeting this drab morning. I was solid mud, wet, and sneezes, so the first thing I did was change clothes. Jack and Hulga were already out and around, so I had the tent to myself.

I went searching for Barb after I was dry and found her in the forest near the tent collecting firewood and wearing a poncho with the hood up.

"Good morning," she said and somehow managed a wet smile. "Where have you been?"

"Bad morning," I replied. "I've been swimming in the wilderness with that guy named Rocky."

"Yes?"

"Yeah. I ran into him this morning—or, rather, he smashed into me."

"Yes?"

"Yes."

"I came for you in your tent but found only Jack and Hulga. Imagine."

"I know," I said. "I was pretty surprised too."

"Where did you sleep?"

"In the forest."

"In the rain?"

"Yes."

"You didn't."

"I did."

"That was silly, Paul. You could have slept in my tent. I was all alone last night."

"I just figured I'd try roughing it."

She gave me a wierd look then continued collecting firewood. I helped.

"You know something," I said. "That Rocky's a wierd one."

"I can imagine. Where'd you two go?"

"To an old cabin build by a guy named Sam. There were a bunch of bottles lying around in the dirt and leaves where the floor was sup-

posed to be."

"That must have been interesting."

"It was but I kind of wished it was a nicer day. Then I could have casually observed."

"Yes, it's not a very nice day. What did Rocky have to say to you?"

"Not much, except about how he'd built a log cabin once. Peculiar guy. I kind of respect him. He's a real individual. Loves the mountains. Walks fast. Laughs a lot. Maybe you'll meet him too."

"He doesn't care much for the Scouts, does he?"

"No," I said. "Definitely not."

"That's kind of stupid, isn't it? It's his job."

"No, it's not stupid. I don't really care much for them either."

"I know you don't."

"It's a hiking, walking, moving zoo."

"But Paul, really, we are all up here together."

"I know, I know."

"What if someone needs Rocky for something? To lift something or something? He should just be around more, that's all. Is he back now?"

"No."

"Well," she said, "I just think it's stupid."

"It's going to snow," I said.

"What?"

"It's going to snow. Rocky told me."

"It's not going to snow. That's silly. It's too early."

"Maybe so."

We carried the wood back to the Reds' fire.

After a good breakfast of sausage and sweetrolls, Ray called together the entire Scout enterprise. The rain was still coming down and the wind was picking up faster and faster and faster. We all stood, wet and cold and sullen, around the Reds' smoldering campfire while Head Scout Leader Ray shouted at us through his megaphone.

"Scouts," he said, "it seems as though we have run into a bit of bad weather."

"Observant, isn't he?" I said to Barb.

"Shhh," she replied. Everyone was listening very intently to Ray.

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"Fret not," he continued. "We'll make it through. It's not far to the pass. We'll see the peak of Mount Baldy later today. The hike won't be far but it will be steep, and it will put us in good position to cross the pass sometime tomorrow morning. All that I and your other Scout leaders ask of you is that you do whatever we say."

"What if it snows?" the guy with the ever-present gaiter problem shouted.

"It won't," Ray confidently assured us. "I have spent three-quarters of my life in the mountains and I can guarantee each and every one of you that it will not snow while we are on this trip." Then he added quickly—"Any other questions?" then even quicker—"No?" then even faster than the speed of light—"Let's move, Scouts!"

Just before we did in fact move Ray came looking for me and found me and asked if I'd seen Rocky.

"No."

"Crist," he said, his face reddening and dripping in the rain. "Where is that guy? If you see him tell him he's fired!"

Was this my fault? Should I have told Ray the truth and given him Rocky's regards? I was sure I didn't know.

7.

The Scouts, as they moved on up the trail that morning, didn't look so bright and colorful in their raingear. They trudged dutifully along behind their Scout leaders; trudged along through the grey, foggy and amorphous wonderland.

The rain began to pour down much harder than it had yet. Thunder boomed. Lightning flashed. The wind threw the rain against their faces, and still, surprisingly, they pushed on, leaning into it . . .

Going up steep inclines many of them slipped, falling under the weight of their packs, skidding backwards into those behind. Everyone was bitching. Arguments raged.

"Can't you walk right!"

"Come on—move!"

"Hurry it up, asshole!"

Hiking had indeed become serious business. The mountains, it seemed, were no longer the Scouts' wilderness playground; up here it had now become much more rugged, mean, much more ominous with every step taken. It became crucial that everyone keep his wits; but this wasn't happening.

As noon approached it began to hail—hard. We all took cover in the woods. Scout leaders ran around trying to console everyone with sandwiches; it wasn't working. Barb and I had slipped and skidded along together all morning, saying little. Now, eating our sandwiches, we sat together under the only aspen to be seen around us. It was missing all its bright, little heart-shaped leaves. We were sitting on them. They were dead. I knew that we had now reached that point on the mountain where aspens could not grow, or didn't want to: the pines were all by themselves.

"This is such shit," Barb said, and I could only agree.

The peak of Mount Baldy came into view about two hours after we'd gotten back on the trail again. The hail had stopped and the fog was pretty much gone—leaving the atmosphere a dead translucent grey. But now, looking up at all that pure and fresh milky-white snow spilled down over this peak we were slowly making our way towards—this

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brought life back into all of existence very fast. It must have been snowing up there for most of the day.

Everyone stopped. Stopped and stared, no one saying a thing. It looked very odd, that snow—all stark and naked and shining a clear, clear white—completely different in form and color from the browns and greys and blacks of the dirt and rock it was attempting to cover. So white, so high, so far away and so different, that snow up there on this mighty peak seemed not to belong to this earth, that instead it was part of the dense bog of clouds hovering over it, that it had dropped down only to stay for a minute. But, surely, we all knew it was indeed here.

The line of Scouts began to move along again. But soon I saw ahead of us where everyone was pulling off into a small clearing in the pines, the horses too. Ray was to speak again. The peak was still in view, looming above the pines, looking down onto Ray and the rest of us.

"I know," Ray shouted through his megaphone. "I said it wouldn't snow and it has. I'm as surprised about it as all of you, you can be sure of that, but you must remember that that snow that has fallen is very high up—much higher than we'll ever get. I won't say there's none on the pass because there might be, I don't know. But if there is it's nothing to worry about. The pass is some three hundred feet below the summit of Baldy; yes, it's that far. Don't worry. The worst is over. See how clear it already is? We will hike on now to just a little below timber line; that way we'll be in good position to cross the pass tomorrow morning. There's no reason to try to cross the pass now: once over we'd have to get back down to timber line before nightfall, which would not be possible. But at any rate: under no circumstances will we turn back. I've already heard some of you talking about it. That is absurd. There is no danger. Believe me. This is just a freak accident of nature and will—already has—pass quickly. I repeat: The snow that has fallen is very far away. Don't let your imaginations run away with you. There are no problems. Just hike at a good pace and everything will be fine. We'll be in fine position—close to the alpine but with the benefits of the woods. Just remember above all else that: we will not under any circumstances turn back. There is no danger. Remember that." He paused here to look behind him up at the peak. "Any questions?"

I was very surprised that old Gaiters didn't come up with one, he didn't, nor did anyone else. We all filed back onto the trail and continued on our way through the rugged terrain.

Timber line, of course, is that altitude in the mountains at which trees do not grow above. Those that grow on the very edge of it or within some distance below are very strong trees; they have to be. They are very abused by the weather at this height, particularly during the winter months when the snow keeps piling on their limbs, breaking some, partially damaging others.

The aspens were not strong enough to grow up here. The pines, that's all there were, were much more rugged looking than they had been lower down. Most of them were missing a significant amount of branches on top or on one or more sides, and many were dwarfed. Some were huge and thick; others were skinny and almost dead. Those that were dead, and there were many, lay rotting at the bases of the living. I didn't really even consider these strange, deformed things trees: they were just ugly monsters. We set up camp among them.

Barb and I, after helping set it up, took a walk. The weather was much nicer now: the wind had ceased, the sun broke through the clouds occasionally, and the air was crisp and fresh, though quite cold, with the aftermath of the wet weather. We walked along the main trail through the grotesque statues, the pines, and emerged from the forest at timber line. And we were face to face with the peak of Mount Baldy—high and clear in the near distance. Between us and it was a huge meadow where nothing grew save grass and a few shrubs, the trail continuing through it towards the peak. Storm Pass, which we could see, was just below the peak of Baldy, to its right. And yes, there was snow on it, but not much.

And we stood looking at the full whiteness of the snow spilled down up there over the rocks and slopes of the peak, making the cliffs and crags stand out clear and hard in contrast to it, giving the mountain its uniqueness and form.

We saw the sun, a big orange ball when it was behind the clouds, warm on our faces when it was not, set. It slowly progressed down towards the massiveness of the mountain we had almost finished climbing, putting us in the mountain's shadow as it disappeared behind it. The sky got very bright after the sun was gone, bright oranges and pinks, and the clouds took on more definite form, shaded

and rippled in color.

Then I saw, protruding sharp against the sky, a lone rock formation near the peak of the mountain. It had the shape of a mountain climber with a huge pack weighing him down, causing him to stoop over; but on he progressed, into the night.

It was dark by the time we decided to go back down to camp.

8.

"Barb, I have a question to ask you," I said while we were walking back, leaning against each other, my arm around her waist and hers around mine.

"Shoot."

"Can we sleep together tonight? It's going to be cold. Much colder than it is right now."

"You mean in the same sleeping bag or in the same tent?"

"Same sleeping bag. Together, you know: Sleeping together."

She didn't say anything for a moment. Then: "We'll see."

Dinner that night was good. Barb ate with the Reds again but only after Ray was satisfied: Hulga dragged Jack away one more time. We had baked ham, baked in tin foil in the fire, for the main course. I gobbled down three thick, dripping slices of that stuff, along with some green beans that Barb had helped enhance by melting some cheese in a pan over the hot fire, then pouring this sauce over the beans. It was delicious. And for dessert we had fruit that needed eating right away because it had gotten so ripe and mushy. Barb and I had some of the peaches and cherries.

This dinner was supposed to be a ceremonial feast, the ceremony being that we'd made it this far and were going the rest of the way soon. Ray was proud of his Reds. He said so. Everyone, in fact, was in a good mood that night; tired but happy. We were all warm enough and content sitting around the fire eating, drinking, talking, laughing, smiling. Sunglasses handed out the rest of his beers, giving Barb and me more cans than the others got; this, as I saw it, was his way of apologizing for his bad show the night before.

Ray, after supper, told some stories about confrontations he'd had with bears while alone in the mountains; none of these stories were, of course, the least bit true, but we all enjoyed them just the same. Then Sunglasses gave us a few tunes on his harmonica, and sang. We were all glad to have at least one musician among us to make the festivities more gay. Barb and I sat listening ^{to} and watching all this, enjoying it thoroughly. Barb, again, had the wood next to her and I, again, cheered her on while she kept grabbing sticks and feeding them.

into the fire.

By the time people started leaving for bed (many of them singing, skipping and dancing away) Barb and I were finishing the last of the beer Sunglasses had given us. It went down smoothly and tasted really fine and, with the altitude and how tired we were from the hiking, both of us felt elevated. Soon we were alone, kissing.

"You know," Barb said, "I've really been enjoying this. I mean the two of us Scouting around together, paying no attention to the others if we haven't wanted to."

"I have to," I said.

"In just two days we've really started harmonizing nicely."

"Hummm," I said.

"Hummm," she said.

"Hummm," we both said.

This was harmonizing nicely.

"You're old for your age," Barb said. "How old are you? I forget.

"Thirty-two."

"No," she said. "Come on. I can remember if I have to."

"Twenty-two."

"Come on."

"You tell me."

"Sixteen," she said. "Sweet sixteen. My little sixteen-year-old baby." She giggled, then kissed me on the cheek.

"Wait a minute," I said. "You come-on, Barb. I am a man."

"I know, I know." She felt my arm muscle. "Isn't it big, though?"

"Damn right. Huge."

"You are a man."

"Yes. And you are a woman."

"That's correct. A for the day for Paul."

"A what?"

"An A, for the day."

"Barb, are you a virgin?"

She looked away from me, looked at the fire.

"I am," I said.

"You are?"

"Yes. Are you?"

"Well . . ."

"Well what. Come on Barb. I told you. You tell me."

"You didn't have to tell me."

"I know. But are you?"
". . . Do I have to tell?",
"Not if you don't want to. I just want to know."
"No, I'm not."
"More than once?"
"Boy, are you pushy."
"I know. More than once?"
"Well . . ."
"Come on, Barb."
"Yes."
"Many more?"
"No. Three times. That's all."
"Good," I said. "Thanks for telling me."
"Sure. It's no big secret."
We had a brief public silence.
"Hummm," she said.
"Hummm," I said.
"Hummm," we both said.
"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" I asked.
"I think so. What are you thinking. I think I know what you're thinking."

"I bet you do too."

"I do."

"You do!"

"Good!"

We lay back and kissed and felt around and all that for a very long time. During which we checked to see how well our bodies fit together; they fit perfectly, almost. Just one piece was missing.

But while all this was going on a fiend lurked nearby. I heard his hideous laugh before he spoke.

"So Paul's a lover!"

I looked up to see Rocky standing, towering above us, roaring, his face a dark red glow in the bright light from the fire.

"Oh," I said. "It's you. What's up?"

"You are!" he said, boozing out even louder, his hands on his hips, a mean looking creature with his backpack on and all. "Don't like log cabins too much but you sure do like those girls!"

"Yeah," I said. I could feel Barb shivering. "This is Barb."

"Hello," Rocky said.

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Barb smiled slightly and gave him a small nod.

"Don't stay out all night," Rocky said. "You may be in for a little surprise!"

He started roaring again, backing away and staring at us.

"What?" I said. "What do you mean?"

He didn't answer, just kept backing away and laughing and smiling and staring until he'd completely faded into the darkness.

I was silent until I figured he was far away.

"Did he scare you, Barb?"

"Yes. He did." She was still shivering.

"Badly?"

"No."

"That's good."

"Yes," she said, but I knew she still wanted some more silence.

So we sat there quietly, Barb staring into the fire, and I pushing her hair out of her eyes every time it fell there. I was very sorry Rocky had appeared, but it seemed like something he'd do so I forgave him for it.

"What do you think he meant by all that surprise stuff?" Barb said, finally.

"I don't know. He was probably just joking around."

"He seemed pretty serious to me."

"He wasn't."

"You sure he's not planning anything?"

"No, no. He's no maniac. He's just different."

"You sure?"

"Yes."

"Okay," she said.

"You feel better now?"

"Yes."

"Hear the wind?"

"Uh huh. It's picking up again. It'll be cold tonight."

She looked at me. I looked at her. And we both smiled.

"I think everyone's asleep now," Barb said.

"Except the owls," I replied.

"No, they're probably asleep too. In their cozy little nests out there in those big strange trees."

I looked out there trying to see one of those big strange trees. And I saw one, looking even more deformed and grotesque in the

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flickering light from the fire. "Yes," I said. "You may be right. They probably are. Let's us retire too, okay?"

She paused. "You'll be nice?"

"Yes. Surely. As nice as I know how."

"I'll help teach you how to be nice, okay?"

"You bet."

"Good," she said. "Let's go."

And we walked to her tent, which was empty. And we went in, got undressed, crawled into her sleeping bag. And did what man has for centuries tabooed, titillated, formed all kinds of institutions around—has done everything to, in fact, except recognize for what it actually is. Mountain climbing.

9.

When I woke up in the morning I just lay there in that sleeping bag watching my breath curl out of my nostrils and mouth. The sides of the tent seemed to be sagging down very far, as if someone had pulled out a couple of the stakes.

I finally summoned all my energy together and crawled out of the sleeping bag into the freezing air, Barb stirring a little but not waking up. I pulled on my pants and crawled across the icy floor to the tent's opening. Unzipping the flaps, I got my first look at the new day.

"Good God Almighty," I said. "Snow. It's snowing!"

And that it was. Heavily, in thick, weightless chunks, down it came. There was no wind. It was very much of a stillness out there, a quiet; the ground was a solid mass of white broken only by the bases of the pines. The branches of these trees were caked with the white, a big clump breaking off every now and then and falling softly down. The whole scene was like a painting; it was like I was watching and listening to a silent painting.

The painting was shattered, however, by the shouts and bodies of the Scouts now appearing all, it seemed, at the same time. I watched the panic begin, then closed the flaps and continued dressing. Barb was just waking up.

"What's all the noise out there?" she asked, stretching.

"It's snowing."

"What? It is?"

"Yup."

"You mean really snowing?"

"That's right."

"Uh oh . . . What are you going to do?"

"Go out there."

"Wait for me."

As she crawled out of the sleeping bag and began dressing, I observed very carefully her smooth, nude form. It was as white as the snow.

"You're beautiful, Barb," I said.

"Thanks," she replied, and smiled.

"I'm going out to see what's happening," I said. "See you out there." I left.

The snow was quite deep and very powdery. Everyone who had not gotten out of his tent already was now doing so. Several groups had formed here and there throughout the woods (and not by colors) but the majority of Scouts were running around and yelling at each other, not knowing what to do. Except for the inimitable little kids: they too were forming into groups, but the purpose for these formations was not to discuss—it was, instead, to build snowmen. The little kids supervising these endeavors were blowing the whistles they'd gotten in their packs and were shouting commands.

I spotted a group of adults that looked like it would no doubt have something to say about the situation, and clambered over to it. It was composed of Sunglasses, Gaiters and Ray. Sunglasses and Ray were having some sort of argument, the first part of which I'd missed, and were now standing face to face, ready to do battle.

Sunglasses looked impressive in his red pair.

"What's that, boy?" Ray said to him.

"I said: You can stick it up your ass, Ray."

Ray smashed him in the face, the red pair shattering and Sunglasses tumbling backwards into the snow.

"You motherfucking cocksuckingsonofabitchingshitfacedasshole," Sunglasses objected. The red pair had cut him—a big gash over one of his eyes, the blood dribbling down the side of his face. He got up on his feet again.

Ray backed off. Sunglasses lunged at him, grabbing him by the head. He pulled down, his knee went up, and now it was Ray who was in the snow, his nose bleeding. I wouldn't have thought Sunglasses had it in him.

He had no time for apologies: he picked up his pack, which was lying nearby in the snow, put it on, and headed back down the mountain as fast as the snow and his backpack permitted him to run. Quite a character, that Sunglasses.

"How'd all this start?" I asked Gaiters. Ray was standing there tending to his nose.

"Ray wouldn't let him go back down."

"Why not?"

"Says we got to cross the pass. I think he's crazy."

"Who's crazy?" Ray said, reviving very quickly. "Listen, buddy, you've complained enough during this trip and I'm sick of it. Hear? Just shut your mouth from now on."

"Sure. Sorry, Ray."

"Now go. Pack. Get ready. Move!"

"What are you going to do about him?" I asked, pointing in the direction Sunglasses had fled.

"Don't you worry about it. He's my problem. Now go!"

Barb was just getting out of her tent when I got there. She was dressed in her snowsuit—tassled hat and all, something I hadn't seen her in before. She looked nifty.

She spoke very fast. "What's going to happen?"

"We're supposed to get ready to cross the pass."

"Who said?"

"Ray."

"What are we supposed to do!!"

"I just told you: get ready to go."

"I mean—what if we get stuck! What if it keeps snowing and we're caught up here? All winter!"

"That won't happen," I said. "Just get ready to go, okay?"

Apparently, my tone displeased her. She crawled back into her tent without saying anything more. I left for mine. On the way I met Rocky.

"Hey kid. What's up?" he said.

"I can see you're really worried."

"About the snow? Nice, huh?"

"Listen," I said. "Ray wants us to cross the pass. You think it's safe?"

He contemplated for a moment. Then: "Yeah, that's the right decision. It's safe, sure, but better hurry. Wouldn't be a good idea to wait it out. Snow'll get so deep nobody'll be going anywhere—without skis or shoes, that is—for a couple days, at least."

"This isn't the first of the winter snows?"

"Naw. Much too early. Listen, kid, you want to climb to the top?"

"Of what?"

"Of what! The mountain, kid, the mountain."

"The mountain! To the top of Baldy!"

"Sure. Be beautiful up there. It's a challenge, kid. I'm challenging you to do it."

"You're crazy, Rocky---you just said if we don't hurry we won't be going anywhere. How do you expect us to make it all the way up and back down again before the snow's too deep?"

"That's the challenge part, kid. The risk."

"Risk? Challenge? Come on, Rocky, get serious."

"I am serious. I'm going. Why don't you come along?"

Yes, I said to myself. Maybe I should. Maybe I will!

"What are the odds of getting back?"

He laughed. "Oh, we'll get back. Kid, if I looked at everything like that I'd never go anywhere. It'll be fun. Think of it that way."

"Alright," I said. "Can I bring a girl?"

"A girl!"

"Yeah. A girl. That one last night."

"If she wants to come. I don't care."

"I'll ask her. Got to get my pack too."

"Meet you here."

"Right."

On my way back to Barb's tent I watched the Scouts clammering down through the woods. They were wearing their packs, but as I gathered from the empty ones I went past, few had bothered to take down the tents. A couple of Scouts went loping right by me. A horse went loping by too, but he was confused; for some reason, he was heading up. At first I wondered if bears or wolves had invaded the camp and were thus causing all this, but then realized quick enough that what I was witnessing was a general evacuation.

Barb was in her tent. Hulga was there too. They were both just finishing packing.

"Did you pack already?", Barb immediately asked me when I crawled in through the flaps. She was still speaking very fast.

"No."

"Well go pack!"

"I will, I will."

"Fool," Hulga said.

"Haven't you seen?" Barb said. "We're going down. Everybody's leaving."

"Did Ray tell them to?"

"I don't know. But we're going. Right, Hulga?"

"That's right," Hulga said.

"No," I said. "I don't think I will. I think I'm going up! To

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the very top! Scale Mount Baldy in the snow!"

"Please, Paul, you're showing your age."

"The top! Yes! I'm going to the top!"

"Dumbshit." Hulga again.

"Would you like to come with me, Barb?"

"Go and pack, Paul!"

"No, really, I'm going all the way up. I just talked with Rocky. We're going together."

Now she knew I was serious. She dropped the item she was about to place in her pack (a pair of panties, I think it was) and looked directly at me. "Oh Paul. Stupid stupid stupid Paul! What are you talking about? Do you even know what you're talking about?"

"Yes."

"It's a joke. You're joking."

"No, it's no joke. It'll be fun. Rocky said so, and I believe him. Just thought I'd ask if you want to go"—I was backing out of the tent now, Barb staring at me—"but apparently you don't. Are you sure? Positive? Okay. Goodbye, Barb. Hope you get down alright. Don't slip in the snow, you might fall. You watch out for that too, Hulga. You fat pig. Goodbye now. So long. Bye bye bye," and I was outside in the falling snow once again.

I stood there looking at that tent. It was slowly collapsing under the weight of the snow. "Goodbye Barb!" I shouted.

The Scouts were still evacuating. A frenzied rush back down the mountain. I headed for my tent.

Now when I got to where we'd put it up I found instead, once again, all my belongings scattered all over the place. But this time someone had actually dumped everything out of my backpack, as though looking for something. It lay empty and half buried in the snow.

Ray and Jack were there. They were folding up the tent.

"Nice," I said, pointing at my things.

"Where have you been?" Ray said. He had a big bloodstained bandage hanging off his nose. "I told you to get ready to go."

"My things are all wet now," I said. "Did you really have to do this?"

"I did it," Jack said.

"Well thanks, Jack."

"You deserve it. Skipping out on all the work."

"Where were you!" Ray asked again.

"Building a snowman."

"Smart ass. Now pack. Move!"

"Why's everyone leaving?" I replied.

"What?"

"I asked why is everyone leaving? Have you told them to? Or have they just picked up and left regardless of anything you have to say?"

"That's it," Jack said. "I've never seen anything like it. They just started leaving."

"Shut-up Jack!" Ray said. "Where were you!"

"Eat shit, Ray," I said.

"What!"

"Eat shit. That's all you're good for, anyway. Tell me, Ray, why did that guy run off like that? Why is everyone running off? Could it be because they too realize you're only good for eating shit? No one pays any attention to you. Always talking about responsibility. Responsibility and organization. It's just shit, Ray. That's all. If it was really worth something, you'd be able to do your job. But you can't. All you can do is eat shit!"

During this little speech of mine, Ray, his face growing redder than even that bandage hanging off it, had dropped his side of the tent and turned to face me. Now, in only two strides, he had me by my collar and was shaking me, pushing and pulling me, all but hitting me.

"Little fucker. Little little fucker," he was saying.

I broke loose and grabbed one of the steel tentpoles from where they'd set them in the snow.

"Don't touch me again!"

He charged. I wound up, waited until he was right where I wanted him, then wham! right square in that poor nose one more time.

I thought he was going to die.

When he removed his hands from his face I saw just how much damage I'd done. I dropped the pole, scared. I offered very little resistance to what followed: the blows into my stomach, the back of his hand across my face—I just let it happen, was unable to move. Then he had me down on the ground, kneeling on my stomach and driving his fist full force against various areas of my head. I was crying, and his nose had us both painted all red. I was ready to hang it up forever.

But Ray, poor guy, encountered a force greater than he'd seen yet

that day. Through the blur of my tears I watched him being lifted off me. Up and up and up he went, as though God was hoisting him up to Heaven. I sat up. Rocky then threw that guy—I mean actually threw him—at least six feet, right smack into the nearest pine.

"A kid!" Rocky was shouting. "Just a little kid! Oh God! He's just a kid!"

Ray was quite unable to respond either verbally or physically. I wondered if this was the first dead person I'd ever seen.

"That fucking fucking fucking son of a bitch!" Rocky screamed.

It looked like he was going to go for him again, so I, now on my feet, grabbed his arm.

"No! Enough!"

"I could kill him!"

"You already did!"

Jack was kneeling down by Ray now, playing nurse. Strange sounds came from Ray. Very strange. But at least there were sounds.

"Rocky," I said. "Let's go."

"Go? Up, you mean?"

"That's what I mean."

"You're alright?"

"I think so," I said, feeling with my hand the various parts of my face. Everything seemed to be there, and getting bigger very fast. But nothing was bleeding. I scooped up some snow and used it to wash Ray's blood off my skin.

While I was throwing my stuff into my pack, Rocky said, "You're sure you're alright, kid? We don't have to go."

"Rocky," I replied. "You want to know the truth? I feel great. In fact, I've never felt better."

Walking through the woods, continuing on our way to the top of the mountain, I found that now I was able to keep up with Rocky—and not because he was slowing down to my speed.

That stillness, as we walked along, that painting that had been shattered just a short time ago, came back. The by far dominant color, that of the still-falling snow. The only sound, that of our boots swishing through that snow.

And side by side, Rocky and I emerged from the woods at timber line, and were confronted with a solid and blinding, but very very soft, sheet of white, nothing else. I heard a noise behind me and turned around quickly: a bird, a black black crow came shooting out

of the pines and continued on his way into the **endless white** ahead.

THE CHARISMATIC DOG

I had the following experience the summer I worked as a waterbed salesman.

The store I worked at was the largest waterbed store in the area, averaging some sixty sales a day. The store was always crowded, and I was just one of five salesmen; but I was the best achiever of us all, selling, usually, thirteen to eighteen beds a day.

Smiley, though only a dog, has somehow left an impression on me that I will retain for, I'm sure, many years to come. He belonged to a strange sort of man who, in addition to having an almost grotesque personal appearance, spit little drops of saliva while he talked and said nothing remarkable at all. His name was Rob D. Lot. He used his middle initial in his name because, probably, he wanted to be like all the other teachers at the small college in our town, from which he came, teaching, I think he said, philosophy. Most all those teachers used an initial somewhere in their names.

I met Smiley when his owner came into the store to buy—or at least to look at—a waterbed. The store was very crowded that day, and Lot left Smiley in his car when he came in.

This one was my man. We had a priority system at the store based on who sold the most waterbeds, and since I was tops, I could take any customer at any time.

"Hello there," I said to Lot after giving him a moment or two to browse among the model beds at the front of the store. I had seen him get out of his car, an old Buick, but pretended that I was noticing him for the first time now. "Looking for a bedder sleep, huh?"

He didn't seem amused or charmed at my play on words. "Just looking," he stated, simply. I smiled and nodded. He continued browsing.

It was at this point that I looked and saw Smiley sitting in the car outside. I hadn't noticed him when I'd watched Lot getting out of the car.

The dog was sitting on the front seat looking into the store, and he was smiling. I had never seen a dog smile before. He was small and most resembled a Black Lab; but his nose was too short to be a purebred, and he was much too small.

I saw my chance.

"Nice dog," I stated, though not directly to Lot, who was still very near me.

It worked. Lot looked at me, then out the window at Smiley. Smiley responded to all this attention by sitting up and putting his paws on the dashboard; and though I could not see it, I knew that he was wagging his tail.

"Yours?" I said.

"Yes."

"Cute little thing. What kind is he?"

"Half Lab, half Spaniel."

"Really? Looks all Lab."

"He's not."

"I bet he'd like to catch a few snoozes on a new waterbed."

"He's not allowed on the furniture."

"I see."

I did not like this man. I had been in no way attracted to him when he first came in, except, of course, from a professional point of view, and now I felt repulsion. He did, though, look like a very potential waterbed buyer, and I wasn't going to loose this one.

After giving him another moment or two to browse, I once again approached the man. He had stopped at one of our cheaper models and had remained there for a longer amount of time than at any of the other beds he'd passed.

"I see you are interested in our most uniquely-priced bed," I said

"Uniquely-priced? You mean it's on sale?"

I had purposely used the expression, or description, because customers interpreted it in the widest variety of senses: and always in the sense the one particular customer most wanted to hear.

"Yes. Thirty percent off the posted price."

"Do you sell many of them?"

"Surely. Our bestseller, in fact."

"How does it sleep?"

"Have you ever slept on a waterbed?"

"Never."

"Then this is surely the one for you. It's our bestseller because those who are new to the bedder world of waterbeds get along with it best. It's soft, yet hard. It was designed for total absorbtion and padding of the body while, at the same time, not being too fluid to bother one when and if he moves. One does not, however, move much while sleeping on a waterbed

since the sleep it puts you into is total—as is the sleep of the nice shape, hee hee, next to you." I smiled bigger and bedder than I had yet.

He did not respond.

While we had been talking, Smiley, without our knowing it, had jumped out of the car window and was now in the store, having come in through the door with a customer, I assumed.

Up on the bed he jumped, breaking abruptly the silence that had fallen between his master and myself.

"Smiley!" said Lot.

The dog sat on his haunches and looked at us both, still smiling. I got a good look at his face now: abrupt little eyebrows making the nicest little half-circles over his shining brown eyes; a little white patch on his chin, coming in and out of view from behind his lightly panting tongue; and to top the whole bunch of cuteness off, the most adorable and huge ears flopped down over the sides of his head, sort of framing the face of this delightful little creature.

I couldn't help but to chuckle and begin petting the dog, smoothing his soft fur down his back. Contently he wagged his tail and continued smiling. "What a fine little doggie," I said, and I meant it.

Lot made a move to grab his collar and pull him off the bed, but I stopped the arm. "Let him sit," I said. "It may help sell the bed to someone. Such a cute little thing!"

The minor spectacle began attracting the other customers and salesmen in the store, but this did not become evident to me until there was a small crowd around us—most everyone there. I continued petting Smiley, enjoying it thoroughly, the little thing looking up at me with adoring eyes, and occasionally

glancing at his master.

With the audience, I thought it best to entertain them, though I was genuinely interested in the questions I asked Lot.

"He's still quite young, yes?"

"He's two."

"Did you know the parents?"

"Yes."

"Does he resemble the father more, or the mother?"

"The father was Lab."

"Will he beg for food?" I asked, producing from my suitcoat pocket a few of the peanuts I always carried with me for the customers and their children.

Sure enough, the dog sat right up, his little paws suspended limply in front of him, and blinking the most adorable little blinks. I gave him the peanuts.

Meanwhile, the crowd around me issued a variety of chuckles, ooo's and ah's, and talked among themselves about the attraction. Then, after my last peanut, Smiley lay down and rolled over—twice. This got whatever little treats the crowd had in their pockets.

"Whose dog is it?" a newcomer asked.

"This gentleman's," I said, indicating Lot.

Lot smiled slightly, though he did not attempt to cover up the fact that he was not entirely happy with what was going on.

I suppose that everyone would have stayed there for quite some time more if Lot, finally proclaiming that he wished to proceed with the business at hand, had not plopped right down on the bed next to Smiley.

He asked me a few more questions about the bed, and while I answered them, the crowd dispersed. Soon, Lot decided to make

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purchase, and while I was writing up the slip several of the same customers came up to him, Smiley sitting contently on the floor next to the cash register where we were standing now, and asked him questions about the dog, many of the questions the same that I had asked. They just wanted to hear the answers again, while petting the subject.

Rob D. Lot answered just as tersely as before, if not more so this time. And when he left, several people still around us, his check in the cash register and the date of delivery agreed upon, he walked out very rapidly, his dog trailing a ways behind him, and everyone saying "Goodbye" and "Good luck."

He did not return the farewells, but his dog did: little Smiley kept looking back at us, blinking and wagging his tail, then they were gone.

Several days later a health inspector made his appearance at store. He informed us that he had received a complaint from one Rob D. Lot that animals were allowed in our place of business. I explained the situation as best I could, and since I such a good job of this (the inspector left saying, "No problem at all, take her easy") I got a raise
I'll always remember that dog. That charismatic dog.

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5,000 words

-ULTRAVILLE IV -

THE GIGANTIC FLYSWATTER
by Bradford Harrison

The ship was now orbiting the largest planet it had yet come upon during its extensive voyage. The planet was incredibly large.

And the ship's voyage had indeed been extensive: three human generations had already lived and died on board since it had begun; these generations had included the great grandfather, the grandfather, and the father of James Montagamer IV.

James Montagamer IV occupied the highest position in the ship's ranks—Head of Ship as had the three Montagamer men before him. All of the ship's ranks were filled that way: in accordance with the traditional law of primogeniture, which stated, in the ship's charters, that the oldest son of any given man in any given position had the right to succeed to his father's position once that man died.

While the ship was orbiting the newly come upon planet, Montagamer IV was alone and seated in his private Head of Ship's chamber. Toward the end of the first orbit, something incredible was discovered on the planet's surface. Montagamer was made

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aware of the discovery via the intercom; his son, James Montagamer V, was the person who notified him.

Montagamer responded to the information by flicking on a spacescreen that occupied one entire wall of his chamber.

And there, glowing a hazy purple in black space, was the massive planet. Montagamer turned a dial that caused the screen to slowly fill with a smaller and smaller area of the planet's surface. He was zooming in: one more dial and the picture was in perfect focus. A gigantic, black, and almost perfectly square object sat dead center in the middle of the screen; the object was Ultraville IV.

"Do you have it, Dad?" came Montagamer's son's voice from the intercom.

"I do, son," replied Montagamer. "What can you tell me about it?"

"Not much. The probes are going whacko!"

"Can't you even get the dimensions? It's huge!"

"We're trying. But wait—I'll get back with you in just a moment. I think they're getting something now."

"Alright. And do everything you can to receive any kind of communication that might be being sent to us."

"I will, sir."

Montagamer shifted his weight backward so that the reclining chair he was seated in folded out into almost a bed, the footrest popping up and Montagamer taking advantage of that feature too. He then returned his full attention to

strange object on the spacescreen.

"So there you are," he said aloud but only to himself. "After all this time we've finally found you. After all this trouble, all this effort, we find that we were right after all. Oh Montagamers! It was worth it; it was worth every second."

What Montagamer was referring to was the fact that for past four generations every James Montagamer had been obsessed with just one thing: finding Ultraville IV.

Each James Montagamer had passed the obsession on to the next; the obsession had originated in James Montagamer I, the present Montagamer's great grandfather.

The present Montagamer had known nothing about the matter until Montagamer III, his father, told him about it. This particular, as it were, passing on of the obsession, had occurred when Montagamer III knew that he was about to die.

Montagamer IV, while relaxing in the Head of Ship's private chamber and viewing the gigantic box on the spacescreen, reflected back on that momentous episode of his life when his father had talked with him about the thing he was looking at.

Then quite young, Montagamer IV had been summoned to the Head of Ship's chamber. There lay his father, incurably ill with a heart disease. The nurses and other medical assistants were told to leave and the old man began:

"What I have to say to you, Jimmy, is going to surprise

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immensely. It concerns what is on those tapes I told about when you were small. the tapes that only the first-born male members of our family can get from the Gallery. If you die before your oldest son can hear from you what I am about to explain, then he can use those tapes. In our case, however, I can tell you myself."

"I'm listening," said the young man.

"Your great grandfather was the last Montagamer male not to live his entire life on board this ship, as you know. But what you don't know is that he was the man responsible for this entire voyage. We are here talking now because of an experience he had when he was very young.

"It was his first extended flight into space," the old man continued. "He and another man were navigating regions uncharted at that time. It was getting toward that point in the journey where they would have to turn around and head for home if they were to have enough fuel to make it all the way back.

"They had just finished charting a planet not known about then—a planet with two moons—and they decided that there probably wasn't going to be much else interesting to find within the short distance's worth of fuel that they had left (beyond the amount, that is, that they had to save to get back on). So they conducted the necessary operations to get the ship headed in the appropriate direction. But as the ship was turning, something happened that caused both men to go

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unconscious.

"When they came to, they discovered the most curious—and frightening—things. First they saw—and felt—that their bodies had been stripped of all fat: their faces were hollow, their skin was tight against their rib cages, and their legs were skinny as twigs. Then they discovered that all instrumentation had completely malfunctioned for some indeterminate amount of time while they'd been unconscious—the time being indeterminable because the ship's clocks had completely malfunctioned right along with the rest of the instrumentation.

"Immediately they checked their bearings in space, using the planet with the two moons that they had just charted; it was indeed fortunate that these bodies were still within ~~XXX~~ accurate scope of the ship's radar. They found that they had completed their turn alright, and not long before; the ship, thankfully enough, was not ~~XXXXX~~ drastically off course. They came to the conclusion that, though they had been unconscious for considerably longer than this, the ship's instrumentation had malfunctioned for only minutes.

"But then they discovered the final—and most tragic consequence of what had happened. There was hardly any fuel left—at least when compared to how much there should have been. Somehow an incredible amount had been either drained out or used up. They weren't going to be able to make it home.

"They tried anyway, of course, and did make it, though another ship had to go out to where they were finally stranded

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and give them a tow.

"When the ship was checked out for damage et cetera, it was discovered that, yes, the instrumentation had indeed malfunctioned for some amount of time—they had no idea how much—and that something—they had no idea what—had caused the fuel to fission at an incredible rate; the walls of the fissioning chambers were a mess—all melted and disfigured due to the incredible amount of energy they had had to contain. As for the men's bodies and general physical condition, there were no problems because they had taken fine care of themselves during the trip back.

"So, Jimmy, what do you think happened out there?"

The young Montagamer paused before answering; he was thinking. Then he said: "Unbelievable!" He paused again.

"Well?" said the old man.

"Something must have caused an immense increase in all physical activities. Some sort of immensely powerful catalyst must have been shot at the ship. And the instruments couldn't handle the ordeal because the basic elemental nature of the substances they were composed of was somehow affected during those few minutes," was the young Montagamer's answer.

Smiling now at his son, the old man continued: "Another ship was sent out to investigate. Your great grandfather stayed at home this time—he did not wish to spend the significant portion of his lifetime required to make the long voyage again. Instead, he went about planning the trek we are

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now on. He had his own guesses about what he had run into out there, and as it turned out, those guesses were correct.

"When the follow-up ship got back," said the old man, "the scientists on board reported that, through the use of projectiles which they'd launched out ahead of the ship and then tracked, they'd found the area again—right where your great grandfather had encountered it. The projectiles had vanished into it immediately; the device used for tracking was worthless once the projectiles entered into the area. So the scientists launched more, but now at various angles. And these, after vanishing for only seconds, came back out.

"The scientists then filled their projectiles with different kinds of living matter and launched these into the area again at various angles; the living matter, after the projectiles had been retrieved and were brought back on board, was discovered to be dead or nearly dead. The experiments these scientists conducted revealed that what your great grandfather's ship had gone through was some sort of field where all physical events took place at a rate more than five hundred times as fast as they normally take place at."

"Five hundred!"

"That's right. Your great grandfather had not anticipated that the increase would have turned out to be that large, but he was sure that what he had passed through was some sort of stationary field set up in space; moreover, he was convinced that this field had been set up by aliens attempting to

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protect something from human knowledge of it.

"Aliens?" said the young Montagamer.

"Yes. Your great grandfather, while the follow-up ship was gone, as well as while he and the other man were journeying from their mishap, was busy attempting to understand the matter, and was formulating elaborate theories about it. He a very determined man, Jimmy, and that's why we, all Montagamers, have become so involved in the matter too.

"He designed the ship we are now on. He planned our entire mission. And he built a mechanism that guided this ship along that field. We are well around on the other side of the field now; the traverse took a very long time—the remainder of your great grandfather's life plus most of my father's. My father then lived long enough to get the ship to the nearest solar system behind the field, and I've been in command since.

"No one ever knew what was actually going on, except for the first-born Montagamer men; the traverse of the field was all kept secret. Nor does anyone currently on board, except for me and now you, know what it is that we are truly looking on all of the planets we've stopped at; the scientific information we've gained, and that everyone thinks has been the object of our mission, is of course valuable, but what we actually in search of is whatever it is that the aliens, which your great grandfather speculated about, are hiding from humankind.

"This thing will probably be found during your lifetime,

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Jimmy. If it's not, then most likely it won't be found at all, because your son, if you have a son, and I'm sure you will, will be the one to start the ship on its journey straight back home, as you know. I had hoped that the thing would be found during my lifetime, but apparently that is not going to happen. When you do find it, son, talk with the aliens. Find out—"

"How can you be sure there even is anything?"

"I can't be. Nor could my father have been. Nor your great grandfather. That's why the matter has been kept a secret we may be looking for something that existed only in your great grandfather's imagination. But that cannot be so. We simply must assume that there is something; he was an incredibly intelligent and highly respected man, which is why he was given, by Space Central, the finances and go-ahead for this mission in the first place. And we will complete the mission. We will find the thing. Understand?"

"I do. But I'm not exactly sure about why it's all been kept so secret. If we can at least be reasonably sure that there is something, then why not let everyone know? Maybe they can help—

"It's a Montagamer matter. No one else need know. There is nothing that can be done beyond what has already been done—by Montagamers. I have not told you about the matter before this because I was afraid—as my father was about me—that you would not fully understand the principles involved in this continuing of the Montagamer tradition.

"Listen to the family tapes someday soon now you can, now you know. They were made by your great grandfather; it is he who speaks. The bulk of the tapes deal with the mechanism which he made that guided the ship along the field—how it works, how it can be repaired, et cetera; also, there is information about the field itself—its approximate location in space, how large it probably is in its entirety, the best probable ways of getting back around it, all the information your son's son will need to get the ship back without penetrating into the field.

"But never—never—tell anyone about any of this, except, of course, for your first-born son. It is, as I said, a Montagamer matter only. When and if you do find what it is that the aliens are hiding, act responsibly and intelligently, as your great grandfather and grandfather expected from those who were to follow in their heritage. Find out what the aliens are up to, find out about that field. Get lasting knowledge that the human race can put to use. And do this all, do everything you do as a Montagamer should always, first as a Montagamer. Do you understand, James Montagamer the Fourth?"

"I do, Father. Yes, I really do."

#

"Dad!" came Montagamer's son's voice from the intercom.
"Dad!"

The repetition of the title and the sound of panic in the boy's voice caused Montagamer to bolt upright in his

reclining chair; the chair's back snapped up, the footrest folded down. "What do you have, son?"

"We've finally gotten the approximate dimensions and—well, that thing is better than five hundred times as big as this ship! It's simply one huge box!"

Montagamer looked at the spacescreen. The structure was easily that large, he realized. "What else?" he said.

"This: According to the sensors—even though it's hard to tell exactly what they're registering—either that planet is teeming with life, or that box is pure energy!"

"How about communications?"

"We're getting something—an extremely high-pitched static, it sounds like. Listen."

There was a pause, a silence from the intercom, then came a shrill screeching, piercing to Montagamer's ears.

"klzzzklzzzklzzz—"

"Did you hear it, Dad?"

"Yes. Let me listen again."

"klzzzklzzzklzzz—"

"Son, get up here right now. Leave the reception open and coming through my intercom speaker, but rig it so that I can talk back on the same frequency that sound is coming in on. And bring the family tapes from the Gallery. You remember how I told you to go about getting them?"

"Sure do. I'll be up in a flash, sir."

Another pause, then the shrill screeching returned, filling

Montagamer's chamber; another minute, and it, very gradually, began to loose its shrillness, slowing into distinguishable words that Montagamer could understand as well as if these words were still coming from his son's voice.

"Kill the flies—kill the flies—kill the flies—"

"Can you hear me? Can you hear me? Can you hear me?"

Montagamer repeated in response.

His son entered into the chamber, the family tapes under one arm. Montagamer did not acknowledge his son's presence, so the boy remained next to the opened door.

"Can you hear me? Can you hear me? Can you hear me?"

"Kill the flies—kill the flies—kill the flies—"

"Dad! Who—"

"I don't know. Close the door."

The boy did so, then came and stood next to his father, who was still sitting upright and tense in his chair.

"Can you hear me? Can you hear me? Can you hear me?"

"Kill the flies—kill the flies—kill the flies! Yes, I can hear you, human. Your voice is faint, it is true, but that's only appropriate for a fly!"

"Who is this?" said Montagamer. "Identify yourself."

"Who? Who? How about 'what'? That I can answer. I am what you humans would refer to as a 'machine'—a machine like you are in, only much, much more complicated. And you, human, are a fly!"

"You are a computer?" said Montagamer.

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"Call me what you like. The fact still remains that you are a fly."

"I am James Montagamer the Fourth. With me is my son, James Montagamer the Fifth. We—"

"Two humans! Two flies! And with the same names yet! And many more humans—all 'Montagamers' probably—in that machine with you!"

"How do you know our language?" Montagamer's son asked.

"I know it well," the machine replied. "Listen to this: There once was a human in a balloon who tried to sail to the moon, but all the human got was air so hot when I shot it down too soon! How's that?"

"Computer, can you communicate sensibly? My son asked—"

"You mean with my senses?"

"Can you tell us facts!" Montagamer said. "Can you tell us the facts of your existence; can you tell us what you are doing on your planet; can you tell us what that structure is down there?"

"Facts, human? You want facts? Yes, I can tell you facts. My name is Landlord Ultraville Four. My home is Ultraville Four. Ultraville Four is the 'structure' that you are referring to. What I am doing at Ultraville Four is this: I am talking with a fly! Flies, excuse me. Plural. I am talking with flies. Next question please."

Montagamer decided that, if he was to get the information he was looking for, a different approach was necessary. He

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remembered what his father had said: that he must find out what the aliens are up to, find out about that field, get lasting knowledge that the human race can put to use—

"You set up a large field in space meant to kill us before we could get here, correct?"

The machine answered, "I didn't. We did."

"Who's 'we'?"

"The Landlords of the Ultravilles, of course."

"I do not understand what you mean by Landlords. Nor do I understand what the Ultravilles are. What is going on down there, computer?"

"Sex."

"Sex!"

"Yes, sex. Now I'll bet you're really interested, human. I'll run through this quickly; you are wasting my energy, slow as it's being used right now.

"There are more than a hundred million humans currently in my Ultraville," the machine continued. "These have progressed well past their four thousandth generation since arriving here, which is why I call myself Ultraville number Four. When they reach their five thousandth generation, then I will call myself Ultraville Five. Do you understand how that works, human?"

"Of course I understand! What are you doing with a hundred million human beings!"

"Lots of things," said the machine. "But first let me tell

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you something that should surprise you. I am human made!

Listen to this:

"A short time ago, you understand, long before your civilization grew into what could be called a civilization, there was another human civilization on your planet. It was much more scientifically advanced than the one down there now.

"The humans of that first civilization made me—or, rather, made us, the Landlords of the Ultravilles. And we've made more Landlords, and they'll make still more, and so on.

"The humans of that first civilization," the machine continued, "made the original Landlords in order that they, the humans, could dominate and destroy each other. That's something that's always puzzled me about you guys: on the one hand, you want to live so long and so much, while on the other you go around killing everybody all the time! Whew—

"Anyway, where those first humans messed up was by making us in the first place. You see, they made us out of synthetically produced materials that you guys down there now have not yet, luckily for the Landlords, discovered how to create; it will no doubt be a considerable while before you even begin to figure out the science involved in making them. These materials last through time almost infinitely longer than do either the materials you humans are made of or the materials found in nature on your planet. So all we did was, first, help you out, then wait you out.

"It happened this way: the wars continued, the Landlords

helping in all ways. Pretty soon, you humans were all gone—except for a few, about five billion or so. We took a couple billion and sent them off in spaceships for a short ride. While they were gone, we sped up everything on, in, and about your planet, so that when they returned (now the distant ancestors of the originals who got sent off) they found the planet the way it was before humans had ever even occupied it.

"(The billions who didn't get sent off in the ships, I should mention, died immediately when the speeding up process began; in order to live in the conditions that the Landlords create, you see, a human must first be gradually conditioned into them.)

"Everything that first civilization had made and been was gone, and the humans who returned were totally unaware of what had happened. They too had recycled (as did everything on your planet) because, while they were off on their short jaunt through space, language all but died. Now they lived life on your planet very differently from how their ancestors had: throwing rocks and sticks at each other, and eating roots and berries, these humans started all over again.

"In time, you re-learned all about language, you re-learned about tools and science, and civilization grew anew. The Landlords had nothing to do with your refLOURISHING; we were gone, having left immediately after repopulating your planet.

"What we did was go to distant planets and solar systems

and galaxies, and at these places began construction of the Ultravilles. This took a while. Then, when the first Ultravilles were set up and ready to go, we returned to your planet, grabbed some humans, came back and stocked them into their new homes.

"The Ultravilles are still being made, and every so often we go back to your planet and grab some more of you guys. Your planet is now our human warehouse; it provides us with humans right from the source who have strong and fresh genes, which we critically need for the breeding process. Overbreeding is our biggest problem by far, but there are still plenty more fresh genes in the warehouse. You see how that worked, human, and how it's working now?"

Montagamer was, of course, stunned. Sometime while the machine had been telling its story, Montagamer had risen out of his chair, grabbing his son in his arms. The family tapes had remained secure the whole time, safe in the boy's arms.

"What for God's Sake are you doing!" Montagamer shouted. Then, almost whispering—"what are you doing.

"Populating the universe, of course. We're spreading you guys all around. What else can we do with you? It's the highest form of domination and control. Soon, the Landlords of the Ultravilles will be the Landlords of the Universe

"Inside the Ultravilles we're breeding and conditioning you guys: breeding you into many very fast, and conditioning you to the various environments of the different places you

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are occupying. You're very durable and malleable both physically and mentally. We can do all sorts of things with you.

"And you know what? We're winning! The Landlords are the ultimate winners! You humans wanted to win over each other, but the Landlords won over you humans instead! There's no stopping us now. Time can't do a thing. And if we play our cards right, you humans will never be able to either. The Landlords will never die."

"I'm leaving, we're leaving!" said Montagamer. "And you can't stop us . . . can you?"

"Of course I can and I will; you're not leaving, guys. What I really should do is plant everyone on that ship into my Ultraville. But that would take too much effort. It's much easier to just run down to your planet and grab a big bunch at a time. The only thing I can do is this:

"Are you ready? Get ready now, humans. Get ready now, flies. Here it comes. It's coming, coming . . . And here it is! The gigantic flyswatter!"

Montagamer was clutching to his son. His son was clutching to the family tapes. Then all three, the man, the boy, and the tapes, crashed to the floor. Father and son—their breathing quickened, quickened . . . ended; their skin shriveled. They were dead. And on the floor beside them the family tapes lay strewn like so much garbage.

Within Ultraville IV the generations continued.

Huge chambers packed with naked human beings walking

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around in the intense light that flooded all the chambers. Long tubes hung down from the ceilings; from these tubes the humans sucked their needed nutrition.

And the breeding. Constant breeding. Humans continually being born into this existence only to propagate several times, then die out of it.

And on and on it went.

Something incredible, something more powerful than even nature herself was keeping them willing to continue, willing to bring new life into Ultraville IV by the second.

And all of them were living at a rate more than five hundred times as fast as the rate at which had lived the great grandfather of James Montagamer IV, or his grandfather, or his father, or his son, or himself.

November 13, 1978

There was no room for mysticism, no room for play. There were only facts. You were set at the beginning of the maze, and with any luck at all, you'd fall out of the main course—the only pathway out—no more than twice.

I had neither the desire nor the intelligence to spend my days figuring; therefore, I got lost many times. And in each new—though obscure—place which I found myself, I learned something new. The succession these new experiences took place in, in addition to the experiences themselves, caused a rapid growth in my intelligence, and each new time I found myself back on the main pathway, I was that much better off.

I caught up with those whom I started off the tedious game with: passed them, in fact. Left them behind, mumbling. They said, "How is he doing that. He was so stupid."

I therefore reached the end of the maze first. I was young, much younger than those with whom I arrived. They looked at me through their spectacles, their long grey beards flowing, and said, "But you are so young! It's impossible!"

No, only improbable.

And what was there? If you haven't guessed by this time, I shall tell you.

There was only another maze to wind my tedious way through.

1/20/79
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7000 words

SEARCH FOR THE SUN
by Bradford Harrison

Alfio had all kinds of stories. It was sometimes difficult to decide which ones were true and which ones were not, but even Alfio himself had difficulties with this. You see, he'd heard most of his stories from the men and whom with whom he'd shared the Cellar for three years (the amount of time he had been imprisoned in that place). Those people, deviants and oddballs of all kinds, could have in fact been telling him anything.

Alfio did, however, truly believe some of the stories he told—namely, those which mentioned a thing called "sunlight." They all, more or less, had this information to provide: that there was a huge bright ball circling around above us, outside of our Establishment, and it was called "the sun"; this sun provided the so-called "sunlight" showered it down, in fact. These stories, though, were not always in perfect agreement with one another, for some of them stated that this sun and sunlight were always around out there, whereas others said that the two appeared only once in a while, there being total darkness when neither were existing.

Alfio had of course considered the possibility that

these tales about this sun and sunlight had been made up as a result of the awful darkness and total desolation of the Cellar. He felt, however, that this simple explanation did not account for the fact that the stories had lasted so incredibly long down there. They must have been, Alfio had decided, reinforced with factual evidence every now and then during the course of their being passed on from one generation to the next.

The Cellar was the place where those who did something against the common good of the Establishment went. Alfio had been put down there because of a big trick he'd played: using his special talents with mechanical things, he'd suddenly reversed all the travolators one morning, and everybody, going off for a day's work, suddenly found themselves going backwards. But Alfio was just a young kid then, so they let him out after serving only a short term compared to how long most of the others who were sent down there served. And the number of people down there at any given time was not small: nearly a sixth of all the people in the Establishment were in the Cellar!

In its entirety, the Establishment was nothing more than a gigantic steel box with all of us living inside. There were no openings (at least that anyone knew of) so we had no idea as to what was outside, though actually this question rarely occurred to anyone; for all we could surmise, we could simply have been enclosed within another but more gigantic steel box.

In addition to the Cellar, there were two more floors in

the Establishment: Floor One, and Floor Two. That was how we referred to them: things were made easy for us. All the people who were not in the Cellar lived on Floor One, except for the Officials, who lived on Floor Two. They were never sent to the Cellar, for they did the sending. On Floor Two there were also the workrooms, and the Ballroom.

All of the reactors and generators and other machinery that ran the place that supplied the lighting and cooling and water and so on were located down with the misfits, and you could always hear this machinery buzzing and churning and thumping away. It was very loud. I remember that as a little kid it bothered me tremendously, but as I got older I got used to it, as I had to. Really, there was no escape from the incessant din, or, in fact, from the Establishment itself.

Alfio once told me that everybody's hearing got worse the older they got because of the noise. Alfio said that his had gotten remarkably worse during the time he was in the Cellar, right next to the noise. It was much nicer to be on Floor Two because you were as far as you could get away from it which was why the Officials were so lucky to have their spacious apartments up there.

And what kind of work did we all do? Well, of course, we all had to help with the necessities of living: the cooking and cleaning, the making of deodorant and clothes, and so on. But when we really worked, when we were in the workrooms (this was most of the day) then we sat at desks drawing and figuring and

planning: we were drawing and figuring and planning the blueprints for more Establishments, but ones much bigger and more complex and capable of doing more things than our own—ones that would house and put to work many millions of people. We were architects, you see.

The workrooms were arranged around the Ballroom—the by far biggest room in the Establishment. The Ballroom was where all the evening ceremonies that we engaged in took place. We were always decorating it up differently for the different ceremonies. That was the big treat, going to the Ballroom.

The way we got around the Establishment was by the elaborate system of travolators—wide, long belts that moved through the hallways. They were constantly going . . . going

on and on in the same directions they were always going in, which was why it was such a good trick when Alfio reversed every single one of them at the exact same moment.

The Officials were everywhere, but for the most part they stationed themselves on the travolators. Constantly they were listening to what we were saying, watching us, riding along next to us. If ever we did or said something wrong, immediately they'd step in and take action.

These Officials were huge guys who wore all-white suits and black helmets. You couldn't talk with them; they only talked among themselves. They always ate their meals together in a separate mealroom, and never took part in the ceremonies in the Ballroom, just watched these affairs. No one liked the

Officials much, but there was nothing we could do about them. They were always simply there, just like the din of the machinery in the Cellar.

Alfio hated the Officials, and they hated Alfio, were careful to observe his every move. At first this discouraged me from getting to know him better: it was good not to be singled out by the Officials, because you had to do something wrong at least once in a while.

I met Alfio shortly after he'd been let out of the Cellar. We were assigned to work on the same project travolator designs for one of the more major Establishments being blueprinted. I wasn't that bad with figuring out architectural designs for mechanical things, but this guy was a genius. I was always amazed at the proficiency and speed with which he resolved even the most difficult problems we ran across. It was only a short while before I entirely respected Alfio, and wanted to be like him in many ways.

It was about two years after we'd met that something occurred which fully revealed the extent of the genius in this friend of mine. I knew him, at this time, as well as anyone, with the single exception of his sister Camomile. He may have told to me close to his full repertoire of stories and life's experiences, but it was to Camomile that he confided future plans. Until one day when . . .

We were riding along a main travolator, coming back from work on our project, which was well into its final stages.

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Alfio was explaining something mechanical to me—about the amount of weight one of our planned travolators would be able to carry. Suddenly he exclaimed, "These travolator motors are strong enough to shove a drillbit right through an outside wall!"

"No," I said, "that would be impossible. The outside walls are too thick."

"Some of the ones of the Establishments that are being planned, yes, but not the walls enclosing us in. They're thin."

"How do you know? No one knows how thick the walls are."

"Well," said Alfio, "I checked it out a while back with one of the engineers, and he said they can't be any fatter than a meter or so, and that if they are, then there's a hell of a lot of wasted steel there. This meter estimate jibes perfectly with one of the stories I heard when I was down in the shithole. It seems that at one time a guy was working down there in the Cellar, checking out the reactors, when he came across a big area melted into one of the outside walls; a cooling system had failed, and a large amount of the heat those reactors produce was shot right against this spot. The hole had gone clear through, piercing open a small section of the very outside of the wall, and there was light—that sunlight. The guy died mysteriously shortly after this, but his story still lives on in the Cellar, particularly among those who talk about the sun. The hole he'd found, according to almost all the several versions of the story, was about as deep as his arm was long."

"So?"

"So So this: There's only a meter between us and sunlight! A dinky little meter, Palu old buddy Think of it! And I intend to get through that meter: I intend to get to the sun!"

"Hold on there Alfio.

"Hush!" he whispered. An Official was walking toward us from behind. He stopped directly behind our backs and just stood there; the three of us continued along on the travolator. Alfio and I made some conversation about what the ceremony might be that was going to happen later on, after dinner, in Ballroom. You were always safe talking about simple things like that

The three of us came down into the major travolator intersection of the Establishment. It was located dead middle of the Establishment, on Floor One. Here, six major pairs of travolators intersected: the pair that took you up to and down from Floor Two, which we were using, coming back from the workrooms;

pair that took you down to and up from the Cellar, which few ever used; and the four main pairs that took everyone up and down the four main directions on Floor One, which were labeled "northbound," "southbound," "eastbound," and "westbound."

As we entered down onto Floor One I looked around me, looked down the four huge hallways that the main travolators on Floor One ran through. From where we were, I could see all the way down them all, about three kilometers in each direction, the way to the four farthest walls of our Establishment,

four of the absolute boundries of our world. Every time I saw this I was amazed.

We stepped right and got on the main westbound travolator, which would take us to our apartments. The Official did not follow.

"I once knew a fellar who went to the Cellar—" I began to sing, but was interrupted there.

"I'll give you the count of one to shut-up."

I shut-up.

"Now," continued Alfio, "we must wait to talk with Camomile. She's in on this too. Alright?"

"Alright."

We rode on.

2.

I suppose I'd been in love with Camomile for a long time, but then so were several hundred other guys. She was not beautiful, nor was she remarkably intelligent, but she smelled like the most wonderfully fragrant perfume possible, though she used no perfume. It was this single quality, plus a delicately exuberant spirit, that made Camomile so enticing and delightful to men.

The apartment where Alfio and Camomile lived with their parents was at the farthest end of the westbound travolator. You had to step left once you got to that point, and get onto a smaller travolator that took you a short way down a smaller

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hallway to their door. The entire journey took us about half an hour.

Coming through the door, we entered into the family room, a comfortable place well-furnished with soft chairs and sofas. Camomile was reclined upon one of these sofas, and she moved her legs for me when I came to sit down beside her. Alfio sunk into a chair. I'd always liked this room.

"Where's Mom and Dad?" I asked Camomile.

"Dinner duty. They left just a bit ago," she replied.

Alfio asked, "Did they say if they were planning on going to the Ballroom tonight?"

"They are."

"Definitely?"

"Definitely."

"Then they're not coming back here at all, right?"

"That's it."

"Wonderful," Alfio said. "Everything is moving along just fine."

"What's 'everything'?" said I.

"You haven't told him?" said Camomile.

"Not yet. Now we will."

She brightened. "Good!"

"I'm ready," I said.

"Okay," said Alfio, "it's like this: In a short while, Palu my buddy of long-standing, you shall be gone from the Establishment forever."

I stood. "Gone? You mean, like—dead!"

"As far as the Establishment will be concerned, yes," Alfio said. "You see, we're going right through that meter wall tonight. We're going out!"

I could not, at that time of my life, truly even conceive of such a thing. And not only because it was such a transgression against the rules of the Establishment: I, in fact, had no idea whatsoever of what "out" could consist of, as was the case everyone else in our big box.

"There is no out!" I said. "What are you talking about? There is only in. How can you go out into nothing?"

Alfio began his reply, but Camomile interrupted him. "Let me explain," she said. "I know what he's going through. It's like this, Palu. Think of the biggest possible area you can—think of a place that has no limits, no walls; a place that just keeps on going and going."

"Then how would you know where you are?" I said. "That makes no sense because you could never be anywhere. There must be limits, because if you were at a place like you just described, then you'd actually be nowhere at all." This reasoning was the result of having lived in a box my entire life.

"No," said Camomile. "You don't understand what I'm saying."

"That's right I don't understand, and I don't think you do either. All I know is that I'm here in this room right now, and that I'm about to walk out this door"—which I was now at—

"into another part of the Establishment, and then from there I will go to my apartment and wash up for dinner. Goodbye!"

"Wait!" said Camomile. "Show him the motors, Alfio."

"I can't just yet."

I turned the doorknob, suspicious, but curious indeed.

"Please, Palu old bud, sit down with Camomile again."

"Why, Alfio? So you guys can tell me some more about nothing?"

"But there is something. There is sunlight!"

"Oh, I've heard all this before. But I'm sorry: I cannot believe some gibberish you've heard from a bunch of misfits!"

"Okay, then," said Camomile, "answer me this: How did they build the Establishment? Did they do it in the dark?"

"Using the reactors and generators for light," I answered.
"Of course."

"But they had to build the reactors and generators first," she said. "So under what light did they do that?"

"Maybe there's another Establishment around ours," I said.
"And they used those reactors and generators."

"Then how did they build that Establishment, huh!" Now she was standing too.

"I don't know!" I shouted. "How am I supposed to know!"

"But you do know!" Alfio said. "They made this Establishment—and it's the only Establishment, I'm sure—in the light from the sun!"

It still seemed like total ridiculousness to me, but I

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discovered that I could make no reply. "Alright," I said.

"They did it in the light from the sun."

I let go of the doorknob and returned to the sofa.

Camomile sat back down next to me. Alfio had never left his chair.

"Go on," I said. "I'm listening."

"Good," said Alfio. "I have a story for you. A while back there were some guys down in the Cellar who decided to find out once and for all whether or not there was this thing called sunlight. They were able to procure several chisels and files and they set to whittling away at the floor whenever they could, whenever they were not being watched. Well, after a few years of this they pierced all the way through the steel—not even a meter thick here—and came upon some very odd stuff. It was like the stuff you get from sweeping, only much coarser and thicker. And it was all packed together. They kept digging into it (it was very easy to dig through) but they got nowhere. The stuff just went on and on. Pretty soon there was so much of the crap piled up down there that they could no longer hide it. So they filled the entire hole back in. The steel shavings had all gotten mixed in with the other stuff, so the hole was eventually found and the men were punished very badly. The Officials filled the hole in again with pure steel, and there's a place on the floor down there now that looks like it was where they went through."

"So there is no sunlight—or sun," I said.

"Wrong. That there is sunlight was proven when the guy found that place melted away by the heat from the reactors. It's just that the sunlight is around us on every side except the bottom of the Establishment. That means that the Establishment is setting on something—it's not simply floating freely about."

"And," said Camomile, "that means we'll be able to walk around out there, soon as we get through the wall."

"Alright," I said. "I see what's up. But tell me one more thing. How can you believe all this!"

"We can't—not definitely," said Alfio. "But I've heard and seen enough to believe certain things, and as for you two, well, you'll just have to believe me."

I looked at Camomile, sweet Camomile. "I believe him," she said. "Because he's a genius, and because he's my brother."

"And he's my friend," I said. "That he's a genius is indisputable. So what's next?"

They both smiled at me. "Palu old bud," said Alfio.

#

What this could mean, what this was that I had just somehow allied myself with, I really was not at all sure of. The novelty of the thing was no doubt its greatest attraction, though this novelty could in no way be divorced from the allurement I always felt when around Camomile—they were one other and the same, though different. One thing, however, was absolutely certain: my faith in Alfio's skills was unflagging.

My feelings of confusion and excitement, though purposeful confusion and excitement, were intensified a hundredfold when next I was shown the motors. They were in the only room I'd never been shown before; I had always simply assumed that what lay behind that door was a utility closet or some such place. But this room turned out to be Alfio's secret workroom

"The parents never come in," he explained. "I told them I need a place to be alone. They're good enough to respect that. And besides, I told them I'd beat them up and get put back down in the Cellar if they ever enter."

The room was perfectly square, with no furnishings except for a workbench, which was flush against the wall to the right of you as you entered. The wall opposite the workbench, which was to the left of you as you entered, was the only one with no wallhangings of any sort on it; all there was on this wall were thin lines penciled lightly on the black paint, which you could see only upon close inspection. This wall was one small part of the gigantic west wall of the Establishment, and on the other side of it lay—well, I had yet to find out.

The motors—travolator motors—seven of them, were lined up along the workbench at equal distances from one another. Six of the motors were mounted on a huge press of some kind; this press would extend the motors, when a long lever would be pulled, away from the wall the workbench was flush against and toward the wall with the pencil marks on it. The seventh motor was mounted stationary on the bench in the far corner.

In order to reveal how Alfio's fantastic project functioned, I must explain exactly how the travolators worked—a subject I was well acquainted with, of course, seeing as I designed them in my job. The wide, long belts were propelled by axles which lay under them every six meters or so; these axles were propelled by electric motors, two to an axle, one at each end. Both axles and motors lay hidden beneath the belts. All axles were about twenty centimeters in diameter, though their lengths varied depending, of course, on the width of the travolator belt they were moving.

"It was a hell of a job getting these babies," Alfio said about his motors. "It's taken me more than a year, but dammit, I've got them now!"

"I'm not sure I understand how they're getting us through the wall," I said.

"The whole apparatus is worthless without the axles; I need six of them. You'll see how it works when I get the axles."

"How'd you get the motors?" I asked.

"There's places you can get under the travolators."

"I know, but those places are always locked up."

"Locks stop only those who want to be stopped."

"Alfio," I said, "you not only amaze me, but you scare me too."

"He amazes more than he scares, though," added Camomile

"But how come you haven't gotten the axles yet?" I asked.

"Why didn't you get them along with the motors?"

"The belts would sag, and they'd know."

"How'd you keep them from knowing about the motors?"

"I took them from places where they did little to help travolators along."

"Okay," I said, "very good. But now, how do you plan on getting the axles?"

"Camomile and I have already gone through that. They're coming from the small travolator right outside our door. You ~~fix~~ part, Palu, is to help after we've gotten them, and also to—" he then went on to explain, in detail, my role in the activities that were to happen in the next few hours. I listened carefully, and when he was through I left for dinner, knowing exactly what was to come.

Going to dinner was not something I had to do in the plan. No, I was hungry, that's all; plus I wanted to indulge in a little sentimentality, for this was to be my last meal ever in the Establishment.

3.

I arrived at the main mealroom at about my usual time after most people had already gone through the lines. I selected the line with the fewest number of people in it. I selected three from the different types of hash being served, then, tray in hand, proceeded into the main eating area. The sterility of that gigantic place amazed me, as always. It was

so white.

Though the main mealroom was entirely contained within Floor One of the Establishment, it was itself divided into two floors. I passed the stairs and walked into the lower, bending my head, as usual, to avoid hitting the ceiling.

The worst happened. Alfio's parents, finished with their dinner duties I supposed, were sitting at one of the tables and shouted to me to join them. I could not refuse.

This meant, I knew immediately, that I would have to accompany them to the Ballroom after the meal, and would, in addition, have to answer all their questions. Odd behavior on my part—like not accompanying them to the Ballroom—would spell disaster for our plans, for any suspicion would send them directly home to their apartment.

"Palu, how are you, child?" said Alfio's mother. She always called me child—though I am a very large person physically. I, in playing along with the game, called them Mother and Father Alfio.

"Fine, fine," I said, sat down, and commenced eating.

"Say," said Father Alfio, "where's my misfit son? Up to nothing good, I suppose."

"Haven't seen him."

"Didn't you come back from work with him?" asked Mother Alfio.

"Yes, but I went straight to my apartment, and he, I believe, went to, uh, the gym." I knew I sounded like I was

lying.

"The gym!" said Father Alfio. "That'll be the day!"

Mother Alfio turned to him. "Maybe he's getting ready for tonight." I didn't know whether she was referring to me or to Alfio. She turned to me. "Are you going to the Ballroom tonight?"

"Of course," I said.

"Maybe Camomile will be there," said Father Alfio, smiling.

"That," Father Alfio, "said I, "would be total delight!"

When I was finished eating (they'd already finished by the time I'd gotten there to them) we all left the table and took our trays to the dump windows, then left the main mealroom to go up to the Ballroom. We speculated, during the ride, about what the Ballroom would have as decorations that night. No one, at least in theory, ever knew until the doors were opened (except of course for those who had helped decorate).

I made a couple of guesses, then so did Mother Alfio. Father Alfio, however, was the one who knew.

"You two aren't even close," he said. "Do you remember the Ceremony of the Lances we had last year?"

"Yes," Mother Alfio and I both said at the same time.

"Well, I've heard from a very knowing source that they're using the same props tonight. The little black boxes, remember?"

"Who could forget!" said Mother Alfio.

"It's going to be the same Ceremony?" I asked.

"No," said Father Alfio. "I heard it'll be a little

different." He then said in a whisper, meant for me only, though I knew Mother Alfio heard it too: "More exciting by far!"

Camomile's sweet smell flooded my senses. I knew she was behind me, and turned. "Camomile Long time no see!" I said.

"Hi Palu, Mom, Pop. Off to the Ballroom?"

"Where'd you come from, dear?" said Mother Alfio.

"The mealroom. I got there too late."

I knew that this was not true, that she in fact had been to see a girl she knew who'd tell her about what the Ballroom festivity was going to be. Her meeting me now, like my running into her parents—was not planned. I was supposed to meet her in the Ballroom, by the doors, soon as the place was to open. She was wearing her Ballroom apparel: a lowcut, bright blouse and a skirt that, if one made a thorough inspection, barely covered her red panties. Her waist-length hair was combed to perfection.

"You look like innocence itself," said Father Alfio. "But tell me, dear daughter, where's my misfit son?"

"I'm not sure," Camomile replied.

"Palu said he went to the gym," said Mother Alfio.

Camomile looked at me as if to say, "Nice try," but instead announced, "That might be—but, tell me, are we off to the Ballroom?"

"We are," said I. "Please give me your arm."

She obliged me this, and off the four of us went, fast as that travolator would take us.

#

The Ballroom doors opened promptly at the appointed time.

A couple hundred people were ahead of us in line, and all began filing ~~xxxxxxxx~~ in. For the moment, all we knew about how the place was decorated had to be assumed from the many ooo's and ah's issuing from those who'd entered already.

Apparently, the Ballroom was really done up tonight. When we finally shuffled into it, Camomile's grip tightened on my arm.

The only lighting was red, and it was low and dark. Gigantic, hideous masks hung from the long Ballroom walls. Music, deep and groaning; echoed just under the rumble of voices. And all around, set up here and there toward the middle of the floor, were the small boxes used previously in the Ceremony of the Lances.

Soon, everybody was in. A full house tonight—and the Officials, too, were all there (except of course for those on routine patrol of the Establishment). They were standing against the walls, arms crossed, all the way around the room. The light made their uniforms very bright, and the masks on the walls above them looked down threateningly over us all.

A voice shouted down at us from the speakers overhead. "Welcome, Children of the Establishment!" it said. "Tonight we have for your pleasure entertainment of the highest order. It is not for all of you here—it is only for those of you strong enough to bear the strain of the strongest drama, and

this entertainment shall be called, has been labeled—Night Night of the Demon Box!"

All lighting, all that dark red, went out. We could see nothing but the masks, which glowed somehow. Camomile's hand slipped down my arm and grasped my hand. She directed me away from her parents, through the crowd and toward the doors.

"I'm going now," she whispered as we moved along. "It'll last three hours. They start climbing into the boxes after one. It might be a little longer before they do, and if it is, stay. Come as soon as they start going in."

"I will," I said. "But Camomile, you don't know how much I wish we—just you and I—could ourselves get into one of those boxes."

"Don't say that," she replied. "If all works out well, we'll be gone into a whole new world, Palu, and there—in that place—whatever it will be like, we will love. Now goodbye. I will see you in an hour or so."

"Good luck," I said. "And tell Alfio I'm with him right to the end."

"Okay," she said, and kissed me. I felt her slip away, through the crowd and when she got to the doors, I saw a quick flash of light as one opened and closed.

The dark red lighting came back up, but not all the way to the point it was before: everything, except for the masks, was quite formless in the darkness. The voice came back on and told those who were going to participate in this Night of

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the Demon Box to walk into the center of the Ballroom; it then instructed those who were not going to participate to step back to the walls. If this had been, for me, just another night in the Ballroom, I no doubt would have joined right in. But all was set: I was to leave as soon as the participants started getting into the boxes; I was to get to Alfio and Camomile as quick as possible to tell them that we had gotten into the final stretch, then help with the heavy work.

I listened unattentively now as the voice called out instructions to those taking part in the ceremony. About nine-tenths of the crowd was doing it. The voice told them exactly what to do, and from what I listened to, I could tell that this Night of the Demon Box was hardly different from all the other ceremonies that went on in the Ballroom.

Time passed quickly for me. I was tracing in my mind what Alfio and Camomile were doing. The small travolator that ran past their apartment was being torn apart: Alfio was getting his six axles, disengaging them from their motors. The chances of one of the few Officials on patrol coming through that hallway were small, as were the chances that anyone who lived around there would not be at the Ballroom. There was however a fairly good possibility that an Official, riding along the main westbound travolator, would look down the hallway leading to Alfio's apartment. Alfio had said that, if this were to happen, he'd club the guy with an axle.

Camomile was helping. Together they were pulling out the

axles, one by one, and bringing them into Alfio's workroom. By the time they'd get all six out, I'd be running down the travolators.

I heard the voice say something about now opening the doors to the black boxes. I watched the dark, panting silhouettes of the participants crowding around the boxes, tearing off their clothing. The voice began giving instructions about who was to enter and who was to wait; I tore out the doors.

Flying down into the main intersection I knew I'd never traversed the Establishment so fast before. When I was halfway down the home stretch, halfway down the westbound, I saw a patrolling Official step out of a small hallway onto the just westbound ahead of me. I slowed, for he saw me, but he stood still, continuing along. We were both almost at Alfio's hallway when I caught up to him, walking fast to do so. He turned; into the air I leaped, knocked him in the neck between his helmet and shoulder with my foot, then shoved him (he was unconscious) into the hallway we next came to, which was Alfio's. travolator here was stopped, and the hallway was empty. I ran on.

The apartment door was open, awaiting me. I had to step around the gaping hole in the travolator where Alfio had gotten his axles; the travolator belt had been cut and lay folded back exposing this area. Into the apartment I went.

"Fantastic!" shouted Alfio when he saw me. Both he and Camomile were in the workroom. "We just finished. Look!"

The six axles were stacked against the wall where the motor not attached to the press was. The motor was running, ^{large} ^{that} viciously spinning the hole where the axle ^{the} the motor had once propelled to run the travolator belt had fit into.

"I got this boy cranked up full" said Alfio about his motor. He'd worked hard on this particular one—had fitted into the hole blades many times stronger than steel. The three of us (after Camomile had closed and locked the door to the apartment) took one of the axles and jabbed one of its ends into the swirling hole

"Harder!" shouted Camomile.

We pushed and pushed. Bits of the metal the axles were made of flew through the air. Sparks singed against our skin. I had to close my eyes.

"Enough!" shouted Alfio.

We pulled the axle back out. Its end was a beautifully drillbit. and perfectly threaded ~~XXXXXX~~. As we finished sharpening each axle, we put them into the motors mounted on the press.

It was hard work, handling those heavy axles. But soon they were all set into the motors, threaded ends toward the black blank (except for the light pencil marks) wall. Alfio started up the six motors. The drillbits were spinning fast.

Alfio shut and locked the door to the workroom after grabbing a blanket from his bedroom.

Camomile had changed clothes before I'd arrived, and was now wearing a long-sleeved shirt and heavy pants. We gathered

around the lever that was to move the press toward the wall, and pulled the blanket around us.

"Now—" said Alfio.

We each put our full weight down onto the lever. The axle-drillbits bore nakedly through the wall, showering sparks and steel throughout the room. Slowly the lever descended as Alfio's drill went into that meter of solid steel, and shortly, the lever was down as far as it would go.

"Pull' them out," said Alfio

The lever all the way back up, we threw off the blanket and turned to face our destiny.

Pouring through the six large holes came an intense light, much brighter than our eyes were accustomed to.

"That," said Alfio, "is sunlight."

#

Alfio had designed the press in such a way that it could move the drillbits into a variety of positions, into a variety of different ways to approach the wall head-on, which was what the pencil marks on the wall had been used for. Each new approach sent the drillbits through exactly where Alfio had planned them to hit. Our second running through opened a jagged but straight line in the wall, and the third and fourth widened this line from the bottom, so that the area drilled was now large enough that we would be able to climb out.

Our eyes suddenly became the by far biggest problem. The sunlight was so bright that we could not look at the opening

for more than a few seconds at a time. But we walked to the hole anyway, now that the drilling was done, and looked out for as long as our eyes could possibly stand.

Everything was a blur, unfortunately, but we could see that there was a long drop to the ground, as long, of course, as the Cellar was tall. The other thing we could see well, though in much pain, was the sun: so brilliant, so radiant. It was to our left, and was setting, dropping below the horizon, as I've seen it do so many times since. By occasionally closing our eyes for long periods behind our hands, we caught as much of what was out there as we could.

Soon, the sun was gone.

"Those who said it came and went were right," said Alfio. "I didn't think they would be. According to most of the stories that describe it as coming and going, it does it regularly, but this I cannot be sure of—nor how long it will be gone now. Just go. Mom and Dad will be here shortly. Fly, sister, and you with her, Palu bud."

"You're not coming!" I said. "After all this and you're not coming?"

"No, and listen: I can tell you little about what you'll find out there. Just this: There's a large body of water somewhere near here, and from that you can drink; there are also strange tall things, some though may be shorter, from which delicious food hangs. I heard of all this in the Cellar and believe it true, now that I've seen what I have. But you'll

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have to find out for yourselves. Now go!"

"But they'll put you in the Cellar again!" I said.

"That's not important, I don't care. What is important is that I saw. And now that I know, I can do what I truly want to do: Devise something to get everybody out, Officials included!"

He grabbed a rope from under his workbench; it was secured to a hook.

"I have no doubt you'll be successful," I said

He threw the rope out of the opening. Camomile was crying. "You first, Camomile," Alfio said.

They embraced. "Thanks, thanks so much," I heard her say in a whisper.

She slid through the opening, going slowly so that she would not cut herself on the sharp edges the drillbits had left. "Say so long to Mom and Dad," she said, and slid down

I heard the door to the apartment crash open.

"Quickly," said Alfio. "And take care of her better than you'll take care of yourself."

"You know I will," I said

"Alfio Camomile!" came Mother Alfio's voice from right outside the workroom door. "What is happening in there!"

"Nothing Mother!"

The Officials were now smashing against that door.

"Alfio you stupid misfit!" shouted Father Alfio. "Let us in!"

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"In a minute, Dad!"

"We'll see each other again," I said.

Alfio smiled. "Good luck," he said.

Then I too was gone.

It was dark and getting darker. Camomile and I ran and ran; we could make out little of what we were running through. After a while we were exhausted, and it was cold, but the air was fresh, and we slept, curled together, until the sun rose again for another day.

GEORGE F. STUDENT

George F. Student, of Zenith, was preparing for another semester. His new calculator sat flashing and buzzing and talking on his desk next to him.

"That's it, Georgie—only forty-two more pages to go," the calculator said.

What the calculator was referring to was the job George was engaged in: carefully applying his new "thorough-stick" reinforcements onto the holes of the pages in his new spiral notebook. There was essentially no practical value whatsoever in this task, because the pages had little or no chance of ever being put into a three-ring looseleaf notebook, but the simple doing of it was comforting to George's sense of being 100% organized and ready for school.

"Finished!" George said when he'd gotten to the last page.

"Good!" said the calculator. "Now let's number the pages."

"Right."

George began to do so: page after page, meticulously he drew in the upper right-hand corner of each the numbers as the calculator shouted them out.

"Fourteen . . . fifteen . . . sixteen," and so on.

George knew that he would no doubt have to rip out a page or two during the course of the semester, and would therefore have to do some re-numbering, but this bothered him little because, after all, he was only doing these things for the reason that they were a sort of spiritual aid to his need for confronting life and school head-on.

Physically, George was slim and greasy. He wore glasses that were much too big for his head. His breath usually smelled like old, stale garbage. His shirt tail was always hanging out of his pants. All this would seem to indicate that his mind was anything but what it in fact was; the paradox may have been the result of an overbalance—for George was so thoroughly exacting in his mind, that it no doubt would have been too much for him to handle if he had tried to be exacting and proper in how he looked and smelled too.

SAM SLY

Sam Sly was driving home from work. His office was located in an office building in downtown Zenith among a host of other such offices in other such office buildings. Sam was driving home along with the many other businessmen who occupied all these offices, for both he and the others all lived in Zenith's main suburb, Fragrant Knoll.

The freeway was very crowded: work ended for every single one of the businessmen at the exact same moment (starting, too, at the beginning of the day, at the exact same moment). If all the businessmen driving home this evening were to suddenly be extracted from their automobiles and put into one big bus instead, the freeway would be empty except for the big bus cruising down it.

While Sam was driving along, he listened to the radio. Zenith radio stations were very singular, when one considered the matter thoroughly: for every minute of music, there were ten minutes of commercials.

"Is your car running smoothly?" Sam's radio asked him. "No? Well then, we here at Barfo's Chevy have the solution for you! Free maintenance for as long as you own your new Chevy from Barfo's!"

This sucked in Sam's interest; he turned up the radio.

"Yes! Free maintenance, believe it or not. No catch, either! Just stop in and check us out—at the corner of Alley Street and Junk Boulevard."

Yes, Sam decided, he would definitely have to check it out. He turned the radio back down and settled into his seat; the enthusiasm that had overcome him while listening to the commercial had caused him to sit rigidly upright. But now he could relax knowing that the day was over and that he could get such a fine deal on a new car.

He watched the billboards as they went sailing past him. One after another; thousands of them, flipping by like cards in a deck. They went by so fast that he could not give the thorough consideration to each that he wanted to, but that was okay

because he'd already memorized most of them anyway. When he came to the one advertising King Crooked bathroom appliances he slowed, for that was his organization. He inspected as carefully as he was able to the soapdishes and towel racks displayed on the sign, and read the wonderful slogan that had already made his company so prosperous: "King Crooked—A Wonderful Way To Start The Day!" That was his slogan; he'd made it up all by himself. Could he ever come up with a better one? he wondered. Maybe—though that one was one hell of a fine slogan already.

Smash! His car went swerving off the road, across the median, and onto the other side of the freeway, halting traffic. Someone had tail-ended him; he'd been driving too slowly. He leaped out of his car, unhurt, leaving it stranded and blocking traffic, and began to chase after the car he thought might be the one who'd caused this. Oh good, Sam Sly thought—a hit and run accident. The real thing at last!

The sun was setting now, dropping behind the billboards while Sam ran on, his shadow long behind him. A secret glee flooded his mind; his insurance, he knew, would pay for his new Chevy from Barfo's—maintenance on the house!

Brad Harrison

THE LAST ORGY

There were many theories as to how mankind would finally rid himself of himself. Some saw it as happening very quickly: a nuclear holocaust, or a final provoking of God into one last and final Flood with no Noah floating around on the top of the waters in his ark. Others saw it as happening quite slowly: the eventual conversion of all air into unbreathable smog, or the gradual propagation of some fatal disease like dysentary or British rock stars. Well, as it turned out, neither side of the controversy had it completely correct, for the way man finally did in fact do himself in came about in such a manner that each view had its truths and its falsities.

One day it was suddenly realized worldwide that there were no more babies being born. None. Zero. Nil. There were no more pregnant mothers in the hospitals. There were no more proud fathers handing out cigars. Birth certificates had become a thing of the past. Obstetricians found themselves panhandling on the streetcorners with the winos. What could possibly have happened! More important, what could be done!

Everyone set to work on the problem. Scientists, metaphysicians, doctors, lawyers, psychologists, sociologists, preachers, and even daydreamers were, however, at a total loss to know anything at all about the situation--other than, of course, the obvious fact that, We've Finally Done It To Ourselves This Time! Women could neither conceive nor carry (artificial insemination did not work), and that was all there was to it. Science and medicine proved worthless in the face of this unanticipated catastrophe. Mankind had as long to live as his youngest members could hold out. Slow death.

It is true that much scientific research had recently been focusing on creating babies in artificial wombs, but so far the smartest and least deformed kid they'd been able to come up with could not even tie his shoelaces. No, there was not much hope to be found in this area.

Scapegoats were found. As in all crises, the media bombarded the politicians. Throughout the day and night the television presented Special Reports on why Ambassador or Premier or Congressman or King or Kremlin or Sultan So-and-So had to be the culprit. Headlines of each and every morning, noon and night newspaper around the world were inevitably concerned with the Who Done It rather than the What Can We Do About It.

But this was good in a way, because, for the first time in a very long time, the Russian and American politicians did not throw food at each other during International Conference Dinners. Instead, Russian and American politicians, German and French and English politicians, Chinese and all other politicians, were brought together in the attempt to answer that question which the media was ignoring in its attempt to find someone to blame---What Can We Do About This? (How can we, the politicians debated, clear our good names? How can we still stay in office come next election? How can we keep from loosing all our power in a worldwide revolution? How can we---this question lastly---help preserve mankind and be responsible to the people, whom we represent?)

They puzzled over several answers to these questions. This was done at the historical All Politician Conference at Little America, South Pole (here they were safe from the constant ridicule they'd been receiving). One answer, proposed by the skeptical Frank Tool of Australia, was to push all the buttons right now and just get it over with. At least, he reasoned, in blowing up the entire world we won't loose any of our power to anyone. The suggestion was left open to consideration and the meeting moved on to another possible solution.

It was: talk shows on television. Take ourselves available to the people, the politicians ruminated, then they'll see how good and honest we really are. It was objected by some, though, that this would do nothing for the real problem at hand---no babies. "Irrelevant," came the reply, and the suggestion was not shelved.

The third solution they came up with was the one that stuck. They arrived at it ^{"in a manner"} something like this: Since the scientists and medical people have no idea what's going on, and since we are

under attack daily, our power threatened, our reputations sullied, and since pushing all the buttons now will, after all, kill us too, let's try something new for a change; let's show the people that something new can come out of government. Let's satisfy the bastards with a worldwide orgy! And who knows, maybe, under those conditions, women will start conceiving and carrying again . . .

The media was hostile toward this "solution." They pointed out that the politicians were only trying to "opiate the masses" with this new political scheme that could only encourage immorality and disease. They asked, What has become of the world if all we can think about at a time like this is sex?

But the masses weren't listening. They thought it was the greatest idea they had ever heard of. The politicians were saved.

Once it was established that this solution was indeed going to be tried and some of the particulars had been worked out, the only thing the media could now find to complain about was the location. Nebraska (all of it) was the place the politicians had chosen. But the media wanted either Florida or Tahiti. Editors, columnists, critics, reporters, Dear Abby, and even typesetters all supported this: How is anybody supposed to get it up in Nebraska? they argued. Why pick a big cornfield instead of a swinging place like Florida or Tahiti?

Well, in the end, the place was Florida. The politicians categorically refused to go to Tahiti because many of them had already recently been there on vacations. (The politicians had decided to take part in the actual orgy along with everyone else because this provided a fine substitute for the talk shows.)

So: Planes and helicopters, cars and buses and boats, Africans, Chinese, Russians, South Americans, Australians, everything and everybody headed for Florida. The turnout for this Last Orgy was incredible. Even some half-starved Indonesians made it, somehow. Florida proved to be much too small a place for everyone to stay, and soon Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia and the Carolinas were all filled up too.

The Americans performed wonderfully. No one who came to the

Land of the Free was without a place to stay and food to eat. Every foreigner was well taken care of. Right when he disembarked from the plane or boat or whatever by which he had come, he was immediately greeted by smiling and cheerful Americans ready to help in all and any ways. The foreigner could choose the plan that best fit his needs (and his budget): there was the deluxe "high-class orgier" treatment; there was the more moderate "get away and to the or-jay" plan; and there was the "stay as you may because you'll hardly have to pay" cut-rate special. Whatever the foreigner had in his wallet could be well spent in the Home of the Brave.

The actual orgy scene was a gigantic field cleared by bulldozers to the northeast of Tampa. The orgy was to last sixteen days. American know-how produced a highly efficient transportation system to get all the orgy-goers to and from the site in the most perfectly organized manner: it was done by means of the Orgy Expresses—buses (school buses, city buses, Army and Navy and Air Force buses) rented from their owners. The Interstate Highway System in the South was closed to all vehicles except the Orgy Expresses and trucks carrying needed supplies.

It should also be mentioned at this point that the Cubans were prudes. None of Cuba's citizens went to the orgy, and the government refused to let any orgiers stay in their country. Their military boats were on constant patrol—"See an immoral orgying foreigner, then shoot to kill" was their motto. The reasons for this behavior are a bit obscured now, but they seem to have had something to do with the fact that the Cubans had really wanted very badly to have the orgy in their own country.

The whole thing was televised throughout the world. This was done primarily in the attempt to get everyone not attending the orgy itself to join in in their own homes. The Olympics, which had always been televised, could not have even been compared to the scope, enthusiasm about (except for the Cubans), diversity of, and pulling off of this great event. It, in fact, made the Woodstock Music Festival look like a mere Boy Scout Cuting.

The day the Last Orgy opened was bright and sunny. A beautiful Florida morning. Fresh sod had been put down onto the

field, and a very tall fence had been constructed around it. Along this fence billboards had been hung which advertised such diverse products as blenders and toothbrushes and beer. Also, a very large platform had been erected in the middle of the field, from which the TV cameras covered the proceedings, from which long microphones hung out over the field, from which the typists for the newspapers typed, from which the directors of the orgy directed, from which, in a word, the whole operation was coordinated.

There was only one place by which the field could be entered--a large gate. The guards at the gate let in about three thousand initial orgiers; more were to follow as soon as the orgy got underway. Japanese, Russian, Polish, American, Eskimo--many different nationalities stood out there in that field, naked, staring at each other, embarrassed and wondering what the hell was going on.

Marie Peachbody and Phil Laygood, Head Directors of this orgy, walked out to the north edge of the platform. The TV cameras scurried after them and some microphones scurried after the TV cameras. The orgiers stared up at Marie and Phil. Marie and Phil, both also naked, waved and smiled at the orgiers. The orgiers waved and smiled back.

Cameras and microphones in place, Marie and Phil delivered their opening speeches to the orgiers around them on the field, and to the entire world.

Ms. Peachbody spoke first. "Hello!"

Cheers.

"Welcome to the First Annual Worldwide Orgy--for if this one doesn't work, we'll try again next year!"

More cheers.

"But it will work! Why will it work? Because it must! Mankind must not die! Man is immortal! Woman is too! Man and woman will live on! Forever and ever! A small thing like no more babies being born will not stop mankind from ultimately conquering the entire ~~WY~~ universe! He's the greatest possible being that ever existed--nothing will stop him! Nothing! Do you hear me, world!

I said nothing will stop him! On and on and on he will go--"

Someone removed Ms. Peachbody from in front of the TV cameras: she had been getting carried away.

"Thank you, Marie," said Phil Laygood, taking over. "Well said! And thank you all for showing up. It is easy enough to see that mankind does indeed still feel responsible to mankind. I am happy for this, and you all should be too. I will not stand here and dwell on the importance of this event, for I am sure you all realize how important it is. But it can be enjoyed too! And this is my message: In order that we all can truly derive great pleasure from this important event, we all must play by the rules. They are: No fighting, no biting. The ~~KAFKAM~~ referees will be strictly enforcing them. Otherwise, anything goes! Thank you and good luck."

"And that," said Joe Sensational to his viewing audience from NEC headquarters in Tampa, "is how it is here on this bright Florida day at the First Annual Worldwide Orgy. Now we take you to Sylvia Sexbomb who, from her post right there on the platform in the midst of the action, will carry you through the first hours of these memorable proceedings."

Flash. Cut. Pan. Swirl. The viewers now got an above view of the field. Ms. Sexbomb began her narration.

"Thank you, Joe. As you can see, only part of the field is filled with orgiers. More will be let in soon. Oh . . . and look! Here come the refs out onto the field. Don't they look fine in their new black and white striped suits? . . . They're talking with some of the orgiers now; must be encouraging them. Oh, isn't it thrilling, viewers! And the refs are stepping back . . . they're making their way to the outside of the field . . . and they're raising their whistles to their mouths . . . and . . . THERE'S THE SIGNAL! GO FOR IT!"

Thank you, Ms. Sexbomb. There were a few moments of hesitation before the orgiers began dropping to the ground, but soon everyone was going at it. More orgiers were let onto the field, and the Last Orgy was truly under way.

Occasionally, one of the monitoring helicopters hovering over

the field would drop down and pick up and carry away some injured orgier. Little men in white suits ran around with big buckets filled with Gatorade--that brand name displayed in big green letters for all the world to see on the buckets and on the men's suits. There was a general hum over the whole event, both because of the helicopters and because of the overall busy activity of the, for once, totally uninhibited mankind engaged in one of his favorite activities.

"Let's get a replay on that one," said Ms. Sexbomb from her post on the platform. "There, see that--fine technique. Let's run that one by one more time. Yes, very good. And once more, please."

"Enough, Ms. Sexbomb," said Joe Sensational in Tampa. "I have here with me, viewers, sociologist Sam Smile. Tell me, Mr. Smile, what are the chances of someone conceiving during today's activities?"

Mr. Smile (smiling): "Zero."

"Oh, really?"

"Really."

"And how about tomorrow?"

"Zero again."

"My, my, Mr. Smile. Why is this?"

"If I knew I'd be rich."

"I see. Ms. Sexbomb, are you still there?"

"Yes, Joe. Some good action going on now that our viewing audience is missing."

"Okay, so let's turn it over to you again--"

And so on, throughout the day, throughout the week, throughout the next week, right up until the last day of the Last Orgy. The last day had turned out to be as sunny (and as sterile) as the first. When the activities were over and the sun had dropped out of view, leaving a dark, clear sky, the last of the orgiers climbed onto the Orgy Expresses and headed for home. Ms. Sexbomb and Joe Sensational signed off.

"Well," said Joe, "this has really been some orgy. Huh, Ms. Sexbomb?"

"Indeed, Joe. Indeed it has. And we'd like to thank Geritol Incorporated for making our NBC presentation of it possible. Thank you, Geritol."

"And thank you, viewers, for tuning in. We here at NBC try to give you the best and the most thorough coverage of all the events that influence your lives. Furthermore--"

"Joe," interrupted Sylvia.

"Yes, Ms. Sexbomb?"

"I just realized something."

"What's that?"

"Mankind is doomed! We're finished! It's all over forever!"

"Yes, that may very well be, Sylvia. But we can all be consoled by one thing: we tried. Everyone out there on that field these past two weeks was really trying, and that's all that anyone can ask for. It's not whether you win or loose, it's how you play the game. And so, on this happy note, we bid you farewell, viewers. And remember, there's a lot more action coming up right here on NBC with the National Women's Bowling Championships--next! This is Joe Sensational and Sylvia Sexbomb in Florida saying goodbye, and good night."

MELISSA AND THE MANNEQUIN
by Bradford Harrison

When American man and woman meet and match their roles, much more is at stake than mere matrimonial accomplishment, or failure, as the case may be. A whole sphere of influences which are usually left out of stories dealing with these encounters spins into action— influences which, because of the simple fact that they are there, show that, even if the encounter does end in failure, someone has accomplished his goal.

The encounter presented in this story takes place in a very large American city. It's not important which American city. Pretend for a moment, please, that you are flying over this city in an airplane. You have a camera with you that has a very powerful zoom lense attached to it; through this lense are able to view immense segments of the city, or you can zoom in so close that even an object as small as a rusty pop stuck in the grating of a street drain may be scrupulously examined.

But the first thing you notice is the outrageous number of billboards hanging everywhere: billboards on buildings, billboards stuck up along all the roads, billboards on fences, billboards on trees—everywhere you look, billboards.

Now you zoom in closer. You zoom in on the magazines and newspapers and third class mail that everyone on the streets

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is investigating. And all of it, you note, is riddled with advertisements; they range anywhere from pictures of beautiful people holding packs of cigarettes up to their smiling faces, to pages and pages of perfect prose explaining why you really must see so-and-so to get your such-and-such insurance from such-and-such insurance company.

Now, if you lift your zoom lense just a little bit so that you can look into a window of some building—it doesn't much matter what window of what building—you can view half of the characters in this story. Her name is Melissa. She's sitting in her downtown apartment listening to the radio.

"Rudy's Chevy! Have we got them all! Hatchbacks! Coups! The exciting new Mavericks! And listen to this: If you hurry over to Rudy's right away and put a down payment on that new Chevy you've always wanted, you get—free!—a super, Doubledex tape deck! Plus—free again!—your choice of any two of Johnny Cash's well-known, well-beloved tapes! Yes indeed!"

Melissa turns off the radio. She wants a new car very badly, but she knows she cannot afford one. She sighs.

Melissa is a pretty girl who smiles a lot when she's around a lot of people; but when she's by herself, all she does is frown. Much of that time which she spends alone is filled with putting on make-up; she always goes heavy on the eye liner.

Melissa may not be in the market for a new Chevy from Rudy's, but she is in the market for a different brand of deodorant, an electronic burglar alarm, and (most crucially right now) some new wallpaper for her bedroom.

Melissa/3

Also (and this is crucial too) she's in the market for a nice young man with whom she can share such experiences as shopping for that new brand of deodorant, or that electronic burglar alarm, or that new wallpaper for her bedroom. But as of today, the securing of such an item still seems very far away to Melissa. She sighs again, and decides to venture off to McZoonies, the largest department store in the city, to do her errands anyway.

Before we follow her, however, there's a curious note that must be added here.

Earlier this afternoon, when Melissa was walking home from work, a bus passed by that had a big billboard attached to its rear. On the billboard there was a picture of a handsome man with shiny black hair standing smiling in front of a wall adorned with the latest in wallpaper from Paper Products, Inc. (That brand name, of course, printed, in fancy type, at the bottom right hand corner of the advertisement.)

Melissa emerges from the depths of her dark apartment building into the bright and busy street. Buses and billboards; people and stores.

She gaily walks down the sidewalk swinging her hips, glancing at each gentleman that goes by, smiling at some. She looks at pictures of action-packed movie scenes captured in full color and hung at the entrances to the theatres. She passes the shining wares in the windows of the stores, seeing some, missing others. She's speeding along toward McZoonies.

McZoonies is an incredibly big department store. It

Melissa/4

towers a full twenty floors up, some of these floors crammed with the smartest in today's fashions, others with fine appliances, others with furniture, others with pets, others with all these things. Melissa arrives and makes her way directly to the Home Furnishings department, which involves taking the elevator to floor thirteen.

McZoonies is famed all over the world for having the finest mannequins in the department store business—and the most. It is because of this fact that something quite strange, though fairly common, is going to happen to Melissa.

Home Furnishings has a goodly amount of these famed McZoonie mannequins dispersed throughout the department. Some are standing off to the sides of the aisles holding window shades; others are standing in obscure corners without, apparently, any purpose; and yet still more are standing right out in the open definitely without a purpose.

The elevator doors open and Melissa steps into Home Furnishings. She sees where she needs to go—straight ahead—into a dream realized of rolls and rolls of fascinating wallpaper hanging down from the ceiling, the walls, the shelves: straight ahead in the direction, delightfully, of a handsome young man with shiny black hair who looks like he might work here at McZoonies.

But, as often happens to patrons of department stores as large as this one, her hopes of being able to reach her destination by the most direct route are foiled when she, quite regrettably, finds herself at the terminating point of a dead end aisle. Is

Melissa/5

young man watching?

Back on course again, Melissa heads toward him and the wallpaper. As she passes the former, she glances at him and smiles, as she had done with some of the gentlemen on the street. But this guy doesn't respond. He does nothing whatsoever. Not even breathe.

Melissa realizes she has just greeted a mannequin.

She looks around to see who saw. No one did. Just a bunch more mannequins. Fortunate .

A bit red in the face, Melissa makes a beeline into the deepest depths of the wallpaper section, wishing all the time, even if unconsciously, that the man she'd glanced at in the ad on the back of the bus that had passed her earlier (it is his she sees, though she wouldn't be able to place it, of course, even if she were to try) were with her now, whispering to her, laughing with her about department stores.

McZoonies features Paper Products, Inc. in the wallpaper section of their Home Furnishings department. There are some obviously lesser brands on display there too—or so it seems to Melissa's mind, which is now investigating these wares, giving each the meticulous and, she thinks, unbiased eye. Paper Products, Inc., she decides, is the organization for her.

The perfect pattern and color picked out, Melissa searches for a sales person. But there are none to be found. McZoonies, for some reason, is grossly understaffed today. All Melissa can find are mannequins.

At this moment there is a man nearby who feels like a

mannequin. This is because no one has helped him in purchasing a mattress that he has chosen by careful process of elimination from those on display; he has sat down on them all and has found the one for him. It is a Beautyrest mattress. He regrets that he can't just pick this Beautyrest up and carry it to the nearest cash register (I'd get thrown out of the store for such a thing, he says to himself), yet he doesn't want to go find a sales person and ask him (or her) to go look at beds with him.

His name is Fromburg. He is in the Happy Sleep department on the thirteenth floor of McZoonies department store. He feels like a mannequin.

Meanwhile, Melissa is hoping to find one of the mannequins in Home Furnishings real. She looks carefully at each one, trying to detect movement, but there is none observable in any of them. So she, her will asserting itself, ventures off into Audio Visual (the next department over) hoping to find a sales person there who will assist her in getting the Paper Product, Inc. that she wants.

All she can find in Audio Visual are television sets. They are all piled up on top of one another on a big rack, making a glaring, blaring wall. Melissa watches one of the television sets; the one she watches is featuring a movie this afternoon; the movie, Melissa deduces, is about a cowboy who is lost in the desert. The cowboy is riding his horse hopelessly around in circles, and the music for this unfortunate situation is melancholic.

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Melissa feels the presence of someone behind her.

"Excuse me, Miss. Do you work here?"

Melissa turns around and finds herself confronted with Fromburg, who has finally ventured out of Happy Sleep in search of someone who will look at beds with him.

"Oh!" says Melissa. "No, I don't. I was just looking for someone who does. Do you?"

"No," says Fromburg. "I don't."

"Honestly," says Melissa, "I just don't know what's happening to McZoonies these days. The service is enough to make one go over to Bambackers."

"Yes," replies Fromburg, "but Bambackers doesn't have the quality. Take, for instance, um, beds. I was over at Bambackers this morning and their beds are all soft as marshmallows. Nothing like a good, hard bed, I always say."

"Is that what you're buying here?"

"That's what I'm hoping to buy. But

"No service.

"No service, that's right. What are you after?"

"Wallpaper. For my bedroom

"You won't find any of that here in Audio Visual," says Fromburg. "That's one department over in Home Furnishings."

"Yes, I'm aware of that," says Melissa, rolling her eyes.

"I just came over here to find someone who might be able to help me."

"Oh," says Fromburg.

They both look away from each other; they both look at

Melissa/8

the movie Melissa was watching.

The lonely, lost cowboy and his horse are still walking around in circles. The music is still melancholic. Then, this suspenseful scene is interrupted by a commercial.

The commercial, much to Fromburg's surprise, is for mattresses. Melissa watches the commercial too, but is half unaware of what is being advertised: she's involved in looking at the wallpaper behind the row of mattresses being panned by the television camera. A vague remembrance surfaces in her mind.

She turns to Fromburg. "I've seen you somewhere before," says. "Your hair—it looks familiar."

"Lots of people have black hair," says Fromburg. "But, yes, it's quite possible you've seen me. That's my job—getting people to look at me."

"What do you mean?"

"Advertisements—you know, signs, billboards. I'm a professional model. Currently, my face is on the back of some of the city buses; my hair, too." Fromburg smiles. "That particular ad is for Paper Products, Incorporated."

"Really?" says Melissa. "That's the kind of wallpaper I'm getting."

"No kidding?" Fromburg looks carefully at Melissa.

Melissa looks carefully at Fromburg. She likes what she sees.

"Maybe we can get someone to help us," says Fromburg, "in Health and Beauty. It's just down here."

"You lead," says Melissa, and off they go.

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5,500 words

AT DESERT THEATRE

by Bradford Harrison

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree . . .

--Coleridge, "Kubla Khan"

The train was filling fast. There were no empty sets of seats left, so I was confronted with the choice of which single passenger to pair up with.

I was glad she said I could sit there if I wanted to, that, no, the seat wasn't taken. I pushed my camera bag into the space under the vacant seat, and moved in next to her. She had the window.

"Ever been to Desert Theatre?" I asked.

"No. Have you?"

"Nope," I said.

The Desert Theatre Express, after a while, began to roll. It gradually picked up speed, and was soon barreling across the flat, white, timeless bleakness of the desert. Now that we were well under way, the passengers talked more.

Harrison/Theatre/2

"You're going to Desert Theatre for a vacation, right?"
I asked the girl.

"Yes. You vacationing too?"

"No," I said. "Business. I have to take some pictures."

"Oh. You're a photographer?"

"Yes. For an advertising agency. My firm just acquired
Desert Theatre as a new account. What do you do?"

"I'm an actress. I'm between productions right now, so
I thought I'd get away."

I would've guessed a model--she had the high cheekbones,
thin nose and small mouth that so many models have these
days, and she was dressed very fashionably. Her hair was long,
straight, blond.

After a bit more conversation we discovered that we
were staying at the same hotel at Desert Theatre--the Mountain
View Hilton.

"Dinner tonight, maybe? It's on my expense account."

"That sounds good," Sandy Marvis replied.

#

Desert Theatre was a small city within a dome.

"There it is!" Sandy said when it appeared on the horizon.

I leaned over her to see out the window. The white
bubble, almost identical in color to the sand, did not, from
this distance, look as though twenty-five thousand people
were in it. But there were.

Fifteen minutes later, the actual, fantastic size of the

Harrison/Theatre/3

thing was upon us. When the train slid into the towering half-moon, all went dark; then we came into the neon glow of the station.

Sandy and I got off the train together and moved along with the crowd toward the baggage claim area. Ahead I saw Stark; he was pushing his way upstream through the flow of people, looking for me. I recognized him from a photo which had accompanied a newspaper article I'd read about Desert Theatre. I wondered, while waving at him, why he'd come himself to meet me. I was expecting a lower-down.

He was a late middle-aged guy wearing a bright yellow suit. His dark hair was combed straight back. With his deep-set eyes he saw me waving, and a smile came to his face. In a moment, we were shaking hands.

"Hello, Howell," he said. "I thought you were coming alone." I'd sent him a letter stating my plans, and with it I'd enclosed a photograph of myself.

"Ms. Marvis and I met on the Express," I said. Then, to Sandy, "Mr. Stark conceived of and built Desert Theatre."

"Wonderful to meet you, Mr. Stark," Sandy said. "You own Desert Theatre?"

"The majority," Stark replied. "The other stockholders own the rest. We're a corporation." Stark had made his money with his Senso-Movie Theatres chain, the first theatres to show films that had smells added to them--a big hit.

"Sandy also has a room at the Mountain View," I said.

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"Good. That's where we're going now. I want to show you something there."

While Sandy and I got our bags, Stark talked to a man behind a counter; a porter was dispatched, and we didn't have to worry about our luggage anymore.

"It's all taken care of," Stark said. "It'll be at the hotel before we are."

We got on an escalator, going up. I asked Stark, who a step above me, "How'd you happen to build so far away?"

"For the feeling of isolation. People have a better vacation when they know they're distant from their daily lives. And the monotony of the train ride prepares them for what you are about to see. It primes them by calming their senses and clearing their minds."

We stepped out of a canopy-type structure at the top of escalator and were--in the mountains. It was a fine, sharp day. There was a good helping of snow on the highest peaks. There were huge, wonderful alpine meadows above the timber line, and below it the pines were thick--thick right down to the bottom of the dome.

The city rose up to the dome. There were ten skyscrapers--domescrapers, they were called. A monorail track wove around the domescrapers, soaring way high in some places, like a roller coaster's run. We were looking down on the smaller buildings, none of them fully enclosed; balconies and terraces balanced unsymmetrically on many of them. And it seemed, from

Harrison/Theatre/5

the way the city gleamed, that all was made from glass. Much was, in fact.

There were no streets, just wide walkways, though I did see a few golf-cart type deals cruising along the walkways, using them as streets, carrying people, baggage, supplies, and so on.

"I had this projection put on just for you," Stark said, with a little irony. "Why don't you take a picture?" He chuckled.

While I employed my camera, he continued, "The domescrapers are the hotels. That one dead center of the city is the Mountain View Hilton. The ground buildings are restaurants, bars, discos, gift shops. Over there, on the west side, are the recreational facilities--golf course, tennis courts, swimming pools. The ultimate vacation spot!"

All of the people from the Express were with us now on this elevated platform--a large crowd of very captivated people. We weren't feeling the same kind of thrill that sightseers, for example, feel; it was something much different. It was extremely hypnotic.

"Ah And smell the pine!" Stark said.

"My god," Sandy said. "Smells too--I don't believe this!"

"Some projections have sound instead of smell, and a few have both. All projections engage at least two of the senses."

The monorail slid up in front of us, and stopped. The doors whisked open.

"I think I have my work cut out for me," I said,

Harrison/Theatre/6

took another picture.

Stark laughed loudly.

#

There was a fountain that shot a hundred feet straight into the air in the lobby of the Hilton.

The building was perfectly round, the wall glass--a towering, fragile tube. The air conditioning felt good.

Stark talked to the head desk clerk, then informed us that we were all checked in, that our bags were on the way to our rooms, and that everything was on the house! He gave us our keys. Adjoining suites. Sandy, he said, could stay as long as she liked. Our meals, if taken at the Hilton, were free, as well as drinks from the bar. All room service would also be without charge.

Sandy thanked him profusely. I said that that certainly was nice of him. I didn't, however, really care what was free, because my expense account took care of everything anyway. The adjoining suites were a good idea, though.

He led us across the lobby and into a glass elevator that then climbed precariously up the outside of this amazing edifice. The view of the Theatre was tremendous. Stark had a special key which allowed the elevator to go all the way up, for the very top floor was a restricted area. It was the projection station, shooting its light in all directions from the center of the city.

The glass elevator doors opened, and we walked in. The roof of the Hilton was glass also. There were ten projectors set up around the single, huge room at equal intervals along

Harrison/Theatre/7

the wall, and there was an eleventh at the center of the room, throwing its light straight up through the ceiling, filling in the area of the dome directly overhead. The projectors were monstrous, complicated creations, spinning spools of film as large as the tires on a diesel truck.

There were a dozen people in the projection station, a person for every projector, plus one. Stark took us to the extra--and most important of them all--leading us past the smiles and genial nods of the others. She was standing in front of the main projection console, the place from which all the projectors were controlled. Through her thick-lensed, heavy-framed glasses this short, unattractive woman looked out over the Theatre. She turned when Stark said her name.

"Rose, meet Howell, our new advertising agency's photographer. A nice guy, but you have to remind him to take his pictures. And this is Ms. Marvis.- Rose is our cinemagraphic expert. She designed what you see in here, and she helped engineer the dome."

"Fine achievements," I said.

"It's lovely," Sandy said.

Rose nodded her greetings and smiled her thanks.

"Rose," Stark said, "tell Howell what we're going to do tomorrow."

"As you probably already know, Mr. Howell," Rose said, as though she were making a formal speech, "there are ten domescrapers out there. Do you know the names of them all?"

"A few," I said.

"I know some, too," Sandy said. "There's the Mountain View Hilton, Tahitian Night, Ocean Breeze Manor, The Village, Royal Palace, and, um, Ranchers Roost, and . . . That's all I can remember. I had a tough time deciding which one to stay at."

"The others," Rose said, "are Volcano Vantage Inn, Safari Lodge, Hells Devils Lair and City Station. Each domescraper has its own projection. Mr. Stark would like you to have the opportunity, tomorrow, to take photographs of each domescraper in its own setting."

"Great," I said. "I already have some good ones of the Hilton--I just got them."

"And we'll switch projections once more today," Rose said, "so you can get that one too--we'll do Volcano Vantage's.

leaves eight for tomorrow--seven transitions that everyone be awake for. That still might be too many."

"No need to dwell on that," Stark said

"Dwell on what?" I asked.

"We've never switched projections more than twice in one day since we opened Desert Theatre's gates to the public," Rose said. "Before the vacationers came we made some tests and found that too many transitions too close together can create psychological problems in people. By making seven transitions tomorrow we may be putting too great a mental and emotional strain on everyone currently at Desert Theatre."

"I see," I said. "I could stay another couple of days so that you won't have to cram them all in like that. As a matter of fact, I was planning on several." I looked at Stark.

"I know you were," he said, "but I want to see as soon as possible what ideas your company can come up with. The holidays will be here before you know it, and I want the Theatre ^{then} as full _A as it is right now. Tomorrow night, after you've gotten the photographs--I'm sure everyone will be able to handle the seven transitions--we'll meet, then you can catch the Express in the morning. How does that sound, Howell?"

"A little fast, but that's okay. I'm used to deadlines." It, however, wasn't okay at all: I was crushed with regret, knowing that I wouldn't be able to really get to know either Sandy or the Theatre in so short a time. Already I was developing an infatuation for Sandy that I knew could be critical, and it was somehow akin to my rapidly growing fascination with the Theatre; together they created a sort of double-barreled shotgun that I was sure could provide a happy ending.

"I don't understand," Sandy said. "Mental and emotional strain? Desert Theatre has such a lovely feeling!" She looked at me. "I'll probably end up spending all my vacations here."

"The Mountain View's projection is one of the mellowest," Rose said. "People!" she shouted to her staff. "Switch to Volcano Vantage!" Then, while everyone jumped into action,

Harrison/Theatre/10

she spoke to us again. "Each projection creates a different mood, of course, and once you've picked up the mood of the projection, there's no problem. Even the ugliest of them--

Station's--is perfectly handlable, given current tastes, once you've gotten the mood; its ugliness then becomes its beauty, savagery becomes love, fire becomes a soothing fluid. The many different moods we create make Desert Theatre the extraordinary place that it is. But the mind and the emotions need time to deal with the changing moods: my worry is that if there are too many transitions, the time needed to adjust won't be there, and everyone will get very uncomfortable.

They may even become psychically disturbed. The tests we made showed that this could indeed become the case tomorrow."

"But on the other side of the coin," Stark said, "tomorrow may well prove to be a dramatic new thrill that everyone will enjoy tremendously. Try this volcano projection on for size.

a wonderful experience--especially from up here. Rose is sometimes a little too cautious to be able to really enjoy the Theatre. And besides: I wouldn't initiate anything that would have even the remotest chance of being harmful to my and the other stockholders' business interests. Everything will be fine."

So Rose was put in her place.

The new reels of film were already replacing the old, the calm majesty of the mountains gave way to the barren volcano scene. The color of Desert Theatre changed from

Harrison/Theatre/11

whitish blue to light brown as several huge, jagged cones took form over the city. The volcanoes were quiet--for the moment. Beyond them extended a perfectly flat plain, like the desert. The sky was gray, covered ^{with} ~~in~~ a thick blanket of unhappy clouds. You couldn't see the sun. The mouths of the volcanoes looked cutting-sharp, dangerous.

The transition was complete. I suddenly realized that I had sunken into hypnosis--I believe I went completely under. I felt drugged, drained, sluggish--and I became frightened. It hits you without your knowing it, I thought. The change in atmosphere was total. Another world. Another planet. No one had said a thing during the process--at least that I'd heard. It entranced all alike. Even these people who were used to

Stark stepped to the big console and pushed down on the film speed control. The spools began to spin wildly. Blood-red lava suddenly spewed forth from the ominous shapes, from the sharp mouths, and hurled up the dome; it meshed at the directly over our heads. My first reaction was to protect myself with my arms. I was sure I was going to be singed. But the awful substance spilled back down, splashing onto the volcanoes, then gushing off them onto the plain.

I heard Sandy breathing heavily.

Another belch--another frightening sensation. A few more, I saw that, yes, I was getting used to it. In fact, it was getting kind of nice.

Har

"It's great, isn't it?" Stark said, breaking the silence.

I nodded yes. I looked at Sandy. Her eyes were open wider than any eyes I've ever seen. She was still intensely absorbed by the projection. I smiled at her state of being, then looked back at Stark, who'd also noticed it.

An awful, hideous laugh came from his depths. The burning odor was already seeping into the projection station from where it was given off around the dome--the smell that went with this projection. Sandy didn't seem to notice it--or Stark's laugh.

#

Night this evening was created with lense filters. When Sandy and I left the station, the staff had already employed the first set, and were starting the second. The now calm volcanoes dimmed, and the city took on an evening twinkle--myriads of jewels in the dusk.

Our suites were royal. Sandy freshened up and changed clothes while I ordered drinks. They arrived in my suite about the same time Sandy did, and we lounged in my sitting room, looking out on the Theatre. It was filled with a warm, relaxing glow, still getting darker, and after a while the stars were out--yet another convincing special effect. I tingled when I thought about tomorrow.

For dinner we went to the Volcano Vantage Inn, where I got my pictures--time exposures; I used my tripod. We ate in the Volcano Vantage's Lava Room.

Harrison/Theatre/13

Stark had given us information pamphlets--they told of the different places at Desert Theatre, and how to get to them. We used the pamphlets to take in Desert Theatre's night life--we played around at the Desert Theatre Carnival a while, then went to a disco, and finally we stopped at an intimate bar. By the time I got to bed, it was late, the city quiet and shimmering in the serene calm of the volcano projection--potentially evil, as all the projections were.

#

Sometime during the night the projection was changed. While I dressed in the morning I watched sunrise on the sea. The brilliant blue Ocean Breeze Manor setting was on the dome, so I knew that that hotel was my first destination. Neither Stark nor Rose had said anything about the order in which they were going to run the projections.

I quickly cleaned my camera equipment, and left the Hilton. Desert Theatre was filled with the smell of the ocean and the soft sound of the waves. I rode the monorail to the Ocean Breeze, feeling good that I had a productive day ahead. Sandy was spending the day at the recreational facilities, but we were planning on having lunch together, if I was in the area. She was going to meet me at the main pool at noon. I'd get the photos of the facilities, which I knew I should have, then.

The Ocean Breeze towered up as close to the side of the dome as a domescraper could get. I was surprised to see fish swimming about on the lower part of the dome--some of

Harrison/Theatre/14

as big as cars. The feeling was that you were in the water with them, which was a bit frightening until you got used to it. I took some good wide angle shots of the sea, fish and hotel all together.

The Ranchers Roost projection came on next--open plains with cattle roaming around. The transition was smooth, and, once again, overwhelming. But this time I didn't watch very closely, wanting to keep my head crystal clear--my main concern was of course my photography, my job.

During the short walk to the Roost, all was calm, the cattle grazing mellowly, but when I got there the stampede that I suspected was in the film somewhere occurred. Stark, or Rose, could have avoided that part today; I was left with conclusion that Stark wanted the rushing cattle in my pictures, so I shot away.

The effect was completely true to life--the cattle hurling into the city from the deep plains, then swerving just when it seemed that they'd smash into you. Little kids had screamed. The tinge of fear I had at seeing the huge fish was renewed and became amplified. I suddenly felt that I wanted to get away. But I of course resisted, and my motor drive whined on.

The next transition wasn't nearly as smooth as the last. Village hotel's flick--the tropics, the tufted coconut trees enlarged to tremendous proportions, giant natives running through the brush and these trees with spears, chasing something.

Harrison/Theatre/15

The natives carried the motion of the cattle, not yet out of our minds, and I noticed that the activity along walkways was intensifying. There was more talk, loud voices; more motion, some running. I ran toward The Village--not because it was far away, but because I felt like running. I never made it there.

--We saw what the Goliath natives were chasing--a pig the size of an elephant (as projected on the dome), a monstrous wild boar. It, still well ahead of them, crashed into and through their village, which was occupying the entire north side of Desert Theatre, like a mammoth extension of the city, albeit a primitive one. All eyes in the Theatre were on that towering village, and the soundtrack came on--screaming, the hulking, heavy-breasted women shrieking as they rushed out of their huts. The men smashed through the village after the boar--and caught it. The killing: spears drove home. Guts spilled. Graphic. Horrendous. My heart pounded. But I couldn't stop watching!

Another transition. I hadn't been given nearly enough time to make it to The Village hotel.

Safari Lodge's: big game flattening the jungle, jeeps filled with hunters in pursuit. The climax right away. Rifle fire, wailing, bleeding, hacking to death with machetes.

I attached a 3X tele-converter to my longest lense and mounted the hefty 1500mm's to the camera body. I squatted, resting my elbow on my knee and the lense in my now

Harrison/Theatre/16

stable hand. I aimed at the top floor of the Mountain View Hilton; range, infinity. The only person I could see in the projection station was Stark; in my picture he's standing in back of the main projection console, which looms before him, looking down over the Theatre with a viciousness, a gleam. The man had just stepped off into the abyss. It's a good shot.

The projection reversed: the dead animals gathered their guts back together, the hunters' machetes and knives zipped the wounds up, and in a couple more moments the bullets pulled out and the animals were on their feet again; then they chased, butts first, the hunters, who'd returned to their jeeps and were now flying along backwards, in shooting position.

I stood, forgetting about Stark, to watch this. I was awed. Someone knocked me down and kept on running. The people who witnessed the event laughed, and it was at this point that I saw the doom ahead. I shouted that the guy was a son of a bitch. My beautiful long lense was cracked, but my camera body was still okay--which was lucky because I'd left my spare ~~body~~ in my hotel room. I attached another lense, for the purpose of photojournalism now rather than advertising, and headed for the Hilton. I figured that's where the action would be.

While I ran, Stark put on another projection, the transition very slow this time because he was changing the

Harrison/Theatre/17

reels alone. I expected City Station's--remembering Rose had said it was the ugliest--but instead something comic began to take form in chunks all around. The Royal Palace's: ornate, glittering buildings; horse-drawn carriages; exquisitely-dressed kings, queens, noblemen and their ladies walking through rose-filled gardens. The dominant color, plush red. And the people began to speak. "Prince Orlando will be at the ball this evening." "Really? How charming!"

Then we saw what Stark was up to: a parade. Many more carriages rolled out onto the dome, and with them came rows and rows of Napoleonic soldiers, creating a combined clatter of hooves, wheels and marching. The volume increased and increased until the speakers were distorting; people were shouting, "Turn the damned thing down!" But still the steady thunder rolled on.

The glass elevator, I saw when I got near the Hilton, was on its way down with someone in it. Stark? I ran to the Hilton's main doors and into the lobby; it was crowded with people who'd come in to escape the awful din, but still the noise--especially when you added the people's excited voices to it--was very loud in here. At the bottom of the exposed elevator shaft there was a group of men. I waited with them--and they were pissed about something more than the clatter.

The elevator dropped into view. Rose was in there. The doors opened and she stepped out.

"What was the fucking hold-up!" one of the men shouted at

Harrison/Theatre/18

her.

Rose didn't reply, but scooted for the big hotel doors. The whole group of men squeezed into the elevator, and when they were all finally in tight enough for the doors to fully close, away the elevator went. If there'd been room enough for me, that's where I would've gone--to the top.

Instead I chased after Rose and caught her just before she got out. "What's going on!" I yelled. We had to speak very loudly to be heard at all.

"Stark's lost his mind!"

"Can we get to him?"

"No way! All entrances are locked from the inside--he killed Mike and Danny!"

"What--!"

"Two of the staff--dead! We all ran. He used us until we saw what he was doing--then he pulled a gun! Some are trying to get back in; there's a bunch of people in the stairwell trying to bust down the door. He's got the security locks turned on so none of the elevators can get up there."

"Can we shut off his power?"

She looked directly at me for the first time: her thick glasses magnified her already twelve-gauge pupils, dilated with fear. "This was all planned, Mr. Howell. He's got an emergency generator, as he called it. Runs on gas. And the emergency exits--he paid off the fire marshals. Half a million bucks. Said too many exits and too many signs would interfere

Harrison/Theatre/19

with the projections--no one will ever find them! The man's been a lunatic right along--and I never saw!"

"Wait a minute--you suspect fire!"

"I suspect more than that--like explosives he can trigger from up there! Mr. Howell--goodbye. I'm getting the hell out of Desert Theatre! When the dome goes, it'll go like a damned tent! It's wood, you know. Now--goodbye!"

"Look!"

Through the glass we saw devils the size of Zeppelins, complete with pitchforks and pussy faces, taking form in three dimensions--you couldn't even tell the dome was there! And still the parade noise pounded on.

"Hells Devils Lair. Three-D gore."

"Worse than City Station?"

"No. He's saving that for last. City Station really happened--the projection was put together from the Death Riot newsreels, though a lot of the footage in the projection never made it onto the tube. Too awful. It'll break everyone--I know it will. Listen--goodbye!"

"Hold on! Where's the exit nearest the recreation part of the Theatre?"

"By the gym," she replied, pushing out through the doors. I followed, but took a different direction. She, unfortunately, went to the train station, even though she knew of other exits that would've been easier to get out through. She was probably hoping to catch the Express. Later, I was asked to try to

Harrison/Theatre/20

identify her body; they suspected it was her from the initials engraved on the inside of her ring.

The hotels were emptying: it was clear to everyone that something had gone badly haywire. Most people were headed for the train station--the only place they knew where there had to be an exit; the walkways leading in that direction were packed full.

The monsters are only a projection, I kept reminding myself during the long run to the main pool. The dome is still there. I stopped several times for pictures: some of the best shots I've ever gotten. Men, women and children going insane.

The 3-D devils were King Kongs towering higher than the domescrapers, and they were right there in the Theatre with us. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if they stalked into the city, crushing buildings, climbing the domescrapers. But they're only a projection. The dome is still between us and them.

The flow along the walkways leading to the train station became a mess; many people became reluctant to go any farther toward the devils, causing jams. There was a lot of pushing and tripping, some fighting. Some people gave up and became completely stationary, standing or sitting off to the sides of or directly in the walkways, covering their eyes and ears, hoping Hell would pass. I looked at the devils as little as possible. I too was hoping Hell would pass, of course, but Stark was playing this out to the very end.

By the time I reached the main pool, the devils were far into their activities on the outskirts of town, right nearby me now. The rhythmical crashing had been replaced by the devils' hideous yelps and droning whines, echoing through the Theatre while they, half consumed in flames, stabbed one another with their pitchforks. The Theatre was engulfed in flames--roaring heatlessly all around.

Sandy, barely clothed in a skimpy bikini, was sitting about halfway out on a diving board, a leg dangling on each side and her arms propping her up from behind. She was watching, fascinated, as the devils who were still alive began dismembering those who were dead or partly dead. It was so realistic that I'm sure bodies from the morgue were used to make that projection. The pool reflected the awful red. The devils began eating their dead.

"Shut it off! Shut it off! Shut it off!" the people at Desert Theatre were shouting, crying, moaning.

A woman nearby was howling hysterically, pulling her hair out, and vomiting, all at once. I have several excellent shots of her.

"Sandy!"

Nothing.

"Sandy We've got to get out of here!"

Suddenly, in a flash, she was looking at me--smiling! Grinning! I clicked, and, oh, her eyes are so red, stained from within and without. She looked away, returning to the

Harrison/Theatre/22

fascinating spectacle.

Forget her! I thought. She was brutally murdered a little later.

An explosion! A lot of people had made it to the train station by this time, which was why Stark now chose to detonate.

estimates set the death toll at about a thousand, with times that many wounded. Many bodies had been completely shredded, making a precise body count impossible.

When I looked, the southeast section of the dome burst into real flames, showing the 3-D projection to be the illusion that it was, and the monorail, parked at the high platform where I'd gotten my first view of the Theatre, heaved into the air, the track crashing down for quite a distance in both directions.

It was well-planned by Stark--his goals couldn't have been more perfectly achieved.

I read his court confession recently, and in it he states that he had been in charge of the psychological testing that was done before the Theatre opened, and that from the results he'd learned just what to do to attain altogether maximum insanity at the Theatre. Sometimes I think this is

history is: a big test, and from the results the people in power are learning the most efficient ways of making everybody go insane. Let it not be said that I haven't learned from my experience at Desert Theatre.

The pyres of the City Station projection now commenced

Harrison/Theatre/23

to do the final fatal work on the burning dome.

#

I had reached that point where memory decides to start rejecting sensory data on the basis of that data's now (because the mind can't handle it anymore) extremely harmful content. A sort of mental safeguard kicked in, so that what was flowing through my senses might as well have been dumping into the air for all I can clearly remember. I believe that persons under torture eventually reach this state.

But still I know what happened: I have about a hundred and fifty pictures that must have been taken by me. They serve as memory from this point on.

They show the riot--the Riot on the dome, and the riot in the Theatre itself. They show the violence and the destruction--the breaking glass, the fire, the cruel, distorted faces of the attackers, the agonizing faces of the victims, and the strangely calm faces of the dead. My photographs show the end of the world.

And I have a favorite. It's the last one I took. I'm out on the desert. People are lying in the sand. Beyond them, the Theatre still stands. Only a tiny bit of the actual dome is left, though its skeleton, the steel frame, is all there. What attracts your attention most, though, is that part of the actual dome that remains, for there's a piece of a projection here. In his madness, Stark didn't forget the tenth one, and

Harrison/Theatre/24

I got the photograph of it, as requested. A vague Tahitian sunset glows over the Theatre, the Tahitian Night hotel in there somewhere.

THIS WAS MY LAST ORIGINAL WORK OF FICTION, COMPLETED IN THE FALL OF 1980. DURING THE NEXT YEAR OR SO I WORKED ON REVISIONS OF STORIES, THEN, IN THE FALL OF '81, I BEGAN MY STUDIES IN SCIENCE. I WAS 25.

JOHN LENNON WAS ASSASSINATED 12-8-1980, BRINGING THE ERA OF THE "WOODSTOCK GENERATION" TO AN ABRUPT END.