

The Thousand Dreams of Stellavista

JG Ballard 1962

No one ever comes to Vermilion Sands now, and I suppose there are few people who have ever heard of it. But ten years ago, when Fay and I first went to live at 99 Stellavista, just before our marriage broke up, the colony was still remembered as the one-time playground of movie stars, delinquent heiresses and eccentric cosmopolites in those fabulous years before the Recess. Admittedly most of the abstract villas and fake palazzos were empty, their huge gardens overgrown, two-level swimming pools long drained, and the whole place was degenerating like an abandoned amusement park, but there was enough bizarre extravagance in the air to make one realize that the giants had only just departed.

I remember the day. we first drove down Stellavista in the property agent's car, and how exhilarated Fay and I were, despite our bogus front of bourgeois respectability. Fay, I think, was even a little awed - one or two of the big names were living on behind the shuttered terraces - and we must have been the easiest prospects the young agent had seen for months.

Presumably this was why he tried to work off the really weird places first. The half dozen we saw to begin with were obviously the old regulars, faithfully paraded in the hope that some unwary client might be staggered into buying one of them, or failing that, temporarily lose all standards of comparison and take the first tolerably conventional pile to come along.

One, just off Stellavista and M, would have shaken even an old-guard surrealist on a heroin swing. Screened from the road by a mass of dusty rhododendrons, it consisted of six aluminium-shelled spheres suspended like the elements of a mobile from an enormous concrete davit. The largest sphere contained the lounge, the others, successively smaller and spiralling upwards into the air, the bedrooms and kitchen. Many of the hull plates had been holed, and the entire slightly tarnished structure hung down into the weeds poking through the cracked concrete court like a collection of forgotten spaceships in a vacant lot.

Stamers, the agent, left us sitting in the car, partly shielded by the rhododendrons. He ran across to the entrance and switched the place on (all the houses in Vermilion Sands, it goes without saying, were psychotropic). There was a dim whirring, and the spheres tipped and began to rotate, brushing against the undergrowth.

Fay sat in the car, staring up in amazement at this awful, beautiful thing, but out of curiosity I got out and walked over to the entrance, the main sphere slowing as I approached, uncertainly steering a course towards me, the smaller ones following.

According to the descriptive brochure, the house had been built eight years earlier for a TV mogul as a weekend retreat. The pedigree was a long one, through two movie starlets, a psychiatrist, an ultrasonic composer (the late Dmitri Shochmann - a notorious madman. I remembered that he had invited a score of guests to his suicide party, but no one had turned up to watch. Chagrined, he bungled the attempt.) and an automobile stylist. With such an overlay of more or less blue-chip

responses built into it, the house should have been snapped up within a week, even in Vermilion Sands. To have been on the market for several months, if not years, indicated that the previous tenants had been none too happy there.

Ten feet from me, the main sphere hovered uncertainly, the entrance extending downwards. Stammers stood in the open doorway, smiling encouragingly, but the house seemed nervous of something. As I stepped forward it suddenly jerked away, almost in alarm, the entrance retracting and sending a low shudder through the rest of the spheres.

It's always interesting to watch a psychotropic house try to adjust itself to strangers, particularly those at all guarded or suspicious. The responses vary, a blend of past reactions to negative emotions, the hostility of the previous tenants, a traumatic encounter with a bailiff or burglar (though both these usually stay well away from PT houses; the dangers of an inverting balcony or the sudden deflatus of a corridor are too great). The initial reaction can be a surer indication of a house's true condition than any amount of sales talk about horsepower and moduli of elasticity.

This one was definitely on the defensive. When I climbed on to the entrance Stammers was fiddling desperately with the control console recessed into the wall behind the door, damping the volume down as low as possible. Usually a property agent will select medium/full, trying to heighten the PT responses.

He smiled thinly at me. 'Circuits are a little worn. Nothing serious, we'll replace them on contract. Some of the previous owners were showbusiness people, had an over-simplified view of the full life.

I nodded, walking on to the balcony which ringed the wide sunken lounge. It was a beautiful room all right, with opaque plastex walls and white fluo-glass ceiling, but something terrible had happened there. As it responded to me, the ceiling lifted slightly and the walls grew less opaque, reflecting my perspective-seeking eye. I noticed that curious mottled knots were forming where the room had been strained and healed faultily. Hidden rifts began to distort the sphere, ballooning out one of the alcoves like a bubble of over-extended gum.

Stammers tapped my elbow.

'Lively responses, aren't they, Mr Talbot?' He put his hand on the wall behind us. The plastex swam and whirled like boiling toothpaste, then extruded itself into a small ledge. Stammers sat down on the lip, which quickly expanded to match the contours of his body, providing back and arm rests. 'Sit down and relax, Mr Talbot, let yourself feel at home here.'

The seat cushioned up around me like an enormous white hand, and immediately the walls and ceiling quietened - obviously Stammers's first job was to get his clients off their feet before their restless shuffling could do any damage. Someone living there must have put in a lot of anguished pacing and knuckle-cracking.

'Of course, you're getting nothing but custom-built units here,' Stammers said. 'The vinyl chains in this plastex were hand-crafted literally molecule by molecule.'

I felt the room shift around me. The ceiling was dilating and contracting in steady pulses,

an absurdly exaggerated response to our own respiratory rhythms, but the motions were overlaid by sharp transverse spasms, feed-back from some cardiac ailment.

The house was not only frightened of us, it was seriously ill. Somebody, Dmitri Shochmann perhaps, overflowing with self-hate, had committed an appalling injury to himself, and the house was recapitulating its previous response. I was about to ask Stammers if the suicide party had been staged here when he sat up and looked around fretfully.

At the same time my ears started to sing. Mysteriously, the air pressure inside the lounge was building up, gusts of old grit whirling out into the hallway towards the exit.

Stammers was on his feet, the seat telescoping back into the wall.

'Er, Mr Talbot, let's stroll around the garden, give you the feel of-'
He broke off, face creased in alarm. The ceiling was only five feet above our heads, contracting like a huge white bladder.

'-explosive decompression,' Stammers finished automatically, taking my arm. 'I don't understand this,' he muttered as we ran out into the hallway, the air whooshing past us.

I had a shrewd idea what was happening, and sure enough we found Fay peering into the control console, swinging the volume tabs.

Stammers dived past her. We were almost dragged back into the lounge as the ceiling began its outward leg and sucked the air in through the doorway. He reached the emergency panel and switched the house off.

Wide-eyed, he buttoned his shirt. 'That was close, Mrs Talbot, really close.' He gave a light hysterical laugh.

As we walked back to the car, the giant spheres resting among the weeds, he said: 'Well, Mr Talbot, it's a fine property. A remarkable pedigree for a house only eight years old. An exciting challenge, you know, a new dimension in living.'

I gave him a weak smile. 'Maybe, but it's not exactly us, is it?'

We had come to Vermilion Sands for two years, while I opened a law office in downtown Red Beach twenty miles away. Apart from the dust, smog and inflationary prices of real estate in Red Beach, a strong motive for coming out to Vermilion Sands was that any number of potential clients were mouldering away there in the old mansions - forgotten movie queens, lonely impresarios and the like, some of the most litigious people in the world. Once installed, I could make my rounds of the bridge tables and dinner parties, tactfully stimulating a little righteous will-paring and contract-breaking.

However, as we drove down Stellavista on our inspection tour I wondered if we'd find anywhere suitable. Rapidly we went through a mock Assyrian ziggurat (the last owner had suffered from St Vitus's Dance, and the whole structure still jittered like a galvanized Tower of Pisa), and a converted submarine pen (here the problem had been alcoholism, we could feel the gloom and helplessness come down off those huge damp walls).

Finally Stammers gave up and brought us back to earth. Unfortunately his more conventional properties were little better. The real trouble was that most of Vermilion Sands is composed of early, or primitive-fantastic psychotropic, when the possibilities offered by the new bio-plastic medium rather went to architects' heads. It was some years before a compromise was reached between the one hundred per cent responsive structure and the rigid non-responsive houses of the past. The first PT houses had so many senso-cells distributed over them, echoing every shift of mood and position of the occupants, that living in one was like inhabiting someone else's brain.

Unluckily bioplastics need a lot of exercise or they grow rigid and crack, and many people believe that PT buildings are still given unnecessarily subtle memories and are far too sensitive - there's the apocryphal story of the millionaire of plebian origins who was literally frozen out of a million-dollar mansion he had bought from an aristocratic family. The place had been trained to respond to their habitual rudeness and bad temper, and reacted discordantly when readjusting itself to the millionaire, unintentionally parodying his soft-spoken politeness.

But although the echoes of previous tenants can be intrusive, this naturally has its advantages. Many medium-priced PT homes resonate with the bygone laughter of happy families, the relaxed harmony of a successful marriage. It was something like this that I wanted for Fay and myself. In the previous year our relationship had begun to fade a little, and a really well-integrated house with a healthy set of reflexes - say, those of a prosperous bank president and his devoted spouse - would go a long way towards healing the rifts between us.

Leafing through the brochures when we reached the end of Stellavista I could see that domesticated bank presidents had been in short supply at Vermilion Sands. The pedigrees were either packed with ulcer-ridden, quadri-divorced TV executives, or discreetly blank.

99 Stellavista was in the latter category. As we climbed out of the car and walked up the short drive I searched the pedigree for data on the past tenants, but only the original owner was given: a Miss Emma Slack, psychic orientation unstated.

That it was a woman's house was obvious. Shaped like an enormous orchid, it was set back on a low concrete dais in the centre of a blue gravel court. The white plastex wings, which carried the lounge on one side and the master bedroom on the other, spanned out across the magnolias on the far side of the drive. Between the two wings, on the first floor, was an open terrace around a heart-shaped swimming pool. The terrace ran back to the central bulb, a three-storey segment containing the chauffeur's apartment and a vast two-decker kitchen.

The house seemed to be in good condition. The plastex was unscarred, its thin seams running smoothly to the far rim like the veins of a giant leaf.

Curiously, Stammers was in no hurry to switch on. He pointed to left and right as we made our way up the glass staircase to the terrace, underlining various attractive features, but made no effort to find the control console, and suspected that the house might be a static conversion - a fair number of PT houses are frozen in one or other position at the end of their working lives, and make tolerable

static homes.

'It's not bad,' I admitted, looking across the powder-blue water as Stammers piled on the superlatives. Through the glass bottom of the pool the car parked below loomed like a coloured whale asleep on the ocean bed. 'This is the sort of thing, all right. But what about switching it on?'

Stammers stepped around me and headed after Fay. 'You'll want to see the kitchen first, Mr Talbot. There's no hurry, let yourself feel at home here.'

The kitchen was fabulous, banks of gleaming control panels and auto units. Everything was recessed and stylized, blending into the overall colour scheme, complex gadgets folding back into self-sealing cabinets. Boiling an egg there would have taken me a couple of days.

'Quite a plant,' I commented. Fay wandered around in a daze of delight, automatically fingering the chrome. 'Looks as if it's tooled up to produce penicillin.' I tapped the brochure. 'But why so cheap? At twenty-five thousand it's damn nearly being given away.'

Stammers's eyes brightened. He flashed me a broad conspiratorial smile which indicated that this was my year, my day. Taking me off on a tour of the rumpus room and library, he began to hammer home the merits of the house, extolling his company's thirty-five-year, easy-purchase plan (they wanted anything except cash - there was no money in that) and the beauty and simplicity of the garden (mostly flexible polyurethane perennials).

Finally, apparently convinced that I was sold, he switched the house on.

I didn't know then what it was, but something strange had taken place in that house. Emma Slack had certainly been a woman with a powerful and oblique personality. As I walked slowly around the empty lounge, feeling the walls angle and edge away, doorways widen when I approached, curious echoes stirred through the memories embedded in the house. The responses were undefined, but somehow eerie and unsettling, like being continually watched over one's shoulder, each room adjusting itself to my soft, random footsteps as if they contained the possibility of some explosive burst of passion or temperament.

Inclining my head, I seemed to hear other echoes, delicate and feminine, a graceful swirl of movement reflected in a brief, fluid sweep in one corner, the decorous unfolding of an archway or recess.

Then, abruptly, the mood would invert, and the hollow eeriness return. Fay touched my arm. 'Howard, it's strange.' I shrugged. 'Interesting, though. Remember, our own responses will overlay these within a few days.' Fay shook her head. 'I couldn't stand it, Howard. Mr Stammers must have something normal.' 'Darling, Vermilion Sands is Vermilion Sands. Don't expect to find the suburban norms. People here were individualists.'

I looked down at Fay. Her small oval face, with its childlike mouth and chin, the fringe of

blonde hair and pert nose, seemed lost and anxious.

I put my arm around her shoulder. 'Okay, sweetie, you're quite right. Let's find somewhere we can put our feet up and relax. Now, what are we going to say to Stammers?'

Surprisingly, Stammers didn't seem all that disappointed. When I shook my head he put up a token protest but soon gave in and switched off the house.

'I know how Mrs Talbot feels,' he conceded as we went down the staircase. 'Some of these places have got too much personality built into them. Living with someone like Gloria Tremayne isn't too easy.'

I stopped, two steps from the bottom, a curious ripple of recognition running through my mind.

'Gloria Tremayne? I thought the only owner was a Miss Emma Slack.'

Stammers nodded. 'Yes. Gloria Tremayne. Emma Slack was her real name. Don't say I told you, though everybody living around here knows it. We keep it quiet as long as we can. If we said Gloria Tremayne no one would even look at the place.'

'Gloria Tremayne,' Fay repeated, puzzled. 'She was the movie star who shot her husband, wasn't she? He

was a famous architect Howard, weren't you on that case?'

As Fay's voice chattered on I turned and looked up the staircase towards the sun-lounge, my mind casting itself back ten years to one of the most famous trials of the decade, whose course and verdict were as much as anything else to mark the end of a whole generation, and show up the irresponsibilities of the world before the Recess. Even though Gloria Tremayne had been acquitted, everyone knew that she had coldbloodedly murdered her husband, the architect Miles Vanden Starr. Only the silver-tongued pleading of Daniel Hammett, her defence attorney, assisted by a young man called Howard Talbot, had saved her. I said to Fay, 'Yes, I helped to defend her. It seems a long time ago. Angel, wait in the car. I want to check something.'

Before she could follow me I ran up the staircase on to the terrace and closed the glass double doors behind me. Inert and unresponsive now, the white walls rose into the sky on either side of the pool. The water was motionless, a transparent block of condensed time, through which I could see the drowned images of Fay and Stammers sitting in the car, like an embalmed fragment of my future.

For three weeks, during her trial ten years earlier, I sat only a few feet from Gloria Tremayne, and like everyone else in that crowded courtroom I would never forget her mask-like face, the composed eyes that examined each of the witnesses as they gave their testimony - chauffeur, police surgeon, neighbours who heard the shots - like a brilliant spider arraigned by its victims, never once showing any emotion or response. As they dismembered her web, skein by skein, she sat impassively at its centre, giving Hammett no encouragement, content to repose in the image of herself ('The Ice Face') projected across the globe for the previous fifteen years.

Perhaps in the end this saved her. The jury were unable to outstare the enigma. To be honest, by the last week of the trial I had lost all interest in it. As I steered Hammett through his brief, opening and shutting his red wooden suitcase (the Hammett hallmark, it was an excellent jury distractor) whenever he indicated, my attention was fixed completely on Gloria Tremayne, trying to find some flaw in the mask through which I

could glimpse her personality. I suppose that I was just another naive young man who had fallen in love with a myth manufactured by a thousand publicity agents, but for me the sensation was the real thing, and when she was acquitted the world began to revolve again.

That justice had been flouted mattered nothing. Hammett, curiously, believed her innocent. Like many successful lawyers he had based his career on the principle of prosecuting the guilty and defending the innocent - this way he was sure of a sufficiently high proportion of successes to give him a reputation for being brilliant and unbeatable. When he defended Gloria Tremayne most lawyers thought he had been tempted to depart from principle by a fat bribe from her studio, but in fact he volunteered to take the case. Perhaps he, too, was working off a secret infatuation.

Of course, I never saw her again. As soon as her next picture had been safely released her studio dropped her. Later she briefly reappeared on a narcotics charge after a car smash, and then disappeared into a limbo of alcoholics hospitals and psychiatric wards. When she died five years afterwards few newspapers gave her more than a couple of lines.

Below, Stammers sounded the horn. Leisurely I retraced my way through the lounge and bedrooms, scanning the empty floors, running my hands over the smooth plastex walls, bracing myself to feel again the impact of Gloria Tremayne's personality. Blissfully, her presence would be everywhere in the house, a thousand echoes of her distilled into every matrix and senso-cell, each moment of emotion blended into a replica more intimate than anyone, apart from her dead husband, could ever know. The Gloria Tremayne with whom I had become infatuated had ceased to exist, but this house was the shrine that entombed the very signatures of her soul.

To begin with everything went quietly. Fay remonstrated with me, but I promised her a new mink wrap out of the savings we made on the house. Secondly, I was careful to keep the volume down for the first few weeks, so that there would be no clash of feminine wills. A major problem of psychotropic houses is that after several months one has to increase the volume to get the same image of the last owner, and this increases the sensitivity of the memory cells and their rate of contamination. At the same time, magnifying the psychic underlay emphasizes the cruder emotional ground-base. One begins to taste the lees rather than the distilled cream of the previous tenancy. I wanted to savour the quintessence of Gloria Tremayne as long as possible so I deliberately rationed myself, turning the volume down during the day while I was out, then switching on only those rooms in which I sat in the evenings.

Right from the outset I was neglecting Fay. Not only were we both preoccupied with the usual problems of adjustment faced by every married couple moving into a new house - undressing in the master bedroom that first night was a positive honeymoon debut all over again - but I was completely immersed in the exhilarating persona of Gloria Tremayne, exploring every alcove and niche in search of her.

In the evenings I sat in the library, feeling her around me in the stirring walls, hovering nearby as I emptied the packing cases like an attendant succubus. Sipping my scotch while night closed over the dark blue pool, I carefully analysed her personality, deliberately varying my moods to evoke as wide a range of responses. The memory cells in the house were perfectly bonded, never revealing any flaws of character, always reposed and self-controlled. If I leapt out of my chair and switched the stereogram

abruptly from Stravinsky to Stan Kenton to the MJQ, the room adjusted its mood and tempo without effort.

And yet how long was it before I discovered that there was another personality present in that house, and began to feel the curious eeriness Fay and I had noticed as soon as Stammers switched the house on? Not for a few weeks, when the house was still responding to my star-struck idealism. While my devotion to the departed spirit of Gloria Tremayne was the dominant mood, the house played itself back accordingly, recapitulating only the more serene aspects of Gloria Tremayne's character.

Soon, however, the mirror was to darken. It was Fay who broke the spell. She quickly realized that the initial responses were being overlaid by others from a more mellow and, from her point of view, more dangerous quarter of the past. After doing her best to put up with them she made a few guarded attempts to freeze Gloria out, switching the volume controls up and down, selecting the maximum of bass lift - which stressed the masculine responses - and the minimum of alto lift.

One morning I caught her on her knees by the console, poking a screwdriver at the memory drum, apparently in an effort to erase the entire store. Taking it from her, I locked the unit and hooked the key on to my chain.

'Darling, the mortgage company could sue us for destroying the pedigree. Without it this house would be valueless. What are you trying to do?'

Fay dusted her hands on her skirt and stared me straight in the eye, chin jutting.

'I'm trying to restore a little sanity here and if possible, find my own marriage again. I thought it might be in there somewhere.'

I put my arm around her and steered her back towards the kitchen. 'Darling, you're getting over- intuitive again. Just relax, don't try to upset everything.'

'Upset - ? Howard, what are you talking about? Haven't I a right to my own husband? I'm sick of sharing him with a homicidal neurotic who died five years ago. It's positively ghoulish!'

I winced as she snapped this out, feeling the walls in the hallway darken and retreat defensively. The air became clouded and frenetic, like a dull storm-filled day.

'Fay, you know your talent for exaggeration...' I searched around for the kitchen, momentarily disoriented as the corridor walls shifted and backed. 'You don't know how lucky you - '

I didn't get any further before she interrupted. Within five seconds we were in the middle of a blistering row. Fay threw all caution to the winds, deliberately, I think, in the hope of damaging the house permanently, while I stupidly let a lot of my unconscious resentment towards her come out.

Finally she stormed away into her bedroom and I stamped into the shattered lounge and slumped down angrily on the sofa.

Above me the ceiling flexed and quivered, the colour of roof slates, here and there mottled by angry veins that bunched the walls in on each other. The air pressure mounted but I felt too tired to open a window and sat stewing in a pit of black anger.

It must have been then that I recognized the presence of Miles Vanden Starr. All echoes

of Gloria Tremayne's personality had vanished, and for the first time since moving in I had recovered my normal perspectives. The mood of anger and resentment in the lounge was remarkably persistent, far longer than expected from what had been little more than a tiff. The walls continued to pulse and knot for over half an hour, long after my own irritation had faded and I was sitting up and examining the room clear-headedly.

The anger, deep and frustrated, was obviously masculine. I assumed, correctly, that the original source had been Vanden Starr, who had designed the house for Gloria Tremayne and lived there for over a year before his death. To have so grooved the memory drum meant that this atmosphere of blind, neurotic hostility had been maintained for most of that time.

As the resentment slowly dispersed I could see that for the time being Fay had succeeded in her object. The serene persona of Gloria Tremayne had vanished. The feminine motif was still there, in a higher and shriller key, but the dominant presence was distinctly Vanden Starr's. This new mood of the house reminded me of the courtroom photographs of him; glowering out of 1950-ish groups with Le Corbusier and Lloyd Wright, stalking about some housing project in Chicago or Tokyo like a petty dictator, heavy-jowled, thyroidal, with large lustreless eyes, and then the Vermilion Sands: 1970 shots of him, fitting into the movie colony like a shark into a goldfish bowl.

However, there was power behind those baleful drives. Cued in by our tantrum, the presence of Vanden Starr had descended upon 99 Stellavista like a thundercloud. At first I tried to recapture the earlier halcyon mood, but this had disappeared and my irritation at losing it only served to inflate the thundercloud. An unfortunate aspect of psychotropic houses is the factor of resonance - diametrically opposed personalities soon stabilize their relationship, the echo inevitably yielding to the new source. But where the personalities are of similar frequency and amplitude they mutually reinforce themselves, each adapting itself for comfort to the personality of the other. All too soon I began to assume the character of Vanden Starr, and my increased exasperation with Fay merely drew from the house a harder front of antagonism.

Later I knew that I was, in fact, treating Fay in exactly the way that Vanden Starr had treated Gloria Tremayne, recapitulating the steps of their tragedy with consequences that were equally disastrous.

Fay recognized the changed mood of the house immediately. 'What's happened to our lodger?' she giped at dinner the next evening. 'Our beautiful ghost seems to be spurning you. Is the spirit unwilling although the flesh is weak?' 'God knows,' I growled testily. 'I think you've really messed the place up.' I glanced around the dining room for any echo of Gloria Tremayne, but she had gone. Fay went out to the kitchen and I sat over my half-eaten hors d'oeuvres, staring at it blankly, when I felt a curious ripple in the wall behind me, a silver dart of movement that vanished as soon as I looked up. I tried to focus it without success, the first echo of Gloria since our row, but later that evening, when I went into Fay's bedroom after I heard her crying, I noticed it again.

Fay had gone into the bathroom. As I was about to find her I felt the same echo of feminine anguish. It had been prompted by Fay's tears, but like Vanden Starr's mood set off by my own anger, it persisted long after the original cue. I followed it into the corridor as it faded out of the room but it diffused outwards into the ceiling and hung there

motionlessly.

Starting to walk down to the lounge, I realized that the house was watching me like a wounded animal.

Two days later came the attack on Fay.

I had just returned home from the office, childishy annoyed with Fay for parking her car on my side of the garage. In the cloakroom I tried to check my anger; the senso-cells had picked up the cue and began to suck the irritation out of me, pouring it back into the air until the walls of the cloakroom darkened and seethed.

I shouted some gratuitous insult at Fay, who was in the lounge. A second later she screamed: 'Howard! Quickly!'

Running towards the lounge, I flung myself at the door, expecting it to retract. Instead, it remained rigid, frame locked in the archway. The entire house seemed grey and strained, the pool outside like a tank of cold lead.

Fay shouted again. I seized the metal handle of the manual control and wrenched the door back.

Fay was almost out of sight, on one of the slab sofas in the centre of the room, buried beneath the sagging canopy of the ceiling which had collapsed on to her. The heavy plastex had flowed together directly above her head, forming a blob a yard in diameter.

Raising the flaccid plastex with my hands, I managed to lift it off Fay, who was spread-eagled into the cushions with only her feet protruding. She wriggled out and flung her arms around me, sobbing noiselessly.

'Howard, this house is insane, I think it's trying to kill me!'

'For heaven's sake, Fay, don't be silly. It was simply a freak accumulation of senso-cells. Your breathing probably set it off.' I patted her shoulder, remembering the child I had married a few years earlier. Smiling to myself, I watched the ceiling retract slowly, the walls grow lighter in tone.

'Howard, can't we leave here?' Fay babbled. 'Let's go and live in a static house. I know it's dull, but what does it matter - ?'

'Well,' I said, 'it's not just dull, it's dead. Don't worry, angel, you'll learn to like it here.'

Fay twisted away from me. 'Howard, I can't stay in this house any more. You've been so preoccupied recently, you're completely changed.' She started to cry again, and pointed at the ceiling. 'If I hadn't been lying down, do you realize it would have killed me?'

I dusted the end of the sofa. 'Yes, I can see your heel marks.' Irritation welled up like bile before I could stop it. 'I thought I told you not to stretch out here. This isn't a beach, Fay. You know it annoys me.'

Around us the walls began to mottle and cloud again.

Why did Fay anger me so easily? Was it, as I assumed at the time, unconscious resentment that egged me on, or was I merely a vehicle for the antagonism which had accumulated during Vanden Starr's marriage to Gloria Tremayne and was now venting itself on the hapless couple who followed them to 99 Stellavista? Perhaps I'm over-

charitable to myself in assuming the latter, but Fay and I had been tolerably happy during our five years of marriage, and I am sure my nostalgic infatuation for Gloria Tremayne couldn't have so swept me off my feet.

Either way, however, Fay didn't wait for a second attempt. Two days later I came home to find a fresh tape on the kitchen memophone. I switched it on to hear her tell me that she could no longer put up with me, my nagging or 99 Stellavista and was going back east to stay with her sister.

Callously, my first reaction, after the initial twinge of indignation, was sheer relief. I still believed that Fay was responsible for Gloria Tremayne's eclipse and the emergence of Vanden Starr, and that with her gone I would recapture the early days of idyll and romance.

I was only partly right. Gloria Tremayne did return, but not in the role expected. I, who had helped to defend her at her trial, should have known better. A few days after Fay left I became aware that the house had taken on a separate existence, its coded memories discharging themselves independently of my own behaviour. Often when I returned in the evening, eager to relax over half a decanter of scotch, I would find the ghosts of Miles Vanden Starr and Gloria Tremayne in full flight. Starr's black and menacing personality crowded after the tenuous but increasingly resilient quintessence of his wife. This rapier-like resistance could be observed literally - the walls of the lounge would stiffen and darken in a vortex of anger that converged upon a small zone of lightness hiding in one of the alcoves, as if to obliterate its presence, but at the last moment Gloria's persona would flit nimbly away, leaving the room to seethe and writhe.

Fay had set off this spirit of resistance, and I visualized Gloria Tremayne going through a similar period of living hell. As her personality re-emerged in its new role I watched it carefully, volume at maximum despite the damage the house might do to itself. Once Stammers stopped by and offered to get the circuits checked for me. He had seen the house from the road, flexing and changing colour like an anguished squid. Thanking him, I made up some excuse and declined. Later he told me that I had kicked him out unceremoniously - apparently he hardly recognized me; I was striding around the dark quaking house like a madman in an Elizabethan horror tragedy, oblivious of everything.

Although submerged by the personality of Miles Vanden Starr, I gradually realized that Gloria Tremayne had been deliberately driven out of her mind by him. What had prompted his implacable hostility I can only hazard - perhaps he resented her success, perhaps she had been unfaithful to him. When she finally retaliated and shot him it was, I'm sure, an act of self-defence.

Two months after she went east Fay filed a divorce suit against me. Frantically I telephoned her, explaining that I would be grateful if she postponed the action as the publicity would probably kill my new law office. However, Fay was adamant. What annoyed me most was that she sounded better than she had done for years, really happy again. When I pleaded with her she said she needed the divorce in order to marry again, and then, as a last straw, refused to tell me who the man was.

By the time I slammed the phone down my temper was taking off like a lunar probe. I left the office early and began a tour of the bars in Red Beach, working my way slowly back to Vermilion Sands. I hit 99 Stellavista like a oneman task force, mowing down most of the

magnolias in the drive, ramming the car into the garage on the third pass after wrecking both auto-doors.

My keys jammed in the door lock and I finally had to kick my way through one of the glass panels. Raging upstairs on to the darkened terrace I flung my hat and coat into the pool and slammed into the lounge. By 2 a.m., as I mixed myself a nightcap at the bar and put the last act of Gotterdammerung on the stereogram, the whole place was really warming up.

On the way to bed I lurched into Fay's room to see what damage I could do to the memories I still retained of her, kicked in a wardrobe and booted the mattress on to the floor, turning the walls literally blue with a salvo of epithets. Shortly after three o'clock I fell asleep, the house revolving around me like an enormous turntable.

It must have been only four o'clock when I woke, conscious of a curious silence in the darkened room. I was stretched across the bed, one hand around the neck of the decanter, the other holding a dead cigar stub.

The walls were motionless, unstirred by even the residual eddies which drift through a psychotropic house when the occupants are asleep. Something had altered the normal perspectives of the room. Trying to focus on the grey underswell of the ceiling, I listened for footsteps outside. Sure enough, the corridor wall began to retract. The archway, usually a six-inch wide slit, rose to admit someone. Nothing came through, but the room expanded to accommodate an additional presence, the ceiling ballooning upwards. Astounded, I tried not to move my head, watching the unoccupied pressure zone move quickly across the room towards the bed, its motion shadowed by a small dome in the ceiling.

The pressure zone paused at the foot of the bed and hesitated for a few seconds. But instead of stabilizing, the walls began to vibrate rapidly, quivering with strange uncertain tremors, radiating a sensation of acute urgency and indecision.

Then, abruptly, the room stilled. A second later, as I lifted myself up on one elbow, a violent spasm convulsed the room, buckling the walls and lifting the bed off the floor. The entire house started to shake and writhe. Gripped by this seizure, the bedroom contracted and expanded like the chamber of a dying heart, the ceiling rising and falling.

I steadied myself on the swinging bed and gradually the convulsion died away, the walls realigning. I stood up, wondering what insane crisis this psychotropic grand mal duplicated.

The room was in darkness, thin moonlight coming through the trio of small circular vents behind the bed. These were contracting as the walls closed in on each other. Pressing my hands against the ceiling, I felt it push downwards strongly. The edges of the floor were blending into the walls as the room converted itself into a sphere.

The air pressure mounted. I tumbled over to the vents, reached them as they clamped around my fists, air whistling through my fingers. Face against the openings, I gulped in the cool night air, and tried to force apart the locking plastex.

The safety cut-out switch was above the door on the other side of the room. I dived across to it, clambering over the tilting bed, but the flowing plastex had submerged the whole unit.

Head bent to avoid the ceiling, I pulled off my tie, gasping at the thudding air. Trapped in the room, I was suffocating as it duplicated the expiring breaths of Vanden Starr after he had been shot. The tremendous spasm had been his convulsive reaction as the bullet from Gloria Tremayne's gun crashed into his chest.

I fumbled in my pockets for a knife, felt my cigarette lighter, pulled it out and flicked it on. The room was now a grey sphere ten feet in diameter. Thick veins, as broad as my arm, were knotting across its surface, crushing the endboards of the bedstead.

I raised the lighter to the surface of the ceiling, and let it play across the opaque fluoglass. Immediately it began to fizz and bubble. It flared alight and split apart, the two burning lips unzipping in a brilliant discharge of heat.

As the cocoon bisected itself, I could see the twisted mouth of the corridor bending into the room below the sagging outline of the dining room ceiling. Feet skating in the molten plastex, I pulled myself up on to the corridor. The whole house seemed to have been ruptured. Walls were buckled, floors furling at their edges. Water was pouring out of the pool as the unit tipped forwards on the weakened foundations. The glass slabs of the staircase had been shattered, the razor-like teeth jutting from the wall.

I ran into Fay's bedroom, found the cut-out switch and stabbed the sprinkler alarm.

The house was still throbbing, but a moment later it locked and became rigid. I leaned against the dented wall and let the spray pour across my face from the sprinkler jets.

Around me, its wings torn and disarrayed, the house reared up like a tortured flower.

Standing in the trampled flower beds, Stammers gazed at the house, an expression of awe and bewilderment on his face. It was just after six o'clock. The last of the three police cars had driven away, the lieutenant in charge finally conceding defeat. 'Dammit, I can't arrest a house for attempted homicide, can I?' he'd asked me somewhat belligerently. I roared with laughter at this, my initial feelings of shock having given way to an almost hysterical sense of fun.

Stammers found me equally difficult to understand. 'What on earth were you doing in there?' he asked, voice down to a whisper. 'Nothing. I tell you I was fast asleep. And relax. The house can't hear you. It's switched off.' We wandered across the churned gravel and waded through the water which lay like a black mirror. Stammers shook his head. 'The place must have been insane. If you ask me it needs a psychiatrist to straighten it out.' 'You're right,' I told him. 'In fact, that was exactly my role - to reconstruct the original traumatic situation and release the repressed material.' 'Why joke about it? It tried to kill you.' 'Don't be absurd. The real culprit is Vanden Starr. But as the lieutenant implied, you can't arrest a man who's been dead for ten years. It was the pent-up memory of his death which tried to kill me. Even if Gloria Tremayne was driven to pulling the trigger, Starr pointed the gun. Believe me, I lived out his role for a couple of months. What worries me is that if Fay hadn't had enough good sense to leave she might have been hypnotized by the persona of Gloria Tremayne into killing me.'

Much to Stammers's surprise, I decided to stay on at 99 Stellavista. Apart from the fact that I hadn't enough cash to buy another place, the house had certain undeniable memories for me that I didn't want to forsake. Gloria Tremayne was still there, and I was sure that Vanden Starr had at last gone. The kitchen and service units were still functional, and apart from their contorted shapes most of the rooms were habitable. In addition I needed a rest, and nothing is so quiet as a static house.

Of course, in its present form 99 Stellavista can hardly be regarded as a typical static dwelling. Yet, the deformed rooms and twisted corridors have as much personality as any psychotropic house. The PT unit is still working and one day I shall switch it on again. But one thing worries me. The violent spasms which ruptured the house may in some way have damaged Gloria Tremayne's personality. To live with it might well be madness for me, as there's a subtle charm about the house even in its distorted form, like the ambiguous smile of a beautiful but insane woman.

Often I unlock the control console and examine the memory drum. Her personality, whatever it may be, is there. Nothing would be simpler than to erase it. But I can't.

One day soon, whatever the outcome, I know that I shall have to switch the house on again.